

## Vietnam

### *Ho Chi Minh*

By PIERRE BROCHEUX

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This new biography of Ho Chi Minh is the latest in a series of biographical studies produced by a publishing group in France called *Références/Facettes*. The stated objective of the series is to depart from the traditional narrative approach to biographical writing, and to focus instead on the public image of the subject, as well as to single out a number of salient issues that define the character and the lifework of that individual. In such a way, the organisers of the series hope to throw fresh light on what may otherwise be a familiar topic.

The Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh appears to be an ideal case study for such a project. During his lifetime, Ho was a highly controversial figure, praised by some as an Asian sage, reviled by others as a Machiavellian agent of the feared Comintern. In the three decades since his death, the dispute over his legacy has by no means abated, and even today it inspires widespread and sometimes acrimonious disagreement, both within Vietnam and abroad.

If the public image of Ho Chi Minh has often appeared to mask reality, this was a phenomenon that was deliberately promoted by Ho himself. Notoriously reticent about his own life, he was famously dexterous in using deceptive tactics in order to disguise his broader objectives. The debate over his motives began in the 1920s, when he emerged in Paris (under the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc, or 'Nguyen the Patriot') as an enthusiastic advocate of Vietnamese independence and the dismantling of the French colonial regime in Indochina. Shortly after, however, he became a founding member of the French Communist Party and served for two decades as one of the primary agents of international communism in Asia. Even after he was named president of a new Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the fall of 1945, he persisted for many years in denying his long years of service to the cause of worldwide revolution, preferring instead to cloak himself in the benign image of the avuncular 'Uncle Ho' beloved to millions of Vietnamese children.

French scholar Pierre Brocheux is well qualified to undertake this study. A senior lecturer at the University of Paris, he has written widely on various aspects of modern Vietnam, and is intimately familiar with the historical sources relevant to the Vietnamese revolution, including the voluminous colonial archives at Aix-en-Provence, in southern France. He is conversant in several languages, and has earned the respect of colleagues in the field for his careful scholarship and his quest for historical objectivity. These qualities are prominently in evidence in the study under review here.

In line with the guidelines established for the series, the author devotes several opening chapters to an investigation of the public image of Ho Chi Minh in the eyes of his contemporaries, as well as of succeeding generations. He also surveys the biographical literature, including the three autobiographical pieces written by Ho Chi Minh himself that were published in Hanoi under assumed names. Almost all such sources, as Brocheux points out, are highly partisan in flavour (some critical and some hagiographic), and it therefore falls to his charge to locate the real man underneath.

In Part II, the author turns to the substantive events of Ho Chi Minh's life, from his childhood and early maturity, through his long career as an anti-colonialist leader and revolutionary, and concluding with his achievements as president of the DRV, as well as a leading figure in the socialist camp. Throughout, the author is careful to avoid being swayed either by Ho's critics or by his acolytes, in a careful effort to produce a balanced assessment of a highly complex personality. He concludes that whereas Ho was probably motivated by sincerely humanitarian considerations, he

was implacable towards his adversaries and fully capable of sacrificing the lives of thousands of his compatriots on the altar of his chosen cause. Although pragmatic in his selection of tactics, he nonetheless possessed a utopian streak that led him – apparently to the end of his life – to overlook the manifold weaknesses of Marxism-Leninism. Unassuming in his personal demeanour, he yet connived in the creation of his public image and was fully convinced that human beings required firm leadership from ‘superior men’ such as himself.

I have some reservations about the structural model adopted for this biographical series. The thematic approach can be daunting for the reader who is not already intimately acquainted with the life of the subject. The fact is, even well informed individuals today often have only a vague idea of Ho Chi Minh and his role in the history of our era. By the same token, the emphasis placed by the organizers on the subject’s public image - while clearly in tune with current trends in the academic world - can sometimes overshadow the more crucial task of seeking an understanding of the subject’s actual achievements and inner character.

For the most part, Brocheux manages to avoid falling into this trap, although his treatment of Ho Chi Minh’s childhood experience and revolutionary career is perhaps too brief and cursory to support some of his broader conclusions about his character and inner motivations. To give just one example, the final section dealing with the possible influence of Confucian values on Ho Chi Minh’s worldview, while quite interesting, is highly speculative and lacking in any concrete evidence. Still, in the aggregate the author has provided us with an honest and balanced portrait of one of the most complex and influential individuals of the twentieth century. For that achievement, all those who seek a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese revolution and its impact on our era should be duly grateful.

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