

# Ho Chi Minh and Komatsu Kiyoshi 小松 清 in Paris: A Reprise

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## Abstract

Having arrived in France in 1921, the young student of French, Komatsu Kiyoshi 小松 清, made the acquaintance of Ho Chi Minh. While briefly acknowledging Komatsu's career as literateur through the French Popular Front years, specifically the article raises a series of questions as to the depth of Komatsu's relationship with Ho Chi Minh. Especially as revealed by French police documentation, such concerns his links with communist and anarcho-syndicalist networks in Paris – Japanese included – and his surprising remembrance of Ho Chi Minh as published in a Hanoi newspaper in 1944, prior to throwing in his lot with the Vietnamese nationalist-communist cause.

**Keywords:** Komatsu Kiyoshi, Ho Chi Minh, Paris, anarcho-syndicalism, communism, anti-French nationalism

Having arrived in France in 1921, the young Kobe-born student of French, Komatsu Kiyoshi 小松 清, made the acquaintance of Ho Chi Minh then going by the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, and so ushering in a relationship with France and Vietnam that practically spanned his en-

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tire life in controversial and ambiguous ways. Well known as a pioneer translator into Japanese of André Gide and André Malraux, Komatsu's reputation as *littérateur* appears to be secure in Japan today especially in view of his prodigious publication output.<sup>1</sup> While not especially concerned with Komatsu's later life in France during the French Popular Front years or back in Japan as with his literary and artistic associations, nevertheless, the article does not entirely ignore Komatsu's war-time activities in French Indochina under Japanese diplomatic cover, prior to throwing in his lot with the Vietnamese nationalist-communist cause. Especially, this article draws attention to Komatsu's arrival in France in late 1921, his correspondence with Ho Chi Minh and other little-known activities entering French archival records. The article raises a series of questions as to the depth of Komatsu's relationship with Ho Chi Minh, his links with anarcho-syndicalist and communist circles in Paris, his suspected relationship with the Japanese Legation in Paris, and his surprising remembrance of Ho Chi Minh as serialized in a Hanoi newspaper in 1944 at a time when the whereabouts or even livelihood of the future president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was practically unknown to French intelligence services.

### *Komatsu's Arrival in France*

As profiled by the French police, Komatsu was born 13 June 1900 in the port city of Kobe. He held a Japanese passport issued in Kobe and was issued a visa by the French consulate in this city on 23 July 1921. From Komatsu's published diary, we know that as a young student in

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<sup>1</sup> To wit, Nagasaki University library holds at least 19 works by or about Komatsu.

the Kobe Prefectural Commercial Junior High School from which he graduated in March 1918, he studied English at a YMCA night school. Entering the Kobe Commercial High School he additionally took up Esperanto. Up until September 1919 when he quit the school he started his writing career by contributing articles to a local literary circle. Early 1920 saw him adrift in Tokyo but awakened as well by experiencing a May Day rally at Ueno Koen. With the goal of continuing study in the United States, he lost the opportunity when his passport was revoked in response to a critical article he published in a newspaper of the day. Thus thwarted, his well-connected uncle in Kyoto helped him to redirect his attention to France (*Furansu chishikijin to no kōryū Tōkyō*, 2010, hereafter, Komatsu Collected Works).<sup>2</sup>

Setting out from Kobe on 31 July 1921 on a Nihon Yusen line vessel, he arrived in Marseille via Colombo on 17 September 1921. Initially putting up in a local “artist village” with compatriot artist Aoyama Kumaji, he then moved on to Paris where he immediately made contact with the artist, Sakamoto Hanjirō (坂本 繁二郎), whom he had met on the sea voyage from Japan, and with Sakamoto preceding him to Paris. Sakamoto, in turn, occupied an apartment rented by Kojima Torajiro (児島 虎次郎) who, as described in a French police report, was “a somewhat celebrated artist who had since returned to Japan.” That was correct. Kojima, who first arrived in Paris in 1908 had returned to Japan but, in

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<sup>2</sup> Volume 8 of a multi-volume collection of Komatsu’s works, namely, *Furansu chishikijin to no kōryū Tōkyō*, offers a useful introduction and a time-line of his early life in Japan and activities in France from which I have drawn. Nevertheless, it does not carry Komatsu’s own memoir or writings on his early stay in France.

1920, revisited Paris at which time he associated himself with the artist Monet and the French impressionist school. After several weeks residing in Sakamoto's apartment, Komatsu rented his own place in the same building (at 18 Rue Ernest Cresson in the 14<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* or district), and it was during this interval that he first made contact with Ho Chi Minh (ANOM HCI SPCE Correspondances entre le Ministère des Colonies et le Gouvernement général 364).

Unknown to Komatsu, he immediately attracted French police attention upon arrival in Paris (and possibly even the moment he stepped off a ship at Marseille). For that matter, he may have aroused suspicion of the French authorities back in Kobe at the time he applied for a visa, especially as to his youthful background and apparent socialist associations (Morgan 2013: 4). That in itself would not have been a major issue with the French authorities, but France itself was wary of Japanese support for exiled Vietnamese anti-colonial agitators, as with the literati Phan Bội Châu and the royal prince, Cường Đê. In 1910, France had successfully sought their expulsion from Japan but Cường Đê's return and high-level political sponsorship literally became a major irritant in Franco-Japanese relations through the entire interwar period (Tran My-Van 2005). Ironically, both Ho Chi Minh and Komatsu would engage Cường Đê later in their careers although in contradictory ways (namely, with Ho Chi Minh rejecting his royal nationalism, and with Komatsu playing the card alongside Japan).

### *Ho Chi Minh in Paris*

The new peace in Europe in the aftermath of World War I found many stay-behind colonials in the major capitals. In France they in-

cluded a number of former worker-soldiers from Indochina, Madagascar and the Arab countries, along with Chinese and other nationalities stranded in France and with certain putting down roots as through marriage, work, or as students. By 1920, they would be joined by newly arriving contingents of officially-sponsored student-workers, mostly Chinese but including smaller numbers of Korean and Thai students. First coming to French police attention in Paris in June 1919 under the name Nguyễn Tất Thành, after some six years of travels from his native Vietnam including time in the Americas and England, Ho Chi Minh met some of them even though he was not formally a student and was obliged to work for his living (Lacouture 1968; Duiker 2000; Brocheux 2000; Quinn-Judge 2002; Ruscio 2019; Gunn 2021a).

Ho Chi Minh's primary networks in Paris were undoubtedly his compatriots and much has been written about the support he received from the time of his arrival in the French capital from the Groupe des Patriotes Annamites, notably the veteran anti-colonial activists, Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Văn Trường (and with both implicated in anti-state activities), and the students Nguyễn Thế Truyền and Nguyễn An Ninh. Nguyễn Tất Thành who would join them, having taken on the persona of Nguyễn Ái Quốc (and not yet firmly identified by the French authorities). Collectively, the group was known as the "five dragons." Either as editors or collaborators they also assisted him in the production of his famous *Revendications*, or the petition he submitted to the Paris Peace Conference (formally opened on 18 January 1919 at the Quai d'Orsay) calling for Indochina autonomy.

To be fair, a full portrait of the then 25-27 year-old Ho Chi Minh cannot be drawn without examining the intellectual and political influences

of his early contacts with a range of French individuals associated with the French Socialist Party and, subsequently the French Communist Party. Nevertheless, despite the abundant literature on Ho Chi Minh in Paris, far less attention has been devoted to yet another circle or network to which he related, namely other colonials. At another level we should not ignore the way that Ho Chi Minh networked with other Asians including members of the Korean and Chinese delegations to the Peace Conference but also, at a later stage, student-worker activists from among the thousands who arrived in the French capital postwar (Gunn 2021b).

### *Engaging Ho Chi Minh*

No sooner had Komatsu arrived in Paris (likely around 13 October 1921) than he attended a speaking session in which Ho Chi Minh participated, along with a broader audience of Asians. Evidently engaging Ho Chi Minh in conversation at the event, Komatsu then volunteered to provide him with information on trade union activities in Japan. But which conference or event? If we examine Ho Chi Minh's schedule for September-December, he was always busy. Mornings he worked as a photo retoucher at the Leine studio adjacent his rented room in a working class district on Rue Compoin, evenings often saw him at revolutionary socialist party meetings, or busy with the newly created Union Intercoloniale bringing together Africans, Madagascans, West Indians along with Vietnamese, or at private meetings with his compatriots especially at their Villa de Gobelins residence near Place d'Italie (also nearby Zhou Enlai's then abode) (see Goebel 2015). Even so, between late 1919-23 he spent every spare moment in Parisian libraries research-

ing the political economy of colonialism with special reference to French Indochina but with a secondary interest in colonialism in general including Japanese colonialism in Korea (Ruscio 2019).

In fact, as Komatsu himself recalled in later life, the event that brought him together with Ho Chi Minh was the occasion of a grand rally attended by prominent politicians of the Left (Marcel Cachin of the French Communist Party included), in support of two Americo-Italian anarchists implicated in a murder case but widely believed to have been railroaded owing to political interference. This took place at the historic Salle Wagram auditorium [Komatsu Collected Works], a fact confirmed. This is confirmed by Ho Chi Minh biographer, Jean Lacouture (1968: 22), who asserted that it was Ho Chi Minh who “tapped him on the shoulder.” As the senior French police agent in charge of surveillance of Ho Chi Minh, Adrian Devèze reported, “on Sunday 23 October 1921 Ho Chi Minh and two Vietnamese compatriots participated in a demonstration organized by revolutionary parties, anarchists, and trade unionists to protest the death sentence imposed in the United States on Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian anarchists who had immigrated to the United States in 1908” (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Notes confidentielles des agents du Service des renseignements; Note de M. Devèze du 26 Octobre 1921). One of the two other Vietnamese attending the meeting that day was the Le Havre-based militant anarcho-syndicalist seaman, Lê Văn Thuyét (Leon), frequently putting up in Ho Chi Minh’s apartment when visiting Paris. Although there is no specific record, most likely Komatsu’s attendance was observed by French police agents.

The next most likely occasion on which Komatsu could have heard Ho Chi Minh speak publicly in the month of October 1921 was at a Satur-

day session of the Club de Faubourg. Hosted by the Club president and socialist journalist, Léo Poldès, Ho Chi Minh had been taken under his wing to overcome his shyness and to polish his oratorical skills. He was a frequent attendee. Debates ranged across a spectrum of topics from hypnotism to socialism. The meeting of Saturday 15 October 1921 commenced at 2:30 p.m. The venue was the Théâtre de Press, rue Montmartre 125 (actually opposite the editorial office of the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*). The title of the debate was “Communisme contre Colonialisme. Le problème, noir, la question jaune, la solution communiste.” As billed, there were four speakers, three from the Republic of Haiti and Nguyen Ai Quoc from Indochina” (Ruscio 2019: 126). The topic was a drawcard on this day and the audience for these Saturday events usually exceeded 100 persons. The next major public event which Ho Chi Minh attended that year was on 17 November. Again, the occasion was a debate hosted by the Club de Faubourg, at 127 Av. de Clichy on the topic of whether or not doctors were charlatans (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI 1921). However, as explained below, Komatsu had been ill that entire week.

### *Failed Rendezvous and Letter Apology*

At their meeting on 23 October, the two obviously set up a rendezvous because, on 19 November 1921, Komatsu sent a letter to Ho Chi Minh addressing him as Nguyễn Ái Quốc. In this, he apologized for failing to keep an appointment owing to illness or a severe case of the flu threatening pneumonia. He also alluded to a manuscript of the “worker’s party of Japan” which he wished to deliver. Explaining that for the past eight days he had been confined to an apartment with no heating, no water,

and no company, and that he was obliged to go outside to fetch his own food and medicine, it sounded like a plausible excuse. As he explained, given the winter conditions in Paris and his malady, he intended to back off to the south of France - Cannes, Manton or Nice - and find employment as a laborer. Then followed some platitudes about “work” and life, nature and the human condition and the creation of a new society in Russia and the East. “Mon cher camarade,” the letter concluded, can you help me acquire a communist party membership card? (signed X. Yokatsu) (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 13 Décembre 1921).

Komatsu also offered the postal address of 18 Rue Ernest Cresson in the 14th arrondissement, not far from the Cimetière Montparnasse. By all appearances – even today – a solidly upper middle-class neighborhood, it was still an eight floor walkup. In making this pitch, Komatsu obviously sought to ingratiate himself with Ho Chi Minh (yet they were hardly equal whether as workers or as committed communists). For that matter, Ho Chi Minh was not in the best of health himself and, likely tubercular (and his boss sought to evict him on those grounds). As French police agents observed, at times he was reduced to eating a piece of bread dunked in soup. His shabby rented room in a working class district likewise lacked heating.

Nevertheless, after some two months in Paris, on 4 December in the company of two other compatriots, one Nogura, and the other, Inosuke Hazama (裕 伊之助), both then residing at 17 Rue Sommerand, an elegant abode adjacent the Sorbonne, the three departed Paris together with the intention of seeking out a warmer climate in the south of France. On his part, Inosuke lived and studied in France from 1921 to 1929 and again in the years 1933-35 and, during this second sojourn,

studying with Henri Matisse. As explained below, they may well have wished to avoid the crowds in Paris at a time when the memory of the devastating Spanish Flu was still recent. At the time, the French authorities understood that Komatsu would return to Paris in the spring (ANOM HCI SPCE Correspondances entre le Ministère des Colonies et le Gouvernement général 364).

According to an official report authored by the Ministry of Interior, there was nothing negative to remark about Komatsu during his two month stay in Paris. He held an identity card issued by the Prefecture of Police and was otherwise unknown to the police and judicial services. He studied French and made good progress. Nothing in his conversations hinted at any attraction to communism. This in itself – or his reticence to speak out – the report estimated, may have attracted some reservation on the part of his compatriots. On the other hand, as the police surmised, he may indeed have been an agent of the Japanese Embassy in Paris which could explain why he wished to contact Ho Chi Minh and obtain a communist party membership card. Accordingly, the letter he wrote to Ho Chi Minh might be treated with some skepticism. For that matter, the severity of his purported sickness might also be questionable (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondances entre le Ministère des Colonies et le Gouvernement général, 13 Décembre 1921). From this report, it is clear that the authorities themselves were perplexed as to the true meaning of this letter and that they really had no clear answers. But, whatever, Komatsu was now under surveillance by the French authorities as to his next move. But unlike the thousands of French colonials then in Paris and with many under surveillance for their anti-colonial attitudes, Komatsu himself was a non-French colonial.

*Interlude in Nice*

According to Komatsu's diary, following their first meeting, Ho Chi Minh introduced him to the French Communist Party-affiliated Comité des études coloniales. But even if Komatsu followed up this suggestion, it is likely that his illness prevented him from a deeper commitment that winter (and neither would he follow it up later) (Komatsu Collected Works). Having moved to Nice in December 1921, Komatsu made contact with a local PCF branch and it was through a PCF connection that he found employment nearby Nice on an Italian-owned farm as gardener (more or less as alluded in his letter to Ho Chi Minh). This was at Villa St. Philippe, Av. Candia (today, Estienne d'Orves), on the high ground overlooking the Mediterranean. During free time he also kept in contact with Japanese artists residing in the Nice area. Still in contact with the PCF in Nice, he evidently clashed with some local party members (Komatsu Collected Works, p.578), but he still cannot have burnt his bridges.

*Komatsu as Suspect in the Emperor Khai Dinh Assassination Plot*

Returning to Paris from the south of France in the spring of 1922, in May Komatsu connected with the *Clarté* literary circle founded by famed antiwar writer Henri Barbusse who, together with writer Raymond Lefèvre and Ho Chi Minh-ally in the PCF, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, formed a left-wing group called L'Association républicaine des anciens combattants (ARAC). Komatsu did not immediately meet Barbusse but was in contact with Magdeleine Marx, militant feminist-communist, a former visitor to Moscow who was then serving as ARAC's secretary. She offered Komatsu a job as messenger "boy." The summer of 1922,

found Komatsu putting up in a cheap apartment on Rue Cujas, a street in the 5th arrondissement near the Sorbonne (Komatsu Collected Works). The *Clarté* circle, with its premises at 16 rue Jacques Callot within walking distance of Rue Cujas, was well known to Ho Chi Minh as well and he could have set up the introduction. In April 1922, the radical anti-colonial newspaper he had just established, namely, *Le Paria* initially shared office space with *Clarté*.

A month later Komatsu once again came under close surveillance. This was at a time when Khai-Dinh, the Emperor of Annam (r.1916-25) was visiting France. Although totally unfounded, Komatsu was linked by the authorities to Ho Chi Minh and a group of Vietnamese in a plot to assassinate the emperor coinciding with his visit to the Exposition Coloniale at Marseilles. Inaugurated on 16 April 1922 by Minister of Colonies and former Indochina Governor General, Albert Sarraut, as a celebratory after-war event to triumph France's empire – as with its replica Rue de Hanoi or Palais de Madagascar – the authorities sought no disturbance as to its success.

Besides penning critical press pieces upon the French protectorate of Annam, on 11 June 1922 Ho Chi Minh successfully staged a theater piece he wrote titled, *Le Dragon de bambou*, a spoof on the visit to France by Emperor Khai Dinh. The venue was Théâtre de la Presse, rue Montmartre, and the host was the intellectual circle, the “Club de Faubourg.” This would have been another occasion where Komatsu had an opportunity to meet Ho Chi Minh and, if so, such an encounter would certainly have been witnessed by French police agents. That would also help to explain why, scarcely twelve days later on the night of 23-24 June 1922, all the Vietnamese suspects, along with Komatsu, were

placed under close police surveillance.

Putting up at a hotel on 4 Quai de Billancourt, Komatsu was absent that night and only returned at 2 p.m. the following day. He was then tracked by French police agents as he took a promenade along the banks of the Seine including an interlude in which he dined with some compatriots in the hotel – presumably the artist group – followed by another promenade. The concerned Vietnamese placed under surveillance that day were Phan Văn Trường and Nguyễn Thế Truyền (as introduced), close Ho Chi Minh associate Lê Văn Thuyết (Leon) (as introduced), Tran Tien Nan, a student in the Faculty of Law (rue Saint Jacques); Vo Ban Doan, apparently involved in the photography business, another unidentified Vietnamese, and Ho Chi Minh. On his part, Nguyễn Thế Truyền was tracked through various Left Bank locales including the Bibliothèque St Geneviève, billiard parlors, etc; Lê Văn Thuyết, was shadowed to Ho Chi Minh's address in Rue Compoin although failed to meet him; and Ho Chi Minh was kept under surveillance all that morning at his workplace and, in the afternoon, at the editorial office of "*Le Journal du Peuple*," organ of the Parti socialiste SFIO. However, later in the day he eluded surveillance and was lost sight of in the Boulevard des Italiens owing to the traffic. On his part, a Vietnamese named Vo Ban Doan was trailed to Place d'Etoile where the visiting Emperor of Annam had placed a plaque to honor the Unknown Soldier. There, he asked questions as to where the emperor was staying prompting even closer police surveillance throughout the day (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Note de la Prefecture de Police de 20 Juin 1922. "Surveillance exercée à l'égard d'Annamites et Japonais suspecte.")

In other words, five weeks off the ship, still a student of French and

barely 21 years old, Komatsu came to be associated with at least the most notorious circle of anti-colonial radicals and suspected anarchists then in Paris, including the authors of the famous petition to the Paris Peace Conference and foundation member of the French Communist Party following the Tours Congress voting in favor of the Third International in support of the Bolshevik revolution. Although Ho Chi Minh himself came to eschew anarchism, that was an unknown to the authorities and anarchism was still a current embraced by some Vietnamese as with earlier bomb outrages in Hanoi and the future failed assassination attempt against French Indochina Governor General Martial Merlin in Canton in 1924.

Ho Chi Minh himself went on to publish articles mocking Khai Dinh's visit as with a two-page piece in *Le Journal de Peuple* (9 August 1922), comparing the emperor to "a colonial artifact" brought to France to be presented at the Colonial Exposition at Marseille, and one "kept in vitrine for some two months like an exhibit so as not to deteriorate." More or less in trenchant verse, he asked the emperor to look beyond Pasteur, Voltaire, Victor Hugo and Anatole France and to open his eyes to the rights of men. Carrying on, he denounced the luxuries surrounding palace life with its opium, its women, and its eunuchs. There may have been no *lesé majesté* law in France but back home the mandarins whom he lambasted were also taking note of his transgressions (and he would later attract a death sentence from the Court of Annam).

### *Second Return to the South of France and the Marseille Plot*

From French police sources, it is apparent that by August 1922, Komatsu had drifted apart from Ho Chi Minh. On his part, he was no

longer attending meetings of the Comité des études coloniales. From November he moved his address again to the Paris suburbs staying with the artist Maeda Kisaburo. With winter setting in, they planned to relocate to the south of France.

On 7 December 1922, French police Agent Jolin once again drew attention to Komatsu. After all, he had a record of association with communists and suspected anarchists and the authorities never lost interest in him. The context was the presence in Marseille of Chua Hai, a Vietnamese worker-specialist in the aviation sector during the First World War. Marseille was also the port of arrival and departure of Vietnamese and other colonials and, at any one time supported a large group of employed and unemployed immigrants (and Ho Chi Minh himself spent a period adrift in the port city while changing ships). Having come to the attention of a compatriot, Phan Thanh Chau, then employed by the Marseille Colonial Exposition, he gained a two year visa extension going on to join Phan in the Marseille Chamber of Commerce planning section. [Phan Châu Trinh, as introduced, was also then employed at the exposition and this could be a confusion of names]. For whatever reason, Chua Hai had entered into relations with the Japanese consulate in Marseille. It also came to French police attention that Chua Hai was among a delegation of Asians at St. Charles Station in Marseille to welcome the arrival of a Japanese going on to Nice or Cannes. As surmised, this person could only have been Komatsu or the artist Maeda or another unknown Japanese (and with Komatsu's address identified as Villa St. Philippe in Nice). On his part, Chua Hai was suspected to be the person behind a distribution of *La Tribune Annamite*, an anti-colonial newspaper published in Paris (ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Note de

Agent Jolin, Marseille, 7 Décembre 1922). Again, all of this is circumstantial and nothing apparently came of it though, it might be said, the French were on to a good lead in keeping a watch on Komatsu.

By the new year of 1923 Komatsu together with Maeda found accommodation in Antibes on the Côte d'Azur, and with Komatsu staying there through to November. Tragically in February Maeda died, just 22 years old, likely a victim of the Spanish flu (but this is speculation)? That month Komatsu received a letter from his sister back in Kobe learning, inter alia, of a difficult family economic situation (perhaps also advising him to look after himself). Keeping up his leftwing connections, namely via the Nice branch of ARAC, the following month Komatsu met at Miramar for a first time with the famed French writer Barbossa (Komatsu Collected Works, p.579). He was now securing his literary contacts.

### *Dalliance with Osugi Sakae*

In April Komatsu traveled together with artist Hayashi Toshio to Lyon where he met the then notorious anarchist Osugi Sakae (大杉 栄) (Komatsu Collected Works, p.580). Unknown to himself, Hayashi was already under French police surveillance and with the Japanese authorities already alerted as to Osugi's presence in Europe. On his part, Osugi had arrived in Marseille by ship from Shanghai on 23 January 1923 moving on to Lyon and Paris where he connected with anarchist circles, Chinese included, and with Hayashi known to Osugi as an "old comrade" from the Syndicalism Research Group formed in Tokyo in 1913. The two then backed off to Lyon where he spent most of the month of April (and it was during this period that Komatsu joined him).

But May Day 1923 found Osugi in Paris speech-making at a rally in support of the Italian-Americans Sacco and Vanzetti only to be arrested and detained (Stanley 1976: 226). Following a judicial process – and defense by a leading communist lawyer – on 23 May he was issued with a deportation order to voluntarily exit French territory (see Peletier 2002: 112-14). However, free from detention, bereft of a passport, and unlikely to gain entry into Spain as advised, he agreed with Japanese Embassy officials as to returning to Japan via Marseille on a Japanese passenger ship bound for Kobe. It defies logic that Osugi contrived in his own “extradition” especially as the Japanese Embassy in Paris had its own interests but he also had family concerns in Japan and this is explained in his memoir initially serialized in Japanese newspaper articles (Osugi 1923). As well known in modern Japanese history, two months after returning to Japan he was dead in Tokyo, murdered (Stanley 1976: 229; anon, *Libero International*, 1978).<sup>3</sup> The events in France, at least, were undoubtedly known to Komatsu – indeed reported in the local French and international media. Likely, as well, he learned of Osugi’s death on 16 September. In fact, he must have been shocked. But what linked Komatsu with Hayashi and Osugi in the first place? Was it an Esperanto connection at the time Komatsu first visited Tokyo in early 1920 or did they meet at the May Day rally that year at Ueno Koen, or was the connection via one or other of the “anarchist-artists” then in France?

Without source, pioneer Ho Chi Minh biographer, Jean Lacouture

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<sup>3</sup> This was Osugi Sakae, *Nippon Dasshutsu Ki* (ARS, Tokyo, 1923). See Michael Schauerte (from Japanese) *My Escapes from Japan* (Doyosha, Tokyo, 2014). Osugi does not mention meeting Komatsu but does allude to Hayashi returning to his place of abode in the south of France.

(1968: 43), asserted that, in November 1923, just prior to leaving for Moscow, Ho Chi Minh invited Komatsu to come along, albeit with the latter declining (yet this seems highly unlikely given Ho Chi Minh's penchant for secrecy as well as the seeming break in their relations). In November 1923 Komatsu settled into Antibes where he secured a job as clerk in a Japanese art-craft boutique named "Yamato-ya" and he would stay on there through 1925 painting, writing and, likely securing and broadening his literary contacts (Komatsu Collected Works). In any case, it would be another 20 years before Komatsu resurfaced in French police files (as far as we know). As explained below, this was a time when Komatsu was deputy head of propaganda in the Japanese setup in Hanoi at the moment the Viet Minh took power.

### *Envoi*

Returning to Japan in 1931, Komatsu began to translate and introduce the works of Malraux and Gide, obviously a major labor. According to Vinh Sinh (2001: 64), a scholar who first exposed Komatsu's wartime activities to a Western audience, Malraux was "nothing short of living model" for Komatsu in the way of combining political activism with art at a high level (and with Malraux himself attune to Komatsu's worldview when it came to framing certain of his literary productions). From Japan in 1934 Komatsu bravely launched his Nouvelle Ecole de l'Humanité de l'Action et de son Esprit or Action Literature movement, which he engaged through the journals *Kôdô* (Act), *Kôdô bungaku* (Action Literature), and *Kanrin* (Academy) (see anon: *France-Japon*, January 1934, p.206). Later in life, as Komatsu (1960: 115) explained of this ultimately doomed initiative (especially given the rise of militarism

and suppression of liberal thought):

About the year 1935, motivated by my activist humanist feelings, I joined a movement which promoted such ideas as anti-fascism, the Popular Front and the defense of culture in Japan. I had secretly planned to introduce to the world of Japanese journalism the same sort of movement which was being developed in France, and to make of it a living force. In that sense I could be said to have been one of the seed-sowers or igniters of the fire of the Popular Front in Japan.

Returning to Paris in 1937, he then set up as a correspondent for the *Hochi Shinbun* (報知新聞) while also working for the French monthly information magazine *France-Japon*. Fleeing France ahead of the German invasion he arrived back in Japan in 1940. Still prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, he made a first trip to Vietnam arriving in April 1941 and, returning to Japan the following month, found himself arrested and detained for his allegedly suspect socialist connections (Vinh Sinh 2001: 68-69, 71; Komatsu Collected Works, p.562).

Gaining his liberty, and having connected with the rebel Prince Cường Đê, in 1943 he returned to Vietnam setting up in Hanoi as an advisor to the so-named Nihon Bunka Kaikan (Japan Institute of Culture), a branch of Japan's diplomatic intelligence services (Nitz 1984: 12; Marr 1997: 84n59). Indochina was then under Vichite cohabitation with the Japanese military at a juncture when Japan was seeking to propagandize its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere project by succoring anti-French Vietnamese nationalists. Still in official service, Komatsu witnessed the military *coup de force* against the French in March 1945, the Japanese capitulation five months later, the communist "August

Revolution,” and the installation of Ho Chi Minh as president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 2 September. Staying on in Vietnam for a total of four years until April 1946 (somehow avoiding immediate repatriation and war crimes charges), he reportedly met Ho Chi Minh one more time. This was in September 1945 (no date offered) and the venue was the headquarters of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Komatsu Collected Works, p.594). In doing so, he may also have been seeking credit for what French intelligence believes was his active role in assisting Japanese to desert with their arms to the Viet Minh cause (Gunn 2014: 209).

According to Vinh Sinh (2001: 57-86), he was probably the Japanese most widely associated with Vietnamese intellectuals from north to south, as with future Republic of South Vietnam strongman, Ngô Đình Diệm, the southern French-educated intellectual and eminence gris of the southern Viet Minh, Dr Phạm Văn Bạch (as well as Prince Cường Để allied with the pro-Japanese or Japanese-backed Đại Việt party). Notably, by associating himself with the Đại Việt party, Komatsu became entangled in what François Guillemot (2009) terms the “*temptation fasciste*” of Đại Việt’s anti-colonial struggle. While Komatsu may have been “somewhat autonomous” vis-à-vis the military (Namba 2002: 234-35), it is hard not to see him as “a propaganda agent” in the service of Japanese Ambassador Yokoyama Masayuki such as described by American OSS agent Archimedes Patti (1980: 304).

As remembered in Vietnam today, during his early Hanoi period Komatsu translated into Japanese Nguyễn Du’s 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese classic, *Tale of Kieu*, more or less at the same time as the first French translation appeared. This was published in Tokyo in October 1942 un-

der the title 金雲翹 阮攸. This he did by working with the help of the Vietnamese journalist and translator, Nguyen Giang, known to him from Paris days (Namba 2002: 234). Again with Giang as translator, Komatsu worked on a partly autobiographical novella looking back on his early months in Paris. Commencing on 25 June 1944, this was serialized in 30 issues of the Hanoi newspaper, *Trung Bắc chủ nhật* (*North Central Sunday*) (from 25 June 1944 to 1945 (no. 208 to 237) or spanning nearly seven and a half months, and published under the title, *Cuộc tái ngộ* (*the Reunion*).

As described by Namba (2002: 237), this was a novel portraying the life of a Vietnamese in France who took on a nationalist persona and returned to Vietnam. Because it is a literary work, the main character's name is not revealed. His communist identity is muted to meet the expectation of Vichy (and Japanese) censors. It is of no small interest that, in 1996, *Tạp chí Xưa & Nay* (*Past and Present Journal*), brought this obscure work back to public attention. A publication of the Vietnam History Association, as minutely analyzed by David Marr (2000), the journal then went as far as possible in expanding the parameters of historical debate inside Vietnam.

According to *Tạp chí Xưa & Nay* (*Past and Present Journal*) (No. 27, May 1996: 21), the author's view and explanation of the characters in the story are based on real facts... ” As Komatsu reveals in one vignette of *Cuộc tái ngộ* (*the Reunion*):

... in the spring of 1921 I went to France and on to Paris... I remember, fifty days after arriving in Paris, by accident, I met a young Vietnamese in a public meeting place. That young Vietnamese man was the first Asian with whom I hung out with in a long time in

France.

... I can tell you right away that that this Vietnamese was such a respectable, worthy, even outstanding person.

Back then we did not have the same direction. Our conceptions of life, literature, and many other things were not the same. Especially in terms of cultural ideas, we were somewhat far apart. Our opinions at times were fiercely contradictory. We were young, it is not easy to yield to each other... although we had a real difference, that young Vietnamese always left in my heart a sincere respect, because I know more than anyone, that my friend was always faithful to his will and his thoughts. Moreover, there were many practical actions that clearly demonstrated that he was committed to a life of service. My friend is really a patriot, no matter what hardship and hardship he has had in his way of life, his patriotism is demonstrated.

That man worked as a wage earner for his living, and you could not imagine how much he suffered. He ate very little, slept very little, worked a lot. Every afternoon, when he had finished hard work in the factory, he sat at the desk to write or read a book. How, damn it! His body was then being ravaged by a terrible disease, practically incurable. His eyes were often lit up by the shady fever seeping inside. Sometimes he coughed up like he's about to stop breathing. Yet, his spiritual life was still plentiful and rich, his activities were still incessant. Two or three times, I had the opportunity to hear him speak in front of a French audience in French, very fluent, eloquent words. He worked as an assistant writer for many daily newspapers and weekly newspapers in Paris by sitting at home

writing articles and sending them regularly.

As the account continues, although becoming friends, after the first meeting, visiting and talking with the character, the author (Komatsu) and his Vietnamese friend had little chance to meet again. Komatsu went down to the south of France to live in seclusion, and his Vietnamese friend left France for northern Europe (Germany and Russia). But Komatsu kept up with the news of his friend and believed.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, the issue has been taken up on official Vietnamese websites in various versions. For example, adumbrating upon the *Tap chí Xưa & Nay* article, writer Thuý Toàn affirms the veracity of the story such as matched by historical documents along with Vietnamese and French publications. As he recaps, Komatsu first set foot in France in August 1921 with the intention of becoming an artist. In Paris, he shared a house with painter Sakamoto and another Japanese - the three of them happened to meet on the way from Japan to Marseille. Komatsu's rented room was in the attic of an eighth floor building near the Montparnasse cemetery. Just as Komatsu mentions in *Reunion*, it was at this address where Nguyễn Ái Quốc first visited Komatsu [and it would resonate with Komatsu's storyline if it was true]. Likely, the article speculates, Komatsu started translating Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều* because he was influenced by Ho Chi Minh/Nguyễn Ái Quốc. This is possible if the two discussed Vietnamese or any other genre of literature and Ho Chi Minh was then considerably better read than Komatsu in classical as well as modern word literature, indeed his senior or mentor on just about any subject except Japan. As with his theatrical produc-

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<sup>4</sup> Author-edited translation from Google translate (however inaccurate).

tion staged in Paris, *Le Dragon de bambou*, Ho Chi Minh also adroitly employed allegory in his political writings.

## Conclusion

Although we are led to believe by Komatsu's own writings that he enjoyed a special and unique relationship with Ho Chi Minh in Paris, the truth is possibly something else. They met briefly in a public venue along with other Asians. They exchanged letters, but neither apparently followed up the correspondence. In his writings Komatsu alludes to mutual visits to each other's apartments, yet that is not a detail entering French police reports. Ho Chi Minh was entirely pragmatic in his friendships and networks. He was then drafting articles on Korea and possibly Japan. He lacked resources on the working class in Japan. Komatsu obviously knew more, but it still had to be on paper. He did not deliver as Ho Chi Minh perhaps naively believed. Moreover, Komatsu made an even more perplexing demand, namely to join the French Communist Party. As revealed, the French authorities responded in their evaluation of Komatsu in two ways. One stream of opinion believed that he was in league with the Japanese Legation in Paris as well as the Consulate in Marseille and therefore some kind of agent (and that view cannot be dismissed in the light of his future career). But, another stream – the police – condemned him by association with Ho Chi Minh in a dark anarchist conspiracy – namely the presumed plot to assassinate a Vietnamese emperor. In fact there was no such plan, and it is ironical in the extreme that Komatsu would later in his career associate himself with a rebel prince of the House of Annam.

It might have been thought that the tone of his letter put Ho Chi Minh on guard as to Komatsu's sincerity or motives and indeed maturity? But that does not appear to be the case. There was one more exchange of letters. This is known because on 30 January 1922, writing from Nice, Komatsu responded to a letter from Ho Chi Minh thanking him for concerns over his health condition (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Le Gouverneur général de l'Indochine, Hanoi, 20 Février 1922 "surveillances des annamites"). This was very generous or noble on the part of Ho Chi Minh. Possibly unknown to Komatsu, Ho Chi Minh also suffered from "*la grippe*" that winter – a term then used to describe the Spanish Flu. Although he presented himself to the Cochinchina Hospital on rue du Faubourg-Saint-Jacques for examination, he was not then hospitalized. He was also extremely busy having attended a communist congress held in Marseille between 25 and 30 December 1921 (ANOM SLOTFOM XVI Note de Agent Désiré, 9 Janvier 1922). He made no apparent attempt to contact Komatsu during that visit and, indeed, that appears to be the end of their correspondence at least in French police and administrative files. Again it is speculation but, at a time when the rift between anarcho-syndicalists and the communist circles in France was becoming increasingly strained, Ho Chi Minh may well have been alerted as to the anarchist influences among the Japanese circle in Paris, Lyon, and possibly the south of France and with the Osugi trial and deportation a negative example.

To place Komatsu's literary flourish of 1944 into context, at the time when he put pen to paper - or, at least when the novella was serialized - Vietnamese were dying in droves owing to the Great Famine in large part of Japanese military making just as rice fields had been converted

to industrial crops. Bodies lined the streets of Hanoi (see Gunn 2019: 227-30). The production of fiction in such circumstances and even the circulation of newspapers defies belief.

As alluded, Nguyễn Ái Quốc had completely disappeared from French police records since his release from a British prison in Hong Kong ten years earlier (and believed by many to be dead). His journey back to China from Moscow was unknown (Gunn 2021a Chap.9). Nevertheless, from mid 1941 French intelligence took possession of a virulent anti-French-anti-Japanese tract signed by Nguyễn Ái Quốc dated June 1941 and written in Chinese: “*Nous nous révoltons, toute la nation se révolte contre les Français et les Japonais.*” Effectively, this brochure announced the creation in May 1941 in the Chinese border village of Tsing Tsi of the “League of Independence for Viet Nam” (or Viet Minh). They also took cognizance of an individual named “Ho Chi Minh” active in the Yunnan/Guangxi sector although the connection between him and Nguyễn Ái Quốc had not yet been positively attested (ANOM HCI SPCE 370 Commandement supérieur des troupes françaises en Extrême-Orient: presse, bulletins et notes de renseignements, tracts, articles et discours de Hồ Chi Minh 1941-1949). In August 1942 Ho Chi Minh was arrested close to the Vietnam border and held in a series of Chinese Nationalist prisons in Guangxi over a fourteen month period until released in September 1943. Then and only then he resumed his clandestine activities in Yunnan where he left off, this time assisted by the American Office of Strategic Services.

Did Komatsu gain wind of Ho Chi Minh’s presence in Guangxi or southern Yunnan from his Japanese military intelligence patrons? Why at this moment of his literary career did he pen such a cloying if nostal-

gic literary piece about a communist-nationalist? Was he hailing the return of a nationalist messiah? How did he fit Cường Đệ and the Đại Việt party into the picture? Ultimately, was he prepared to play any anti-French card, communist or royalist? These are not easy questions to answer or, indeed, that of Komatsu's interest in French Indochina in the first place. Somehow, out of all these contradictions, his status as *littérateur* and humanist remains mostly secure in Japan today and with some rehabilitation – or recognition – in official Vietnamese circles as with the *Tap chí Xưa & Nay* (*Past and Present Journal*) circle.

## Appendix

Le 19 Novembre 1921

18 Rue Ernst Cresson – 14th,

Mon Cher Camarade NGUYEN AI QUOC

Pardonez moi ne n'avoir pu tenir ma promesse de me rendre a la réunion de jeudi soir et de vous envoyer mes manuscrits relative au "parti des travailleurs" au Japon, en raison de ma sérieuse maladie de ces jours derniers. J'ai souffert d'un cataracte qui m'a atteint par suite du froid rigoureux qu'il fait ici.

Durant huit jours, j'ai été obligé de garder la chambre n'avant ni feu, ni eau, ni camarades. Je n'avais personne pour m'apporter médicaments et nourriture, par conséquent j'ai été obligé de descendre pour les acheter moi-même. Je craignait que ma maladie ne tournât en pneumonie. Heureusement, je suis maintenant tiré des

affaires et puis vous écrire, en m'acusanant de ma longue négligence envers vous.

Ma santé ne pouvant absolument supporter une telle température, il me faut partir pur la Côte d'Azur par nécessité. J'aimerais habite prés de Cannes, Manton ou Nice, où je gagnerait a vie comme ouvrier.

Là bas, je veux travailler non seulement pur acquérir une réelle expérience de travaille mais encore pour comprendre le vrai sens de la vie, c'est a dire que "Vivre c'est travailler et travailler c'est vivre." Le travail n'est jamais le fardeau de la vie, mais c'est la seule chose qui donne le sens le plus élevé de la vie humaine."

Tous les hommes doivent travailler pour gagner leur vie. Je veux travailler dans une prairie, un verger ou une ferme.

Je veuz me familiariser avec la nature qui m'apprendre toutes choses. Je veux me choisir mes meilleurs camarades parmi les paysans dont la vie est plus heureuse et la plus gaie. Ces choses ne doivent pas etre négligées par ceux qui ont le devoir de reconstruire la nouvelle "Société" tel que dans l'Est de la Russie.

Mon Cher Camarade, je vous prie de me dire la plus tôt possible de quel manière je puis me procurer une carte de communiste et dès que je l'aurais obtenus je partirai pour le Midi, Nice ou Cannes, ou il ya le parti communiste.

Dites moi tout de suite comment et où je pourrai me procurer la carte qui est très nécessaire.

Espérant vous revoir bientôt,

Votre très sincèrement,

X Yokatsu [K. Komatsu]

P.S. Quant à mes manuscrits, je me suis en train de les écrire et je crois que je pourrai vous pour les envoyer incessamment.

(ANOM HCI SPCE 364 Correspondances entre le Ministère des Colonies et le Gouvernement général 1921).

## Abbreviations

ANOM, Archives nationales d'outre-mer

SLOTFOFOM, Service de Liaison des Originaires des Territoires français d'outre-mer

SPCE, Service de protection du corps expéditionnaire

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