

Vietnamese, Chinese, and Overseas Chinese during the Chinese Occupation of Northern Indochina (1945–1946)

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Abstract:

In late August 1945, after Japan's sudden collapse ended World War II, Chinese forces marched into northern Vietnam to take the Japanese surrender there. They would not leave again for more than a year. Drawing on extensive Vietnamese and French archival and newspaper research, this note discusses relations between Chinese forces, local Vietnamese (including the new Vietnam government and its adherents), and Chinese residents in northern Vietnam during this brief but trying interlude between the Second World War and the First Indochina War.

Keywords:

Chinese in Vietnam; Overseas Chinese; Viet Minh

Introduction

On 28 August, Chinese divisions began pouring across the Indochina border. Days later, the Chinese advance command flew from Kunming to Hanoi where, on 9 September, a well-equipped and disciplined Yunnan regiment entered the city, followed by increasingly bedraggled units well into the night.¹ Vietnamese observers commented how supposedly victorious Chinese troops appeared quite inferior to defeated Japanese units.² A week before, as Chinese soldiers had entered the heavily populated Red River Delta, mostly on foot, Vietnamese villagers had also been stunned by their emaciated bodies, tattered clothing, and seeming lack of organisation. Yet whatever their initial assessment of Chinese troops, Vietnamese had to accept this visible Chinese presence. By the end of 1945, they probably numbered about 100,000, before the 1946 withdrawals began,³ along with at least ten thousand porters, camp followers, and petty merchants. Overall, this influx easily tripled the approximate number of resident Chinese in northern Vietnam.⁴

Their commanding officer, General Lu Han, arrived in Hanoi on 14 September. Two days later he summoned Hồ Chí Minh, provisional president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), to discuss currency exchange rates, feeding the Chinese Army, repairing roads, the size of the Vietnamese Army, and the importance of maintaining order. Lu arbitrarily declared that one "Chinese gold unit" (*guan jin*; CGU) would be worth 1.5 Indochina piastres, grossly overvaluing the Chinese currency. Fearful of Chinese buying up rice with inflated bank notes, Hồ promised that his government would supply Chinese troops with grain and keep the peace, a deal accepted by Lu on 22 September. Ho was well aware from Lu's exchange rate decree how easily the Chinese general could insert himself into Vietnamese government affairs if the fledgling DRV failed in either matter. This

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1. Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 281–82, 204–05.

2. David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945. The Quest for Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 418–21.

3. For an educated discussion of Chinese troop numbers, see Peter M. Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution: China and the Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 57–58. Other studies assert up to 200,000 Chinese soldiers were present, but without substantiation.

4. There were approximately 53,000 Chinese there in 1943. See Shiu Wentang in this issue of *CSDS*

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meeting and agreement created the framework for events over the next year. Supporters of the DRV government were desperate to avoid Chinese interference in government or Chinese support for the return of colonial French forces north of the 16th parallel. To achieve these vital policy goals, Hồ strove to ensure that Vietnamese swallowed many day-to-day grievances against the Chinese until the bitter disappointment of the Sino–French negotiations in 1946, which led to Chinese military withdrawal and the return of the French. Without their own army to defend them, by the end of 1946 resident Chinese would be forced to choose between French and Vietnamese antagonists, with the fighting in Hải Phòng causing most to make the fateful choice of colonial power over Vietnamese national aspirations.

The Chinese Occupation of North Vietnam

Right from the start, the Chinese Army posed problems for the new revolutionary government in the north. We get some idea of their scope from early periodic reports of province administrative committees. In upland provinces north and west of Hanoi, Chinese troops mostly walked through but left a company-size garrison at the province seat. In Thái Nguyên, for example, after a sizeable Chinese contingent arrived on 13 September, the province people's committee made some grain available and the Chinese quartermaster promised to pay. However, soldiers descended on the market place with Chinese currency, which shopkeepers refused to accept, and the whole market ended up closing down in protest. Most of the troops departed two weeks later, but without paying the unit's grain bill.⁵ Two hundred kilometres to the west, after political tussles between Vietnamese nationalists and the Viet Minh, the Chinese military seized 90,000 piastres from the Sơn La treasury and commandeered 70 tons of rice, 14 tons of cattle, 150 horses, 150 saddles, and 20 floor mats.⁶ In the lowland Red River Delta, a spate of early brutalities went unpunished before a Chinese commander summarily executed two soldiers accused of killing three Vietnamese in Bắc Ninh town on 18 September. One newspaper commented that, after a number of incidents where Chinese perpetrators had gone untouched, "people are happy to see a change".⁷ That same night, twenty-three Bắc Ninh residents reported that they had been attacked and pillaged by Chinese.⁸ In Sơn Tây Province, just west of Hanoi, several thousand Chinese occupied the former colonial military base at Tổng and all school buildings in town. In early October, the DRV Foreign Ministry warned the government that Chinese Army ill-discipline in Hải Phòng, combined with a wide range of Sino–Vietnamese "misunderstandings" and repeated altercations, had produced a "very troublesome" situation in the city. Just to its northeast, in Hòn Gai town, Chinese troops had imprisoned fifty individuals, broken into buildings, and seized a range of public and private property. In the nearby hills, local Chinese bands claiming to belong to the Chinese Army collected protection money from some villages and wreaked havoc on others.⁹ On 31 October, three Chinese soldiers in Vietnamese clothing killed three civilians and wounded others. Vietnamese militiamen captured two of them, but Chinese officers insisted they be

5. 1 Oct 45 UBND Thái Nguyên report, Thái Nguyên 1945 folder, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (CAOM), INDO, GF71.

6. 27 Sep 45, 1 Oct 45, and 22 Oct 45 correspondence between Sơn La and BB, Sơn La folder, CAOM, INDO, GF16. 23 Oct 45 UBND Sơn La report, Sơn La folder, CAOM, INDO, GF71. The province committee may have inflated the commandeered figures, as they hoped for recompense from the central authorities.

7. *Dân Chủ* (Hải Phòng), no. 23 (19 Sept 45). The commander also gave 1,200 piastres to the 3 aggrieved families.

8. Undated Cảnh sát Bắc Ninh report for 18 Sept 45 'violent incident', 3rd Phòng Kinh tế folder, CAOM, INDO, GF47. The report makes no mention of Chinese soldiers executed.

9. 10 Oct 45 report on foreign relations in BB during September, Bộ Ngoại Giao folder, CAOM, INDO, GF68.

handed over, which was apparently done.¹⁰ In Hà Đông provincial seat, a spate of Chinese troop outrages in November provoked scores of citizen petitions to central government officials. The accusations included raping women, beating up men, seizing personal property, occupying some private dwellings, and burning down others.¹¹

Nevertheless, Hanoi and Hải Phòng remained the most sensitive occupation venues, as any major altercation in either city would jeopardise the bargain of 22 September 1945 struck between General Lu Han and Hồ Chí Minh. Only three days afterwards Chinese soldiers triggered a fracas in downtown Hanoi that left two Vietnamese killed and ten badly injured. According to the newly established Hanoi Sino–Vietnamese Liaison Committee, Chinese officers quickly apologised, gave compensation of 3300 “gold units”, and turned over ten Vietnamese they had detained. Emotions still ran high, however, with city officials and policemen repeatedly encountering Hanoi residents wanting to retaliate for this incident and others.¹² In Hải Phòng, the commander of the newly arrived Chinese 62nd Division gave his troops a long list of prohibitions (*cấm*) when dealing with local people. Notably, no soldier could enter anyone’s home without military orders, no individual should be forced to accept Chinese currency, and it was a capital offence to seize Vietnamese or Overseas Chinese property without authorisation.¹³ Nonetheless, a plethora of neighbourhood-level altercations occurred in the early days of Chinese occupation of Hải Phòng, causing the chair of the city’s people’s committee to urge residents to remain disciplined in the face of “minor disagreements”. Hải Phòng’s Việt Minh paper urged citizens to stop saying or doing things “not conducive to Sino–Vietnamese friendship”, and to cease condemning Vietnamese officials for their handling of the issue.¹⁴

If no particular Sino–Vietnamese altercation was ever described in the press at this time, Vietnamese newspapers of late August and early September 1945 openly repeated public fears about the Chinese occupation. Articles recalled the early 15th century occupation of Vietnam by Ming dynasty forces which lasted two decades. Elderly Vietnamese who had experienced Chinese Black Flag depredations of the early 1880s now repeated their stories to worried countrymen. Writers pointed out that rapacious warlords controlled some Chinese troop units, and the Chinese military in general had a reputation for treating civilians badly.¹⁵ However, government censors made sure that no overtly anti-Chinese articles appeared. Việt Minh newspapers urged the public to remain calm, and to accept at face value Chinese government assurances that it had no territorial ambitions in Vietnam. “Today’s China is not the same as feudal China,” one editorial emphasised.¹⁶ China had suffered humiliation at the hands of western imperialists, undergone the 1911 Revolution, and heroically resisted Japanese aggression. According to another editorial, China and Vietnam shared the same culture and ancestry (*huyết thống*). “We will defend our territory in the same way China defended its territory,” the editors insisted, which could be taken as a warning.¹⁷

10. 1 Nov 45 UBND Sơn Tây (Ngô Quyền) report to BB, Sơn Tây folder, CAOM, INDO, GF71.

11. 11 Dec 45 Ủy viên Ngoại giao BB to Nội Vụ, with Hà Đông attachments, Việc xảy ra tại tỉnh lỵ folder, CAOM, INDO, GF28.

12. 26 Sep 45 Ủy ban liên lạc Hoa Việt Hà Nội report, CAOM, INDO, GF71. No mention is made of any Chinese soldiers being punished for the 25 September incident.

13. The 16-point list of Chinese troop prohibitions was translated and printed in *Dân Chủ*, no. 18 (13 Sept 45). Stealing, gambling, fornication, and opium smoking were also banned. Execution by firing squad was prescribed for rape, armed robbery, passing counterfeit notes, revealing secrets, killing civilians, fomenting disorder, and hiding weapons.

14. *Dân Chủ*, no. 22 (18 Sept 45).

15. *Cứu Quốc*, 30 (27 Aug 45); *Dân Chủ*, no. 6 (30 Aug 45); no. 11 (5 Sept 45); *Độc Lập*, no. 4 (14 Sept 45).

16. *Dân Chủ*, no. 11 (5 Sept 45).

17. *Độc Lập*, no. 3 (11 Sept 45).

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Conditions in Hải Phòng were complicated by its large number of Overseas Chinese residents. Even before the 62nd Division arrived there, local Chinese had irritated the city's people's committee by going to several private houses to request they be vacated. The committee had confidently asserted its responsibility for billeting,¹⁸ only to be inundated shortly after with complaints from families whose homes had been seized by Chinese troops. Many local Chinese had hoped to benefit from the Chinese troop presence, yet they soon found themselves victims of General Lu's extortionate exchange rate and assorted "requests" from troop commanders. The official dialect-based Chinese congregations (*bang*) that had organised Chinese life from the start of the colonial era seem to have withdrawn from public life in Hải Phòng at this time, perhaps because they were seen as having collaborated too closely with the French and the Japanese. Instead, the Hải Phòng branch of the Kuomintang moved quickly to the fore, with its leaders routinely representing local Chinese in meetings with Chinese troop commanders and the Hải Phòng People's Committee.¹⁹ While one group of Overseas Chinese in Hải Phòng chose to complain publicly about the bad behaviour of Chinese troops, others paid soldiers to protect their private property or collect debts. Resident Chinese caught by DRV customs officers trying to smuggle out gold and opium sought Chinese Army intercession, in one case convincing soldiers to take Vietnamese customs officers hostage. When a Chinese ship bringing in consumer goods refused to pay duty on grounds that the cargo belonged to the Chinese Army, the DRV Foreign Affairs Ministry had to tell the Customs Bureau not to pursue the matter.²⁰ As Hải Phòng gradually restored its commercial links to the outside world the stakes increased for Chinese generals, Overseas Chinese, and the DRV government alike.

Despite Hồ Chí Minh's September offer to supply rice, the Chinese Army's Quartermaster Corps had seized a number of rice warehouses in Hải Phòng immediately thereafter.²¹ This event seems to have caused DRV committees elsewhere to hide grain stocks, as no further reports of Chinese confiscations appear in the files until 30 October, when Chinese units descended on two Hanoi warehouses belonging to the Cereals Department. They took the modest total of 12 tons of paddy and 30 tons of milled rice, but more importantly 144,861 gunny sacks and 37 weighing scales.²² Quartermasters also seized some salt stocks, beginning with a government warehouse in Hải Phòng in mid-September.²³ Early Chinese removal of cloth stocks from Hải Phòng failed to alert DRV authorities in Hanoi to the danger; one month later quartermasters emptied the warehouse of the Société Cotonnière du Tonkin of all its 43,742.5 meters of cloth.²⁴ Chinese forces also took custody of the trucks and automobiles used by the Japanese Army before commandeering former colonial government vehicles and private cars belonging to French civilians. Nine trucks of the DRV Northern Region Materials Bureau were surrendered to the Chinese in November. The Chinese also took command of the Yunnan railway, as well

18. *Dân Chủ*, no. 15 (10 Sept 45).

19. *Dân Chủ*, no. 9 (3 Sept 45); 16 (11 Sept 45); 28 (26 Sept 45). According to Patti (*Why Vietnam?*, p. 286), on 16 September Lu Han abolished the congregation system as demeaning to the Chinese community in Indochina. However, I have seen no confirmation of this elsewhere.

20. 10 Oct 45 report on foreign relations in BB during September, Bộ Ngoại Giao folder, CAOM, INDO, GF68; 24 Oct 45 UBND Hải Phòng to UBHCBB, Văn Phòng Mật outgoing message file, CAOM, INDO, GF31; Nov 1945 Thuế Quan Hải Phòng report, CAOM, INDO, GF53.

21. 21 Sep 45 Kinh tế BB to UBNDDB, CAOM, INDO, GF37.

22. 16 Nov 45 Giám đốc Nha Kinh tế BB to UBNDDB, CAOM, INDO, GF36.

23. 22 Jan 46 Thuế Quan report, CAOM, INDO, GF31.

24. 16 Oct 45 Société Cotonnière du Tonkin to Service Economique BB, Công Văn Đệ Ký Folder, CAOM, INDO, GF31.

as of a French-owned shipping company that operated a number of small river craft and three larger ships.²⁵

Despite all this, the most serious issue remained the ongoing Chinese demand for rice. In early 1945, northern and north-central Vietnam had suffered its worst famine in half a century, with about one-tenth of the population starving to death. In mid-August, the Red River had flooded, destroying or damaging about one-third of Tonkin's summer rice crop.²⁶ Although Chinese officers flew to Saigon in October to organise rice shipments for their troops, by early December they had apparently only transported 1,500 tons north.²⁷ Meanwhile, local Chinese troop commanders were demanding that DRV province and city committees feed their troops, threatening otherwise to go into the marketplace with their Chinese currency and drive up the price for everyone. This occurred most notably in October in Hải Phòng, where over a fortnight the initial attempts of the commander of the 52nd Division to buy rice from the city at a mutually-agreed price escalated by steps into an ultimatum for the Vietnamese to supply 200 tons by the 15th, or see him take "forceful measures in the marketplace". The city committee managed to convince two Chinese and two Vietnamese merchant associations to provide fifty tons of rice quickly, without hiking the price, but the merchants insisted the DRV government compensate them for the unfavourable exchange rate when the 52nd Division paid in Chinese "gold units".²⁸

In mid-December, the DRV government agreed to sell the Chinese Army 2,000 tons of rice before the end of the month, with another 4,000 tons to follow in January. The price of rice had dropped somewhat following the November harvest, but was expected to climb again from February. Assuming Chinese Army quartermasters had 100,000 mouths to feed, at twenty-five kilograms of milled rice per person per month, they required 2,500 tons each month. The DRV government dispatched officials to six delta provinces to agree on quotas, with provincial committees responsible for purchasing and delivering the rice to one of three collection points. In return, the Chinese promised not to buy rice in local markets with their "gold units", a practice that had triggered numerous public protests and altercations.²⁹ When all this was happening, many Vietnamese families were subsisting on corn, manioc, and beans, with rice possible only on special occasions.

Despite numerous grievances, very few acts of violence seem to have occurred against Chinese personnel. A handful of incidents were recorded in the archives, with only four of them serious. In December, a DRV National Guard platoon leader was detained by Chinese soldiers when he sought passage for his unit through the town of Hải Dương. His forty-four comrades opened fire in response, but were soon overwhelmed, with one killed and seven captured by the Chinese. Even so, the Hải Dương provincial committee managed to win the release of all but three prisoners and thirteen firearms.³⁰ In early January 1946, ten Chinese soldiers and twenty-two Overseas Chinese were reportedly killed in Ninh Bình province by local militia. Hồ Đức Thành, Special Commissioner for Sino-Vietnamese Affairs, immediately informed the Foreign Affairs Ministry, but the

25. 30 Nov 45 Ty Vật Liệu to Công Chính BB, CAOM, INDO, GF52.

26. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp. 96–107, 393–94.

27. 18 Oct 45 Bộ trưởng Bộ Quốc Dân Kinh Tế to Trưởng ban tiếp tế tại Nam Bộ, Service Economique Local folio, CAOM, INDO, GF34; 11 Jan 46 UB Tiếp tế Haiphong to Nha Kinh tế BB, Phòng Kinh tế BBP folio, CAOM, INDO, GF46. Jacques Mordal, *Marine Indochine* (Paris, 1953), pp. 118–19, states that 2,000 tons of rice shipped north by the *Kontum* in November was mostly for Chinese troops.

28. *Dân Chủ*, no. 28 (26 Sept 45); 29 (27 Sept 45). 10 Oct 45 Ủy Viên tiếp tế Tô Hiệu (Hải Phòng) to Sở Kinh tế BB, and subsequent correspondence, Service Economique Local folder, CAOM, INDO, GF41. To complete these Hải Phòng transactions piastres had to come from the DRV Finance Ministry in Hanoi.

29. 15 Feb 46 Chủ sự Phòng sản xuất report, Phòng Kinh tế BBP folio, CAOM, INDO, GF46. Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, pp. 92–93.

30. 22 Dec 45 UBNDDB to Quốc Phòng, Quân Sự (linh tinh) 1945 folder, Văn Phòng BB, CAOM, INDO, GF38.

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archives fail to reveal what happened subsequently. A month later, another commissioner was sent to Ninh Bình to investigate a charge that Vietnamese soldiers had destroyed an automobile and killed seven Overseas Chinese occupants. Again we have no information as to what happened next. These may have been false alarms, yet the DRV government took them seriously in terms of initial response.³¹ Finally, on 6 March, in An Dương district (Kiến An), Vietnamese stopped a Chinese Army truck coming from nearby Hải Phòng, killed six occupants, and carried away boxes of clothing, shoes, leather belts, soap, and ammunition. DRV authorities in Hanoi quickly dispatched two special commissioners to investigate. Three persons were soon arrested by Vietnamese police, and the Kiến An provincial court handed down capital sentences on them all. Two of the three were subsequently executed after Hồ refused to commute the sentences. (The family and fellow villagers of the third person had raised questions about his guilt, so his sentence was reduced to a heavy fine.) The DRV government had to offer the 60th Army 70,000 piastres for the lives lost and 225,000 Chinese “gold units” for the missing supplies, in the hope that it would be regarded as adequate compensation. Given the circumstances, this seems a remarkable record.

Overseas Chinese

Although the Japanese had treated some Chinese badly after overthrowing the French administration in March 1945, most Vietnamese considered resident Chinese (*Hoa Kiều*) overall to have enjoyed favourable treatment under colonialism, enabling them to get rich at the expense of the *Kinh* (or Vietnamese) majority. With the arrival of the Chinese Army in September, Vietnamese immediately suspected local Chinese would link up with the occupation authorities for mutual gain. They were bitter when Overseas Chinese draped Chinese government flags outside residences rather than DRV flags. Chinese pride in China's new status as a Big Four member sometimes translated into overbearing behaviour towards Vietnamese, who could never be more than citizens of a small country. Nonetheless, most Overseas Chinese found themselves exposed to Chinese Army currency and exchange rate manipulations fully as much as their Vietnamese neighbours. They also came to realise that the Chinese Army might not remain for long in Indochina, in which case careful account had to be taken of the DRV government, on the one hand, and of returning French forces on the other. Overseas Chinese appreciated Hồ Chí Minh's efforts to sustain relations with the Chinese government beyond the occupation period, but often doubted the DRV's capacity to withstand French pressure. The growing confrontation between Kuomintang and Communist forces in China also had repercussions among Indochina's Chinese.

In late September 1945, Vietnamese and Overseas Chinese jointly expressed outrage at British–French attacks in Saigon–Chợ Lớn. Both nationalities endured casualties, properties torched, and merchandise destroyed; both fled for their lives to the countryside. The Chinese government protested to London and Paris, newspapers in China denounced renewed western colonial ambitions, and Chinese citizens donated money to assist refugees in Cochinchina. Some Overseas Chinese organisations inside Indochina declared their support for anti-colonial resistance. Chinese-language newspapers in Hanoi and Hải Phòng vehemently condemned French atrocities in Cochinchina, even to the point of proposing reprisals against French nationals in the north.³² Chinese associations in the north donated to a range of DRV welfare initiatives.

31. 3 Jan 46 UBND Ninh Bình to Nội Vụ, thence to Ngoại giao, Inter-ministry message folio, CAOM, INDO, GF56; 3 Feb 46 BB authorisation paper for Đào Văn Biểu to investigate, Văn Phòng BB; CAOM, INDO, GF67.

32. French intelligence followed Chinese opinion and behaviour closely. See, for example, the fortnightly and monthly reports of the Sûreté Federales, in CAOM, INDO, CP186.

They created their own fund for Vietnamese and Chinese victims of the Red River floods in August, culminating in a public meeting at the Hanoi sports stadium.³³ President Hồ reciprocated by meeting Overseas Chinese representatives, encouraging formation of local Sino–Vietnamese friendship associations, and ensuring that the anniversary of the 1911 Chinese Revolution was observed prominently. In Hải Phòng, the Vietnamese organised a big “double ten” commemoration in front of the Opera House, complete with massed Việt Minh groups, flags of both countries, speeches by the chairman of the city’s people’s committee and a member of the Chinese General Staff, and the singing of both national anthems.³⁴

The property of an unknown number of Overseas Chinese had been commandeered by local Việt Minh groups during the August 1945 Revolution, but those who petitioned the government for redress received quick attention from the Interior Ministry’s Sino–Vietnamese Bureau (*Ty Hoa–Việt*). Provincial people’s committees investigated, and the files suggest that petitioners eventually received partial, if not full, satisfaction. One case was that of Mr Ung Ngan Nhie, absentee owner of a plantation in Vĩnh Yên province, who petitioned for return of twenty water buffaloes, three tons of rice, one bicycle, two rifles (registered), and a stack of office files. Ung added that the Việt Minh group had threatened to confiscate his November rice harvest, and even to re-distribute plantation land to local villagers. The Foreign Ministry took charge of the case, instructing the Northern Region Committee to order the Bình Xuyên district committee to have Ung’s property restored. A month after lodging his petition, Ung reported that 60 percent of his property had been restored. He waived further restitution, and promised to donate three tons of rice from the upcoming harvest to the Bình Xuyên district Liberation Army unit, as “my expression of Sino–Vietnamese friendship”. The Northern Region Committee instructed the district committee to protect Ung’s upcoming harvest.³⁵

Some Overseas Chinese actions caused real difficulties for the DRV. Resident Chinese accepted proposals from French factory owners to lease or purchase enterprises at cut-rate prices, thus cutting across DRV plans to requisition or manage French enterprises. Others recruited Chinese soldiers to accompany them into Vietnamese enterprises, demanding that goods or even the building itself be sold for highly inflated Chinese “gold units”. Overseas Chinese merchants routinely ignored DRV edicts banning the export of rice, gold, or opium. They also evaded customs duties on legitimate imports and exports, sometimes employing Chinese soldiers to keep DRV inspectors away.³⁶ One such instance occurred in November 1945 in the DRV’s salt monopoly, when it was discovered that Stanley Lee, of the Sino–Indochina Development Corporation, had used Chinese soldiers to ward off customs inspection.³⁷ Government efforts to continue wartime controls on scarce commodities like cloth, condensed milk, soap, and medicines might sometimes be ignored by resident Chinese merchants. In late September 1945, for example, after the Northern Region Economic Bureau instructed an Overseas Chinese wholesaler to turn over 3,000 of his remaining 3,266 cakes of scented soap, it was

33. 17 Oct 45 Nội Vụ to Ô Tchang Yi Wen, Nội Vụ Bộ outgoing message file, vol. 1, CAOM, INDO, GF73.

34. *Dân Chủ*, no. 40 (10 Oct 45); 41 (11 Oct 45); and 42 (12 Oct 45). *Dân Quốc*, no. 30 (10 Oct 45). Curiously, no representative of Overseas Chinese appeared among the dignitaries. For further details on early DRV–Overseas Chinese encounters, see Christopher Goscha, “Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco-vietnamienne: Réseaux, relations et économie” (Ph. D. diss., École Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, 2000), pp. 427–31.

35. 4 Sept–6 Oct 45 correspondence, in Bảo vệ quyền lợi của Hoa Kiều folder, Văn Phòng BBP, CAOM, INDO, GF68.

36. UBND Haiphong reports for September and November 1945, CAOM, INDO, GF53; 30 Nov 45 UBNDDBB to Thuế Quan, Tuyên Quang folder, CAOM, INDO, GF16; Correspondence Dec 45–Jan 46 on shipping 100 tons of salt to Guangxi, Salt sales and purchases folder, CAOM, INDO, GF31.

37. Correspondence Nov. 45–Nov. 46 in Việc muối Văn Lý folder, CAOM, INDO, GF1, CQ 258 (5 Jun 46).

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informed that the entire stock had been donated to the Chinese Army. Citing a 1944 colonial edict placing soap under government supervision, the Bureau asked its superiors that the merchant be reprimanded but, probably mindful of top-level DRV concerns to maintain correct relations with both the Chinese Army and Overseas Chinese, it did not suggest levying a fine.³⁸

DRV censors, continuing the colonial practice of opening civilian mail, concentrated their diminished resources on the Hải Phòng postal exchange, to include as many as 200 outgoing Chinese language letters per day. Lacking a staff member able to read these letters, the Hải Phòng chief censor daily carried a stack over to Nguyễn Sỹ Túc, head of the city's Sino–Vietnamese Friendship Committee, who could only give them cursory attention. Many correspondents praised the cheap price of rice compared to southern China, and some complimented the “docility” of Vietnamese. However, other letters called the Vietnamese “cowards”, or expressed fear of being poisoned by them. (The censors held back or destroyed these uncomplimentary letters.)³⁹ Although the archives contain no cases of poisoning, reports show that some Vietnamese did physically assault Overseas Chinese, steal their property, and even burn their homes. In late November, General Lu sent an itemised complaint to the DRV government that listed a series of such criminal activities. Lu concluded: “We have many times raised these matters [with you], yet still no appropriate action has been taken.”⁴⁰ The DRV government must have been privately relieved that Lu did not threaten Chinese Army retaliation for these violent incidents.

In early January 1946, following three days of violent altercations in Hải Phòng between Chinese soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, an urgent meeting of the Sino–Vietnamese Friendship Association tried to calm things down. Representatives of the Việt Minh city branch and Hải Phòng people's committee spoke first, followed by the Kuomintang chairman in Hải Phòng, an Overseas Chinese spokesman, and an Overseas Chinese youth group organizer. The violence was blamed on “language errors” and “individual misunderstandings”. Bouquets of flowers were exchanged by Vietnamese and Overseas Chinese participants in conclusion. If Chinese military officers were present, they did not speak.⁴¹ Overseas Chinese were clearly being called upon here as intermediaries to help reduce the chances of a riot and bloody repression by Chinese troops. At a subsequent mass meeting in Nam Định, Hồ Chí Minh reiterated that: “Both Chinese soldiers and Chinese merchants are our close friends”.⁴²

The position of resident Chinese became more complicated, however, once it became evident in early 1946 that the Chungking government was negotiating with France over a Chinese troop withdrawal. In early February, a group of local Chinese in Hanoi obtained government permission to start a quốc ngữ daily newspaper entitled *Trung Việt Tân Văn* (China–Vietnam News). It lasted only eleven issues before closing without explanation, probably a victim of the 28 February Sino–French Agreement.⁴³ Two weeks later, however, the DRV Interior Minister still insisted that friendly relations with China, and Vietnamese co-operation with resident Chinese, were both in the interests of the Vietnam Fatherland.⁴⁴ Việt Minh newspapers continued to call for Vietnamese and Overseas

38. 7 Oct 45 Nha Kinh tế BB to UBNDDBB, Contrôle 1945 folio, CAOM, INDO, GF65.

39. Ty Kiểm Duyệt Haiphong report for Nov 45, Báo cáo hàng tháng (Hải Phòng) folder, CAOM, INDO, GF53. The censor also worried that he might be caught by a Chinese patrol when conveying stacks of Chinese correspondence to and from Mr. Túc's office.

40. 1 Dec 45 translation of General Lu Han's complaint, Hanoi (việc lưu) 1945 folder, CAOM, INDO, GF69.

41. *Dân Chủ*, no. 119 (11 Jan 46).

42. *Nam Tiến* (Nam Định), no. 6 (28 Jan 46).

43. *Trung Việt Tân Văn*, 55 Hàng Bông St., Hanoi. Publisher: Lê Kỳ. Xa trường (?). Tsan Kam Thoong. Editor: Vũ Bằng (Vietnamese).

44. *Cứu Quốc*, 184 (12 Mar 46).

Chinese solidarity against the French colonialists. In Huế, both Việt Minh papers covered the story of an Overseas Chinese father grieving for a son killed in action in Laos, yet reportedly not regretting that two of his other sons had joined the fight.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, after French troops returned in the north, the local Chinese mostly avoided further affirmations of anti-colonial resistance in favour of support for DRV education, health, and welfare programs. In Hải Phòng, for example, the Chinese owner of five movie theatres donated the proceeds of several screenings to the quốc ngữ literacy campaign.⁴⁶

Events in Saigon in September–October 1945 had demonstrated to resident Chinese throughout Indochina just how vulnerable they were to armed clashes and conflagrations. In 1946, smaller groups of Overseas Chinese in central Vietnam had to flee fighting, in Phan Thiết, Nha Trang, and Qui Nhơn town,⁴⁷ while local Chinese in Tiên Yên town (northeast of Haiphong) were compelled to flee armed confrontations between Việt Minh and Revolutionary League adherents.⁴⁸ In June, it was the turn of Overseas Chinese in Lạng Sơn town, who fled fighting between the DRV National Guard and several multi-ethnic groups that had staked out positions in the vicinity.⁴⁹

If the Overseas Chinese were concerned about how to avoid violence, DRV officials often focused their attention on evidence of Overseas Chinese economic manipulation and tax avoidance. Thus, the Hải Ninh people's committee asserted that wealthy Overseas Chinese had seized two-thirds of all arable land in the province, leaving little for Vietnamese, Nùng, or other ethnic groups.⁵⁰ The mayor of Hanoi blamed the escalation of rice prices in March and early April on teams of foreign (Chinese) speculators and Chinese soldiers roaming the city, buying and selling at will.⁵¹ In June, even though Chinese troop numbers had declined considerably in Hanoi, soldiers were still protecting illicit trading. When customs officers moved to impound some barrels of gasoline and oil, a Chinese soldier tried unsuccessfully to stop them by firing his pistol into the air. Police arrested the Overseas Chinese merchant involved but apparently allowed the soldier to escape.⁵² As Chinese forces withdrew, Vietnamese increasingly rejected their "gold units". Some province committees were left with large quantities of this paper, which they presumably destroyed eventually.⁵³ During the summer of 1946, the DRV government attempted to shift the wholesale rice trade away from the big Overseas Chinese merchants towards a host of smaller dealers, each authorised to buy in a specific province. In October, however, big traders still accounted for 94.5 percent of rice delivered to Hanoi.⁵⁴

Through that same summer, a Franco–Vietnamese customs dispute simmering in Hải Phòng placed local Chinese in an increasingly precarious position.⁵⁵ Each side employed "carrot and stick" tactics to induce them into its camp. From September, the

45. "Lòng Trung Người Việt", *Chiến Sĩ*, no. 20 (10 Apr 46). *Quyết Thắng*, no. 33 (17 Apr 46). The mother was Vietnamese.

46. *Dân Chủ*, no. 248 (22 Jun 46).

47. *Trung Việt Tân Văn* (Hanoi), no. 10 (27 Feb 46).

48. Letter from Hoa Kiều of Tiên Yên to President Hồ, reprinted in *Đồng Minh*, no. 16 (10 Feb 46).

49. *Gió Mới* (Hanoi), no. 45 (30 Jun 45).

50. 29 Mar 46 chủ tịch UBND Hải Ninh to BB, Tiên Yên folder, CAOM, INDO, GF54.

51. 12 Apr 46 UBHC Hanoi (Trần Duy Hưng signing) to UBHCBB, Grain output folder, CAOM, INDO, GF19.

52. 11 Jun 46 Thuế Quan Hà Nội to BB; 19 Jun 46 UBHCBB to Thuế Quan, Văn Phòng BB folio #1, CAOM, INDO, GF66. Translation of the accompanying Chinese military documents revealed them to be forgeries.

53. The only itemization I could find is 29 Mar 46 Ủy Viên Tài Chính Hải Dương to Thanh Tra BB, Hải Dương (hiện hành) folder, CAOM, INDO, GF59. Hải Dương reports 724,695.97 'tiền tàu' in a special account, some being the proceeds from selling rice to the Chinese Army.

54. 3 Dec 46 Phòng Kinh tế BB to UBHC Hanoi, Phòng Kinh tế BB outgoing message folder, CAOM, INDO, GF41.

55. Stein Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 118–19.

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French military intensified checks on imports and exports, giving Overseas Chinese engaged in foreign trade little choice but to register with French customs authorities. The DRV police retaliated by arresting some Overseas Chinese merchants for failing to pay Vietnamese duties.⁵⁶ While Hải Phòng's principal Việt Minh paper condemned the French for using customs to try to destroy the Vietnamese economy, and did not blame the Chinese merchants, anyone reading these articles would have caught the undertones of disapproval.⁵⁷ On 17 November, DRV customs headquarters in Hanoi warned publicly that any merchant failing to declare goods to Vietnamese customs in Hải Phòng risked confiscation, a fine equal to the value of the goods, and 3 to 36 months imprisonment.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the Chinese consulate in Hanoi complained confidentially to the DRV government that Vietnamese soldiers and police had been "making it very hard for Chinese in recent months".⁵⁹

Matters came to a head with five days of heavy fighting in Hải Phòng, from 20 November, which ended with Overseas Chinese there under French control. The French commander, Colonel Debès, may have liaised with Overseas Chinese representatives early in the fighting, and certainly wished to spare the Chinese quarter by trying, although without success, to convince Vietnamese defenders to withdraw from it. When four French warships opened fire on 23 November, they concentrated on the Vietnamese quarter and deliberately spared the Chinese area.⁶⁰ *Cứu Quốc*, the principle Việt Minh newspaper, concluded that "some French" were trying to divide the Vietnamese and Overseas Chinese.⁶¹ By early December, *Cứu Quốc* stated that militia suicide units were "protecting the Overseas Chinese", an ominous assertion given the pro-French trend among Chinese at the time.⁶² The DRV Foreign Affairs ministry urged Overseas Chinese to obtain identification papers from local Vietnamese authorities, as militia groups were detaining some people who merely possessed Chinese nationality cards.⁶³

On 21 November, fighting also erupted in Lạng Sơn town, and here there is no doubt that the Overseas Chinese contingent of about 5,000 wanted French protection. Earlier, resident Chinese here had affirmed their own identity vis-à-vis the more numerous Nùng and Thổ ethnic groups,⁶⁴ and the French had recruited "partisans", among them some Overseas Chinese. After the French seizure of the town on 25 November, 800 local Chinese met French officers to receive firearms and discuss how best to deal with Vietnamese National Guard and militia units in the adjacent countryside. At other locations in Lạng Sơn Province, Chinese residents were told to show a Chinese flag whenever a French plane approached.⁶⁵

56. 10 Oct 46 Sûreté Federales report for month of September 46, 2nd folio, CAOM, INDO, CP186.

57. *Dân Chủ*, no. 344 (17 Oct 46).

58. *Dân Chủ*, no. 374 (20 Nov 46). The lead editorial castigates French pressures on "our Chinese friends doing business here".

59. 6 Nov 46 chủ nhiệm Ty Hoa-Việt Bộ Nội Vụ to UBHCBB, Văn Phòng Mật Outgoing message file, CAOM, INDO, GF31. This general complaint was triggered by a specific incident in Hòa Bình province. In response, the UBHCBB instructed the UBHC Hòa Bình to "treat the Overseas Chinese in a friendly and clever (*khéo léo*) manner".

60. Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, pp. 123–28, 133–35.

61. *Cứu Quốc*, 420 (29 Nov 46).

62. *Cứu Quốc*, 430 (9 Dec 46).

63. Goscha, "Le contexte asiatique", p. 434.

64. This was styled the "Phong trào Hoa kiều hóa" (Movement to become Ethnic Chinese). Simultaneously, some Nùng applied to the Chinese consul general to become Chinese citizens.

65. 13 Dec 46 Ty Thông tin Tuyên truyền Lạng Sơn to Giám đốc Thông tin Tuyên truyền BB, Lạng Sơn (việc lưu) folder, CAOM, INDO, GF11.

Throughout late 1945 and 1946, the DRV made no attempt to define by law or decree the status of Overseas Chinese in Vietnam. In practice they were considered citizens of China but subject to Vietnamese authority wherever feasible. There was no policy to recruit Overseas Chinese to the National Guard, although a few Chinese youths volunteered and were accepted. As the French moved to assert sovereignty north of the 16th parallel, they naturally claimed the right to protect and manage the resident Chinese. After the last Chinese troops departed in September 1946, Chinese diplomats in Hanoi and Hải Phòng tried to intercede with DRV and French officials on behalf of their citizens, who were under mounting pressure from both sides. Increasingly, however, Overseas Chinese families had to make their own difficult choices to avoid being caught in the cross-fire, and in the end most made the fateful decision to seek refuge behind French lines, even if many continued to pay clandestine Viet Minh taxes.