

How the Sino-Vietnamese War Was Purposefully Forgotten

In both China and Vietnam, the governments have deliberately tried to bury memories of their 1979 war.

By Christelle Nguyen

In the novel “Reunions of Companions-in-Arms” (战友重逢) published in 2001 by Nobel prize laureate Mo Yan, the soul of a dead soldier, Qian Yinghao, bared his heart to a living comrade. Qian confessed his ambitions to become a wartime hero rather than a peacetime soldier. As a result, he was elated to be thrown to the frontline in what China called a self-defensive counterattack against Vietnam, a war in which both sides employed Chinese weapons. Being a combatant, he imagined, is glorious in various ways. Returning alive brings glory; if he was killed, his impoverished parents would earn extra money.

Yet, far from winning glory, Qian died without even having seen the southern enemy. The realization dawned upon him, and many other ghosts, that in this war most soldiers died in silence, and only a few were extolled as heroes. “Most people like you and I died in obscurity. Some of them froze to death, some starved to death, some drowned in the river, some were bitten to death by dogs, some died of disease...”

In response, his comrade said: “I am sad for you, not because you died, but because you died ingloriously. You had good military skills, good physical fitness, and a clear mind with heroic qualities, but died a soundless death.”

The novel also depicts piercing cries from the ghosts of Chinese soldiers killed in the 1979 war upon hearing that the two enemies normalized their ties, because it rendered invisible those who were told to defend their country. Their souls could not be at peace even in death.

Behind this fiction lies a fact: In China, veterans and families of dead soldiers do not have space to mourn the fallen of the purposefully obscured Sino-Vietnam war. Mo Yan had to resort to literary fiction to break the silence, because public debates on this destructive war were not allowed.

On the website of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the overview of China-Vietnam relations only mentions that the relations went downhill between the 1980s and the 1990s, but does not specify the reasons behind the hiatus. Nor does it mention this war. While China mentions its various border wars in other contexts – including the 1962 Sino-Indian war, known in Chinese as a “self-defensive border counterattack against India” ([中印边境自卫反击](#)) and the 1969 Sino-Russian war, known otherwise as the “self-defensive counterattack at Bao Zhen island” (珍宝岛自卫反击战), it barely touched upon the so-called “self defensive counterattack against Vietnam” (对越自卫反击战), China’s name for the Sino-Vietnamese War.

A Sudden, Short, and Bloody War Between Comrades

In 1950, the People's Republic of China – then only a year old – was the very first country to recognize the Vietnam Democratic Republic led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Vietnam was also one of the first countries to recognize the Communist Party-led PRC. Party-to-party relations remained front and center in the relationship.

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China was the biggest provider of aid to North Vietnam during its war against French and American troops. Yet this wartime assistance was never unconditional. Since 1965, Chinese aid was conditioned upon Hanoi's political and ideological compromises: Vietnam would have to recognize China's leadership role in Indochina and involvement in Vietnam's foreign affairs, including its reception of sophisticated Soviet aid. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provided Vietnam with weapons, the Soviet Union offered wide-ranging support.

Under the leadership of pro-Soviet Party Chief Le Duan, however, Vietnam gradually distanced itself from China. Skirmishes on the border with China started from 1973 onwards. The number of Sino-Vietnamese border clashes quadrupled from [100 cases](#) in 1974 to 400 in 1975 and rose to 900 in 1976.

In mid-1976, Hanoi introduced a Chinese assimilationist policy in Vietnam and began to nationalize “businesses” owned by what it deemed as the “capitalist bourgeoisie” in Southern Vietnam who were supposedly menacing Vietnam's socialist transformation. The policy mostly targeted the Hoa (ethnic Chinese) – a privileged minority group in Vietnam.

In addition, in the 1970s Hanoi also intervened in the curriculum at Chinese schools in Northern Vietnam, banning content that was deemed as indicative of “reactionary idealistic nationalism.” The Hanoi regime accused Beijing of using the issue of Hoa people, the majority of whom were concentrated in the border areas, to undermine Vietnamese society. The Hoa's major exodus back to China in 1978 was the official reason for Beijing's termination of aid to Vietnam.

With Vietnam choosing to get closer to the Soviet Union, China became less able to intervene and influence Hanoi's decisions. As China's leader at the time, Deng Xiaoping, put it in explaining the invasion of 1979, “Vietnam is a child that does not listen and needs to be spanked.”

The war caught Vietnam off guard, given that Deng had agreed with Le Duan in 1977 to begin talks on border issues. Three rounds of talks that Vietnam initiated in 1979 with the Chinese side did not come to fruition. Meanwhile, disagreement over Cambodia was also causing tensions. Vietnam supported the government it had installed in Phnom Penh after its December 1978 invasion, while China endorsed the tripartite guerrilla coalition, which included the Khmer Rouge.

Deng launched a massive war against Vietnam a few days after his trips to the United States and Japan and several Southeast Asian countries.

According to the book “Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991” by Xiaoming Zhang, the war consisted of three phases: The first phase (February 17-25, 1979) saw Chinese forces successfully capture the provincial capitals of Cao Bang and Lao Cai, and some border towns of Lang Son. The second phase (from February 26 to

March 5) was a campaign against Lang Son and its surrounding areas in the east, and Sa Pa and Phong Tho in the north-west. The final stage (by March 16) aimed to defeat the remaining Vietnamese forces while annihilating military installations in the border region.

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), sizable yet short on fighting experience compared to the battle-hardened Vietnamese troops, made a swift withdrawal. While the major armed conflict lasted less than a month, fighting continued throughout the 1980s.

China's Domestic Propaganda on the War

From Beijing's point of view, Vietnam's post-1975 misbehavior toward China, embodied by the boundary dispute and anti-Hoa policy, betrayed the fundamental principle of Sino-Vietnamese fraternal relations. According to the 2011 book "The Punitive War: The Liberation Army triggered the Anti-Vietnam Self-Defense Operations" by Wang Lili, the punitive intention was already expressed by Deng during his visit to Japan in 1978: "China needs to forcefully punish Vietnam" because "China can no longer stand it."

With the war, China sought to reinforce its Sino-centric view of the world, which regarded small nations on China's periphery, including Vietnam, as inferior and within the rightful orbit of China's influence. Asymmetries in size and strengths have shaped the relationship between the two countries for centuries. In the past, Vietnamese rulers declared themselves domestically as emperors but also presented as kings who paid tribute to the northern emperors – despite beating them militarily. Vietnam's ingratitude for Chinese aid worth some \$20 billion, its impertinence and even insubordination signaled refusal to continue to comply with the China-imposed order.

As a result, Deng, the chief architect of the blitzkrieg war, wanted to teach the "little brother" a lesson. Yet, Deng and China also learned many hard lessons, even though the war did not produce significant international consequences for China. This is certainly not one of the most glorious chapters in the history of the PLA, which mobilized more than one-quarter of its field armies or a total of more than 320,000 troops to little effect.

Such was Deng's fury that he was determined to shore up the army. During the next few years, hundreds of thousands of below-par conscripts were sent home.

To add insult to injury, his efforts to court the United States by fighting the bloodiest battles since the Korean War backfired. Deng's unspoken alliance with the U.S. was widely viewed as a public relations victory. Washington, despite its bad blood with the Vietnamese and their Soviet patrons, declined to be implicated in internal communist affairs. The United States called on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, and China to withdraw from Vietnam, counter to Deng's expectation. Plus, the United States even approved arms sales to Taiwan, despite having normalized relations with China.

Throughout history, China always described itself as invincible in battles but also vulnerable to external attacks. Describing China as the one who launched the war would run counter to their propaganda about their leaders' peace-focused leadership. A pragmatist leader, Deng championed peace and development, unlike Mao, who favored war and revolution.

Chinese leaders have always portrayed China as a benevolent advocate of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, win-win cooperation, harmony, and justice. Allowing transparency on the war would be a huge loss of face for China, revealing Beijing not only as a big loser, but also a big liar. It was a well-calculated and well-orchestrated military attack, with

Deng as commander-in-chief, rather than just a reactive war of self-defense, as China has framed it in propaganda.

The CCP also described itself as a winner in a flash fight. The gloomy reality, including massive casualties, were hidden to paint a happy picture of victory. Also, China preached to its citizens that the self-defensive counterattack not only served to protect the country's sovereignty but also fulfilled its international mission: to protect the Cambodian friends in their anti-Vietnam war, to combat the global hegemony of the Soviet Union and the regional hegemonic ambitions of Vietnam. Yet the pedagogical war failed to hasten Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia. In addition to the Treaty of Amity with the Soviet Union, the CPV put forward a special relationship between three Indochinese countries.

Also, China was not blameless in the exodus of Hoa people from Vietnam. The Chinese government had agreed to accept the ethnic Chinese back, as long as Vietnam admitted that the refugees were Chinese citizens ostracized and persecuted by the Vietnamese government. It was China that closed the border to ethnic kin in 1978 and demanded that Vietnam take them back as Vietnamese citizens.

At the time of publication, four Chinese scholars based in China did not respond to requests for comment. One history professor at a Beijing-based university, who declined to be named, said "It is too sensitive to speak on the record."

A Chinese scholar currently based in Europe elaborated: "Describing the war would paint a negative image of Deng Xiaoping as a great leader. He is an icon."

The Agreed Silence

In 2019, Li Jiazhong, the former Chinese ambassador to Vietnam (1995-2005), who also served at the Chinese Embassy to Hanoi in the 1970s, published the book "Sino-Vietnamese relations: 40 Years of Personal Experiences." Li dedicated a whole chapter to the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations, but he omitted the ins and the outs of the 1979 war.

In Li's telling, it was the Vietnamese side that made the first move toward normalizing ties, without going through the official diplomatic channels led by the francophone and francophile Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Co Thach. The Chinese foreign minister twice refused to meet with Thach.

After foreign minister level talks proved a dead end, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, who succeeded to power after Le Duan died in 1986, put forward an informal meeting through envoys to the Chinese Embassy in order to have "direct and deep exchange" with Chinese high-level leaders. However, the Chinese side conveyed the message that "China was not prepared to meet with Vietnam" and that it would depend on Linh's wisdom to realize his own objectives.

Also, according to the 2013 memoir "La Marseillaise du Général Giap" by Claude Blanchemaison, who served as French ambassador to Vietnam from 1989 to 1993, in autumn 1989, there was a rumor that Vietnamese leaders secretly went to China to reaffirm their ideological closeness and political similarities.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the European socialist bloc in 1991 further increased Vietnam's sense of insecurity. The government's sinophobic strategy could not sustain. After Le

Duan passed away in 1986, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh was proactive toward normalization with China.

According to Li, since China was preparing for the Asian Games at the time, the meeting was held in Chengdu to protect its secrecy. Little is known about what exactly was agreed upon during the meeting. Vietnam's proposal of a military alliance, however, was turned down.

The meeting was described as amiable, with two sides agreeing to "end the past and open the future," which paved the way for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1991. Nguyen Van Linh was quoted as saying, "We are determined to correct the wrong policies of the past, and we will never be ungrateful. We will restore Chairman Ho Chi Minh's China policy and restore the traditional friendship between the two parties and the two countries."

The meeting ends with Linh's own poem: "Our brotherly relations have been passed down for generations. The resentment goes away in an instant. When we meet again, we smile, and the thousand-year friendship is rebuilt."

The Vietnamese version of events, by contrast, holds that China initiated the normalization, as Vietnam showed some signs of veering toward the West amid China's isolation in the wake of the Tiananmen Square.

But while Hanoi sought improvement in relations for economic and other reasons, Beijing insisted that ties could not be normalized until there was a Cambodian peace settlement, including a full withdrawal of Vietnamese troops. Vietnam needed to stay silent to win China's material and moral support.

Thus the Vietnamese government has never celebrated its successful repulsion of the PLA with fanfare, unlike the annual celebrations of military triumphs over the United States and France. The CPV knew that it could not afford to alienate China. Hanoi's reluctance to forge a formal military alliance with the faraway Soviet Union against China was chiefly driven by the importance of China's remaining aid and economic potential to Vietnam's post-war economic reconstruction – compared to the uncertainty of the Soviet commitment to aid Vietnam.

In his virtually circulated memoir, former Deputy Minister Tran Quang Co wrote: "No matter how expansionist China is, it is still a socialist country." He added that missing the opportunity to normalize relations with the United States and reluctance to join ASEAN at that time made Vietnam lonely in the face of an ambitious China.

The paradox is that the Vietnamese government's legitimacy is rooted in its claimed victory over foreign invaders. Stopping people to commemorate the war is detrimental to its own power. Nonetheless, Vietnam's official commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War remains reactive and restrictive.

Ties continued to improve from the 1990s into the 21st century. In 2008, Vietnam and China officially elevated relations to the status of a comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership, the first of its kind for Vietnam. The comprehensive strategic partnership with China evinces the high priority Vietnam assigns to its relationship with China. Vietnam only adopted a tougher approach to China following Beijing's aggressiveness in disputed areas of the South China Sea in 2014.

The war is not brought up at all in Chinese textbooks, while minimally mentioned at the end of Year 12 textbook in Vietnam. Nearly half a century later, both sides have suppressed official commemorations of the war that caused tens of thousands of deaths of soldiers from both countries.

“All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory,” writes Pulitzer Nguyen Viet Thanh in his book “Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War.” The official silence on the Sino-Vietnamese War stemmed from both governments’ attempts to control the collective memory versus the people’s struggles to make sense of injustices.

Yet the publics of both sides have not forgotten the war and continue to fight for the recognition of ordinary people’s sufferings and sacrifices. Mo Yan confirmed that his work is far from an eulogy of heroism. Soldiers were nothing but ordinary people who were dragged to the war and died tragic deaths. Mo Yan’s novel imagines that dialogues in the supernatural world might ease their pain – a necessary fiction when real world discussions are quashed.

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