

Class, Nationalism and the Vietnam Riots - Workers targeted Chinese, Taiwanese and even Korean and Vietnamese factories and businesses

Saturday 17 May 2014, by [Joshkinh](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2014).

To begin with, there are two kinds of anti-Chinese sentiments in Vietnam today. The first is a general animosity toward the more powerful northern neighbour and economically dominant force, the People's Republic of China; the second is the blatant racism against the local Chinese Hoa people, predominantly located in the south of Vietnam – Saigon in particular – including accusations of being a “fifth column” of Vietnamese society. At times of diplomatic emergency or military confrontation with China, ethnic Chinese Vietnamese become targets of violence, whether organised (state sponsored) or disorganised. Like many Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam hosts a significant ethnic Chinese population who have traditionally played critical roles in trade and commerce. This minority suffered greatly after the re-unification of Vietnam from 1976 onwards when over 600,000 fled the country either over land to China from the north or by boat from the south, along with many more ethnic Vietnamese fleeing political persecution. Just as a personal note, the kind of stereotypes made against Chinese Vietnamese sounds strikingly similar to traditional antisemitic stereotypes held by many bigots.

Vietnamese nationalism was born from a series of protracted and ultimately victorious national liberation campaigns lead against different Chinese dynasties, French colonialism and then US imperialism, the latter two having been repelled by a non-conventional army under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party – VCP. This Party still dictates over the re-unified state to the present day. The VCP has systematically gone about destroying political dissidents and putting down the labour movement wherever it springs up. It has also employed rhetoric to the effect that political dissidents are national traitors. In order to bolster this assertion, it has gone to great lengths to persistently unite the populace under the banner of nationalism. Nationalism can often be used by the ruling class to disguise class-antagonisms and politically disorient workers from reaching a conclusion that, in order to achieve their economic interest or fight for political power, they must challenge their own ruling class.

In the case of Vietnam, where the VCP monopolises power undemocratically and through force, the occasional stirring of nationalist sentiments and permitting of political protests is useful when it demonstrates a mass base for a sentiment that the government wishes to reinforce. Of course, they impose a strict limit to both the protests and what slogans they raise. The anti-China protests received abundant coverage in the Vietnamese, Chinese and general Asian media as a successful stunt, raising slogans with banners in Chinese, Vietnamese and English (see photo). It is useful to the Vietnamese government because it strengthens the pro-VCP hysteria and temporarily silences the dissenters. However, the Vietnamese government is extremely wary of too large a protest potentially emboldening a section of the populace to raise more than demands it allows – for example, democratic reform. Demands for democratic reform can easily be given a nationalist

character. More importantly, it potentially destabilises the rule of law which permits a space for protesters and rioters, anti-China or not, to do things that harm the interests of the Vietnamese ruling class. The attacks on foreign-owned businesses, in particular the factories in the Binh Duong Province, north of Ho Chi Minh City, are certainly not in the interests of the ruling class of Vietnam, who vigorously encourage foreign corporations to establish operations in Vietnam.

Foreign direct investment and tourism have been the pillars of the Vietnamese economy since the transition to a “market-based socialist” system aimed for in Doi Moi – the “renovation.” Apart from the interruption of the Asian Economic Crisis of the late 1990s, the Vietnamese economy has maintained consistent growth rates of over 8% for the last decade. Whether or not it is incidental, investment in the economy is beneficial for both the Vietnamese ruling and working classes. Nevertheless, the disparity between rich and poor continues to widen, significantly. This is the case in many developing countries that have adopted similar free-market models of development and restricted the bargaining capacity of workers. Like China, Vietnam’s official (legal) trade unions are all state-controlled and ineffective at serving the workers they supposedly represent.

In this regard, it’s worth interrogating the motivations of the rioters who have targeted Chinese, Taiwanese and even Korean and Vietnamese factories and businesses across the country. Few news reports have done much more than label the Vietnamese rioters, many of which allegedly work at the factories they attacked, to be anything more than illiterate nationalists who cannot tell the difference between Taiwan, Korea and China. Media commentators in the West might struggle to distinguish between different types of Asian people but why shouldn’t the average Vietnamese worker be able to? Taiwanese professor of sociology at Sun Yat-Sen University, Hong-Zen Wang and labour researcher Anita Chan contended in their 2004 paper on the subject of foreign owned factories in Vietnam and China:

“Korean and Taiwanese managers are particularly known for their disciplinarian approach in their offshore factories, which have gained a reputation for harsh working conditions not only in Asia but also elsewhere in the world, including Central America and southern Africa.”

When comparing the foreign-owned factories in China and Vietnam the authors noted:

“Also of importance are the differences in the operations of the two countries’ government-sponsored trade unions. We have observed how the trade union confederation in Vietnam has been given the leeway by the government to press more vigorously to protect working conditions in foreign-managed factories”

which speaks to the horrific working conditions faced by workers in China. In this light it may appear that the limited space granted by the Vietnamese government to target China has translated into more than was originally permitted. As for the attacks on Taiwanese businesses, in particular, Hong Zen-Wang explains:

“....many Taiwanese multinational such as PCC have a factory in China , when they want to set up a new plant in Vietnam, they send Chinese managers to run it; after the start of operations, the plant will employ people to serve from its Mainland factory in Vietnam as management cadres . Even without the Taiwanese factories in China, they can, through human agency, or other contractors hire Chinese managers to, on the one hand, reduce the difficulty of communicating with the Vietnamese cadres in Taiwanese language, on the other hand it is cheaper than hiring Taiwanese.

However, this organizational structure resulted in “glass ceiling” effect, promotion within the organization, the Taiwan management are always at the top, even mid-level cadres seats are reserved for Chinese people, then how can the Vietnamese be promoted? In addition, Chinese

managers often introduce management “with Chinese characteristics”, that is, with a relatively high pressure approach to management of the factory production line, which is met by daily friction, in turn, accumulating resentment and dissatisfaction. With no venting mechanism, Vietnamese workers usually quit to express their dissatisfaction, but as this is more of a sovereignty dispute, in the Vietnamese government ‘s acquiescence, the workers finally found a pipeline to express discontent. [1]

Just how acquiescent the Vietnamese government was in these riots remains to be seen, but given the nature of the attacks, it’s unlikely to have orchestrated them, particularly since it works against the VCP’s economic program of encouraging foreign direct investment.

Joshkinh

P.S.

* <http://joshkinh.wordpress.com/2014/05/16/class-nationalism-and-the-vietnam-riots/>

Footnotes

[1] In Chinese:

“中國政府對越南的騷亂採取了高壓手段，這是一種典型的中國式管理，即通過高壓手段來管理工廠生產線，這導致了日常摩擦，進而積聚了不滿和怨恨。由於沒有發洩機制，越南工人通常會辭職來表達他們的不滿，但由於這更多是主權爭端，在越南政府的默許下，工人最終找到了一條管道來表達不滿。”

中國政府對越南的騷亂採取了高壓手段，這是一種典型的中國式管理，即通過高壓手段來管理工廠生產線，這導致了日常摩擦，進而積聚了不滿和怨恨。由於沒有發洩機制，越南工人通常會辭職來表達他們的不滿，但由於這更多是主權爭端，在越南政府的默許下，工人最終找到了一條管道來表達不滿。”

From:

<http://www.appledaily.com.tw/realtimenews/article/new/20140516/398528/>

Screen shot 2014-05-16 at 3.52.36 PM Screen shot 2014-05-16 at 3.52.19 PM

Screen shot 2014-05-16 at 3.52.12 PM