

THE CRISIS OF THE EIGHTH LUNAR MONTH The Cao Dai, Prince Cuong De and the Japanese in 1937–1939

Dean Meyers and My-Van Tran
University of South Australia

It has long been noted by scholars familiar with the Vietnamese religious, social, and political movement properly called the *Dai-Dao-Tam-Ky-Pho-Do*, but more often known outside Vietnam by the shorter title "Cao Dai", that movement, beginning in the spring of 1938, underwent a period of intense nationalistic and apocalyptic agitation.¹ That ferment continued throughout much of that year, was echoed to some extent in the year which followed, and reemerged with new stridency in the summer of 1940—until the definitive silencing of the provocative divinations issuing from the Holy See at Tay Ninh, and the temporary occupation of the sacred site itself, by the French in July of that year. These decisive actions were followed, little more than a year later, by the exiling to Nossi Lava in the Comores Islands, off Madagascar, of the movement's interim Pope, and Protector of the Law (*Ho Phap*), Pham Cong Tac, along with much of Tay Ninh's upper-level leadership, in July, 1941. Taken into French custody immediately prior to the arrival of Japanese occupation forces in southern Vietnam, Tac remained in exile for the remainder of World War II, and was permitted to return to Indochina only in June 1946.

On the whole, this extended period of Cao Dai agitation, which began in 1938, has been seen as a single, more-or-less continuous, progress of rise to confrontation with the French—climaxing in the their forceful actions cited above, which by the end of 1941 had effectively disabled much of the Cao Dai establishment. The events of 1939, 1940, and the first half of 1941 appear to be regarded essentially as the gradual intensification of those of 1938, as the region underwent the slow escalation of Franco-Japanese tensions which culminated in the Japanese occupation of French Indochina

¹ For example, Andre Gaudel, *L'Indochine Francaise en Face du Japon* (Paris, 1947), pp. 46–47; Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (New Haven, 1981) pp. 40–41.

The first official notice of the Cao Dai agitation by the French would appear to have been recorded in the Surete monthly report for May 1938. Archives Nationales de France, Section Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (AOM Aix); *Indochine*; Rapport de la Direction de la Surete, Cochinchine, Police de l'Indochine, Premiere Section (DSCPI), May 1938, p. 23.

The report for June, however, indicated that such nationalist propaganda had already been observable in Cochinchina for several months. AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1938, p. 36.

in its entirety—though until March 1945 the Japanese permitted the French flag to continue to fly.²

What appears to have been largely overlooked—except in the overly general terms of an only vaguely articulated Japanese interest in the Indochina region in this period—is just why the Cao Dai agitation of early-to-mid-1938 was initiated at that time in the first place. It is widely known that for some time before 1938 a number of Cao Dai leaders, including Pham Cong Tac, held anti-French feelings. However, by 1938 a new pro-Japanese element became manifest in their sympathies. The ferment of this period was marked repeatedly by Cao Dai prophecies of an imminent world war, the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, and the subsequent liberation of Vietnam at Japanese hands—in conjunction with the return of their icon, Prince Cuong De, who had been in exile in Japan since 1915.³ It has also been suggested that Cao Dai leaders, and most likely Tac himself, were themselves, from at least 1938, in contact with Japanese residents in Indochina, and that the initiation of pro-Japanese agitation from 1938 onward would seem likely attributable to these associations.

But, assuming these postulations to be correct—that the Cao Dai agitation was, in fact, effected in accord with Japanese wishes—it has yet to be explored in detail just what the Japanese were hoping to achieve in this period. For, whereas the pro-Japanese pronouncements issuing from Tay Ninh began in the mid 1938, the actual Japanese occupation of northern Indochina was two years distant, and the arrival of Japanese forces in Cochinchina—the primary locus of Cao Dai activity—fully three years away. Clearly, some detailed exploration both of the character of Cao Dai–Japanese relations in this period, and the motivations of both parties, is necessary in order to comprehend the extraordinary Cao Dai actions in this period.

Unfortunately, the actions of both the Japanese and the Cao Dai, and to some extent those of the French, as well, remain to a considerable degree obscured in the shadows of clandestine intelligence operations. But, at least a limited elucidation seems possible regarding these obscure events of more than six decades past. What emerges is a picture not entirely clear in its presentation, but one in which the specific events of 1938 take on an organic wholeness which defines them as an integrated, coherent, discrete unit, substantially separate from those events which both preceded and followed

² This was the phrase famously used by Indochina Governor-General Admiral Jean Decoux in justifying his actions during the immediate prewar and wartime period, in his account, *A la Barre de L'Indochine, 1940–45* (Paris, 1949), p. 164.

³ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, May, 1938, op. cit., p. 23; Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cuong De, 1822–1951* (London, 2005), pp. 149–150.

them, integrally linking them in ways which have as yet been only incompletely understood.

Vietnam is sometimes called the "Smaller Dragon", in reference to its close, formative, and enduring relationship with the "Larger Dragon", China—from whom so much of Vietnamese culture and tradition were drawn. The influence of the Chinese giant next door did not entirely end either with Vietnam's independence in 939 A.D., or its absorption into the colonial empire of France in the 19th century. Rather, it remained an important factor in Vietnamese political life over the centuries, and is so even today. The effects of Chinese politics have frequently, for good or for ill, spilled over into Vietnam, which some have seen as more an egregious extension of the Chinese world into the tropics, than an integral part of the Southeast Asian scene. On many occasions, indigenous Vietnamese politics have become intermingled and fused with imperatives emanating from China to create internal fissions within the "Smaller Dragon". It is our contention that such a political interpenetration occurred in the period under our scrutiny, and helps significantly to explain what occurred in Cochinchina in 1938, in what we have chosen to call the "Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month".

The Cao Dai agitation of 1938 coincided with one of the most dire and critical periods in the long history of Vietnam's neighbor to the north. In July 1937, in what was called the "China Incident", a long period of unofficial but very real warfare was initiated, in which the Japanese attempted to establish their hegemony over much of China, and the Nationalist regime under Chiang Kai-shek was sorely tested. After approximately five months of armed conflict, the Japanese armies were able to occupy the Nationalist capital at Nanjing, in December 1937. The Japanese had anticipated that with the fall of Nanjing the will of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government would have been broken, and they fully expected the Chinese Nationalist government, the Kuomintang, would come to terms with Japanese hegemony in China.

But, in this regard they were sorely disappointed when, despite the privations, losses, and wholesale destruction of the Japanese invasion, the Nationalist government resolutely determined to carry on the war, even with the loss of their capital. Chiang Kai-shek moved his center of operations to the city of Hankow, and the war continued on into 1938.⁴ One result, on the

⁴ An overview of the military events occurring in China in this period, and the sense of dire urgency which attended them, may be gleaned from Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard, *Total War: The Causes and Courses of the Second World War – Volume II: The Greater East Asia and Pacific Conflict* (London, 1989). For the political background in Japan underlying the military events, see Kimitada Miwa, "The Wang Ching-Wei Regime and Japanese Efforts to Terminate the China

Japanese side, was that early in the year 1938, the balance of power in Japan shifted in favor of military expansionists in the Army, supported by a similarly minded radical faction within the Navy, who proposed to terminate all negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek's government until the Chinese had been firmly humiliated and brought to the peace table.⁵

In January, the government of Prince Konoé issued their *Aite ni Sezu* (Refusal to Meet) proclamation,⁶ whereby they announced their intention to end all negotiations with Chiang's government and pursue their policy objectives through even more aggressive military policies in north and central China, designed to either intimidate Chiang Kai-shek or eliminate his Nationalist government from power. As the year progressed, it became increasingly clear that Chiang's government found itself in very difficult straits. Faced with the substantial presence and expansion of Japanese military forces in China, Chiang Kai-shek had fervently sought the support of China's European and American allies—the United States (US), France, and Britain—to take some form of resolute action against Japan. If not actual military action, then some sort of embargo or other pressure tactic designed to curtail the very severe Japanese pressure on China. But, in this regard, the Chinese government had been sorely disappointed when, in November 1937, the Brussels Convention, meeting in fulfillment of the Nine Power Treaty of 1922, failed to decide on any effective measures to be taken against Japan.⁷ Early 1938 then saw the Japanese commit themselves to an all-out military offensive, designed to take advantage of this Western inaction—to bring China to her knees.

The reasons for the failure of the Brussels Convention to provide substantial assistance to China in this period are various, but revolved largely around the fact that the most important power present at the convention, the US, felt constrained by the isolationist sentiments of much of its population, who sought to avoid involvement in a Far East, or indeed in any war. Thus, despite the apparent willingness of both Britain and France to commit themselves to some sort of significant action in opposition to Japan if there would be a promise—or perhaps even a strong suggestion—of American support, the government of President Roosevelt found itself unable to make any such pledge.

Conflict," in Joseph Rogendorf (ed.), *Studies in Japanese Culture* (Tokyo, 1963), and John Hunter Boyle, *The Politics of Collaboration* (Stanford, 1972). Boyle notes the highly critical character for Japan of the military events in 1938 on page 53, and deals with the particular point here cited on page 69.

⁵ Boyle, *ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶ Miwa, *op. cit.*, p. 123; Boyle, *ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ Boyle, *ibid.*, p. 69.

By late November, the Brussels Conference broke up in failure. But, this would appear to be far from the end of keen American interest in the fate of Chiang's regime, and there are strong indicators that President Roosevelt, known for his proclivity for back door channels, undertook substantial unofficial—perhaps clandestine would be the better word—efforts to insure that adequate supplies continued to reach the Nationalists throughout our period. In addition, it may be noteworthy that at nearly the height of our crisis period, on June 11th, 1938 as tensions in Indochina approached their zenith; the US enacted its first embargo—a so-called "moral embargo"—on Japan, banning the shipment of aircraft, armaments, engine parts, aerial bombs, and torpedoes.⁸ Clearly, something major was at issue in this period.

In contrast to the low morale of China's Western allies and supporters, Japanese ambition in this period ran high. Western inaction and irresolution offered them the opening they needed to pursue their aims in China, essentially unfettered. What Western support did continue to be provided to the Nationalist government came in the form of supplies, both military and otherwise, which was transported into China through a number of routes.

These included a route into northwestern China from the Soviet Union, a number of seaports along the southern coast of China, the most important of which was Canton, and a series of road and rail connections into the southern Chinese province of Yunnan from the seaport of Haiphong, in the northeastern part of French Indochina known as Tonkin. In addition, the British, responding to a Chinese request, were in the process of constructing an all-weather road—also into southwestern China—from Burma. But, this road was not likely to be operational for some time—and, as it turned out, even thereafter was sometimes subject to periods of minimal utility due to washouts caused by excessive rain.

The great port of Shanghai was by this time already in Japanese hands. As the Japanese juggernaut proceeded, through the early months of 1938, to bring within its purview ever-larger areas of central China, the likelihood of the eventual closure of all of her coastal ports, including Canton, became more manifest. As city after city fell to Japanese arms in the course of the spring and summer of 1938, observers predicted the complete elimination of the Chinese coastal centers of supply to Chiang Kai-shek. In fact, well before the end of 1938, the last important maritime center on the south Chinese coast, Canton, had fallen to the Japanese, coming under their control in October.

⁸ Gordon M. Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan: 1931–1941* (Princeton, 1977), p. 185.

Observers considered it unlikely that—given the delay in the opening of the Burma Road—the Russian source of supply into northwestern China would, by itself, prove adequate to maintain Chiang's army, which was being pressed both westwards and southwards. In the event, Chiang was forced to shift his capital once again, this time from Hankow⁹ to the far-western Yunnanese city of Chungking. It was in this context that attention focused increasingly on the one remaining source of military supply to Chiang's beleaguered government: the French Indochinese route from the port city of Haiphong, via rail to Hanoi, and thence northward to the Chinese border by rail or by truck, most of the supplies being transferred by rail on the so-called Yunnan Railroad. It was expected that, should this source of supply be closed, Chiang would find himself unable to maintain his military resistance to Japan and would be forced to come to terms with them—or else abandon his position of leadership in China entirely.

The Japanese thus found themselves facing a "window of opportunity" which would extend from whatever time they could effectively close the Chinese port cities, until the time when the Burma Road was expected to become fully operative. This "window of opportunity", however, was contingent upon Japan's success in her efforts to induce the French government of Indochina, or the French Government in Paris, to effectively close the critical Tonkin-to-Yunnan lifeline of military supplies to Chiang Kai-shek and his government.

Already, in August 1937, the Japanese had recognized the importance of the Indochina supply route and had brought strong pressure to bear on the French to close it, beginning with a diplomatic request, followed by more direct and forceful inducement by the veiled suggestion of an actual military threat to Indochina through the proposed occupation of the Tonkin Gulf island of Hainan, a stone's throw from the northern Indochina coast—and considered by the French to be a significant threat to their naval base at Cam Ranh Bay.¹⁰

Faced with the unsettled conditions in Europe extant in the fall of 1937, focusing on the German occupation of the Ruhr, the French government—prior to the opening of the Brussels Conference, where it

⁹ Hankow fell in October, 1938, the same month Canton was captured.

¹⁰ The matter of French concern regarding a possible Japanese occupation of Hainan—threatening their naval base at Cam Ranh Bay—is mentioned in an April 15th, 1938 letter from the Assistant Military Attache, Canton, to the US War Department. National Archives of the United States of America (NA), Washington, D.C. Letters and other communications cited herein from American officials, unless otherwise indicated, have been drawn from that archival source.

That French concern regarding a Japanese threat to Hainan was more than illusory is indicated by subsequent events. Having failed the previous year to coerce France into closing the Yunnan supply route, the Japanese in February, 1939 did resort to the direct pressure of an invasion of Hainan. J. M. Pluvier, *Southeast Asia from Colonialism to Independence* (Kuala Lumpur, 1974), p. 109.

hoped to achieve some form of united Western policy in opposition to Japanese actions—found itself compelled, at least in principle, to accept the Japanese demands, and agreed to halt "war material" to China. Throughout 1938, in their formal discussions with the Japanese government, French diplomats continued to insist on the "correctness" of their behavior in living up to the letter of this pledge to end the supply of "war material".

Some have taken these French diplomats at their word and have assumed that French war supplies, of all kinds, to Chiang Kai-shek ended at this time and were not renewed. In reality, however, the situation appears to have been much more complex. Despite these pledges, there appears considerable evidence that, at the very least, French supplies of war materials to Chiang's government continued intermittently, may, in fact, have never been interrupted at all, and may well even have increased. Their entry into China from Tonkin appears to have been monitored with unusual concern, throughout our period, by agents or observers of the US, from which an increasing proportion of these materials originated.

The French seem to have depended heavily, in the presentation of their case, on the technical distinction between "war materials" in the narrower sense—arms and munitions—whose supply they took greater pains to deny,¹¹ and in the broader sense—to include such things as trucks, gasoline, and aviation fuel—all of vital importance to Chiang's desperate military effort, but whose "war" status might be questioned. Indeed, the fact that no "war", per se, had been declared over what continued to be termed the "China Incident" assisted the French in this somewhat legalistic maneuver. Observers on the scene, however, have maintained that very substantial quantities of materials from both categories cited above found themselves on their way into China via French Indochina.

In any case, Japanese dissatisfaction with French behavior was clearly manifest in the ultimatum presented to the French authorities in Tokyo on February 13th, 1938, demanding that the French abide by their previous promise and end, once and for all, the supply of war materials to Chiang Kai-shek through Indochina.¹² Despite repeated French assurances of their

¹¹ J. M. Pluvier, *op. cit.*, p. 109, takes the position that transport of such "hard" war supplies as arms and ammunition was, in fact, ended. But, others have suggested otherwise.

¹² A Japanese ultimatum demanding the cessation of supplies of munitions to Chiang Kai-shek through French Indochina is cited in a report from J. P. Palmer, US Consul, Saigon, to the State Department, dated March 25, 1938 (NA). A summary of Palmer's reports for March 25th and April 19th (NA), however indicates that opinion in Saigon was unanimous that a sizeable movement of munitions was entering China via Haiphong. There was also the claim of "a large tank and field artillery farm" near the border with China, under French military guard, who kept visitors at a distance.

A June 8th, 1938, report from US Consul Southard, in Yunnanfu, to State (NA) predicted shortly the resumption of war materials arriving from France via Indochina—to include machine guns,

compliance, Japanese protests continued to be made intermittently over the period under our consideration¹³—and, indeed, for two years thereafter, until Japan utilized her occupation of northern Indochina in the mid 1940s to close the border, once and for all, by main force.

But, in 1938, faced with what must have seemed a French dual policy—one overt, another covert—the Japanese appear to have decided upon alternative means of inducing French compliance with their demands. The Cao Dai agitation appears to have conjoined with a series of pressures exerted by Japan on the French government, both in Indochina and in Paris. These pressures included an aerial over flight of the Tonkin-China border area;¹⁴ the threatened menacing, by the Japanese military, of the population of the French Concession in Tientsin;¹⁵ the temporary occupation of an island opposite the southern Chinese city of Pakhoi, which induced in the French the fear the Japanese were about to invade nearby Tonkin;¹⁶ pro-Japanese articles inserted into local newspapers in Cochinchina by local individuals thought to be "in the pay of Japan",¹⁷ and a Thai press campaign, likely organized with the collaboration of the Japanese intelligence service, over the issue of the Siamese-Indochina border dispute.

With regard to the Cao Dai themselves, the agitation appears to have begun in the spring of 1938, with rumors among the faithful of the imminent return of the *Minh Vuong* ("Enlightened King", implying Cuong De) and of an impending crisis involving a Japanese invasion of Indochina, in the context of a major world war. The associated predictions of a subsequent

ammunition, bombs, and possibly planes. Other reports of this period indicate that, in addition to the war materials from France, large quantities of US origin were arriving.

Palmer, in Saigon, on June 17th, 1938 (NA) reported a well-established clandestine supply route by road, as an alternative to the Yunnan Railroad—which now, in the post-ultimatum period, was presumably being carefully observed by the Japanese. It was said false descriptions of merchandise being transported on the road were used.

In addition, US Ambassador Joseph Grew, in Tokyo, reported to State on June 15th (NA) Japanese Foreign Ministry claims of, in Grew's words, a "recent conspicuous increase of military supplies through Indochina... notwithstanding French official announcements that the traffic has been stopped."

¹³ Addison E. Southard, US Consul-General in Hong Kong, reported to State on May 28th, 1938 (NA) that the Japanese Consul-General in Hong Kong, Mr. Nakamura, had informed him that, in Mr. Nakamura's words, "there existed in Tokyo much vexation with the French government because of the failure of the latter to keep its agreement to restrict the transit of war materials via Indochina if the Japanese would keep hands off Hainan Island."

¹⁴ US Consul Palmer in Saigon reported to State on October 3rd, 1938 (NA) that Western residents of Cao Bang were unanimous in maintaining that on September 26th, eight Japanese aircraft over flew the town, and one made a deliberate demonstration. Four days later (September 30th) Hanoi held an air-raid drill.

¹⁵ Intelligence cited in reports of August 29th and September 10th, 1938 to the US War Office from Military Attache Barret, in China (NA).

¹⁶ Noted in his weekly intelligence report to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence on October 4th, 1938 by US Military Attache Roberts, in Canton (NA).

¹⁷ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1938, p. 36.

liberation of Indochina at Japanese hands acquired a particular urgency when a pseudo-divination from the Cao Dai Holy See at Tay Ninh included the setting of an actual date for the onset of these apocalyptic events: the Eighth Lunar Month of that year.¹⁸

The Lunar Year in 1938 began on January 31st, with the result that the Eighth Lunar Month extended from September 24th through October 22nd. Whether fortuitously or otherwise, this particular period lent itself unusually well to a heightened revolutionary consciousness among Cao Dai members. The year 1938, according to the Chinese and Vietnamese lunar calendar, was the Year of the "Earth Tiger", whose character abounded in the revolutionary attributes of rebelliousness, impetuosity, and fiery spontaneity, but included as well the qualities of discipline and perseverance in following through on one's pursuits to their successful realization.

The Eighth Lunar Month was marked in the Cao Dai religious calendar by the second most important festival of the Cao Dai religious year: that of the Mother Goddess, "Dieu Tri", who had made her first appearance at a Cao Dai séance on the 15th of the eighth lunar month in 1925. In addition, the period also saw the annual celebration of Confucius, which would have further supported and accentuated the conservative and Vietnamese traditionalist, anti-French, nationalist sentiments of such a Confucian-influenced, and in many ways highly traditional, and organization as the Cao Dai.

While it would appear that the Eighth Lunar Month was selected in advance at least partly for its insurrectionary utility—including the expectation that numerous believers would attend the observances of these auspicious days at the Holy See—world events contrived to afford that period an additional sense of emergency, which could hardly have been other than fortuitous. For, this period of tension in Indochina, which began in the shadow of what were essentially merely local and regional events, attained early on a dramatic impetus through its coincidence with the worldwide tension that attended Adolf Hitler's Austrian *Anschluss*, in March of the year.

Subsequently, following the brief respite and apparent easing of tension in European affairs which followed the resolution of the *Anschluss* matter in the late spring and early summer of 1938, the zenith of the critical period in our Indochina crisis coincided with the renewed, and greatly enlarged, European tension that emerged in the summer and early fall of the year. That period, one of the most anxious in modern European history, centered on Adolf Hitler's demand for the Sudeten provinces of

¹⁸ This prophecy is cited in AOM, Aix; *Indochine*; DSCPI, December 1938, p. 16.

Czechoslovakia—which rapidly evolved into the "Munich Crisis" of September 1938.

French anxiety over the Cao Dai divinations was substantially heightened by the fact that they were accompanied by injunctions emanating from the Holy See at Tay Ninh to the Cao Dai membership to prepare for and abet their imminent liberation through practical measures, which were seen as directly countervailing French preparations for the defense of Indochina. Specifically, Cao Dai members were enjoined to decline subscribing to a government loan recently legislated for the purpose of enlarging the armed forces, and to refuse recruitment into those French-led armed forces.¹⁹ Tac called for those who were being urged to enlist in French service to report instead to Tay Ninh, where he proposed to organize them into an internal security force under the leadership of the Cao Dai itself. In addition, Cao Dai members throughout Cochinchina were enjoined by Tac to paint swastikas on the roofs of their houses²⁰ so that the Japanese—allies of Nazi-Germany—would avoid bombing these habitations. Meanwhile, Cao Dai members were encouraged to assemble at the Holy See, and large numbers made their way to Tay Ninh.²¹

The French authorities viewed all this as an attempt by the Cao Dai to create a veritable "state-within-a-state". Yet their response to these Cao Dai provocations was one of careful and measured actions, which avoided direct confrontation with the religious authorities. This was, at least partly, the consequence of restraints imposed by the "Popular Front" government in Paris on the coercive actions, which could be taken by the colonial authorities. For, this was that most unusual era in Indochinese colonial history—the period of approximately four years between 1935 and 1939 during which a socialist-dominated government in Paris went to some effort to restrict at least the most glaring examples of brutality and repression by the colonial authorities.

Several Frenchmen, including at least one former colonial officer, a Monsieur Abadie, had become members of the Cao Dai, and had lobbied vigorously in France for its official recognition and humanitarian treatment of its members. The religion found, by far, its most effective supporter in Monsieur Gabriel Gobron, the Cao Dai's official representative in France,

¹⁹ Both of these points are noted in AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI; June 1938, p. 35.

²⁰ This would appear to have had particular import, as Tac had earlier been specifically enjoined by the French authorities from carrying out this practice.

²¹ The French authorities appear to have been particularly incensed by the Holy See's efforts to facilitate, through the publication of a circular, the organization of transport for Cao Dai members to Tay Ninh—presumably to include those young men being encouraged to resist recruitment into French military service. They noted that, if this action could be tied to the Japanese Intelligence Service, a case of espionage could be lodged. AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI; June 1938, p. 35.

whose highly active defenses of the Cao Dai movement—which he advocated as a genuine and universal religion—had at least some effective influence on the Paris authorities, and through them on the colonial government in Indochina. During the period under our consideration, Gobron argued persistently and eloquently on the Cao Dai's behalf.²²

An additional factor on the Cao Dai's side was the fact that, although it has been claimed by Admiral Decoux that the movement was officially recognized by Governor-General Mandel only in 1939,²³ it would appear that the Cao Dai had, already in 1937, been granted more-or-less *de facto* government recognition. This may well have led French authorities to take a more moderate stand than they otherwise would have done. They may also have hoped to profit from sectarian factionalism within the, as yet, incompletely unified structure of the Cao Dai authority, through support for one faction—possibly one reasonably complaisant under French rule—against another.

In any case, the French appear to have chosen to cautiously wait and watch, rather than move with force at this time against the Cao Dai. Their appeals to force were left to a period nearly two full years distant—beginning in the summer of 1940 with the closure of the Holy See and Cao Dai oratories throughout Vietnam. By that time, the constraints imposed upon the colonial regime by the "Popular Front" government in Paris had already been removed, in consequence of the collapse of that government in the face of the Nazi-Soviet "Non-Aggression Pact" of 1939, and its replacement by a more conservative, and to some extent more repressive, regime. In 1938, however, instead of directly confronting the Cao Dai, whose interests were, at this very time, being vigorously defended by Monsieur Gobron,²⁴ the French authorities in Indochina chose to direct their repressive measures against what appears to have been the other pole of a

²² An October 14th, 1938 letter from the Administrator of Tay Ninh Province to the Governor of Cochinchina pointed to an open letter to Pham Cong Tac from Professor Gobron, in Nancy, in which Gobron pledged his full devotion, and made contributions of 2,300 and 3,000 francs to the Cao Dai. Tac had shown this letter to the French Administrator-Delegate of Tay Ninh Province, in order to demonstrate Gobron's support for the movement. AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; Tay Ninh to Governor of Cochinchina (GC). October 14th, 1938. See Sergei Blagov, *Caodaiism Vietnamese Traditionalism and its Leap into Modernity* (New York, 2001), pp. 87–88.

²³ Decoux, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

²⁴ That Gobron's efforts may have had some effect is indicated by mention of a telegram—shown by Tac to that same Administrator-Delegate—allegedly from the Minister of Colonies to the Governor-General of Indochina, requesting that he treat Caodai members with benevolence.

Tac also presented what appeared to be a telegram from the Minister of Colonies to Tac, himself, informing Tac of his orders to lift all restrictions on the right of Cao Dai members to exercise their religion. However, the report writer indicated that the telegram had not arrived in Tay Ninh through the customary telegraphic means. AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; Tay Ninh to GC, October 14th, 1938, *op. cit.*

Cao Dai-Japanese axis: Japanese intelligence service operatives in Indochina.

The history of Japanese intelligence activities in the Indochina region remains somewhat obscure, but a delicate thread of involvement appears, at least intermittently, from the late 19th century. Japanese interest in Vietnam—considered, through its traditional use of Chinese characters, to be a member of a common East Asian cultural fraternity—was spurred initially by France's violent seizure of Annam and Tonkin in the 1880s. It was further stimulated by the emergence in Japan of "patriotic", or "pan-Asianist", organizations such as the late 19th century *Genyosha*, or "Dark Ocean Society," and its early 20th century successor, the *Kokuryukai* or "Amur Society"—frequently referred to in the West as the "Black Dragon Society", through the direct translation of the characters for its name—whose aims included the return to Asian rule of territories which had been usurped by Western colonizers.²⁵

As early as the 1880s, an occasional Japanese individual thought to be associated with one of these organizations made his way to French Indochina, and attempted to do what he could in the cause of Vietnam's struggle for independence from France. Unfortunately, the purposes of these individual *shishi*—men of ardent spirit—who went out to Indochina on their own authority, was usually in direct opposition to the purposes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo, who determined Japan's official policies towards those same Western Powers. The result was that such individuals sometimes suffered persecution, not only at the hands of the French, but from their own government, as well.

²⁵ The premier Japanese-language account of these non-official agent-activists abroad, including some in Southeast Asia, is the multi-volume commemorative history published by the *Kokuryukai* itself: *Toa Senkaku Shishi Kiden* (Record of the Feats of the Pioneering Heroes in East Asia) (Tokyo, 1938).

In English, the world of these *pan-Asianist* or *patriotic* societies, both the conditions of their creation in Japan and their activities abroad—especially in China and Korea, where they were particularly active—was explored by E. Herbert Norman in his unpublished paper, *The Feudal Background of Japanese Politics*, presented to the 9th Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Hot Springs, Virginia, in January 1945. It was made available in mimeographed form, as Secretariat Paper No. 9, by the former International Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations, New York. But, there's little or nothing here concerning Southeast Asia, per se.

Informative overviews in English of the activities of these societies, including some reference to Southeast Asia, may be found in two works of popular history: the misleadingly titled, *Kempeitai: A History of the Japanese Secret Service*—whose coverage of Japanese espionage is, in fact, far more comprehensive than the misnamed title would indicate—by Richard Deacon (New York, 1983); and *Secret Servants* by Ronald Seth (London, 1957). In both these works, much of the most fascinating detail is, unfortunately, unattributed—presumably provided by sources who preferred to keep their names out of print.

An additional work of popular character—whose focus is the run-up to World War II and the war period itself, but includes substantial material on our period—is Peter Elphick's, *Far Eastern File: The Intelligence war in the Far East, 1930–1945* (London, 1997).

It was in 1917 that a Japanese individual who would refer to himself as a *shishi* but never acknowledge membership in one of these organizations, arrived in Cochinchina—the southern portion of Vietnam which is the locus of our study—from the Hanoi-Haiphong area, where he had lived since his arrival in Vietnam in 1913. It was this man, perhaps the most enigmatic figure in the long involvement of Japan with the Vietnamese independence struggle, who seems to have had the most significant, yet also the most elusive, role in the affairs surrounding the crisis of late summer and autumn of 1938. His name was Mitsuhiro Matsushita.²⁶

In his own testimony, Matsushita stated his purpose in coming to Indochina from the impoverished island of Amakusa in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu, where he was born in 1897, involved a combination of romanticism—spawned by his birth and upbringing in a part of Japan where, centuries before, there had existed large numbers of Christians—and more importantly, the opportunity to make some money, given the critical underdevelopment of his birthplace.

He refers to himself as a male *karayuki-san*,²⁷ literally "someone who goes to China." But the term referred more generally to the multitude of Japanese young women, mostly from impoverished zones of Western Japan—especially Amakusa and neighboring Shimabara in Kyushu—who almost immediately after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, undertook an exodus from their homes to ply their newly adopted trade of prostitution in Japanese-run brothels throughout China, the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. They were to be found in the largest numbers, however, in the burgeoning port cities of colonialized Southeast Asia: Singapore, Penang, Malacca, Port Swettenham, Sandakan, Kuching, Jakarta, Surabaya, Bangkok, Saigon, Haiphong, and Hanoi, where they sought to supplement the meager income of their families in Japan on the basis of the thriving economies of these Southeast Asian cities.²⁸

²⁶ Matsushita has told his story several times for Japanese public consumption, the earliest probably being a November 23rd, 1959 interview article in the popular magazine *Shukan Bunshun* entitled, "*Jinbutsu Kurozappu: Betonamu Baisho ni Odori Deta Kaibutsu—Tonan Ajia ni yuhi shita Matsushita Mitsuhiro* (Personality Close-up: The Mystery Man Who Popped Out of Vietnam Reparations—Mitsuhiro Matsushita, Who Boldly Went Out to Southeast Asia)."

Essentially the same version of events, but in a considerably expanded form, is offered in a subsequent detailing of his life and activities abroad in Kitano Norio, *Amakusa Kaigai Hatten-shi, shita-maki* (Norio Kitano, *A History of Emigration from Amakusa*, Vol. II; Fukuoka, 1985), pp. 236–279.

²⁷ *Shukan Bunshu*, November 23rd, 1959, op. cit., p. 76.

²⁸ In recent years, not only historians and sociologists, but novelists and film makers, as well, have become fascinated by the "hidden history" of what Sophia University historian Kimitada Miwa has termed "Japan's first export". A representative sample of scholarship on this subject might be James Francis Warren's "*Karayuki-san of Singapore: 1877–1941*", in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS)*, Vol. LXII, Part II (1989). I'm not aware, however, of any study focusing on *karayuki-san* in French Indochina.

It's clear that throughout the last three decades of the 19th century the vast majority of Japanese living abroad in Southeast Asia were in fact such prostitutes,²⁹ as can be seen readily from a survey of the graves of Japanese throughout the region. By about 1920, however, the balance in the Japanese population had begun to shift rapidly from women to men—from prostitutes to businessmen—as Japan's home government increasingly viewed the presence abroad of so many "ladies of disrepute" as a source of national embarrassment.

Interestingly, Matsushita's own career mirrored this change. Although he used the term *karayuki-san* metaphorically in reference to himself, he did, indeed, find his initial employment in Vietnam on the periphery of this world of Japanese "hotels", and the prostitution with which they were often involved. He married into a family of Kyushu-born hoteliers, and briefly, in Hanoi, served as the proprietor of the family business—an institution the French termed the "Japanese hotel", but was actually more properly in this period the "Matsushita Hotel".

Matsushita has been careful to avoid any acknowledgment of his involvement with Japanese intelligence, and it's possible his journey to Indochina in 1912—he arrived in 1913—was uncomplicated by anything other than the ambitions he enumerated. Once in Indochina, however, he appears to have moved in circles, which were traditionally intermingled with the world of intelligence gathering. Japanese hotels and the prostitution with which they were associated had long been one of the prime venues for Japanese intelligence operations throughout all of East and Southeast Asia. Japanese tradition accords the *karayuki-san* of Southeast Asia a place of honor in the most dramatic and decisive event in Japanese early 20th century history: the defeat of the Russian Baltic Fleet at the Battle of the Japan Sea in May 1905.

According to the story, when it was known that Russia's Baltic Fleet would proceed around the world via the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Malacca, with a coaling stop at the French naval station at Cam Ranh Bay, the communities of Japanese port-city prostitutes throughout the entire region were alerted to the patriotic duty of their lifetime: to elicit from their Russian sailor clientele which route would be used for the Russian approach to Port Arthur. Tradition accords them success in their quest—witness the triumphant positioning of the Japanese fleet astride the Straits of Tsushima, where it decimated the Russian forces and effected the first decisive victory of an Oriental over a Western power in the modern age.

²⁹ Numerical data on Japanese men and women who went abroad throughout this period can be found in Irie Toraji, *Hojin Kaigai Hatten-shi (History of Natives of Japan Who Went Abroad)*, Vol. I.

Living and working in the Hanoi-Haiphong area from 1913 to 1917, Matsushita would almost certainly have been aware of well-publicized nationalist events of that era, such as the capture of Phan Xich Long, the "Red Dragon Emperor", in Saigon in 1913; the abortive anti-French insurrection by Emperor Duy Tan in Hue in 1917; and the equally abortive attack by nationalist insurgents on the Saigon Prison, that same year.

Matsushita's employment in the Saigon area between 1917 and 1922 with the great Japanese trading company of Mitsui Bussan would also have been far from incompatible with intelligence gathering activities, as that company had long served—for example, throughout China—as a front for Japanese Army General Staff intelligence gathering operations, and quite a number of ostensible Mitsui Bussan employees in China were actually Army Intelligence operatives in disguise.³⁰

Closer to home, a Belgian geographer and army officer, writing in 1906, apparently on the basis of contemporary French accounts, cited "waves of Japanese spies, officers in their army, all over Indochina posing as mendicant monks in pursuit of historical research in the monasteries... especially in...Siam, Cambodia, and Laos."³¹ It seems entirely likely that the far-ranging travels undertaken in both Siam and French Indochina just before the turn of the century by Iwamoto Chizuna, who dressed in this fashion as a monk, but had been trained and served for a considerable period as a regular army officer, were made for similar purposes.³²

There would appear to be, however, no real evidence that Matsushita was in this period actually involved in intelligence-gathering activities. In his own account, he maintains that, rather than seeking them out, he advertently came into contact with members of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, who approached him—rather than he them³³—not long after he arrived in the Hanoi-Haiphong area from Japan. In this way he came to understand the plight of these fellow East Asians and heirs to the common Sinitic heritage, which yet expressed itself, in both Japan and Vietnam, through the written Chinese language. It was, in fact, through such written Chinese characters that Matsushita claims to have first communicated with Vietnamese nationalists, at a time when his own command of Vietnamese was still rudimentary.

³⁰ See John Roberts, *Mitsui* (New York, 1989).

³¹ Ernest Robert, *Le Siam, Etude de Geographie Politique* (Liege, 1906).

³² Iwamoto Chizuna's *Sankoku Tanken Jikki: Siam, Laos, Annam* (Diary Account of Travels in Three Countries: Siam, Laos, Annam) (Tokyo, 1943), was composed soon after his return from a journey that began in 1897.

³³ *Betonamu Baisho ni Odori Deta Kaibutsu* (1959), op. cit., p. 78.

He professes to having come subsequently to a passionate sympathy and commitment to assist these revolutionaries in their undertakings to free themselves from the French. But, he has emphasized that it was they who approached him, rather than the reverse—their having seen in Japan the potential source of an invaluable assistance, which they desperately needed. This version of events appears entirely plausible, in view of the fact that for some years, dating back to the period of the Russo-Japanese War, numerous Vietnamese patriots had looked to Japan as both a model of development, and a source of critical assistance in their liberation struggle.

Key among the leaders of those Vietnamese who looked to Japan for guidance and/or military assistance were the preeminent nationalist revolutionary Phan Boi Chau, who made a pioneering clandestine voyage to Japan in 1905, and the dissident, anti-French Prince Cuong De, who escaped to Japan in 1906. Soon numerous young Vietnamese patriots made the secret "Voyage to the East", usually via Canton or Hong Kong, after having unobtrusively made their way across the Tonkin-China border.

Despite receiving only very limited assistance from the Japanese authorities, who overwhelmingly sought to avoid friction with the Western Powers who governed the colonial territories of Southeast Asia, Phan Boi Chau and Prince Cuong De were often accorded sympathetic treatment by unofficial, but not always uninfluential, individuals and organizations with a "pan-Asianist" orientation—some of them with contacts in very high places.

Such supporters included both prominent politicians, such as the future Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi (also known as Inukai Ki)—who had considerable interest in Vietnam, and was said to have been the patron of Cuong De in Japan until Inukai's death in 1932—and individuals associated with Army General Staff Intelligence, who were always interested in possible future war contingencies in other areas of Asia. But, also members of the "patriotic" societies, who frequently worked hand-in-glove—as unofficial espionage agents abroad—with Army Intelligence.³⁴ Whether such individuals would ever be in a position to afford Chau and Prince Cuong De any substantial amount of concrete assistance in winning their liberation struggle in Vietnam, however, was a difficult-to-answer question.

³⁴ Some of the individuals who made up these circles, together with photos, are presented in the portion of an article devoted to Matsushita's life and achievements, "*Dokuritsu no Shishi to Tomo ni* (With the Heroes Struggling for Independence). This article is a sub-portion of the chapter concerning Southeast Asia, *Nanjuji Sei Kirameku Shita Ni* (Under the Sparkling Southern Cross)", in the book, cited above, published to celebrate the accomplishments of Amakusa's sons and daughters who went abroad: *Amakusa Kaigai Hatten-shi* (A History of Emigration from Amakusa). See Vol. II, pp. 236–279, which is devoted to Matsushita and his associates in Indochina and Japan, and contains substantial mention of Prince Cuong De.

The likelihood of that ever happening must have appeared bleak when, in 1908, France succeeded in extracting from the Japanese Foreign Ministry—as a condition for a large loan—Japan's agreement to banish Vietnamese émigrés living in the country. By that time Chau had already been forced out of Japan, but Cuong De managed to stay on a bit longer. In 1910, however, he was forced to leave, as well, and began his wandering years in search of alternative strategies. He was able to return to Japan in 1915, and remained there largely until his death in 1951. But, after the experience of having been expelled and forced to wander abroad for five years, his confidence in any imminent and significant Japanese assistance must have been substantially weakened.

In Vietnam, the essential problem for both Cuong De and Phan Boi Chau was how to locate and organize a sufficiently numerous and solid party of constituents to support their cause—to create not merely a tiny intellectual elite following, but a mass social base for their political movement. Attention was directed to the traditional Vietnamese secret societies, but by the early 1920s, Chau determined that there existed, in neither Annam nor Tonkin—the traditional scene of his activities—sufficient numbers of secret society members to support his cause. Furthermore, from 1925 onwards, Chau himself largely disappeared from active Vietnamese nationalist politics—following his arrest, trial, conviction, and placement under house arrest in Hue. This left Prince Cuong De, whose supporters existed in every region of the country, as the most prominent remaining symbol of nationalist resistance to the colonial authorities.

In contrast to the more northerly areas, however, where the revolutionary following comprised merely a collection of incompletely organized individuals, far southern Cochinchina retained substantial reservoirs of massed secret society membership. The potential for mobilizing these organizations in their cause could hardly have been lost on the revolutionary leaders. It's not surprising, therefore, that in this early period, the primary intermediary between Cuong De in Japan and his supporters in Cochinchina would seem to have been Gilbert Chieu—head of the Cochinchinese branch of the *Thien Dia Hoi* (Heaven and Earth Society), Vietnam's preeminent secret society—but also a co-founder, along with Phan Boi Chau and Prince Cuong De, of the *Duy Tan Hoi* (Reform Association).³⁵

The essential identity of the Cao Dai movement has been one of the most complex and intractable questions involved in any attempt to

³⁵ Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (London, 1968), p. 124.

understand the organization. Various aspects have been explored, and its various faces have been presented—often with an emphasis on one above all others. Was it basically a religious or spiritual phenomenon, a vehicle for the expression of patriotic grievances and ambitions, an instrument for overcoming the social distortions and economic distresses of an unbalanced colonial economy? Various commentators have seen it as one or the other, perhaps all three, or even something else?

Whatever else it may have been, the evidence of our crisis study would seem to indicate that the Cao Dai movement held substantial potential for providing that mass social base sought for the political movement envisioned by Cuong De for Vietnamese independence. Indeed, a cogent case can be made that one major aspect of the Cao Dai was as a sort of umbrella organization, emerging in the context of the dramatically enhanced transportation infrastructure of an increasingly modernized Cochinchina—to more effectively house, integrate, and activate a congeries of previously disparate and localized traditional Cochinchinese secret societies. In effect, if not in name, a sort of mega-secret society.³⁶

Given their intimate and longstanding familiarization with the—sometimes-supreme—political influence of secret societies in China, it wouldn't have been only Chau and Prince Cuong De who recognized the political potential of such an organization. The Japanese intelligence services, as well, would almost certainly have taken note.

In 1922, after five years in the Saigon area with Mitsui Bussan, Matsushita, following a visit to Japan, returned to Hanoi and initiated a two-fold major enterprise: the purchase of what became the Hotel Matsushita, but, more importantly, the opening of his own company, the Dai Nan Koshi. Its name, meaning "Great South Company", evoked clear Vietnamese nationalist connotations, since it echoed the name (*Dai Nam*) of the last

³⁶ This strong continuity with the secret societies of the past has been explicitly suggested by Captain de Fregate Jean Auroux in his unpublished typed 1952 manuscript, *La Merveilleuse Histoire de Caodaisme* (AOM, Aix), and is argued, as well, in Duncanson, op. cit., pp. 125–127. Duncanson even refers explicitly to the Cao Dai as a *dao noi* (esoteric sect), strongly suggesting its kinship with similar organizations of the past.

Hue-Tam Ho Tai also envisions considerable continuity with the past in her studies of both the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao (*Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*; Cambridge, 1983). Regarding her primary point of focus, the Hoa Hao, she emphasizes the rapid expansion of the motor transport system in Cochinchina in the 20th century, which she believes facilitated the integration of formerly largely isolated Buu-Son-Ky-Huong (predecessor of the modern Hoa Hao) organizations and communities.

A look at her map on page 62, however, might seem to indicate that the causal motif she postulates would be even more effective in explaining the even more rapid early 20th century expansion of the Cao Dai. The Cao Dai communities were predominantly located substantially closer to urban centers—where the effects of modern communication and transport would have been significantly stronger. By contrast, the history, culture, and tradition of the Buu-Son-Ky-Huong/Hoa Hao communities have been virtually defined by their comparative isolation.

independent Vietnamese state. At the same time that he established the Head Office of the Dai Nan Koshi in Hanoi, the company also established a branch office in Saigon, to which Matsushita transferred the Head Office—and to which he himself moved—six years later in 1928. This was the first of an ever increasing series of tentacle-like connections established by the Dai Nan Koshi—initially throughout Vietnam, then spreading to Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1933), and Bangkok in Siam (1936).³⁷ By the end of World War II, the company had established connections throughout much of mainland Southeast Asia.

In contrast to Matsushita's vehement insistence that the activity of the Dai Nan Koshi was exclusively business, other sources, not all of them French, have indicated otherwise. One Japanese military intelligence source who had personal involvement with the company in Thailand during World War II had declared that it was set up by the Japanese military as a front for intelligence activities, presumably from the very beginning.³⁸ A knowledgeable American intelligence operative in Indochina in 1945 asserted, likewise, that the Dai Nan Koshi was intimately linked to Japanese military intelligence gathering and related activities.³⁹ It is perhaps significant that a 1935 US Department of State study detected a worldwide pattern of Japanese intelligence activities in which commercial firms of the first rank constituted a characteristic element.

The timing of the creation and rapid expansion of the Dai Nan Koshi in the 1920s may be related to what has been seen as a resurgence of Japanese interest in expanding their influence to the south—what the Japanese refer to as *nanshin* or "southern advance"⁴⁰—following profound disappointment, even resentment and anger, at what many in Japan perceived as her ignominious capitulation to Western limitations on her naval forces at the Washington Naval Conference of 1922.

There appeared increasingly a convergence of antipathies to the West long held by "pan-Asianist" elements in both the Army and the ultra nationalist or "patriotic" societies, with similar sentiments now found increasingly among elements within the Navy. A consensus began to build for a southward, as opposed to a northward—a maritime rather than a

³⁷ *DNK Rirekisho* (Dai Nan Koshi Official Company History), published as a pamphlet in 1964.

³⁸ Iwaichi Fujiwara, *F Kikan: Japanese Army Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia during World War II* (Hong Kong, 1983). Fujiwara launched his paramilitary operations into northern Malaya on December 7th, 1941 from the Dai Nan Koshi office in Songkhla, in southern Thailand.

³⁹ Former OSS operative Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam: The Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 303–305, 488. In an appendix note, page 488, Patti indicates that Matsushita functioned as "a Japanese secret service agent under the direction of Consul General Minoda" as early as 1930.

⁴⁰ For the evolution of this concept/doctrine in Japan over the first half of the 20th century, the works of Toru Yano, Hajime Shimizu, and Sumio Hatano might profitably be consulted.

continental—expansion policy, which ultimately would pit Japan against the Western colonial powers rather than against the Soviet Union. Almost certainly, this scenario would eventually embrace many of the regions of Southeast Asia. The 1929 visit of General Iwane Matsui, one of the most active "pan-Asianist" serving officers, to Siam has been noted as heralding this revived and strengthened interest, at least in semi-official circles, both civilian and military, of Japan in Southeast Asia.⁴¹

Thus, fully a decade before the events of our study, there had begun that convergence of focus upon Southeast Asia of, on the one hand, the old-line "ultra nationalist" or "patriotic societies", like the *Genyosha* and the *Kokuryukai*, with a sprinkling of Army General Staff Intelligence Officers—who had long been together involved in extensive intelligence and espionage operations throughout virtually all of the region; and, on the other, the official, or at least semi-official, civilian and military community, as represented by influential individuals like General Matsui. By 1936, this latter group appears to have included elements of the Navy as well.

Whereas at an earlier time, Matsushita's associates would appear to have been found largely among the local diplomatic and Army officials in the Japanese embassies and consulates in the region,⁴² among whom were the key affiliates in the Japanese covert intelligence operations in the Indochina area, as of 1936, naval intelligence officers also began to establish affiliations with this community. Thus it was that in 1937 a Japanese naval officer well known for his "pan-Asianist", and especially for his *nanshin* or "southward advance" views, Kanei Chuto, who had been sent as Naval Attache to the Japanese Embassy in Bangkok, arrived in Indochina on what he has acknowledged was an intelligence gathering mission, and made contact with, among others, Matsushita.

Chuto, while readily acknowledging the essential intelligence purpose of his visit to Indochina, declines to implicate Matsushita in those activities, and maintains that Matsushita assisted him, merely as a businessman and fellow countryman, in finding his way around Indochina.⁴³ It has been noted, however, that from 1936, there occurred a significantly enhanced

⁴¹ Edward Thaddeus Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand: 1928–1941* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington; Ann Arbor, 1968), pp. 28–29.

⁴² Philippe Devillers details who some of these influential Japanese personalities were in his *Histoire du Vietnam, de 1940 a 1952* (Paris, 1952), p. 89.

⁴³ In 1977, the former Admiral Chuto produced a printed, but apparently unpublished, 10-page pamphlet detailing his earlier association with Matsushita in Indochina, entitled *Matsushita Shacho to Watashi* (Company President Matsushita and Myself). In it, among other things, he credits Matsushita with having performed an invaluable service to Japan in preparing airfields and other military facilities used in Japan's actions in Southeast Asia on December 7th, 1941.

Matsushita has stated that during the actual wartime period much of his work concerned naval procurement, and that his ties to the Japanese Navy were far stronger than to the Army.

cooperation and unity of focus on southward expansion by both the Army and the Navy. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the French authorities noticed a significant increase in incidents of Japanese espionage in Indochina as having begun in that same year, 1936.

The Dai Nan Koshi Bangkok office is of special interest, as it appears to have played a role in the crisis we are investigating. Japanese relations with Siam—and in particular with her military, headed by Field Marshal Pibun Songkram, Defense Minister in 1936, and Prime Minister in 1938—had been steadily strengthening throughout the decade.⁴⁴ Siam, subsequently nationalistically renamed "Thailand" in 1939, was on her way to becoming the keystone to Japan's expansion in the region, ultimately serving as a forward base from which Japan launched her attacks southwards into Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia and westwards into Burma.

It has been suggested that Matsushita and the Dai Nan Koshi were themselves of importance in building these connections with Siam, as Matsushita in this period is said to have had the ear of Pibun and the Thai General Staff.⁴⁵ In addition, following his departure from Indochina in late 1937, prior to his formal expulsion from French Indochina in 1938, Matsushita spent at least part of the succeeding three years at the Dai Nan Koshi office in Bangkok. He appears to have been out of French Indochina when the expulsion order was pronounced in 1938, having departed on an ostensible home visit to Japan from about October, 1937, and was able to return only when the Japanese military occupied southern Indochina in August, 1941. Matsushita may well have spent the period of tension in 1938 we are investigating in Bangkok. It's not unreasonable to imagine that, as our crisis opened, he may have deliberately chosen the haven of a sympathetic Siam—where he had friends in high places—to be his base of operations, rather than an insecure Indochina.

Such a hypothesis would jibe nicely with the allegation that from Bangkok, which Admiral Chuto has claimed was, from about 1937, the center for Japanese intelligence over all of Southeast Asia, Matsushita was able to simultaneously oversee Japanese espionage activities in Siam, and maintain contact, through neighboring Cambodia, with his intelligence nets in CochinChina.⁴⁶ It would thus seem entirely possible, that it was through their Bangkok office that key personnel of the Dai Nan Koshi—quite likely

⁴⁴ Flood, *op. cit.*, Ch. VI deals with this period.

⁴⁵ This has been asserted by subsequent French Deuxieme Bureau Chief, General Henri Jacquin, *La Guerre Secrete en Indochine* (Paris, 1979), p. 76.

⁴⁶ Jacquin has maintained that this was the case (*op. cit.*, p. 76). He has further claimed that the Japanese were behind at least a portion of the famed Communist *Nam-Ky* revolt in late 1940s— that in My Tho, in December of that year.

including Matsushita himself—directed the events in the crisis under our consideration.

As 1938 began, Matsushita and the Dai Nan Koshi appear clearly to have been under the scrutiny of the French authorities. This attention seems to have been raised over Matsushita's involvement in a Japanese press campaign waged in the late 1937 in support of Japanese policies in China,⁴⁷ and what was more objectionable in the eyes of the French, their opposition to the French policy of support for Chiang Kai-shek. According to Matsushita's own account of this affair, the French authorities, suggesting that he was in fact a "spy",⁴⁸ searched his house and found certain questionable documents.

Admiral Chuto, who was acquainted with Matsushita in this period, has claimed these documents were merely marine charts designed for exploitation of salt fields, and thus part of the legitimate business of the Dai Nan Koshi. The French seem to have believed otherwise. Interestingly, the very fact of Matsushita's involvement in this press campaign heightens the air of suspicion surrounding his activities, since there is evidence of a nearly worldwide propaganda campaign waged by Japanese intelligence agencies in support of Japanese war policies in China in the late 1937.⁴⁹ The matter of the "marine charts" arouses at least equal grounds for suspicion, as this sort of activity—coastal soundings and mapping—has been cited as a characteristic activity of Japanese intelligence in this period, carried out on a virtually worldwide basis.

With regard specifically to the Cao Dai, Matsushita has usually been careful to avoid any acknowledgement of involvement with them, or indeed even knowing much about them. However, while he was out of the country in the course of 1938, he was brought before a French military court in absentia and declared ineligible to return. In effect, he was "expelled". David Marr, who interviewed Matsushita in 1967, has declared unequivocally that it was Matsushita's involvement with the Cao Dai, including carrying messages back and forth between them and the dissident Prince Cuong De in Japan, that was the reason for the 1938 French

⁴⁷ Matsushita discusses these events in 1937, and his subsequent problems with the French authorities in 1938, in an interview article in his own name from 1965. Matsushita Mitsuhiro, President of Dai Nan Koshi; "*Betonamu Dokuritsu-in no Suishinsha* (Secret Instigator of Vietnam's Independence)"; in the monthly magazine *Seisaku* (Policy), No. 20, December, 1965; pp. 24–27.

⁴⁸ Philippe Devillers, referring to Matsushita after his return to Indochina in 1941, called him the "civilian spy chief for southern Indochina." Devillers, op. cit., p. 89.

⁴⁹ A collection of official documents in the archives of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entitled "*Shogaikoku ni okeru Joho Kankei Kancho Chosa Ikken* (Documents Relating to Investigations of Intelligence Offices in Various Foreign Countries)", details the period June 1936 to March 1938.

expulsion order.⁵⁰ French sources, as well, notably Philippe Devillers, have confirmed significant liaison functions by Matsushita with the Cao Dai in this period.⁵¹ Despite certain unfortunate lacunae, however, a reasonable picture of the events of this period may be discerned.

The scenario we see appears to have been a Japanese psychological terror campaign against the French, a sort of brinkmanship to see if the French would crack under the dual intimidation of the threat in Europe—first over the Austrian *Anschluss*, and subsequently over the fate of an independent Czechoslovakia to whom France had sworn military assistance—combined with a complex orchestration of pressure tactics in and around Indochina. In this latter struggle, both Japanese military forces and the Japanese intelligence services appear to have played a very important role.

If we accept the conclusion that the Cao Dai divinations, or pseudo-divinations, of early-to-mid 1938 prophesying an imminent World War, a Japanese invasion of Indochina, and the liberation of Vietnam at their hands were indeed made in collusion with, or under the influence of, Japanese agents, it remains to ask what exactly was the motivation for the Cao Dai leadership, and in particular that of the *Ho Phap*, Pham Cong Tac, in doing so. In other words, why would the Cao Dai allow itself to be utilized in this way? In pursuing this question, we are necessarily led to a more extensive inquiry than we have as yet made into the nature and history of the Cao Dai movement, and in particular to Tac's role in it.

One concern which immediately makes itself felt is the obvious desire of the *Ho Phap* to utilize available opportunities to strengthen his own centralized control over the organization, at a time when recent factional disputes had led a significant portion of the membership to break away and form dissident Cao Dai sects. It would appear that in mid-to-late 1937, the period in which Tac was struggling to weld as much of the dispersed Cao Dai federation as possible into a unitary organization based on Tay Ninh, the financial situation of the Tay Ninh branch was, to say the least, very strained. Later reports, however, associated the increasing prominence and strength of a revitalized Tay Ninh center—and in particular its ability to rapidly expand through the construction of new oratories in the countryside

⁵⁰ See Marr's article on wartime French Indochina in Alfred W. McCoy (Ed.), *Southeast Asia Under Japanese Occupation* (New Haven, 1980), p. 109.

⁵¹ Devillers, *op. cit.*, p. 89. Professor Devillers informed me in private correspondence in September 1990, that he had seen Surete reports in Saigon in 1946 which established his claim, but I was unable to locate them in French archives. Equally regrettable is the seeming absence of surviving French documentation regarding the specific reasons for Matsushita's expulsion from Indochina—or, indeed, as far as I can tell, much of significance concerning what the Surete knew about him in this period.

—with the supply of funds by the Japanese.⁵² Facilitating this building program can be seen, in turn, as enhancing the reputation and influence of Tac.

There are, however, other explanations for Tac's behavior, and for that of the Cao Dai membership as a whole, which are equally helpful in explaining the pro-Japanese agitation, which occurred during this period. Pro-Japanese sympathies, which emerged with clarity among the Cao Dai membership during 1938, would appear to have been much more long-standing and significant than has always been understood. Though it has been suggested that Japanese contacts with the Cao Dai likely began only in 1938, in fact, such associations may go back to a much earlier period. The key to understanding the link between the Japanese and the Cao Dai would appear to be the long-standing involvement of a key Japanese intermediary between exiled Vietnamese Prince Cuong De, in Japan, and the body of his supporters in Vietnam. That man was Mitsuhiro Matsushita.

Although, the extent of the continuity between the previously existing secret societies in Cochinchina and the newly emerged Cao Dai organization may be open to debate, the common link of the fervent nationalism of the secret societies of an earlier period, and the strident nationalism that ultimately emerged in the Cao Dai, appears incontestable. Some have argued that the leadership of the Cao Dai constituted a new and discontinuous element from that of previous nationalist-oriented secret societies,⁵³ pointing out that, though some Cao Dai leaders were clearly fervent nationalists, others appear to have been motivated in their allegiance to the Cao Dai by religious, social, or other reasons.⁵⁴ It would seem, however, that the nationalist component within the Cao Dai leadership, as it emerged after 1925, has been incompletely understood and, to some extent, undervalued.

The fervent nationalist orientation of Pham Cong Tac, himself, appears very clear, and it may well be that he harbored these sentiments from his earliest years. Indeed, it has been suggested that all of the *pho*

⁵² For example, a report of January 1939 noted that "the rumor continues to circulate among the population that the rapidity with which Caodaism has spread in Indochina is due, in part, to the fact that the Japanese have furnished M. Pham Cong-Tac with funds for the construction of new oratories." AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, January 1939, p. IV.

It was also observed that over the previous few months, several oratories had been constructed in *Thu dau Mot* and *Gia Dinh* provinces with money believed partly to have been contributed by the Japanese.

⁵³ This is Werner's position.

⁵⁴ Ralph Smith has argued in this fashion. See his seminal study of the Cao Dai, "An Introduction to Caodaism: I. Origins and Early History, and II. Beliefs and Organization," in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London (1970). A similar position has been taken by Victor L. Oliver in *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society* (Leiden, 1976).

*loan*⁵⁵ element, led by Tac—who seem to have played the key role in catalyzing and coalescing the previously diverse individuals, beliefs, and organizations which went into forming the single Cao Dai movement in 1926—were nationalists from the very beginning.⁵⁶ Even the allegations of financial improprieties by Pope—and fellow *pho loan* member—Le Van Trung during the Cao Dai's early years, said to have led to his deposition in 1934, can be seen as nationalist-motivated. It has been argued that these related to subsidies from Cao Dai funds sent jointly by Tac and Trung to Cuong De in Japan, without the knowledge of the general membership.

An additional example of the continuity between the old "nationalist-cum-secret society" leadership in Cochinchina and the early Cao Dai is the case of the individual known as *Tu Mat*, who joined the Cao Dai in 1926 and became a *giao su*, or bishop. *Tu Mat*, a longstanding supporter of Cuong De, had been the *Thien Dia Hoi* (Heaven and Earth Society) leader of the 1916 attack on the Chi Hoa Prison in Saigon to free Phan Xich Long, the would be "Red Dragon Emperor", who had been captured in a nationalist incident in Saigon area in 1913. *Tu Mat* would appear to be one of a number of secret society leaders who, in a changing age, found a place in the Cao Dai to replace their leadership roles in a declining secret society world.⁵⁷

Upon the displacement of Le Van Trung as Pope in 1934, and Tac's subsequent steady progress in centralizing his own authority at Tay Ninh, culminating in his January, 1938 imposition—technically illegal—of himself as the leader of both of the two key Cao Dai leadership organs—the *Cuu Trung Dai* and the *Hiep Thien Dai*—the nationalist characteristics of the organization became steadily more overt. On the basis of this understanding of the movement's early history and membership, the strident nationalism exhibited by the movement from 1938 onwards must appear less surprising.

In essence, through its incorporation, under the aegis of the complexly structured Cao Dai religious organization—that structure itself largely the creation of Pham Cong Tac—of a wide range of preexistent Cochinchinese secret societies, and other, newer adherents, the Cao Dai came to realize, to a degree far surpassing any preexisting organization or

⁵⁵ Oliver (ibid., p. 36) states "The term *pho loan* indicates a medium whose office is to be the recipient of the divine law."

Hue-Tam Ho Tai, however, translates the term *pho loan* as meaning "enlisting the aid of the phoenix", which she says is a reference to the mode of séance the group around Tac employed—in which a planchette was used by the medium. Ho Tai, op. cit., pp. 84–85.

⁵⁶ Oliver, op. cit., has made this claim; also see, Tran My-Van "Japan and Vietnam's Caodaists: A Wartime Relationship (1939–1945)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, 1 (March) 1984, pp. 181–182.

⁵⁷ Both Werner and Ho Tai seem to suggest this.

structure, that solid body of adherents, that social base, which Cuong De had been seeking since his flight to Japan in 1906. Most of the work of transforming this welter of individual adherents and scattered organizations in Cochinchina into a single organizational structure would seem to have been a consequence of the administrative genius of Pham Cong Tac.

Himself a Catholic by origin, he appears to have recognized the organizational potential of the Roman Church-model in forging this coalescence of disparate elements. Although some antecedents are to be found among Taoist and Buddhist usages, the very highly articulated hierarchical structure of the Cao Dai organization appears to have been largely influenced by the Roman Church.

Following his assumption of power in the wake of Trung's *decanonization* in 1934, Tac initiated a series of not-always-entirely-legal administrative moves, by which he steadily centralized his own authority over all the key leadership elements in the Cao Dai hierarchy. This culminated, in January 1938, his control over both the *Cuu Trung Dai*—the Cao Dai executive organ—and the *Hiep Thien Dai*—the all-important policy-making element referred to, in English, as the "Temple of Religious Union," the Temple of Divine Alliance," or, more frequently, the "College of Mediums." This centralization of power, among other effects, reorganized the structure of the Cao Dai—redesignating the titles of both central and provincial leaders, and placing direction of the key charitable organizations directly under Tac's control. Thus, on the very eve of our crisis period, Tac had forged among those branches of the Cao Dai dominated by Tay Ninh—between 70 and 80% of the entire membership of the Cao Dai⁵⁸—a single, massive organization highly responsive to his own direction.

Matsushita's own involvement in the increasingly close association of the Cao Dai with Cuong De and his cause is not entirely clear, but some indicators are apparent. His early involvement with Vietnamese nationalists in the Hanoi-Haiphong area would suggest a substantial familiarity with secret society politics. Those Vietnamese nationalists who, shortly after his arrival from Japan, came to his shop "hooded...in the dark of night" seeking his help,⁵⁹ would almost certainly have been secret society members of some sort—and almost equally certainly Cuong De supporters.

Matsushita must early have been aware of Cuong De's key role in the Vietnamese independence movement. He indicates that his own direct involvement with Cuong De began with an exchange of letters in 1921. He

⁵⁸ Werner, *op. cit.* offers the approximate numbers of adherents in each of the Cao Dai sects on page 78.

⁵⁹ *Shukan Bunshun*, 1959, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

says his official role as intermediary between Cuong De and the mass of his supporters in Indochina dates only from 1928, following a personal meeting with Cuong De in Taiwan. It is perhaps noteworthy that the person he would have replaced as intermediary between Prince Cuong De and his supporters in Cochinchina would have been Gilbert Chieu—the head of the Cochinchinese branch of the *Thien Dia Hoi*.

Thus, fully a decade before the events of 1938, there existed a close structure of authority and communication emanating from Japan, to the adherents of Cuong De in Vietnam—in which Matsushita bore the key role as intermediary. It's not known whether Matsushita had involvement with Pham Cong Tac or other Cao Dai leaders prior to the foundation of the movement in 1925. But, given the rapid—indeed phenomenal—burgeoning of Cao Dai membership between 1925 and 1928, Matsushita's role as intermediary between Cuong De and his followers in Indochina would certainly have brought the organization to his attention, and he would have established contacts of a substantial character with them, as by far the largest body of present and potential Cuong De supporters.

It was in a situation of dramatically enhanced regional and international tension that, in the early months of 1938, Tac—almost certainly in collaboration with the Japanese—launched the Cao Dai in a bid to seize the moral high ground of Vietnamese public opinion. Igniting anew the long-smoldering cause of national liberation, the movement boldly pronounced its challenge to the French authorities.

The timing of this bid was uniquely propitious, as events in the preceding few years had worked to offer the Cao Dai a brief, unprecedented opportunity to outshine its rivals. In 1934, France had signed a defensive military alliance with Moscow—clearly aimed at the growing common threat from Nazi Germany. But, the effects of Franco-Soviet cooperation were not solely felt in Europe. They had clear implications in Indochina, as well, where the policy of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) became one of, if not actual cooperation with the French, at least significantly diminished confrontation.⁶⁰

For the ICP, the primary enemy in the region shifted—together with that of Moscow—from France to Japan. But, many among the common ICP membership found it difficult to reconcile the Party's traditional claim to be the vanguard in the struggle for national liberation, with its now nearly conciliatory attitude towards the colonial authorities.

⁶⁰ Huynh Kim Khanh, in his book, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca, 1982), refers to this difficult period for the ICP, of enforced adherence to the shifting policies of Moscow, as the "international wilderness", evoking the image of the Israelites' years of aimless and unproductive wanderings in the desert of Zinn.

One of the most successful efforts, by far, of the ICP during the mid-1930s had been its—theoretically forbidden, but temporarily tolerated—collaboration in Saigon with the Trotskyite party of Ta Thu Thau, in publishing the newspaper *La Lutte* ("Struggle"). Beginning in 1935, this publication flourished vigorously until mid-1937, when Moscow vehemently demanded an end to the ICP's heretofore mutually highly beneficial joint venture with the Trotskyite heresy.⁶¹ In thus deliberately splitting the Left, it might be argued that the ICP "shot itself in the foot"—and inadvertently forged an opening for the Cao Dai. For, much or most of the initiative and creativity which had gone into the newspaper, from which the ICP had shared jointly—and, indeed, responsibility for much of the vitality of the Cochinchinese Left in this period—would appear to have derived from the Trotskyite movement.

But, international priorities appear to have overridden local benefits in this case. For, whereas the Moscow-dominated ICP in this period had committed itself to an, at least temporary, semi-truce with the French, the Trotskyites, by contrast, maintained a fierce resistance to them—and utilized the limited freedoms newly permitted them by Paris to heighten, rather than diminish, their attacks on the colonial regime. In the period under our consideration, this made them, at least on some issues, the natural allies of the Cao Dai—and the possibility of some measure of cooperation between them was entertained.

Given, in this period, the dramatically enhanced placement of the Cao Dai in the cause of national liberation, even the ICP—desperate to maintain at least a semblance of the nationalist pretension, which constituted its grass-roots appeal—was forced to extend to the Cao Dai occasional feelers regarding possible collaboration. But, these feelers were made only to several of the dissident sects, rather than to Tay Ninh, and would seem purposed more towards luring the Cao Dai membership into supporting ICP policies, than the reverse. ICP intransigence regarding the international issue ultimately prevented anything more than short-lived and superficial contacts. In the end, what might have evolved—in this unusually favorable period of comparatively moderate policies issuing from Paris—as a united Cao Dai-Trotskyite-ICP political alliance in the struggle for liberation from France, shattered against the hard rocks of Moscow's international priorities.

Nevertheless, the Cao Dai was approaching the height of its power and influence in this period, with between 300,000 and 500,000 members—far outdistancing the comparatively puny numbers which could be marshaled by either of its Leftist rivals. The organization's drawing power,

⁶¹ Khanh, *ibid.*, covers this period in ICP history thoroughly.

furthermore, was not limited to its patriotic appeal. For, in this strained period when, not only the memory—but many of the everyday effects—of the recent Great Depression yet lingered in the hard-hit colonial economy, many were drawn to the Cao Dai by the benefits to be had from the *Phuoc Thien*, a welfare organ created as an integral element of the *Cuu Trung Dai*. Landlord-tenant tensions, which otherwise might have escalated into hostility and possible violence, were usually successfully moderated into cooperation when both landlords and tenants were Cao Dai members.⁶² Thus, as one of its chief antagonists in this period, ICP leader Tran Van Giau, conceded, "the Cao Dai offered something for everyone."⁶³

For the Tay Ninh sect—the source of the original divinations, and the primary focus of our inquiry—the course of ferment seems to have charted a pattern of rising intensity, a cresting, and then a slow, steady decline. Throughout the summer of 1938, the divinations continued, and there were repeated indications of suspected contacts between the Japanese intelligence services and the Cao Dai—although the French had difficulty in confirming these suspicions.⁶⁴ Pro-Japanese newspaper articles appeared in a number of publications, written by journalists said to be "in the pay of Japan."⁶⁵ At the same time, French attention focused persistently on the activities of known supporters of Prince Cuong De, who featured very prominently in the "propaganda" issuing from both the Holy See and other, dissident, Cao Dai centers—with regard to the prophesied Japanese invasion and the subsequent liberation of Indochina.⁶⁶

One poem in particular, in circulation among Cao Daiists in approximately this period and said to be the transcription of an oral communication from Tac, seems to have aroused French concern—as it was believed to allude to "the liberation of the people of Annam by the Prince Cuong-De, aided by Japan," and, in the view of the French report writer, "gives an idea of the danger such messages had for French sovereignty."⁶⁷

The poem is somewhat enigmatic. The citation of Japan and Italy, but the absence of any reference to Germany --- the prime disturber of world peace in 1938—is a bit puzzling. There appears some question whether it was newly composed in the context of current events, or was the, at least partially, recycled product of an earlier era—perhaps the early 1930s, another period of intense Cao Dai agitation and prophesying, due to the

⁶² Hue-Tam Ho Tai (op. cit., p. 96) cites a French report noting this effect.

⁶³ Quoted in Werner, op. cit., p. 56.

⁶⁴ For example, AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1938, p. 36; July 1938, p. v.; and August 1938, p. v.

⁶⁵ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1938, pp. 34–35; and August 1938, p. 21.

⁶⁶ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1938, pp. 34–35; and September 1938, p. 26.

⁶⁷ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, October 1938; pp. 14–15.

exigencies in Indochina proceeding from the effects of the Great Depression. The reference to the *Duy Tan* rebellion in 1917, and, even more so, to the ending of the *Dong-Kinh-Nghia-Thuc* school approximately a decade before that, would be more understandable in the context of 1930 than 1938.

However, its references to both Prince Cuong De and the Cao Dai are clear. The *Hiep Thien Corps* (*Dai*, in Vietnamese)—referred to specifically in the poem—is the Cao Dai policy-making organ, which directed religious rites. The suggestion of its key role in a post-liberation Vietnam, and the world, is explicit. The reference to a wise man born in Annam "who will aid in reconquering the independence of the Nation" is ambiguous, as may have been the writer's intention. But, it may well refer to Pham Cong Tac, himself. Tac was known as a skilled versifier, in both *quoc ngu* and French; and his role in creating this French-language poem seems highly likely. In view of the long train of events which followed, the suggestion of the sad prospect of Prince Cuong De possibly having to spend his old age in waiting are both poignant and strangely prophetic.

The stars Khoi and Khue (France and England) are on the decline in Asia
 Until the present time, the country of Annam has been governed by monarchs
 But the dynasty of the Nguyen will now lose its crown
 A day will come when that precious gem will be returned to its master
 And on that day, the population will live in peace
 ----- Missing Line -----
 In the land of Annam has been born a wise man
 Who will assist in reconquering the Nation's independence
 Let the task of ruling be entrusted to the Hiep Thien Corps
 To point humankind on the path to follow
 And to save it from misfortune on the day when it comes to power
 We must rely on Japan and Italy to reconquer the country
 Let us not do as those who revealed the secret
 (An allusion to the insurrection of the Emperor *Duy-Tan* in 1917)
 And ended by bringing a defeat whose memory yet stings
 That misadventure was due to some subjects lacking the courage to rise up
 That failure filled us with bitterness
 And we yet regret the dispersal of the *Dong-Kinh-Nghia-Thuc* school, and the
 expatriation of its directors
 When will the savior dragon make his appearance in our waters?
 Without whom Prince Cuong De will be forced to pass his old age in waiting⁶⁸

In August, Pham Cong Tac was reported preparing to transform the Central Temple at Tay Ninh into a citadel, to be guarded by a militia

⁶⁸ The poem is recorded, in French, in AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI; October, 1938, pp. 15–16.

recruited throughout Cochinchina.⁶⁹ He was said to be planning to send a number of Cao Dai dignitaries to Japan—there to receive, in the Ho Phap's words, an education "to render them capable of participating in the government of Indochina when the Japanese seized it."⁷⁰ And, there were indications that some Cao Dai dignitaries, under the influence of pro-Japanese propaganda, had begun to behave in a haughty manner in their relations with French officials.⁷¹

As pro-Japanese propaganda among the Cao Daiists of Cochinchina continued unabated throughout September, the French noted, "some inhabitants of the interior are beginning to accept as an inescapable fact the conquest of Indochina by the Japanese." Tac was reported to have claimed Cao Daiists were organizing subscriptions to be sent to Japan through him. He was also said to have indicated in a divination that the Cao Dai on high had sent to earth two disciples, Mussolini and Hitler, "to alter the European situation and destroy China."⁷² By October, possibly anticipating that the French might now move physically against the Cao Dai, Tac was said to have "informed the dignitaries who direct the Cao Dai provinces they must at all costs prevent the authorities from discovering in the homes of followers secret documents of the religion in the case of search."⁷³

But, the French authorities, seemingly hesitant in this period to take strong measures against the Cao Dai, itself, directed their attention instead to the other pole of the presumed Cao Dai-Japanese axis: individuals they believed to be agents or clients of the Japanese intelligence service. With the passing of the European crisis—through the signing of the Munich Agreement on September 30th, 1938—it became far less likely that Japan would take advantage of France's preoccupations at home to meddle in her Asian territories. The French, as a consequence, having waited and watched patiently through the preceding months, now felt free to act.

On October 14th, the journalist P. Fauquenot, who had written pro-Japanese articles in the publication *L'Alerte* was arrested, leading the editor of the weekly *Mai*, Dao Trinh-Nhut, to cease publishing pro-Japanese articles in his own paper, as well.⁷⁴ In November, the French reported the recent sentencing in Saigon of two suspected Japanese intelligence agents—Japanese of Formosan origin who had passed themselves off as Chinese—to

⁶⁹ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI; August 1938, p. 21.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21. These included an incident on August 27th when a Cao Dai member "presented to the Special Police commissioner of Sadec Province a copy of a document drawn up by Gabriel Gobron in which violent attacks were made towards France."

⁷² All three of these points are included in AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, September 1938, p. 24.

⁷³ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, October 1938, p. 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

10 months imprisonment for use of false identification and infraction of immigration procedures.⁷⁵ The same report noted that Doan Van-Thanh, a former secretary to the French Residency in Tonkin who had purveyed pro-Japanese propaganda in Cochinchina, was imprisoned for false identification.⁷⁶

But, perhaps the most decisive French action in this period was a raid, on October 18th by the French military authorities, on the premises of the Saigon head office of the Dai Nan Koshi, on a presumption of espionage, in which a large number of documents were seized.⁷⁷ This was followed by the military trial in absentia, and formal expulsion from Indochina, of its director, Mitsuhiro Matsushita. Matsushita, who had left for a visit to Japan in the late 1937 and had not yet returned, would be unable to reenter Indochina until late in 1941. While he may well have been able to direct his activities in Cochinchina in a fashion from Siam during that four-year interim, these would likely have suffered significantly from the absence of the master's hand. In expelling him, the French would appear to have taken a major step in circumscribing the effectiveness of the Japanese intelligence service in Cochinchina.

While Cao Dai predictions of a coming war and the liberation of Indochina continued to be echoed here and there in Cochinchina, these came increasingly from the outlying, smaller dissident sects rather than from the Holy See at Tay Ninh—where the nationalist fever appeared to have crested. Already in December 1938 a French report noted: "The non-realization of the predictions of Pham Cong-Tac, according to which a foreign intervention would take place in Indochina in favor of an insurrectional movement in the eighth month of the Annamite year, has convinced a large number of Cao Dai artisans who were installed in the central (temple) at Tay Ninh. They have recently returned to their provinces."⁷⁸

In January, it was observed that earlier reports of the ICP having proposed to "hold hands with those Cao Daiists who will accept their advances" (the so-called "extended hand" policy) and even ordered its members to enter relations with Cao Dai leaders, had not seen new confirmation.⁷⁹ That the acute nationalist challenge earlier posed to the ICP by the Cao Dai was no longer perceived as so threatening, might be suggested by an article in the Stalinist organ *Dan Chung*, noted in that same

⁷⁵ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, November 1938, p. 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Letter from US Consul Peter H. A. Flood, in Saigon, to US Secretary of State, dated October 20th, 1938 (NA).

⁷⁸ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, December 1938, p. 16.

⁷⁹ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, January 1939, p. 7.

January report. The article warned ICP readers "not to be duped by religions which do not at all have their interests at heart."⁸⁰ A subsequent report indicated that the ICP had attempted to get hold of compromising Cao Dai documents in order to hand them over to the French authorities.⁸¹ Though occasional feelers were directed during 1939 by the ICP towards one or another of the dissident Cao Dai sects—temporarily reviving the "extended hand" policy—much of the urgency of 1938 would appear to have faded, and such efforts of apparent collaboration may well have been essentially purposed to win over individual Cao Dai members to the ICP.

While French reports continued to observe that "pro-Japanese propaganda is being carried on feverishly by certain Cao Dai dignitaries,"⁸² and that "numerous collections have been confirmed among the faithful for the purposes of aiding Japan, financing pro-Japanese propaganda in Indochina, and insuring the connection of Cao Dai leaders with the pro-Japanese movement abroad,"⁸³ these reports increasingly concerned not the Cao Dai center at Tay Ninh—but those of the far smaller dissident sects.

It was becoming clear that the Holy See at Tay Ninh was preoccupied with maintaining its own cohesion—and Tac with retaining his central authority—and that they could now devote little time to pro-Japan or nationalist concerns. A French report of March 1939 noted that Tac had been accused of violating four young women in his service, as a result of which he had become the target of violent anger among his followers. This was said to have included an attempt on his life on the night of March 3rd, news of which he was said to have attempted to hide—lest it lead to scandal and his isolation.⁸⁴ Following the attack, he was reported to have been guarded night and day, and to have given no audiences to dignitaries of the faith.

In April 1939, the French reported "continuing discord at the Central Temple of Tay Ninh resulting from the severe diminution of the authority of Pham Cong Tac because of accusations against him."⁸⁵ This, despite strong actions on his part to reestablish his authority against "several important leaders in the movement who are intriguing to take his place."⁸⁶ It noted that "in order to take sanctions against his detractors, he has released a 'divination' to his followers, the 'spirit' declaring that in all times, the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸¹ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, March 1939, pp. 5–6.

⁸² Ibid., p. 15.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 15.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. III.

⁸⁵ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, April 1939, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. IV.

effecters of great works are victims of adversity and that he would take measures against the traitors."⁸⁷

But, while some Cao Daiists, notably members of the Vinh Long-based *Tien- Thien* sect, continued a vigorous pro-Japanese agitation,⁸⁸ May, 1939 found Tay Ninh preoccupied with the effort to "conserve intact the unity of their sect, while appearing to have no time to devote to pro-Japanese propaganda."⁸⁹ By contrast, "since the attempt on his life, the *Ho Phap* has attempted to reaffirm his power in the central Temple, in the religious provinces of Cochinchina, and even in the other countries of the Union."⁹⁰ These efforts included sending missionary teams beyond the Cochinchina Cao Dai heartland. Especially noteworthy were Tac's reorganization of his bodyguard, which now was composed of "ten well trained Vietnamese who never leave him,"⁹¹ and his directive to key subordinates that, within one month, all Cao Dai members hostile to him be expelled from the Holy See. These were said to comprise "60 families who have given all their worldly wealth to the religion in order to install themselves in Tay Ninh."⁹² Consolidation, not confrontation, appears to have been the key concern at Tay Ninh throughout 1939.

Second only to centralizing his authority and expanding the membership of the Tay Ninh sect, in competition with those of his dissident Cao Dai rivals, was Tac's extensive effort in this period to expand the Sect's revenues through subscriptions and other methods.⁹³ But, little or nothing of a nationalist political nature is noted in the monthly 1939 Surete reports concerning Tay Ninh until the very outbreak of World War II—and then what issued was more than a little surprising.

For, immediately upon the outbreak of war in September, notes the French writer—himself perhaps more than a little skeptical—Tac "haughtily proclaimed his loyalty" to France.⁹⁴ Shortly thereafter, he submitted to the local press "a telegram addressed to the Government General in which he haughtily affirms the loyalty of the Cao Daiists, proclaiming their entrusting of their country uniquely to France for its evolution towards complete emancipation, refusing all other foreign domination."⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸⁸ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, May 1939, p. 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. II.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹² Ibid., p. 17.

⁹³ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, June 1939, p. 20–21.

⁹⁴ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, September 1939, p. III.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

The report writer attributes this surprising stance taken by Tac to the complex shifts in international politics which ensued from the unexpected Soviet-German *Non-Aggression Pact*—in particular as they affected Japan. Even so, this was a dramatic reversal of position by Tac and the Cao Dai from the one they held one year before. The remainder of 1939 followed in like fashion, with almost nothing of a nationalist or pro-Japanese character noted concerning Tay Ninh.

Prince Cuong De, by contrast—perhaps stimulated to action by what appeared in 1938 to be a unique opportunity to realize his long-awaited hope to return to Vietnam as the monarch of an independent nation—seems to have redoubled his efforts in 1939. Already in 1938, he had undertaken a clandestine trip to Bangkok, presumably under the auspices of the Japanese—and likely including Matsushita, himself, although Cuong De never mentioned having met him there. Matsushita, already long acquainted with Cuong De, was, by this time, well established in Bangkok, which served in this period as the center for Japanese espionage throughout the region—which would have included French Indochina.

A French report of March, 1939 noted vigorous pro-Japanese, anti-French propaganda "directed by a group called 'Return from China', supporters of Cuong De, sent to Indochina by 'The League for the Independence of Annam,' a section of which was established at Canton this past January."⁹⁶ In April, the French observed that pro-Japanese propaganda in Cochinchina had so disturbed ICP leaders in My Tho that they "have sent one of their sympathizers to China in order to obtain information concerning the purposes of the Cuong De followers (there)," though the French writer also noted that "he does not possess the qualities of intelligence necessary to permit him to properly fulfill his mission."⁹⁷ In May, the French reported great activity, over several months past, at the *Tien-Thien* sect, "which includes among its most influential members elder dignitaries who are former supporters of Prince Cuong De, and who have often been noted for their pro-Japanese propaganda."⁹⁸ Among many such individual Cuong De supporters, the hope for Japanese intervention and the imminent bestowal of national liberation continued.

But, the vital moment had already passed. The congeries of forces and factors which had merged briefly to form that unique window of opportunity—for Japan, for Cuong De and the nationalists of Vietnam, for Pham Cong-Tac and the Tay Ninh Sect of the Cao Dai—had dispersed and dissipated, and would never again come together in precisely the same way.

⁹⁶ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, March 1939, p. 15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹⁸ AOM, Aix, *Indochine*; DSCPI, May 1939, p. 18.

Within a couple of months the Burma Road would come fully into operation, and the Tonkin-Yunnan roads and railroad—though undeniably of value—would never again constitute that single decisive factor in the fortunes of Japan's China War.

Japan would continue to look for opportunities to shut down the passage of war supplies to Chiang Kai-shek through French Indochina—and finally accomplish that goal in the summer of 1940, with the German defeat of the home country. But, by that time other supply routes were operational, and Chiang's regime would survive World War II intact. The Japanese meanwhile would search for other means of winning China. Already by May 1938, their determination to refuse to treat with Chiang Kai-shek was beginning to weaken⁹⁹ and soon tentative feelers were once again extended to the Nationalist Government¹⁰⁰—though the aggressive military campaign to intimidate China continued.

Ultimately, Japan was able to co-opt an important former member of Chiang's own regime, Wang Ching-wei, who would form a collaborationist regime in league with Japan.¹⁰¹ Japan's need for Cuong De and the Cao Dai would fluctuate throughout the war period, but it might be argued that it would never again be as important as it was in 1938—when these two played a unique and key role in Japan's psychological battle to intimidate the French.

The remarkable availability of Vietnamese nationalist forces (Cao Dai, Trotskyite, ICP) extant in 1938—potential allies in the struggle for colonial liberation—would prove equally transient. With the astounding reversal of Moscow's primary military affiliation, from France to Germany, in 1939, both the ICP and the Trotskyites were left open to brutal suppression by the colonial authorities—which followed almost immediately. All of the Trotskyite apparatus, and all of the ICP that was in the open, were smashed—only the covert ICP structure remained.

Then, when the Tay Ninh Sect of the Cao Dai once again launched its *pro-Cuong De* nationalist agitation in the summer of 1940—in support of Japan's renewed bid to close the Tonkin supply route, in conjunction with its occupation of northern Indochina—the French authorities in far-off, unoccupied Cochinchina were easily able to deliver the second of a one-two punch sequence. Tay Ninh was quickly occupied, and pro-Japanese agitation crushed.

It wasn't unexpected, then, that when the ICP, breaking from the cover of its clandestine structure, launched its *Nam-Ky* revolt in November

⁹⁹ Boyle, op. cit., p. 81, p. 148.

¹⁰⁰ Berger, op. cit., pp. 189–190; Boyle, op. cit., p. 156–60.

¹⁰¹ See Miwa, op. cit.

of 1940, it was definitively smashed and largely uprooted from Cochinchina. From that point forward, the home ground of the Communist movement would be found in faraway northern Tonkin, near the sanctuary of the China border—rather than in Cochinchina, where its most impressive achievements had heretofore been made.

The last in this series of serial blows which pulverized the pre-war Vietnamese nationalist movement in Cochinchina—the exiling of the upper leadership of the Cao Dai Tay Ninh Sect on the very eve of the Japanese entry into southern Indochina in 1941—might be seen as merely a final, inevitable footnote to that process.¹⁰² By that time, the Cao Dai had no potential allies left, except the Japanese themselves, who arrived too late to do much—and who, if their actions both in 1940 and subsequently are an indication, never really cared much regarding the fate of the Vietnamese nationalists, beyond their usefulness as a tool for their own schemes.

Even when, in March, 1945, they had the power to finally place long-suffering Prince Cuong De on the throne of an independent Vietnam, they chose not to—for practical considerations. The prince, virtually as Tac had prophesied in his poem, indeed spent his old age in waiting—and died, still in Japan, in 1951, after four and a half decades in exile.¹⁰³

Those few previous efforts which have touched on this largely neglected period (1937–1938) and subject (Japanese relations with the Cao Dai) have usually focused narrowly on one or two aspects of the problem, and correspondingly utilized a fairly narrow range of sources. By contrast, we've attempted to offer a much broader and deeper perspective by marshalling sources detailing the actions and outlook of a good number of the primary players: the Cao Dai, Cuong De, and other Vietnamese nationalists; the Japanese, especially their intelligence service operatives in the Indochinese region; the French colonial authorities in Indochina, particularly those organizations engaged in monitoring political dissidence and intercepting agents of foreign espionage; and certain interested observers—and possible clandestine participants—in the signal events of this period, especially the United States of America. The result, we believe, is something quite new, a *gestalt* or way of seeing the overall pattern of events in this period in a new, enlightened way. With this new way of

¹⁰² Both Devillers, *op. cit.* and Auroux, *op. cit.*, present a view of the comparative ease, thoroughness, and finality with which the French authorities in Cochinchina were able to roll-up the remaining hotbeds of Cao Dai anti-French opposition in 1940 and 1941, leaving the Colonial Power, on the eve of the Japanese occupation of Cochinchina, rather thoroughly in command of its own house.

With Tac and the other members of the Tay Ninh leadership in distant exile, the Japanese, upon their eventual arrival, had essentially to start afresh in building up the Cao Dai's influence in the region.

¹⁰³ See, Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 208–217.

seeing, the significance of these events is palpably altered, and an entirely new perspective on the period emerges.

The essential focus of our research has been the interrelation of those various components cited above, not details of the structure of one or another—or of their evolution. These matters have been the subject of other scholars, and are already reasonably well known. What we propose to offer is something altogether new: the contention that in this period the Cao Dai underwent—in the context of one of the world's most intensely critical periods, the events leading up to and including the "Munich Crisis" of 1938—a decisive series of experiences which saw it rise to both seize the moral high ground of Vietnamese nationalism, and to briefly challenge the French authorities. With the passing of that crisis by the end of the year, and the French authorities' more-or-less successful navigation of those troubled waters, the Cao Dai—or at least the dominant Tay Ninh sect, which is the subject of our investigation—found itself enfeebled, high and dry, and seemingly having lost its compass as the would-be leader of Vietnamese nationalism. It would never regain that brief ascendancy. In the future, the ICP would more and more forcibly claim that mantle, and the Cao Dai—clearly the most prominent, and numerous, nationalist organization in 1938—would slowly and steadily slide into a position of secondary importance.

The political disarray which thus ensued this failed initiative within Caodaism, and in particular within the Tay Ninh sect, would prove to be merely the first step in the progressive, step by step dismantling of the heretofore burgeoning nationalist movement in Cochinchina. One by one the various isolated nationalist organizations fell prey to repression by the colonial authorities, as the political situation in Indochina was altered drastically under the influence of events in Europe. Tay Ninh's *enfaiblessement* by early 1939 was soon followed by the round-up of numerous nationalists of the Left in September of that year—making the subsequent June 1940 occupation of the Holy See all that much easier. This done, the French authorities were then free to move with impunity to decisively smash the communist risings later in 1940s. The final step in this process was the *de facto* decapitation of Tay Ninh's leadership through the exiling of Tac and a number of his key lieutenants, immediately prior to the arrival of the Japanese in 1941.

The primary arena of the Vietnamese nationalist struggle would shift dramatically, with Cochinchina giving way to the isolated China-border region of Tonkin, far to the north. The increasingly modernized and urbanized context of revolutionary activity, which had been the hallmark of nationalist agitation in Cochinchina in our period—when the Cao Dai, the

Trotskyists, and the ICP all stood in concentration and potential union in the areas around Saigon—would give way irreversibly to the isolated, agricultural, revolutionary base-areas of the distant *Viet Bac* zone. Here, it would be peasant-revolutionary doctrines espoused by Mao Tse-tung—rather than the more urbanized, or at least semi-urbanized, frameworks propounded by Pham Cong Tac, Trotsky, Lenin, or Stalin—which would predominate. More than one decisive corner had been turned in Vietnam's history as a result of what we've called the "Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month".