

THE VIETNAMESE IN THAILAND: A CULTURAL BRIDGE IN THAI-VIETNAMESE RELATIONSHIP

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Many people may not know that there are a lot of Vietnamese living in Thailand. The majority of them have been living in Isan – a popular name for the northern part of the country. The Vietnamese migration spanned many generations and time periods and took place both by land and sea, though we still do not know precisely when the Vietnamese first moved into present-day Thailand.

There is evidence of the presence of Vietnamese community in Ayutthaya in the 17th century. Is it possible that the migration might have occurred much earlier, going back even to the Sukhothai period? We have no evidence to support this idea.

This paper begins with the Vietnamese arrivals and the routes through which they moved from Vietnam to Thailand. It pays particular attention to their large exoduses during and after World War II, especially in 1945-1946, and the plights they experienced during this period. The Vietnamese who arrived during this time include those who, fleeing the French armed suppression in Laos in March 1946, crossed the Mekong River to northeastern Thailand. To distinguish them from the "Old Vietnamese" or "Viet Cu", who had arrived in Thailand before World War II, these people were called "New Vietnamese"

or "Viet Moi". There is the word "Viet Kieu" in the Vietnamese language; this refers to the Vietnamese who live outside the country or abroad, including those in Thailand.

The attachment to both Vietnam and Thailand of the former Vietnamese refugees who used to live in Isan and the Vietnamese who are still living here will also be mentioned to delineate their sense of belonging to two mothers – Vietnam and Thailand. This sense is evident, in the case of those still living in Isan, in the preservation of Vietnamese culture in their communities, such as those in Nakhon Phanom Province. It is also evident, in the case of those who returned to Vietnam during 1960-1964, in the construction of "Hoi Huong" Memorial, their regular meetings to keep their memory of life in Isan alive.

The paper will also indicate how these two groups of Vietnamese – the former refugees who already returned to Vietnam and those still living in Thailand – have served as a cultural bridge between the two countries. This can be seen in their continued relationship and regular exchanges of visits and the role many of them have assumed as Vietnamese language instructors in certain Thai academic institutions or as coordination assistants in the diplomatic delegations and missions of both countries. To mark this friendship and cultural link a Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village has been founded up at Ban Na Chok in Nakhon Phanom largely through their efforts and contributions.

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1. The arrival of Vietnamese in Thailand in the past

The migration of Vietnamese into Thailand (or Siam before 1939)¹ took place in many periods of time: the Ayutthaya period in the mid 17th century, the early Rattanakosin period (the reigns of King Rama I and II during the late 18th-early 19th centuries), the reign of King Rama IV in the mid 19th century, the reign of King Rama V from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, and the period during and after World War II.

The Vietnamese migration into Siam was motivated by various factors – religious persecution by the Nguyen Court, French suppression, as well as hardships and sufferings from poverty. Besides, during the reign of King Rama III, the Vietnamese were forcibly moved from Cambodia as prisoners of war following the war between Vietnam and Siam on Cambodia in 1832-1846. From the late 19th to mid 20th centuries, the Vietnamese nationalists moved to present-day northeastern Thailand and used it as a base for their resistance to the French in Laos and Vietnam. During World War II, famine and poverty also forced a number of Vietnamese to leave their country.

In 1946, fleeing the French armed suppression, a large number of Vietnamese from the towns on the Mekong bank in Laos crossed the river to Thailand. This was the hitherto biggest wave of Vietnamese migrants or refugees moving into Thailand.

The old Vietnamese Chronicles of Nguyen Dynasty "Dai Viet su Ky Toan Thu" mention the ancient Viet's contacts

with the people who were then called "Tiem La" or "Xich Dieu" by the Vietnamese. During the late 12th century, the Viet-Tiem contacts through maritime trade mostly involved exchanges of the natural and forest products². Besides, the old Vietnamese Chronicles also mention the battle between "Tiem" and "Viet", though there is no precise indication of its location. There is nevertheless no evidence of Vietnamese migration into Siam before the Ayutthaya period.

Clear evidence has been found of Vietnamese migration into Siam in the Ayutthaya period. There is evidence, in particular, of a Vietnamese community among the foreigners' villages in the city. These Vietnamese had traveled from the south of Vietnam by sea to the Gulf of Siam and then to Ayutthaya. They were called "Cochinchine" in French.

The Vietnamese migration of this period resulted from the violent conflict between "Trinh" and "Nguyen" families, as well as the suppression by the Vietnam Royal Court of Vietnamese Catholics led by Portuguese priests. This forced a number of Vietnamese to flee, via the southern part of Vietnam and the Gulf of Siam, to Ayutthaya. The "Cochinchinois" in Ayutthaya continued to grow in number especially during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688).

During the reign of King Rama I in the early Rattanakosin era, Nguyen Phuc Anh, who later became Emperor Gia Long, and his attendants also fled to Thailand as a result of internal conflict.

¹ The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939.

² According to the Vietnamese Chronicles "Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu" and "Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc".

During King Rama III's period, some Vietnamese arrived from Cambodia as prisoners of war, as mentioned earlier.

In the reign of King Rama IV, a new wave of Vietnamese began to arrive in the northeastern part of Siam by land through Laos. Coming from the north of the central part of Vietnam, this group of Vietnamese moved to settle down along the Mekong River in Isan. Thanks to King Rama IV's policy of expanding and developing this northeastern region of Siam, labour was needed, and the Vietnamese were consequently encouraged and facilitated to move into Siam.

During King Rama V's period from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the patriotic Vietnamese who resisted French domination moved into Siam. During this same period a large number of Vietnamese also fled famine and poverty in their country, but after WW II, in an attempt to escape from French suppression, a larger number of them crossed the Mekong River to northeastern Thailand. The Vietnamese who arrived in Isan during and after World War II will receive particular attention in this paper.

2. The migration routes from Vietnam to Thailand during and after World War II

The Vietnamese migrated to Thailand by various land and sea routes. This section will nevertheless mention only the Vietnamese migration to Isan by land through Laos.³

³ See Thanyathip Sripana, "The East- West Corridor in historical perspective" (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 26 March 2003, p.7.

The most important land route used by the Vietnamese in their migration through Laos to Thailand in the old days is the present-day Route Number 8 connecting Vinh in Vietnam with Tha Khek in Laos. Along this route, the people from Nghe An and Ha Tinh made their journey to Tha Khek, in Laos's Kham Muan Province, and then crossed the Mekong River to Nakhon Phanom, a province in northeastern Thailand. Moreover, Route Number 8 also joins Route Number 13 at Ban Nam Thon, Bolikhamsai Province in Laos, before leading to Vientiane, its capital city. From Cao Troe point in Vietnam to Ban Nam Thon in Laos (opposite Ban Pheng, Nakhon Phanom Province in Thailand) where Routes Number 8 and 13 meet, the distance is only 120 kilometres. And then from Ban Nam Thon to Tha khek, the distance is 100 kilometres.

There is also Route Number 12, connecting Quang Binh in Vietnam with Tha Khek, and then Nakorn Phanom. From the Vietnamese-Lao border at Cha Lo, it leads to Kham Muan in Laos, and then to Nakhon Phanom Province.

Route Number 9, which is usually mentioned in the framework of the East-West Economic Corridor in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), was also used by the Vietnamese from Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Hue in their journey to Mukdahan in Thailand (Mukdahan once was a district in Nakhon Phanom Province).

The most difficult migration path was Route Number 8 which passes through high mountains. Even nowadays, in travelling through the mountainous landscape in Laos, we still have to move very carefully, especially in the rainy season. Route upgrading in a mountainous area such as this one is difficult, because of

both the height of the landscape and the lack of funding. Route Number 9 is a far friendlier path because it passes mostly through flat landscapes. In the past, the French used Route Number 9 as a weapon and ammunition transport route between Vietnam and Laos.

Geo-strategically, Isan in Thailand became an important base for the Vietnamese patriotic movement. It also served as their refuge base west of Vietnam, especially after the anti-French nationalist movement in Quangzhou was totally suppressed in 1927.

Indeed, without French presence, as in Laos or Cambodia, Isan became a safe haven for the anti-French patriots.

3. The migration of Vietnamese to Thailand in 1945-1946

The Vietnamese who migrated into Thailand during 1945-1946 were fleeing suppression by the French armed forces in March 1946 in the provinces along the Mekong River in Laos. In an escape from hardship in their home country, some of these Vietnamese had settled down in Laos for quite some time, while others had been sent to work for the French administration in this country.

The violent suppression of the Vietnamese and Laotians by the French occurred on 21 March 1946 in Tha Khek in Kham Muan Province. The event was called "Tha Khek Incident" by the Vietnamese and Lao people.⁴ This incident remains alive in the memory of the people who directly witnessed it or were part of it.

⁴ See Thanyathip Sripana, "When will they become Thai people?" (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 9 May 2003, p.7.

This event took place after the surrender and withdrawal of the Japanese troops from Laos and Vietnam at the end of World War II. This led to the return of the French in Laos. The severe suppression by the French focused on the Vietnamese community near the Mekong River bank, mainly in Tha Khek, where the anti-French patriotic Vietnamese were concentrated and were coordinating with the Lao Issara in their resistance to French rule.

At the dawn of 21 March 1946, French airplanes started dropping bombs on the Tha Khek market, which was the town centre,⁵ resulting in a lot of deaths. Many people tried to escape by heading to the Mekong River in order to cross over to Nakhon Phanom. Some of them swam across the river, others floated on banana trees, and still others were shot from the airplanes and died in the river. The violent suppression went on from the morning until the afternoon.⁶ The French forced the Vietnamese who were captured to stand in a row and shot them down; some of them were tied in sacks and drowned in the Mekong River.

Those who could escape to Thailand had to leave their houses and properties in Tha Khek. They had no opportunity to go back, and some even had no opportunity to see their families again.

The Vietnamese and Lao people who managed to cross the Mekong River were

⁵ Supot Dantrakoon, *General Singapo and the Revolution in Lao History and American Bases in Thailand* (in Thai), Institute of Social Science (Thailand). (no publication date) p.74.

⁶ Prince Suphanouwong, *the Revolutionary Leader* (in Lao), the Committee of Social Science of the People's Republic of Democratic Laos, Vientiane, 1989, pp.24-25.

helped by the old Vietnamese or Viet Cu and the Thai people living along the river bank and directly witnessing this incident. The "Viet Cu" and the Thais in Nakhon Phanom provided the new Vietnamese or Viet Moi with accommodation, clothes, medicine, and other basic necessities. According to some informants and certain documents, Prince Suphanouwong, the leader of the Lao Issara, was among those who were able to reach the Thai side of the river. He was injured by shots from a warplane "Spitfire" while trying to escape in a boat from Tha Khek to Nakhon Phanom.⁷

Pridi Banomyong, the Thai Prime Minister at the time, offered these refugees humanitarian assistance⁸ consisting of dwellings, food, medicines, land, and jobs, particularly in construction works such as building and repairing the roads, as well as in other activities including preparation of charcoal and agricultural cultivation. The Vietnamese refugees still keep their memory alive of this truly difficult time and remain grateful to Thailand and its people. These victims of French repression have regarded the country as their second mother who gave them a rebirth after this violent incident.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25 ; and *op.cit.*, Supot Dantrakoon, *General Singapo and the Revolution in Lao History and American Bases in Thailand*, p.75.

⁸ See, Charivat Santapura, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, Committee on the Project for the National Celebration on the Occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Pridi Banomyong, Senior Statesman (private sector), Ruankaew Printing House, Bangkok, 2000; Pridi Banomyong, *Political and military tasks of the Free-Thai movement to regain national sovereignty and independence*, Committee on the Project for the national Celebration on the Occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Pridi Banomyong, Senior Statesman (private sector), Ruankaew Printing House, Bangkok, 2001.

The life of the Vietnamese refugees at that time was very difficult. Some earned their living as hawkers, travelling from village to village, from town to town, from province to province, carrying with them heavy loads of goods such as agricultural tools, food, rice, simple consumer products, etc. Others had to walk from Nakhon Phanom to Sakon Nakhon (100 kilometres), but along the way they received help from the Thais who offered water and food.

On their arrival in Nakhon Phanom in March 1946, the Vietnamese refugees were given simple accommodation by the Thais and the old Vietnamese there – in particular, the space in the basements of their houses. The New Vietnamese nevertheless started to clear empty land and build their own huts around Nakhon Phanom Province, such as at Phu Kra Tae (near present-day Technical Collage of Nakhon Phanom) and Rong Mienne (Nong Chan). Some of them scattered to live with the old Vietnamese at Ban Wat Pa, Ban Na Chok or Ban May where Ho Chi Minh once resided, Ban Don Mong, Ban Phon Bok, Nong Seang, Ban Na, etc. These people later scattered to other provinces, including Sakon Nakhon, Udorn Thani, Nong Khai, Khon Kaen, Roi-ed, and Ubonratchathani. Given characteristic endurance, thrift, hard work, and communal unity and solidarity, these Vietnamese succeeded in starting a new and better life in a short time.

4. The situation of Viet Kieu in Thailand during 1945- 1946

The number of the Vietnamese who fled French repression in March 1946 was

approximately 40,000.⁹ (The figures from different sources vary from 30,000 to 50,000, and these figures did not include 4,000 Lao, most of the Vietnamese still living in Isan.) The Ministry of the Interior of Thailand designated these people as "Vietnamese Refugees" or "Yuan Mai" (meaning "New Vietnamese") to distinguish them from those who had previously arrived in Thailand. But among the Vietnamese in Thailand, they are called "Viet Moi" that also means "New Vietnamese". Since the arrival of "Yuan Mai" in 1946 there have already been three generations of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. The first generation consists of those with direct experience of the Tha Khek Incident; they were born outside Thailand. The second generation is the offshoot of the first generation, and the third generation includes the children of the second generation and the grand children of the first generation. The second- and third-generation Vietnamese were born on Thai territory.

The legal status of the first-generation refugees is that of "legal immigrant" or "alien". The second- and third-generation Vietnamese are entitled to Thai nationality as they were born on Thai territory. Thus far a large number of these Thai-born Vietnamese have become Thai citizens. However, many of them have not yet been granted such a status. This is largely due to the bureaucratic process of granting Thai nationality, which, in practice, is a long and time-consuming one.

⁹ Christopher E. Goscha, "Chapter 4 Building Indochinese Links to Thailand (1945-46)", *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1885-1954)*, Monograph Series, No.79, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Curzon Press, Great Britain, 1999, p.155.

The process has now been vastly improved, and it is expected that all of those who are legally eligible to Thai nationality will be granted such a status within the year 2004.¹⁰

With the end of the Cold War and subsequent improvements in world as well as regional situations since the end of the 1980's, Thai-Vietnamese relations have undergone positive developments. The Thai government's policy towards the Vietnamese in Thailand has also positively changed. In particular, Thai authorities have not only adopted a better attitude towards them but also accepted them as part of Thai society. The era of the extreme suspicion and fear of the "Viet Moi" as forming a spy network for the "Viet cong" has effectively come to an end.

5. Thai policy towards Viet Kieu during the Cold War and its impact on these people

The life of Viet Kieu totally changed with the end of Priddee's government. Under the Phiboon regime which succeeded it, the Viet Kieu faced many hardships as a result of the anticommunist policy of this government.

Thailand's anticommunist policy placed it in the Western camp led by the United States. It supported the latter's strategy of containing communism during the Cold War, and strongly opposed North Vietnam (or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) particularly during the height of

¹⁰ The speech made by the Thai PM Thaksin Chinawatra at the opening ceremony of the Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok, Nakorn Phanom province on the 21 February 2004; See also, Thanyathip Sripana, "PM Thaksin's promise at Friendship Village in Ban Na Chok" (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 23 March 2004, p.7.

the Vietnam War in the 1960's until the mid 1970's.

Even with the end of Vietnam War, the Thai government remained concerned about the intention of Vietnam: it feared the spread of communist ideology and influence into Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, leading to the fall of these countries into the communist orbit. This was a scenario commonly known at that time as the "domino theory".

Viet Kieu in Isan were considered spies supporting North Vietnam in its fight against America during the Vietnam War. As a result, they were kept under strict control and surveillance of the Thai government's security agencies by their restrictive rules and regulations. Moreover, the violence in Thai internal politics resulting from Thailand's strongly anticommunist policy in 1976, as well as the fear of communist threat, led to violence against the Vietnamese, especially those who lived in Isan.

During this time, the Vietnamese were once again under threat and deprived of security in life. Some were suspected, and many of them were arrested and put in jail for subversive activities.

Though Thailand and Vietnam established formal diplomatic relations in August 6, 1976, their friendly relationship did not develop immediately. The Thai government was still worried throughout the later half of the 1970's and early 1980's that the Vietnamese in Thailand were secret agents of Vietnam.

Another important factor impeding the relation development of the two countries was the repressive policy of successive

Thai governments, the military ones in particular.

Three factors at least brought about the actual development of friendly relations between the two countries. On the Vietnamese side, these were the announcements, on the one hand, of an economic reform policy (Doi Moi) at the 6th Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, and, on the other hand, of the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia scheduled be accomplished within 1989. On the Thai side, it was the change of Thai attitude and policy towards the Indochinese countries adopted in 1988 by the government of General Chatchai Choonhawan. Since then, the Thai government has shown a real interest in solving problem of the Vietnamese in Thailand by granting them the status of legal immigrants and Thai nationality which would facilitate the livelihood of these people, especially in getting job, earning a living, and enjoying rights as Thai citizens.

Both the positive change of Thai policy towards the Vietnamese in Thailand and the adoption of the Vietnamese-omni directional foreign policy focusing on developing relations with neighbouring countries have enormously contributed to the build up the mutual trust and sincerity between the two countries.

A new page of Thai-Vietnam relations started in early 1990 with the exchange of visits of the two Prime Ministers. This development also resulted in a new era and better life of the Vietnamese in Thailand. Since the 1990's, though the granting of legal status to them has not yet

been totally accomplished, the life of the Vietnamese in Thailand has been improved in terms of life stability and security. The era of strict control and surveillance on the Vietnamese effectively came to a close.

It could be said that, the Thai government's policy towards the Vietnamese in Thailand has been a factor determining relations between Thailand and Vietnam since the Cold War, both as obstacle in this relationship and as its facilitator.

At present, these Vietnamese have become a cultural and economic "bridge" between the two countries, at both people-to-people and inter-state levels. This "bridge" will be more stable if the Vietnamese are correctly and equally treated before the law, and by Thai security authorities and agencies. It is important that the latter (Thai security authorities and agencies) should adjust their attitude and adopt a new one towards these Vietnamese or the Thai of Vietnamese origin, ridding themselves of distrust, and implement seriously the government's policy in accordance with the changing world and regional situations.

6. The attachment of the Vietnamese in Isan to Vietnam

The sense of having two mothers

Though the "Viet Moi" have fully been absorbed into Thai-Isan culture, most of them, certainly those of the first generation and even those who were born in Thailand (especially the second-generation Vietnamese), still maintain a strong attachment to Vietnam. Vietnam has been considered their motherland.

They never forget where their "root" is and they have tried to preserve their Vietnamese culture as much as possible. The third-generation Vietnamese, who, unlike those of the first and second generations, have experienced far less hardship in life, have been more thoroughly assimilated into Thai society and culture. Hence, though conscious of their Vietnamese root, their attachment to Vietnam is not as strong as that of the other two generations. However, the Vietnamese of all three generations share a feeling of love for both Thailand and Vietnam.

Many Vietnamese of both first and second generations in various provinces in Isan, explain to the writer that they have a sense of belong to both Vietnam and Thailand as their two mothers.¹¹ Vietnam is the mother who gave birth to them, whereas Thailand is the mother who has raised them. In return, they wish to be able to help both countries in all possible respects, particularly in their economic and cultural development efforts. They thus strongly desire that both countries, which are their two mothers, have a strong relationship firmly rooted in good understanding and friendship. On their part, they wish to serve as a bridge linking the two countries.

The Vietnamese of the first generation, particularly those in the 60-90 age group, would like to visit their motherland once in order to pay respect to their ancestors' cemeteries before they have no chance to do so. Such an act is very important and

¹¹ According to the interviews with Vietnamese in Isan on many occasions in 2003-2004.

means a lot to them, as it represents their highest gratitude to their parents and ancestors.¹²

In her numerous interviews with the Vietnamese in Isan, including those in Udorn Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan and Khon Kaen from 2002 to 2004, the writer was repeatedly told that this desire to pay a visit Vietnam does not mean that they want to live or to spend the rest of their life there. In fact they always want to come back to spend the rest of their life in Thailand. This is so natural because they have already settled down in Thailand, and have already their family extended here.

The preservation of Vietnamese culture among the Vietnamese in Thailand: the case of the Vietnamese community in Nakhon Phanom

The Vietnamese in Thailand have tried to preserve their own tradition and culture among themselves. This is, in essence, a form of their attachment to Vietnam.

Vietnamese culture has actually been much diluted and has somehow mingled with Thai culture. However, it has never been completely assimilated into its Thai counterpart; it has in one way or another been kept alive among the Vietnamese in each northeastern province in Thailand. The Vietnamese in the provinces bordering the Mekong River, such as Nakhon Phanom, which have served as a main gate though which they have moved between Vietnam and Thailand especially through Route Number 8 in Laos, are mostly part

of the most ardently patriotic groups. These people thus have better succeeded in preserving Vietnamese culture than those residing in the provinces far from the river, such as Sakon Nakhon, Udorn Thani, and Khon Kaen. It seems indeed that the further they have been away from the Mekong, the further they have tended to move away from their cultural identity and have been more deeply assimilated into the local culture.

Another reason why the Vietnamese in Nakhon Phanom has been better able to preserve their Vietnamese culture than those in other provinces is that most of the Vietnamese there were former activists and remain alive with patriotic and nationalistic feelings. So their children who have inherited the same feelings are more concerned about their cultural identity than those in other provinces.

We will see that, in Nakhon Phanom in the late 19th early 20th centuries, there were a large number of patriotic Vietnamese than other provinces. Nakhon Phanom is, in other words, an important anti-French base of the Vietnamese, and those who have lived there remain very conscious of their patriotism and cultural identities.

Geographically, Nakhon Phanom is the most convenient contact point between Thailand and Vietnam, as mentioned earlier. The route running from Nghe An to Tha Khek and then across Mekong River to Nakhon Phanom is the main route used by the patriotic Vietnamese in the past. Also, Nghe An, Ha Tinh are the homeland of many patriotic leaders, particularly, Ho Chi Minh.

¹² According to the interviews with the "Viet Moi" of the first generation in Isan in 2003-2004.

Though under constant pressure and control by the Thai military governments in the past, they have in large measure been able to preserve their own tradition and culture. The cultural activities that have been preserved include:

- The New Year celebration or Tet, though not as big as in Vietnam.

- The Den .

- The ancestor-worship tradition.

- The character and life styles of being simple, economical, humble, obedient, and abiding by the law. All of these cultural traits have been inherited from the teachings of Ho Chi Minh, who remains highly respected by the Vietnamese in Thailand, particularly those living in Isan.

- The wearing of traditional dress called Ao Dai on certain occasions and in some ceremonies, such as on the Tet Day, the big events as the opening ceremony of the Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok, Nakhon Phanom Province on 21 February 2004.

- The communication in Vietnamese among the Vietnamese of all generations, old or new Viet Kieu ("Viet Cu" or "Viet Moi")

- The preservation of Vietnamese cuisine, especially in Isan where most of the Vietnamese live.

- The Vietnamese-style funeral ceremony (now mixed with Thai elements).

- The worshipping of Ho Chi Minh's picture and sculpture, etc.

7. The attachment to Thailand of the former "Vietnamese refugees" who returned to Vietnam in 1960- 1964

A mention should also be made here of the Vietnamese who went back to Vietnam in 1960-1964. These people have been a

major part of the cultural bridge between two countries.

During the years 1960-1964, a large number of Vietnamese were repatriated. The repatriation scheme was part of the Agreement between the Thai Red Cross Society and the Red Cross Society of Democratic Republic of Vietnam concerning the Repatriation of Vietnamese in Thailand to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, signed on 14 August 1959 in Rangoon. This accord is also known as the Rangoon Agreement. In 1962, another agreement was signed. It was Agreement in Addition between the Thai Red Cross Society and the Red Cross Society of Democratic Republic of Vietnam concerning the Repatriation of Vietnamese in Thailand to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, signed in Bangkok on 17 December 1962.

The Vietnamese called the repatriation "Hoi Huong", which means "back to the domicile" or "back to the motherland".

The ship left the Klong Teoy pier in Bangkok, and disembarked in Hai Phong in the northeast of Vietnam. The journey from Bangkok to Hai Phong took about 7-15 days, depending on the weather conditions. The first ship left Klong Teoy on 4 January 1960 and the last one on 28 July 1964. The Vietnamese were repatriated in 75 shipments.¹³

Arriving in Hai Phong, some settled down there, while others went back to their parents' hometowns, such as in Ha Noi, Hoa Binh, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tay,

¹³ Kachatpai Burutpat, "Chaper 4 The repatriation of the Vietnameses to the North Vietnam 1960-1964", *Vietnamese Refugees* (in Thai), Duang Kamol Publishing House, Bangkok, 1978, p.85.

Phu Tho, Yen Bai, and Lao Cai close to China. Still others were relocated under the government resettlement scheme.

Unfortunately, the repatriation ended in 1964 because of the American bombing in Tonkin Gulf in North Vietnam. The total number of Vietnamese who had been repatriated was 46,256 of a registered number of 70,032.¹⁴ As a result, the number of those who could not be repatriated was no less than 23,776. This number of 70,032 did not include a number of Vietnamese who had not registered or asked for the repatriation.

The repatriates were mostly those who had arrived in Isan during and after World War II, as well as those who had fled the violent suppression by the French after the war, particularly the bloody Tha Khek Incident on 21 March 1946, and their children.

The reasons for the repatriation in 1960-1964 varied from one case to another.¹⁵ Some, in compliance with the persuasion of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, wanted to go back to develop their motherland. Others had experienced hardships and difficulties in earning a living in Thailand because of the occupational restrictions imposed by the Thai government. For still others the difficulty of obtaining a legal status was the main reason for their decision to return to their homeland. In general,

however, it was the restrictive policies of the military government since 1947 towards the "Viet Moi" that pushed the Vietnamese back to Vietnam.

Though the return to Vietnam was filled with enthusiasm and strong intention to help the country at the time of its war with the US, some of the repatriates still missed their old days in Thailand as well as their families who still remained in Isan. Upon arrival in Vietnam, these people had to adjust themselves to the completely different economic and social environments, as well as to the real hardships of "War against the United State of America". It was nevertheless the escalating war in Vietnam when the US started bombing Tonking Gulf in 1964 that finally ended the repatriation programme in that year. The end of the repatriation left behind a number of the Vietnamese in Isan, and they have settled down permanently in Thailand.

The construction of "Hoi Huong" Memorial

Before returning to Vietnam, the Vietnamese constructed a memorial in each of Thailand's northern province where they had been living to express their gratitude to the second mother who had raised them. Such a memorial can be found in the form, for instance, of the clock tower in Nakhon Phanom erected in 1960, or the temple gates in many provinces, the clock tower on a roundabout in Udorn Thani, etc.

Regular meetings to keep alive the memory of life in Isan.

The Vietnamese repatriates who have since then settled down in their own country organize informal get-togethers on various occasions every year. Such

¹⁴ Vichan Champeesri and Suthawit Suphan, "Chapter 4 Repatriation to the North Vietnam", *Vietnamese Refugees and the National Security* (in Thai), Odeon Store, Bangkok, 1976, pp. 109-110.

¹⁵ According the interviews during 2002-2004 with the Vietnamese still living in Thailand, and those who had returned and settled down in Vietnam at the beginning of the 1960's. The interviews were conducted in Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Hoa Binh, and Hai Phong.

occasions include the New Year celebration on 1 January and the annual meeting of the "Association of the Viet Kieu in Laos and Thailand" (Hoi Than nhan Viet Kieu Lao-Thai lan) in each province. These get-togethers provide them with an opportunity to collectively recall the old days in Isan.

These regular meetings provide them with an opportunity to show their profound assimilation into Thai-Isan culture. This can be detected, in particular, from their dresses, which were usually made from Isan cotton or Isan silk, the garland laces hung around their necks, and the loincloths tied around their waists. On these occasions they also play Thai drums, performing Thai dances and sing Thai popular songs of the 1950's-1960's period. Moreover, the politeness, friendliness, and modesty that are normally found in the Thai-Isan people can also be found in these Vietnamese. Besides, serving food in the Isan way and eating sticky rice with fingers, which are not familiar practices in the Vietnamese culture of "Kinh" people,¹⁶ mark these special occasions. Equally important, these people can fluently communicate in Thai.

During the past two years, the writer has had a chance to meet and celebrate the New Year (2004) with these Vietnamese. They expressed their gratitude to the Thai people for their generosity, particularly at the time when they experienced extreme hardships after their escape from Tha Khek. They also asked the writer to convey

¹⁶ From the observations in meeting with these people on many occasions in Hoa Binh, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong, and Hanoi in 2002- 2004.

their thoughts and gratitude to the Thai people for the kind help following the Tha Khek Incident.¹⁷

8. Ongoing relationships and exchanges of visits between the Thai and Vietnamese people and between the two groups of Vietnamese in both countries from the past to the present.

Despite the end of the violence of "War against the United State of America" or the "Vietnam War", the legacy of the cold-war conflict dragged on. Hence, although Thailand and Vietnam established their diplomatic relationship in August 1976, the two countries remained so far apart until the end of the 1980's.

Real normalization of Thai-Vietnamese relations started to develop only from the beginning of the 1990's. Since then, the exchanges of visits between the Thai and Vietnamese people have been on the increase, together with those between the Viet Kieu in Thailand and the former Viet Kieu in Vietnam. Those who returned to Vietnam have had opportunities to come back to worship their parents' cemeteries in Thailand, and those in Thailand can go to Vietnam for the same purpose.

9. Viet Kieu as a cultural bridge between Thailand and Vietnam

"Viet Kieu" means the Vietnamese who live outside the country or abroad, including those who live in Thailand. And we can use this word for the Vietnamese who used to live in Isan and went back to Vietnam during 1960-1964, though they

¹⁷ According the interviews during 2002-2004 with the Vietnamese who had returned and settled down in Vietnam at the beginning of 1960's. The interviews were conducted in Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Hoa Binh, and Hai Phong.

have settled down permanently in Vietnam. We can also call them (the Vietnamese who used to live in Isan and went back to Vietnam) "Viet Kieu Thai lan", which means Viet Kieu from Thailand, whereas the Vietnamese now living in Isan can be referred to as Viet Kieu in Isan or the Vietnamese in Isan. From now on, we will occasionally use the word Viet Kieu.

We can use "Viet Kieu" to refer to the Vietnamese of all generations: Viet Cu or Viet Moi. We can also use Viet Moi to refer to those who arrived in Thailand during and after WW II regardless of the legal status they now have: Thai nationals; "legal immigrants" or "aliens"; or "Vietnamese refugees". And we also call the third-generation Viet Moi (the grand children of those who crossed the Mekong to Isan during 1945-1946) "Viet Moi", "Viet Kieu", or "Viet Kieu's children" if both their parents are ethnic Vietnamese, regardless of their legal status, that is, whether they have become Thai, "legal immigrants" or "aliens", or still "Vietnamese refugees".

The Viet Kieu in Thailand and Vietnam can serve as a crucial cultural bridge between the two countries. Those still living in Isan have so far made many important contributions, especially in the form of:

Language instructors in Thai educational institutions

The Viet Kieu in Isan, such as those in Nakorn Phanom, can make important contributions to Thai education, particularly as Vietnamese language

instructors.¹⁸ So far a number of Viet Kieu have been employed as Vietnamese language teachers in many Thai educational institutions in some northeastern provinces and Bangkok. They have also been teaching Thai to the Vietnamese who have come to Thailand on official or business trips, or for some other purposes, such as to the officers from Quang Tri, who have been in Nakhon Phanom to study the Thai Language.¹⁹ Moreover, Viet Kieu have also co-organized academic seminars and other similar activities. For instance, they collaborated with Nakhon Phanom Rajabath Institute in organizing a seminar on "Viet Kieu's life in Isan: From Vietnam to Nakhon Phanom" in March 2003.²⁰

Cordination assistants/interpreters for the Thai and Vietnamese delegations

The Viet Kieu in Isan also have a potential role as coordination assistants and/or interpreters for the Thai and Vietnamese delegations in any negotiation, at local and national levels, and in any substantive areas: economic cooperation, tourism etc. Through their contributions many negotiations and collaborative activities between two countries have been immensely facilitated. They have also made vital contributions to trilateral relationships involving Thailand, Vietnam and Laos in certain local trilateral programmes for economic development

¹⁸ Regarding the potential of the Vietnamese in Isan, see Thanyathip Sripana, "From Sea Games in Vietnam to Vietnamese refugees" (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 5 December 2993, p.7.

¹⁹ The writer met the Vietnamese from Quang Tri on 7-10 and 19-25 February 2004 and has so far (June 2004) been in contact with them.

²⁰ The seminar was held in Nakhon Phanom on 26 March 2003.

cooperation and tourism. One such programme is entitled "a Seven-Province Programme in Three Countries", which aims to contribute to economic and cultural cooperation in the framework of the Greater Mekong Sub-Region Development (GMS Development).

Co-founders of the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok in Nakhon Phanom Province

The Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok, or "Ban May,"²¹ which was initiated as a memorial of Ho Chi Minh, has already been completed while a similar memorial at Nong On in Udorn Thani is already under construction and will be accomplished very soon.

In this part of the paper, the focus will be on the Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok, Tambon Nong Yat, Nakhon Phanom, now a major symbol of Thai-Vietnamese friendship. Also, this part will make a brief mention of Ho Chi Minh's presence in Siam in 1928-1929 and in a very short period in 1930.²² At that time Thailand was called Siam, but in this paper we will mostly use "Thailand" in stead of Siam.

Ban Na Chok is one of the places where Ho Chi Minh sometimes resided during his presence in Thailand. Ho Chi Minh stayed not only at Ban Na Chok but also in other provinces. However, Ban Na Chok was used as an important revolutionary base against the French in Vietnam and Laos, and for preparatory

work for the setting up of Vietnam Communist Party in 1930. Ho Chi Minh helped set up a school for children in the village. He taught the young Vietnamese there about national consciousness, ethics, and how to behave properly in Thai society by respecting Thai culture and abiding by Thai law. In addition, he also always briefed his students on world situations as well as economic and political situations in Vietnam during that time.²³

On 21 February 2004, the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Chinawatra and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai jointly presided over a formal opening of the "Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok,"²⁴ a museum erected in Ho Chi Minh's honour and as a testimony to good relationship between two countries. This also reflects the mutual trust and good understanding of both countries. In the past, Ho Chi Minh's activities and the existence of his revolutionary movement had to be kept in secret. These were known only among the Vietnamese there, for fear that the information about him and the movement would fall into French hands. Moreover, given the anti-Communist stance of the Thai government in the past, the security of the Vietnamese in Isan could also be threatened, though the use of Thai territory by the Vietnamese revolutionary movement was meant in any way to threaten Thailand. Its aim was solely to fight for independence from the French.

²¹ The word "Ban May" is called by the Vietnamese in Isan.

²² See, Thanyathip Sripana, "Ban Na Chok, A Remembrance of Friendship of Ho Chi Minh in Siam" (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 23 February 2004, p.7.

²³ According to the interviews with the Vietnamese in Nakhon Phanom, and a personal document written by a Vietnamese "Viet Cu" living in Isan.

²⁴ The writer also attended the opening ceremony, and spent many days in Ban Na Chok and other places in Nakhon Phanom before and after the ceremony.

One major consequence of improving understanding between the two countries is the growing interest in more in-depth and more open studies of Ho Chi Minh's life and his anti-French activities, as well as the Vietnamese nationalist movement in Thailand during the colonial period. Moreover, it is now opening the way for more extensive academic and cultural cooperation between the two sides in studying Ho Chi Minh's presence in Thailand in the very near future.

The success in inaugurating the "Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village" at Ban Na Chok, is primarily the outcome of the cooperation and good will of the two countries. The Museum of Ho Chi Minh sent their specialists to construct model houses of Ho Chi Minh's in Nghe An and Ha Noi on a 1:10 scale, together with proper materials to be used for this purpose.²⁵ On the other hand, we can not deny that the Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in Nakhon Phanom have made numerous contributions to the completion of the building and inauguration of the Friendship Village.

Another memorial of Ho Chi Minh's presence in Thailand has been also under construction at Ban Nong On in Udon Thani Province. Certainly, the Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in Udon are actively supportive of the plan to build Ho Chi Minh's house at Ban Nong On. This Ho Chi Minh's model residence at Ban Nong On will also symbolize the friendship

between Thailand and Vietnam, solidarity among the Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in Udon, and also their gratitude to their ancestors. Udon Thani is another province where Ho Chi Minh probably resided in 1928-1929, and is another province where the Vietnamese anti-French movement was present.

A Vietnamese anti-French leader working for the movement who deserves to be mentioned is Dang Thuc Hua. He passed away in Udon Thani in 1932²⁶, some document in 1931, and his cemetery is still there.²⁷ The topic on both Ho Chi Minh's and Dang Thuc Hua's presence and activities in Thailand can be another research topic.

All the memorials already erected, or in the construction process have owed much to the Viet Kieu, who actually are considered a cultural bridge between the two countries. Their attachment to Thailand represents those of both the Viet Kieu still been living in Isan and those who have already returned to Vietnam in the first half of the 1960's.

In my research on "The Viet Kieu in Thai-Vietnamese Relationship" from 2002-2004 supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, I have had an opportunity to spend a lot of time studying Ho Chi Minh's presence in Thailand, which is only a small part of the research. I have also spent a lot of time from 2002 to the present studying the Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in many provinces in Vietnam and in Isan, such as

²⁵ Information obtained from the visit to the Museum on 21-23 February 2004; from the interviews of the Vietnamese in Nakhon Phanom before and after 21 February 2004; and from discussion with the Vietnamese researcher of the Museum of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi.

²⁶ See, Nguyen Tai, *May mau chuyen ve Cu Dang Thuc Hua*, *Tap chi NCLS*, so 80, Vien Su Hoc, thang 11 nam 1965, Hanoi.

²⁷ The writer visited the cemetery many times in 2002-2004.

Nakhon Phanom, Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, Mukdahan, Khon Kaen, etc. I have received kind assistance and sincere cooperation from them both in Thailand and Vietnam. In spending a lot of time doing this research, finding information both in the form of documents and interviews on Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in Isan and Ho Chi Minh in Thailand, I have written an article and already have it published in a Thai newspaper, *Matichon Daily*. The article is entitled "Ban Na Chok, A Memorial of Friendship of Ho Chi Minh in Siam."²⁸ This is to honour Ho Chi Minh on the occasion of the opening of the Thai-Vietnamese Friendship Village at Ban Na Chok in Nakhon Phanom, on 21 February 2004, as mentioned earlier.

It can be said that the issue of Ho Chi Minh in Thailand is a very new one in this country, though probably not so in France. It has begun to attract attention from the Thai people and academics. It can be also said that a research on this topic has hitherto never been attempted in Thailand. Given that the topic is no longer a taboo, it has received a growing attention. But it is sad to say that the aforementioned article was used by some Thai academics without acknowledgement. Such a practice is certainly not acceptable, not matter what its purpose is. Academic

ethics should be respected. If one doesn't respect others, at least one should have more self-respect.

In undertaking this research on Viet Kieu in Thai-Vietnamese relationship, as well as on Ho Chi Minh in Thailand, many requirements need to be met. The ability to read and understand many languages is a prerequisite. This requires not only English and French, but also Lao, Thai, and, of course, Vietnamese. A collaborative network needed also to be set up in support of this work. Trust and close relations with the Vietnamese or Viet Kieu in Thailand and in Vietnam is another crucial requirement. Knowledge on international relations, Vietnamese history and culture, Thai policy towards the US and the Communist countries in the past, as well as the Thai government policy towards the Vietnamese in Thailand from the end of the 1940's is also of crucial importance.

This research project is one of the good examples of the fact that Viet Kieu in Thailand and in Vietnam become a cultural bridge linking Thailand and Vietnam, both at the national and people-to-people levels which the two governments, especially Thai government, have to pay attention to.

²⁸ Op. cit., Thanyathip Sripana, "Ban Na Chok , A Memorial of Friendship of Ho Chi Minh in Siam"(in Thai).