CHAPTER 2

Patriotic Emulation (1948–1952)

What is the goal of patriotic emulation? It is to fight famine and poverty, to fight ignorance, and to fight the foreign invaders. The way to do this is to rely upon the people’s forces and the people’s spirit, in order to bring happiness for the people…. The first results of patriotic emulation will be the following: the entire people will have enough food and clothing, [they] will have learnt to read and write, the entire army will have enough food and armaments to wipe out the invaders, and the whole nation will be completely unified and independent.

Hồ Chí Minh

Lord, it is through greater obedience to your will that I feel the most free.

Saint Augustine

With the outbreak of war with France in 1946, the Việt Minh resistance was isolated on the international scene. At the close of World War II, the Soviet Union had openly ignored the Indochinese question to avoid jeopardising their policies in Europe. In addition, the traditional disinterest of Soviet leaders for this Asian peninsula had turned to discord when Hồ Chí Minh decided to dissolve the Indochinese Communist Party in November 1945. After that, the DRV remained politically open to dialogue with any country willing to support its demands for independence. Moscow held this against Hồ Chí Minh for a long time. Vietnam remained only of secondary importance to both the


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Cominform and its little-known Asian wing. In 1947, a report on Indochina by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs praised Hồ Chí Minh as a “high-quality journalist with good theoretical training”. The Kremlin continued — though not publicly — to see Hồ as a potential “Asian Tito”.

Meanwhile, the French were pushing for a solution under Bảo Đại, which further confused the situation. Paris excluded any possibility of negotiation with the DRV as per the Halong Bay Agreement of 5 June 1948. The Việt Minh fought to increase its presence within the country and transform the chaos of its rise in 1945 into political stability. In late 1947, Trương Chinh’s The Resistance Will Win proposed the first theoretical outline of the movement, declaring that the Việt Minh defended a just cause — it was not a question of politics but ethics. Hồ Chí Minh wanted to usher in a “new life” whereby a society based on a horizontal relationship between the members of a group would replace the old and perverted vertical relationship linking an individual to his sovereign. But in 1948, the DRV was not Vietnam; its territorial roots did not encompass all of the nation’s cultural, ethnic, or political diversity. The peasantry was not as won over as the official historiography has claimed since 1954.

Thus the first order of business for the Việt Minh was mass mobilisation. The DRV counted on emulation campaigns to mobilise the people as these had already proven to be a great success throughout the communist world. During the war with France (1947–1954), Vietnam organised not one but two distinct emulation campaigns. The first, launched in June 1948, promoted patriotism under the term “patriotic emulation” (phong trào thi đua ái quốc). The second was embarked upon in the early 1950s and was entirely concerned with “socialist emulation” (phong trào thi đua xã hội chủ nghĩa). Until 1950 the aim had been to reformulate the individual in his relationship with the group, but now socialist emulation demanded the opposite: a transformation of society through the example of a new figure — the internationalist new man. In the winter of 1951–52, the second emulation campaign brought forth the emulation fighter (Chiến sĩ thi đua) and the new hero (Anh hùng mới). The Việt Minh government hoped the movement would strengthen its political influence on the nation and increase its “ideological legality” as it resumed its dialogue with the Soviets.

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3 “Information report on the situation in Indochina for Comrade Jdanov”, in Archives of the Cominform, Coll. no. 575, file no. 21, document no. 25/F 25116, 13 September 1947, p. 18.

4 “Documents from the Information Services of Vietnam (Prague)”, in Archives of the Cominform, Coll. no. 575, file no. 118, document no. 195, 6 February 1949.
Emulation and Collective Morality

In 1948, patriotic emulation tried to reposition the Vietnamese citizen at the centre of his community. The revolution — or more precisely, the revolutionary struggle — was first and foremost a moral issue. Hồ Chí Minh wrote, “Like a river that is fed by its spring, and dries up without it, a tree needs to have roots, and dies without them. A revolutionary needs to have morality; without it, regardless of his abilities, he cannot lead the people.” This transformation of morals did not, however, aim for a rupture between the old and the new. Hồ Chí Minh had mastered the art of gradual change and tactical moderation to a much greater extent than had Mao. The new Vietnamese Republic, based in the Viêt Bác province until the end of the war with the French, initially hoped to gain the upper hand over the pro-French nationalist government of General Nguyễn Văn Xuân (1948–49), its primary political rival. The revolutionaries were not trying to orient the country towards a foreign model of a progressivist society; rather, they wanted to create a homegrown alternative and to renew their political purity, rejecting the compromises of the outdated, traditionalist ideology of the provisional central government. President Hồ hoped to win over the peasantry, who tended more towards conservatism than Bolshevik conversion. By the end of the 1940s, efforts towards the “new life” were much more concerned with opposing “collaboration with France” than with aping an internationalist movement. The DRV sought a new legitimacy of power centred on collective morality, and concepts of family and filial duty underpinned these patriotic emulation campaigns.

The new man was first of all an enemy of the Nguyễn regime. The Việt Minh did not approach their patriotic war in terms of class; it was a just war that they fought against “invaders and oppressors, safeguarding the freedom and independence of the entire nation”. The myth of national purity was not set against feudalism in the Marxist-Leninist sense. The DRV was engaged in a progressivist struggle since it was founded on defending the vital interests of the common people; the government thus

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5 “Sửa đổi lề lối làm việc” (Correct the way we work), October 1947, in Hồ Chí Minh, Về xây dựng con người mới (On constructing the new man). Hanoi: nxb Chính trị Quốc gia, 1995, p. 86.
7 “Sur la modification des mœurs” (On the changing of customs), in CAOM, Coll. du HCl, file no. 6–36, document no. 1376, 8 August 1948.
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wanted to improve living conditions and increase democratic rights. Declaring its intention to defend the people helped to anchor the DRV’s legitimacy in the countryside and facilitate a general mobilisation of the nation’s working population. DRV leaders claimed a direct lineage with the heroes and heroines of the nation’s glorious past. The discourse was about unity, but a union that the revolutionary movement wanted to take credit for. Patriotic emulation would first serve to “train new cadres and improve old ones in a new spirit of collective solidarity”.9 The government evoked the need to promote collective heroes capable of guiding the people towards the path of “people’s liberation”, a heroic collective mass which would give rise to a few exemplary individuals.10

As the war progressed, the Việt Minh had to step up its mobilisation. Though they had not invented the concept of the new man, the Vietnamese resistance hoped that emulation would strengthen the bonds of solidarity in a nation that had been divided by the colonial administration. In January 1948, DVR leaders reacted to several military setbacks by announcing the beginning of a second phase, one of “equilibrium”. Patriotic emulation campaigns were launched as part of this change in strategy. The DRV increased the numbers of its regular troops, provincial forces, and local militia groups: from 50,000 at the beginning of the war to 250,000 soldiers and militia forces in 1948. Even though the French still occupied most of the area around the Red River Delta, the Việt Minh launched a “phase of pacification of the free zones” to strengthen its political activities in the villages. Võ Nguyên Giáp, Minister of National Defence, affirmed that guerrilla warfare no longer suited the political objectives of the new phase of action.11 They had to take command on the battlefield and increase their mobilisation. Already in December 1945, the DRV had instituted administrative reforms to increase its hold on the local elite.12

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Viet Minh leaders had a second objective in 1948: the rapid unification of a population that was “dismembered, forced together, and heterogeneous”. The unanimous support of the people for the Viet Minh is a myth of communist historiography. In July 1945, Trương Chinh had already criticised the people of Tonkin for their poor engagement in the struggle to liberate their country. In his study on the August Revolution, the historian David Marr points out that barely 10 per cent of the population from the liberated mountainous regions in the North were actually enlisted in the National Liberation Army. The August insurrection was not the sole effort of the Việt Minh, since there were many other local groups that called themselves Việt Minh without having the slightest idea about the Party line. Two years later, in late 1947, the Việt Minh was confronted with not only the advances of the French army but also an erosion of their political legitimacy in the countryside due to the waves of repression and the decline of communal autonomy. Since the 1930s, the Party fought to safeguard its influence in rural areas by lowering taxes, abolishing monopolies, and distributing rice paddies. When the war resumed in December 1946, the DRV again offered to reduce interest rates and farm rents in order to secure peasant support.

On the eve of the first emulation campaign, the DRV’s activities to mobilise the population turned out to be rather disappointing on the ground. Trương Chinh admitted that their measures had done little to win the good graces of poor peasants. For the most part, new Việt Minh recruits came from the urban and industrialised areas of the country while the rural population was reluctant to join mass organisations in the villages. Peasants’ Associations loyal to the Việt Minh barely garnered 820,000 members throughout the country. For Defence Minister Giáp, the key priority was not so much to combat French occupying forces but to rebuild “the spirit of the Vietnamese man”, so he could distinguish for himself the just cause — that of the Việt Minh. Propaganda organs repeated that the resistance would lead to the “metamorphosis of the Vietnamese people”.

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14 Văn Tạo. “Vài nét về quá trình xây dựng và Phát triển của Nhà nước cách mạng Việt Nam 20 năm qua” (A few notes on the evolution of the construction and development of the Vietnamese revolutionary party in the last 20 years), *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, Hanoi, no. 77, August 1965: 23.
leaders would have to establish a new mass mobilisation movement that would finally reach their objective — transforming Man to better secure his allegiance to their cause. The patriotic emulation campaign of 1948 was their attempt to resolve the political and moral dysfunction in society. Emulation was supposed to be a springboard towards a “new life” whereby the Việt Minh would offer the peasant class a “legitimate reason” for mobilising and uniting under the flag of patriotism. The formation of minds was to be the final step in the DRV’s attempt to allay the chronic weakness in their quest for support in the countryside.

The First Patriotic Emulation Campaign

The first campaign for patriotic emulation was laid out in the spring of 1948. The movement, it was announced, would acquire the human and material means to victory and would strengthen the credibility of the Việt Minh resistance in the eyes of the communist world. On 19 June 1948 — the thousandth day of fighting against France — patriotic emulation was officially launched throughout the country:

What is the patriotic emulation competition? Competing with patriotic feeling in everything one does in order to obtain good results. Mobilising the masses to achieve victory. Exterminating the three enemies: invaders, hunger, and ignorance. What are its main goals? Politically, we must establish the basic organisations of the Party, the people, and political authority in the occupied zones. We must develop and consolidate the popular organisations of the Liên Việt [the reformed and renamed Việt Minh] and set up autonomous cells. Economically, we must make weapons, increase the production of rice and rice paddies to put aside reserves, reorganise the cooperatives and create new ones, reduce farm taxes by twenty-five percent, and sabotage the enemy’s economy. Culturally, we must eradicate illiteracy and advocate the new life. Lastly, militarily we must develop the people’s war, create the foundations for a guerrilla war, buy resistance bonds and contribute to the Resistance Fund. The patriotic emulation competitions must have the characteristics of a popular movement.

17 Chương trình cơ sở (Basic programme), in CAOM, Coll. CP, single document, 1950, 70 pp.
A national emulation committee or bureau was created to oversee the programme. It was made up of government representatives, delegates of the National Assembly, and members of the leadership committees of all mass organisations. Each level (national, zone, province, district, and commune) was supposed to have a branch office staffed by three or four people to organise local campaigns. The government wanted them to pay particular attention to the make-up of the committees, suggesting they assign people who were not Party members. Villagers deemed progressivist were the natural choice to lead these new bodies. They were told to avoid village elders or scholars and to choose instead people who were active and successful in their field, since it would take a well-selected committee to win over the rural population, which traditionally shied away from change.

On the communal level, the emulation bureau made a list of its model citizens, then shared their stories with people in the area. These men and women were part of a vanguard that had to go out and educate the villagers. In reality, however, not many of these branch offices saw the light of day. At the end of the first season of emulation, only the military zones or a few provinces had emulation facilities. At the village level, the president of the commune or the Party secretary was in charge. In response to this shortfall, the government shifted the main burden of its emulation policy to provincial authorities. Delegates from provincial committees received training in the military zones and served as a relay between the central government and the local collectives within their area. The province delegated two types of officials: emulation cadres who devised programmes adapted to the particular conditions of their area, and itinerant cadres who would help implement the movement throughout the territory. In 1949 there were only a few itinerant cadres, so the provinces sent them first to the more populated villages in the valleys or low mountains. Lacking time, they would just hold short informational meetings to explain how people could benefit from participating in the emulation campaigns. Cadres from the provincial apparatus ran up against the conservatism of the villagers, who were not very open to new ideas. Absenteeism was high.

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19 “Le Parti doit agir contre l’esprit ‘régional’, borné de paysans” (The Party must combat the “regional”, narrow mindset of the peasants), in CAOM, Coll. du HCI, file no. 253/34, document no. CP 867/0, 8 August 1947. In a later document, the specific characteristics of peasants are listed as: “self-interested and egotistical, conservative, servile, pacifistic”, in CAOM, Coll. HCI, file no. 245–718, no. 9868 (summer 1950), 3 November 1950.
To combat this lack of interest, cadres wrote down the names of those who did not show up and later paid them a visit to explain the error of their ways. The organisation of this first emulation campaign in the provinces of North Vietnam was carried out by these small groups of itinerant cadres (sent by the province or, when not available, by the district).

Communal authorities launched collective operations (cleaning and draining canals, clearing land, etc.) to show the benefits of group work and its advantages in terms of productivity and effort. Village chronicles by the new government describe the “collective and jovial [atmosphere] that suddenly arose among the villagers” whenever they came to help each other. The National Emulation Committee printed out patriotic songs that cadres handed out to the local people to sing as they worked:

Uncle Ho called for emulation, let’s see who succeeds and who fails. Go to the Front to fight the foreigners, and to the fields for the harvest. If you are poor you’ll stay poor, since you cannot fight alone against the morning heat and the afternoon rain. If you want enough rice and money to feed every soldier, you must boldly take a stand. Young children must stand by their aging mothers, older ones by their younger siblings. And you, you must try to see farther, fight on so many fronts, cut down so many heads; to every husband and every wife, tell me who will receive recompense — the ones who take the lead in emulation.20

Educational groups used Hồ’s declaration of 19 June to launch emulation as a pedagogic tool. Youth organisations sent groups of two or three children to villages to recite poems and sing songs about emulation. They had to overcome the prejudices and mistrust of the peasants. In each hamlet, government representatives created emulation units made up of 20 to 50 families.21 Provincial cadres studied the data to establish “programmes adapted to local conditions”. The division of land was carefully examined; the various professions and modes of production were indexed as well as the standard references (gender, age, family situation, attitude towards the resistance, etc.) and the physical ability of the inhabitants. The province

21 Chính Nghĩa. “Phát triển thi đua ở xã” (Developing emulation at the village level), Sinh Hoạt Nội Bồ, no. 16, April 1949: 6.
asked its cadres to talk with village elders to avoid the risk of confrontation (mainly hostilities among families), which would impede the campaign’s progress. Finally, villagers were gathered together to present their assessment of the operation. The government advised its cadres to “speak quite firmly, if necessary, to show the villagers what they had to do” but “with a spirit of simplicity and flexibility”.\footnote{Vận động phong trào thi đua âi quốc, p. 24.}\footnote{Về việc khen thưởng cho các dân du kích 1948 (On the distribution of recompense to our resistance fighters in 1948), in AVN3, Coll. Assemblée Nationale, file no. 59, document no. 53/LQCT, 19 July 1948.}

Emulation leaders first brought up the “congenital” bond between the villager and his nation before explaining the organisation of a local competition for patriotic emulation.

The notion of a competition was familiar to the people but in its traditional form. Before, gruelling competitions were held to elect officials of the imperial state; now the key to success rested on one’s patriotism and allegiance to the Việt Minh struggle. It was no longer a question of competition but of solidarity between the members of a community; one did not have to study Chinese classical literature but government directives. The winner was the one who most enthusiastically responded to the government’s productivist, military, or political needs. At the end of each emulation season or campaign (lasting three to six months), the government selected the “most progressive elements”. In the villages, cadres awarded all participants an emulation certificate with a simple inscription: “I take part in emulation” (tôi thi đua). They had to display it at home so that cadres could freely control their participation in the movement. Within the ranks of the army (both regular and regional forces) or the people’s militia, the certificate was in the form of a pennant or flag issued by the Minister of Defence.\footnote{“All services rendered must be rewarded and encouraged in order to create good soldiers. Offenders must be punished so that they conform to the rules of discipline, which is the driving force of an army.” Directive by the Foreign Affairs Commission in Nam bô, in CAOM, Coll. du HCI, file no. 314/863, document no. 5165/S, 5 September 1949. See also Khổng Minh, Cách huấn luyện cán bộ Quân sự (Training of military cadres), 1948 (translated from the Chinese by Hồ Chí Minh); and Cuốn sách của chính trị viên (Manual for the political cadres), Hội tan văn hóa, 1948.} Within each sector of activity, steering committees organised closing meetings to elect the best representatives of the season. The National Emulation Committee explained to the people what they personally stood to gain from taking part in the movement.\footnote{“All services rendered must be rewarded and encouraged in order to create good soldiers. Offenders must be punished so that they conform to the rules of discipline, which is the driving force of an army.” Directive by the Foreign Affairs Commission in Nam bô, in CAOM, Coll. du HCI, file no. 314/863, document no. 5165/S, 5 September 1949. See also Khổng Minh, Cách huấn luyện cán bộ Quân sự (Training of military cadres), 1948 (translated from the Chinese by Hồ Chí Minh); and Cuốn sách của chính trị viên (Manual for the political cadres), Hội tan văn hóa, 1948.}
In the Soviet Union, socialist emulation took pains to “offer all Stakhanovites special privileges in kind or in services that were previously unavailable to their income level”. In the same vein, the Vietnamese government promised to reward “virtuous people” for their engagement in the struggle of “legitimate forces”. In Asian societies, a medal was like a gift. A gift demanded reciprocity, not a quantitative one, but one based on honour. The recipient becomes a debtor and must return the gift in order to ease the temporary imbalance in social order. The gift brought about a distinction that was unacceptable to the perenniality of the collective. A family rewarded by the State gained legitimacy over those around them, thus creating a source of disorder. The cultural continuity of the principle of “gift/counter-gift” gave the State a vector for further emulation to strengthen its mobilisation of the masses. A reward pay scale was drawn up by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly in May 1948. An Institute of Decorations was created to award new patriotic titles to the “exemplary men of the DRV”: the Hồ Chí Minh Prize, the Medal of Military Merit and Medal of the Combatant, the Gold Star, the Hồ Chí Minh Medal, the Medal of Independence, and the Medal of Resistance. These individual and collective awards came with a small sum of money. The government saw this reward policy as a way to strengthen its influence on the minds of the people.

**Emulation in Nghê Tinh Province**

Long considered by the government as a pillar in its efforts to establish authority, Nghê Tinh province (which encompasses the territory of Nghê An and Hà Tĩnh) had been a defensive shield against the south for centuries. The Party’s Central Committee chose Thanh Hóa and Nghê Tinh

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27 The poet and strategist Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442) saw Nghê Tinh as the “third shield” in the South, and the historian Phan Huy Chú (1782–1840) wrote that “Nghê Tinh was a strategic region, a defensive shield throughout the dynasties”, in Phan Huy Chú, *Lịch triều hiện chia rang loài chí* (Institutions of different dynasties), vol. 1. Nxb Bộ Văn hóa Giáo dục và Thanh niên (published between 1809 and 1819, re-issued in 1974).
in early 1947 as rear bases for the battles to come in the centre of the country. Their watchword was “Protect the South, advance towards the South, push the enemy towards the South”, and Thanh Hóa and Nghệ Tĩnh were to be bulwarks against the advances of the French army. In mid-1947 the region of Bình Tri Thiên fell into the hands of Franco-Vietnamese forces, so the strategic importance of Nghệ Tĩnh increased and the mobilisation of its people became a priority.

The first campaign of patriotic emulation was meant to follow the popular mobilisation movements put into place when the war with France began. As of the summer of 1947, the Women’s Association from Nghệ An had been put in charge of creating units of mothers of combatants from each commune. Other groups were in charge of collecting food, clothes, and money. Patriotic emulation was a variant of these campaigns of patriotic solidarity. A conference was organised in Nam Đàn (seat of Nam Đàn district) in June 1948 to outline the nature and objectives of the movement.
Under the supervision of the local branch of the Party, the Provincial Committee of Resistance and Administration brought together representatives from the people’s assemblies, the Liên Việt, mass organisations, and from each administrative level in the area to explain the procedure. The emulation campaign was spread over eleven months and comprised two distinct phases, from 1 August–23 December and from 1 March–19 June 1949. The Ministry of Labour advised the communes and districts to create special bureaus to manage the programme, but this was largely ignored. Instead, communal cadres entrusted the dissemination of the movement to mass organisations, while the management would be shared between themselves and Party representatives.

In 1948, however, not all communes had Party cells (it should also be noted that the Party had been officially dissolved in November 1945 as a means of disguising its leadership over the provisional government established in September). The movement had the quickest success within the army. Political commissioners held informational meetings with their troops (within the military zone of the district) and then offered courses in politics, military strategy, and guerrilla tactics. The government wanted to increase the number of revolutionary organisations, communal forces of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the People’s Militia, and guerrilla units. In June, the province launched a movement called “One month in the people’s militia forces”. All men from 18–45 years of age and women from 18–35 were encouraged to join local resistance groups. Official statistics show excellent results: in just a few weeks, membership in the provincial people’s militia went from 166,460 to 387,530. Security forces were established on the communal and town levels. Village security groups, made up of five families, were formed and put in charge of neighbourhood safety. In February 1949, the district of Nam Đàn created the first group of “senior” soldiers in North Vietnam, attracting 43,380 people before the year was out. By the end of the year, the Supreme Council for National Defence entrusted the financing of the people’s militia forces to the provinces. The Party organised a collection in the villages of the area to raise

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the necessary funds. In January 1949, the village of Ông Khê in Can Lộc district (Hà Tĩnh) was chosen to test out the new campaign.\textsuperscript{29}

After increasing membership in the patriotic forces, the emulation movement added a second objective: improving agricultural, artisanal and industrial production. People were encouraged to clear new land and plant on tracts that lay fallow. Official sources confirm that Nghê An increased its cultivable land area by almost two thousand hectares (nearly five thousand acres) in November 1948. The government encouraged peasants to improve their productivity with the help of fertilizers, both natural (vegetable and animal manure, compost) and industrial (phosphates). Cadres explained that it was more productive to get together in small groups, to share the workload, encourage each other, and provide criticism. They explained how to set up support cells. In June 1949, the district of Nghi Lộc (Nghệ An) had 462 collective production groups, with the participation of some twenty thousand peasants.

On the provincial and district level, agricultural committees were created to train new “cadres of agricultural production”. These technicians would be the link between the communal committees and mass organisations, and would help choose the outstanding workers of the village. It was thus that in 1948, the agricultural committee from Nghê An province awarded the first award to the Catholic peasant Hoàng Hanh (Xuân Lộc, Nam Đàn), four years before he was given the first title of “Hero of Agricultural Labour” during the conference at Tuyên Quang in May 1952. In the area of artisanal and industrial production, however, the patriotic emulation movement turned out to be less effective. In the late 1940s, Nghê Tĩnh’s industrial infrastructure was still very poorly developed. Only the provincial seat, Vinh, and the surrounding areas, had a few factory workshops — but in 1948 the small town of Vinh was still solidly held by the French. In the outlying areas, however, there were a few workshops in the hands of the Việt Minh, such as the grenade plant in the district of Nam Đàn.

\textsuperscript{29} From February to December 1949, Nghê Tinh province managed to collect the following for the resistance: 1,800 mậu (600 hectares) of land, 195 homes, 2,679,213 đồng, 886 tons of paddy, 8 tons of salt, 2,967 water buffaloes, 7,000 swing-plows, 5,361 pigs, 50 gold ingots, 6 silver taels, 6 gold rings, 1,397 bracelets, 3,948 earrings, 17,308 vases, etc., in Lịch sử Đảng bộ Đảng công sản Việt Nam tỉnh Nghệ Tĩnh (History of the Vietnamese Communist Party section of Nghệ Tinh province), p. 267.
Official statistics showed that these small Việt Minh-controlled plants saw a real increase in production as a result of the emulation movement.

Patriotic emulation also helped in the fight against illiteracy. The DRV had already established mass education in 1945, but in 1947 only 15 per cent of the population of Hà Tĩnh could read and write. The government made it a point of honour to fight against what it considered a “deficiency of the colonial administration”. In Confucian societies, it was the ruling power’s duty to teach its citizens and its legitimacy depended on its ability to educate the people. The DRV’s mission was thus a traditional one. In 1949, the provincial administration rewarded Hoàng Thị Liên, a former illiterate, for her work as a teacher in the village of Nghi Hướng (Nghi Lộc district). Resistance committees tried to reach out to teachers who had been trained and employed by the French, encouraging them to “return to the village” to host mass education groups. In exchange, the government awarded certificates of patriotism to those who wanted to erase their “collaborationist indiscretions”. In Quỳnh Lưu, an Association for Educational Development was created to persuade the nation’s scholars to teach in these “official training programmes”. The administration solicited donations from the people to cover costs. Within the people’s militias, those who could read were placed in cultural groups and sent to teach in their hamlets or families. In 1949, the government proudly proclaimed a “total victory against the scourge of illiteracy, one month before the close of the first phase of patriotic emulation”.

Lastly, patriotic emulation aimed at creating a “new life”. Local cadres praised government efforts in public hygiene. The Việt Minh press claimed that within a few months, latrines, collective showers, enclosures for livestock, and hundreds of hospital beds had been set up around the communes of Nghệ Tĩnh. In reality, however, the number of places that actually had these facilities in the late 1940s were still rare or even nonexistent. The government also encouraged participation in sports and fought to eradicate opium use, prostitution, feudal beliefs, etc. In the spirit of “Cultivate the mind, build the nation”, local cadres urged young women to cut their hair short and stop wearing traditional necklaces and bracelets in order to “espouse the spirit of patriotic emulation”. In the village of Văn Hải (Quỳnh Lưu district), the Party cadre Hoàng Ngọc Oanh suggested that people get together to destroy the communal halls and pagodas in the area and use the building materials (bricks, stones, wooden beams) to build “progressive buildings”. However, aside from the actions of a few cadres in a couple of villages, most Vietnamese villages did not undergo any profound changes in the late 1940s.
In Nghệ Tĩnh as in the rest of the country, the emulation campaign served primarily to further establish the mechanisms for ideological training in the countryside. In May 1949, the district of Nghi Lộc had five new organisations: a group of local officials, a network of cultural groups, an association for Marxist studies, a teachers’ federation, and a student group. New Party cells were created by the hundreds throughout the area. The sudden increase in membership of “progressive organisations” was amazing. According to official statistics, Việt Minh membership went from 21,160 to 31,050, the Liên Việt from 10,307 to 32,957, the youth association from 6,070 to 10,450, the association of women grew from 300 to 5,212, and the Association of Mothers of Combatants from 1,700 to 3,540. Cadres of the DRV saw patriotic emulation in 1948–49 as a tool for winning over the villages. But one year after the start of the first campaign, several government reports pointed out weaknesses in the operation. DRV leaders noted with some disappointment that “many provinces were still barely affected by the movement”, but admitted that “patriotic emulation was a new movement that had disoriented the people and cadres to some degree”.

Once a province had established a broad ideological infrastructure, the State sometimes criticised its cadres for seeing emulation only as a way of increasing Party membership or improving the training of local leaders while offering nothing to the people. By following only the directive “Emulation to help build the Party”, these zealous cadres were accused of showing a “segregationist attitude that threatened national unity”, while the government wanted to rely more on people who were outside of the Party. Hồ Chí Minh brought up this issue during a public speech on 1 August 1949 and said it was because “Party cadres did not understand the meaning of the patriotic emulation campaign”. Local cadres were criticised for not explaining the notion of emulation well enough to the

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30 Về Quân quán khu VII (On the people’s army in zone VII), no. 9, 17 November 1949: 2.
31 Thảoi Sơn. “Đây mạnh phong trào thi đua ái quốc” (Strengthening the patriotic emulation movement), Sự thật, no. 106–107, 2 January 1949: 4.
32 L.T. “Thi đua ái quốc, một ý kiến về thi đua” (Patriotic emulation, an opinion on emulation), in Sinh Hoạt Nội Bộ, no. 11, November 1948: 5.
villagers, for forgetting to nominate leaders in the communes, for not encouraging the sharing of experiences, for not sending enough activity reports from their level, or for neglecting the standard forms of propaganda (arts, popular theatre, etc.) to spread “the spirit of the campaign to the popular masses”. The campaign’s poor implementation at the communal level sometimes made it seem like just a new patriotic tax imposed by the central government. Hồ Chí Minh reminded the people that “patriotic emulation was in their own best interest, in the interest of their families, the village, and the nation, regardless of one’s ethnicity”. Most importantly, patriotic emulation was not a passing phase but defined “the new life of the Vietnamese people”.

The Sino-Soviet Reform of Emulation

Since its creation in 1941, the Việt Minh’s political strategy was that of a united front. Trương Chinh stressed the need to “rely on the solidarity of an entire nation” in the country’s resistance against France. It would take the land itself, insisted Hồ Chí Minh, to win over the favour of the rural population. Resistance against the foreign oppressor should be accompanied by agrarian reform. In 1948–49, however, word from Hồ’s entourage was that agrarian reform was not ready yet for implementation. Trương Chinh reiterated that progressive land reform had always been envisaged so as not to alienate a segment of the population. Prudence on the part of the government resulted in the less-than-rigorous implementation of the programme in the countryside. The DRV was not officially looking for a model, but it was also not in a position to defend one. The journal Sự thật (Truth) discussed this issue in its edition of 6 January 1950.

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36 In 1949, Truong Chinh explained the three stages of agrarian reform: 1) Reduce farm taxes, distribute the land from colonialists and traitors to peasants, and force the rich to donate parcels of land; 2) Abolish the dominance of large farms through expropriation with indemnity; and 3) Abolish all exploitative systems and prepare for the socialisation of land. See On Vietnam, in Archives of the Central Committee [CC] of the CPSU, file no. 425, document no. 89 357, 1 April 1950.
37 “Đẩy mạnh phong trào thi dũ ái quốc” (Strengthening the patriotic emulation movement), Sự thật, no. 126, 6 January 1950: 10.
leaders sought a third way between Stalinist emulation and capitalist-style competition, while hardliners defended the higher principle of solidarity within the community. But this concept of solidarity — which I call “filial” or “Confucian” for convenience — was different in many ways from the internationalist understanding of the term. After quite prudently affirming that the class struggle was also a reality in Vietnam, the government advocated a national specificity in their conception of emulation policy. The goal of Vietnamese-style emulation was to unite the people to better fight “foreign oppression” — basically they wanted a patriotic emulation that was adapted to the socio-cultural conditions of the country.

This stance was not universally supported within the Party. In the autumn of 1948, the communist Trần Ngọc Danh criticised the Party’s approach in the Cominform journal, *For Lasting Peace, for People’s Democracy*, a diatribe against the excesses of Hồ Chí Minh’s system that circulated for a long time among high Soviet authorities. Trần Ngọc Danh accused North Vietnamese leaders of repudiating proletarian internationalism, of being obsessed with nationalism, and for lacking solidarity with the causes of a progressive world. Shortly before the official diplomatic recognition of the DRV by Beijing and Moscow in January 1950, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the fall of 1949 marked an important turning point. The defence of national specificity was not a new concept for leaders of the Việt Minh, but this was the time of the schism in Yugoslavia and the communist world was divided. Any nationalist deviation from the Marxist-Leninist line was harshly condemned by Stalin. In December 1949, Mao Zedong cleverly dedicated his victory against the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek to the Russian leader. His government made sure to increase its acts of deference toward the lord of the Kremlin as Stalin dreaded the emergence of a challenger to his supremacy in the communist world.

In January 1950, Hồ Chí Minh and Trần Đặng Ninh set out for Moscow where a new partnership was hammered out between the Soviets, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The Kremlin demanded that the Vietnamese take the path of “internationalist progressivism”. An agreement was secretly

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signed between the Soviets and the Chinese — with Vietnamese representatives conspicuously absent — entrusting the supervision of Vietnam’s revolutionary development to China. The stakes were high for the DRV as they needed to regain the confidence of the socialist world as well as secure military help from Beijing and, to a lesser degree, from other Eastern European countries. It seems clear that the agreement was more of a diktat than a free political choice, but the resumption of hostilities did not allow them much choice. The Soviet government demanded a profound recasting of the system of ideological training in North Vietnam in order to propel the country quickly into agrarian reform. Patriotic emulation was entering a totally new phase, and the arrival of Chinese advisors in the northern provinces announced a complete transformation of patriotic emulation nationwide.

In the spring of 1950, Hồ Chí Minh knew these reforms were crucial if he wanted to retain the military, economic, and diplomatic support of the communist world. In 1947, General Nguyễn Sơn, known for his Maoist leanings, was the first to propose the organisation of “rectification sessions”. Việt Minh leadership, however, deemed the method unsuited to the “Vietnamese spirit”: “Hồ Chí Minh did not want to change Man from one day to the next, but to teach him gradually to help him evolve. He did not like to rush into things. The idea that consciousness could leap forward did not even cross his mind.” The Việt Minh criticised China’s approach for its anti-intellectualism and ideological orthodoxy. In the spring of 1950, however, Beijing went even further and oriented itself towards “an operation to remodel the character, temperament, ideas, or basically the entire psychology of Man. The goal was not intellectual but emotional: it was a matter of creating a new mentality, a new behaviour.”

On 6 May 1950, Hồ Chí Minh finally decided to bring up the issue during a “training and study meeting” in which he openly criticised the

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40 At the time, General Nguyễn Sơn (1908–1956) was the president of Zone IV. He was a colourful figure who had spent ten years fighting the Japanese in China. Hồ Chí Minh always mistrusted him because of his strong “Maoist” stance. Close rival and enemy of Võ Nguyên Giáp, he was sent to Korea as the representative of Vietnamese support. He returned in 1953 to the Party’s Central Committee, but died prematurely of liver disease.


43 Ibid., pp. 60–1.
Maoist model of re-education, advocating a closely supervised reform of the Vietnamese man:

The process of re-education must be positive and meticulous. One must know exactly who needs to be re-educated, who should be in charge, of what this should consist, how to do it and on what basis. One must be sure to follow closely the training process and the driving force of this teaching. One must correct overzealousness immediately and without hesitation. One must know how to use one’s principles well rather than use them too much; it is useless to open re-education classes anarchically, if a class has too many participants then the levels are not equal, the program will not be suitable … and this will undoubtedly have an effect on the whole re-education process.44

Bùi Tin, a former colonel in the PAVN who ran afoul of the government and went into exile in Paris in 1990, writes in his memoirs that Hồ Chí Minh clearly feared a Chinese takeover of the ideological terrain at the time.45 When Hồ spoke of self-criticism he was referring more to a therapy that could bring out the best in community members. The Vietnamese method left room for difference and flexibility and its aim was to garner the people’s support for the just cause.

In the spring of 1950, however, the Maoist model of re-education dominated, despite Hồ’s reservations. From changing its citizens to creating the new man, the recasting of Vietnam’s emulation policy aimed to produce a whole cache of new men, which was necessary for the launching of large-scale agrarian reform. The Soviet Union was especially keen for Vietnam to speed up changes in this regard. After the agreement reached in Moscow in February 1950, the CPSU sent a group of cadres specialising in ideological matters to Beijing to organise a training seminar for Chinese advisors bound for Vietnam.46 From 17–28 April 1950, several conferences were held on organisational matters. The Soviets stressed the key role played by socialist emulation in the formation of the masses. 27 April was entirely dedicated to “the work, Party organisation, and socialist emulation

46 The conversations between the CPSU and the CCP from 17–28 April 1950 were transcribed into two files in the archives of the CC of the CPSU (no. 1200 and no. 1201), amounting to more than 720 pages (in Russian and Chinese).
experiences of the Serp & Molot [Russian: sickle and hammer] factory in Moscow’. Soviet instructors explained in detail how to organise a socialist emulation campaign. They sang the praises of the emulation fighter and explained to Chinese cadres the advantages of the Soviet experience and the way to adapt its model in China and Vietnam:

As for developments in the culture and the consciousness of our workers, we have already accomplished a lot, seen a great show of will, and had many victories. The extraordinary qualities of the Soviet man are clearly expressed via the socialist emulation movement. For the Party, emulation means: telling workers about a certain work experience, generalising it, making it clear to everyone, and sharing it as much as possible with others. In practice, this happens in the following way: a worker has a high rate of production, so his success puts into question his neighbour’s methods; the neighbour then understands the error of his ways and doesn’t want to be considered a bad worker, so he learns from his neighbour’s experience, corrects his faults, and becomes an exemplary man himself. The workers sign an agreement on emulation and take it upon themselves to improve performance. Our job is to support such initiative and support emulation champions for taking such interest in their work. In factories, top workers are awarded certificates of honour and their names and photos are inscribed in a book and in an honour roll. Their stories are shared in magazines, newspapers, on the radio and in meetings. We have organised Stakhanovite conferences in order to change work habits via shared successful experiences. Thanks to emulation, we feel a great force pushing our society forward every day. Emulation has become a social movement, one that is alive, indispensable, and an integral part of individual consciousness. The Communist Party supports new emulations and supervises the movement.47

Mikhail Chiaureli’s epic 1949 film about a labour hero (Ivanov), The Fall of Berlin, was cited as an example.48 It showed how traditional heroism

47 Conversation with the CCP delegation on the organisation of socialist emulation campaigns in the Serp & Molot [Sickle and hammer] factory, in Archives of the CC of the CPSU, file no. 1201, unnumbered document, April–December 1950.
48 The Fall of Berlin (Padenie Berlina). Directed by Mikhail Chiaureli, 1949, screenplay by Pyotr Pavlenko, starring Mihail Gelovani (Stalin), Oleg Frölich (Roosevelt), Viktor Stanitsyn (Churchill), Boris Andreyev (Ivanov), Marina Kovalyova (Natacha), 165 minutes.
Figure 4. Mikhail Chiaureli’s film, *The Fall of Berlin*
based on success in battle, found its modern-day counterpart in productivist performance. In North Vietnam, the Ministries of Labour and Culture were given the order to use the film to spread the new socialist emulation through the countryside. The “Ivanov syndrome” was supposed to penetrate into youth organisations, professional groups, and other mass movements. In the autumn of 1950, the Vietnamese delegate to the PRC, Hoàng Văn Hoan (1905–1991), proudly announced to the Soviet ambassador that Vietnamese audiences were flocking by the thousands to see *The Fall of Berlin* in the border provinces of Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, and Lạng Sơn.49 The propaganda machine extolled the virtues of “the glorious Red Army and its eternal victory over Nazi Germany”, and Ivanov’s struggle was now that of the exemplary Vietnamese worker, and what’s more, that of the patriot seeking freedom.50 Starting in 1950, DRV leaders sent bi-annual reports to the Soviet Union detailing their progress in organisational matters, of which a large part was devoted to the creation of the new man51 whose transformation was brought about by emulation. Phạm Văn Đông soon announced to the Soviets that they had elected the first seven heroes in the history of the DRV, “a huge success in the resistance and the national construction of the Vietnamese people”.52 Thanks to the help of their Chinese advisors, he explained, the figure of Ivanov served as a model for Ngô Gia Khảm, Ivanov’s Vietnamese alter ego who was awarded the title of “labour hero” in the mountains of Tuyên Quang in May 1952.

In March 1950, China sent a first preparatory mission to Vietnam under the supervision of Luo Guibo (1908–1995), Central Committee representative, head of the committee overseeing the Chinese advisors in Vietnam and special advisor to Hồ Chí Minh from January 1950 to August 1954. The question of patriotic emulation was at the very heart of ideological reform, which called for the DRV to “align itself absolutely with its Chinese allies”. Beijing insisted that the North Vietnamese regime rethink its entire ideological programme for mass ideological training.

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49 *Conversation between Comrades Phin (Hoàng Văn Hoan) and Rochin (9 November 1950)*, in Archives of the CC of the CPSU, file no. 425, document no. 01486, 20 December 1950 (archival recording date 4 January 1951).


51 “Vietnamese Society and Revolution”, in Archives of the CC of the CPSU, file no. 740, single document, March 1951.

52 *Report by Phạm Văn Đông in 1952*, in Archives of the CC of the CPSU, file no. 951, document no. 65 271, 4 September 1952 (archival recording date).
Hồ Chí Minh admitted several years later that “what had happened in China really did help the emulation movement work better in Vietnam.”

In 1950, Chinese advisors increased the number of training sessions with Vietnamese mass organisations, holding conferences for the Student Union, the Youth Movement, the Peasants’ Association, the National Union, etc. In August, the Việt Minh Youth Movement was unified; and in late September, the Peasants’ Association divided the peasants into two distinct groups: landlords and rich peasants joined the Liên Việt, while poor and middle peasants were accepted into the Peasants’ Association for National Salvation once they turned 18. From then on, the government demanded increased vigilance from Party leaders in their choice of members. Potential members had to undergo probation while the merits of their candidacy were being examined. The waiting period before integration varied according to the candidate’s social standing. A worker had to wait two months, a peasant four, a scholar or businessman six, and former members of other organisations had to wait at least a year.

For the celebration of Workers’ Day, 1 May 1950, the DRV created a new medal for its exemplary blue- and white-collar labourers. This had three ranks, with the highest distinction awarded by the President of the Republic while the others were issued by the office of the Prime Minister. The government set up local bureaus under the Institute of Medals to manage candidate files and gather information. On the local level, this new institution was made up of the president of the province, the head of the provincial Labour Department, delegates from the professional branch (head of Economic Department and the Bureau of Rural Affairs, for example), and finally the representative of mass organisations (the peasant

53 Báo cáo thi đua trước Đại hội chiến sĩ thi đua và cán bộ gương mẫu toàn quốc từ 1.5 đến 6.5.1952 (Report on emulation for the national conference of emulation combatants and exemplary cadres), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 422, May 1952.
57 Hồ Chí Minh — Biên niên tiểu sử (Hồ Chí Minh, biographical accounts), vol. IV, p. 423.
58 Tài liệu về việc thưởng Huân chương Lao động (Documents on the awarding of work medals), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 402, document no. 16 110, 16 November 1950.
union or association). The Institute of Medals oversaw these activities on the national level (the institute was replaced by a medals commission in 1961).\(^\text{59}\) The State propaganda machine continually repeated to the Vietnamese people that “the exploits of the workers deserve this new reward hierarchy to speed up the mobilisation of the masses”.\(^\text{60}\) Virtuocratic regimes use honorific distinctions as key elements in their education and propaganda efforts.

While the medals given out during the first years of the war were distributed by the central government or the office of the president, the recasting of the system in 1950 aimed at a more popular broadening of the system. The theme was changed to: “More individual awards than before; more people who deserve it.” The DRV wanted to reach out to more people and a more diverse crowd — in other words, to democratise its patriotic awards. Two new awards were created: the Certificate of Satisfaction and the Certificate of Merit. At the village level, local cadres selected individuals, production units, and exemplary cells, then distributed Certificates of Satisfaction to the deserving candidates. The Certificate of Merit was awarded by the province, the regiment, the military zone, or directly by the administrative branch in charge of the deserving subject. Local cadres (from the commune or district) were told to organise solemn award services “as often as possible”, in conjunction with provincial administration committees. The award (be it a medal, certificate, or some form of decoration) linked its recipient to a world of “respectability and patriotic exemplarity”. Titles and decorations created, in return, a feeling of duty in those honoured. The newfound pride earned by the peasant or labourer had no quantifiable value. The State used “the honour won by the common people” as a springboard for the conquest of minds.

From then on, emulation policy fell to the Ministries of National Defence, Labour, and Agriculture. Following the model of its brother nations,

\(^{59}\) In 1961 the awards commission had 11 members. Lê Thanh Nghị (Vice-Prime Minister) was president and Nguyễn Khang (Government Minister) was vice-president, with the following nine other members: Nguyễn Văn Tào (Minister of Labour), Vũ Dương (second-in-charge of organisation for the Central Committee), Xuân Thủy (Secretary-General of the Fatherland Front), Lê Tắt Đắc (Minister of the Interior), Trương Quang Giao (Vice-Director of the Committee for Unification), Bùi Quý (member of the standing Committee for Unions), Hoàng Thị Lý (Vice-Director of the Women’s Association), Dương Công Hoát (Vice-President of the Committee for Nationalities), and Vũ Quang (Secretary of the Youth Steering Committee), in AVN3, BNV, file no.1722, 1961.

\(^{60}\) Tài liệu về việc thưởng Huân chương Lao động, document no. 16 116, 18 November 1950.
the DRV created its first title of emulation fighter in 1950, reserved for workers, peasants, and outstanding combatants. The Ministry of Agriculture, symbolically, bestowed the first title of Agricultural Fighter on 4 November. The journal Nhân dân (The People) explained to its readers:

… in order to achieve positive results in the selection of emulation fighters, we must encourage and honour the exemplary men and women within the agricultural emulation movement. This selection must be completely democratic. Representatives of each family at the village level must select the best among them, a similar choice will then be done at the communal level, then the district, province, and finally zone. When the selection process is finished in all military zones of the country, all exemplary individuals will be summoned to a national conference to select emulation fighters on the national level. The selection must be a popular one, the people must be active participants.  

By the end of 1950, the DRV had a new administrative hierarchy of patriotic merit. At its base, in the villages, communes or production units, the government nominated “exceptional workers” (lao động xuất sắc) at the end of each emulation season. The units got together every three months to choose their best workers. Local cadres in charge of emulation then took up these lists and went through another selection to determine the outstanding workers of the year. Until 1953–54, a distinction was made between those nominated for short-term efforts and those who were selected for longer periods, but eventually the certificate of exemplary worker was only given to the former, while the latter received the title of “emulation fighter” (Chiến sĩ thi đua). Finally, in the spring of 1952, the DRV crowned this new hierarchy of merit with the selection of the first contingent of “new heroes” (Anh hùng mới), thus achieving in scarcely two years the recasting of the hierarchy of patriotic merit.

In order to produce a new society made up of outstanding citizens and new men, the government and its foreign advisors had to increase the rate of recruitment. The old emulation system had two large-scale campaigns per year (from February–May and June–December), but now they had to do more, and in less time. From then on the government organised three separate campaigns per year. A first session opened on 3 February

61 “Kinh nghiệm bầu Chiến sĩ nông nghiệp ở Liên khu Việt Bắc” (Experience in the election of agricultural emulation fighters in the Việt Bắc zone), Nhân dân, no. 5, 22 April 1951: 1.
(the anniversary of the foundation of the ICP) and closed on 19 May (Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday). The second began as the first one ended and continued until 2 September (Independence Day); and the third session lasted from 19 December (celebrating the creation of the PAVN in 1944) to 3 February, dedicating itself to a review of the year’s activity.

The arrival of the new man in Vietnam was accompanied by the creation of a bureaucracy of heroism to manage the patriotic competitions. In 1948, a national committee began coordinating the emulation activities of each ministry. Then in the summer of 1950, Chinese advisors were sent to re-evaluate the efficiency of the system, from the central level to the de-localised bureaus in the provinces and military zones of North Vietnam. The DRV needed a solid response to the failure of the first emulation campaign. On the advice of Chinese experts, Vietnamese cadres reorganised the emulation campaigns according to the type of activity (agriculture, light industry, heavy industry, arms, education, etc.). Each ministry created an emulation planning cell, with Chinese advisors active in the decision-making process. The programme elaborated by the ministerial branch was then communicated to the administrative committees of the military zones, which supervised the implementation of these directives on the provincial level. Emulation bureaus in the zones and provinces were led by a representative of the administrative committee and comprised six members: the director of the Department of Labour, the secretary of the Communist Workers’ Union, the director of the Propaganda Department, the director of Public Works, the president of the Peasants’ Association, and a representative from the Department of Social Assistance.

As a relay between communes and the central government, the provincial emulation commissions transmitted ministerial instructions to their areas via mass organisations and collected the end-of-year reports by the various branches of activity for submission to their respective ministries. This was supposed to revive the dialogue with the countryside, but reform did not come easily. In late 1951, the provinces still had problems estimating the results of their emulation activities. Nguyễn Ba Kính, President of the Administrative Resistance Committee of Sơn La province, explained that in his area, “the population is quite backward and is battling hunger,

62 Thông trích của UBND Khu Hồng Quảng thành lập Hội đồng Thi đua các cấp (Decisions of the people’s committee of the zone of Hồng Quảng on the creation of a multi-level emulation commission), in AVN3, BLD file no. 491, document no. 1139, 26 September 1955.
[so] the emulation movement did not take hold among the people.” In April 1951, the journal Nhân dân criticised the town of Bắc Giang for not working actively enough with the Peasants’ Association to set up emulation campaigns. Since no committee had actually been created on the provincial level, the government suggested that the Peasants’ Association take over emulation activities in the area. The situation was even more uncertain for industries or businesses. The lack of steering committees for emulation led the government to strengthen cooperation between the Party and the Communist Workers’ Union in order to improve awareness among workers. State enterprises (weapons, consumer goods, mining, etc.) had to serve as examples for the private sector. The government stressed that the emulation campaign would only succeed with a strict collaboration between mass organisations and the administrative apparatus in the nation’s districts and communes.

The selection of an emulation fighter was a novelty in Vietnamese villages. The State wanted to base the programme on productivist merit and class origin, which then freed it from the traditional age requirements. The DRV sent itinerant cadres into villages, accompanied by a “Chinese comrade” when possible, to explain the validity and necessity of reform to the people.Traditionally, peasants respected and feared cadres from other places. A high-placed cadre had more success implementing change than his counterpart in the commune, who was often just a neighbour, a cousin, or even a family enemy. The selection of new exemplary men offered the central government a way to reaffirm its control over the commune and “perfect the education of cadres, train new servants of the State, and correct the ideological deviations of some local officials”. The government took advantage of this to increase its patriotic tax and recruit new members to the VWP. Government leaders understood that villagers would not accept the appointment of this alter ego without explanation or through intimidation:

63 AVN3, regional coll. (Sơn La), file no. 15, document no. 70/NC, 12 January 1952.
65 Tài liệu hướng dẫn thi đua của Tổng Liên đoàn LDVN năm 1951 (Orientation documents for emulation from the Vietnamese general confederation of labour), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 408, single document, 1951.
66 Tờ chèo Đại hội chiến sĩ thi đua và cán bộ gương mẫu (Organisation of the conference for emulation fighters and exemplary cadres), in AVN3, 30 October 1951.
To avoid misunderstanding in the process of selecting an emulation fighter, which has happened in some provinces, we must clearly understand the meaning of these selections. Choosing an agricultural emulation fighter consists of singing his praises and sharing his experiences in agricultural production... To achieve this end, each administrative level must send cadres to the level below. They must go into the communes, to each village, and correctly explain the reasons for these selections and the criteria required to obtain the title.67

Once the candidates were nominated by village production groups and mass organisations, a file on each “exemplary worker” was to be sent to the next level up. Once the province received the files, they could start preparing conferences by branch (peasants, workers, the military) to choose which “outstanding citizens” would represent the jurisdiction at the national congress.

On 16 January 1952, the People’s Committee of Vĩnh Phú province gathered its 24 agricultural emulation fighters.68 After an inaugural speech by the president of the province, and in the presence of a representative from the ministry, the peasants seated on the podium read out a résumé of their productivist and political performance. Three of them were then chosen to represent their province at the next national conference for peasant emulation fighters: Tạ Văn Cửu (Phường Khoan commune, Lấp Thạch district), Khổng Văn Cực (Cao Phong, Lấp Thạch), and Nguyễn Thị Hiền, a young woman from the village of Văn Quân (Lấp Thạch). The title of provincial emulation fighter was awarded to all 24 participants and the day ended with a buffet. At this stage, the number of candidates receiving awards varied from one province to another. Lạng Sơn, for example, sent 7 outstanding combatants to the national conference, among the 32 nominated.

The penultimate step in forging the new hero in Vietnam was to hold national conferences with all provincial winners, grouped by branch of activity. For the national conference of outstanding peasants in the spring of 1952, 42 emulation fighters were invited: 8 from guerrilla zones and 34 from liberated zones. The national committee chose 11 exemplary combatants from ethnic minorities (6 Thổ, 2 Nùng, 2 Mường, and 1 Yáo), some women, and some youth representatives. The day began with labour

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68 “Để chuẩn bị Đại hội chiến sĩ thì dưa toàn quốc” (Preparing the national emulation conference), Nhân Dân, 17 January 1952.
meetings led by Party cadres, during which the exemplary peasants studied theory on new heroism and the Party’s role in society. In the evening, everyone got together to watch plays, films, or concerts, to “facilitate the education of these men and woman and make it enjoyable”. The peasants were thus able to share their professional experiences. The meeting ended with an awards ceremony to issue certificates, special prizes, and the title of “national agricultural emulation fighter” for all participants. In 1952, 5 peasants received a title of the First Rank, 5 got the Second Order, 27 the Third, and 5 were ranked as “encouraging.”

During the first season, the emulation movement in industry chose 1,221 exemplary workers, 41 of whom were invited to the national conference in April. Finally, within the army, 50 combatants from 5 sectors were invited: 16 per cent were cadres working in defence, 12 per cent were guerrilla fighters, 22 per cent were from communal forces of the PAVN, 44 per cent from the PAVN itself, and 6 per cent were technical specialists.

All of these outstanding peasants, workers, and soldiers were carefully selected for their productivist or military performance, but also for their social or ethnic backgrounds. Among the 50 emulation fighters chosen from the army, 42 of them (82 per cent) had been classified “proletarian-peasant” and “poor peasant.” Since 1945, government leaders had fought to offer the classes once oppressed by the previous regime a special place within the new system. An “exemplary society”, by giving rise to the emergence of a virtuous elite, led to the reform of the social link among members of the community. The “new honourees of the DRV” were primarily recruited according to the social criteria established during the classification campaigns organised by Chinese advisors.

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69 Directive no. 58 LD/P5, in AVN3, file no. 415, document no. 3.7489, 26 December 1951.
70 Báo cáo Tổng kết Hội nghị chiến sĩ thí dưa nông nghiệp toàn quốc lần thứ nhất tháng 4.1952 (Final report from the fourth national conference on agricultural emulation fighters), in AVN3, BLD, document no. 182 B1/NDTQ, April 1952.
71 Hoàng Quốc Việt, “Lao Động Việt Nam phải làm gì?” (What does the Vietnamese worker have to do?), in Nhân Dân, April 1952, p. 1.
73 There were seven “middle peasants”, one rich peasant, and one from the “petite bourgeoise”. See Thép Mới, “Quân đội ta là Quân đội anh hùng” (Our army is a heroic army), Nhân Dân, no. 59, 29 April 1952: 1.
In the spring of 1952, the war hindered the efforts of agrarian reform teams to reclassify and select a new patriotic elite. The spread of emulation was deemed satisfactory in the military Interzones IV and V, and in the Viêt Bắ́c, while nothing was done in Interzone III or anywhere in the South. Regardless of these disparities, the national congress for the first heroes of the DRV was still held on 1 May 1952 and 230 emulation fighters from the national level (peasants, workers, and soldiers) were invited to Tuyên Quang province. In his opening speech, Hồ Chí Minh re-situated the Vietnamese experience in a context of internationalist cooperation, declaring to his foreign guests that the success of the reorganisation of Vietnamese emulation since 1950 was due entirely to the experience of the Soviets and Chinese.\footnote{Hồ Chí Minh. “Lời phát biểu trong buổi lễ khai mạc Đại hội chiến sĩ thi đua và cán bộ gươm mâu toàn quốc” (Speech for the inauguration of the national conference of emulation fighters and exemplary cadres), in Thì đồ ñài quốc. Hanoi: nxb Sự thật, 1984, pp. 30–1.} North Vietnamese leaders chose seven of those selected on the national level to receive the title of “new hero” of the DRV (one of them posthumously). Among the 50 emulation fighters from the PAVN, 4 received the certificate of “military hero”: La Văn Câu, Nguyễn Quốc Trị, Nguyễn Thị Chiên, and the martyr Cù Chính Lan. Of the 42 distinguished workers on the national level, 2 were awarded the title of “labour hero”: the engineer Trần Đại Nghĩa, who invented the Vietnamese bazooka, and the arms specialist Ngô Gia Khảm. Lastly, the peasant movement was represented by 42 national figures, of whom only one won the title “agricultural hero”: Hoàng Hanh, an elderly Catholic farmer from Nghê An province.

In the traditional agricultural societies of Southeast Asia, the recognition of an individual’s heroic qualities “inspired loyalty that could help form groups and gain political influence. Their extraordinary individual abilities reveal leadership qualities and confer upon their ruler an aura of miraculous virtue, and thereby his affinity with supernatural powers.”\footnote{Nguyễn Thế Anh. “La conception de la monarchie divine dans le Viêt Nam traditionnel”, p. 147.} The Tuyên Quang conference of 1952 marked the high point of the reorganisation of the bureaucracy of heroism, carried out with the help of Vietnam’s brother nations, especially China.\footnote{Đại hội toàn quốc chiến sĩ thi đua và cán bộ gươm mâu (1–6.5.1952 tại Viêt Bắ́c) (National conference on emulation fighters and exemplary cadres held from 1–6 May 1952, in the Viêt Bắ́c province), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 432.} This was all part of an evolution —
whether desired or suggested by the government — to remodel the social relationship between members of the community. The government still lamented the poor implementation of some of its directives, which had led to the unequal development of the programme around the country. Yet, despite the internal weaknesses of the movement, the DRV had at least shown to the communist world its respect for the decisions of January 1950. Hồ Chí Minh liked to tell Soviet authorities: “The Chinese people are very close to us, we are exalted by their example.”77 The new heroic figure answered Stalin’s demand that they quickly develop new “exemplary men” in order to launch agrarian reform. But — and this is especially true of the heroes at Tuyên Quang — the “newly elect of the DRV” were there mainly to rework the hierarchy of patriotic merit in order to solidify the new government’s hold on power. Though the turning point of 1952 did not lead to any real reflection on the role of the new heroic figure, it answered the demands of the era, quickly transforming the emulation fighter and the new hero into the exemplary citizen of past times.

77 Letter from Vietnam, in Archives of the CC of the CPSU, file no. 951, document no. 4531k259, 19 March 1952.