

BOOK REVIEWS

***Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954.* By Christopher E. Goscha.** Richmond: Curzon, 1999, 418pp.

During Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s, ASEAN rallied behind the front-line state of Thailand, which feared Vietnamese tanks would roll down (and eventually become gridlocked in) the narrow streets of Bangkok. For Christopher Goscha, the irony is that the Vietnamese revolution was made manifest on the same streets of Thailand. Goscha presents a fascinating history of the Southeast Asian roots of the Vietnamese revolution, and strikes into fertile ground. While most works on the early days of the Vietnamese revolution focus on Ho Chi Minh's years in France and Moscow, where he was trained by the Comintern before being sent to China, Goscha argues that there already was an active revolutionary network across Indochina into Siam, that dated back into the 1880s when Indochinese patriots fled from French colonial oppression into Thailand. By the late 1940s, according to one Viet Minh document, "Thailand has become the sole corridor (*cua ngo duy nhat*) to the international community for the Vietnamese and Indochinese resistance movements" (p.288).

Most research to date has focused on the Viet Minh's ties to China. This is understandable for several reasons. Ho himself spent many years as the Comintern's representative in China and he founded the Thanh Nien movement in southern China, where his chief lieutenants would eventually emerge, many of whom went on to attend the Whampoa military academy. And we tend to look towards China for the roots of the Vietnamese revolution simply for ideological reasons

and the fact that China, after 1949, became Hanoi's chief supplier of aid and matériel. The problem with the Vietnamese revolutionaries concentrating their efforts and resources in China was that they became vulnerable to the radical shifts of Chinese politics. Following Chiang Kai Shek's violent attack on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which drove the CCP underground and out of the cities in 1927, there were minimal contacts between the Thanh Nien and the CCP. From 1927, through the CCP's regrouping in Jiangxi, through the Long March, ending in 1935, there was little the CCP could offer the Thanh Nien: it was fighting for its own survival. Moscow, likewise, was little help at that time.

Chiang Kai Shek drove the Thanh Nien leadership underground as well, and in 1929 the Kuomintang (KMT) helped to found Ho's primary rival for power and the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese community of southern China: the anti-colonial nationalist group, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), a radical organization that spent more time fighting the Thanh Nien than it did fighting the French. By May 1929, the Thanh Nien had ceased to be an effective anti-colonial organization, and the fortunes of the China-based Vietnamese revolution were dim. This, according to Goscha, forced the communist leadership to redouble its efforts in Southeast Asia. Ho himself left China in 1928 for Thailand where he remained until he founded the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) in Hong Kong in 1929. He became head of the Comintern's Far East Bureau in early 1930, where he was charged with setting up the Thai and Laotian communist parties.

Goscha argues that the ICP was blessed by having the support of the Siamese government, which had a very tenuous relationship with the Europeans. The Siamese had strong reason to mistrust the French. Not only were they a powerful colonial power on the Thai doorstep, but they were an irridentist power as well, claiming the region of Laos that sits on the west bank of the Mekong as well as much of the Thai-Cambodian borderlands. The Siamese government had great interest in fostering a revolutionary movement in Vietnam that could expel the French. This was perhaps the first, but not the last, of many alliances between a Southeast Asian monarchy and a revolutionary movement. Politics, indeed, does make for strange bedfellows. Only this longstanding co-operation between Siam and its Indochina neighbours, based on a mutual fear and mistrust of the French, allowed the ICP to organize on Thai soil. Thai Premier Phibun, for example, encouraged Vietnamese refugees to settle on Thai soil, even offering a tax amnesty to encourage them in the mid-1940s (p.119). And organize they did — a skill that communist movements have always had, giving them a distinct advantage over their political rivals. The ICP organized

networks of Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese), monks, traders, sailors, and prostitutes, based along traditional trading roots across Indochina. They created a network of corporations, fund-raising organizations, spies, a press, and a shadow government.

At the heart of all this was Hoang Van Hoan, a young Thai and Chinese-speaking revolutionary who had joined Ho's Thanh Nien movement in the 1920s. He was dispatched to Thailand in 1928 for nearly eight years, to organize the Viet Kieu, raise funds and acquire matériel. In 1948, after being elected to the ICP's Central Committee, he was dispatched back to Thailand to organize the ICP's relations with all of Southeast Asia, a key diplomatic post which was to win him accolades. He was also to become the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV's) first ambassador to China in April 1951.

The story that unfolds is not the tight, cohesive revolutionary unit that Hanoi portrays. There are years without contact between the Viet Kieu in Thailand and the ICP/Viet Minh leadership in southern China. As Goscha notes:

The Vietnamese communist leadership positioned along the Sino-Vietnamese border in 1940 had no links to its Thai-based operations until 1943 and did not establish direct control over the ICP's pre-war Mekong bases until mid-1945. Whatever Thai-based Vietnamese communists did prior to mid-1945 was largely based on local initiatives and what the latter thought the ICP leadership wanted them to do (p.124).

After the founding of the umbrella resistance organization, the Viet Minh, in 1941, the ICP's networks in Thailand became more important as a fund-raiser for the anti-colonial struggle. Following Japan's unconditional surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh sought to consolidate their power in Laos and Cambodia, to protect Vietnam's western flank against French attack. Here, again, they had a willing ally in Thailand, which also sought to prevent France's return to Indochina. The Thai Government attempted to arm the Laotians, following the Sino-French agreement in February 1946. Yet, the March 6 Accord between Ho and Sainteny paved the way for France's reoccupation of Laos. And with it came a flood of Indochinese refugees into Thailand. Again, the Thais allowed armed Viet Minh teams to organize the refugees, and even provided the Viet Minh with intelligence on France's activities in western Indochina. According to one Viet Minh source cited by Goscha, the Thai army was "now intimately with us" (p.156), providing the beleaguered Viet Minh with their only source of external assistance. And the Vietnamese continued to look up to the Thais as the natural leaders of an anti-colonial Asia, which is the subject of chapter six.

Thai support for the Vietnamese revolution was, of course, based on national interest, not altruism. To that end, they were willing to aid the Vietnamese with money, supplies and some weaponry, as well as let them organize on Thai soil in order to get the French out of Indochina. But at that point their goals diverged. The Thais sought to reassert their dominance in western Indochina. And at any occasion when they could cut a deal to achieve that goal, they were willing to forgo the Viet Minh's interests. But when ties with the French were at a low point, Viet-Thai relations flourished. Such was the case in 1946 when Admiral D'Argenlieu considered sending troops to Thailand after border talks broke down (pp.165-66). But with the advent of the Cold War, the West put pressure on Thailand to curb its relations with the Viet Minh. Even before the 1947 coup, which ousted the Seri Thai government, Bangkok never recognized Ho's DRV government. This forced the Vietnamese to move their entire governmental, diplomatic, espionage, and commercial network into Rangoon.

But Thailand always remained at the centre of Ho's revolutionary efforts. After the Fontainebleau talks broke down on 10 September 1946, tensions in Hanoi rose and war broke out between the Viet Minh and the French on 19 December 1946. Thailand once again became a focal point for the Vietnamese revolution, this time as a source of funds, equipment, arms, and medicine. Building on existing networks, the Viet Minh were able to tap the flourishing post-war arms market that was burgeoning in Thailand. And there was an added benefit: the Seri Thai government was in power, which closed its eyes "to Viet Minh's clandestine activities in Thailand," (p.186) and even extended 10,000 rifles to the revolutionaries. The most fascinating part of the book is chapter five, which seeks to uncover the commercial links of the Viet Minh, both overt businesses and clandestine gun-running. The Viet Minh tapped into a vast network of ethnic Chinese trading networks that spread across Southeast Asia, which seemed to centre on Bangkok. Goscha explains how Japanese guns captured by the Americans in the Philippines found their way into Thailand, and later Burma, and then into Thailand where they were purchased by the Viet Minh, very often using revenue garnered from the Laotian opium trade. These arms were either smuggled overland into northern Vietnam through Laos, or by boat into the Nambo (southern) military region, but were soon overshadowed by aid from China, which began in late 1950. But there are substantial weaknesses in this chapter, especially the treatment Goscha gives the Viet Minh's internal wartime economy, which should have been covered in greater detail and substantiated with better footnotes.

More could have been done to contrast the concurrent revolutionary efforts in China; and indeed, there are several errors regarding the

China connection. Goscha notes that “Li Lisan did, in fact exist” (p.302). Anyone familiar with Chinese politics knows that Li was one of the 28 Bolsheviks who controlled the Chinese Communist Party until Mao Zedong consolidated his power at the Zunyi Conference in January 1935. My only other criticism is that the narrative ends around 1951, rather than the advertised 1955.

General Vo Nguyen Giap spoke of Indochina as being a “single strategic battlefield”. Goscha agrees, but for him, the battlefield extended beyond Indochina into Thailand, and from there through the vast networks of overseas Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese trading networks that spanned across Southeast Asia into southern China. To understand how the revolution got off the ground, one must not just study Vietnam’s revolutionary ties with China but with the region.

This book makes for a fascinating read for anyone who is not just interested in Vietnamese history and politics, but also in the region’s as well. Goscha is able to bring to light many Thai language sources that remain inaccessible to most scholars on Vietnam. That said, the book is heavy in detail and will have a limited audience. At times it is a confusing story; this is no fault of the author’s but simply because of the very complex and covert matter that he deals with. As the author is still in the midst of his doctoral research, we should expect more fine scholarship from him on the regional networks that made the Vietnamese revolution possible.

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China’s Provinces in Reform: Class, Community, and Political Culture.
Edited by David S.G. Goodman. London and New York: Routledge,
1997. 278 pp.

This highly informative book is a long overdue antidote to the plethora of studies of China in transition, which adopt a macro-perspective of the post-Mao reform period. Those conventional studies largely fail to convey or explain the often subtle, sometimes dramatic, though always important, diversity of social, political and spatial variation in China. Furthermore, much of the inability of outside observers to adequately