

PRINCE CƯỜNG ĐÊ (1882-1951) AND HIS QUEST FOR VIETNAMESE INDEPENDENCE

MY-VAN TRAN¹
University of South Australia

This study presents the story of Prince Cường Đê (1882-1951) as a royal exile in Japan and his relentless quest to eliminate French colonial rule from his homeland, Vietnam. His story encapsulates a most interesting, yet disturbing chapter of Vietnamese-Japanese relations. Prince Cường Đê's political life was intertwined with the rise of imperial Japan and Franco-Japanese self-interested cooperation in East Asia during the first half of the twentieth century. The French waged an amazing pursuit of Prince Cường Đê, suspicious of his close links with Japan and his dynastic status as 'a pretender to the throne'. To a significant extent this study seeks to highlight a very complex episode of Vietnam's long and hard search for independence. The expectations of non-communist Vietnamese nationalists of Japanese power were crushed by the realities of Japanese imperialism and the politics of Franco-Japanese relations that were primarily based on respective economic and strategic self-interests.

In presenting the story of Cường Đê, I also want to make a point. While I have been personally fascinated with his struggle, I feel rather disturbed at the way twentieth century Vietnamese history has been written. Prince Cường Đê died in Japan in 1951 a broken man, after 46 years of continuous anti-French agitation. Fifty years on from his passing, he remained an undeservedly neglected figure in the long history of Vietnam's anti-colonialism struggle. Much has been written about various other events in Vietnamese history, in particular the much publicised success of the communist forces of Hồ Chí Minh (1890-1969) and his declaration of independence on 2 September 1945, and the so called 'liberation of Vietnam' in 1975.² Furthermore, the historiography of Vietnam is full of stories of

¹ My-Van Tran (my-van.tran@unisa.edu.au) is Associate Professor and Coordinator of International and Asian Studies, University of South Australia.

² For instance, see J. Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969; P. Mus, *Ho Chi Minh, Le Vietnam et l'Asie*, Paris 1971; C. Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973; K. Yevgeny, *Ho Chi Minh*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989; Nguyen the Anh, ed., *Ho Chi Minh. L'homme et son heritage*, Paris: Duong Moi,

those who succeeded. Many who did not succeed, but tried equally hard like Cường Đê, should also deserve attention.

Cường Đê and Aspiration for Independence

Born as Nguyễn Phúc Dân, Prince Cường Đê was a direct descendant of Crown Prince Cảnh, the eldest son of Emperor Gia Long, the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945), the last imperial house of Vietnam. He grew up mostly in Huế, the royal capital of Vietnam, and witnessed the hard impact of French colonial rule. In Vietnam he was known as Kỳ Ngoại Hầu (Marquis of the Exterieur), which indicated he was outside the reigning clan.³ He became politically conscious at a young age. His father was approached to lead the anti-French resistance by an envoy of Phan Đình Phùng, one of the highest ranking militant leaders, after the French captured King Hàm Nghi. However, his father refused the request because of his old age and ill health. Instead he introduced Cường Đê to the anti-French movement, even though at that time Cường Đê was only 13 years old.⁴ In his memoirs, Cường Đê recorded his disappointment at missing out ‘the first opportunity to serve the country’.⁵ Cường Đê lived a quiet life in An Điền until 1904 when the famous revolutionary scholar Phan Bội Châu (1868 -1940) approached him. He was chosen above all of the royal family to be the figure head of a newly emerged reformation movement to help salvage Vietnam. Cường Đê clandestinely left for Japan in late 1905, leaving behind his official, young pregnant wife and two sons aged three and one. However, he carried within him a burning desire to ‘restore the nation and its independence’.



Figure 1. Prince Cường Đê.⁶

1990; Chính Đạo, *Hồ Chí Minh, Con Người và Huyền Thoại*, vol. 2, USA: Văn Hoá, 1993; W. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, New York: Hyperion, 2000; P. Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2000

³ Crown Prince Cảnh died prematurely in 1801. Hence when Emperor Gia Long (1802-20) passed away, the second son from a different consort named Minh Mạng was selected and ascended the throne.

⁴ Cường Đê, *Cuộc Đời Cách Mạng Cường Đê*, Saigon, 1957, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cuong De, 1882-1951*, London: Routledge, 2005, front cover.

Prince Cường Để was closely linked with the Reformation Association (Duy Tân Hội) that took place in the wake of the Japanese victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). Duy Tân Hội was founded on deep patriotism and an ardent desire to gain freedom and democracy for Vietnam with the help of Japan, a fellow Asian country. From this grew the Phong Trào Đông Du, which literally means 'Travel East Movement',⁷ destined for Japan, led by Phan Bội Châu and other like-minded associates, who invested heavily in Prince Cường Để. Against the reality of the total loss of Vietnamese independence since 1884, harsh French colonialism, and the sorrowful state of Vietnamese affairs, Phong Trào Đông Du sought to tap Japanese know-how including military and technological advances, to train Vietnamese youth. The actions of Phong Trào Đông Du were viewed as a way forward. Thus the movement saw more than 200 bright, young Vietnamese studying in Japan from 1905 to 1910. Prince Cường Để was among them, having arrived in Japan in 1906.⁸

Under the leadership of Châu and Cường Để, a promising Vietnamese community with many members in their tender years grew in Japan. They undertook revolutionary work, including military training and study in order to liberate Vietnam. Most significantly, the community was supported financially as well as spiritually by many nationalists, Catholics, elites and landlords, from within Vietnam and from without. Generous financial support for Cường Để came from the more affluent South Vietnam. In addition Châu and Cường Để had access to Chinese reformers, especially Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Liang Ch'i-chao (1873-1929) and a few Japanese statesmen like Inukai Tsuyoshi and Buntaro Kashiwabara for inspiration and support for the Vietnamese cause. However, the Vietnamese faced constant French surveillance and subsequently fell victim to a barrage of French pressure on the Japanese authorities to have their activities curtailed.

Franco-Japanese diplomatic collusion saw the collapse of Phong Trào Đông Du within five years from its inception. The Japanese had signed the Franco-Japanese Treaty (10 June 1907) aimed at safeguarding each other's interests in the Asian region, which included Japan securing a huge loan from France. The treaty had a detrimental effect on the pro-Japanese nationalist movement that by then had gained momentum. French colonial authorities used astute diplomacy, in particular, the treaty as leeway to exert pressure on the Japanese to force the Vietnamese students, including Phan Bội Châu and Cường Để, out of Japan.⁹ In the meantime the French ruthlessly cracked

⁷ See D. G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 120-55; Vinh Sinh, ed., *Phan Boi Chau and the Dong Du Movement*, New Haven: Yale Centre for International and Area Studies, 1988.

⁸ Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 47-51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-63.

down on nationalist activities, resulting in numerous imprisonments and executions of backers within Vietnam and in their concession areas in China, including Shanghai. As a consequence these bright and hopeful students scattered, with most of them continuing their revolutionary activities in southern China, in Siam (Thailand), or in Vietnam, where some of them perished.

Cường Đê' campaigned for five years (1910-15) through China, Siam, Singapore, and Europe to seek allies and secure financial support for his struggle, though with little success.¹⁰ He even took a clandestine trip back to Cochinchina in order to nurture support for his anti-French struggle. At one stage Châu and the Prince sought help from the newly inaugurated Chinese Republic by establishing the Vietnam Restoration Association (Quang Phục Hội). The venture did not gather momentum apart from causing a few rumblings which in turn prompted the French colonial authorities to take even harsher actions to quell resistance.

In 1915 Prince Cường Đê' returned to Japan to live as an exile. His decision was partly prompted by the fact he still had many Japanese supporters and friends who harboured pan-Asianist aspirations. Among them were Inukai, General Matsui Iwane, and Toyama Mitsuru. Cường Đê' had built a very close relationship with Inukai during his first five years in Japan, prior to his forced departure. Since his return Inukai consistently supported him, initially with a monthly stipend of ¥ 100, then ¥150. Inukai became prime minister of Japan in 1931; shortly thereafter he was assassinated by militants in 1932. Inukai's demise was a great setback for Cường Đê' in his quest for Vietnamese independence. It robbed him of a true mentor and a great supporter, both financially and morally. In fact Inukai had asked Cường Đê' to wait for an opportune time when Japan, and himself could render assistance.¹¹ Had Inukai lived Cường Đê's destiny might have been favourably different.

During his exile in Japan Cường Đê' made a few trips abroad to explore possibilities for his revolutionary program but without success. French and Japanese archival documents and his personal letters to associates and family members revealed that he frequently experienced poverty, isolation, disappointment and demoralisation.¹² Moreover, Vietnamese nationalists' anti-French activities outside Vietnam suffered a severe blow with the arrest of Phan Bội Châu in Shanghai in 1925 and subsequently incarceration in Huế by the French colonial authorities. From the late 1920s Cường Đê' faced serious political challenges from the newly emerging revolutionary Vietnamese youth group (Thanh Niên Cách Mạng), then operating in

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 68-93

¹¹ Cường Đê', *Cuộc Đời Cách Mạng Cường Đê'*, p. 126.

¹² See Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 119-29

southern China and Siam with close links to Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Lý Thụy or Hồ Chí Minh) and other international communists. Cường Để failed to detect the challenge within his own ranks as some within his circle switched loyalty. The creation of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) led by Hồ Chí Minh adversely compromised Cường Để's efforts for independence in later years.

Nevertheless in the eyes of the non-communist Vietnamese nationalists Cường Để remained their symbol of nationalism and personified the anti-French struggle, despite his limitations and the severe French clamp down on nationalist activities. Cường Để dedicated most of his time in Japan to the cause of Vietnam's independence and peace partly in memory of his great ancestors who reunified the country, and partly of his own accord and patriotism. Consequently Cường Để waited anxiously for an opportunity to launch his strike into Vietnam with the help of Japan.

A Window of Opportunity?

From the late 1930s with Japan's advance into the East Asian mainland, there appeared an opportunity for Cường Để to ride on the imperial Japanese wave. Rumours surfaced that he would be installed as the P'u -Yi of Annam after the example of the newly-installed Manchukuo (1932-45).¹³ In anticipation Cường Để established the Phục Quốc (National Restoration) Party (1938) including a military wing in the hope to re-conquer Vietnam. However, that opportunity failed to materialize when the Nishihara mission and Guangdong (Kwangtung) based Japanese forces advanced into the northern part of Vietnam in 1940 to exert pressure on the French to cut supplies to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (Guomindang; KMT) forces through the Yunnan railways. What became known as the Lang Son episode was a testament to the failure of the Japanese to respond to Vietnamese aspiration for self-determination. Instead the military wing of the Phục Quốc that took advantage of Japanese advance to Tonkin suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the French colonial forces; its leader, Trần Trung Lập was captured and executed. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) had abandoned the Phục Quốc forces on orders from Tokyo following Japan's successful agreement with the French colonial authorities in Vietnam to protect Japan's war needs against China.

In fact the opportunity to ride on the Japanese 'coat tails' failed even when Japanese forces successfully invaded and occupied Southeast Asia

¹³ 'P'u-Yi (1906-67), the last Ching emperor of China who was deposed by the Chinese Revolution (1911), was resurrected as 'emperor' of the Japanese puppet state of Manchuko (Manchuria) in 1932. He was captured by the Red Army in 1945, and handed over to the People's Republic of China where he was imprisoned (1949-59). He lived as a commoner during the last eight years of his life.

during the Pacific War (1941-5). Although many individual Japanese were sympathetic to the Vietnamese nationalist struggle for independence, Japanese official policy dictated that the successful prosecution of the war took utmost priority. Ironically, the Japanese adoption of slogans such as 'Asia for Asians' and 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' succeeded in enlisting support from Asian nationalists including Cường Để, but subsequently the Japanese proved insincere and self-serving. Japan had entered a convenient arrangement with the French, allowing French colonial administration to continue whilst the Japanese utilized Vietnam as a launching and supply base for their invasion and occupation of Southeast Asia, without having to bother with local administration.¹⁴ This arrangement certainly complicated the local situation of the many non-communist Vietnamese nationalists who looked to Japan to secure independence for Vietnam and to bring Cường Để back to rule.

During the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, and the stationing of up to 15,000 troops in Cochinchina, Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) remained under French colonial rule, with police and security forces in place as in the pre-war period. This peculiar situation allowed French colonial Governor General Admiral Jean Decoux to continue to fly the French tricolour flag with pride over the colony. The Japanese saw no necessity to change their agreement with the French. As a consequence, Indochina like Thailand (formerly Siam that was renamed in 1939), came under the control of Japan's foreign ministry in Tokyo with a sizable Japanese diplomatic mission headed by an ambassador alongside a garrison of Japanese forces (later known as the 38th Army). This *de facto* French colonial administration persisted until the Japanese staged a *coup de force* on 9 March 1945. Despite the conduct of the Japanese in Indochina under the rubric of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, there emerged many underground anti-French activities with clandestine 'blessing of the Japanese authorities'. Of particular importance to Cường Để was the paramilitary venture of the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo, two religious-political groups that emerged prominently in Cochinchina to salvage the nation and to bring their iconic Prince Cường Để back to the helm.¹⁵ The Cao Đài in particular, under the leadership of Trần Quang Vinh, had struck a deal with the IJA, involving their supply of labourers to the Japanese for their shipyards and in return, for Japanese protection to carry out their venture since 1943.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 150-4.

¹⁵ See Tran My-Van, 'Beneath the Japanese Umbrella; Vietnam's Hoa Hao during and after the Pacific War', *Crossroads: An Inter disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17, 1, 2003, pp. 71-80.

¹⁶ Tran My-Van, 'Working for the Japanese: Working for Vietnamese Independence, 1941-1945', in Paul H. Kratoska, ed., *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005, pp. 290-5.

From mid 1944, following the Allied landing in Normandy and Decoux's shifting 'alliance', there was the possibility that Japan might liberate Vietnam from the French to safeguard their position. The Cao Đài with up to 3000 workers in various shipyards around the Saigon and Cholon vicinities, notably the Nichinan dockyard, earnestly doubled their contribution in an attempt to accelerate the pace of Vietnamese independence. During the day they constructed and repaired ships for the Japanese; at night they received training in martial arts, to ready themselves to aid Japan against 'the enemies'.¹⁷ These activities received endorsement from both Cường Để and the Japanese themselves in four aspects.



Figure 2. Address to the compatriots.¹⁸

Firstly, there was the establishment of a provisional government headed by Prince Cường Để with four key members—Ngô Đình Diệm, Nguyễn Xuân Chử, Lê Toàn, and Vũ Đình Duy. The last mentioned was Cường Để's general secretary who just returned from Japan. The first three had sought refuge with the Japanese. They held various meetings during July and August 1944 at the IJA headquarters in Saigon where they were lodged. It was apparent that some Japanese officials, namely General Matsui of Kisaragi-kai, Lieutenant Colonel Hayashi Hidezumi of the military police assisted the 'get-together' of this group of four. There was also the active involvement of Matsushita Mitsuhiro, the head of Dainan Koshi, and Trần Quang Vinh, the mastermind of the Japanese-Vietnamese deal.¹⁹ These activities represented the most concrete linkages between the Japanese occupation forces (38th Army) and Prince Cường Để, the hopeful claimant to the throne, and the nationalist movements within Vietnam, in particular the Cao Đài. Secondly, various sectors in the Japanese community within Vietnam and even in Japan itself, including the army, diplomatic and even business circles, apparently encouraged the nationalists to pursue their agenda of liberating Vietnam. Thirdly, various Japanese cultural centres provided meeting places for Vietnamese nationalists and Japanese

¹⁷ See Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 179-93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁹ See Dean Meyers and My-Van Tran, 'The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month: The Cao Dai, Prince Cuong De, and the Japanese in 1937-39', *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* (IJAPS), 2, 1 May 2006; Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 169-70

sympathisers. Fourthly, the Japanese protected some nationalists under threat of arrest by French colonial authorities by moving them to neighbouring occupied territories.

This emerged as a fascinating episode of Vietnam's history. It encapsulated a firm relationship between Prince Cường Đê from afar with the religious political groups in Cochinchina (Cao Đài) with links to Japan for a joint purpose, while Vietnam itself remained under two foreign masters: the French and the Japanese, and a ruling Vietnamese monarch, Emperor Bảo Đại. At the same time there was an amazing symbiotic Japanese relationship with the Cao Đài, to the extent that Japan inadvertently played a crucial part in shaping their political and military path. The Cao Đài paramilitary forces within the shipyards were set up to support Cường Đê's aspiration for independence and for his use upon his return to Vietnam. These forces were alongside of the IJA during a most critical event in Vietnamese history: the Japanese *coup de force* of 9 March 1945 that overthrew the French. Thus after 80 years of French colonial rule, Vietnam was finally liberated. However, this was done primarily out of Japanese fear of French betrayal following the Allied liberation of France and the deterioration of Japan's war situation in Asia.

Vietnamese Independence with Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim

What happened during the post-coup period was not as Prince Cường Đê and his supporters had envisaged. In the first place the provisional government under Cường Đê was swept aside, as the Japanese were more concerned to survive the Pacific War which had turned against them. The Japanese retained Emperor Bảo Đại and urged him to declare Vietnamese independence. In his memoirs Emperor Bảo Đại recorded great surprise at the Japanese behaviour. He thought the Japanese would have chosen Cường Đê, the man they had long nurtured. He however realised that the Japanese had sacrificed Cường Đê for their benefit. Special Ambassador Yokoyama Masayuki told Emperor Bảo Đại that he was the only 'suitable person to achieve the [Japanese] goal'.²⁰ Another surprise twist was the formation of a new government under Trần Trọng Kim without any member from the earlier provisional government in exile.²¹ Hence both Cường Đê and his group were

²⁰ Bảo Đại, *Con Rồng Việt Nam- Hồi Ký 1913-1987*, n.p.: Nguyễn Phước Tộc Xuất Bản, 1990, pp. 157-9.

²¹ See Nitz Kyoko Kurusu, 'Independence without Nationalists? The Japanese and Vietnamese Nationalism during the Japanese Period, 1940-1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 15, 1, March 1984, pp. 108-33; R. B. Smith, 'The Japanese in Indochina and the Coup of March 1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 8, 2, Sept 1977, pp. 226-8. For the Japanese plans for governing Vietnam, see, Masaya Shiraishi 'Background to the

sidelined. Moreover the situation became worse with the replacement of Japanese personnel in senior administrative positions once occupied by the French. General Tsuchihashi Yuichi became the new governor general. In fact the Japanese replaced the French as Vietnam's overlord and retained their grip on Vietnamese resources. Cochinchina remained in Japanese military hands despite Trần Trọng Kim's urge to have it reunited with the rest of Vietnam.

It is generally accepted that the period from the 9 March coup to the official surrender of the Japanese in mid August 1945 directly shaped the subsequent history of Vietnam. The unpopularity of the Japanese during this interregnum, aggravated by huge famine in the north, and severe Japanese exploitation of Vietnamese resources, for example rice and rubber, further alienated them from even their nationalist supporters. The demise of the Japanese-backed Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim government in the royal capital of Huế worsened the national political situation in which the Viet Minh under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh, skilfully and strategically, seized the opportunity to expand their revolutionary activities.

From his Tokyo base Cường Để manoeuvred to return to Vietnam. His move was vigorously backed by many of his nationalist supporters as well as his Japanese supporters including Lieutenant Colonel Hayashi and General Kawamura. They saw the great need for his return to restore some order; Ngô Đình Diệm and Trần Quang Vinh in particular anticipated his role in counterbalancing the rise of communism. Finally by early July 1945 the Japanese including Governor General Tsuchihashi agreed to the return of Cường Để from Japan to play a role as supreme adviser to Bảo Đại. Cường Để made earnest preparations for his return; he thanked his Japanese hosts for their support and hospitality throughout his exile. Cường Để also received favourable publicity in Japan for instance, Japanese newspaper headlines read 'The Return of the Father of an Independent Vietnam', and 'Forty Years of Exile, Asia is now Welcoming Him Home'. Throughout Vietnam news of his homecoming spread like wildfire and many arches were set up to welcome him. However, he never came home. The Japanese were more preoccupied with their worsening war effort than Cường Để affairs. On the verge of being defeated they failed to send him home. Apparently there was no available plane for his return.²²

The subsequent abdication of Emperor Bảo Đại on 25 August, preferring to become 'a citizen of an independent country rather than emperor

Formation of Trần Trọng Kim Cabinet in April 1945: Japanese Plans for Governing Vietnam', in *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, Translation Series, Ithaca: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1992, pp. 113-41.

²² Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 175-7.

of a colonised country',²³ followed by the orchestrated 'Declaration of Independence' from Hồ Chí Minh on 2 September 1945 in Hà Nội, plunged the entire country into further chaos.²⁴ The power vacuum caused by the Japanese demise led to more infighting among Vietnamese political factions each struggling to secure their position. This was complicated by the return of French colonial rule. The Cochinchina region that had provided much support to Cường Để experienced the full impact of the anarchic situation. Consequently, Cường Để remained in Japan and could only observe the turmoil from afar.

During the last five years of his exile (1946-51) confined in US-occupied Japan, Cường Để did not give up his struggle as the political atmosphere of Vietnam worsened with much division between north and south and the expanding power of Hồ Chí Minh. The whole situation in turn robbed Cường Để of any chance to return to Vietnam as the leader. Further complicating matters, the French agreed to the establishment of an autonomous south to stem the threat of communist expansion and utilizing the 'Bao Dai solution' as a bulwark to Hồ Chí Minh. Cường Để could only communicate through writings to his associates, to Bảo Đại, and to the French authorities to express his disturbed feelings and grave concern for Vietnam. By then, he steadfastly backed Bảo Đại believing that Vietnam should not become communist. He also believed Bảo Đại was a patriot, since his abdication consistently showed concern for Vietnam and worked towards a genuine independence. Consequently Cường Để wrote many letters to the French government insisting that the French should render support to Bảo Đại in order to strengthen his position in the struggle against Hồ Chí Minh and communism. He also urged the French to quickly reform their policies for the benefit of the Vietnamese. In one of his letters to French President Vincent Auriol, he urged France to grant Vietnam more rights, such as to form an army, to establish diplomatic relations with other countries and to gain admission to the UN because: 'This is to spare Vietnam from fighting, from resistance and from communism.'²⁵ Cường Để also appealed to US President Harry S. Truman (1945-53) through General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964), commander-in-chief of Allied occupation forces in Japan, seeking American support for the Vietnamese people to be free from 'totalitarian pressures'. Indirectly, he urged Washington to stem communism and to put pressure on the French colonial authorities to improve the conditions of Vietnam and its people. Part of his letter dated 9 June 1947

²³ For the full text of the Bảo Đại's abdication, see <http://www.vwip.org/articles/b/BaoDai>. Also, see Bảo Đại, *Con Rồng*, pp. 187-8.

²⁴ See D. G Marr, *Vietnam 1945- The Quest for Power*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 453-72.

²⁵ Full letter is cited in Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, *Bảo Đại và các Đảng Phái Quốc Gia*, Montreal: Tủ Sách Sử Địa, 1991, pp. 186-87.

read: 'I would like to express my gratitude to His Excellency President Truman through your Excellency's good offices, and simultaneously wish to beseech Your Excellency's kind support and aid to our Vietnam's independence, freedom and democratic institution'.²⁶

In mid-1950 Cường Để made a desperate sea voyage attempt to return to his home land 'to salvage the situation by the side of Bảo Đại'. He reached as far as Bangkok and was forced back to Japan.²⁷ Many parties, especially the French, were not keen of his homecoming. All his efforts seemed wasted and took a toll on him. One of Cường Để's supporter and friend, a former employee of Dainan Koosi, Mr Nichikawa Sutesaburo recalled that the prince was prematurely aged and greatly demoralized after his last vain attempt to return to Vietnam.²⁸ In fact he was totally isolated. Of his supporters from Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm was the last to see Cường Để. Diệm, who, together with his brother Ngô Đình Thục, stopped briefly in Tokyo to visit him on their way to the US. It was recorded that upon seeing Cường Để, Ngô Đình Diệm knelt down, uttering, 'Majesty, you should have been king'. After that Prince Cường Để shed tears.²⁹

Yet no one then realized that Cường Để was stricken with cancer. As he was lying on his deathbed in Tokyo (1951) he was reported uttering in Vietnamese, 'Stop this war, brothers, don't kill each other.' Apparently Vietnamese was the only language he could speak despite living abroad for close to five decades. By his bedside were some of his closest and most loyal friends, both Japanese and Vietnamese. They were witness to his long and futile struggle for Vietnamese independence.

Conclusion

To a large extent, Prince Cường Để's political life as an exile in Japan was a tragedy. His long and steadfast reliance on Japanese assistance was futile. Furthermore this reliance on the Japanese backfired in view of the triumphal rise of Hồ Chí Minh and his communist force that claimed to be both anti-French and anti-fascist (read Japanese). They regarded Cường Để as a collaborator with the Japanese aggressors. In reality it seems that Cường Để failed to be blessed with *thời cơ* ('opportune moment') which was experienced by Hồ Chí Minh and his group, in the wake of the Japanese

²⁶ Letter found in folder of General McArthur's Correspondences, Douglas McArthur Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.

²⁷ See Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 209-10.

²⁸ Personal communication.

²⁹ Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, p. 213.

demise.³⁰ Despite any misgivings of his unrelenting reliance on the Japanese owing to his persistent effort to save Vietnam from the French, Cường Đê was held in the highest regard as a beacon of independence and a symbol of nationalism by many non-communist nationalists.

Because of his exile in Japan, Prince Cường Đê's story encapsulated an interesting chapter of Vietnamese-Japanese relations. On the one hand there were personal and enduring relationships with loyal Japanese friends who shared his dream. On the other hand there was Japan's official policy, especially during the Pacific War towards Indochina that was conducted in Japan's self-interest that brought in its wake much detriment to Cường Đê's quest for Vietnamese independence.

By most accounts, Cường Đê was a genuine patriot, who wanted the French to lighten their harsh rule to allow his people some fundamental rights, including freedom from oppression, free speech, and access to education. To this end he awkwardly connected the nationalist struggle to national, regional and global events in the hope of bringing his goals to fruition. He gradually lost support as a result of his failure to create any viable political response to changing circumstances and to Vietnamese aspirations. However in the context of the emergence of Hồ Chí Minh as a winner who declared Vietnamese independence, one should not forget that fortuitous timing played a large part in the communists' ascension to prominence, in particular during the critical March-August 1945 period. Moreover the Japanese also retarded the nationalist movement. Japanese betrayal of Cường Đê should not come as a surprise in hindsight. Vietnamese independence as espoused by Cường Đê and his associates was set to fail at the outset on account of Japan's self-interest and imperialist agenda.

Indeed Cường Đê, in his relentless quest for independence and reform for Vietnam, gave him an ominous task as an exile in Japan. While he failed in his struggle, his determination, effort and actions certainly add colourful pages to the colonial history of Vietnam in the twentieth century; this in itself deserves a long lasting memory and should be appropriately placed on record.

³⁰ See Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, pp.347-401; Tran, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan*, pp. 186-9.