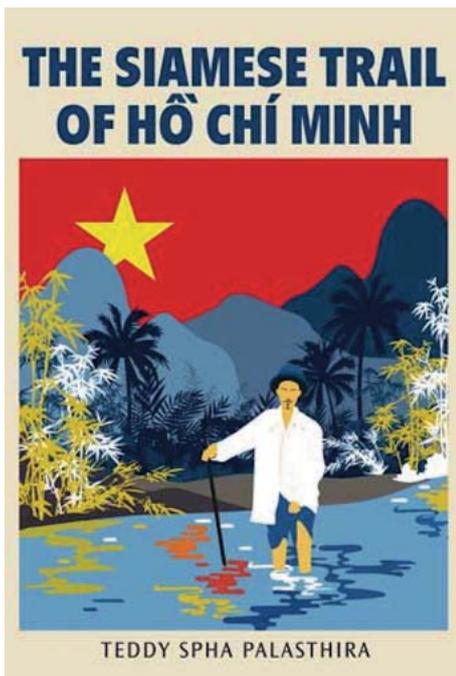


images has waxed and waned in Myanmar. Heidi Tan discusses the various semi-didactic situations where Buddha images are found in Myanmar, such as the collections of assorted objects exhibited at pagoda complexes which combine images of Buddha with a wide range of other artifacts, the Archaeology Museum and other ancient sites in Bagan, and the National Museum in Yangon.

This book contains essays and a catalogue condensing a large proportion of the gamut of Myanmar art history. It is a necessary reference for any general reader interested in acquiring familiarity with the broad scope of Myanmar art, and can be read with enjoyment by the advanced student of the field.

John N. Miksic

*The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh* by Teddy Spha Palasthira (Bangkok: Post Books, 2015). ISBN 978-974-228-285-1. 400 Baht.



Subject and style set *The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh* apart. The subject is the Vietnamese leader, Ho Chi Minh, who under various aliases spent much of 1928 and 1929 living in the northeast of Siam recruiting allies among the “Viet-Kieu”, the Vietnamese minority who settled there as the French moved into Vietnam in the late 19th century. As such, the book is a straightforward biography about a mysterious period of Ho’s life. To find out “the facts” during this period, Palasthira does the ordinary detective work of the historian: consulting primary and secondary sources, as well as revisiting the known sites of Ho’s time in Bangkok and, most particularly, in the northeast.

But such historical method has limitations for writing a biography of Ho in Siam, which is why none of his many biographers devoted more than about four pages to his Siamese sojourn. This is largely because before, during, and after his time in Siam, Ho was on the run from the French secret police (*Sûreté*) who sought Vietnamese rebels like Ho, who took refuge just across the border from their French Indochinese colony. In this context, Ho became a chameleon, changing identities, names, costumes, and donning disguises that make it difficult for historians to trace by conventional means. Nevertheless, from what Ho later told his official biographers, it was in Siam that he first became a master of the jungle lore which he later used as the basis for the guerilla wars in Vietnam against the Japanese, French, and Americans.

Thus, what remains for the historian about the time Ho was in Thailand are just bits and pieces. He appeared in different guises (local medicine man, Chinese businessman, and even as a Buddhist monk), changed names, and purposefully obscured his movements. Ho was known to appear and disappear rapidly, like a mole. But what happened in-between? To address this mystery, Palasthira artfully shifts mid-point in his book from historian (just the facts!) to novelist. The second half of the book is a fictionalized account about one of Ho's Thai recruits, Wong, who is the son of a Vietnamese émigré and Thai mother living in Phichit.

In Vietnam, Wong's father had a failed first marriage in which his wife betrayed him with a French military officer. Despite his father's protests, Wong's Thai mother made sure that Wong learned to speak Vietnamese. With a bilingual background, Wong in 1928 surreptitiously joined the expedition of "Thau Chin" in Thailand at the age of seventeen. As a guide and interpreter for the Viet Minh rebels he accompanied the man who will become Ho Chi Minh, falling for Ho's charisma and revolutionary fervor. Wong led Ho on an arduous 500-kilometer trip through the mountains of the northeast between Phichit and Udon Thani, rugged areas which, ironically enough, would later be held by the Communist Party of Thailand during the late 1970s. Ho made the trip in two weeks—a strategy that "defeated geography" by making improbable journeys on foot. This strategy later benefited the Viet Minh when conducting raids on the French in the 1940s, at the battle of Dien Bieh Phu in 1954, and in the 1960s-1970s during the war against the Americans. "Thau Chin", the man who became Ho Chi Minh, developed this strategy in Siam: suddenly appearing at organizing meetings under one name, disappearing into another disguise before reappearing at the next.

His time in Thailand finished, Ho commanded his new disciple Wong to educate himself—a task Wong undertook as Thailand modernized quickly in the 1930s. A brief period of democratic rule in Thailand was quickly followed by the dictatorship of Luang Pibulsongram, the Japanese Occupation, and the emergence of the underground "Free Thai" movement which challenged the Japanese. Palasthira in this context uses his Viet Kieu character Wong to describe the rise of Thai nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s in which the Vietnamese minority came to be seen as a threat to Thai identity, particularly in the context of the uneasy role that Thailand had with neighboring French Indochina. This in turn sets the stage for the last part of the novel, which is about Wong's trip to Vietnam to fight as a volunteer with the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh between roughly 1944 and 1947.

Palasthira describes well the cruelty of French and Japanese colonialism with their racial segregation and the violent nature of colonial rule. In this context Wong is sent by Ho to survey the Tai-speaking villagers of Vietnam, whom Ho sought to incorporate into his revolt against the Japanese occupation. Wong then observes the surrender of the Japanese forces to the Viet Minh, after which Ho briefly establishing an independent Vietnam in 1945, followed by re-occupation by the French military. Wong becomes an intelligence officer for Ho during the subsequent revolt against the French immediately following the end of the Second World War.

In the end, Wong grows weary of all war and the cruelties he both witnesses and commits. Worn out by his time in Vietnam, he returns to his mother in Phichit, and quietly

enters academia as a lecturer in anthropology and Thai linguistics at Chulalongkorn University. From the perspective of Wong, Palasthira then presents the rest of Ho's story, including the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the outbreak of the American War in the 1960s, and finally the emergence of an independent Vietnam which Wong visits as an old man in 1987.

In "Wong", Palasthira creates an engaging character that describes the role of the Viet Kieu in Thailand. Much of what Palasthira writes about the Viet Kieu is interesting for its own sake, both in the more "historical" part of the book, as well as the novelized second part. Wong himself is an interesting case study for his engagement with Ho Chi Minh. But the backstory about Thailand's ongoing relationship with Vietnam before, during, and after the Cold War is also interesting. By the end of the book, Wong is more than a heuristic device to develop Ho's story, though he is that. Wong also becomes a literary device to describe Thailand's ongoing relationship with Vietnam, and its Vietnamese minority. In this sense, the book is also an exploration of "Thai-ness".

My criticism of *The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh* is that the novelized story of Wong at 136 pages is not long enough. Because the character is indeed sympathetic, I wondered about Wong's broader story. For example, I would like to read more about his experiences among the Tai people of northern Vietnam in 1945. But perhaps most lacking is Wong's account of the Thai history through which he lived, particularly after he returned from Vietnam in 1947. What did he think about Thailand's role in the Vietnam War during the 1970s, and the student uprisings at Thammasat University in the 1970s? What did he think about the withdrawal of the Americans from Thailand in 1976? What did he think when the mountains through which he led Ho in 1928 became a redoubt for the Thai Communist Party in the 1970s?

What makes *The Siamese Trail of Ho Chi Minh* effective is its grounding in historical research, much of which is found in the first 178 pages which is the "biography" of Ho's time in Siam. But what makes the book enjoyable is the historical novel focused by Wong. In this sense the book also follows in an important Thai literary tradition that includes Botan's *Letters from Thailand* (Tan Suang U) and Kukrit's *Four Kingdoms* (Mae Ploy). So perhaps in future we can hope for more elaboration from the fertile imagination of Teddy Spha Palasthira.

Tony Waters