

The Relationship between Certain Vietnamese and Japanese Militarists in the Second World War and the Historical Lessons

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Introduction

There has been an extensive literature written on the invasion and domination of Vietnam by Japanese militarists (hereafter “the Japanese” for short), and on Vietnamese political parties and religious organizations that relied on the Japanese for patronage to various extents. They provide the basic information to understand the relationship between some Vietnamese and the Japanese in the Second World War and to explore valuable historical experiences for the building of Vietnam–Japan relations in the modern age.

In the Second World War, Japanese militarists invaded Vietnam. Their crimes brought sorrows to many hearts not only of the Vietnamese but also the Japanese. Before and during the invasion of Vietnam, the Japanese launched a series of mass mobilisation campaigns to promote the doctrine of Greater East Asia, which held that yellow people (Asian) should not accept foreign rulers who had “blue eyes and white skin” on their territory, and praised the role of Japan in supporting Vietnamese in their struggle against the French.

Many Vietnamese at the time, who failed to see the true intentions of the Japanese, had an illusion that they could depend on Japan to eliminate the French domination and regain national independence. Those Vietnamese thus chose to support and cooperate with the Japanese and formed many political parties, notably *Việt Nam Phục quốc Đồng minh hội* (Vietnam National Restoration League), *Việt Nam Phục quốc đảng* (Vietnam Restoration Party), *Việt Nam Dân chính đảng* (Vietnam Democratic Party), *Việt Nam Hưng quốc Cách mạng đảng* (Vietnam Revolutionary Party for National Prosperity), *Đại Việt Quốc xã* (Great Vietnam Nationalist League), *Đảng Việt Nam Ái quốc* (Vietnam Patriotic Party), *Đảng Đại Việt Quốc gia Liên minh* (Great Vietnam National Unity Party), *Thanh niên Ái quốc đoàn* (The Youth Patriots), and *Đại Việt Quốc dân đảng* (Nationalist Party of Great Vietnam).

After the Japanese overthrow of the French in Indochina (March 3, 1945), apart from the establishment of political parties, some Vietnamese also cooperated in the formation of a pro-Japanese government in the hope of “gaining independence.” Their decision not only ran counter to the will and wishes of the Vietnamese people and was incompatible with the historical conditions, but was also turned

into a tool for the Japanese to repress the movement of national liberation.

The relationship between Vietnam and Japan at the time was truly regrettable. However, it left many historical experiences for the building and development of a good relationship between the two countries today: respecting each other's independence, sovereignty and political system; cooperation on the grounds of mutual trust and mutual benefit for both peoples, for peace and stability in the region and in the world.

1. Before the Japanese invaded Indochina, there had been Vietnamese who wanted to escape from the domination of French colonial rulers, yet only passively waited for Japanese help

Under French domination, Vietnam became a colony. The country lost its independence. The people lost their freedom. Thus, independence and freedom became the burning desires of all enslaved Vietnamese. From the time of the Meiji Reform (beginning in 1868), Japan quickly emerged as a powerful empire that could protect its national independence against the threat from Western capitalism. Thus in the eyes of many Vietnamese patriots, Japan was a role model for all Eastern peoples, a "yellow brother" that Vietnam could rely on to defeat the white colonial rulers. In the early 20th century, with the aim of seeking Japanese support, Phan Bội Châu and other patriots initiated the Đông du (Eastern Study) movement with the hope of rallying Japanese support for their quest for independence. The movement was unsuccessful. However, many Vietnamese still had admiration for Japan. They did not know that the Japanese empire had already targeted Vietnam in particular and Indochinese countries in general for their plan of invasion and domination.

In the 1930s, the land to the south of China began attracting Japanese attention because they believed that the area could be turned into a colony where they could extract supplies of food and fuel for their army. The *Nanshin* (Southward Advancement) plan was formulated and implemented by members of Black Dragon, a Japanese intelligence agency¹ to collect information on the population and cultures of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.² Following the *Nanshin* plan, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (*Tonan Ajia Kenkyu Senta*) was established by Japanese intelligence commanders to propagate the doctrine of a "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" (*Daito A Kyo-eiken*). Black Dragon units spread this doctrine using slogans like "East Asia for East Asians" and "An independent Vietnam in the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere." Together with Black Dragon forces, a number

¹ In the late 19th century, when the Japanese were preparing for "the expansion of the empire across the globe," the Japanese Empire established the Kempeitai (law enforcement force), whose mission was to monitor the army's internal affairs, and to gather intelligence. The strategic intelligence unit, named Black Dragon, grew rapidly in China. Its members were disguised as consulate staff members, teachers of Japanese language, clockmakers or photographers. Many infiltrated street gangs, gathering new members from among the locals. After the Sino-Japanese War (1894), Japan planned to invade neighbouring countries by means of establishing organizations such as the Indochinese Study group, Asian Study group, and Chinese study group to serve intelligence activities, including the Black Dragon.

² Black Dragon members followed traditional martial arts troupes and medicine peddlers to travel across cities and villages in Indochina. They compiled reports on French Indochina that provided detailed descriptions of natural resources, the economy, politics, social structure, from the lives of colonial and feudal rulers with everyday practices, customs and beliefs of ordinary people.

of Japanese agents were also sent to Vietnam.³ Japan also provided allowance to Marquess Cường Đê⁴ to live in Tokyo in the 1930s, with the aim of using him as a political card for the plan of invading Vietnam. In 1935, as the President of Vietnam National Restoration League, Cường Đê⁵ received a guarantee of assistance from Japanese intelligence agencies. Mistaking the Japanese promise as a gesture of goodwill, when the Japanese entered Indochina, Cường Đê sent liaisons to Vietnam to make contact with anti-French groups⁶ and to establish bases of his Vietnam National Restoration League in some localities in the country.

Before the Second World War, two new religious sects were formed in southern Vietnam: the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo. Some individuals, notably Phạm Công Tắc, Huỳnh Phú Sổ, Cao Đức Trọng, Trần Quang Vinh, and Đặng Trung Chử met Yamaguchi, a Japanese agent. Phạm Công Tắc called for the establishment of an organization to support Cường Đê and the Japanese. The French Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel was correct when treating the Cao Đài as a legal organization (1938), while also remaining suspicious of the connections between leaders of this religious sect and the movement led by Cường Đê in Japan.

In general, from the mid-1930s, the number of Japanese in Vietnam increased rapidly. Whether on purpose or by mistake, many Vietnamese cooperated with Japanese intelligence out of hatred against French domination or out of failure to see the true intentions of the Japanese. Their cooperation thus allowed the Japanese to gather information necessary for their forthcoming invasion of Indochina.

2. Having failed to recognise Japan's plan of invasion and the cooperation between Japan and France, some Vietnamese established pro-Japanese political parties in the hope of gaining independence

In September 1939, the Second World War began and quickly spread across the globe. The Japanese escalated the invasion of China and sent troops to the border with Vietnam, threatening to invade Indochina. After France surrendered to Germany in Europe (June 1940), the Japanese increased pressure to force the French in Indochina to make compromise.⁷ In September 1940, the Japanese entered

³ In Saigon in 1936, Yamaguchi, a Japanese agent disguised as a student studying the history of the Nguyễn dynasty, befriended many Vietnamese scholars and politicians to propagate the doctrine of Greater East Asia and the role of Japan in supporting anti-French movements of the Vietnamese.

⁴ Cường Đê, whose true name was Nguyễn Phúc Hồng Dân, was born on February 28, 1882 in the Imperial Citadel (Huế), a descendant of former Crown Prince Nguyễn Phúc Cảnh, the eldest son of Emperor Gia Long. In 1904, Hồng Dân, was invited by Phan Bội Châu to become President of the Renovation movement, when he adopted the name Cường Đê. During his stay in China, he also used other names such as Lý Cảnh Thành, Lâm Thuận Đức.

⁵ At the time Cường Đê used the Japanese name Minami.

⁶ In 1939, Cường Đê founded the Restoration movement. In September 1940, he sent Trần Văn An and Hoàng Nam Hùng to Vietnam. When Hoàng Nam Hùng, Trần Trung Lập, and Hoàng Lương orchestrated an uprising in Đồng Đăng and Lạng Sơn, Trần Văn An returned to Saigon to build up his forces and gather anti-French elements in Vietnam, including the Great Vietnam branch led by Ngô Đình Diệm in Huế, the Great Vietnam branch led by Trương Tử Anh in Hà Nội and groups led by Vũ Đình Duy and Hồ Văn Ngà in Saigon. Trần Văn An also managed to establish contact with the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo.

⁷ On June 19, 1940, Japan sent an ultimatum to Indochina Governor-General Indochina G. Catroux, ordering the French to close the Vietnam-China border. On August 30, 1940, the Vichy government signed a treaty with Tokyo allowing Japan to send 25,000 troops to Indochina and to use certain airports and seaports in the colony. On the morning of September 22,

Indochina and pursued a two-sided policy. On the one hand, they stationed troops across the country, yet maintained and used the colonial governing apparatus, on the condition that the French would 'cooperate' with Japan in all aspects and help enhance its war efforts.⁸ On the other hand, they sought to win the support of anti-French Vietnamese in order to create the social base for Japanese domination and to monitor French movements so as to overthrow the French when necessary.

To this end, Japan continuously propagated the slogan of "liberating Asia" and "building the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" to legitimize their invasion and win the support of Vietnamese. The Japanese Central Command in Indochina asserted that they would pay particular attention to winning the support of the local population. In order to achieve that, it was necessary to foster propaganda that would help form an image amongst the Vietnamese public of the Japanese as liberators who respected their right to independence and would rescue them from French domination. The Japanese military authorities also hoped that the Vietnamese would collaborate with them in the formation of a new Greater East Asia Sphere and in their struggles to liberate East Asia.

Apart from advocating the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," Japan also opened centers to propagate Japanese culture and language in Hanoi and Saigon. Delegations of Japanese intellectuals and Buddhists were encouraged to visit Cochinchina, and later Vietnamese patriotic scholars were invited to Japan. Some Japanese individuals and organizations also established ties with members of "indigenous nationalist" movements. Some Japanese monks travelled across the three Indochinese countries to propagate the idea that yellow people should not accept the presence of those who had "blue eyes and white skin" in their territory. The Japanese also established the Vietnam National Restoration League and publicly announced the plan of bringing Cường Để home to replace Bảo Đại as the new emperor.

In 1943, Japan sent Matsui⁹ to Saigon to foster the propagation of the doctrine of Greater East Asia and to gather former members of the Renovation movement to nurture anti-French sentiments in Vietnam. In Tokyo, Japanese press released General Matsui's statements in Saigon that intended to inspire "patriotism" among Vietnamese young intellectuals. These policies eventually led to the unification of pro-Japanese forces in Vietnam. Even those Vietnamese who had hitherto pursued the policy of 'cooperating' with the French, being loyal to the French and who had even sworn that they would never cooperate with any other power if France was defeated by Germany, began to praise the arrival of the Japanese in Indochina. Lê Quang Liêm wrote, "Thanks to the Japanese, the grain production in Indochina will be rescued. The people of this land will have enough goods to consume, at low prices. This will benefit particularly the poor."¹⁰

Apart from launching propaganda campaigns, the Japanese also sought to establish pro-Japanese

1940, Japanese troops attacked French military posts in Lạng Sơn, landed on Đồ Sơn and bombed Hải Phòng port. That afternoon the French accepted the supplement to the previous treaty, which regulated the terms and conditions of the stationing of Japanese troops in Indochina, marking the surrender of the French to the Japanese militarists.

⁸ The strategic aims of the Japanese when they invaded Indochina were to extract manpower and resources (notably rice, rubber and coal) to serve the war effort and to turn Indochina into a strategic base to expand their invasion in the region.

⁹ Matsui was an intelligence commander who led Black Dragon units in China.

¹⁰ *Lục tỉnh Tân văn* (magazine), 19-7-1940.

groups across Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. Many anti-French intellectuals across Vietnam were secretly recruited in different groups and organizations. Some Vietnamese who had long been nurtured by the Japanese then became the latter's tools to propagate anti-French sentiments, and became supporters of Japanese war efforts. The most prominent among these were Trần Trung Lập, Hoàng Lương, and Ngô Văn Ba. Under the leadership of Colonel Shibata, in November 1940, only two months after the Japanese troops arrived in Indochina, a pro-Japanese political organization, *Việt Nam Phục quốc Đảng* (Vietnam National Restoration Party) was established with branches across Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. The leaders of this organization in Tonkin were Trần Trung Lập, Ngô Văn Ba and Matsui; in Annam Ngô Đình Diệm, and Ngô Đình Khôi; in Cochinchina Trần Văn An, Lương Văn Tượng, Trần Quang Vinh, Ngô Đình Đậu and the President of Great Vietnam Company Matsushita.

A number of pro-Japanese parties emerged: Vietnam National Restoration League (led by Cường Để with branches across the three parts of Vietnam), Great Vietnam Democratic Party and Vietnam Youth Patriots (which had bases amongst intellectuals in Tonkin and Annam), Vietnam Revolutionary Party for National Prosperity and The Great Vietnam Nationalist League (led by Trương Đình Trí), Vietnam Patriotic Party (led by Nguyễn Xuân Chử, Vũ Đình Dy and Lê Toàn), and Great Vietnam National Unity Party (led by Nguyễn Thế Nghiệp). The Nationalist Party of Greater Vietnam was a political organization which merged different parties, notably the groups Hưng Việt founded by Nguyễn Tường Tam and Great Vietnam Democracy by Nguyễn Tiến Lâu (12-1940).

There were also many pro-Japanese parties that claimed to represent “the entire nation” although they were only small groups with a few members and no popular support without political agenda or terms of membership. For example, in Annam, the Annam National Restoration League and Vietnam Youth Patriots were established in Huế), and Inter-Japanese Youth in Quảng Nam, following Matsushita's instructions. They exploited the conflicts between the masses and local French authorities. Everywhere they raised slogans such as “Support Great Japan,” “Place Cường Để on the throne,” “Throw the French out of Indochina”... In Tonkin, there were other groups, including Restoration, Vietnam Nationalist Party, Vietnam National Independence Party, and Veterans Association.

3. Many Vietnamese followers of anti-French religious sects also sought help from the Japanese

Besides the establishment of political parties, the Japanese also utilized anti-French religious sects, particularly Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo Buddhism in Cochinchina.

The Cao Đài movement was founded in 1926 in Cochinchina. The religion was divided into several groups, among which the most influential was the Tây Ninh group. After the Japanese arrived in Indochina, the *Restoration League* and the Cao Đài both sent representatives to contact Cường Để. The leaders of this religion publicly announced their pro-Japanese policy. Therefore, from 1940, the French colonial rulers suppressed this sect, shut down the worship sites and sentenced exile or house detention to some of the leaders. For example, Phạm Công Tắc was banished to Madagascar. The Japanese could not openly stop these French actions. Instead, they secretly helped Trần Quang Vinh, a high-ranking cler-

gyman of the Tây Ninh group, to organize a new Cao Đài board of leaders. Supported by the Japanese, Trần Quang Vinh quickly restored the influence of the religion and began calling for donations to purchase weapons to fight the French. From July 1941, Cao Đài cooperated closely with the Japanese. The Japanese supported and protected them and helped train a paramilitary force of 3,000 men, most of whom were workers in the Japanese ship-repairing workshop in Saigon. Before the Japanese overthrow of the French, many pro-Japanese groups in Cochinchina expected the new regime in Vietnam with “Cường Đê as emperor, Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister, and Cao Đài as the national religion.”

Huỳnh Phú Sổ founded Hoà Hảo (or Hoà Hảo Buddhism) in September 1939, with a large number of followers in Châu Đốc, Long Xuyên and Sa Đéc. As Huỳnh Phú Sổ had made many prophecies about the forthcoming collapse of the French colonialism, in 1941 the French rulers arrested, put him in the Chợ Quán mental hospital and then detained him in Bạc Liêu. However, the Hoà Hảo did not stop growing, but attracted more followers especially from 1942. In May 1942, the French planned to send Huỳnh Phú Sổ to house detention in Cambodia. However, the Japanese forestalled them, sending agents to Bạc Liêu to escort Huỳnh Phú Sổ to Saigon and put him under the Japanese protection. The Japanese sent Huỳnh Phú Sổ twice to Mekong Delta provinces for preaching. He encouraged local farmers to supply rice to the Japanese army. Thus, the Hoà Hảo was one of the two largest pro-Japanese religious sects in Indochina, though it had no paramilitary force.

In 1943, the pro-Japanese Vietnamese arranged to “hold a big ceremony” to welcome Matsui when he visited Saigon. Matsui gave a speech in front of Vietnamese journalists condemning French, British and American colonial rulers. He declared firmly, “The Japanese will help Asian nations, regardless of the desires of the American, British and French.” However, as the French rulers knew that the Japanese had no plan to do anything radical, they decided to arrest some pro-Japanese activists, such as Trần Văn Lai, Nguyễn Trác, Lê Đức, Phạm Lợi, Hồ Nhật Tân, Giác Quế... Some others—Trần Trọng Kim, Dương Bá Trạc, and Đặng Văn Ký—were frightened and took shelter at Japanese headquarters. The Japanese sent them to Singapore. The Japanese failure to sufficiently protect them against the French intelligence’s suppression disappointed many people who had believed that “the Japanese are heroes.”

4. Hope and disappointment—the “bitterness” of the pro-Japanese when Japan overthrew the French in Indochina

Since their early days in Indochina, the Japanese had been aware that pro-Japanese groups and individuals in Vietnam were poorly organized, split into small factions that did not cooperate with each other and would not have the capacity to lead a native government that could effectively cooperate. In January 1945, in a meeting at the Central Command of the Army in Tokyo, Lieutenant General Sanada stated that there was no Vietnamese leader that could represent Vietnam with “independence.” The military leaders in Indochina soon disclosed their idea to exclude Cường Đê and Ngô Đình Diệm from their plans. On February 20, 1945, the Commander of Japanese army in Indochina Tsuchihashi informed Consul Tsukamoto in Saigon that for the time being, no Vietnamese political exiles should

be allowed to return home. A few days later, however, a diplomat came from Tokyo and attempted to persuade Tsuchihashi to allow Cường Để to return to Vietnam and to enthrone him. The general, however, replied that Cường Để might be able to return, but as soon as he landed in Saigon airport, he would be arrested and sentenced to exile in Côn Đảo.¹¹

In 1945, the war situation for Japan was worsening. The Allies began bombing campaigns against Indochina, where Japanese troops were stationed. To protect themselves against possible French betrayal and to keep Indochina open as a pathway to other parts in the southern region, the Japanese carried out a coup against the French on March 9. The French put up weak resistance and quickly surrendered. The Japanese took full control of Indochina. In Cochinchina, pro-Japanese forces, including the Cao Đài “Local Righteous Army” Cao Đài and the Hoà Hảo “League of Righteous Soldiers” assisted the Japanese in disarming the French. In many places, local people even placed altars on the roads, waiting to welcome Cường Để back to inherit the throne, although in the end he did not return.

After overthrowing the French, the Japanese quickly appointed their high-ranking military officers to replace the colonial Governor-General, Governor of Cochinchina, and the *Résidents Supérieurs* of Tonkin and Annam. General Tsuchihashi issued a press release stating that the administrative and legal system and all previous rules and regulations would remain unchanged. “All government officials, whoever they are, will be protected and allowed to continue their job if they cooperate with the Japanese army.”

Emperor Bảo Đại immediately accepted the replacement of the old master with a new one. On March 11, 1945, following the Japanese suggestion and permission, he declared Annam “independent” and the establishment of the Great Vietnam Empire. He also declared that Vietnam would “consider itself a part of Greater East Asia, and would contribute resources and efforts to the co-prosperity. The government of Vietnam thus would sincerely trust and cooperate with Japan, and would mobilise all national resources to achieve that goal.”¹²

In March 1945, Japan brought Trần Trọng Kim¹³ from exile back to Saigon, then Huế and arranged for him to become Prime Minister of the new government under Bảo Đại. On April 17, 1945, his cabinet was formed. Phạm Khắc Hoè wrote in his memoir:

“The Declaration of the Trần Trọng Kim cabinet presented a relatively comprehensive political agenda. It called for the people ‘to work hard, sacrifice more and to *sincerely cooperate with the Great Japan* (author’s emphasis) in the construction of Greater East Asia. If the co-prosperity of Greater East Asia is successfully established, then independence of our country will not be just a short-lived dream.”

The pro-Japanese groups had high hopes that independence would be brought by the Japanese. The leaders of the Cao Đài, Restoration League and Vietnam National Independence Party distributed tens

¹¹ Cà Mau province—Online Portal, 22-9-2014.

¹² Dương Trung Quốc: *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1919–1945)* (Hanoi: Giáo Dục, 2001), p. 388.

¹³ Trần Trọng Kim was a non-partisan patriotic intellectual, who had worked as an educator and historian. Although he was an enthusiastic patriot, he was not a revolutionary.

of thousands of leaflets, calling for people in Cochinchina to show gratitude toward the Japanese empire. They held a massive parade at the centre of Saigon. Hồ Văn Ngà, on behalf of the Vietnam National Independence Party, and Trần Quang Vinh, on behalf of the Cao Đài, delivered speeches to express gratitude to the liberation by the Japanese army. However, when Trần Quang Vinh and Hồ Văn Ngà shouted out the slogans “Long live the invincible Japanese army,” the masses instead shouted back the slogans “Independence for Vietnam!” and “Unification for Vietnam!” These groups also launched demonstrations in Saigon and other localities to call for the Japanese to expel the French working in public agencies and replace them with Vietnamese. They also expressed the wish that the Japanese would return independence to Cochinchina, which had not been included in the “independent” Empire under Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim and was ruled by Governor Fujio Minoda (As a directly ruled colony, it had already been separate from the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam, and the Japanese maintained that separate status).

The number of organizations and parties grew rapidly in the cities where the Japanese troops were stationed; there were over 30 parties in Tonkin alone.¹⁴ According to the *Ngày Nay* [Today] magazine (May 5, 1945), “After a short storm of fire, political parties, societies and leagues sprouted up like mushrooms.” In Tonkin and Annam there were the New Vietnam National Party, Great Vietnam National Party, National Service Party, Vietnam League for Building Independence, Vietnam Youth Patriots, New Vietnam Association, Vietnam Student Union, and Union of Civil Servants, among others. In Cochinchina, the number of political, military and religious organizations and parties was even larger than in Tonkin. Apart from the organizations already in operation such as Restoration League, Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo, a number of new organizations were established or emerged publicly, such as Vietnam National Party, Vietnam National Independence Party, Huỳnh Long Party, Federation of Civil Servants and the Veterans Association... Though not all of these organizations were pro-Japanese, most of them were formed by pro-Japanese individuals and locally based. Most members in the Student Union, Federation of Civil Servants and Vanguard Youth were influenced by communist revolutionaries. Pro-Japanese parties such as Vietnam National Independence Party and Restoration had no credibility amongst the masses.

Bảo Đại

However, decisions made by the Japanese after March 9, 1945 strongly disappointed pro-Japanese “nationalists,” particularly in Cochinchina. Despite their efforts to persuade the Japanese to restore the unity of Vietnam, the Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet failed to achieve independence for the whole nation. Moreover, when the Japanese troops attacked revolutionary bases of the Việt Minh, they heavily repressed patriots in villages and gathered grain to supply to the Japanese army. Why did the government of Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim fail to notice these crimes? Was it because they blindly believed in Japanese “good will,” or they were busy in negotiating with Japan over the right to govern an “inde-

¹⁴ *Tin Mới* (magazine), 10-5-1945.

pendent” country, a right that they had never had. If they did know about Japanese crimes, then were they forced to “let things be done against their own will”?

During the early days of August 1945, the U.S dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and the Soviet Red Army started attacking the Japanese troops in Manchuria. The Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet in Vietnam fell into crisis and finally dissolved itself. When the 1945 August Revolution broke out and succeeded, the pro-Japanese organizations also self-disintegrated or transformed into different political groups. Some joined the Việt Minh, others relocated their operations outside the country, and some went over to the French.

5. Historical lessons

The Vietnam–Japan relationship in the Second World War was an abnormal one. The “independence” of Vietnam in Greater East Asia as the Japanese claimed was in practice an illusion. Eventually all the hope and trust of the pro-Japanese Vietnamese vanished. This painful historical period, however, left many valuable lessons for the two countries today.

First, a good relationship can be only established and developed on the grounds of truly respecting each other's independence, sovereignty and political regime.

The stationing of Japanese troops in Vietnam in the Second World War was an act of invasion. When the Japanese arrived in Vietnam, they did not want to liberate Vietnam from the French colonial domination, but only wanted to realise the dream of “Greater East Asia” with Japan as the leader of the entire Asia. Japan’s main goal was to turn Vietnam into a colony to serve Japanese war efforts in Asia-Pacific. What the Japanese needed was an administration and a base for their domination, rather than a government that could achieve true independence for Vietnam. This was the ultimate aim of the Japanese when they cooperated with and later overthrew the French, when they planned to use and later discarded Cường Để and Ngô Đình Diệm as their potential local collaborators, and when they took advantage of and later abandoned pro-Japanese political parties and religious sects.

The pro-Japanese political parties and religious sects, although their numbers may have reached several hundred thousands, still constituted only a small portion of the Vietnamese population. They lacked unity and solidarity. They did not represent the will and wish of the entire people. When the majority of Vietnamese regarded the Japanese troops in Indochina as invaders, these pro-Japanese political parties and religious sects considered Japan to be a savior and thus were utilised by the Japanese for their plan of dividing Vietnam and Vietnamese people. The Japanese did not intend to hand over Cochinchina to the Vietnamese. They considered it their new colony. They did not decide to “transfer” control of Cochinchina to the government of Bảo Đại–Trần Trọng Kim, until they were totally defeated in the war. It was too late. This showed that the Japanese had no respect for the long-established unity of Vietnam.

In short, Japan cared little about the independence and unity of Vietnam. They did not really respect

the political regime, which they had established in Vietnam. Historical experience has shown that a prerequisite for a relationship between nations should be mutual respect for national independence, equality and national self-determination. These are also principles of modern international relations as regulated in the Charter of the United Nations.

Second, true cooperation can only be achieved based on mutual trust, for the benefit of people in both countries, for peace and stability in the region and in the world.

In practice, the wartime relationship between Japan and some pro-Japanese Vietnamese, whether political parties, religious sects or individuals, was only what is called in Vietnamese “same bed, different dreams.” Whether these Vietnamese truly believed in the Japanese or only wanted to take advantage of them, they were too naïve when they believed in Japan’s good will, and considered it a savior that would selflessly help Vietnam to regain independence. The illusion ultimately vanished. It was a pity that they had failed to recognise that after the Japanese overthrow of the French, Vietnam would be Japan’s colony.

Japan’s real strategic goals were hidden behind the doctrine of Greater East Asia and the Co-prosperity Sphere. Those Vietnamese who were “nationalists” actually did nothing, except for relying on and supporting Japan in exchange for ‘an illusion of independence.’ Japan certainly had no faith in those unorganized and fragmented organizations with no clear political agendas or credibility amongst the masses. Thus, the Vietnamese who had relied on the Japanese throughout the war were eventually abandoned.

This bitter experience shows that a good relationship can be only built on mutual trust, mutual understanding, mutual respect and a commitment to protect each other’s legitimate interests. Cooperation should not be used for the sake of one single side at the expense of the other. It should benefit both sides and the interests of the people in the region and in the world.

The Second World War has now become the past, though some of its consequences still remain today. The two countries had an abnormal relationship in the past, yet this can change, if the people of the contemporary generation draw lessons to strive for a better future. As a Japanese Prime Minister once said,

Our actions in the past have brought long-lasting pains, losses and sufferings not only to our people, but also to those in our Asian neighbouring countries. As a person deeply remorseful for the unbearable pains and sufferings that many have endured because of the invasion and domination by our country, I believe the way forward for Japan is definitely to avoid war at all costs, and to dedicate ourselves whole-heartedly to building and protecting world peace.¹⁵

In fact, the mutual relationship of partnership between Vietnam and Japan continues to develop.

¹⁵ Quoted in Văn Tạo và Furuta Motoo ed., *Nạn đói năm 1945 ở Việt Nam: những chứng tích lịch sử/The 1945 famine in Vietnam—Historical evidence* (Hanoi: Viện Sử học, 1995), p. 11.