



Geoffrey C. Gunn. *Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 300 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-83325-7.

Reviewed by Sophie Quinn-Judge (Temple University)

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Commissioned by Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong: Anticolonial Networks, Extradition, and the Rule of Law

Ho Chi Minh's 1931 arrest and close brush with extradition from Hong Kong to French-controlled Vietnam is the central theme of this book. Working in Hong Kong for the Comintern when he was caught up in a sweep of communist agents by the British police, Ho remained a prisoner until late January 1933, when his lawyers finally secured his departure from the colony on a ship of his choosing, with no advance warning to the French. Ho's days in Victoria Prison, followed by time spent in the prison hospital to cure his tuberculosis, constitute one of the few periods in this undercover phase of his life for which there is a public record. Newspaper accounts of his court hearings, combined with records from his lawyers and the British courts, provide a glimpse of an experienced political activist, who followed his lawyers' advice to deny his real identity and Vietnamese origins. Yet he still managed to win the sympathy of the press and members of the Hong Kong establishment, speaking English in court and to his visitors in the prison infirmary. These included both his lawyer's wife and the wife of the British colonial secretary in Hong Kong. They seem to have had little doubt that this man was indeed the anticolonial leader known as Nguyen Ai Quoc.

Gunn delves into the complex legal maneuvers of the colonial court system to demonstrate that in spite of pressures from the French and their own Foreign Office to extradite Ho, the Hong Kong court and the Privy Council in London upheld their principles. Deportation and extradition to a foreign power were two different actions: as Ho was not judged to have carried out an illegal act while on British territory, in the end there was no justification for extradition. The Privy Council in London supported this finding on appeal. The likelihood that Ho might be executed if sent back to Vietnam had a strong bearing on the case. As an unidentified Colonial Office official stated in November 1931: "In having to make him return to Indo-China we shall be putting his head in a noose. There are strong objections to doing this in a case where the crime was political and non-extraditable" (p. 160).

There have been a number of books recounting Ho's political career since the French and Russian archives began to open up in the 1990s.[1] Gunn supplies several chapters of context on the earlier parts of Ho's activism, beginning in Paris at the end of the First World War and continuing through his stays in Moscow and southern China, mainly based on these and other secondary

sources. For readers new to the story, this exposition should be useful. However, it strikes this reviewer as too fragmentary and jumbled to provide a clear narrative or discussion of the thornier points of Ho's political trajectory. Gunn's contribution of a chapter on the Indonesian anticolonial activist Tan Malaka provides an interesting contrast to Ho's path, but in this case the lack of detail, archival or otherwise, in this biography makes it difficult to analyze how and why their experiences with the Comintern diverged. It is clear enough, however, that Ho received excellent legal aid while imprisoned in Hong Kong, whereas Tan Malaka was left to defend himself while an inmate of Victoria Prison.

What gives Gunn's work power and poignancy is the current collapse of human rights law in Hong Kong, and to a certain degree in Great Britain itself. The attention to the rights of a third-country national in 1931-32 and the reluctance of the Hong Kong courts to be pressured makes a sad contrast with the present. Following Dennis Duncanson and Lady Borton, Gunn raises the political background of the British lawyers involved in Ho's case as a possible reason for this humane treatment of an anti-imperialist activist. [2] Ho's trial and Privy Council appeal took place during the second Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald, and then under the National Government the latter formed in late 1931. Ho's lawyer, D. N. Pritt, a Socialist Party member and admirer of the Soviet Union, settled the case out of court with Sir Stafford Cripps, who served as the representative of the Crown. Cripps was the nephew of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, well-known socialists. Like Pritt he was also a leading light in the British Socialist Party. Not until the closing days of World War II would Ho Chi Minh have the occasion to collaborate with Western officials who would view his cause with such sympathy. But at this crucial moment in his struggle with France, these men ensured that he could return to Moscow to wait out the twists and turns of Soviet policy in obscurity,

until he would once again in 1938 be sent to advise the Vietnamese independence movement.

Note

[1]. Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years: 1919-1941* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003).

[2]. Gunn cites articles by Dennis J. Duncanson, "Ho Chi Minh in Hong Kong, 1931-32," *China Quarterly* 57 (1974): 84-100, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100001095X>; and Lady Borton, "Cheating Death and Saving a Nation," *Vietnam News*, June 7, 2011.

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