

The repatriation of Japanese in Vietnam from 1954 to 1960

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Abstract:

The Japanese military presence in Vietnam during the Second World War is well known among academia and has left traces in the history of Vietnam, however, the impacts of the remaining Japanese in Vietnam since the war ended has been somewhat forgotten on an individual and collective level. It is a common thought that there was only a Chinese presence in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s, but the real picture was immensely more complex than that. During the First Indochina War, many Japanese and Westerners (German, Austrian, French, Greek, etc.) defected and stood in the same line with the Vietnamese people during the struggle against the French invaders. These people became known as “new Vietnamese citizens” and joined hands with the Vietnamese people to build and defend the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). After the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, according to the wishes of these Japanese, the Vietnamese government created policies for favourable conditions for them to be repatriated to their fatherland. Drawing on untapped documents at the Vietnamese National Archives Center III, this article contributes to clarifying the history of the Japanese soldiers that remained in Vietnam after the end of the Second World War.

Keywords: Japanese, the national resistance war, Vietnamese.

Classification number: 8.1

Introduction

In mid-August 1945, as soon as the Japanese emperor announced their surrender to the Allies, the Vietnamese national uprising led by Viet Minh quickly and successfully took place throughout the country. The revolutionary government was established by the Provisional Government of the DRV and headed by Ho Chi Minh. The DRV was proclaimed on September 2, 1945. At that time, it was estimated that 97,000 Japanese troops and civilians were still in Indochina. Until September and October 1945, about 48,000 soldiers and 2,000 Japanese civilians remained north of the 16th parallel of Vietnam [1]. According to the

ceasefire, Japanese troops were disarmed and left for Japan from the ports of Hai Phong and Vung Tau. From April to August 1946, groups of Japanese soldiers stationed from the 16th parallel northward returned to Japan from Haiphong port. About 30,500 Japanese soldiers were repatriated through Hai Phong on April 29, 1946, and 1,500 civilians were deported shortly thereafter. At the same time, groups south of the 16th parallel under British military control left Vietnam from the Vung Tau port [1].

Taking advantage of the negligence of Chiang Kai-shek and British troops, many Japanese soldiers defected from the concentration camp

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and did not leave Vietnam. There are numerous reasons that could explain why these Japanese soldiers did not return to their homeland after the war ended, however, three main motives can be established: 1) These failed soldiers were pessimistic about the future of Japan under U.S. military occupation; 2) The Japanese soldiers had a fear of being mistreated as prisoners of war or would be prosecuted as war criminals; 3) Some of them had a relationship with Vietnamese girlfriends [1].

The number of Japanese soldiers remaining in Vietnam as of December 1946 was also not accurate because of the turbulent context at that time. However, according to Japanese statistics, about 800 Japanese soldiers remained in Indochina [2] and they had no intention of returning to Japan. It was estimated that the number of Japanese soldiers who deserted and remained in Vietnam by the end of 1946 was 800 of which about 600 joined the Viet Minh and “about half of them died in Vietnamese fatherland” [3]. Up until now, there have been 160 Japanese people who joined the Vietnamese people's struggle to fight against the French colonists [3]. Not all Japanese deserters joined the Viet Minh nor were they ready to join the Viet Minh immediately after defecting. Their act of desertion was spontaneous, unorganized, and not owing to any group or organization.

There are some studies regarding the Japanese army involved in Vietnam during the Second World War, however, the Japanese soldiers in Vietnam during the period of 1954 and 1960 was never fully clarified in Vietnamese academia. According to the 2002 publication of *Belated Asian Allies: The technical and military contributions of Japanese deserters (1945-1950)* by Christopher Goscha, there were a number of Japanese troops remaining in Vietnam after the

Second World War. Goscha also emphasised the contributions of Japanese soldiers to the service of the DRV during the war against the French in terms of helping the transformation to a modern military as well as technological and economic development. *Etrangers in Indochinese colonial society*: The situation of Japanese migrants written by Roustan Frédéric in 2010 introduces the concept of étranger or “foreigners” in French Indochina by focusing on Japanese migrants in Indochinese society between 1882 and 1952. This is a notable study; however, it refers to Japanese migrants in Indochina in general and does not focus on the Vietnamese community as compared to this research. Hong Hoang is the first Vietnamese scholar to point out the contributions of Japanese soldiers to the national resistance war in the 2008 paper entitled *The Japanese “new Vietnamese” in Vietnam’s anti-French war (1945-1954)*. Based on sources from Vietnamese archives, Hong managed to produce an incomplete list of names of the Japanese or “new Vietnamese” with their contributions to the Vietnamese struggle for independence from 1945 to 1954. Drawing on Japanese materials, Minh Vu Vo’s 2019 paper titled *Repatriation of Japanese in Vietnam after World War II* focuses on the disarmament and repatriation policies for the Japanese army and civilians in Vietnam. Vu also analyses the differences in this process between the North and South of Vietnam. In *Last Japanese overseas in Vietnam repatriated after 1954*, published in 2005, Quang Hai Dinh illustrates the journey of the last Japanese soldiers that returned to Japan in the 1960s.

All these studies affirm that the presence of Japanese soldiers in Vietnam after the Second World War as well as their hard work and bloody contributions to the Vietnamese resistance war. However, these historical facts have not yet been

fully restored. This paper analyses the DRV's policies as well as provides a detailed account of Japanese living in Vietnam after August 1945 and aims to contribute to a complete understanding of the history of the First Indochina War, the solidarity policies of the Vietnamese, as well as a historical mark in Vietnamese and Japanese relations.

Becoming new citizens

At the time, the newly established DRV faced many challenges. The country was devastated after the Great Famine of 1945 afflicting the Northern region and leaving behind between one to two million victims. The flood in August 1945 broke dikes in nine Northern provinces causing a third of the cultivated areas to be severely damaged. The damage triggered by this flood was estimated to cost 13 million VND [4]. Three provinces in North-Central Vietnam lost about half of their crops. After the flood, a prolonged drought made 50% of the land area in North Vietnam uncultivable [5]. The resulting famine threatened the new government. Moreover, the finances of the revolutionary State were nearly zero because the national budget at that time was only 1,230,000 VND of which more than half was depleted [6]. The greatest threat to the DRV government at that time was the determination of the French to re-occupy their old colonies. In the North, Chiang Kai-shek's forces arrived in massive numbers to take the Japanese surrender in Hanoi as well as most cities and towns from the Vietnam - China border to the sixteenth parallel. The political situation in Southern Vietnam was more serious. On September 13, 1945, following the Potsdam agreement, British-Indian soldiers arrived in Saigon to disarm Japanese troops. With the backing of the British command, nearly 2,000 French troops were released [7]. In addition to the forces of Chiang Kai-shek and the British

and French forces, there were still about 5,000 disarmed Japanese troops in Vietnam at this time [8]. On September 23, 1945, a clash broke out in Saigon marking the return of French colonial rule in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the DRV army was in the process of construction and had not yet received much training. Most commanders lacked military knowledge, combat experience, as well as weapons.

The presence of Japanese soldiers in Vietnam at that time was quite strange, making Vietnamese local officials utterly confused and unsure of how to handle the situation. In December 1945, Le Van Hien was the special representative of the DRV in the Central and Southern regions, then was later appointed Minister of Finance of the DRV. He proposed a solution that was accepted by the DRV [9]. Following that, the government accepted Japanese soldiers who remained in Vietnam and desired to use their technical knowledge and skills to contribute to the newly established regime. Hundreds of Japanese, instead of being indiscriminately handled by local officials, lived and worked equally in military units and government agencies of the DRV with the common name "new Vietnamese" as coined by President Ho Chi Minh.

The most prominent activity of the "new Vietnamese" was military training. Indeed, the "new Vietnamese" played an important role in running the Infantry of Academy in Quang Ngai, which was one of the first schools to train regular military officers in Vietnam. The school had eleven Japanese military training teachers including four military instructors for four companies, namely, Tanimoto Kikuo - Dong Hung, Mitsunobu Nakahara - Minh Ngoc, Igari Kazumasa - Phan Lai, and Kamo Tokuji - Phan Hue. There were four teaching assistants, namely, Aoyama Hiroshi, Onishi Suegami, Namada

Suegami, and Minegishi Sadai. The training team had two Japanese: Ishii Taku - Nguyen Van Thong and Sato - Minh Tam. The military doctor was Kisei Fujio - Le Trung. The Japanese teachers' lectures were compiled according to Japanese military books [3]. Of the 46 Japanese officers joining Viet Minh in the Southern part of central Vietnam in 1948, there were 36 working as military instructors, which accounts for 78% of the total [1].

The use of Japanese soldiers as military instructors for cadres and soldiers of the Vietnam People's Army during the early period of the resistance war against the French proved to be an appropriate and effective policy. These "new Vietnamese" played an important role in promoting the abilities of the Vietnamese army. The military support of these Japanese soldiers was the greatest contribution to the fight against the French colonists together with the Vietnamese people.

The "new Vietnamese" also directly participated in major campaigns and fought on the frontlines. Some of them became senior officers in the Vietnamese army such as Major Ishii Takuo who became a colonel in the Vietnam People's Army. He served as the leader of the Infantry of Academy of Quang Ngai and later served as "chief advisor" of the Viet Minh armed forces in South Vietnam. Colonel Mukayama, a former member of the Imperial Japanese Army, later became an advisor to General Vo Nguyen Giap. There were at least 41 Japanese who participated in major campaigns or fought on local frontlines such as the Viet Bac Campaign, Border Campaign, and 14th Street Campaign. Some "new Vietnamese" were brave warriors and were admired by Vietnamese soldiers. Indeed, many "new Vietnamese" were awarded medals by the Government and Vietnam People's Army.

Four of these individuals were members of the Vietnamese Labour Party (another name of the Vietnamese Communist Party): Yutumi Suchio - Nguyen Duc Hong (in 1949), Tsuchiyo Tuchtami - Nguyen Van Dong (in 1949), Yoshida Tamio - Phan Tien Bo (in 1950), and Iwai Koshiro - Nguyen Van Sau (in 1952).

Besides, the "new Vietnamese" also helped Vietnam in other fields such as finance, currency, medicine, resource exploitation, printing, meteorology, etc. Several Japanese financial experts also advised the DRV in managing the government's banking and monetary policies, which was one of the most pressing problems faced by the Viet Minh during the struggle. Some "new Vietnamese" worked at the printing agency under the Ministry of Finance. One notable individual was Fujita Isamu-Hoang Dinh Tung, a former employee of the Yokohama Bank branch in Hanoi, who helped build a modern financial and monetary system, fabricate money printing paper, and issue banknotes under the direction of Finance Minister Le Van Hien.

Returning hometown

During the period from 1954 to 1960, there were a total of five repatriations for Japanese expatriates to return home.

The first repatriation took place in 1954 right after the North was at peace. The Vietnamese government organized the repatriation of 71 Japanese expatriates back home. At this time, Japan and the DRV did not establish official diplomatic relations, so the organizations of the two countries agreed to bring the "new Vietnamese" back home through a third country as an intermediary. At the World Peace Congress in Sweden (taking place from June 19-23, 1954), representatives of the Japan Peace Committee and the Vietnam Peace Committee attending

the congress discussed this issue. The Chinese Red Cross Society agreed to help the Japanese people remaining in Vietnam return home through Chinese territory. In November 1954, the Vietnamese government gathered some of the "new Vietnamese" in Thai Nguyen. After that, these overseas Japanese moved to the Vietnam - China border and then took a train to Nanning and from there to Tianjin as arranged by Chinese officials. They made it back to Japan on November 29, 1954 [10]. This was the first repatriation since the end of the resistance war against the French colonialists. On this first trip, these Japanese were not allowed to bring their wives and children with them.

By the end of 1958, in North Vietnam, there were 37 Japanese including 36 male, one female. Three people claimed to be Taiwanese with Japanese nationality, and one person claimed to be Japanese with a father that was Korean and a mother that was Japanese. Out of the 37 Japanese, 21 were working for state agencies, and 16 were self-employed in the provinces [11]. The majority of the Japanese married Vietnamese women of which 22 were married to the Northerners, one female (Japanese name was Saito Hanako, Vietnamese name was Nguyen Thi Thanh) that married and had two children in Hanoi, three Japanese that married Southerners that remained in the South, and five Japanese that were unmarried [12].

Regarding the issue of Japanese soldiers, the Vietnamese government's policy was to make preparations for them to return to their fatherland and to request the Japanese government to ensure their safety so that they could easily return to Japan. To create favourable conditions for the repatriation of these Japanese expatriates, on October 31, 1958, the Vietnamese Prime Minister organized an investigation into the

difficulties and problems of Japanese expatriates at all agencies and localities where they were working and living. Together with Vietnamese agencies, Japanese friendship organizations actively worked to return the "new Vietnamese" back home. Some notable people involved were Fujita Isamu and Nakahara Mitsunobu, some of the first "new Vietnamese" Japanese that returned home on the first repatriation in November 1954 [10]. On December 11, 1958, a Japanese peace delegation consisting of the Japanese Red Cross Society, the Japan Peace Committee, the Japan - Vietnam Friendship Association, and the Japan - Vietnam Trade Association visited Vietnam. The delegation and the Vietnam Red Cross Society discussed the issue of bringing back the Japanese remaining in Vietnam after the Second World War. On December 28, 1958, the two sides signed the "Joint Communiqué of Peace" [10] agreeing to return the remaining Japanese soldiers in Vietnam back home.

In 1959, the second repatriation of the Japanese - Vietnamese took place. The Vietnamese government stipulated that officials of provinces and agencies would help the repatriated Japanese quickly sell properties that could not be taken with them at an affordable price. If Japanese expatriates were officials, they were entitled to severance allowances and other benefits granted by the agency, which had to be resolved before the overseas Japanese left Vietnam. Each person was entitled to receive a severance allowance and a seniority allowance of at least 20,000 VND with a maximum of one million VND. However, compared to the average living standard in Japan at that time, this amount was not enough to ensure a stable life for Japanese expatriates. Therefore, the Vietnamese government decided to provide an additional allowance of 500,000 VND for each Japanese expatriate who was an

employee of a state agency. Particularly, for those “new Vietnamese” who were members of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, they would be given an additional 300,000 VND each. For Japanese expatriates who were commoners, they were given 250,000 VND each [13].

Many Japanese expatriates desired to bring their wives and children with them. However, because of the concern of difficulties when returning home at this time, the DRV encouraged the Japanese to return first and then reunite with their wives and children later. The Vietnamese authority worried that if Vietnamese spouses returned to Japan at the same time as their husbands, they would face difficulties such as new languages and lack of jobs and housing. The Ministry of Home Affairs also suggested that Vietnamese officials should analyse these concerns and advise their wives and children not to hurry to leave for Japan. But, for a few cases in which Japanese families earnestly requested their wives and children to return, and there was evidence to ensure their stability in Japan, the Government would intervene to let their wives and children return at the same time. The Provincial Administrative Committee and state agencies specified their opinions together with the application of the overseas Japanese to the Vietnam Red Cross Society.

For Japanese wives and children staying in Vietnam, the Ministry of Home Affairs requested local authorities to find jobs for them. The women’s union was responsible for taking care of the wives and children of Japanese expatriates in terms of material and spiritual matters and to help solve part of their difficulties after their husbands returned home. The Ministry of Home Affairs advocated helping overseas Japanese wives and children as follows:

For overseas Japanese wives and children

who were state officials and employees, the wife (including the case if the wife was a state officer or employee) was granted VND 50,000. Each child was given 25,000 VND.

For the wife and children of Japanese expatriates who were ordinary people, the administration considered their actual situation and gave support with the maximum amount of 30,000 VND for a wife and 15,000 VND for each child.

The administrative committees of the provinces and agencies having Japanese employees returning home would consider and promptly issue them right before their leaving.

For those with meritorious services in the Vietnamese resistance war, in addition to enjoying the benefits of Japanese expatriates when returning home under the specific conditions specified above, there were also the following policies:

Those who were war invalids would receive 6 months of subsistence allowance and 5 years of disability allowance. If they qualified for distribution of warm clothes and blankets, they could receive money.

Those with meritorious services in the resistance war were provided by the State with some necessary items such as clothes and some personal belongings. If they were wounded soldiers after returning to Japan for 5 years, but life was difficult, according to their wishes, Vietnam would find a way to send more money to them [14].

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and agencies also paid attention to solving difficulties for Japanese expatriates because the first expatriation was expected to be conducted around February 20, 1959. However, according to the Japanese Red Cross Society, at the end of March and the

beginning of April 1959, there was only one ship to welcome the Japanese Vietnamese for the second time, so Mr. Nguyen Van Dong who worked for the Meteorological Department and Mr. Tran Ha who worked at a factory could not receive their salary. These Japanese were laid off by the state agency from the beginning of March 1959, but the Japanese ship to pick up the repatriates did not follow the plan thereby affecting their lives. The Vietnamese Red Cross Society proposed to subsidize Mr. Nguyen Van Dong 150 VND and Mr. Tran Ha 100 VND for consumption while waiting for repatriation to Japan. The Ministry of Home Affairs realized that Nguyen Van Dong and Tran Ha could not be repatriated because the Japanese did not have a ship to pick them up and the two Japanese had quit their jobs in a fair and reasonable manner to prepare for repatriation after receiving a call from the Japanese Red Cross Society. These two Japanese expatriates waited for 4 months and they did not receive any salary and allowances. Because this situation was not caused by the two involved parties, the Ministry of Home Affairs paid their salaries and allowances until they returned home in order to protect the interests of these two Japanese expatriates following the personnel policy [15].

The second repatriation occurred on March 4, 1959, with nine Japanese expatriates. They repatriated via the Japanese Red Cross Society, the World Peace Protection Committee of Japan, and the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Association. These also were "new Vietnamese" that made great contributions to the Vietnamese resistance war, namely, Nguyen Van Hien, Phan Tien Bo, Nguyen Van Tam, Nguyen Van Loi, Nguyen Duc Hong, Nguyen Van Phuoc, and Nguyen Nghi.

The third repatriation took place on July 26, 1959, with ten Japanese expatriates with their

wives and children. Among these Japanese, there were four "new Vietnamese" with many achievements: Nguyen Van Dong (Tuchitani Isamu), who was awarded the second-class Labour Medal, a resistance badge, an anniversary of resistance, a certificate of merit from the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour, a certificate of merit from the Inter-regional Administrative Committee IV, and a certificate of merit from the Meteorological Department; Mr. Ho Tam (Mawaki Yoshihiro), who was awarded a certificate of merit for a first-class victory, a glorious family merit certificate, a certificate of wounded soldiers, and a wounded soldier badge; Mr. Tong Van Huan (Hayakawa Seichiro) was awarded a resistance commemoration and certificate, a resistance badge, and a certificate; and Mr. Nguyen Minh Thanh (Takahasi Makoto) who was awarded a certificate of merit from the Vinh Electrical Machine Installation Site, and 3 certificates of merit from the Lao Cai Electric Machine Installation Site.

The fourth repatriation occurred on April 13, 1960, included 12 Japanese expatriates, 11 wives, and 46 children.

The last repatriation occurred on June 16, 1960, with only one Japanese expatriate, his wife, and three children. Thus, by the end of 1960, the last soldiers and civilians in North Vietnam were repatriated with their families to Japan.

These repatriated Japanese had sympathy for the Vietnamese government and contributed to their resistance war as well as nation-building. Therefore, after being repatriated to Japan, they would be good seeds for creating solidarity and friendship between the Vietnamese and Japanese people. They also would be active factors in the movement to fight for democracy and peace in Japan. Vietnam advocated for preserving

and fostering the existing good feelings of the Japanese “new Vietnamese” so that when they returned home, they still retained their good feelings towards Vietnam and could continue to fight for the resistance war in Vietnam [16]. Because of this sympathy, Vietnamese authorities encouraged Japanese soldiers and created the most favourable conditions for them to return to their homeland safely.

Conclusions

After the Second World War (1945), there were still a number of Japanese prisoners and soldiers who, for various reasons, remained and lived in North Vietnam. To encourage their support to the Vietnamese resistance war, a “correct and generous policy” was applied. Japanese deserters were able to live and work equally in Vietnamese military units and government agencies with the common name of “new Vietnamese”. Since then, this Japanese community made remarkable contributions to the Vietnamese revolution. In addition to training as Vietnamese military officers or directly participating in combat, the “new Vietnamese” also contributed to many other fields such as finance, medicine, exploitation of resources, or participation in the production of weapons in military factories. Because of their great contribution to the Vietnamese revolution, when these Japanese had a desire to return to their homeland, the Vietnamese government created favourable conditions for their repatriation. However, at this time, the DRV and Japan did not have established official diplomatic relations, so it was difficult to organize the repatriation of these Japanese. Through the efforts of organizations and unions in both Japan and Vietnam, the remaining Japanese expatriates in Vietnam after the Second World War were repatriated. From 1954 to 1960, there were a total of five repatriations for Japanese

expatriates returning home. By 1960, the last Japanese expatriates in North Vietnam, along with their families, returned to their homeland by their wishes. However, it was only since the third repatriation that Japanese soldiers could be allowed to take their wives and children to Japan with them. All of those who repatriated in the first and second repatriation had to leave their spouses in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese wives of these Japanese soldiers could not wait to see their husbands again. In many cases, when they were finally able to communicate with each other, they were old and sick and unable to return to Vietnam or go to Japan to see their husband/wife/children again. The sadness of this circumstances still remains.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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