Selected Works

*Ho Chi Minh*

OVERVIEW

Ho Chi Minh's *Selected Works* (1960) contains a number of Ho's speeches and political addresses. The first part of the work offers essays concerning the collective Vietnamese response to French oppression in the early 1920s. Launched as part of a series of literary attacks on French colonials by Ho while he was living in Paris, these early essays acknowledge French control over the Vietnamese but refute the fundamental moral or cultural right of the French to that dominance by exposing their hypocrisy and ineptitude through satirical ridicule. In doing so, Ho effectively turns the tables on French authorities, exposing their unjustifiable assumptions of superiority to the Vietnamese.

From the very beginning of Ho's career as a revolutionary until his death in 1969, one of his most powerful revolutionary tools was his typewriter. The French began feeling the sting of his particular kind of narrative attacks while he was a young radical communist and nationalist in Paris, changing his name and address constantly to avoid being picked up by French agents who were always hot on his trail. Through his association with French radicals, Ho learned the power of the press, and in 1922 he founded his own journal, *Le Paria*, dedicated to the plight of the French colonial peoples. He also wrote scores of articles for other revolutionary journals, including *L'Humanité*, *La Vie Ouvrière*, and *La Correspondance Internationale*. These articles had an impact on political affairs in metropole France and on political affairs in colonial Vietnam, articulating Ho's basic rationale for resistance to colonial oppression. They helped set the stage for the Viet-namese people to eventually retake their country from the French, who had dominated the region since the late nineteenth century.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

In the 1880s France added the Chinese protectorates Tonkin and Annam to Cochin China. This tripartite area of control became part of the larger French colonial sphere of Indochina, but after World War II it was known as Vietnam. France retained control of Vietnam until 1945. After a short period of Japanese rule, Ho's Viet Minh soldiers conquered the area but then had to contend with French attempts to regain the former colony. With ongoing assistance from China but using their own battle tactics, the Viet Minh defeated France in 1954. Having supported and funded France, the United States stepped in with a long conflict to continue what it saw as the fight to contain communism.
When Ho began writing his essays, Paris was already a breeding ground for Vietnamese radicalism. Wealthy Vietnamese families sent their sons to France for an education. They often became radicalized after attending meetings dedicated to socialist and communist ideology in what Ho biographer William Duiker has called the “Byzantine world of Vietnamese émigré politics in Paris.” Ho agitated on behalf of underpaid and overworked factory and shipyard workers from colonial countries and was a founding member of the French Communist Party. Returning Vietnamese brought back ideas first encountered through articles penned by Ho, who had himself come to France by working on steamships through Asia, South America, the United States, and Europe.

Ho’s Paris essays began a tradition of revolutionary writing focused on workers and peasants as both subjects of colonial abuse and the core of revolutionary efforts. Unlike Mao Zedong, Ho remained part of revolutionary struggle for most of his life and lacked the leisure that would have allowed him to engage in a wider philosophic scope. His work in relation to its specific target—colonial France—is thematically consistent with that of other international writers advocating resistance to colonialism. Frantz Fanon and Leopold Senghor in Africa, as well as Nuri as-Said and Bishara al-Khoury in the Arab world, developed the same sort of rhetorical stance in relation to their colonizers. All were reversing the paradigm of Westerners as bringers of civilization, instead insisting that Western civilization was built upon what Fanon calls “the sweat and the dead bodies of negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races.”

Sidebar: Key Facts

- **Time Period:** Mid-20th Century
- **Genre:** Speech/Essay
- **Events:** Rise of the Vietnamese independence movement; growth of anticolonialism
- **Nationality:** Vietnamese

Because Ho was both writer and political actor, it is impossible to disconnect his essays from his actions in the field. His work as part of Vladimir Lenin’s Communist International Movement (COMINTERN) and his shared agenda with Mao in China gave him experience in radical hotbeds in Moscow, Berlin, and Southeast Asia. In 1941, with the help of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, Ho started a guerilla warfare school on the Sino-Viet border. Its students emerged as leaders of the Viet Minh army that successfully battled Japan in 1945 and France in 1954, then fought the United States. All of these
developments had their motives inscribed in Ho's essays, and in many ways their influence is enshrined in Vietnam, particularly its capital, Ho Chi Minh City.

THEMES AND STYLE

Ho's early essays focus on the plight of the Vietnam-ese at the hands of the French. “The Civilizers” (1922) and “The Colonial Abyss” (1923), for example, take a hard, sardonic look at colonizers whose “civilizing influence” results in oppression. The essays achieve believability by creating a sense of journalistic immediacy. The use of specific dates, times, and instances creates the impression of a special news flash reported by an eyewitness. In “Murderous Civilization” (1922) Ho reports that on April 2, at 4:30 p.m., a Vietnamese man employed for thirty-five years by the railroad is told by his supervisors to close the drawbridge, so he dutifully hoists a red flag. Then a different drunken government official orders him to open the bridge. Caught between conflicting orders, the old man hesitates, so is beaten unconscious. “Horribly burnt ... he dies after six days of atrocious suffering,” Ho asserts, all the while animating the scene with fictional steam whistles from the boat, a mad Frenchman knocking over a red-hot brazier, and the red caution flag to which the beaten man points.

The collective intention of Ho's early essays is to rhetorically shift the moral high ground from the colonizing French to the Vietnamese people. In “Annamese Women and French Domination” (1922), he creates a scene of Vietnamese domesticity and innocence in order to show French barbarism disrupting it. After French troops move through a small village, most villagers flee into the jungle, but a few trustingly remain: two old men, a maiden, a mother “suckling her baby,” and an eight-year-old girl. They are accosted by drunken French soldiers seeking “money, spirits, and opium.” One confused old man is hit on the head with rifle butts; the other is slowly roasted over a fire. The soldiers rape the maiden, the mother, and the eight-year old girl. The mother escapes with her baby and watches as a soldier slowly pushes his bayonet in and out of the girl's stomach. He then cuts off her head to steal her necklace. When the rest of the villagers return, they find the beheaded corpse of the disemboweled girl, her fist clenched under an “indifferent sky,” and the roasted corpse of the old man “bloated, grilled, and golden.”

Ho's emphasis on vivid images gives his essays their emotional power. His tone is consistently ironic and disdainful, denigrating the French as immoral while holding up the Vietnamese as exemplars of morality. Thus, while a Vietnamese employee fulfills his duties for years, French government workers are drunk in the afternoon, skipping work, and taking their government boats out on hunting larks. While villages are filled with serene and trusting elders, children, maidens, and young mothers, the French interlopers are
armed, drunk, and violent. In *The Dehumanization of Art*, Jose Ortega y Gasset suggests that works such as Ho's, emphasizing specificity and visual imagery, offered audiences a “corporeality” and a “tactile” quality resulting in high emotional impact, so as works of propaganda, Ho's essays hit their mark.

**CRITICAL DISCUSSION**

Though there is no specific information regarding their immediate reception, the factual presentation in Ho's essays would have stretched the credulity of readers in 1960, when the Paris essays were first published as a collection. The impossibility of anyone in early 1920s Paris receiving such detailed and timely information from Vietnam as Ho reports would have been obvious. The technology, as well as the reporting venue that would have included such details, simply did not exist. Likewise, the logical presumptions of many essay details waver. It is unlikely that a drunken Frenchmen would cut off a head for a necklace, for example, if for no other reason than the item is easily taken without such horrific labor. Likewise, the slow, sexualized movement of the bayonet in and out of the eight-year-old girl's stomach can be construed as little more than a literary attempt to conflate one heinous act with another. The events, as reported, seem imagined.

Sidebar: **THE CONFUCIAN EXAMS AND HO CHI MINH**

The Han Emperor Wu Di (156 BCE-87 BCE) adopted a system of examinations based on the study of the five Chinese and the four Confucian classic texts to assign jobs to those who took the exams. This tradition lasted for nearly 2,000 years in China and for centuries in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh’s father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, reading a book while sitting on the back of a water buffalo, was noted by the Confucian Master Duong. Duong took the boy home, trained him, and married him to his daughter. Sac first sat for the Confucian Examinations in 1878 and did so again in 1891, 1894, 1895, and in 1898, failing several times, but he eventually earned the venerable *pho-bang*, or doctorate, *second* class. As a reward, his home village of Kim Lien gave him a house with two acres for cultivating rice. The villagers wished to throw him an expensive banquet too, but Sac asked instead that the meat for such a banquet be given to the poor. Like his father, the young **Ho Chi Minh** studied the Confucian classics, and though he never sat for the exams as his father had, he spent his life fighting for his own country's poor, ultimately establishing the Republic of Vietnam.
Ho's essays of the 1920s constitute the juvenilia of a social and political pragmatist whose passionate desire to free his people from French colonial oppression started him on the long road to the presidency of the country he founded. As Jean Lacouture notes in *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (1966), through Ho's actions and through his countless essays and political tracts, he became known to an ever-increasing readership as a living legend committed to his people and his nation. Likewise, his later essays, letters, and political tracts show an increasingly sophisticated awareness of the larger job of nation building that Ho had taken as his personal mission and of the wider public audience he needed to address. Consequently, they lack the vivid propagandist flamboyance of his early essays. But as ever, they carry in their words the same commitment as those penned by the bright-eyed young patriot showing up at all the socialist and communist meetings in Paris, speaking out on behalf of oppressed colonial peoples everywhere.

At the pinnacle of his success, biographies about Ho naturally began to appear. Though there is still relatively little scholarship about his essays, Lacouture offers one of the first comprehensive looks at Ho's life, and the scope has broadened with Duiker's *Ho Chi Minh* (2000) and Pierre Brocheux's *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (2007). Despite Ho's enduring status as a master political strategist and nation builder, no extensive critical examination of him as a writer and master propagandist has yet emerged.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Sources**


Further Reading


North Vietnamese president *Ho Chi Minh* (1950). Some of his writings can be found in *Selected Works* (1960). © *BETTMANN/CORBIS.*


--Robert Kibler