

CHAPTER VI

THE HO CHI MINH FACTOR IN POST-COLD WAR THAILAND-VIETNAM RELATIONS

The ending of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s closed the long-lasting conflict between the two camps ideologically, politically and economically. By the middle of the 1990s, competition in the world had shifted from the ideological to economic and developmental spheres. Globalization, backed by advanced technology, especially in terms of informatics, had significantly increased inter-dependence among countries while sharpening states' competition in the economic and science and technology areas. State strategy for development, especially in less-developed countries, thus, was to strengthen international and regional cooperation in order to maximize opportunities as well as minimize negative impacts from globalization.

In Southeast Asia, the power vacuum in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lessening of China threat and of the conflicts in South China Sea, together with increasing economic competition in the context of globalization and internal desires for peaceful and stable environment for economic development, had the important effect of strengthening regionalism. This resulted, in turn, in Southeast Asian countries moving closer together and seeking security capacity as well as economic cooperation within the region. According to Acharya (cited in Wheeler. 2001: 72), in the 1990s, as the bipolar dynamic of the Cold War began to ebb, ASEAN, encouraged by Southeast Asia's economic success, shifted from an "inward looking, subregional, exclusionary approach" to "a more direct, outward looking, extraregional and inclusive approach".

The context created the environment for post-Cold War Thailand-Vietnam interactions. Interestingly, the Ho Chi Minh factor still played a significant role in the bilateral relations, this time as a catalyst for boosting Hanoi-Bangkok rapprochement. The chapter will evaluate the role, beginning with examining bilateral interactions in light of the Thai elite's post-Cold War beliefs and of the ASEAN expansion context. From this background, the Thai ruling elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh in the new context, which is reflected through the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, will be explored and elaborated. This will be followed by an

examination of the impact of the Thai perception of bilateral relations through an assessment of Vietnam's response to and evaluation of the relic sites.

6.1. Thailand-Vietnam interactions in the post-Cold War context

The post-Cold War context helps to bring in new concepts in the Thai elite's beliefs. The world system is no longer seen as characterized by bipolar confrontation but rather by interdependence and cooperation. For the Thai elite's beliefs, though basically the worldview and principled beliefs have been still attached to the concept of Thai-ness, modern concepts such as capitalist globalization, regionalization, [Thai-style] democracy and human-rights, also have significant impacts on the Thais' thinking and actions¹. In a speech on 23 August 1998, Thaksin said, "We have just come out of the Cold War between communism and the free world. From here onwards it will be an economic war, and no less brutal. In the past, countries were seized as colonies by using gunboats and troops...Nowadays the mode of warfare has changed. It is about the movement of capital and the use of technology for economic competition. It is not territory that is seized but the economy...And from 2000 onwards, this war will be more violent" (cited in Pasuk and Baker. 2004: 69). Thaksin's viewpoint undoubtedly reflects globalists' argument about the world structure as a global capitalist system that conditions and constrains the behavior of all states and societies². Concerning the issue of human rights, Chuan Leekpay's 1997 foreign policy statement enjoined Thailand to "participate jointly in international fora in protecting and promoting democratic values and human rights" (Wheeler. 2001: 75). Besides, the post-Cold War Thai leaders have increasingly valued regional cooperation in dealing with the dynamics of economic and political situations. According to Panitan (in Alagappa. 1998: 442), the post-Cold War Thai elite "has begun to place serious emphasis on good relations with neighboring states and other regional countries".

From the standpoint, with reference to Vietnam policy, the Thai ruling elite believed that Thailand's rapprochement with Vietnam would benefit Thailand politically and economically as well as serve Bangkok's regional calculations. In order

¹ Capitalist and Western values are modified to suit the concept of Thai-ness, which in turn help protect the interests of capitalist class. However, with rapid and crucial changes in Thai society, the concept of Thai-ness, as Saichol argues (*Bangkok Post*, 9 February 2008), is "too narrow to help Thais understand the complexities and diverse change in their society, especially the economic, social, political and cultural problems which have occurred since the late 1960s".

² For details of the globalist theory, see Viotti and Kauppi (1998)

to evaluate these causal beliefs, it is necessary to go back to the baseline in the early 1990s to see Thailand-Vietnam interactions in the context of ASEAN expansion.

Vietnam in Thailand's regional calculations in the context of ASEAN expansion

In the wake of the eventual settlement of the Cambodia conflict in 1991, ASEAN saw the opportunity to fulfill its objective of creating a regional organization which embraces all Southeast Asian states and a zone of peace, stability and freedom from super powers' influence. The context provided the groundwork for the admission of Vietnam into ASEAN. Convergence was seen between the former and the latter in terms of creating peaceful and stable environment in the region for economic development and of dealing with super powers, such as the Western countries as well as China and Japan.

Given the past confrontation between ASEAN and Indochina, ASEAN considered Vietnam's membership as an important factor for the regional security. A 1993 report on ASEAN-Vietnam relations contended that an extension of ASEAN to include Vietnam was "a necessary condition for Southeast Asia's future peace and prosperity" (Sukhumbhand. 1994). Furthermore, with Vietnam's membership, ASEAN could increase its bargaining position in relations with China given that the former had expressed concerns about China's hegemony and voiced objections to China's South China Sea strategy. Additionally, as Hari Singh argues (cited in Wheeler. 2001: 42), in the context of increasing pressures and intervention from the West in the matter of "democracy" and "human rights", Vietnam and the ASEAN countries move towards a common ground of "soft-authoritarianism" to defence "Asian values".

Last but not least, in terms of economic cooperation, ASEAN saw Vietnam as a potential market, second after Indonesia in the region in terms of population. According to Vietnamese analysts (cited in Frost. 1994: 60-61), by the early 1990s, "all the countries in the region faced major economic challenges in trade relations with Europe, North American, and Japan and advocated a strengthening of regional economic co-operation". Vietnam, therefore, would be another alternative for ASEAN states to expand trade and investments given that ASEAN now faced a reduced access to traditional markets in Europe and North America as these regions had become more protectionist (Tuan. 1994).

From the background, along with Hanoi's determination to join ASEAN, the trend of Vietnam's entry into the organization seemed irreversible. In March 1991, at the ASEAN Summit on economic future of ASEAN held in Indonesia, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir announced concrete steps for ASEAN-Indochina combination. In 1992, the fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore gave a green light for ASEAN expansion. In early 1994, Ajit Singh, the then Secretary General of ASEAN, said during his trip to Hanoi, "There are no obstacles to Vietnam's membership in ASEAN" (Tuan. 1994). In July 1994, the AMM (Annual Ministerial Meeting) in Bangkok announced ASEAN's readiness for Vietnam's admission.

The context enabled Bangkok to take advantage of her interactions with Indochina in general and Vietnam in particular to consolidate Thailand's role and status in the region. Being the "frontline" state in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, Thailand's rapprochement with Vietnam and Indochina would put the former ahead of other ASEAN member states in ASEAN-Indochina integration given the proximity as well as political and economic significance of Thailand to Indochina.

Vietnam in Thailand's Indochina calculations

Apart from promoting rapprochement with Vietnam, Thailand also moved to improve relations with other Indochinese states. The promotion of the policy suggested Thailand's strategic calculations in two respects. Politically, Thailand could become the focus of the region and the world in terms of engaging Indochina, especially Vietnam, in the post Cold War affairs. Moreover, Thailand could take advantage of the new markets to serve its increasing economic demands. It is worth noting that since the late 1980s, Thailand's economy started to change from one based on import substitution to one relying on export promotion as the domestic market was being saturated (Panom. 2004: 25). Given the proximity of Thailand to Indochina and not least Indochinese potential markets with rich natural resources and cheap labor, which by and large had been still untapped as the consequence of the embargo imposed by the US, the Indochinese states had relative attractiveness to the Thai business sector. This was further stimulated given the fact that other ASEAN member states, especially Singapore and Malaysia, had speeded up their economic cooperation with Indochinese countries, especially Vietnam since the early 1990s. As the Thai journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn comments (cited in Thanh. 1997: 24), over the past year Thailand "has lost out to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in terms of cooperation with its

neighbors...Malaysia is leading ASEAN's efforts to develop the area even though it does not border the [Mekong] river at all".

In Thailand's Indochina policy, Vietnam probably occupied an important position given the role of the former in Indochina. It was possible that the Thai policy to make Bangkok a "gateway to Indochina", provided that it was successful, would fail should Bangkok and Hanoi were not on good terms. In a conference in Bangkok in 1983, one of Thai scholar contended that "...by eliminating conflicts with Vietnam which has a great deal of influence on Laos and Kampuchea, Thailand also could increase its trade surplus with Laos and Kampuchea" (Ruangdej, in Turley. 1985: 89).

From the standpoint, Thailand, as Ganesan (2004) points out, was instrumental in bridging "the previous divide between the Indochinese countries and in particular Vietnam on the one hand and ASEAN on the other hand". At the 21st ASEAN AMM in Bangkok in July 1988, the then Thai Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda declared that the "opportunity for real peace in Southeast Asia is at hand" (Wheeler. 2001: 21). His successor Chatichai Choochavan moved forward with his Indochinese policy of "turning the battle field into the market place". The next premier Anand Panyarachun speeded up the policy of enhancing Thailand's role as the gateway for information, capital and services to Indochina. Anand, as Wheeler (2001: 32) notes, called for the expansion of ASEAN and was instrumental in helping Laos and Vietnam accede to the TAC in 1992. The policy was continued by Chuan Leekpai's government. During his visit to Vietnam in March 1994, the Thai Prime Minister stressed that not only were Vietnam-Thailand relations an important factor for peace and stability in the region but also significantly contributed to the development cooperation in the whole region (Lai. 2001: 108).

6.2. Post-Cold War Thai ruling elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh

As already discussed, modern Thai elites are defined by overlapping groups of the royalists, the senior bureaucrats, the military, the business elite and the party elite. However, in light of geographical, historical as well as ideological backgrounds, these elite groups can be divided into three groups, i.e. the South-Bangkok based group, North and Northeast based group, and ex-communist group.

The first group was represented by the Democrat Party with general support from the royalists, the bureaucracy, and upper and middle classes. Historically, the South was cosmopolitan and experienced open trade. Economically, Bangkok and the southern region enjoyed more opportunities for capital income and better development

than the North and Northeast³. According to Pasuk and Baker (2005: 247), the southern region had “a high proportion of urban population clustered in old port towns down the peninsula” and had an “export-oriented economy based on rubber, tin, fishing and tourism”. Culturally, southerners were said to be “typically more aggressive” and “tend to vote together for a party they perceive to be the party of the South – the Democrat Party” (Parichart. 1997: 263). They were also pictured as people with “individual freedom, intolerance and opposition to heavy-handed authority” and “more interested in political affairs” (Charun, cited in Askew. 2006: 52) or as people with “love of independence”, “sense of justice” and “willingness to struggle” (Klin, cited in Askew. 2006: 53), or as those with “commitment to democracy”, and “approval of free enterprise capitalism” (Suwat, cited in Askew. 2006: 56).

Ideologically, this group tended to be metropolitan and more liberal in outlook - liberalism under the concept of “*udomkan*”, i.e. “opposition to authoritarianism, moral uprightness (opposition to vote-buying) and the opportunity for all to gain elective office-holding in the party on the basis of merit, not of wealth” (Askew. 2006: 228). However, this “liberalism” did not apply to the peasantry in other regions, especially in the Northeast. During the 1990s, in the public eyes, the Democrat party administration was pictured as one that was “pro-urban, pro-globalist” (Pasuk and Baker. 2000: 156), that “spent all its time in office bailing out the rich with government money, while beating the poor with riot police” (Ungpakorn. 2003: 32), and that “had worked closely with the bureaucrat to suppress grassroots protest and dissent” (McCargo and Ukrist. 2005: 98).

Arguably, the dominance of the Democrat Party in the 1990s was partly attributed to support from the royalists and the bureaucracy. Accordingly, a close tie between the party and the monarchy can be seen during Chuan’s two tenures. As McCargo points out (2005), in a September 1992 campaign speech, Chuan openly declared that he had contacted Chairman of the Privy Council Prem Tinsulanonda on 18 May 1992, asking him to call upon the King to intervene to stop the violence surrounding the anti-Suchinda protests. The scholar also extracts an article in the *Naeo*

³ The three Southern border provinces are exceptional given that the sub-region, not different from the North and Northeast, have been neglected economically and discriminated culturally and politically. Moreover, when there has been development it has not been the majority of local Malay Muslims who have benefited. The only difference in term of political status from the North-Northeast and the Malay speaking provinces is that the former with its strength stemming from its population can raise their voice through the parliamentary system, while the latter, almost alienated under the concept of *Thainess*, has had little say.

Na in 1993 which states that “Prem has been an important person to whom the Democrat Party pays respect and constantly asks for advice. No one can deny that every military transfer and promotion has to be seen by Prem before it is publicly announced”.

In the political unrest which could lead to the collapse of Chuan’s government in the wake of the withdrawal of the New Aspiration Party from the government coalition, it was believed that Prem orchestrated a new coalition realignment of Chuan’s government (Chatchai’s Chart Pattana replaced New Aspiration, allowing Chuan another six months in office) to please the King, whose “strong distrust of Chavalit led him to favor Chuan” (McCargo. 2005). After the financial crisis in July 1997, Chavalit was replaced by Chuan Leekpai in November 1997 in a move that “had Prem’s fingerprints all over it” (McCargo. 2005).

In the 2006 coup, the Democrats with support from Bangkokian royalists played a main role in delegitimizing Thaksin’s regime. At an anti-Thaksin rally at Sanam Luang on 24 March 2006, Democrat party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva appealed to the King to appoint a new Prime Minister and Cabinet to resolve the political crisis. In the wake of the December 2007 elections, the CNS was believed to attempt to prevent the PPP from taking power while backing the Democrats to head the coalition government (*Bangkok Post* online, 24 October 2007, 29 October 2007, 7 December 2007, at <http://www.bangkokpost.net>; the *Nation* online, 7 December 2007, at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com>). Immediately after the unofficial result of the elections was released, Prem was reported to meet with representatives of the Democrat Party, Chart Thai and Pua Pandin to discuss the post-election situation (*Bangkok Post* online, 23 December 2007, at <http://www.bangkokpost.net>).

The rise of the North-Northeast based group took place in the context of the parliamentary democracy. Historically, the areas were neglected, discriminated and politically suppressed. Economically, inland North and Northeast were based on agrarian economy. Culturally, those from the North and Northeast accounted for a majority of rural electorates which were referred to by the urban middle class as “uneducated, uninformed, open to bribery, and morally deficient” (Nelson. 2006c), an image in contrast with that of Southerners, and were described as “playful” and/or “demanding” (Parichart. 1997: 263). Ideologically, the North-Northeast based group

tended to be more commercial, parochial and paternal⁴. Though the group should be better defined as various small interest groups of provincial politicians in a “money politics” system, they more or less reflect the neglected voice, albeit segmented, of the peasantry, especially in the Northeast, in a political system that has been long dominated and defined by the urban rich and the middle class. As Pasuk and Baker observe (2000: 148), the growth of local protest, particularly in the poor northeast region, during the 1990s “was reflected in party politics”. The argument is upheld through Chavalit’s New Aspiration, Thaksin’s TRT and then PPP with populist policy promotion.

It is interesting to note that almost all of the main parties which gathered support of northeastern politicians seemed to be less favored by the royalists and urban middle class. According to Handley (cited in McCargo. 2005), Chart Thai leader and Prem’s successor Chatichai Choonavan, was rather too independent-minded: “Chatichai tried to dismantle the machine the King and Prem had built”. Holding the same view, Hewison (1997: 70) points out that the monarch regarded Chatichai as unable to control the government. Similarly, the short reign of Banharn Silpa-Archa and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was arguably partly attributed to the lack of support from the royalists and Bangkok’s business community. The new Banharn Silpa-archan government, as McCargo (2005) notes, was unwelcome by the monarch while Chalavit was often rumored to be unsympathetic to the monarchy and was, argues Ungpakorn (in Ungpakorn. 2003: 24), disliked by the Thai big business for his New Aspiration’s “populist” leaning. Thaksin, likewise, was arguably accused of being unfriendly to the monarchy. Complacent about his performance and popular support from the rural areas, Thaksin was said to be the first figure since 1992 who openly challenged the monarchy. According to McCargo (2005), “Thaksin represented the epitome of the new money-based political forces that were unhappy with the poly-archy of the network monarchy” and “He set about systematically to dismantle the political networks loyal to Prem in a wide range of sectors, aiming to replace them with his own supporters, associates and relatives”.

⁴ According to Prof. Pasuk Phongpaichit, from the background of agrarian economy based on rice land and strongly historical repression, the Northeasterner tended to be more paternalism oriented. She also pointed out that the composition of the current PPP government suggested that the cabinet went back to the mid 1990s pattern of provincial medium enterprises as opposed to big business feature of the TRT’s regime. Interview conducted at Chulalongkorn University on 18 March 2008.

The line separated the North-Northeast and the South-Bangkok appeared to become clearer with the rise of the TRT and then of the PPP. Ideologically, the arguably defined line somewhat reflects divergence of interests between the urban and provincial areas, and between the rich and the poor. As Kulabkaew and Tan-Mullins remark (2005), the North and the Northeast locals who are mainly farmers are “antagonized by the middle class metropolitans and the South folks who are still seen as loyal to Democrat Party, and as opposition of economic development for the poor”. Undoubtedly, the popularity of the defunct TRT and its proxy PPP in the North and Northeast was significantly attributed to its populist policy which more or less unprecedentedly benefited the rural poor. According to Chang Noi (*The Nation* online, 27 November 2006, at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com>), TRT’s populism “was sometimes crude, often extravagant, and always a cover for corruption, cronyism and profiteering. But what made this populism truly frightening for the middle class...was its political implications. Thaksin was giving political legitimacy to rural demands”. As a result, while the royalists, the military and the Bangkokian middle class discredited TRT’s government on grounds that the rural majority was “uneducated, uninformed, open to bribery, and morally deficient” (Nelson. 2006c), it was the rural electorates, who were admitted by Viroj Naranong (*Bangkok Post*, 14 February 2008) as “real people with real wisdom from whom we [anti-Thaksin intellectuals] should learn more”, in the North and Northeast that brought the PPP back to power.

Another group that rose to the elite status through the parliamentary system was of ex-CPT sympathizers. Though the vast majority of them, as Ungpakorn argues (2003: 32), firmly believed that socialism died along with the Cold War, they still kept their beliefs in justice and in an equal society which benefits the poor and little people⁵. While many of the “October generation” chose to work in local Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), others, in the context of the parliamentary democracy, preferred to return to politics through political parties to fulfill their aspiration. Though many of them were not rich, and disunity, especially in terms of ideology, undoubtedly existed

⁵ As Supalak Ganjanakhundee of the *Nation* commented on 20 October 2007: “Whatever else they [ex-communists] may have been taught by the Communist Party, they were instilled with the spirit of struggle for justice for their class of poor peasants and believed that politics could be a tool to achieve this with the end of the armed struggle” (at <http://www.parliament.go.th>).

among ex-activists⁶, their strength lied in their relatively broad connections among the old colleagues and with the rural electorates. That helps to explain why Chavalit's New Aspiration stretched from ex-generals to ex-communists by 1996 and attempted to apply "populist policy" in order to "win the hearts and minds of the people" (Ungpakorn. 2007: 112). Also many of the ex-Communist sympathizers then joined the defunct TRT and held important or senior positions, i.e. advisors, secretary general, deputy leader; prominent among them were Phumtham Vej Jayachai, Prapat Panyachatrak, Phrommin Lertsuridej, Kriengkamon Laohapairot, Surapong Seubwonglee, Sutham Saengprathum and Chaturon Chaisaeng (Pasuk and Baker. 2004, McCargo and Ukrist. 2005, Ungpakorn. 2007).

According to Ungpakorn, TRT became a very strange mix of old and new politicians and ex-left wing activists alongside ex-right wing thugs (1999: 32); and it was "a party of the rich capitalists for the rich capitalists and any reasonable social policies it might have were designed to buy social peace at the cheapest possible price" (2007: 115). However, given the history of communist suppression, the nature of Thai politics dominated by paternalism, the capitalist worldview spinning around traditional values of the monarchy, religion and the nation, this can be seen as efforts by the ex-radicals to be involved in the policy making process to realize their social goals⁷. As an ex-CPT sympathize in TRT commented, "we've seized state power without having to eat taro and sweet potatoes" (cited in Ungpakorn. 1999: 32). Unsurprisingly, it was the ex-left wing activists who helped to draft "populist policy" of the TRT. "These ex-radicals helped to articulate TRT's social agenda. They gave Thaksin a tinge of legitimacy with journalists and activists from the same generation" (Pasuk and Baker. 2004: 69). These "October people" encouraged Premier Thaksin to "meet with social movements like the Assembly of the Poor and they coordinated with movement and NGO leaders in order to solve disputes or dampen down protest actions against the government" (Ungpakorn. 2007: 113). Also they were instrumental in bringing their former peasant comrades in as party supporters; some of them played a key role in mobilizing people from the grass roots in rural areas in the North and Northeast to

⁶ According to Ungpakorn (2007), joining the PAD were also ex-student activists who, based on their right-wing free-market position, saw TRT's populist policy as a factor leading to a "patron-client" type of dependency by village upon the state.

⁷ Ironically, these former activists seem to pay no attention to the discriminated status of the Malay speaking provinces. This can be seen as the legacy of the concept of Thai-ness. The Takbai incident is vivid evidence to show the government's brutality to and suppression on the Malay Thais.

support the TRT (The *Nation*, cited at www.parliament.go.th). This helps to explain why in the wake of the 2006 coup, the military handpicked premier Surayud Chulanont had to open talks with ex-communists in the North and Northeast in order to win their support for the junta (The *Nation* online, 14 October 2007, 19 October 2007, 21 October 2007, at www.nationmultimedia.com).

Ideologically, the support of the ex-radicals to New Aspiration and TRT was probably due to their modern Marxist interpretation of the Thai politics. According to Ungpakorn (2007), in the early 1970s the CPT argued that Thailand was “semi-feudal, semi-colonial” and it was necessary to cooperate with the “progressive capitalists” to weaken the monarchy institution – a “democratic revolution” used by Stalinist and Maoist parties in the developing world. “For the CPT and its descendants, especially those in TRT, the modernizing capitalist class (people like Thaksin) needed to be supported because it would reduce the power of the ‘feudal monarch’” (Ungpakorn. 2007: 48). Many old CPT leaders, as Ungpakorn points out (2007: 114), even suggested that it was necessary to back TRT in order to confront the “old feudal power” in society.

From the background of the Thai ruling elites, it is interesting to note that the relations between Thailand and Vietnam seemed to go more smoothly when the North-Northeast based parties held power. During the first Chuan administration⁸, though Thai leaders and diplomats had publicly greeted Vietnam’s ASEAN membership with a “proper” degree of enthusiasm, “numerous questions remained concerning the Thai officialdom’s real perceptions of Hanoi” (Sukhumbhand. 1994)⁹. Many of the Thai governing elite still saw Hanoi as a “trouble maker” (Surin. 1994) in the area of national security. Accordingly, the Thai foreign ministry had set strict criteria for Vietnam’s membership, stressing the need for the latter to participate in and contribute to all ASEAN activities, including payment of USD1 million to the newly constituted ASEAN fund, which could be seen as difficult to be accepted by Hanoi.

Regarding the second Chuan administration, which advocated “democracy” and “human rights” in line with the transformation of the Democrat Party from a provincially oriented party in early 1990s into the spearhead of the urban aspirations (Pasuk and Baker. 2000: 142), divergence between Thailand and Vietnam was seen in

⁸ It is interesting to note that in early 1990s the Democrat Party was also provincially oriented with the dominance of Southerners in the party (Pasuk and Baker. 2000: 136-137).

⁹ MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra was one of key advisers of Chatichai, who was the most outspoken critic of the Minister of Foreign Affairs over how quickly Thailand should move to accommodate Vietnam

terms of the “ASEAN way” and consequently of the Burmese, East Timorese and Cambodian issues. In December 1997, Thailand insisted that the concept of “open societies” be included in the ASEAN vision 2020 statement (Wheeler. 2001, Funston. 1998). Also the Thais called for a review of the principle of non-interference, proposing a policy of “flexible engagement” instead. As a result, Bangkok’s criticism on Myanmar’s democracy had been on the rise. In the East Timor conflict, Thailand undertook a major role in the Australian-led military force sent to restore order in the newly born country (Wheeler. 2001).

Adopting a different approach, Vietnam, having been concerned about the so-called “peaceful revolution”, always affirmed its adherence to the ASEAN way, specifically the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Unsurprisingly, Hanoi did not support the Thai proposal of building “open societies” in Southeast Asia and refused to take part in the East Timor issue, perceiving it as Indonesia’s internal affairs. Moreover, in the wake of the 1997 political crisis in Cambodia, while Bangkok opposed to the former’s immediate admission, Hanoi pushed very hard for Cambodia’s membership in the 1998 ASEAN Summit (Wheeler. 2001).

Meanwhile, under Chatichai’s era, Thailand promoted the policy of “turning Indochina from a battlefield into a market place”. This policy was at that time not welcomed by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Thai National Security, and the ASEAN neighbors who regarded Chatichai’s action as “an act undermining ASEAN’s credibility” (Thanyathip. 2003: 64). Under Chavalit administration, Vietnam was “a focus of considerable Thai attention” in early 1997 (Funston. 1998). Notably, Bangkok and Hanoi reached a historic agreement on the thorny issue of water territory with the signing of the Treaty for Water Border Demarcation on 9 August 1997. This is the first treaty on water border demarcation that Vietnam has signed with another country after a relatively short time, which opened ways for joint-exploitation of sea resources, especially fishing and oil.

Though moving cautiously over the issue of ASEAN expansion to include Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in light of the possibility of a negative reaction from the US and the EU, Chavalit’s cabinet still supported the three countries’ early membership of ASEAN (Funston. 1998). This was undoubtedly welcome by Vietnam given Hanoi’s

strong supporting voice for these entries¹⁰. Also it is worth recalling that Chavalit was the initiator of the project of constructing the Thai-Vietnamese friendship village in his foothold province of Nakhon Phanom.

The TRT's era in the 2001-2006 periods witnessed a watershed in Vietnam-Thailand relations, marked by the first joint cabinet meeting in Nakhon Phanom in February 2004. In the meeting, the *Joint Statement on the Thailand-Vietnam Cooperation Framework in the First Decade of the 21st Century*, which was believed to serve as a guideline for bilateral relations, was signed among other sound important documents for bilateral cooperation. Also the two prime ministers co-presided the inauguration of the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village in the province.

It is important to note that provincial politicians were not necessary pro-Vietnam. However, since they were more commercial and parochial, they tended to support policies that were able to bring benefits to their business and to the region in order to ensure their political position. Given that good neighborliness policies, especially relations with Indochina, could benefit Isan economy, particularly through cooperation within the framework of the Greater Mekong Sub-region programs (GMS), Northeast-based political parties tended to pay more attention to Indochina policies, especially those concerning Thailand-Vietnam cooperation. Furthermore, because they tended to be paternal-oriented, they were less influenced by the West defined concepts of democracy, human rights, and liberalism. Therefore, less confrontation with Hanoi over these issues under the reign of provincial parties was expectable.

The strategy can be clearly seen under TRT's era. Accordingly, one of the main foci of Thaksin's regionalism was the promotion of sub-regional economic zones (SREZs) in mainland Southeast Asia¹¹, of which the ADB initiated Greater Mekong Sub-region Economic Cooperation Program (GMS) and the Thaksin proposed Ayeyawady-Chaophraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) appeared to receive greater attention. On the regional level, these programs would serve

¹⁰ For Hanoi strategists, given differences in terms of ideology and political structures and not least the past confrontation between Vietnam and the "old" ASEAN states, the membership of the three could help Hanoi counterbalance the "old forces". Obviously, for a number of "sensitive" issues proposed in ASEAN, probable support from Laos and Cambodia, and quite possible from Myanmar, could give Vietnam's voice more weight. Also it is worth noting that Vietnam's lobbying for Laos' and Cambodia's entry into ASEAN could consolidate relations between Vietnam and the other two Indochinese states. It is worth noting that after the delay of Cambodia's admission into ASEAN in the wake of the political upheaval in Phnom Penh in Jul 1997, Hanoi pushed very hard for Cambodia's membership.

¹¹ SREZs integrate the nation of industrial estate across national boundaries. They generally involve cooperation among parts of nations instead of entire nations (Chambers. 2005: 9).

Bangkok's policy of becoming the hub of the region economically and politically. Domestically, the fact that the focused areas under these programs were in the North and Northeast of Thailand, the poorest areas and strongholds of TRT, suggested political calculations of Thaksin to ensure his party's victory in elections. Moreover, under Thaksin leadership, given the authoritarian style of the "CEO" premier, divergence in terms of "democracy" and "human rights" did not pose serious problems to Thailand-Vietnam interactions.

The Thai elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh

"Every nation had its heroes. Methods of combat may differ, as do the historical eras in which the conflicts in which they distinguished themselves took place. But one thing that is always the same is the exalted status of a hero who fights for the country he loves. Ho Chi Minh is one of the greatest of Vietnam's national heroes, but in Thailand, too, played an important part in his achievement" (Suthon Sukphisit, in the *Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2003).

With the readjusted worldviews, principled as well as causal beliefs in the post-Cold War context, generally the Thai governing elite have adopted moderate, if not to say positive, perception of Ho Chi Minh, especially since the late 1990s. Though the Cold War's legacy has still haunted a section of the Thai elite, especially the conservatives who seem to continue to be latently obsessed by the image of a "Communist Ho Chi Minh", by and large the Thai governing elite tend to refer to Ho Chi Minh as a respectable patriotic leader of the Vietnamese people. In the context of Thai-Vietnamese détente, the Ho Chi Minh factor has been seen as a catalyst for boosting bilateral relations between Thailand and Vietnam. Moreover, Ho Chi Minh's image has been "utilized" to serve Thailand's Isan tourism development strategy, and to a certain extent, calculations of political parties.

Upholding the traditional values of the monarchy, Buddhism and the nation, a section of the Thai elite, especially the conservatives, has been still haunted by the ideological confrontation of the Cold War. Giving interview to the CNN in his capacity as Thailand's post-coup elected premier, Samak Sundaravej remarked, "What's wrong to be right wing? The right wing is with the King. The left wing is communist" (*Bangkok Post*, 11 February 2008). As a result, Ho Chi Minh has been still somewhat seen as an unwelcome Communist. As some ethnic Vietnamese Thais in Nakhon Phanom recalled, during the 1980s whoever found with Ho pictures in their houses could be charged as communists needed to be get rid of. After Ho passed away, the Viet Kieu renovated the Duc Thanh Tran (Tran Hung Dao) Temple to worship Ho and other Vietnamese national heroes but anti-Vietnamese measures ran so harsh that they had to

replace the picture of Ho Chi Minh, which used to be placed in the middle of the temple, by a picture of the sun¹². The claim is supplemented by a former Thai communist who pointed out that even the media during the 1980s avoided showing Ho's picture¹³. Until the late 1990s, ethnic Vietnamese Thais had been still afraid of mentioning about Ho Chi Minh in public areas or of talking about their late leader even with Thai scholars¹⁴. According to a Thai professor, concerning Thailand-Vietnam relations, hitherto the conservative elite have preferred to mention King Gia Long, who once, before he became a king, had to seek refuge in Siam following his defeat by the Tay Son and was received assistance from the Siamese court in his attempt to return to Vietnam, rather than Ho Chi Minh. In their view, Nguyen Anh was associated with the monarchy while Ho Chi Minh was a liberator¹⁵.

When the projects of building historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani came along, the plans had been under fire on grounds that Ho Chi Minh was a Communist. Regarding the project in Nakhon Phanom, according to Artha Nantachukra, who took charge of the Mahasarakham University study team, "Endless criticism from the starting of the project to the present time [2006] still exists especially the questions such as 'Why must Ho Chi Minh be esteemed?'" (Artha. 2006). The opponents even accused the scholar of having Vietnamese origin. Some officials at the office of the National Security Council, as Artha claims (*Bangkok Post*, 24 April 2000), expressed concerns about political effects the project might bring.

At the first stage of the friendship village project, which started in 1999, several village heads in Tambon Nongyat, where the historical site locates, and old Thais who were of the Cold War generation, opposed to the plan¹⁶. Under such opposition, even a number of the ethnic Vietnamese Thais expressed their concerns about "political

¹² According to interviews conducted in Nakhon Phanom in May 2007

¹³ According to the interview with a former Thai communist in Bangkok on 14 November 2007

¹⁴ Giving interview to Kavi Chongkittavorn of the *Nation* in August 1996, Vo Trong Tieu, the owner of the land which Ho used to stay during his time in Nakhon Phanom, expressed that he dared not to tell anyone about who planted the ma-phaeng tree in his garden until recently (*The Nation*, 6 August 1996). Also according to Prof. Artha Nantachukra who headed the Mahasarakham University team to carry out historical studies about Ho's stay in Nakhon Phanom in preparation for the project of building historical site of Ho Chi Minh in the province, at the team's meeting with the Viet Kieu to collect data about Ho's stay in 1998, they "realized anxiety and fear" among the informants (Artha. 2006).

¹⁵ Based on the interview with a Thai senior professor in Chulalongkorn University on 29 October 2007

¹⁶ According to interviews with some ethnic Vietnamese Thais in Nakhon Phanom in May 2007

consequences” of the project. Until recently, some have still been cautious about attending ceremonies held on the occasion of Ho Chi Minh’s birthday at the site.

The same problem went for the project in Ban Nong On, Tambon Chieng Pin, Udon Thani. This area was used to be referred to as “Red Area” during the Vietnam War; and anti-Communist measures were so harsh that almost all Vietnamese refugees who used to live in the area had to move their houses. By 1997, the local authorities, especially the police, used to come to Nong On to question the Viet Kieu about communists (Khoan and Tien. 2005: 101). Concerning the historical site of Ho Chi Minh, at first the provincial authorities had encountered such acute opposition from some village heads and old Thais who argued that Ho Chi Minh was a Communist whose ideology went against the Thai tradition that they had to convene several meetings to discuss the issue. Though generally provincial and tambon officials gave full support for the site since 2003, not until late 2005 was the project able to be actively carried out¹⁷. In 2005, Thai security agencies even questioned the motive of Chieng Pin’s Nayok for advocating the Ho Chi Minh site project. At the time of the elections that year, the project had to be postponed by the authorities in order to circumvent possible political attacks from opponents.

As the ethnic Vietnamese Thais who are sitting in the site management board recalled, when the provincial governor suggested the Viet Kieu rebuild the historical site where Ho Chi Minh used to stay, in the face of opposition from several old local Thais, some Viet Kieu, like those in Nakhon Phanom, expressed their caution about the initiation, worrying that the project could be taken advantage of for political purposes when the two countries were not on good terms. To overcome the hurdle, the ethnic Vietnamese Thais had to launch a new round of “building Thai-Vietnamese friendship” in order to win support of the local Thais for the project.

However, in the new context, the ideological confrontation, though it has been lingering among a section of the Thai elite, has been by and large downplayed in the interest of cooperation. Additionally, it is worth noting that in the late 1980s, Ho Chi Minh was internationally revered by the UNESCO whose a 1987 resolution stated that the late Vietnamese president was “the national liberation hero and outstanding man of

¹⁷ According to Thin and Thanyathip (2006: 357), the site was inaugurated on 21 September 2004. However, the Viet-Thais who are in the site management board affirmed that the official inauguration day was on 19 May 2006. On 21 September 2004, the board just organized a meeting to introduce the project to the local officials and the Viet-Thai community.

culture". As a result, officially the Thai government and the press have now referred to Ho Chi Minh as a patriotic leader of the Vietnamese people. Moreover, the Ho Chi Minh image has been "utilized" by the Thai government to boost bilateral relations between the two countries.

This trend is undoubtedly reflected through the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, though opposition could be seen at the first stage, and through the Thai government's Viet Kieu policy. Mentioning about Ho Chi Minh at the inauguration of the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village in Nakhon Phanom on 21 February 2004, then Deputy Prime Minister General Chavalit, who initiated the project during his short premiership tenure, remarked, "President Ho Chi Minh is not only a great leader of the Vietnamese people...but also a great man known by the whole world". Addressing in the event, the then Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra emphasized the cultural aspect of Ho Chi Minh as an important factor to foster Thai-Vietnamese friendship. "I wish the Vietnamese Thais follow the teachings of President Ho Chi Minh, who is also Uncle Ho of Ban Na Chok. You should take these as a typical example in life. You surely remember that our Uncle Ho, when staying here, educated the Thais in raising fresh fish in a technical way, and always reiterated that people should be grateful to the land that sheltered them. Uncle Ho also always taught that the Thai-Vietnamese friendship was bridged by the Mekong River. Uncle Ho's thought makes Thailand-Vietnam relations further developed" (cited in Khoan and Tien. 2005: 131). According to Vo Trong Tieu, the owner of the land where the Ho Chi Minh historical site is located, many delegations of Thai senior officials, including royalists and military generals, have visited the site. They all expressed their admiration for the national liberation cause as well as cultural qualities of Ho Chi Minh.

This policy has been echoed by the Thai press. Unlike in the Cold War period, Ho Chi Minh has been recently publicly pictured as "founding father of Vietnam" (*The Nation*, 6 August 1996), "great freedom fighter" (*Bangkok Post*, 24 April 2000), "father of the Vietnamese nation" (*Bangkok Post* 18 July 2000), "Vietnamese national hero" (*Bangkok Post*, 20 February 2004). The trend was clearly reflected through the Thai journalist Suthon Sukphisit's comment on Ho Chi Minh: "Every nation had its heroes. Methods of combat may differ, as do the historical eras in which the conflicts in which they distinguished themselves took place. But one thing that is always the same is the exalted status of a hero who fights for the country he loves. *Ho Chi Minh is one of the*

greatest of Vietnam's national heroes, but in Thailand, too, played an important part in his achievement" (*Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2003)¹⁸.

It is worth noting that the projects on Ho Chi Minh sites seemed to be strongly given a boost under General Chavalit's and Thaksin's administrations. This came as a result of not only political and economic calculations by the New Aspiration and TRT, but possibly from personal ideas held by Chavalit and Thaksin.

According to a Thai senior professor of Chulalongkorn University, who took part in the student uprisings in the 1970s, General Chavalit was once a disciple of Khaiseng Suksai, a well-known Isan politician during the 1970s who bore great respect for Ho Chi Minh¹⁹. Moreover, Chavalit, as Pasuk and Baker (1999: 265) point out, believed in strong leadership. He openly admired the military-backed Golkar party in Indonesia; and noted that Deng Hsiao-Ping was effective because he held the Chinese leadership for a long time. During the 1970s-1980s, Chavalit, emerging as the leader of the Democratic Soldiers, closely worked with some CPT defectors who did not agree on the Chinese tactics adopted by the party, and realized that injustice, discrimination and poverty in rural areas were the main forces behind the antagonism of the peasantry towards the government. Like other Democratic Soldiers, he believed the "problem of communism" stemmed from capitalism (Pasuk and Baker, 2005: 233).

In the Cambodian conflict, Chavalit was among the Democratic Soldiers who closely followed the issue and openly criticized the government's policy toward Vietnam and Cambodia. In their view, which was influenced by Prasert Sapsunthorn, a former member of the CPT, Vietnamese military actions in Cambodia should be considered as an attempt to protect socialism in a young socialist country and Thailand should not intervene in the affairs of the socialist community but remain neutral (Chai-anan, in Turley, 1985: 85). During Chatichai's era, Chavalit in his capacity as armed forces chief supported the premier's Indochina policy (Funston, 1998).

From the background, in the context of Thailand-Vietnam rapprochement, Chavalit initiated the plan to build a Thai-Vietnamese friendship village at Ban Na Chok where Ho Chi Minh used to stay, and encouraged Nakhon Phanom governor to propose the project. This attempt, as a former CPT member claimed, also aimed at winning support from ex-CPT sympathizers in the Northeast. According to the

¹⁸ Emphasized by the researcher

¹⁹ Interview conducted in Chulalongkorn University on 29 October 2007

informant²⁰, most of the CPT supporters, especially intellectuals, respected Ho's ideas on social justice, equality and human emancipation as well as his strong will for national liberation and unification. "Ho Chi Minh's thoughts are part of the Thai communists". For many ex-leftwingers, "Ho Chi Minh is not a Vietnamese national hero but also a world leader"; and they, claimed the informant, appreciated Chavalit's initiation.

During TRT's era, Thaksin must have realized the opportunity to use the "Ho Chi Minh factor" to boost bilateral relations with Vietnam to serve his regional policy as well as, to a certain extent, to consolidate support of the ex-leftwingers for TRT. Under Thaksin's leadership, the Thai government seemed to strongly promote the projects to restructure Ho's house and the friendship village in Nakhon Phanom. In September 2001, the Thaksin administration announced a plan to renovate the house where Ho Chi Minh stayed at Ban Na Chok. In 2003, the cabinet issued a government decision to preserve the relics site and approved a fund of Bt7.5 million for the first phase of the site and the friendship village project (Luu. 2004: 197, Khoan and Tien. 2005: 123). In February the following year, Nakhon Phanom was chosen as the venue for the first joint cabinet meeting between Thailand and Vietnam. Thaksin together with his Vietnamese counterpart joined the inauguration ceremony of the Thai-Vietnamese friendship village at Ban Na Chok. Evaluating the significance of the village to Thailand-Vietnam relations, then Thai Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkhon emphasized that the site could be seen as a symbol of the bilateral relationship. "During the first Joint Cabinet Retreat in 2004, we established the Thailand-Vietnam Friendship Village in Nakhon Phanom as a symbol of our relations. The village has strong historical value since it was where Uncle Ho stayed during exile and planned his campaign for Vietnam's independence" (cited in the *Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006).

Not only did the policy aim at boosting bilateral relations with Vietnam but also was part of Thailand's overall strategy in mainland Southeast Asia. Like Hanoi, post-financial crisis Bangkok attached importance to mainland Southeast Asia. Given Thailand's advantages over the other mainland states, all of which except Vietnam share border with Thailand, in terms of political image and economic development, Bangkok could undoubtedly assume the leadership role in the mainland. "Regionalism would

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Interview conducted with a former CPT member in Bangkok on 14 November 2007

complement Thailand's role as core of the sub-region and place it in a favorable position of the commodity chain with its neighbors as de facto periphery area. The periphery could supply raw material to Thailand and form an extended market for products from Thailand. This is supposed to make Thailand more attractive as a base of intermediate economic activities to foreign investors" (Panom, 2004: 39).

According to Arkhom Tempittayapaisith, then Deputy Secretary General of Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board, Thaksin's administration had constantly supported the improvement and relaxation of regulations and measures to facilitate trade and investment with the neighboring countries under the GMS framework (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006). Under this policy, Vietnam probably occupied high consideration in the Thais' calculations not only due to Hanoi's strategic relations with Laos and Cambodia but also to Vietnam's position in the GMS. Vietnam, as ADB's Vietnam country director Bradford Philips pointed out, is "a major proponent of the early implementation of trade and transport facilitation measures in GMS, which is key to the transformation of transport corridors to economic corridors and would greatly improve the sub-region's competitiveness" (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006).

Nakhon Phanom, sharing the Mekong River with Laos' Kham Muon province, is connected to central Vietnam through Laos by highway route 12 which is situated between route 8 and route 9 along the West-East Economic Corridor²¹. That helps to explain why the province's friendship village was expected by the Thai authorities to become a place for studying cultures of peoples in the lower Mekong river basin in accordance with the Thai government's policy on "developing friendly relations with neighboring countries" (*Thai Rath*, 18 November 2003, cited in Khoan and Tien, 2005: 119).

Moreover, tourism, which was believed to help foster economic growth in the most impoverished region of Northeast, was another main momentum for the promotion of the projects of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani. The Thais believed that these sites would attract more Vietnamese as well as international tourists to the region. In former Thai Ambassador to Hanoi Krit Kraichitti's words, "In

²¹ As for road transportation from Nakhon Phanom to Vietnam, there are three routes: Nakhon Phanom-Thakhek following the route 12 to Quang Binh; Nakhon Phanom-Thakhek along the route 13 which connects to the route 8 to Nghe An and Ha Tinh; Nakhon Phanom-Thakhek-Savannakhet running down route 9 to Quang Tri.

northeastern provinces of Thailand, many hotels and tour companies are owned by overseas Vietnamese who have been living in Thailand during the past decades. Large number of overseas Vietnamese who have received Thai citizenship are leading businessmen in those provinces and have close connection with Vietnamese business in Vietnam, in particular in tourism sector, and now are actively promote the exchange of Thai and Vietnamese tourists” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006). The view was shared by Juthamas Siriwan, then Governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, who revealed that “Thailand is considering organizing tourism functions to commemorate the founding of the Friendship Village in Nakhon Phanom province...The two sides will be creating conditions to grow overland travel between the two countries, along the East West Economic Corridor” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006).

Additionally, it is worth recalling that tourism was strongly encouraged under Thaksin’s era through the “CEO governors” program. Accordingly, provincial governors were told to be responsible for provincial economic growth, and subject to more stringent assessments of their performance. Each had to draw up a provincial plan on the model of a corporate business plan. Most of these plans, as Pasuk and Baker observe (2004: 188), targeted growth through tourism. Unsurprisingly, boosting tourism was another important theme in Udon Thani and Nakhon Phanom governors’ talks when they mentioned the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh. The then Governor of Nakhon Phanom Nikom Kerdkhanmak remarked, “Tourism has been carried out via many activities through travel agents in many important cities of Vietnam from the north to the south...The most interesting thing is that both Nakhon Phanom and Vietnam have a Ho Chi Minh Museum, which is a very important vestige of history...The policy and vision of Nakhon Phanom aims to help create a ‘Wonderful habitat and relationship in Indochina’” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006).

In the same vein, the then Governor of Udon Thani Vichai Tasanasetra stated, “the Udon Thani Provincial Administration together with Viet-Thais have cooperated in the project to develop Nong Hang and Nong On villages to become a historical attraction and educational site. Viet-Thais in Udon Thani and the people of Udon Thani have supported trade, investment, and tourism projects as part of the strategic plan for provincial development integration with the aim of increasing productivity and product distribution...As for Udon Thani, the tourism cooperation plan under the Triangle of World Heritage Sites Project has been expedited to realize a concrete outcome” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006). The view is reflected through the official name

of the Ho Chi Minh site in Udon Thani, i.e. “Ho Chi Minh Educational and Tourism Historical Site”. However, this authorities-given name is criticized by Udon intellectuals on grounds that Ho Chi Minh is a historical figure and man of culture; using the name “tourism site”, therefore, is inappropriate and unnecessary²².

Besides external relation as well as economic calculations, the fact that among the key advisors of Thaksin and senior positions of the TRT were ex-CPT sympathizers suggested that the Thaksin cabinet’s promotion of the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh might, like in the Chavalit’s era, also aim at attracting to and consolidating support from the ex-leftwingers in the North and Northeast of Thailand. The Ho Chi Minh sites, as an ex-CPT member claimed, not only were for the Vietnamese but also were the symbol of the quest of the ex-leftwingers for social justice, equality and human emancipation²³. One typical example of the claim was Adisorn Piengkes, former TRT’s executive member and ex-CPT sympathizer who composed a song named “Oh, Vietnam” in Hanoi on 19 February 1978 to praise Ho Chi Minh. In his words, “Ho Chi Minh will live forever. Not only I but many Thai MPs who have visited Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum have the same feelings” (cited in Khoan and Tien. 2005: 140-141).

The emphasis of Ho Chi Minh’s patriotic and cultural qualities over “Communist” aspect by the Thai governing elite gave momentum for change in the government’s Viet Kieu policy in the context of Thailand-Vietnam rapprochement. The “fifth column” who were “loyal to a Ho Chi Minh Communist” are now by and large seen as people of Vietnamese origin who love Thailand as much as their motherland.

It is worth noting that the Chatichai’s, Chavalit’s and Thaksin’s governments seemed to adopt more supportive stance on the Viet Kieu. The Chatichai cabinet was the first to raise the Viet Kieu problem. Under Chatichai, the Liaison Center 114 which took charge of the refugees affairs during the Cold War was dissolved. While in the Chuan’s first government, the process of considering granting of citizenship to offsprings of the Vietnamese migrants was postponed in accordance to the 1992 amended Law on Nationality Citizen Act²⁴, under Chavalit’s leadership, the

²² According to the interview with Assoc. Prof. Sorat Pitchomchum, Rachabhat University of Udon Thani on 7 November 2007

²³ According to the interview with a former CPT member in Bangkok on 14 November 2007

²⁴ According to the Vietnam Commission for Overseas Vietnamese (2006), following the 2nd amendment of the Law on Nationality Citizen Act in 1992, the process of considering granting of citizenship to offsprings of the Vietnamese migrants was postponed. For those who had been granted the citizenship right, their status was cancelled.

administration granted citizenship to the biggest number of the Viet Kieu in June 1997 (Thanyathip. 2006). The process was then slowed until the late 2002 when the Thaksin regime promoted the policy of integrating the Vietnamese into Thai society. Also in March 2004, the government issued a resolution recommending the Ministry of the Interior use the word “Vietnamese refugees” instead of “Youn Oppayop” for the latter implied disparagement and insulting (Thanyathip. 2006).

6.3. Vietnam’s response to the Thai elite’s perception of Ho Chi Minh

The Thai elite’s preference for emphasizing the patriotic as well as cultural features of Ho Chi Minh, which is reflected through the historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani as well as through the Thai government’s Viet Kieu policy, undoubtedly had significant impacts on Hanoi’s attitude towards its former Cold War rival. In order to comprehensively evaluate the attitude, it is necessary to review Ho’s legacy in post-Cold War Vietnam and its impacts on Thailand-Vietnam interactions.

The economic crisis with “hyperinflation” during the 1980s together with the demise of the socialist camp in the Soviet Union and East Europe in the late 1980s, early 1990s blew a strike against Hanoi strategists’ beliefs in the way to realize socialism as well as against the leadership of the party. This was the driving force for the renovation policy (Doi Moi) promoted in the 1986 Party Congress, which was seen as “the matter of live or death” by Hanoi. The focus of the policy was to carry out extensive socio-economic “reform”, including the area of foreign policies, in order to serve economic development and uphold political leadership of the party. This objective was set based on a new worldview held by the party leaders, which emphasized the importance of economic development over ideological confrontation.

According to Hanoi strategists, competition among countries in the post-Cold War context would be no longer based on political ideologies but on national, regional and international interests; of them economic interest was the leading force. As the 6th Party Congress pointed out, “Competition in the economic front bears in itself political significance that has become more and more important than that between the two systems [i.e. socialism and capitalism]...the only correct choice in the competition is that conducted through economic and social spheres...and [for Vietnam] the race will be only carried out in the context of peace and stability” (cited in Ly. 2005: 176). The belief was reinforced with the demise of the Cold War. “The race for economic development has compelled nations, especially developing countries, to renew their

external relations policies. [These countries need to] implement multifaceted and multilateral foreign policies, widen and strengthen linkages and cooperation with developed countries to take advantage of their capital and technology, to expand markets [to] as well as learn experience of production and business management [from developed countries]...[They also need] to change the old concept of assessing a nation's strength from military strength to considering aggregation of different factors, of which the economic and science-technology strength is prominent" (Ly. 2005: 142).

From the perceived image of the international system, the party leaders now saw the need to reactivate Ho's thoughts on the Vietnamese revolution. As the 6th Congress concluded, "...in order to renew our views, the party has to thoroughly understand the revolutionary and scientific nature of Marxism and Leninism and to inherit the valuable treasure of the revolutionary ideologies and theories of Ho Chi Minh" (Vietnam Communist Party. 1987: 125). This was reinforced at the 7th Party Congress in the wake of the UNESCO's reverence for Ho Chi Minh in the late 1980s. For the first time, Ho Chi Minh Thought was officially ranked equal as Marxism-Leninism, and was affirmed to be "an invaluable asset of the nation" (Vietnam Communist Party. 1991: 127).

In 2001, the official definition of Ho Chi Minh Thought was given in the 9th Party Congress. Two years later, on 27 March 2003 the politburo released an instruction on studying and following Ho Chi Minh Thought. The document stated that "in order to successfully fulfill the tasks of the Vietnamese revolution in the new development era, it is necessary to thoroughly understand and creatively apply Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought to deal with practical issues in every aspect such as economics, politics, culture, society, security, defense, foreign affairs, political system and party construction" (*Nhan Dan*, 4 April 2003). Studying of Ho Chi Minh Thought, therefore, was set as the main task in order to "have the whole party, the people, and the military thoroughly understand the origins, contents, value, and significance of Ho Chi Minh Thought...to make Ho Chi Minh Thought increasingly become the core value in the spiritual and ideological life of our society" (*Nhan Dan*, 4 April 2003). As a result, from the academic year of 2003-2004 on, Ho Chi Minh thought has been taught in universities and colleges as a main subject (Ly. 2005: 139).

The resurrection of Ho Chi Minh's thoughts by the Vietnamese party helped to give momentum to Thailand-Vietnam rapprochement. Essentially, it can be said that the core of Ho Chi Minh Thought on the Vietnamese revolution is to stick to socialist ideals and principles and maintain the leadership of the party while applying pragmatic

approaches to economic development and foreign relations to serve *national interests*. Fifteen years after Vietnam was unified, Ho's thoughts on "national interests" were brought back in its place in Vietnam's foreign policy in relation to "international responsibility" defined by the party leaders during the 1970s-1980s.

In the third plenum of the Central Committee in June 1992, the then Party Secretary General Do Muoi stressed the importance of national interests, stating that the objective of peace and development had become standards for international activities of Vietnam and "these standards are to serve the highest national interests of our nation, [that] is to quickly escape from the crisis, to consolidate and strengthen political stability, to develop socio-economy, to make the people prosperous and the nation strong, and to protect national independence and freedom" (Tung. 2007: 36).

From the standpoint, since the early 1990s Vietnam, as Tung argues (2007: 37), changed their perception of ASEAN. Unlike in the Cold War in which the organization was seen by Hanoi strategists as a US's lackey being set up for imperial expansion and against democratic and progressive movements in the region, from the national interest point of view, ASEAN founding members' policies were now seen by Vietnam as the moves aiming at protecting national independence and developing economy while retaining national self-determination in relations with big powers. The new interpretation was also applied for Thailand.

Moreover, it is worth noting that at the 7th Party Congress, though importance was still attached to consolidating and developing "special friendship and solidarity relations among the three Indochinese countries", the phrase of "to fulfill international responsibility in Cambodia and Laos", which was a main theme in foreign policy in previous party documents, was dropped (Ly. 2005: 175). This probably helped to ensure the Thais about Hanoi's sincere intention of peace and cooperation in the region and to rule out Bangkok's fear of "a Federation of Indochina that would include 17 provinces in Thailand's northeast" (Phung. 1997: 271).

Vietnam's evaluation of the Thai elite's perception of Ho Chi Minh

In light of Ho's strong legacy in terms of ideology and culture as well as of the policy on promotion of Ho Chi Minh Thought in Vietnam, the Thai moves to promote the historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani are undoubtedly appreciated by Hanoi. In order to evaluate the appreciation, it is important to explore the significance of

these sites to Vietnam in international, bilateral and domestic areas as well as in Hanoi's Viet Kieu policy.

Internationally, not only do the vestige sites in the former anti-Communist "bastion" help to consolidate Ho Chi Minh's prestige but also to boost Vietnam image in the world and in the region. Given the popularity of Thailand in the region in terms of tourism, the historical sites are expected to bring Ho's image as well as Vietnam history and culture to not only Thais but also international visitors²⁵. This, as a Vietnamese embassy official claimed, is "a golden opportunity that cannot be obtained by desire only"²⁶. According to Vo Trong Tieu, since the Ho Chi Minh house was inaugurated, many international journalists as well as foreigners visited the site and interviewed him about Ho's life and activities during his stay in Nakhon Phanom. In 2006, former Thai Ambassador Krit Kraichitti organized a delegation trip participated by dozens of foreign ambassadors to Hanoi to visit the site in Udon Thani. Undoubtedly, these historical sites unwittingly function as a propaganda means for Hanoi amidst the latter's efforts to further integrate into the globalized world.

In terms of policy, the inauguration of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand helps to give more leverage to the party's policy on promoting Ho Chi Minh Thought, as well as to serve historical studies of Ho's life and activities abroad in line with the policy. According to Nguyen Thi Tinh (*Bangkok Post*, 18 July 2000), Director of the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi, Vietnam has planned to set up branches of the museum in the countries where Ho lived during his revolutionary days. The policy has two main purposes. Firstly, these branches will allow Vietnamese curators to study more extensively the life of Ho Chi Minh in other countries and to reconstruct Ho's simple way of life in each location. Secondly, the sites will hopefully help the peoples know more about the relationship between two and other countries and serve as the beginning of friendship among nations. To implement the policy, the first difficulty, confirmed Tinh, is to get approval from the host country. The Thai moves, therefore, must have impressed the Vietnamese and had positive impacts on the latter's attitude toward the former.

As for bilateral relations, undoubtedly the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh together with Bangkok's granting citizenship to the Viet Kieu helped to rule out Hanoi's

²⁵ According to the interview with an embassy official who takes charge of the Viet Kieu issues, conducted in the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok on 3 August 2007.

²⁶ Ibid.

suspicion about their former Cold War rival. The Vietnamese see the presence of the vestige sites of their great leader in the Thai soil as a goodwill gesture offered by the Thai government to foster mutual understanding between the two countries and two peoples and as “a progressive step” in the Thai elite’s thinking given Bangkok’s anti-Communist stance during the Cold War²⁷. Addressing the inauguration ceremony of the friendship village in 2004, the then Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai expressed sincere thanks to the Government and people of Thailand and Nakhon Phanom for having built the village, describing it as a vivid manifestation of the friendship between the two nations (www.vietnamembassy.or.th). The view is reaffirmed by the then Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien, who stated that the friendship village and the relics of Ho Chi Minh “helped to enhance understanding and linkage between the two peoples” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006), and by acting Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Duy Hung, who boasted the friendship village “is a friendly gift of the Thai people to the Vietnamese” (*Vietnam Investment Review*, July 2006). Commenting on the historical sites, an embassy official even boldly claimed that no matter what may happen in the future, the bilateral relations “will be at least as good as they are currently, cannot be worse”²⁸.

Practically, the significance of the historical sites to Hanoi lies in potential effects of these locations in Thailand-Vietnam interactions, especially on the people-to-people level. Firstly, given the past confrontation between the two regimes, the Ho Chi Minh sites would serve as diplomatic propaganda tools to help the Thais understand more about Vietnam, no longer as an “aggressive Communist entity” as in the Cold War, but as a Southeast Asian country and as a Thailand’s neighbor that shares the Mekong River. Secondly, the sites would help to bring Ho Chi Minh’s image as Vietnam’s national hero and a man of culture, to the Thais, especially to those still haunted by the Cold War ideological confrontation.

The effects are more real than imagined. Since the inauguration of the Ho Chi Minh sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, more and more local Thais have known about Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam. Many Thai delegations and individuals, especially scholars and students from north to south, even royalists and military generals, have

²⁷ According to the interview with a former party senior official who used to be Thai language interpreter for the late premier Pham Van Dong conducted in Hanoi on 5 January 2008.

²⁸ Interview conducted on 24 October 2007 in Bangkok

visited the Ho Chi Minh house at Ban Na Chok²⁹. At Ban Nong On, the Ho Chi Minh site has become part of the local community; and local people are used to referring to the site as “pai Ho Chi Minh”³⁰. In terms of academia, according to Thanyathip Sripana (at www.rockmekong.org), a prominent Thai scholar in the area of Vietnamese studies, the historical sites in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani have encouraged “more in-depth and more open studies of Ho’s life and his anti-French activities, as well as the Vietnamese nationalist movement in Thailand during the colonial period”, opening the way for “more extensive academic and cultural cooperation between the two sides in studying Ho Chi Minh’s presence in Thailand”.

Besides the significance of the historical sites in diplomatic propaganda, these locations are expected to be instrumental in preserving Vietnamese tradition among the Viet Kieu and in uniting the Viet Kieu to serve the Ho Chi Minh initiated policy of people’s diplomacy. Overseas Vietnamese have long been seen as an important part of the Vietnamese national community. This is reaffirmed by the 2006 Party Congress’s resolution which states that overseas Vietnamese are “an inseparable part and a resource of Vietnamese national community” and are “an important factor contributing to boosting friendly and cooperative relations between our people and other peoples in the world” (Vietnam Communist Party. 2006: 123). Clearly, the overseas Vietnamese or Viet Kieu are seen not only as a resource to contribute to the national construction but also as a cultural bridge connecting Vietnam and the host country.

In Thailand, given the popularity of Ho Chi Minh among the Viet Kieu, the historical sites are expected to function as cultural centers for the Vietnamese community to pay respect to the late president as well as to preserve and educate Vietnamese tradition, and at the same time to contribute to building friendly relations and further understanding between Vietnam and Thailand. According to Hoang Van Phuc, former representative of the Viet Kieu in Nakhon Phanom, for overseas Vietnamese in Thailand who are yet to have chance to visit their homeland and pay tribute to Ho Chi Minh at his mausoleum, coming to Nakhon Phanom to visit Uncle Ho’s house and the Thailand-Vietnam friendship village is “like a visit to the

²⁹ According to Vo Trong Tieu, Privy Council Chairman Prem once led a military-royalist delegation to visit the site and showed his respect to the late Vietnamese president. Even one general expressed that “President Ho Chi Minh is second to none in the world”. Also many Thai scholars and students from Thai universities paid a visit to the Ho Chi Minh house. Interviewed in Nakhon Phanom on 17 May 2007.

³⁰ Interviews conducted in Udon Thani in November 2007

homeland” (at www.nhandan.com.vn). As for the site in Udon Thani, Le Van Hy, Chairman of the Viet Kieu Association in Udon, remarked that the location will be the place for organizing community activities of the ethnic Vietnamese Thais in the province, and for educating Vietnamese tradition among the youth as well as building Viet-Thai friendship (at www.vapa.org.vn).

6.4. Conclusion

The post-Cold War context brought new worldviews, principled as well as causal beliefs to both the Thais and the Vietnamese. This gave momentum to the rapprochement between the two countries, especially within the framework of regionalism and ASEAN mechanisms. From the background, the Thai elite, though a section of them have been still haunted by the past confrontation, tend to refer to the late Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh as a patriotic and cultural figure and as a catalyst for boosting bilateral relations between the two countries. The belief gave momentum to the inauguration of the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani.

Though cooperation has become a main theme in Hanoi-Bangkok interactions in the post-Cold War context, the extent of the rapprochement between the two countries appeared to be affected by each Thai elite group holding power. From geographical, historical as well as ideological backgrounds, modern ruling Thai elites can be divided into three groups, namely the South-Bangkok based group, the North-Northeast based group, and the ex-CPT sympathizer group. While the South-Bangkok based group, in the areas that have enjoyed higher economic growth, tended to be pro-urban and liberal-oriented, the second group, in the areas that have experienced a history of being neglected and discriminated, seemed to be more commercial, parochial and paternal in outlook. Besides, after the demise of the CPT in middle 1980s, many ex-leftwingers chose to return to politics through political parties in order to realize their social goals in the parliamentary democracy. These ex-radicals tended to join provincial parties from the Northeast and appeared to be the main force behind people-oriented policies of these parties. The trend was reflected through Chavalit’s New Aspiration and Thaksin’s TRT.

Under the reign of provincial parties, Thailand-Vietnam relations appeared to go more smoothly as in the cases of Chatichai’s, Chavalit’s and Thaksin’s governments. Also it seemed that during Chavalit’s and Thaksin’s era, more supporting voice for the historical sites of Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani was recorded. This came as a result of not only political as well as economic calculations of Bangkok in the

context of Thailand-Vietnam rapprochement but possibly also of ideas held by the ruling elite in power. Since Ho Chi Minh was prominently seen as a national Vietnamese hero and a man of culture, in the rapprochement context the Viet Kieu who worshiped him was no longer perceived as the “fifth column”, but gradually accepted as part of Thailand’s ethnic community.

The new emphasis on patriotic as well as cultural aspects of Ho Chi Minh by the Thai ruling elite has been undoubtedly appreciated by Hanoi and had a significant impact on the latter’s attitude towards its former Cold War rival. Given the past confrontation between the two countries, Vietnam has seen the historical sites of their late leader in Thailand as a goodwill gesture and symbol of Thai-Vietnamese friendship. This belief is supplemented in light of the significance of the sites to Vietnam’s policy on promotion of Ho Chi Minh Thought as well as on overseas Vietnamese. Accordingly, the Ho Chi Minh sites in Thailand could function as a propaganda tool to boost Ho Chi Minh’s prestige as well as Vietnam’s image on the international as well as regional levels. Moreover, the sites are expected to become cultural centers to educate on the Vietnamese tradition as well as to build Thailand-Vietnam friendly relations. Undoubtedly, these sites will continue to play an important role in bilateral interactions between the two countries and two peoples.