The Sino-Vietnamese War: How to Forget a Victory?

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in History
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Abstract

This thesis explores the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and its extended conflicts through the 1980s, focusing on the forgotten narratives and marginalized experiences of the war's veterans. It aims to uncover why this victory has been intentionally omitted from China's official historical narrative and to highlight the veterans' ongoing struggles in a rapidly transforming society.

This research combines oral histories, extensive fieldwork, and a review of both Chinese and non-Chinese scholarly works. By integrating diverse sources, the thesis challenges the official narrative and emphasizes the need for a more inclusive historical memory that acknowledges the sacrifices and experiences of these veterans, highlighting the complexities of historical memory and the politics of memory in China, where the legitimacy of the CCP's rule is deeply rooted in its historical narrative.

Keywords: Sino-Vietnamese War, Indochina, veterans, historical memory, China, nationalism, ideological shifts, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hua Guofeng, Cultural Revolution, Three Supports, Two Militaries.
Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis explores the often-overlooked Sino-Vietnamese War and its lasting impact on Chinese veterans. The war, which began in 1979, was a brief but intense conflict between China and Vietnam. Although it lasted only 28 days, subsequent battles continued throughout the 1980s, making it a prolonged and complex period of tension.

This research aims to understand why this war, despite its significance, has been largely forgotten in official Chinese history. The study combines primary and secondary sources with personal interviews with veterans to provide a comprehensive picture of the war's impact and the struggles faced by those who served.

The research highlights several key issues:

1. **Historical Memory:** One of the main focuses is why the Chinese government has downplayed or ignored this war in its official history. The thesis argues that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimacy relies heavily on a selective historical narrative that avoids acknowledging the complexities and failures of the past.

2. **Political Context:** The study delves into the political dynamics between China and Vietnam and the broader international context involving Laos, Cambodia, the United States, and the Soviet Union. This geopolitical background helps explain the motivations behind the conflict.

3. **Veterans' Experiences:** By collecting oral histories, the thesis gives voice to the veterans, revealing their personal stories, struggles, and the emotional toll of the war. Their narratives differ significantly from the official history presented by the Chinese government.

4. **Impact on Veterans:** The thesis also examines the long-term effects on veterans, including inadequate resettlement policies and the ongoing struggle for recognition and support. These veterans often feel marginalized and forgotten by the country they serve.
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List of Abbreviations

CCP - Chinese Communist Party
CMC – Central Military Commission (China)
CMAG - Chinese Military Advisory Group
COMECON - Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CPSU - Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CCRG – Central Cultural Revolution Group
DRV - Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FUNK - National United Front of Kampuchea
GLD - General Logistics Department (within the PLA)
GRUNK - Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea
ICP - Indochinese Communist Party
ILD - International Liaison Department (within CCP)
Kangfa Yuanyue - Resist France and Assist Vietnam
Kangmei Yuanyue - Resist America and Assist Vietnam
Khmer Issarak - Free Khmer Movement
Laos Issara - Free Laos Movement
Lianmei Kangsu - Ally with Americans against the Soviets
NLF - National Liberation Front (Viet Cong)
PAVN - People’s Army of Vietnam
Pathet Lao - Lao People’s Liberation Army
PLA - People’s Liberation Army (China)
PRC - People’s Republic of China
PRK – People’s Republic of Kampuchea
Sanzhi Liangjun – Three Supports, Two Militaries
SEATO - Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
VWP - Vietnamese Workers Party
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Introduction

The Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and the subsequent border conflicts in the 1980s represent a complex chapter in the history of modern China. Despite its significance, this conflict remains a "forgotten" war, overshadowed by other historical narratives within China. This thesis, titled "The Sino-Vietnamese War: How to Forget a Victory," aims to uncover why this victory has been intentionally omitted from China's official historical narrative and highlight the veterans' ongoing struggles in a rapidly transforming society. By exploring the forgotten narratives and marginalized experiences of the war's veterans, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Sino-Vietnamese War's legacy and its implications for Chinese society and historiography.

Literature Review

The historiography of the Sino-Vietnamese War is characterized by a fragmented and often politically charged discourse. Several scholars have made significant contributions to the study of this conflict, yet their works reveal notable gaps and limitations. This section reviews key literature, highlighting their contributions and shortcomings.

Nayan Chanda's Brother Enemy: The War After the War provides a detailed account of the Sino-Vietnamese War, emphasizing the geopolitical dynamics between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Chanda's narrative is instrumental in understanding the broader international context of the conflict. However, his focus on high-level
diplomacy often overlooks the experiences of individual soldiers and the domestic implications of the war within China.

Christopher Goscha's *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, particularly his analysis of the Vietnamese proposed Indochinese Union, offers valuable insights into the divergences between Vietnam's status as both a colonizer and a colonized state. Goscha's work is notable for its multi-archival approach, drawing on sources from various countries to construct a nuanced picture of the origins of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Nevertheless, Goscha's emphasis on regional geopolitics similarly sidelines the micro-level narratives.

Kosal Path's research on the economic factors that triggered the Sino-Vietnamese War period is another cornerstone of this thesis. In *The Economic Factor in the Sino-Vietnamese Split*, Path's detailed examination of China's financial support for the Khmer Rouge regime and the subsequent fallout provides a critical context for understanding China's motivations and actions during the war. Despite his comprehensive approach, Path's work focuses more on Cambodia and less on the internal dynamics within China.

Chen Jian and Yang Jisheng have contributed significantly to understanding China's foreign policy and politics in the Cold War era. In *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, Chen Jian's analysis of Maoist China and its international strategies offers crucial insights into the ideological foundation of the Sino-Vietnamese War. Similarly, in *Political Struggles in China’s Reform Era*, Yang Jisheng's work on the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath (China's reform era) provides a valuable
framework for understanding the internal political shifts that influenced China's
decision to engage in the conflict. However, both scholars primarily focus on high-
level political narratives, often neglecting the grassroots experiences and the human
costs of the war.

The sociological perspectives provided by Fei Xiaotong and Yu Ruxin are
instrumental in contextualizing the societal changes in China before, during and after
the Sino-Vietnamese War. In From the Soil, Fei Xiaotong's concept of the
"differential mode of association" (Chaxu Geju) is particularly relevant for
understanding the social dynamics and the ongoing legacy of selfishness in Chinese
society. In Through the Storm: The PLA in the Cultural Revolution, Yu Ruxin's work
on the involvement of the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution
further explains the ideological transformations that shaped the experiences of
Chinese veterans. While both scholars offer valuable sociological insights, their
analyses are not explicitly focused on the Sino-Vietnamese War, highlighting the need
for a more direct examination of the experiences of the war's veterans.

**Methodology Overview**

This research uses a qualitative methodology, combining oral histories from
veterans, extensive fieldwork, and a comprehensive literature review to provide a
multifaceted understanding of the war's legacy. The methodology includes visits to
key sites such as the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, the Laoshan/Vi Xuyen War
Memorial, and the Laoshan/Vi Xuyen main peak battlefield. Oral histories offer
firsthand accounts of veterans' experiences, providing insights often missing from
official records. The fieldwork helps to contextualize these narratives within the physical and emotional landscapes of the war. The literature review integrates both Chinese and non-Chinese scholarly works, offering a theoretical and contextual framework for analyzing the veterans' narratives.

**Original Contribution and Significance**

This thesis makes several original contributions to the historiography of the Sino-Vietnamese War and the broader field of Modern Chinese history. This research provides a multifaceted understanding of the war's legacy by integrating oral histories, fieldwork, and a comprehensive literature review. The significance of this thesis lies in its focus on the often-overlooked narratives of Chinese veterans and the implications of their experiences for contemporary Chinese society.

One of the primary contributions of this thesis is its emphasis on the "forgotten" narratives and marginalized experiences of Chinese veterans. Through extensive fieldwork and interviews, this research illuminates the personal stories and struggles of veterans who fought in the Sino-Vietnamese War and its subsequent battles. This thesis challenges the dominant historical narratives, which have overshadowed these experiences, by bringing these voices to the forefront. This examination is particularly crucial given that the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's rule is derived from its historical narratives.

This thesis also explores the intersection of history and memory, examining how the Sino-Vietnamese War has been remembered (or forgotten) in Chinese and Vietnamese society. Through exploring various commemoration reports from
Vietnam's official media platforms, this research aims to indicate the contrast between how Vietnamese remembered the Sino-Vietnamese War as an extension of their victory over the Cambodian-Vietnamese War. At the same time, by analyzing the Chinese veterans' advocacy for recognition and the official narratives propagated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this research highlights the complexities of historical memory and its political implications. The concept of "living martyrs," as articulated by the veterans, emphasizes the enduring impact of the war on their lives and their struggle for acknowledgment.

The thesis provides a detailed analysis of the sociopolitical shifts in post-Mao China, particularly focusing on the transition from collectivist ideals to individualistic, profit-driven values. By examining the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the changes in military and veteran policies, this research contextualizes the veterans' experiences within the broader transformations of Chinese society. The contrast between the Maoist era's collectivist rhetoric and the post-Mao era's focus on economic developmentalism highlights the veterans' sense of displacement and disillusionment. Finally, this thesis addresses the policy implications of the veterans' experiences and their advocacy efforts. This research sheds light on the challenges and shortcomings of current policies by analyzing the evolution of China's Regulations on the Resettlement of Demobilized Conscripts and the establishment of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. The veterans' calls for recognition and better treatment highlight the ongoing issues in China's approach to veteran affairs and the need for more comprehensive and equitable policies.
Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured into five chapters, each addressing different aspects of the Sino-Vietnamese War and its aftermath.

Chapter 1 explores the complex geopolitical landscape of 1970s Indochina, focusing on the complicated relationships between China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. It examines the geopolitical dynamics that led to the establishment of a 'special' Laotian-Vietnamese friendship in 1977, a precursor to the Cambodian-Vietnamese War of 1978 and the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. The chapter emphasizes Laos's pivotal role despite its relatively low profile in the broader context of Indochina, highlighting how its strategic importance influenced China's decision-making. It examines the divergent visions for Laos and Cambodia held by China and Vietnam, articulated by authors such as Nayan Chanda, Christopher Goscha, and Benedict Anderson, and how these conflicting aspirations contributed to the region's instability. The chapter also discusses the French colonial legacy, which shaped the political and social structures of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, setting the stage for the following conflicts.

Chapter 2 examines the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and its impact on the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It discusses how the Cultural Revolution's policies, particularly the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign, entrenched the PLA's political involvement and influenced China's military strategies. The chapter explores the ideological shifts after Mao's death, focusing on the transition from the Cultural Revolution's radical policies to the pragmatic approaches of the post-Mao era. It
highlights the role of the PLA in maintaining order during the Cultural Revolution and how the Lin Biao incident and subsequent political shifts led to a re-evaluation of Mao's policies. By examining the PLA's transformation and the broader societal changes, this chapter sets the stage for understanding the motivations behind China's involvement in the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Chapter 3 explores the ideological shifts within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their impact on China's foreign relations, particularly with Vietnam. It examines the legacy of Mao's policies, including the strategic stance of "aligning with the United States to resist the Soviet Union," and traces their evolution into the post-Mao era. The chapter explores the emergence of different factions within the CCP after Mao's death, each advocating distinct paths forward for China and the internal political struggles that shaped China's governance and diplomatic strategies. It highlights the roles of key figures such as Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping in navigating these ideological shifts and their influence on China's decision to engage in the Sino-Vietnamese War. By contrasting Vietnam's extensive commemorative practices with China's subdued approach, the chapter emphasizes the challenges of historical memory and the lasting impact of the conflict on both nations.

Chapter 4 shifts to a micro-level analysis, utilizing a diverse range of primary sources, including fieldwork and interviews, to build on the insights from the previous chapters. Through extensive fieldwork at the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, the Laoshan/Vi Xuyen battlefield, the Laoshan/Vi Xuyen War Memorial in Malipo County, and three interviews in Gong County with veterans who fought in the 1979
Sino-Vietnamese War and subsequent battles, it provides a detailed exploration of the reasons behind the "forgotten" memory of many Chinese veterans and their subsequent marginalization. By examining the disappointments and struggles of the veterans, this chapter explains why the Sino-Vietnamese War's narrative cannot fit into the current CCP historical narrative. Chapter 5 extends the micro-level analysis by exploring the veterans' advocacy efforts and the evolution of China's veteran policies. It provides a comparative analysis of the diverse experiences and views of the veterans, with a particular focus on the discrepancies between personal narratives and the CCP's official historical narrative. This chapter highlights the ongoing issues in China's veteran affairs approach and the need for more comprehensive policies.
Chapter 1

Ensnared in the Unrelenting Turmoil of 1970s

Indochina

Prior to delving into the complex history and politics of 1970s mainland Southeast Asia, it is important to note that the Sino-Vietnamese War and its subsequent battles throughout the 1980s can be seen as products of accumulated distrust, misunderstandings, and misestimations between China and Vietnam over various trilateral relations with Laos, Cambodia, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Hanoi and Beijing had fundamentally different opinions on the concept of the Indochinese Union. Hanoi insisted on building a federation that would include Cambodia and Laos within the Indochinese Union, while Beijing supported the independence of Cambodia and Laos.

The Sino-Vietnamese War lasted only 28 days, but its subsequent battles took more than a decade to conclude. The subsequent clashes were even fiercer and caused higher casualties than the war. The bloody battles of the 1980s, including the 1984 Laoshan/Vi Xuyen battle, were not only military conflicts between Beijing and Hanoi but also proxy confrontations between Washington and Moscow.

This chapter will delve into the origins of this mutual distrust to fully explain the motivations behind the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, beginning with Laos, followed by Cambodia, and concluding with Vietnam.
A fragile peace in Laos

To understand the forgetting of the Sino-Vietnamese War, the role of Laos must be examined, as it lies at the intersection of trilateral relations between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The 'special' Laotian-Vietnamese friendship established in 1977 preceded the Cambodian-Vietnamese War of 1978 and the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. The loss of Laotian support critically preceded Cambodia's shift towards ultra-leftist governance, aligning ideologically with China during the Cultural Revolution, as China sought to extend its influence over regional communist states.

Laos, though less known, became a focal point for major powers in the 1970s due to its role in the Laotian Civil War and Anti-Communism efforts. The geopolitical implications of Laos influenced China's strategies and decisions during the conflict. Understanding Laos's role helps illuminate the broader context of the Sino-Vietnamese War and the intricate geopolitical dynamics that influenced the war's progression and memory. The entangled relationships and conflicts involving Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam created a narrative that the Chinese government might prefer to downplay, contributing to the war's 'forgotten' status in official discourses and public memory.

In *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict*, Duiker concludes that the origin of the Sino-Vietnamese War was based on divergent ideas regarding the fate of both Laos and Cambodia. Duiker explains China's strategy to maintain Laos and Cambodia
as friendly buffer states, contrasting with Vietnam's ambition to form a united Indochinese Union under Vietnamese control. As Duiker argues, "Not only would the alleged DRV\(^1\) plan for an Indochinese Union appear to rule out a meaningful role for the PRC in the area, but it might also provoke a strong counter-response from Western powers and embroil the region once more in a Cold War crisis."\(^2\) In essence, the Sino-Vietnamese War can be seen as a clash between Soviet-backed Vietnam and Western-backed China.

However, describing China's attitude toward Laos and Cambodia as purely pragmatic is misleading. China's goals were both ideological and pragmatic, reflecting a Comintern position of supporting anti-imperialist nationalists, even if they were non-Communist. This stance is aligned with the historical Chinese view of exerting hegemonic influence over border countries, expecting them to act as quiet, friendly states. Such expectations were embedded in the broader ideological framework, where China's support for Laos and Cambodia was not only strategic but also rooted in a historical context of regional dominance. This is exemplified by China's collaboration with Laotian neutralist politician Prince Phouma, which irritated the Vietnamese.

The concept of the Indochinese Union is not new; it is a continuation of a French colonial construct. This French vision of an imagined Indochinese Union forms the

\(^1\) Note: Democratic Republic of Vietnam, better known as North Vietnam

basis of conflicts between China and Vietnam, as the Vietnamese have inherited this concept from their colonial past. In "The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam," Christopher Goscha argues that the idea of a Franco-Vietnamese Indochina was complex and fraught with contradictions. Goscha notes that many Vietnamese took Albert Sarraut's proposals seriously, engaging deeply with his speech and considering the potential for an Indochinese Union with shared decision-making powers. Sarraut, who served as the Governor-General of French Indochina from 1911 to 1913 and again from 1917 to 1919, envisioned a collaborative future between the French and the Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{3} This hope for collaboration with the French arose when the exhausted Third Republic was looking to its empire to aid its economic recovery from the Great War and maintain its status as a great power. Sarraut's publication of his colonial treatise, "On the Development of the Colonies" ("La mise en valeur des colonies") in 1923, underscores the significance of this period. Goscha emphasizes that these notions of colonial reformism, development, and federalism did not originate from the aftermath of the Second World War but were rooted in responses to earlier upheavals, such as the 1908 revolts and the First World War. However, Sarraut's vision was ultimately riddled with naiveté and contradictions, leading to its eventual failure by the 1940s. At the time, though, the idea of Indochina represented both a state and a concept with which all Vietnamese had to contend. This perspective

is further nuanced by Goscha's observation that pre-French Vietnam itself was a product of centuries of colonial expansion, suggesting that the complexities of colonial rule and national identity were deeply entrenched in Vietnam's history long before French involvement.4

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* further reinforces Duiker's argument. Anderson gives clear evidence that a tiny group of French-educated elites imagined the Indochinese Union plan, and in this group, most of these local 'elites' are Vietnamese. It is a historical question that the French colonists left. With the tradition of Confucian educational systems, more and more Vietnamese elites sent their children to study under the French-Vietnamese colonial education system.5 French schools were opened in Hanoi and Saigon; they successfully achieved two goals. First, through teaching French as a second language in the lower grades, students embraced the European-invented script, which separated them from the old and traditional Confucian literates. Second, making Hanoi and Saigon became the educational centers of Indochina by limiting the French colonial education in Laos and Cambodia to junior high school (collège) as the highest educational institution. Local elites had to send their children to study in Hanoi or Saigon. However, they would all return home after graduation, working in the local administration for French

colonists. In exchange, in the eyes of French colonists, they preferred to use Vietnamese as functionaries to help colonists rule Laos and Khmers; by 1937, over 176,000 Vietnamese were sent to Cambodia and over 5,000 Vietnamese to Laos, working as functionaries.\textsuperscript{6} Indeed, the Vietnamese are also victims of colonialism, but the Indochinese Union and the Vietnamese privilege over Laotians and Khmers are all products of colonialism. Just as Christopher Goscha concludes, Vietnam was never a passive participant or victim of colonization; instead, it is also a colonizer of the weaker and a product of colonization.\textsuperscript{7}

Laotian neutralists’ failed attempts to build a coalition government were pivotal until the Pathet Lao\textsuperscript{8} took Vientiane and founded the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) following King Sisavang Vatthana’s abdication in 1975. Laos' royal family played crucial roles in modern history of Laos. Modern Laos emerged from colonization and the decline of the Lan Xang kingdom, eventually splitting into Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak. Significant figures in Laos’s history arose from these kingdoms.\textsuperscript{9} In the mid-nineteenth century, all Lao states had fallen under


\textsuperscript{8} Pathet Laos is known as a left-wing communist guerrilla. For detail, see Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, \textit{Laos: War and Revolution} (New York, NY: Happer & Row Publisher, 1970), xv

\textsuperscript{9} Grant Evans, \textit{A Short History of Laos: The Land In Between}, trans. Jiguang Guo, Gang Liu, and Ying Wang (Shanghai, Shanghai: Dong fang chu ban zhong xin, 2016), 22. Note: For clarification, members of the royal family of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak are all referred to as royal family members of Laos.
exclusive Siamese hegemony, except for Luang Prabhang, which maintained some autonomy by paying tribute to Vietnam and the Qing empire as well as to Siam. In *Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos*, Ivarsson and Goscha argue that modern Laotian history began with the French-Siamese treaties in the early twentieth century. These treaties established Laos as a French-ruled colony distinct from Siam. However, only the Kingdom of Luang Prabang gained the status of a protectorate and administrative identity. At the same time, the French ruled the other two kingdoms, Vientiane and Champasak, as colonies or military territories. The unequal distribution of autonomy gave rise to key figures like Prince Souvanna Phouma (neutralist) and Prince Souphanouvong (pro-Vietnam communist) from Luang Prabang. However, the French never clearly defined the relationships between Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak, which limited the potential for solidarity among Laotian factions and undermined the Laos Issara (Free Laos Movement), a short-lived national independence movement led by Prince Phetsarath.

Another decisive event played a crucial role in shaping modern Laos is the battle of Dien Bien Phu. This battle is essential to discuss before moving to the 1970s.

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because its outcome ended French Indochina and marked the failure of the Indochina Union. The Vietnamese later sought to revive this union after the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) annexed the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. As Christopher Goscha clarifies, "The reason for using DRV instead of Viet Minh is that Viet Minh ceased to exist in early 1951 and was never a state." The 1954 Geneva Conference redefined the geopolitics of former French Indochina, granting independence to Laos and Cambodia and temporarily dividing Vietnam into two states. For the Laos part, we are not delving into the details of the 1954 Geneva Conference, as Laos was not the protagonist, and it is irrelevant to the core argument of this section—the failure of Laos neutralists. All we need to know is that the Geneva Conference was a failed attempt at peace. Laos participated in the conference alongside the Associate States of Vietnam, DRV, and Cambodia, with Indochina and Korea as the main topics.

After World War II, under Prince Phetsarath’s leadership, Laos declared its national independence, but not everyone was ready for this outcome. Prince Phetsarath recognized as a hero who led Laos to sovereignty, is often depicted as a nationalist hero in modern Laos, as seen in tourist sites like his former palace in

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Luang Prabang, now a 4-star hotel with a short description of his heroic past.\textsuperscript{15} How did Phetsarath fail to fit into the current Laotian historical narrative? His pro-Japanese past limited his potential as a neutralist, addressing the escalating division between pro-Vietnamese and pro-Western factions. Goscha notes that “his nationalist opposition to the return of French colonialism after World War II posed a problem for colonial-minded historiography, even though he was non-Communist and wary of the Vietnamese.”\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, despite graduating from Saigon's lycée Chasseloup-Laubat, Phetsarath’s Thai wife limited his collaboration with pro-Vietnamese factions. In contrast, Pathet Lao leaders like Souphanouvong and Kaysone Phomvihane, married to Vietnamese wives, ensured their loyalty to a 'special' Lao-Vietnamese friendship.\textsuperscript{17}

Regarding the national independence movement in Laos and Cambodia, "Issara" is a crucial term, as it was a prominent force leading to Laotian and Cambodian independence. Prince Phetsarath had faith in building the Lao Issara government, but when Chinese troops\textsuperscript{18} withdrew, and the French returned, Phetsarath and Lao Issara went into exile in Thailand. Like Vietnam’s Bao Dai and Cambodia’s Sihanouk, King Sisavang Vong returned to Laos as monarch when the French realized the Indochinese

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{17} Benedict R. Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (London; Verso, 2006), 127.
\bibitem{18} Chinese troops here refer to the GMD or Chinese Nationalist army.
\end{thebibliography}
Union was hard to maintain. They turned to local monarchies to preserve Indochina within the French Union. Based on this failed attempt, the Vietnamese aimed to build a united Indochinese Union again in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{19}

Unlike Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s, which focused on bilateral relations with China, Laos concentrated its diplomatic efforts on its relationship with Vietnam, originating from the 'special' Lao-Vietnamese friendship that emerged after the Pathet Lao's victory in the Laotian Civil War in 1975. This friendship began with China's military advisory efforts during the 'Resist America and Assist Vietnam' campaign. In Chen Jian’s \textit{Mao’s China and the Cold War}, by 1952, the Chinese Military Advisor Group’s commander, Luo Guibo, approved a plan to use parts of Laos as bases for reorganization and training, laying the groundwork for the Pathet Lao.\textsuperscript{20} Like the Soviets, the Chinese showed little interest in using the Pathet Lao to overthrow the Lao government or retake South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{21} Both the Soviets and Chinese were committed to the outcome of the 1954 Geneva Conference, which guaranteed the independence of Laos. For the British, the Royal Governments of Laos and Cambodia were seen as pro-Western regimes. As newly independent states, Laos and Cambodia were required to be neutralist, ensuring that communism would not immediately

\textsuperscript{21} Nayan Chanda, \textit{Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon)} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 127.
spread to these countries. Before the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Chinese had limited knowledge of Indochina’s political landscape. Yang Kuisong argues that, by the April 1954 Moscow meeting, Chinese leaders, influenced by their Vietnamese counterparts, believed that Laotians and Cambodians were minorities of Vietnam. However, this misunderstanding did not last long. When the Geneva Conference began, Zhou Enlai, the Premier of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), quickly adjusted his stance towards Laos and Cambodia. He concluded that these countries must be treated separately for two reasons:

1. Even without American intervention, local communist armed struggles could take years.

2. Given the weakness of communist forces in both Laos and Cambodia, violent struggle might push their neutral royal governments to ally with the United States, which would aid Washington and London in organizing the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

The rise of Pathet Lao is linked to Prince Phetsarath, who founded Lao Issara, the precursor to Pathet Lao forces. However, Goscha argues that after the dissolution of Lao Issara in 1949, Phetsarath’s refusal to collaborate with Viet Minh marked the end of his political career. Now, Souphanouvong would lead the Pathet Lao under

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his royal status. But why was Pathet Lao so pro-Vietnamese? It was not just because Souphanouvong and Kaysone Phomvihane married Vietnamese women. Goscha, in the "Penguin History of Modern Vietnam," argues that creating both Lao and Khmer nationalist fronts was part of Vietnam’s plan to mirror the Indochinese Union.25 The Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP) was founded in 1949, and, according to Chanda, Laos and Cambodia were under the Indochinese Communist Party’s influence. Ho Chi Minh was aware of the anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the Khmers and Laotians. Thus, the second VWP party congress split the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) into three national parties in 1951.26 The mission was clear: attract public support and eliminate anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia and Laos, ultimately serving the goal of a Vietnam-led Indochinese Union. After the second VWP Congress, Ho Chi Minh selected Prince Souphanouvong as the leader of Pathet Lao to appease the disgruntled Lao royalty supporters. He chose a former Cambodian Buddhist, Son Ngoc Minh27, to attract public support in Cambodia. Both Souphanouvong and Son Ngoc Minh were fluent in Vietnamese. Võ Nguyên Giáp

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selected Kaysone Phoumvihane\textsuperscript{28}, the son of a Vietnamese bureaucrat in Laos, to join the creation of the Pathet Lao army. Thanks to Vietnamese efforts, Kaysone and Souphanouvong would one day rule Laos.\textsuperscript{29}

Prince Phouma is the second key figure in the neutralist faction. Simplistically, Prince Phouma is why Laos maintained a fragile peace under the Royal Lao Government until 1975. He served as the premier of Laos four times, but each term saw the goal of a neutral Laos drift further away. In \textit{A History of Laos}, Martin Stuart-Fox dates the possible peace resolution for Laos to the 1956-1957 Vientiane Accord between Premier Phouma and Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong. This accord planned to integrate the two Pathet Lao-controlled provinces under the Royal Lao government's administration and merge Pathet Lao forces with the Royal Lao Army. In return, a 'supplementary election' would form a Government of National Union, guaranteeing citizens' security, rights, and freedoms.

However, from the American perspective, this attempt at coalition-building signified that Prince Phouma might be a crypto-communist. These suspicions escalated when Prince Phouma visited Beijing and Hanoi in August 1956, despite his

\textsuperscript{28} Back in the 1930s, Kaysone Phoumvihane attended the University of Hanoi in the faculty of medicine. Similarly, before studying engineering in France, Prince Souphanouvong completed his studies at Hanoi's lycée Albert Sarraut.

explanations to the Americans that the trips sought China and North Vietnam’s acceptance and recognition of his strict neutrality and good neighbourliness policy. In the Cold War context, the Americans did everything to interrupt reconciliation between the Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao. American Ambassador J. Graham Parsons said he had "struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition." The CIA and the French Deuxième Bureau also worked hard to reshape Laotian elites’ opinions against Prince Phouma’s attempts to unite Pathet Lao with the Royal Lao Government. Following American efforts, Prince Phouma’s plan for a coalition government was attacked in the Laos National Assembly, leading to a vote of no confidence. Eventually, Prince Phouma was forced to resign, although he would return to power later. Future attempts to build a coalition with Pathet Lao became impossible after Prince Phouma's premiership until his resignation in 1975, the same year Pathet Lao established the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Overall, Vietnamese support and influence were pervasive, from the Pathet Lao's foundation to the Lao PDR's establishment. The 'special Lao-Vietnamese friendship' explains why Laos sided with Vietnam during the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Laos's geopolitical dynamics impacted China's strategies and contributed to the complex historical narrative that the Chinese government may prefer to downplay,

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thus contributing to the 'forgotten' status of the Sino-Vietnamese War in official
discourses and public memory. Understanding Laos's role provides critical insights
into the broader geopolitical landscape of Indochina and the intertwined conflicts that
shaped the region.

**The Cambodian Crisis of the 1970s**

Cambodia's situation in the 1970s is a critical part of the narrative surrounding
the Sino-Vietnamese War. It represents the most traceable origin of the war outside
the bilateral relations between China and Vietnam. The chaos in Cambodia during this
decade can be traced back to a coup d'état led by General Lon Nol and other right-
wing Cambodians, with American support, on March 18, 1970.

Prince Sihanouk appointed Lon Nol as the premier of Cambodia in August 1969,
recognizing his loyalty. However, the right-wing Cambodian leaders, including
Premier Lon Nol and Deputy Premier Sirik Matak\(^\text{31}\), gradually became disillusioned
with Sihanouk's silence and compromise regarding the Vietnamese communist
presence in Cambodia. This growing disappointment, combined with other political
and economic factors, culminated in the coup when Prince Sihanouk returned from a
foreign visit to Moscow.

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\(^{31}\) Sisowath Sirik Matak is a royal member of the House of Sisowath. Also, Sirik
Matak is the cousin of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, known for his opposition to
Sihanouk. He refused to be evacuated during the fall of Phnom Penh, and the Khmer
Rouge shortly executed him.
The details of the coup are less important than its consequences. It set the stage for subsequent events, including the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Sino-Vietnamese War. Although there are many arguments about Lon Nol's motivations, most scholars agree that he was a pro-American General who received preliminary acceptance from the Chinese and Soviets before the coup.32

There are several steps to answer why Cambodia does not fit the present PRC's historical narrative. The first thing is China's ambivalent attitude towards General Lon Nol. Before the coup, Lon Nol had visited Beijing during the 20th anniversary of the PRC. Chinese leadership put much hope in Lon Nol, hoping he would keep allowing Vietnamese troops in Cambodia to maintain the Ho Chi Minh Trails, the main access to aid NLF (National Liberation Front) in South Vietnam.33 This hope was not unfounded. The initial contact between China and General Lon Nol dates back to 1964. That same year, Prince Sihanouk accepted an agreement from Peking and Hanoi to use the port of Sihanoukville to transport arms supplies for the National Liberation Front (NLF). In exchange, Cambodia could keep 10 percent of these supplies, while food and other supplies incurred an extra fee. Lon Nol was the chief in charge of this transportation. This information comes from a 1977 interview between Nayan Chanda and Sihanouk's former personal advisor, Charles Meyer. Meyer

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32 Details see Qiang Zhai's *China and Vietnam Wars 1950-1975*, and Nayan Chanda's *Brother Enemy*.
clarified that many officers benefited from this deal and subsequently leaned towards supporting General Lon Nol in the 1970 coup.\textsuperscript{34}

The Vietnamese premier, Pham Van Dong, had warned Zhou Enlai that he did not put any hope on the forthcoming Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime.\textsuperscript{35} The Chinese maintained this ambivalent attitude to the end. The Soviets also contributed to this stance towards the Lon Nol regime. Amid the Sino-Soviet Split, both powers tried to accept Lon Nol's regime as a continuation of Norodom Sihanouk's regime, with the prerequisite of a neutral Cambodia aimed at anti-American struggle.

However, the situation changed dramatically after Lon Nol seized power during Sihanouk's foreign visit to Moscow. The new Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime announced the withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces from Cambodia. Lon Nol gave the Vietnamese communists 48 hours to leave the country, which was perhaps the most unrealistic moment in modern Cambodian history.\textsuperscript{36} Even a month after the March coup, the Chinese were still attempting to negotiate with the newly established Lon Nol regime. Chinese Ambassador Kang Maozhao informed Lon Nol that if his government allowed weapon transportation through Cambodia and permitted the presence of Vietnamese troops, China would consider recognizing Lon Nol's

\textsuperscript{34} Nayan Chanda, \textit{Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon)} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 420.


\textsuperscript{36} David P. Chandler, \textit{A History of Cambodia} (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2008), 261.
government. However, Lon Nol refused Beijing's offer, and Chinese diplomats ultimately withdrew from Phnom Penh. In contrast, the Vietnamese withdrew their diplomats three days after Lon Nol took power.\textsuperscript{37} Although the story of this 'great deal' with Lon Nol became different in \textit{Kissinger transcripts}\textsuperscript{38}, such contradictory reactions from Beijing and Hanoi imply the deepening split of political aims on Cambodia between the Chinese and Vietnamese comrade-in-arms.\textsuperscript{39}

Besides the ambivalent attitude toward Lon Nol, the Chinese failed to manage the relations between the Khmer Rouge and Prince Sihanouk effectively, presenting a nuanced challenge in fitting such sophisticated diplomatic engagements into the straightforward historical narratives of China and Vietnam. This complexity is highlighted by Qiang Zhai's argument that the development of the Khmer Rouge was somewhat isolated from China, revealing the intricacies of China's foreign policy maneuvers. Despite this isolation, China sheltered Prince Sihanouk after his overthrow, leveraging his influence to advocate for a coalition government against the Lon Nol regime. The strategic rationale behind China's support for Sihanouk can be

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\textsuperscript{38} Note: In 1973, Zhou Enlai told Henry Kissinger that Lon Nol wanted to maintain diplomatic relations with China after his coup against Sihanouk. According to Zhou, at the beginning, Lon Nol promised that he would permit using Sihanoukville to transport weapons to South Vietnam. Zhou informed Kissinger that China "rejected" Lon Nol because he had engaged in "subversive activities" and made "unreasonable and unjust" policies.
\end{flushright}
traced back to Zhou Enlai's 1967 insights. During a conversation with Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong on April 10, 1967, Zhou elaborated on the necessity of winning Sihanouk's sympathy while recognizing his nature, stating, "We have to win his (Sihanouk) sympathy, but at the same time, we have to understand his nature. The connections are like this: because France will not abandon Cambodia, the latter will not abandon us either. If Cambodia does so, it will be at odds with the coalition government in South Vietnam, in which the pro-French faction will be invited to take part. And if Cambodia worsens its relations with China, the French influence in the Far East will be further reduced, thus weakening the French leverage in relations with the US. The possibility for the US to open another front in Cambodia is not great. So exerting pressure on Cambodia can make it agreeable to our policies." ⁴⁰

What a well-said statement on the essence of Sihanouk, but sadly, it is about how to manipulate Sihanouk by analyzing his essence. Zhou even commented that Sihanouk was more intelligent than the Indonesian leader Sukarno because Sihanouk was unafraid of the People's movement. ⁴¹ Despite the DRV's immediate condemnation of the 1970 Cambodian coup, Sihanouk chose Beijing as his refuge, where he united his forces with the Khmer Communists to form the FUNK (National United Front of Kampuchea), which further complicated the narrative. FUNK was better known as GRUNK (Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea), the French

⁴¹ ibid, 100.
acronym for Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia— the government-in-exile set up by the prince in collaboration with the Khmer Rouge.42 This decision reflects the depth of Sihanouk's political strategy and the sophistication of China's diplomatic engagement in Southeast Asia, making it problematic to fit Sihanouk's status into a coherent historical narrative.43

With endless Chinese support and the popularity of Sihanouk, a countdown had already been set for the Lon Nol government. Like a domino effect from the 1973 Paris Accord, following the American withdrawal, the fall of Phnom Penh occurred just days before the fall of Saigon on April 17, 1975. The Khmer Rouge then took charge of Cambodia. Ben Kiernan contends that from that point forward, China supplanted the United States as the preeminent external force in Cambodia.44 In Brother in Arms, one of the most recent books on bilateral relations between China and Cambodia, Andrew Martha argues that although China provided substantial aid packages to the Khmer Rouge, it failed to exert significant influence over them. China was internationally condemned for maintaining relations with the Khmer Rouge while

42 Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon) (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 42.
receiving negligible returns. Martha leaves an open question in his book: "Exactly what did Chinese development aid buy?"\textsuperscript{45}

Wang Chenyi, in his Wilson Center Cold War History paper, highlights the China-Khmer Rouge relations as an ideological victory but a strategic failure.\textsuperscript{46} Based on Wang Chenyi's argument, I conclude that the Khmer Rouge’s victory highlighted the ideological conflict between Mao’s PRC and the post-Mao PRC. This conflict shaped the historical narrative of the Sino-Vietnamese War in China. In a conversation with Mao’s apparatchiks—Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen, Hua Guofeng, and Wang Dongxing—Mao famously said, “There are two things I have done in my life: defeating Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, defeating the Japanese imperialists, and the Cultural Revolution.” This statement emphasized Mao's enduring legacy and the ideological schism influencing China’s foreign policy and historical memory.\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{47} Xianzhi Pang and Hui Feng, eds., \textit{Mao Zedong Nianpu [Chronicle of Mao Zedong], 1949–1976}, vol. 6 (Beijing: Central Literature Press, 2013), 649. Note: The traceable origin of this conversation could only be found in Marshal Ye Jianying’s closing speech at the CCP central conference on March 22, 1977. The author of Mao Zedong Nianpu did not find further evidence to verify the authenticity.
Among Mao's self-recognized achievements, the Cultural Revolution stands alongside the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek and the Japanese as one of the most significant. Despite its unpopularity, Mao was deeply concerned about the future of the Cultural Revolution after his death. In Mao’s PRC, the victory and revolutionary struggle of the Khmer Rouge were crucial for supporting his continuous revolutionary theory and the Cultural Revolution. The actions of the Khmer Rouge aligned with the historical narrative of legitimacy in Mao’s China, particularly in 1975, a year marked by significant international and domestic decline. However, as China sought to move away from Mao's influence, the Khmer Rouge no longer fit this legitimacy narrative. From the Chinese perspective, the fall of the Khmer Rouge is intricately tied to the PRC’s historical narrative of its legitimacy.

China’s extensive aid to Cambodia in the early 1970s is directly linked to the political upheavals, notably the 1970 coup d'état where General Lon Nol usurped power from Prince Norodom Sihanouk. This pivotal event led Beijing to persuade Prince Sihanouk to become an ally of the Khmer Rouge. The complex situation in Cambodia contrasted sharply with the relative peace in Vietnam and Laos following their reunification. Cambodia descended into a state of hostility, terror, and genocide, culminating in the Cambodian-Vietnamese War of 1978—a significant precursor to the Sino-Vietnamese War. The shift from allies to adversaries in Cambodia's relations with Vietnam, especially compared to Laos's pursuit of peace under Prince Phouma, emphasizes the challenges faced by Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk’s government
struggled to maintain a fragile balance between competing political factions, ultimately failing to secure the neutrality essential for Cambodia's stability.

Prince Sihanouk's foreign policy philosophy is encapsulated in two critical quotations that emphasize his vision for Cambodia's path:

1. "In order to safeguard themselves, the large and small nations of Southeast Asia should deploy all of their goodwill in order to create a center of pacific resistance to all pacts or alliances susceptible to provoking world conflicts. That is to say, a large group of nations should observe neutrality strictly."^49

2. "I did not choose the liberal world or the communist world. I always chose the Cambodian road."^50

Similar to Zhou Enlai's conversation with Pham Van Dong on April 10, 1967, these statements, while reflective of Sihanouk's commitment to neutrality and self-determination, also highlight the foundational challenge of maintaining such a stance amidst the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War era. Cambodia's attempt at neutrality, as envisioned by Sihanouk, was predicated on balancing the influences of two superpower groups, a task that proved increasingly untenable as regional and international conflicts deepened.


Thus, the eligibility of Cambodia’s neutrality has a prerequisite: to have strong, trusted, and friendly neighbours with Cambodia. Just as David Chandler writes: "As in the past, however, this prosperity was dependent on the behavior of Cambodia’s neighbors and the policies of larger, more distant powers. Cambodia was neutral and at peace for as long as it served the interests other states."\(^5\) Chandler's assumption that Cambodia's neutrality was contingent on the behaviour of its neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam, is evident in historical examples. The 1954 Geneva Conference prohibited Cambodia from joining Western pacts to ensure neutrality. However, to curb the spread of communism from North Vietnam, the American-led Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established in September 1954, with its headquarters in Bangkok.\(^5\)

Certainly, pressures on Sihanouk's regime did not come only from SEATO but also from various domestic opponents. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh continued to support a group of anti-Sihanouk Cambodians, notably Son Ngoc Minh, one of the prominent leaders of Khmer Issarak.\(^5\) As part of the 1954 Geneva Conference's decision, the Chinese and Soviets convinced the Vietnamese to accept the temporary

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\(^{53}\)Note: Khmer Issarak is an anti-colonial organization that initially aimed to overthrow the French rule in Cambodia; later, it became the foundation of the Democratic Kampuchea or the Khmer Rouge regime.
partition of Vietnam and to cease supporting any Vietnam-led organizations in Laos and Cambodia, including Khmer Issarak. Consequently, Khmer Issarak was forced to disband, relinquishing significant territory to the Royal Government of Cambodia. This disbandment marked a crucial moment in Cambodian-Vietnamese relations, serving as the most direct traceable origin of the 1978 Cambodian-Vietnamese War. Several factors contributed to this development:

1. When Son Ngoc Minh and other top Khmer Issarak leaders obeyed Vietnamese orders to return controlled areas to Sihanouk's government, younger, ultra-nationalistic communists like Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Song Sen accused the Vietnamese of double standards, sacrificing Khmer revolutionary gains during the anti-French movement.


3. The rise of Pol Pot is closely tied to these events. After Tou Samouth, a monk-turned-communist, served as the secretary of Khmer Issarak, the organization was severely damaged and forced to flee to the jungles. Following Samouth's mysterious disappearance in 1962, Pol Pot was elected deputy secretary and then party secretary.54

These reasons, viewed from a Cambodian perspective, underpin the Cambodian-Vietnamese Conflict that emerged after the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh in 1975, with Pol Pot and his apparatchiks assuming control of Cambodia. As Nayan Chanda summarizes, the conflict became a problem of diverging ideologies: the radical line of Pol Pot's regime versus Sihanouk's relatively moderate, anti-American government.55

55ibid 59-60.
As the Washington Bureau Chief for the Far Eastern Economic Review, Nayan Chanda observed the Third Indochina Conflict. In March 1978, during a dinner with Vietnam's Vice-Foreign Minister Vo Dong Giang, he noted Vietnamese disdain for Pol Pot, describing his regime as "infantile communism." The Vietnamese criticized Pol Pot's legitimacy, arguing that Democratic Kampuchea's existence relied on Prince Sihanouk's prestige and lacked participation in the anti-French resistance. As Chanda explained, the Vietnamese despised and underestimated the Khmer Rouge. This underestimation led to catastrophes like the Ba Chúc massacre, which occurred just a month after Chanda's dinner with Vo Dong Giang in April 1978.

Simultaneously, the Khmer Rouge never underestimated the Vietnamese threat; instead, they prioritized it. This tension is evident in Huang Qun's memoir. Under this precondition, Huang Qun had opportunities to witness the escalation of the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict through his several visits to the Khmer Rouge. From December 3 to 15, 1977, Huang Qun accompanied CCP Vice Premier Chen Yonggui to visit the Khmer Rouge. This visit reciprocated Pol Pot's October 1977

56:ibid 60.
58:Chen Yonggui, a peasant from Dazhai, became China's vice premier, exemplifying Mao's promotion of revolutionary spirit and Cultural Revolution ideals through his agricultural success. For details, see Si Wu, Chen Yonggui Chen Fu Zhongnan Hai:
visit to Dazhai, a model village of Mao's era led by Chen. Chen was well-known in Cambodia due to the film "Nongye Xue Dazhai" (Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture). During the visit, Chen praised the Khmer Rouge's achievements, commenting that their revolution was pure, their integration of Marxism-Leninism with Mao Zedong Thought was successful, and their mistakes were manageable.59

Chen's visit received the highest reception level as Vice Premier of the PRC, with governors from each province or district offering homecoming hospitality at every train stop. However, during Huang Qun's stay in the Eastern District, the escalating Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict was evident, with daily reports of increasing casualties. Even at Chen's farewell dinner, Khmer Rouge Central Committee member Son Sen was absent due to the intensifying conflict. This indicated that the Cambodian-Vietnamese border conflict was far from ending.

**Vietnam**

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson cited the Sino-Vietnamese War as an example that challenged Marxist ideology. Although he did not delve into the specifics of the Third Indochina War, Anderson emphasized that neither China nor

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Gai Ge Zhongguo de Shi Yan (Chen Yonggui’s Rise and Fall in Zhongnanhai: An Experiment to Transform China/陈永贵沉浮中南海: 改造中国的实验) (Guangzhou: Guangdong Flower City Publishing House, 1993).

Vietnam employed Marxist theory to justify the conflict. This sets the Sino-Vietnamese War apart from previous socialist state conflicts, such as the 1956 Hungarian Revolution or the 1968 Prague Spring. This argument reinforces Eric Hobsbawm's argument from the article 'Some Reflection on the Break-up of Britain' in the New Left Review, in which Hobsbawm writes: "Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance, i.e. nationalist. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will not continue." In other words, Anderson implies that both the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Sino-Vietnamese War were conflicts driven primarily by nationalist, and not a socialist, ideology. While it is challenging to endorse Anderson's argument fully, it is evident that analyzing Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia or China's invasion of Vietnam through the lens of nationalist provides more clarity than viewing them as purely ideological struggles.

In recent years, both Chinese and Vietnamese official memories of the Sino-Vietnamese War have reached a tacit agreement to downplay the question: who is the enemy? China refers to the conflict as "the Self-Defensive War against Vietnam," emphasizing the term self-defence while omitting that the entire war was conducted by Chinese forces fighting in Vietnam. On Xinhua News Agency's website, one of the

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official media platforms of the CCP, there is no information available in either 
Chinese or English about terms like the Sino-Vietnamese War or the Self-Defensive 
War Against Vietnam. It is evident that this war does not align with the current 
Chinese historical narrative from any positive perspective.

The Vietnamese approach is different but still aligns with the tacit agreement. 
Information about the war is available through Vietnam Plus, a media platform run by 
the Vietnam News Agency. Interestingly, this information is presented only in terms 
of commemoration and is available solely in the English version, not in Vietnamese or 
Chinese. No general information is available under terms like the Sino-Vietnamese 
War or the War Against Chinese Expansionism. Instead, one must specify the name 
of a particular battle, such as the Battle of Vi Xuyen (the Battle of Laoshan to the 
Chinese).

In 2020, Vietnam Plus published a photo series titled "A Look Back at 1979 
Northern Border War," documenting the devastating damage from the Battle of Vi 
Xuyen during the Sino-Vietnamese War. The first four photos depicted public 
commemorations, highlighting the attendance of high-ranking Vietnamese leaders, 
including former Deputy Premier Trương Hòa Bình and leaders of Ha Giang 
province, where Vi Xuyen is located. The remaining photos emphasized destroyed 
factories, bridges, and other infrastructure, possibly aiming to highlight the brutality
of Chinese forces. However, in all photo descriptions, China was never mentioned explicitly; instead, the term 'enemy' was used when referring to China.62

However, the Cambodian-Vietnamese War is portrayed differently. On the Vietnam Plus platform, numerous reports commemorate the victory, with one notable report using photos to emphasize key events. It claims that Pol Pot's regime invaded Vietnam, refers to the Vietnamese troops as the 'Volunteer Army' that helped liberate the Khmers from genocide, and glorifies the Vietnamese invasion as 'liberation.' One photo description state: "January 7, 1979, Phnom Penh was liberated, and by January 17, the entire Cambodia was liberated by the Vietnamese Volunteer Army."63 Such careful term usage implies the significance of the Sino-Vietnamese War to the current Chinese and Vietnamese historical narrative, which is never forgotten but intentionally frozen.

Though the Sino-Vietnamese War's outbreak shocked the world, it follows a chronological order, making analysis possible. Christopher Goscha argues that Vietnam was never a passive participant or victim of colonization; instead, it was also a colonizer. The S-shaped territory of present-day Vietnam dates back to 1802 when

Emperor Gia Long of the Nguyen Dynasty unified the country. Before French colonization, at least two "Vietnams" coexisted: one in the Red River Delta and another in the Mekong Delta. The Nguyen dynasty expanded its territories into Laos and Cambodia. Despite criticisms of harsh colonial rule, France mediated by creating the Indochinese Union in 1887, laying the groundwork for modern Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnam was divided into three protectorates: Tonkin (Red River Delta), Annam (central region, with the imperial capital Huế), and Cochinchina (Mekong Delta). Vietnam is ethnically diverse. From the perspectives of Khmers, Laotians, and other ethnic minorities, modern Vietnam's history is also a history of striving to build a national identity.

So, where is the origin of the Sino-Vietnamese War? It can be traced through three critical steps:

1. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the subsequent 1954 Geneva Conference
2. Geopolitical divergences between China and Vietnam over Cambodia and Laos
3. The Sino-Soviet Split and Sino-American rapprochement

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In 1945, when the Viet Minh triumphed in the August Revolution, President Ho Chi Minh declared national independence in Ba Đình Square, stating: "All men are created equal."

Indeed, unifying Vietnam was the initial goal of the Viet Minh, not creating a delusional Indochinese Union by annexing Laos and Cambodia. However, plans often change. Chinese aid was crucial to the success of the First Indochina War. Despite trying to avoid confrontation with the United States after the Korean War, China provided constant aid to North Vietnam. The decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu owed much to the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG). As Duiker noted in *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, Ho Chi Minh knew the Viet Minh could not sustain their struggle without Chinese support. China covered military logistics, including food, weapons, and infrastructure maintenance. This further supports Anderson's argument that the Sino-Vietnamese War were primarily driven by nationalism.

The 1954 Geneva Conference is often seen as the earliest origin of Sino-Vietnamese divergence. Both the Soviets and the Chinese adhered to the Geneva Conference's outcome, which temporarily divided Vietnam into two neutral states pending a united election in 1956. However, when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai invited North Vietnamese leader Pham Van Dong and delegates from the Bao Dai

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regime for dinner, it reinforced Anderson's argument that China would collaborate with any state willing to serve as a friendly buffer.\textsuperscript{68} Despite the high point in Sino-Soviet relations, Vietnam had to accept the "kind" persuasion, delaying its reunification for over two decades. Such accusations became common following the Sino-Soviet Split and Sino-American rapprochement. The Soviets had little interest in Indochina, while the Chinese viewed the 1954 Geneva Conference as a stage to showcase their Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which gained recognition at the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. Sino-Vietnamese tensions escalated with the Sino-Soviet Split. As Vietnam gradually accepted the Geneva Conference's outcome, China abandoned its Five Principles to undermine Khrushchev's peaceful coexistence stance with the U.S. By 1958, Mao re-emphasized support for national liberation struggles. Despite significant shifts in China's foreign policy, China continued to back Prince Sihanouk, believing his neutrality would help China break American isolation.\textsuperscript{69}

However, these shifts did not critically damage Sino-Vietnamese relations, as both the Soviets and Chinese had already betrayed Vietnam during the 1954 Geneva Conference. The 1966 Cultural Revolution radicalized China's foreign policy,

\textsuperscript{68}Nayan Chanda, \textit{Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon)} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 127.
especially during the Sino-Soviet Split, and China pressured Vietnam to choose between them and the Soviets.

Despite increased Chinese support for Vietnam from 1956 to 1968, Mao's criticism of Soviet-led peace initiatives, especially after the 1968 Tet Offensive, nudged Vietnam closer to the Soviet Union.

After 1969, disillusioned by the lacklustre outcomes of his global revolutionary ambitions and the Soviet Union's aggressive actions, including the 1968 Czechoslovakia invasion and the Sino-Soviet border conflicts, Mao experienced significant ideological shifts. He rejected the Soviet line and denounced Khrushchev as a revisionist, emphasizing a nationalist rejection of Soviet dominance. By supporting Zhou Enlai's diplomatic efforts, Mao sought to counter Soviet threats by reapproaching relations with the United States, reflecting a complex interplay of pragmatic strategy and ideological realignment. This marked a significant pivot in China's foreign policy towards realpolitik and global diplomacy.70

For Hanoi, the sense of betrayal by China was more profound than that felt towards the Soviet Union, primarily due to two factors: the direct competition between China and Vietnam over influence in Indochina, specifically regarding Cambodia and Laos, and the noticeable disparity between China's rhetoric and its

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actions. Unlike Moscow, Beijing was a direct rival for influence over the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Rouge. Additionally, China's frequent cautionary statements to Vietnam about Soviet deceit, American schemes, and "big power" chauvinism amplified the perception of Chinese duplicity, making the betrayal seem even more stark.\footnote{Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "The Sino-Vietnamese split and the Indochina War" ed. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, \textit{The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79} (New York, and NY: Routledge, 2006), 24-25.}

However, the Sino-American rapprochement almost simultaneously achieved a breakthrough via Pakistani and Romanian channels. Chinese and American officials began peaceful negotiations over Taiwan, marking an unprecedented potential for Sino-American relations. Justifying this rapprochement to Vietnamese comrades posed a challenge. Premier Zhou Enlai repeatedly stated, "The Sino-American talks may cause temporary ups and downs in the anti-American war in Indochina and the Paris peace negotiations.\footnote{For details on the changes of the trilateral relations between China, Vietnam and the Soviet Union, see Lorenz M Luthi, “Beyond Betrayal: Beijing, Moscow, and the Paris Negotiations, 1971–1973,” \textit{Journal of Cold War Studies} 11, no. 1 (2009): 57–107, \url{https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.1.57}.} However, once the questions become clarified [in the Sino-American talks], the war of resistance in Indochina and the Paris peace negotiation will be enhanced. This is because Nixon has clearly realized that the
emphasis of America’s and the Soviet Union’s competition for hegemony lies in the Middle East and Europe rather than the Far East."  

Certainly, Zhou could not fully convince his Vietnamese comrades about the Sino-American rapprochement. These talks were crucial for the Chinese as they aimed to resolve the Taiwan issue, which should have been prioritized and addressed long before, dating back to the pre-Korean War period. Li Danhui summarizes this shift in PRC foreign policy from “ideology” to “pragmatism”. Following the direct Sino-Soviet conflicts at Zhenbao Island and Tielieketi in 1969, Chinese foreign policy had to pivot towards seeking international support rather than confronting both the Soviets and Americans. However, Chinese foreign policy in Mao's last decade was deeply flawed. After years of the Cultural Revolution, bolstered by the Continuous Revolutionary Theory and Mao's Third World Theory, China could not abandon its support for global revolutions, as this had become an essential part of Maoist China's legitimacy. Despite this ideological commitment, the Soviet nuclear threat forced China to seek rapprochement with the United States. Ideologically and theoretically, China had to continue supporting North Vietnam's anti-American resistance. Consequently, China was deeply ensnared in two complex trilateral relations: one involving China, the United States, and Vietnam, and the other involving China, the

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Soviet Union, and Vietnam. This interpretation is not even plausible for Vietnam under Le Duan's leadership, except for Hoàng Văn Hoan, who defected to China shortly after the Sino-Vietnamese War.

However, many Vietnamese leaders were skeptical of Le Duan's complete shift towards the Soviet Union, even though this did not necessarily mean they leaned towards China. This skepticism is evident in Le Duan and the Break with China, documented by Goscha and Tønnesson. First, almost no names are mentioned during the conversations, including prominent figures like Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Xuan Thuy, and Hoang Van Hoan. Second, Le Duan, the second most powerful Vietnamese communist leader, rose to prominence due to Ho Chi Minh's strategic decision. But why did Le Duan become such a powerful figure in the VWP? Goscha explains, "Ho's decision to leave the party leadership to Duan in 1957 to 1960 and to endorse his formal election in 1960 must be interpreted as a way

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74 Danhui Li, China and the Indochina War (中国与印度支那战争) (Hong Kong, HK: Cosmosbooks (天地图书有限公司), 2000), 395.
75 Note: Hoang Van Hoan (1905-1991) was a long-standing member of the ICP and a Politburo member of the Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers' Party, VWP) from 1960 to 1976. Hoan was a crucial link between the DRV and China, ambassador to Beijing 1950-57, and led many delegations to China as vice chairman of the DRV National Assembly Standing Committee in the 1960s. He lost much of his influence after Ho Chi Minh's death in September 1969. In 1973, Hoan again went to China to arrange for a visit by Le Duan and Pham Van Dong. He defected to China in July 1979. In 1986, he published his memoir (A Drop in the Ocean), which gave a rare glimpse into the inner life of the ICP/VWP.
to ensure national unity. When Vietnam was divided in two, and many Southern cadres had been regrouped to the North, the safest way to ensure that the VWP would remain a party for all Vietnamese was probably to make the leader of the Southern branch the whole party. Presumably, this was the motive behind Ho's choice."

For both Chinese and Vietnamese, on the memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War, Le Duan's problem was over-emphasizing his moral pride while extremely relegating the Chinese support for Vietnam. On the Chinese side of memory, he once said, "It was only Vietnam that was not afraid of the U.S." Hilariously, in Le Duan's view, Mao was the first to fear the Americans. Relating to the results of the 1954 Geneva Conference, Le Duan argued that Mao's fear led him to discourage the Vietnamese from fighting the Americans. Le Duan emphasized that his dislike targeted Chinese leaders, not the Chinese people. He disliked Mao extremely, saying, "the most uncompromising person, the one with the Greater Han heart who wanted to take Southeast Asia," while expressing more sympathy for both Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. Indeed, there is no way for the Chinese to fit Le Duan into their current historical narrative. Simultaneously, Le Duan also poses a problem for the Vietnamese historical narrative because he chose to forgive and forget the Soviets' mistakes and responsibilities while harshly criticizing the Chinese. Based on Le Duan's perspective, in a less biased way, the Soviets should bear at least half of the

77 ibid
78 ibid 458
79 ibid 459
responsibility since they also betrayed the Vietnamese during the 1954 Geneva Conference, with Khrushchev advocating for Peaceful Coexistence with the United States. Additionally, Brezhnev signed the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Treaty but never realistically helped Vietnam during the Sino-Vietnamese War, though they condemned China.

If, as Le Duan stated, China betrayed Vietnam three times in thirty years, how many times could the Soviets' betrayals be counted? Ultimately, Le Duan's accusations against China would lead to a dead end, erasing him from the memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War. On the Vietnam Plus platform, searching for Le Duan does not mention his position in the Sino-Vietnamese War. An article glorifying Le Duan's contributions to the VWP ends his story with his glory in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign in 1975.  

The leadership struggles in Vietnam arose largely due to the power vacuum left after Ho Chi Minh's death in the late 1960s. Under Le Duan's faction's crackdown, pro-China figures like Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp lost power, and Hoàng Văn Hoan fled to China. The strongest response to Le Duan's statements on China came from Hoàng Văn Hoan. Similar to Trương Như Tàng, who went into exile in Paris, Hoang was marginalized, persecuted, and eventually exiled to Beijing. In his

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memoir, Hoang countered almost all of Le Duan's speeches from every perspective. As a result, Le Duan sentenced Hoang to death in absentia and expelled him from the VWP. Hoang listed three undeniable mistakes attributable to Le Duan.

Firstly, Le Duan marginalized any opponents during the fourth Congress of the VWP in 1976, where many senior cadres lost power because they did not belong to his faction. Hoang recounted a meeting in 1968 that discussed the anti-American war of resistance. In this meeting, North Vietnam's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Nguyễn Thọ Chân, stated that the current aid was mainly from China, with the Soviets supporting them but fearing the Americans. Premier Pham Van Dong interrupted Nguyễn Thọ Chân, emphasizing that the Chinese feared the Americans. Ultimately, Pham did not allow Nguyễn Thọ Chân to argue this point further.81

As Goscha noted in *Le Duan and the Break with China*, after his 1952 visit to China, Le Duan told Ho Chi Minh, "Vietnam is very brave, and they are not brave at all." Duan had sensed the fundamental difference between the Chinese and the Vietnamese: "We were entirely different from them. Within the Vietnamese person, there is a very courageous spirit, and thus, we have never had defensive tactics. Every person fights."82 Secondly, Hoang highlights Le Duan's double standard and anti-

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Chinese persecution. Le Duan knew that China, despite being ensnared by the Cultural Revolution, increased aid to Vietnam. Nevertheless, he still claimed the Chinese were ungrateful for supporting Vietnam's resistance against the Americans. Le Duan also expelled the Chinese-Vietnamese by labelling them as the bourgeoisie, ignoring their contributions to the war. Finally, Hoang accused Le Duan of pressuring Trương Chinh to add anti-Chinese sentiments to the constitution and criticized his decisions to invade Cambodia and sign the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Pact.83

There was no judgment on whether Le Duan or Hoàng Văn Hoan was right or wrong. The glory of Vietnam’s victory in the Cambodian-Vietnamese War was flawed because Vietnam was ensnared in Cambodia until 1989, significantly limiting its economic development. While the Khmer Rouge committed mass genocide, their brutalities were exposed as Vietnamese troops quickly took over Phnom Penh. However, Vietnamese forces also committed genocides against Khmers and Chinese Cambodians, which is less known globally. For Vietnam, building public memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War is challenging since the current historical narrative relies on normalizing Sino-Vietnamese relations, erasing the history of this bilateral relationship during Le Duan's era. The Vietnam Plus photographs likely avoid

mentioning China as the enemy that destroyed infrastructure because much of it was built with Chinese or Soviet aid.
Chapter 2

Emerging from the Shadows of Mao's Era

Mao's Legacy and PLA in the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was a tumultuous period in Chinese history, marked by political upheaval and social chaos. This chapter will not attempt to solve and answer the complexity behind the disposal of the Continuous Revolutionary Theory after Mao's era; instead, it will explain why many senior CCP cadres discarded this central doctrine of the Cultural Revolution. For the People's Liberation Army (PLA), however, it represented a peak in political power and influence. As Mao Zedong dismantled existing administrative structures and encouraged mass movements, the PLA was pushed into a central role in maintaining order and supporting the revolution. This chapter explores how the Cultural Revolution's legacy, particularly the spirit of collectivism and the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign, shaped the PLA's role during this era and its involvement in the Sino-Vietnamese War. Understanding the division between Mao's era and the post-Mao era is key to comprehending the changes within the PLA and the broader Chinese society. The

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Sino-Vietnamese War was a significant milestone that marked the transition between these two periods. This chapter will examine how the end of the Cultural Revolution and subsequent political shifts led to a re-evaluation of Mao's policies and their impact on China's military and political strategies, ultimately contributing to the narrative of forgetting the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Many historians agree that the Cultural Revolution would not have been without the PLA's involvement. The PLA engagement in the Cultural Revolution was marked by 关于人民解放军坚决支持革命左派群众的决定 (Decision on the People's Liberation Army's resolute support for the leftist revolutionary masses) on January 23, 1967, from Central Committee of CCP and Central Military Commission of CCP. This decision later shaped the famous PLA campaign of the Three Supports, Two Militaries (Sanzhi Liangjun/三支两军); PLA played a crucial role in stabilizing the paralyzed society, which lasted until 1973. It also marked the start of the PLA's intervention in politics. According to Tang Shaojie, Mao's challenge to party and state structures during the Cultural Revolution led to their near-paralysis, prompting him to initiate mass movements that thrust the CCP into turmoil. Mao's dependence on the military, mainly through the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign, inadvertently shifted authority from the party to the military, disrupting the revolution's direction. This military ascendancy, climaxing with the Lin Biao incident, fundamentally
destabilized party governance and embedded lasting political discord. In *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, Zhang Xiaoming argues that the Three Supports, Two Militaries, also pushed China into the Sino-Vietnamese War. Through this campaign, the PLA held key administrative positions from the county level to the provincial level to stabilize the political and social order of the local situation. Deng Xiaoping deemed that such military involvement in each level of the PRC's administrative system had severely damaged the reputation of the PLA since the abuse of power escalated the PLA and civilian relations, and the military should not manipulate politics. Nevertheless, for PLA, the Three Supports Two Militaries were among the few heritages being credited after the Cultural Revolution. This thesis will later discuss "the Resolution on Certain Historical Issues since the PRC was Founded" from the June 1981 Sixth Plenum of the CCP Central Committee. Despite criticism of Lin Biao, Gang of Four and Kang Sheng manipulating the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign for their ambition, the resolution still acknowledged PLA's effort in this campaign to stabilize the Chaos.

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87 Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Party Literature Research Office, *San Zhong Quan Hui Yi Lai Zhong Yao Wen Xian Xuan Bian (Selected Important Documents Since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee:*)...
After the Boluan Fanzheng era (Eliminating chaos and returning to normal), following Deng Xiaoping and his followers' victory, the Three Supports, Two Militaries, as part of a flawed collectivism model, was discarded. The mobilization slogan "To fear neither hardship nor death" is remembered as a legacy of collectivism. Unlike many other remnants of Mao's Cultural Revolution, this slogan remains praised and widely mentioned on official platforms. It continues to encourage PLA soldiers to uphold the spirit of collectivism.89

The relationship between Mao's era and the post-Mao era is never not detached. Instead, excluding two elements from the Cultural Revolution: The Continuous Revolutionary Theory and bourgeois in the CCP90, the post-Mao era was almost a continuation of Mao's era. Veterans did not know the context of the Sino-Vietnamese War, except for Mao Zedong Thought on arming the military and the following slogans on the spirit of collectivism. Indeed, the Sino-Vietnamese War was a milestone that coincidentally distinguished the history of the PRC into Mao's era and

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88 Note: this slogan comes from a Chinese soldier named Wang Jie (1942-1965 July 14), who had served in PLA and died in a landmine testing accident for protecting Chinese militia.


90 Note: Bourgeois in the CCP refers to 资产阶级就在党内; for details, please refer to the May 16 Notification/Tongzhi from People's Daily.
the post-Mao era. Along with the nationalistic reasons behind the mobilization, Mao
Zedong Thought was applied both during the mobilization and for decades afterward.
However, the emphasis was predominantly on collectivism within Mao Zedong
Thought, which prioritized sacrificing individualism for honouring death for the
country. While this notion of sacrificing individualism is a core component of Mao
Zedong Thought, it falls short of fully explaining the broader implications of the
People's Liberation Army's (PLA) role during the Cultural Revolution. To understand
this relationship and the resulting struggles, it is essential to re-evaluate the fall of
Mao's last revolution and comprehend the underlying reasons for its collapse. 91

Three months before Mao's death, he had a conversation with his apparatchiks,
Hua Guofeng, Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen, and Wang Dongxing:

“There are two things I have done in my life. One is defeating the Chiang Kai-
shek to Taiwan, defeating the Japanese imperialists; another is the Cultural
Revolution.” 92

91 For details on the origins of the Cultural Revolution, see the trilogy of Roderick
MacFarquhar. Roderick Macfarquhar, The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, II: The
II, III vols. (Hong Kong: 新世紀出版社 (New Century Press), 2012). Roderick
Macfarquhar, The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, I: Contradictions Among the
(Hong Kong: 新世紀出版社 (New Century Press), 2012). Roderick Macfarquhar,
The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, III: The Coming of the Cataclysm (文化大革

92 Xianzhi Pang and Hui Feng, eds., Mao Zedong Nianpu [Chronicle of Mao
Regarding the Cultural Revolution as the most significant 'two things' in his lifelong revolutionary struggle, Mao tried to protect the result of the Cultural Revolution in his last years. Why was Mao so desperate to safeguard the Cultural Revolution? Gao Wenqian, in his book *Later Years of Zhou Enlai*, explains the origins of the Cultural Revolution. He argues that the earliest traceable origin of the Cultural Revolution came from the Death of Stalin, developed through the Sino-Soviet Split, especially after Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union). At least, Gao was correct on one thing that Mao was panicking and desperately wanted to find the "Chinese Khrushchev".\(^{93}\) The "Chinese Khrushchev" question is traceable to the Great Leap Forward's failure (GLF) and the Seven Thousand Cadre Conference in 1961 and 1962, respectively.

Consequently, for the former Mao was forced to take responsibility and let his trusted apparatchiks, Liu Shaoqi, Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping, work on the economy and stop the famine; for the latter, after receiving tremendous criticism from the senior cadres of the CCP for the failure of GLF, Mao was removed from the real power of CCP, only nominally kept the title of PRC's chairman, which was ironically a suggestion of Liu Shaoqi.\(^{94}\) He later became a victim of the Cultural Revolution.

\(^{93}\) Wenqian Gao, *晚年周恩来 (Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary/Later Years of Zhou Enlai)* (Hong Kong: Mirror Books (明镜出版社), 2003), 85, 88.

\(^{94}\) For criticism of Liu Shaoqi, see Hua Gao, *How Did the ‘Red Sun’ Rise over Yan’an—A History of the Rectification Movement* (红太阳是怎么升起的: 延安整风运动史)
At the same time, the Vietnamese leadership harboured reservations regarding Khrushchev's secret speech, perceiving its implications through a lens distinctly different from Mao's primarily ideological critique of Stalin. Ho Chi Minh, in particular, was deeply concerned about the ramifications of Khrushchev's revelations for Vietnam's national reunification efforts. This divergence in perspective emphasized a fragile Sino-Vietnamese consensus, one that the subsequent shifts in Chinese foreign policy during the Cultural Revolution would strain further. As China embarked on a path of radical internal transformation, its foreign policy took on a more isolationist and ideological tone, leading to a significant reduction in aid to Vietnam in the critical moment of reunification.

Conversely, the Soviets seized this moment to bolster its support for Vietnam significantly, stepping in to fill the void left by China's retrenchment. This period marked a complex chapter in the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations, problematizing efforts on the public commemoration of any themes of camaraderie between China and Vietnam, which also implies the difficulties for the public commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War. The resultant recalibration of alliances and aid dynamics during this critical juncture of Vietnam's reunification reshaped regional geopolitics and sowed the seeds for future diplomatic challenges.

运动来龙去脉 (Hong Kong, HK: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press (香港中文大学出版社), 2000).

Historians, including Roderick Macfarquhar, Chen Jian, Qian Liqun, Li Danhui and Yu Ruxin, are asking a simple question: Why did Mao want to launch such a catastrophic movement to destroy every achievement that he and his comrade-in-arms had made? Certainly, if we skipped all the previous causes and consequences, the direct answer is in the May 16 Notification. Gao Wenqian's answer was successfully reflected in this Notification:

“The bourgeois representatives who have penetrated the party, the government, the army, and various cultural sectors are a group of counter-revolutionary revisionists. Once the conditions are ripe, they will seize power and transform the proletarian dictatorship into a bourgeois dictatorship. Some of them we have already identified, but not others. Others, for example, individuals like Khruschev, who still enjoy our trust, are being trained as our successors and can be found at present among us.”

Mao made two predictions: First, the party was already infiltrated by bourgeoisie, and second, there was a Chinese Khrushchev inside the party. The answer to Mao's mindset on the Cultural Revolution is clear. Clean out the bourgeoisie in the CCP and find out whom the Chinese Khrushchev became, a duet that marked the start of the decade-long Cultural Revolution. At least for this thesis, the first prediction received positive reflection, and the second remained questionable.

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For Sino-Soviet, Sino-American and Sino-Vietnamese relations alike, 1969 was a year that marked a profound transformation. This transformation is known as Lianmei Kangsu (ally with Americans against the Soviets). This period was particularly turbulent for Sino-Soviet relations. The border conflicts in Heilongjiang and Xinjiang were not isolated incidents but rather the culmination of a series of unequal treaties historically signed between the Chinese and Russians long before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) or the Soviet Union. Russia's infiltration of Xinjiang began in 1851 after the first trade treaty between Qing China and Imperial Russia. During the Russian Civil War, Xinjiang became a refuge for the defeated Russian White Army, making Soviet control of Xinjiang crucial for border security. The Soviets supported Chinese ethnic minorities' armed struggles, leading to the 1944 Three Districts Revolution and de facto Soviet control of Yining, Tacheng, and Altai. Sovietization of education in these regions fostered a preference for the Soviets among ethnic minorities like Tartars, Uyghurs, and Kazakhs.

This orchestrated division laid the groundwork for direct Sino-Soviet confrontation. But before the 1969 direct Sino-Soviet confrontation, the previous Soviet effort in Xinjiang eventually led to the 1962 Yi-Ta incident in Xinjiang, a
precondition of the 1969 border conflicts. Following the Yi-Ta incident, the situation nearly escalated into a full-scale Sino-Soviet war due to two major border conflicts in 1969. In Heilongjiang, the conflict over Zhenbao/Damanskii Island has intensified since early February. Battles were fought in this contested area, but the conflict scale between Sino-Soviet border troops was limited; still, the casualties were heavy. Yu Ruxin argues that the significance of the Zhenbao Island incident was the propaganda of Anti-Revisionism since no senior cadres could deny Soviet chauvinism when the situation in Zhenbao Island escalated. Mao had realized a full-scale Sino-Soviet war was unlikely. However, he wanted to use the Zhenbao Island conflict as a propaganda machine to call for solidarity to solidify the Cultural Revolution. In August, in Tielieketi, Xinjiang, the Soviets orchestrated a hidden attack on Chinese border troops, seemingly in retaliation for the Zhenbao Island border conflict. During Ho Chi Minh's funeral in September, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai did not answer Soviet Premier Kosygin's proposal for peace talks; instead, Zhou informed Mao about Kosygin's request. A Sino-Soviet conversation seeking peace would occur two days later at Beijing's airport, which temporarily interrupted the escalation of a full-scale

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97 For details on Yi-Ta incident, see Zhihua Shen and Danhui Li, Zhan Hou Zhong Su Guan Xi Ruo Gan Wen Ti Yan Jiu (战后中苏关系若干问题研究/Research on Several Issues in Post-War Sino-Soviet Relations) (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2006), 486-490.
Sino-Soviet nuclear war. However, the Sino-Soviet friendship could not go back, and the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations occurred three decades later in 1989.9899

Now, simultaneously facing the challenges of anti-imperialism (American) and anti-revisionism (Soviet), China had become internationally isolated; it had to seek change. Sino-American rapprochement seemed possible when the Sino-Soviet Split became unavoidable in the same year. After 1967’s February Countercurrent, backed by Mao, the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) became the de facto leadership of the PRC, replacing the function of the Politburo of the CCP. Even Premier Zhou Enlai had given up the struggle by committing to CCRG:” *From now on, you make decisions; I do the work.*”100

However, the removal from power also brought changes to China's future foreign policy. Four Marshals, Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Ye Jianying and Xu Xiangqian, have been out of power but still tried to make suggestions to improve China's foreign policy. The most significant contribution made by the four marshals is that they redefined the trilateral relations between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, differentiating from the report of the 9th National Congress of CCP. They

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100 Wenqian Gao, *晚年周恩来 (Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary/Later Years of Zhou Enlai)* (Hong Kong: Mirror Books (明镜出版社), 2003), 193.
suggested that the chance of a united front of Soviets and Americans invading China was extremely unlikely; instead, China could improve its foreign relations by manipulating the trilateral relations between China, the Soviet Union and the United States. This suggestion via Zhou was eventually handed to Mao and significantly impacted the Sino-American Rapprochement; in fact, the Sino-American initial contact was established by December 1969, which founded the Sino-American normalization.\(^{101}\)

Through the 1971 table tennis championship in Nagoya, Japan, Mao eventually, against all the odds, approved the invitation of the American table tennis team to visit China, which marked the start of the Sino-American rapprochement.\(^{102}\) This invitation is better known as Ping-Pong diplomacy, which eventually brought Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China and Nixon to China. The Sino-American rapprochement also provides Deng Xiaoping with opportunities for rehabilitation. Through Zhou's spectacular diplomatic ability, Jiang Qin eventually labelled Zhou Enlai as a representative of 'right surrenderism' since Zhou accepted a private meeting with Henry Kissinger on 13 November 1973 during the 1973 Kissinger visit to China. Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated after he joined the event to criticize Zhou Enlai.\(^{103}\)

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\(^{101}\) Jisen Ma, 外交部文革紀實 (The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), 268-273.

\(^{102}\) Jian Chen, Mao's China and the Cold War, of The New Cold War History. (Chapel Hill [N.C.]; University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 259-261.

\(^{103}\) Wenqian Gao, 晚年周恩来 (Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary/Later Years of Zhou Enlai) (Hong Kong: Mirror Books (明鏡出版社), 2003), 458-461.
Ultimately, neither the Sino-Soviet Split, Sino-American rapprochement, nor the Soviet-American detente was good for Hanoi. All the above diplomatic changes had a tremendous impact on Hanoi's decision-making to reunify South Vietnam. In March 1972, North Vietnam launched its spring offensive across the demilitarized zone in Central Highlands and the Cambodia-Vietnam border northwest of Saigon to respond to Nixon's Vietnamization of the Vietnam War. Under the background of Sino-American rapprochement and Soviet-American detente, Nixon was less worried and authorized extensive bombing of military targets across North Vietnam, which made the North Vietnamese suffer.\(^\text{104}\) For Le Duan, both Sino-American rapprochement and Soviet-American detente was a betrayal of the Vietnamese people. But he would eventually lean to the Soviets, not the Chinese. For the Vietnamese, China's *Lianmei Kangsui* crossed a red line by aligning with the Western bloc purely for its national interests; this was not a choice determined by Le Duan, but it necessitated Vietnam's choice of the Soviets over the Chinese. As Hoang Van Hoan did, anyone denying this fact would end up marginalized or defecting to China.

Overall, the significance of *Lianmei Kangsui* laid the foundation for the post-Mao era. The Sino-American Rapprochement marked a strategic pivot where China began to distance itself from the Soviet bloc and gravitate toward the American bloc, which included embracing the market economy. This shift emphasizes the earlier argument

in this chapter that Mao's era and the post-Mao era are interconnected. The post-Mao era should be viewed as a continuation of Mao's policies, excluding specific elements from Mao's final years.

Deng Xiaoping, Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Vietnamese relations

Public commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War is difficult because there is still a significant gap in understanding between officials and the public, including veterans from the Sino-Vietnamese War, making the event a continuing source of controversy. On the one hand, the officials call the Cultural Revolution a decade-long social-political turmoil. On the other hand, most veterans considered themselves victims of the post-Mao era as their lives were still tough.

Such contradiction is likely a result of the ambiguous narrative of the Cultural Revolution. Even today, from the official PRC history narrative, the ending of the Cultural Revolution is usually marked by the smashing of the Gang of Four, which simplified the collapse of the Cultural Revolution. The reason behind this could be simple: the Cultural Revolution was ended by a coup d'etat without any trial, which was morally and legally flawed.

The ultra-leftist orientation was evident even prior to the start of the Cultural Revolution. The first director of the ILD, Wang Jiaxiang (Zhonglianbu, International Liaison Department of the CCP), held a moderate view on the Sino-Soviet Split, for
which he doubted there would not be a world war soon so that PRC should concentrate on rehabilitating the economy from the failure of GLF. His proposal was later criticized and became known as Sanheyishao (*Three Closeness and One Less*).

Though considered a pro-Mao loyalist, Wang's moderate views were disliked by Mao, leading to his purge during the Cultural Revolution. Wang's fall exemplifies Deng Xiaoping's dangerous situation. Despite being a Mao loyalist, Deng's political career was at risk following the rise of the Gang of Four and his inability to align with the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰⁵ Back on track to the Sino-Vietnamese War, Deng Xiaoping was one of the protagonists; it is the same case in the Cultural Revolution, where Deng was also a protagonist. In the official narrative, Deng Xiaoping was not the successor of Mao's era; instead, he started the PRC's reform era and was called the ‘chief engineer of the reform and opening up.' At the same time, it is true that not only the CCP officialdom but also some historians like Vogel credit the role of Deng Xiaoping's contribution in the post-Mao era.¹⁰⁶ This thesis will not challenge the crucial role that Deng Xiaoping played in both the Cultural Revolution and the post-


Mao reform era. However, some criticism of Deng Xiaoping's role would provide us with a more nuanced and neutral perspective. In *Deng Xiaoping Before the Cultural Revolution: Mao's Vice Marshal*, Zhong Yanlin explains that Deng's essence is a pro-Mao loyalist; based on this fact, Deng Xiaoping's political career was almost fully attached to Mao Zedong until Deng was not yet ready to catch up after the Great Leap Forward. The essence of the Mao-Deng conflict is traceable to the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadre Conference, where Deng Xiaoping insisted on supporting PRC chairman Liu Shaoqi; Deng's conflict with Lin Biao and Jiang Qing reassured that Deng's Cultural Revolution years would be tough.\(^{107}\)

Deng's essence would be further evident in the move to the post-Mao era. For building the 'process of forgetting' of the Sino-Vietnamese War, the most significant contribution of Deng Xiaoping before the Cultural Revolution is that he was a witness to Chinese foreign policy changes, from the Sino-Soviet Split to the Sino-Vietnamese Split; he was always there, and such rich experience in foreign affairs is an essential foundation that set Deng's mindset on choosing the Sino-Vietnamese War instead of any compromise.

Zhong argues that Chinese foreign policy was in dual-track throughout Mao's era. On the one hand, the PRC government held official diplomatic relations with

countries. On the other hand, it maintained party-to-party communication with the local communist parties. In this period, Mao Zedong dominated the CCP's foreign relations, and Deng Xiaoping could be described as the executor of Mao's will. In the Sino-Soviet relations, Deng was the main organizer and representative on the debate of ideological conflict between China and the Soviet Union. Deng's pitiless image of the Soviets satisfied Mao's will.

Meanwhile, Deng's 'tough' image also pushed Vietnam either willingly or unwillingly to lean toward China when they had to face the hassle of choosing between the Chinese and the Soviets.\(^{108}\) This dual-track diplomacy continued until the Sino-Soviet Split was exposed to the public after the famous Nine Open Letters to CPSU members.\(^{109}\) Chapter 1 discussed Le Duan's local revolutionary status as an essential factor contributing to his dislike of China. Here, Deng's 'tough' image over Vietnam on the issue of the Sino-Soviet Split might also have contributed to Le Duan's outrage at China. His anger was evident and reasonable regarding the trilateral aid negotiation between the Soviets, Chinese and Vietnamese. In *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*, a series of Wilson Center papers, Stein Tønnesson, in his *Tracking Multi-Directional*

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109 九评苏共/Nine Open Letters to CPSU members is a series of open letters published in the People's Daily and Red Flag between September 1963 and July 1964. It aims to criticize Soviet revisionism based on Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the 20th Congress of CPSU, which marked the Sino-Soviet Split.
Dominoes, depicted a hilarious metaphor by Le Duan from a conversation he had with Deng in 1966. For Le Duan, all of Moscow's aid had become problematic because most aid had to be taken from the Chinese railroad before entering North Vietnam. By this moment, Le Duan had no choice but to listen to the 'real bad experience' that his Chinese comrades, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, had with the Soviets. Instead of alleviating the escalated Sino-Soviet divergence, Le Duan very untimely referred to the current Sino-Soviet relations as similar to the relations between the CCP and Guomindang during the First United Front, by his wish, was initially wishing less Chinese intervention in Soviet aid across China to Vietnam but went opposite.¹¹⁰

Official narratives highlight one of Deng Xiaoping's notable achievements, which was easing tensions with the Western world, particularly improving Sino-American relations — a fundamental step towards China's economic prosperity. Although it is undeniable that the Sino-American Rapprochement stands as one of the pivotal moments in PRC history, Deng's efforts can be seen as an extension of Mao Zedong's legacy. The rationale is straightforward: Deng was not a participant in the early stages of the 1972 Sino-American Rapprochement or the arrest of the Gang of Four. Moreover, despite the downfall of the Gang of Four, Deng continued to face

criticism. More importantly, the origins of Sino-American negotiations can be traced back to the mid-1950s.

In conventional narratives, Mao is often portrayed as a steadfast leader in Anti-Imperialism and Anti-Revisionism, a stance emphasized by the Sino-Soviet Split. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that Mao might have favoured the adaptability of the American system over the rigid Soviet bureaucracy. As far back as the Yan'an period, Mao confided in John S. Service, a member of the Dixie Mission\textsuperscript{111}, expressing that foreign capital was essential for China's industrialization. In return, China would open its markets to American exports and supply the United States with raw materials. This early openness to cooperation illustrates a dual aspect of Mao's strategic approach to foreign relations, setting a foundation for later rapprochement initiatives. However, it is worth questioning whether Mao maintained this position consistently throughout the Korean War.\textsuperscript{112} This contradiction questions the conflicts between the image of Mao and his real personality. Such ambiguous and variable Mao's personality became a reason that justified his efforts in the political struggle until his end of life.

Deng's short rehabilitation during the Cultural Revolution was mainly a result of the Lin Biao Incident, where Lin Biao, Mao's comrade-in-arms, mysteriously died in

\textsuperscript{111} Note: from 1944 to 1947, the Dixie Mission was formerly known as the United States Army Observatory Group.

\textsuperscript{112} Yun Shi and Danhui Li, 難以繼續的「繼續革命」：從批林到批鄧, 1972-1976/The Difficulty of Continuing the “Continuing Revolution”: From Criticizing Lin to Criticizing Deng, 1972-1976 (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2008), 111.
an airplane crash on 13 September 1971. As early as the 1970 Lushan Conference (August-September), the conflicts between Mao and Lin had already been publicized among senior cadres. Mao was strongly disappointed by Chen Boda's criticism of Zhang Chunqiao since Zhang's ideology perfectly matched Mao's intentions; Zhang and his ideology were the foundation of the Cultural Revolution. In October 1970, Mao launched the Criticize Chen campaign. One of Mao's initial wishes for this campaign was to test Lin Biao and his Fourth Field army generals' loyalty, which was, by now, something that Mao was concerned about as a potential threat to the Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, in the end, Mao did not receive the review letter from Lin Biao, but only from Lin's following generals, Huang Yongsheng, Li Zuopeng, Wu Faxian, and Qiu Huizuo, which escalated Mao's concern about Lin Biao. Mao pointed out his disagreement with Lin Biao's slogan of Four Greats: 'Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander, Great Helmsman,' implying Mao's strong disappointment and distrust of his hand-picked successor, Lin Biao.113 Mao was extremely disappointed by the attitude of the Fourth Field Army generals' review letters, but Lin Biao still chose to defend these generals, which further intensified the Mao-Lin conflict. The final strike on Lin Biao's defection was Mao's south tour. Lin determined that Mao had decided to persecute him since Mao's south tour.

'coincidentally' met almost every general Lin Biao had promoted. The defection of Lin Biao is a long story to tell. We need to know that following the Lin Biao incident, most of the remaining Chinese generals were out of power throughout the Cultural Revolution. The First Field Army under marshals Peng Dehuai and He Long was purged; the Second Field Army under Deng Xiaoping and Liu Bocheng was purged; the Third Field Army under Su Yu and Chen Yi was purged; now, the Fourth Field Army under Lin Biao was purged. The purge here does not mean execution, but the political career of the generals from these four field armies could be significantly negatively affected. The purge of PLA generals after the Lin Biao incident severely damaged the Cultural Revolution's credibility. PLA intervention in politics was crucial to its continuation and fundamentally impaired the PLA's combat capabilities.

The military, developed through wars like the Second Chinese Civil War and the Korean War, was a cornerstone of the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong viewed the

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115 Ruxin Yu, “林彪研究专辑(一)/Lin Biao Research Album (I),” Remembrance 166 (August 31, 2016), http://prchistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/166%E6%9C%9F%E8%AE%B0%E5%BF%86%E6%9E%97%E5%BD%AA%E4%B8%93%E8%BE%91%E4%B8%80.pdf, 8-9.

military as the "gun barrel" supporting the "pen barrel" of the Central Cultural Revolution Group. However, the military was the only area Mao's faction could not fully control, as its leaders were largely first-generation revolutionaries. Mao believed these generals could not be trusted and needed to be purged to secure the Cultural Revolution's future. Consequently, including the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign must be out; Mao was ensnared in the fear of how to safeguard his Cultural Revolution after the absence of the PLA.

The Lin Biao incident is commonly recognized as a turning point of the Cultural Revolution, as Mao's hand-picked successor defected and ended up in an air crash, which raised tremendous questions about the legitimacy of the current *Continuous Revolution Theory*. The Following Criticizing Lin Biao, Criticizing Confucius campaign extended further doubts about the practicability of the Cultural Revolution.\(^\text{117}\)

After the Lin Biao incident, while most PLA generals were removed from central political positions in Beijing, they continued to enjoy a strong reputation and charisma among junior officers and soldiers within the PLA. By 1975, Mao Yuanxin\(^\text{118}\) was the

\(^{117}\) For details and criticism of this campaign, see Shi, Yun, and Danhui Li. 難以继续的「继续革命」：從林到到 frec, 1972-1976/When the “Continuing Revolution” Goes Awry: From Anti-Linbiao Campaign to Anti-Deng Xiaoping Campaign, 1972-1976. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2008, 32-38.

\(^{118}\) Mao Yuanxin is the son of a CCP martyr, Mao's younger brother Mao Zemin, whom Xinjiang warlord Sheng Shicai slaughtered in 1943; Yuanxin is Mao Zedong's nephew.
sole influential military figure within the PLA who fully supported the Cultural Revolution, holding the roles of deputy director of the Revolutionary Committee and military commissar of Liaoning Province. Yuanxin's position laid the foundation for his favourable relationship with Chen Xilian, who was Mao's most trusted general during the latter years of Mao's life.

For this thesis, the Lin Biao incident highlights the PLA's growing disappointment with the Cultural Revolution and the Mao-backed Gang of Four. The PLA emerged as a decisive force in ending the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four's influence. This makes it nearly impossible to discuss the Sino-Vietnamese War without acknowledging the PLA's role during the Cultural Revolution. Many causes of the Sino-Vietnamese War, from political motivations to mobilization slogans and even veterans' post-war resettlements, are deeply intertwined with the Cultural Revolution.

Deng's rehabilitation is undoubtedly a long story, but we must skip its process and jump to the end here. Almost a year prior to the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng had another conversation with Le Duan on 29 September 1975. In this conversation, both Deng and Le Duan disagreed on whether the Soviets or the

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Chinese threatened the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. This conversation ended as both sides could not convince one another.\textsuperscript{121} Shortly after this conversation, Liu Bing, the deputy secretary of CCP at Tsinghua University, among three other senior scholars and cadres, wrote a letter to Mao Zedong aiming to criticize Chi Qun and Xie Jingyi, who were two hand-picked leaders of Tsinghua University by the Gang of Four.\textsuperscript{122} This letter initially went through Deng Xiaoping before being handed to Mao, which was why Mao felt sure that the criticism in the letter aimed to criticize him. In return, Mao restated the significance of class struggle by publicizing his comments on the Cultural Revolution, stating that three out of ten, three are the portion of mistakes, and seven are the portion of achievements.\textsuperscript{123} As a result, Deng was criticized again as he refused to acknowledge the Cultural Revolution as achievements outweighed mistakes, which caused Deng to lose Mao's trust again but win much sympathy and support from the PLA and civilians.

\textbf{Who ended the Cultural Revolution?}


Indeed, the answer does not lie with Deng Xiaoping, as he was singled out by Mao for criticism following the Liu Bing incident. Rather than the Gang of Four, Mao Yuanxin emerged as the pivotal figure in advancing the criticism of Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and Ye Jianying. These actions ultimately led to the ousting of Deng and Ye from power. Mao Yuanxin's insurgent stance and radical notions, however, would swiftly lead to the downfall of his political career.¹²⁴ Shi Yun and Li Danhui argue that Mao chose to select Hua Guofeng as his successor as a compromised result, though Hua was already the best solution.¹²⁵ On 8 January 1976, Zhou Enlai passed away; thousands of civilians spontaneously organized and marched to Beijing's Tiananmen Square to commemorate Zhou's contributions to the founding of the CCP and PRC. This event was soon recognized as a counter-revolutionary act against the prevailing trend of the Cultural Revolution. The Gang of Four identified Deng as the orchestrator behind this massive demonstration, leading to Deng losing all the power he held before Mao's death.

Consequently, Mao selected Hua Guofeng as his successor, which was a compromise choice since Hua's status as a pragmatist satisfied Mao, the Gang of

¹²⁵ Details on how Hua Guofeng came to power, see ibid, 607-613.
Four, and senior cadres who leaned toward Deng. Selecting Hua Guofeng as the new PRC premier also marked the removal and absence of Deng from power and politics until Mao's death. Hua would become an essential figure in the future of the Cultural Revolution. Hua is a key figure that cannot be ignored in the context of the Sino-Vietnamese War since he was the authentic PRC supreme leader before the Sino-Vietnamese War. His apparatchiks had numerous different interactions with both the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam compared to Deng, which increased the challenge for public commemoration. Perhaps the only fault of Hua Guofeng was his insistence on labelling the public commemoration of Zhou Enlai as counter-revolutionary. This stance aligned with the intentions of the Gang of Four. Later, this point would be the basis for harsh criticism of Hua by Deng's followers.

Returning to the question of 'who ended the Cultural Revolution,' Hua Guofeng was undeniably a pivotal figure. Together with Ye Jianying, he played a leading role in the arrest of the Gang of Four. This contrasts the CCP's official narratives, often underplaying Hua's contributions to the post-Mao era reforms. Han Gang contributed significantly to the discussion of Hua Guofeng. He summarizes that the current official narrative of Hua since the 1980s is based on One Merit and Four Demerits ("yizheng sifu"/一正四负). The sole commendable action attributed to Hua was smashing the Gang of Four. The negative aspects include mistakes in the "Two
Whatevers" policy, delays in the rehabilitation process, the establishment of a new
cult of personality around Hua, and mistakes in some ultraleftist economic reforms.126

Vogel offers a neutral and sympathetic portrayal of Hua's legacy during this
period (September 1976 - December 1978). Indeed, Hua Guofeng emerged as one of
the most powerful political figures in the history of the People's Republic of China.
Following Mao's death, Hua became the first person in the history of the PRC to be
named chairman of the party, premier, and chairman of the Central Military
Commission simultaneously, granting him immense power, at least in name. Vogel
further defended that Hua's maneuver was in the arrest of the Gang of Four. Deng's
return made him the most important protagonist of the early post-Mao era. When
criticism later targeted Hua, Deng's supporters often exaggerated Hua's intentions in
criticizing Deng's policies, suggesting he aimed to delay China's transition into the
post-Mao era. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Hua Guofeng never explicitly
banned Deng from returning to work, and Hua's criticism on Deng ceased as early as
March 1977.127

Han Gang highlighted that perhaps the only fault he could identify was Hua
Guofeng's decision to label some protesters as counter-revolutionaries during the first

126 Gang Han, “还原华国锋——关于华国锋的若干史实 (Restoring Hua Guofeng -
Some Historical Facts about Hua Guofeng),” Yanhuang Chunqiu 炎黄春秋, no. 2
127 Ezra F. Vogel, Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China (Cambridge, MA:
anniversary of Zhou Enlai's death in 1977. He further argued that Hua is arguably the most modest leader in the history of the CCP and the PRC. He cited the December 1978 Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP as an example, where Hua, who convened the meeting, faced severe criticism for his "Two Whatevers" policy. Rather than retaliating, Hua welcomed the free speech environment among senior cadres and admitted his mistakes regarding the "Two Whatevers." It is widely acknowledged that this session marked the end of Hua Guofeng's political career or the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's era. However, given the scarcity of primary and secondary sources, it is too simplistic to conform solely to the CCP's narrative on Hua Guofeng. Han concluded his article by reaffirming his support for Hua's status in the post-Mao era, noting that in less than three years of leadership, Hua oversaw a peaceful transition from the aftermath of Mao's death to a new era, culminating in the transfer of power to Deng Xiaoping. Han argues that this peaceful transition merits a more favourable representation in official history.

The Sino-Vietnamese War is a pivotal moment that illustrates the transition from Mao's to the post-Mao era. During the Cultural Revolution, the PLA enjoyed unparalleled influence, stepping into the political vacuum created by Mao's radical policies. The Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign highlighted the PLA's central role in maintaining social order and supporting Mao's revolutionary objectives.

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128 Gang Han, “还原华国锋——关于华国锋的若干史实” (Restoring Hua Guofeng - Some Historical Facts about Hua Guofeng),“炎黄春秋” Yanhuang Chunqiu, no. 3 (2011), 15-16.
However, the Lin Biao incident and the end of the Cultural Revolution marked a
turning point, leading to a gradual decline in the PLA's political power.

In the post-Mao era, China shifted its focus toward economic growth and
modernization, relegating the PLA to a more traditional military role centred on
homeland security. This shift, coupled with the political and ideological re-
evaluations that followed the Cultural Revolution, contributed to the gradual erasure
of the Sino-Vietnamese War from public memory. As China embraced a market
economy and sought to improve its international standing, the war's complex legacy
and the PLA's contentious role during the Cultural Revolution were quietly sidelined.

By exploring the intricate connections between the Cultural Revolution, the
PLA's political involvement, and the Sino-Vietnamese War, this chapter emphasizes a
central theme of this thesis: the mechanisms through which a significant military
victory is forgotten. The PLA's transformation and the broader societal shifts in post-
Mao China reveal the intricate process of historical memory construction and the
deliberate choices that shape collective remembrance and forgetting.
Chapter 3

Echoes of Revolution: The CCP's Ideological Shifts and the Road to the Sino-Vietnamese War

This chapter explores the Sino-Vietnamese War, a key event in Southeast Asia's Cold War history that emphasizes the complex dynamics within China's political landscape in the post-Mao era. Against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet Split, this analysis delves into the ideological shifts within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their profound impact on China's foreign relations, particularly with Vietnam. The narrative begins with the legacies of Mao's policies—especially his strategic stance of "aligning with the United States to resist the Soviet Union"—and traces their evolution into the post-Mao era, highlighting the political and economic reforms that ensued.

In addition to examining the political landscape within China, this chapter also addresses the theme of Vietnamese victimhood, a narrative reinforced through extensive commemorative practices and state-led initiatives. By contrasting the large-scale official commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War in Vietnam with the tranquil and often awkward narrative from the Chinese side, this chapter aims to highlight the significant differences in how the two countries remember the conflict. This contrast emphasizes the challenges China faces in commemorating the war. The analysis of these contrasting commemorations provides a nuanced understanding of the factors leading up to the Sino-Vietnamese War and its enduring legacy in the collective memory of both nations.
The chapter navigates through the emergence of factions within the CCP, each advocating different paths forward for China in the post-Mao era. It critically examines the roles of key figures such as Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping, alongside the internal struggles that shaped China's governance and international diplomacy approach. By unravelling the complex interplay between these political battles and China's external strategies, particularly regarding Vietnam, this analysis aims to illuminate the reasons behind the divergent narratives and the lasting impact of the Sino-Vietnamese War on regional stability and historical memory.

**Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping and the Origins of the Sino-Vietnamese War**

The Sino-Vietnamese War can be seen as a continuation of the heightened tensions resulting from the Sino-Soviet Split. Mao's legacy of *Lianmei Kangsui*, significantly influenced post-Mao China's foreign relations. In this context, the Sino-Vietnamese War, much like the Sino-American rapprochement, is a component under *Lianmei Kangsui*. It was aimed at countering Soviet hegemonic influence along China's northern frontiers.

On September 9, 1976, the death of Mao Zedong marked the end of his era and the collapse of his long-cherished Cultural Revolution. Yang Jisheng, a former senior journalist for the Xinhua News Agency, argues in his book *China's Political Struggles in the Reform Era* that Mao's legacy includes two major issues: economic poverty and political dictatorship. He suggests that the solutions to these problems are reforms of
the economic and political systems. This chapter's story also starts with the political and economic reforms.129

According to Yang, following Mao's death, at least four factions emerged in the political struggle to shape China's future. While this thesis disagrees with his placement of Hua Guofeng in the first faction, Yang's overall analysis remains insightful.

The First Faction is characterized by its loyalty to Mao Zedong's late-year policies, specifically the Continuous Revolution Theory during the Cultural Revolution, with class struggle as the key principle. The Gang of Four, Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxin, Ji Dengkui130, and Wu De are classified within this group.131 The Second Faction rejected Mao's late-year policies, particularly the Continuous Revolution Theory, advocating instead for a post-Mao China grounded in a planned economy that highlights the achievements of the 1950s before the Great Leap Forward's failure. Chen Yun is a prominent proponent of this viewpoint. The Third Faction, while also rejecting aspects of Mao's late-year policies, supports the idea that an open-market economy would be more beneficial than the planned economy of the 1950s endorsed by the Second Faction.132 The Fourth Faction advocates for the

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130 Ji Dengkui was a member of the CCP politburo from 1973-1980.
131 Note: Distinguished from the Gang of Four, Hua Guofeng and his allies, as detailed in Chapter 2, did not rigidly follow Mao's later policies. Instead, Hua is considered a moderate and open-minded forerunner in exploring the post-Mao era.
132 Note: The first three factions share a common principle: an adherence to the socialist system, the original ideology, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the dictatorship of the proletariat.
abandonment of both the planned economy and the dictatorship of the proletariat, including the leadership of the CCP. Due to its radical political propositions, this faction was less influential in the early post-Mao period. Members of the Fourth Faction usually came from the Third Faction, including Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang and Hu Qili.\(^{133}\) Yang further argues that due to the unpopularity of the first and fourth factions, the post-Mao era's political struggle was based on the debate of the second and third factions. Nevertheless, all factions played a role in building the 'process of forgetting' of the Sino-Vietnamese War.\(^{134}\)

Since Chapter 2, this thesis has conducted a detailed analysis to support the argument that the post-Mao era should be viewed as an extension of Mao's era rather than an entirely new era under Deng. Qian Liqun, in his work *Mao Zedong Era and Post-Mao Era*, strongly endorses this argument. Qian provides two main reasons: first, he argues that the policy of opening up was a decision made by Mao Zedong, as evidenced by the Sino-American rapprochement. Normalizing Sino-American relations signifies an open Chinese market for international capital (mainly Americans and their allies). Second, Qian describes the post-Mao era as embodying a new form

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\(^{133}\) Note: Both the third and fourth factions could be labelled as advocating 'bourgeois restoration,' one of the weightiest accusations during Mao's era, a charge that could have been lethal during the Cultural Revolution.

\(^{134}\) Jisheng Yang, *Political Struggles in China’s Reform Era* (中国改革年代的政治斗争) (Hong Kong: Excellent Culture Press, 2004), 1-3.
of 'Zhongti Xiyong', where Mao Zedong's legacy forms the 'Zhongti,' and adopting Western market economies and management practices represents 'Xiyong.'

As a result, another challenge has arisen for the official narrative of the Sino-Vietnamese War. Public commemorations struggle to delineate Deng's era from Mao's due to the persistent use of slogans and propaganda deeply ingrained in Mao's ideologies. This includes the promotion of collectivism, which advocates for the sacrifice of individualism for the collective's benefit. This raises a question: If the post-Mao era, or Deng's era, is considered new, why does it not reflect a change in the way it is experienced or perceived? The response to this query is found in one of the significant issues inherited from Mao's era, notably poverty.

Maurice Meisner's *Mao's China and After* offers a balanced yet persuasive overview of Mao's legacy without exonerating Mao for the Great Leap Forward's failure or the Cultural Revolution. Through detailed statistical analysis, Meisner notes, "China's transformation from a primarily agrarian country to a relatively industrialized nation was reflected in dramatic increases in the production of the products associated with modernization, at least prior to the information age." Rather than solely focusing on criticism regarding Mao's cult of personality and other

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135 Note: Zhongti Xiyong means Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application, which is a term of Late Qing's Self-Strengthening Movement.
mistakes, Meisner acknowledges Mao's role in laying the groundwork for China's fundamental modernization and industrialization, even though that was partially based on the exploitation of the peasantry.137

Meisner's analysis offers a compelling and direct response to the questions raised. This alignment with perspectives is largely attributable to the experiences of peasants in rural areas, where labour and production were often prioritized for urban areas and the bureaucratic system. Such prioritization was necessary since most of Mao's China's heavy industry was located in major cities. However, the Sino-Soviet Split catalyzed the development of new industrial cities and towns in Western China, notably in Sichuan, as part of the Third Front Movement.138 These industrial centers, distinct from traditional countryside villages, represented a strategic diversification of China's industrial landscape.

Because of Mao's legacy, poverty presented a formidable challenge that both Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng endeavoured to overcome. Many historians chose to skip the contribution of Hua Guofeng to China's transformation from the Mao era to the post-Mao era. Nevertheless, Deng and Hua aimed to steer China away from the economic hardships worsened by Mao's late-year policies, marking a pivotal shift towards reform and opening up. This transition emphasized a critical period in China's history, where leadership and policy direction sought to fundamentally alter the

138For details of the Third Front Movement, see Covell F. Meyskens, Mao’s Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
The course of the nation's socio-economic trajectory. The key distinction between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng lies in their political legacies and alignment with Mao Zedong. Despite being a Maoist, Deng Xiaoping notably diverged in his views on the Cultural Revolution yet remained one of Mao's favoured successors, ranking higher than both Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao.

Conversely, Hua Guofeng is often regarded as an interim leader within the CCP, his ascent to central power largely attributed to the later stages of the Cultural Revolution, particularly after the 1971 Lin Biao incident and the 1975 Criticizing Deng Campaign. In official history, the criticism of Hua was extended from the 'Two Whatevers,' handicapping the process of rehabilitation, the 1976 Tiananmen incident, and the cult of personality.139

Despite these accusations, none are entirely convincing. Throughout Hua Guofeng's brief tenure, his policy, known as "Zhuangangzhiguo" (抓纲治国/grasping the key link to govern the country), was rooted in the lexicon of the Cultural Revolution. However, this policy focused on critiquing the Gang of Four rather than on class struggle. Beyond this focal point, in the post-Mao era, Hua emerged as a pioneer in highlighting the importance of enhancing productivity, as evidenced during the second national meeting of Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture. Although he

continued to emphasize the People's Commune, he prioritized improving citizens' quality of life. Yet, following the third plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP, Hua Guofeng and his followers were mostly out of power; Deng Xiaoping adopted these initiatives without acknowledging Hua's contributions.140

Another criticism levelled against Hua Guofeng concerns his continued support for the Khmer Rouge, which exacerbated tensions between China and Vietnam. Following the downfall of the Gang of Four, many high-ranking officials who had risen to power during the Cultural Revolution aligned themselves with Hua Guofeng, as they assumed that Hua was also a product of that era.

A notable instance that drew significant condemnation was Vice Premier Chen Yonggui's visit to the Khmer Rouge in December 1977. Huang Qun, a senior diplomat from the International Liaison Department (ILD) and a member of Chen Yonggui's delegation, explicitly criticized Chen's cluelessness about the situation in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge in his memoirs. Chen became popular in Cambodia, bolstered by the film "Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture" and Pol Pot's visit to Dazhai, which cultivated a personality cult around Chen in Cambodia.141 Both Huang Qun's memoir and Chen Yonggui's autobiography, detailing the visit to

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140 For a detailed account of Hua Guofeng, see Gang Han, “还原华国锋——关于华国锋的若干史实 (Restoring Hua Guofeng - Some Historical Facts about Hua Guofeng),” Yanhuang Chunqiu 炎黄春秋, no. 2 and 3 (2011) 9-18, 9-16.

Cambodia, offer insights into the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge. Ben Kiernan suggests that Pol Pot's return from Dazhai marked an acceleration in the massacres.\textsuperscript{142}

For example, Chen, accompanied by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, departed from Phnom Penh and was greeted by So Phim and Phuong, the Khmer Rouge's minister of rubber plantations. Chen Yonggui visited what were referred to as the 'New Class' people in the Eastern Zone of Cambodia's rural areas. There, he faced the grim realities of the Khmer Rouge's policies firsthand. These 'New Class' individuals, once Cambodian intellectuals, and urban dwellers, found themselves in an extremely harsh working environment. Despite this, it seems unrealistic that Chen ultimately chose to praise the achievements of the Khmer Rouge, asserting that they had surpassed China in establishing a communist state.\textsuperscript{143}

Chen chose to disregard the clear signs of the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict, which were starkly highlighted by the absence of senior Khmer Rouge cadre Son Sen, who was entangled in border disputes, during Chen's farewell dinner.\textsuperscript{144} Andrew Mertha provides the most insightful account of Chen Yonggui's trip to Cambodia, stating: "His trip was also meant to shore up evidence to strengthen his position at home and was apparently perceived by the Khmer Rouge leadership as a last, best,


\textsuperscript{143}Si Wu, \textit{Chen Yonggui Chen Fu Zhongnan Hai: Gai Ge Zhongguo de Shi Yan} (陈永贵沉浮中南海: 改造中国的实验) (Guangzhou: Guangdong Flower City Publishing House, 1993), 248-249.

\textsuperscript{144}Nayan Chanda, \textit{Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon)} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 203-204, 209.
and, ultimately, unsuccessful chance to help strengthen the waning leftist line in China that was threatened by the (re)emergence of Deng Xiaoping and the reform coalition."¹⁴⁵

Certainly, among the senior cadres of the Khmer Rouge, including Pol Pot, none knew that all the remaining leftists would be out of power in less than two years.

After Hua Guofeng was out of power in October-November 1980, over 4,000 senior cadres who had just been rehabilitated participated in a discussion on the draft of "Guanyu Jianguo Yilai Ruogan Lishiwen De Jueyi" (The Resolution on Certain Historical Questions since the Founding of the PRC).¹⁴⁶ Apart from evaluating Mao's merits and demerits, the criticism extended to Sino-Cambodian relations, particularly regarding the financial assistance to the Khmer Rouge.¹⁴⁷ In Wang Chenyi's paper on CCP-Khmer Rouge relations, he effectively captured criticism of Mao's radical foreign policy. Zhu Liang, the head of Bureau VIII of the ILD and was promoted to

director of the ILD in 1985, criticized Mao’s radical policy of directing China’s limited resources to foreign assistance. Regarding the CCP's policy with the Khmer Rouge, Zhu said: "On the eve of the liberation of Phnom Penh, Ji Dengkui talked with Ieng Sary on March 15, 1975. Ji elaborated on Chairman Mao’s instructions on theoretical issues and said, 'Now you will enter the cities, and (we) hope that after entering the cities, you will not learn what we did after entering the cities.' Zhang Chunqiao propagated the same (to the Khmer Rouge leaders) in the same year when he visited Cambodia. Until 1977, our leaders still told the Khmer Rouge that it was 'well-done' and 'right' to drive the people of Phnom Penh to the countryside. Thus, we have some responsibility in that the Khmer Rouge and other 'leftist parties' practiced ultra-leftist policies. They were also the victims of the 'Cultural Revolution'."\(^{148}\)

Consequently, the brutality of the Khmer Rouge can be partially attributed to the policies of Mao's late-year policy, particularly those stemming from the Cultural Revolution. This situation further exacerbated tensions between China and Vietnam, as China's radical recommendations provided Le Duan with legitimate and rational grounds to intensify the distrust between the two nations. This dynamic cemented an almost indisputable stance regarding the victimhood of the Vietnamese in the Sino-Vietnamese War.

**Building a Vietnamese Victimhood**

The conflict between Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) and Vietnam played a significant role in shaping the narrative of Vietnamese victimhood, which centers on the portrayal of Vietnam as a nation that endured aggression and suffered significant losses. However, it was Chinese aid that had the most crucial impact on this narrative, especially given that Vietnam's new Five-Year Plan was heavily dependent on Chinese support.

Kosal Path, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide and an expert on Sino-Vietnamese relations, has written extensively about the role of economic factors in leading to the Third Indochina War. Through extensive research in Vietnamese archives, Kosal offers a nuanced perspective on the origins of the Sino-Vietnamese War, contrasting the decrease in Chinese aid to Vietnam with the increase in support for the Khmer Rouge. He asserts that the sharp decline in Chinese assistance to Vietnam was a key factor that compelled Hanoi to seek an alliance with Moscow. Specifically, Kosal points out that the reduction in Chinese aid can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's decision, driven by his public frustration over anti-Chinese

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sentiments in Vietnamese media.\textsuperscript{151} Drawing from the conversation between Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan, Kosal contends that Deng and vice premier Li Xiannian had planned to cut Chinese aid to Vietnam as early as February 1975, before the Cultural Revolution had ended.\textsuperscript{152}

However, the reduction of Chinese aid was in a predicament. Also, from the 1975 Deng and Le Duan conversation, Wang Taiping's analysis highlighted the difficulties China encountered after years of providing free assistance amidst the devastation of the Cultural Revolution; it also emphasized the need to focus on economic development. Deng stated that China had already provided more than 1.7 billion yuan in free assistance as part of a scheduled 2 billion yuan aid project. He could only promise that the planned aid projects would be completed, but no additional free assistance could be expected from China in the short term. Despite Deng's best offer, this compromise failed to elicit any sympathy from Le Duan; in fact, anti-Chinese sentiment further escalated after this conversation. By 1975, there were 439 Vietnamese-led armed confrontations, a number that soared to 986 by 1976. Yet, these incidents were insufficient for a full-scale war.


Before Le Duan's final visit to China on November 20, 1977, Pham Van Dong visited Beijing on June 9. Li Xiannian presented five appeals to Pham, requesting that he relay these to Le Duan:

1. The anti-Chinese sentiment, particularly among some senior VWP (Vietnamese Workers' Party) cadres, had significantly undermined the Sino-Vietnamese friendship.
2. The increase in border disputes, especially armed confrontations led by the PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam), had intensified the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict. However, Li reaffirmed China's preference for dialogue and peaceful negotiation over armed confrontation.
3. Issues with the railroad, specifically the maintenance of the Chinese-built Vietnamese railroad.
4. Other border disputes, including those over islands in the South China Sea.\(^\text{153}\)
5. Given the historical context, over a million Chinese Vietnamese resided in Vietnam. Li emphasized that Hanoi should honour its promise and not persecute the Chinese Vietnamese, for instance, by forcibly changing their national identity to Vietnamese.

All five appeals were reasonable and persuasive, which will be repeatedly mentioned when China started military mobilization. Despite Pham's disagreement and his communication of these points to Le Duan, negotiations were delayed as the border conflict escalated.

During Le Duan's final visit to China, he emphasized the urgency of increasing Chinese aid for Vietnam's reconstruction and its Five-Year Plan. Chairman Hua Guofeng and Vice Premier Li Xiannian engaged in discussions with Le Duan.

Although Le Duan did not address the five appeals directly, Hua reiterated his best

wishes for the Sino-Vietnamese friendship, a legacy Chairman Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh established. However, Hua declined Le Duan's request for increased aid, explaining that China faced economic challenges and natural disasters (i.e. the Tangshan Earthquake). He indicated that while some economic aid to Vietnam might be possible, military assistance was not feasible, given the war's end and the PAVN's acquisition of numerous weapons.

Ultimately, Le Duan highlighted those differing perspectives on the Soviets and Americans constituted the primary divergence between China and Vietnam. He recognized the critical role of Chinese aid in achieving Vietnam's reunification victory and desired an enduring friendship between China and Vietnam. However, Le Duan's stance shifted dramatically within a year, labelling China as Vietnam's most dangerous enemy, which retrospectively renders his earlier sentiments seemingly delusional.¹⁵⁴

The Soviet-Vietnamese alliance was formed almost simultaneously with China's refusal to increase aid to Vietnam. Shortly after reunification, in May 1975, Moscow forgave all of Hanoi's debts, amounting to over 450 million dollars. By December 1976, during the Fourth Congress of the VWP, Moscow had doubled its aid to Vietnam to between 11 and 13 billion dollars for Vietnam's upcoming Five-Year Plan.

More importantly, through the Soviets, COMECON\(^{155}\) members offered Vietnam numerous economic benefits, such as preferential exchange rates in intra-bloc trading. COMECON also took on some aid projects in Vietnam that China had abandoned.\(^{156}\) Nicholas Khoo contends that the roots of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance can be traced back to the 1930s. When faced with the difficult choice between China and the Soviet Union, Khoo elucidates why Hanoi ultimately gravitated towards Moscow: the Soviets supported the creation of a Vietnamese sphere of influence that included Laos and Cambodia, closely mirroring the former French Indochinese Union. This unwavering support stemmed from the absence of border disputes between Hanoi and Moscow and, under the Sino-Soviet Split, their shared adversary in China. As discussed in Chapter 1, Laos accepted its 'special friendship' with Vietnam, given that Vietnam heavily influenced the Laos communist leadership. Cambodia remained the sole challenge in establishing a Vietnamese sphere of influence.\(^{157}\)

The widespread anti-Chinese sentiment could be partially attributed to Le Duan's divergence from China and the decline of Chinese aid; however, the primary cause remains the Cambodian-Vietnamese border dispute.

\(^{155}\)COMECON is an acronym of The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, was an economic alliance of communist countries aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, established in response to the U.S. Marshall Plan for post-WWII European reconstruction.  
\(^{157}\)ibid 116.
On the origins of the Cambodian-Vietnamese dispute, Chanda argues, "At the root of the racial antagonism between the Khmers and the Vietnamese lie almost a thousand years of contact, the last three hundred of them characterized by a struggle between an advancing Vietnamese empire and a shrinking Cambodia."  

The Cambodian-Vietnamese border dispute was influenced by multiple factors, including the legacy of French colonialism and the nationalist tensions between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam. The maps drawn by the French before independence contributed to the complexity of the issue, as they were problematic and sometimes poorly defined. However, these maps were not the sole root cause of the conflict. Instead, they served as an inadequate tool for resolving disputes between the anti-Vietnamese irredentist nationalism of the Pol Pot regime and the Vietnamese assertion of territorial sovereignty.

The French maps exhibited several issues, such as ambiguous border sections and discrepancies between the maps and documentary records. These inconsistencies provided room for interpretations supporting either side's stance. Nonetheless, the conflict's deeper roots lay in the contested nature of the lower Mekong region, which had been a source of tension long before the border negotiations, and the complex legacy of French colonial rule, which included more than just unclear boundaries.  

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159 For details of the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict, see Kosal Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, of New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).
Before the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict escalated into a full-scale war, Khoo noted numerous attempts by Beijing to mediate and ease the tensions between Hanoi and Phnom Penh, which ultimately proved unsuccessful. He further highlighted the critical impact of the Sino-Soviet Split and the resulting alignment of Chinese-backed Cambodia and Soviet-backed Vietnam. Hanoi was deeply offended as reports of civilians killed by the Khmer Rouge mounted. Similarly, Beijing was also offended as reports of civilians killed by PAVN ascended.

On September 29, 1977, Hua Guofeng and Pol Pot had a conversation in which Pol Pot expressed strong concerns about Vietnam's threat of annexation of both Cambodia and Laos. Pol Pot:

"1. We are not concerned about fighting but about the constant threat from Vietnam. Not only does Vietnam want to annex Cambodia and Laos. It also wants to occupy the whole of Southeast Asia. We have conducted negotiations with them many times but to no avail.

2. The Vietnamese-Lao Treaty of July 13, 1977, is a treaty under which Vietnam annexed Lao territory. Laos’ population is three million. Yet, the number of Vietnamese in Laos alone—not to mention the Vietnamese Laotians—is three million. The Vietnamese population is increasing by between one and two million every year. After five years, the Laotians will be a minority."

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Hua Guofeng stated his support for Pol Pot's analysis of the current Vietnam threat and agreed on the fact that the Pol Pot regime's resistance to Vietnamese expansionism is equal to the defence of Southeast Asia's security. Indeed, Cambodia is now Chinese-backed.¹⁶¹

The massacres in Vietnam's Tay Ninh province are widely regarded as the tipping point leading to a full-scale Cambodian-Vietnamese war. Before the Tay Ninh tragedy, from April to May 1977, the Khmer Rouge military had infiltrated Vietnam, targeting civilians primarily in Vietnam's An Giang province. One of the reported massacres in Ba Chuc resulted in over a hundred casualties. In response, Hanoi opted for a hidden military mobilization and, through a broadcast from Hanoi, even sent a message to Pol Pot, marking the public debut of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.¹⁶²

However, when the Khmer Rouge army reappeared in Tay Ninh province in September 1977, the death toll escalated to over a thousand. More significantly, due to the military purge in Cambodia's Eastern Zone, a group of high-ranked Khmer Rouge military officers defected to Vietnam, including Hang Samrin and Hun Sen, both of whom would later emerge as leaders of the Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Hun Sen had provided detailed plans for Khmer Rouge military operations, which was critical to the victory of Vietnam's invasion of

Cambodia. Thus, the defection of these high-ranking Khmer Rouge officers, coupled with the Khmer Rouge's extensive killings in Tay Ninh, ultimately compelled Hanoi to consider the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime.\textsuperscript{163,164} From this viewpoint, Vietnam is unmistakably regarded as the legitimate victim of Cambodia's aggression, finding itself in the position of a victim in both the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Nevertheless, this status does not justify Vietnam's decade-long de facto control over Cambodia, which stands as a clear infringement of Cambodian sovereignty, irrespective of the rationale. In contrast, China's invasion, though briefly occupied several provincial capitals at key military strategic locations, lasted only 28 days from the onset of the invasion to the withdrawal of Chinese troops. This context explains why the narrative might significantly differ from the Chinese perspective.

The narrative of Vietnamese victimhood is further reinforced by the ongoing commemorations of the Sino-Vietnamese War, particularly the 1984 battle of Vi Xuyen (Laoshan). These commemorations reflect the historical significance of these events and serve as powerful reminders of the sacrifices made by Vietnamese soldiers. An article on VNExpress discusses the high casualty rates during the battle

\textsuperscript{164}Nayan Chanda, \textit{Brother Enemy: The War after the War (A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon)} (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1986), 197-198.
of Vi Xuyen, where thousands of soldiers were either wounded or killed.\textsuperscript{165} Known in China as the battle of Laoshan, this confrontation is particularly remembered for its intensity and the significant losses suffered by both sides. Another article from Báo Điện tử Chính phủ (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam Government News) emphasizes the recognition and support for the families of the soldiers who fought in the battle of Vi Xuyen, including commemorative events and memorials that honour their sacrifice.\textsuperscript{166} These events are poignant reminders of the personal and national losses incurred during the conflict. They are crucial in maintaining the narrative of Vietnamese victimhood and resilience against foreign aggression.

Martin Grossheim's research provides additional insights into the Vietnamese state's evolving approach to commemorating the Sino-Vietnamese War and the critical role of war veterans in this process. Although Hanoi has attempted to maintain a low-profile public commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War, especially compared to the commemoration of the war against the Pol Pot regime (Cambodian-Vietnamese War), there are still government-led public commemorations at the county, provincial, and national levels annually. This sharply contrasts the lack of


public commemoration on the Chinese side, where commemorative activities rarely extend beyond the county level.\textsuperscript{167}

Grossheim highlights that the Vietnamese state, through the Central Department of Propaganda and Education, has been gradually increasing its efforts to commemorate the war, albeit in a subdued manner compared to other historical events. This cautious approach reflects the sensitive nature of Vietnam's relations with China. For instance, the 40th anniversary of the war in 2019 saw the state organizing controlled and low-key ceremonies. These events emphasized the war's significance while avoiding actions that could provoke China.\textsuperscript{168} However, veterans have independently played a crucial role in reviving and reshaping the memory of the war. Notably, veterans of the battle of Vi Xuyen have organized commemorative activities and established memorials using private donations, often without state support. In contrast, Chinese veterans do not enjoy the same level of freedom; even collective visits to martyrs' cemeteries require official approval.

The significance of these commemorations is emphasized by events such as the visit by former President Truong Tan Sang and Minister of Planning and Investment Nguyen Chi Dung to the Vi Xuyen National Martyrs Cemetery and the Heroic

\textsuperscript{167}Note: In Vietnam, the administrative divisions are hierarchical: national, provincial, district, and commune levels. In China, the divisions include national, provincial, prefectural/municipal, county, and township levels. The main difference is China's additional prefectural/municipal level, which adds a layer of governance between the provincial and county levels, facilitating more localized administration and control.

Martyrs Memorial Temple at Peak 468. The Vi Xuyen National Martyrs Cemetery is the resting place of over 1,800 martyrs who sacrificed their lives during the Northern Border Defense War (Sino-Vietnamese War). The cemetery has been expanded and maintained as a memorial, reflecting the nation's respect and gratitude for these sacrifices. In the fierce battles at Peak 468, nearly 5,000 soldiers heroically defended the border, with many remains still scattered. These sites have become places of annual remembrance and honour, deeply ingraining the sense of victimhood and heroism in the Vietnamese collective memory.\textsuperscript{169}

In 2016, veterans established the Nationwide Liaison Committee of the Veterans of the Battle of Vi Xuyen-Hà Tuyên. This organization has been instrumental in advocating for proper recognition and commemoration of the conflict, including efforts to find and bury the remains of fallen soldiers. Despite some progress, Grossheim notes that veterans continue to express frustration over the lack of state support and recognition of their sacrifices.\textsuperscript{170}

Such commemorative activities and memorials reinforce the narrative of Vietnamese victimhood by highlighting the extensive human cost of the conflict and the ongoing efforts to honour and remember those who fought and died. This


narrative is further supported by the state's continuous efforts to maintain and enhance these sites and organize ceremonies and events involving high-ranking officials and veterans. Despite the official withdrawal in 1979, Chinese forces maintained a presence, resulting in prolonged conflict for another decade. Starting in April 1984, intense fighting resumed, with China deploying significant military forces and artillery, resulting in high casualties and destruction in areas like Thanh Thủy and Vi Xuyen. Over 2 million artillery shells were fired into Hà Tuyên (Hà Giang and Tuyên Quang) from 1984 to 1989, causing significant damage and casualties. On July 12, 1984, during a counter-attack to regain strategic points from Chinese forces in Vi Xuyen, 820 Vietnamese soldiers were wounded, and about 600 soldiers from Division 356 were killed. This significant loss emphasized the continued struggle and heavy toll on Vietnamese forces.\(^{171}\)

Lao Động Báo, one of Vietnam's official newspapers, commemorated the Northern Border Defence War by highlighting the reconstruction achievements in regions severely damaged during the war. The initial Chinese attack on February 17, 1979, marked a large-scale military offensive along the entire northern border of Vietnam, leading to a fierce defensive battle to protect Vietnam's sovereignty. This war had devastating effects on regions like Mường Khương County, which were heavily damaged but have since been rebuilt with significant socio-economic

progress. Continuous efforts to honour and support war veterans and families affected by the conflict reflect the enduring impact and recognition of their sacrifices.

Northern border regions, once war-torn, have seen significant improvements in infrastructure, economic development, and living standards due to government policies and investments. 172

The narratives of loss and sacrifice have been entrenched in the Vietnamese consciousness through commemorations and memorials. Vi Xuyen National Cemetery, holding the remains of over 1,800 soldiers who died defending the northern border from 1979-1989, is a poignant symbol of this. More than 4,000 soldiers died, and over 9,000 were injured during the conflict at the Vi Xuyen front alone, with many remains still unaccounted for. 173 Leaders and former soldiers commemorate the sacrifices at key sites like Peak 468, a site of intense battles. The transformation of former battlefields into thriving communities highlights the resilience and recovery efforts post-war. 174 By emphasizing the human cost and valour of Vietnamese soldiers, these commemorative efforts not only preserve the memory of the conflict but also reinforce the narrative of national resilience and victimhood. The state's


174 ibid 20-23.
active role in these commemorations highlights the ongoing relevance of the war in contemporary Vietnamese identity and historical consciousness.

**Conclusion**

The Sino-Vietnamese War, rooted in the ideological shifts within the CCP and the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War, remains a significant but often overlooked chapter in Southeast Asian history. The ideological struggles and policy shifts in post-Mao China played a critical role in shaping the conflict and its legacy. Through a detailed examination of the political factions, key figures, and commemorative practices, this chapter has highlighted the complicated interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy in driving the war. The stark contrast between Vietnam's extensive commemorative activities and China's subdued approach emphasizes the ongoing relevance of this conflict in both nations' historical narratives. The narrative of Vietnamese victimhood, reinforced through state-led commemorations and veteran initiatives, serves as a reminder of the human cost of the conflict and the resilience of the Vietnamese people.
Chapter 4
Revisiting the 'Forgotten' Memory

The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist regime originates from historical narratives rather than ballots. Given this, historical narratives carry significant political meanings beyond their original function of recounting history. They play a crucial role in justifying the legitimacy of the CCP's rule, which is expected to be flawless.

Unfortunately, the historical narrative of the Sino-Vietnamese War cannot fit into such a category. Building upon the comprehensive analysis of the intricate international relations between China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and the nuanced exploration of China's pivotal transition from Mao's era to the post-Mao era laid out in the previous chapters, Chapter 4 seeks to delve deeper. While the earlier sections constructed a theoretical framework to understand the challenges in creating a public commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War, this chapter will turn toward the micro-level. Drawing from my extensive fieldwork and interviews, Chapter 4 aims to illuminate and articulate the reasons behind the 'forgotten' memory of many Chinese veterans of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and its subsequent battles in the 1980s. Despite their survival, these veterans remain shrouded from public consciousness, embodying China's profound shifts from the war's end to the present day. Throughout the interview, the veterans unanimously advocated for official and public recognition and respect, emphasizing that this acknowledgment is more important than monetary compensation. In doing so, just as their fallen comrades were heralded as martyrs, this
chapter argues that the surviving veterans represent living martyrs, their sacrifices obscured by time. Their survival became problematic in fitting the current CCP's historical narrative.

**Legacy of the Cultural Revolution**

I conducted several interviews to gain an accurate and nuanced understanding of the challenges that veterans faced. With approval from the Western University Research Ethics Board (REB), these included a group interview with 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War veterans who served as automobile troops in Longzhou County, Guangxi Province, and an individual interview with an artillery veteran who participated in the 1979 War in Maguan County, Yunnan Province, adjacent to Ha Giang Province. Additionally, I held another group interview with veterans who served in the military from 1986 to 1989 after the battle of Laoshan/Vi Xuyen in Malipo County, Yunnan Province. Before discussing the advocacy efforts of these veterans, it is important to acknowledge their "forgotten" memories, reflecting on my fieldwork in Malipo County. All these interviews were conducted in Gong County, Sichuan, which is both my hometown and that of the veterans.

I decided to separate the veterans' advocacy into three distinct categories instead of one because two groups of veterans and one individual provided vastly different responses to my questions. These varied answers will help illustrate the challenges of constructing an official historical narrative of the Sino-Vietnamese War in China.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{175} Note: In compliance with REB requirements, pseudonyms are used to protect interviewees' privacy. On July 18, 2023, five veterans from the GLD 49th automobile
After I listened again and collected these interviews from the recording, they reminded me of a masterpiece by Fei Xiaotong.

In Fei Xiaotong's *From the Soil*, he argues that the traditional Chinese society was based on a so-called 'differential mode of association' (Chaxu geju/差序格局). Fei Xiaotong points out that selfishness is the greatest shortcoming of the country's people. Fei continues his explanation: "Why is this so? The reason is that such canals belong to the public. Once you mention something belonging to the public, it is almost like saying everyone can take advantage of it." 176

Building on Fei Xiaotong's argument, as discussed in Chapter 2, we can view the Cultural Revolution from a unique perspective: a radical attempt to address deep-seated issues in Chinese rural society. Mao hoped that such a public-driven and radical political movement would ultimately transform the so-called differential mode of association, particularly addressing the deep-seated selfishness that pervaded every corner of Chinese society.

In the language of Mao's China, selfishness could be seen as the insurmountable chasm between bureaucrats and the masses. Bureaucrats, whose career advancements depended solely on their superiors, focused primarily on currying favour with them. This behaviour created an all-purpose scapegoat, attributing all failures and tragedies

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in Mao's China to bureaucratic indifference. On the other hand, the masses, lacking a comprehensive understanding of how the bureaucratic system worked, were entrenched in the belief that the gap between bureaucrats and the public was insurmountable. One of the objectives of the Cultural Revolution was to dismantle the differential mode of association by eliminating the distinctions between bureaucrats and the public.

However, on the one hand, the descendants of bureaucrats joined the military to avoid harsh political struggles against them, an action that falls into the category of selfishness. On the other hand, for ordinary people, joining the bureaucratic system seemed to be almost the only solution in this cycle. More specifically, joining the military was almost the only opportunity for ordinary people to shift their status from the ruled to the rulers during the late years of Mao's China. This move was, unfortunately, also driven by self-interest. Perhaps, in the case of the Sino-Vietnamese War, the only remnant of Mao's last revolution is these grassroots veterans who still believe that sacrifice is worthwhile regardless.

In other words, for the PLA, Mao Zedong's final revolution—including the Three Supports and Two Militaries campaign, along with other propaganda promoting the spirit of collectivism—was significant. For instance, the story of Comrade Wang
Jie\textsuperscript{177} was recounted by veterans of both the automobile troops and the artillery who participated in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.\textsuperscript{178}

It is important to note that Wang Jie died in 1965, more than a decade before these veterans served in the army. This phenomenon can be explained by the delay in receiving outside information and a conservatism that is crucial for maintaining stability within the PLA. The cost is that many veterans have become disconnected from current societal trends, which contributes to their struggle with poverty.

Although Wang Jie's sacrifice may seem out of step with today's profit-driven societal values, its influence persists within the PLA.

\textbf{Guangxi, Longzhou}

Longzhou County, situated in Guangxi, China, borders the Vietnamese provincial capitals of Cao Bang and Lang Son, which hold strategic significance. During the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fully occupied both cities, among others. Longzhou is home to the largest cemetery dedicated to veterans of the Sino-Vietnamese War, where over 2,000 martyrs are buried.\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{177}Note: this slogan comes from a Chinese soldier named Wang Jie (1942-1965 July 14), who had served in PLA and died in a landmine testing accident for protecting Chinese militia.


\textsuperscript{179}Note: There are 17 cemeteries along the China-Vietnam border that contain the graves of martyrs from the Sino-Vietnamese War
The Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery, located about 5 kilometres from the county seat, is the final resting place for 2,008 martyrs. Among them, 129 fell in earlier conflicts, while 1,879 perished during the Sino-Vietnamese War.\(^{180}\)

![Figure 4.1 Veterans from the GLD 49th Automobile Regiment in Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery. Photo provided by Veteran 5.](image)

Despite its size, Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery is less known than Malipo Martyrs Cemetery because most interred at Longzhou died in the 1979 conflict. In contrast, Malipo Cemetery includes martyrs from the prolonged border skirmishes throughout the 1980s. Notable battles near Malipo include the 1984 Laoshan (Vi Xuyen in Vietnam) Battle 老山战役, the Zheyinshan Battle 者阴山战役, and the 1986 Operation Blue Sword-B 蓝剑 B行动. The *official military chronicle of Guangxi* allocates only two pages to the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.\(^{181}\) My visit was limited

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to the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, which, unlike Longzhou, includes a small war
memorial dedicated to the War, the only one of its kind in China.

Before my visit to Malipo, I had the opportunity to interview veterans from the
PLA’s General Logistics Department’s 49th Automobile Regiment. These veterans
shared detailed recollections of their experiences during and after the War.

Zhang Zhen, a prominent military general who served as the director of the
General Logistics Department (GLD) during the Sino-Vietnamese War, published his
insightful memoir in 2003. In it, he provides a detailed account of the challenges the
PLA’s General Logistics Department faced, particularly the automobile troops.182

Veterans Forgotten War Memory (First Interview with the GLD
49th Automobile Regiment)

Before the first interview started, veterans spontaneously shared that they served
in the GLD 49th automobile regiment, which was established in 1968 in Guangxi,
originally for Kangmei Yuanyue, the "Resist America and Assist Vietnam" campaign.
It is crucial to understand that most railroad constructions in northern Vietnam heavily
depended on Chinese assistance. This dependency later became one of the main
reasons Chinese official platforms accused Hanoi as Baiyanlang/Wangen Fuyi (an
ingrateful person) for motivating Chinese soldiers during the mobilization process.183

182 For a detailed account on GLD, see Zhen Zhang, Zhang Zhen Hui Yi Lu (Memoirs
of Zhang Zhen), vol. 2 (Beijing: Chinese People’s Liberation Army Publishing House,
2003).

183 Kunji Wang, Veteran Group 1 (1979 Automobile Troop) Guangxi, Longzhou ㄏ
西，龙州县, personal, July 18, 2023.
In the interview, the first question I asked was about veterans' post-war jobs. All five veterans reported that they continued in their previous professions as truck and bus drivers until they turned sixty years old. At that point, their licenses were downgraded to personal driving only, preventing them from continuing in those roles. They also shared challenges in transitioning to running businesses, which they were unfamiliar with, such as public transportation, leading to limited financial success. The veterans' hometown, Gong County, is rich in natural resources, especially coal. Before the last decade, when coal resources were depleted, they primarily worked as truck drivers transporting coal. However, due to the downgrade of their licenses and the depletion of coal, they have returned to farming, working diligently for self-sufficiency.

**Longzhou in wartime**

According to Zhang Zhen's memoir, on the evening of December 31, at an expanded CCP Politburo meeting that included not just its members but also high-ranking party and government officials, Deng formally proposed a punitive war against Vietnam. It was also decided that regardless of the outcome, after occupying Cao Bang and Lang Son, the Chinese forces would not pursue further but would immediately withdraw.\(^{184}\) Zhang Xiaoming argues that influenced by Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, all attendees, including Hua Guofeng, unanimously supported Deng’s plan to attack Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Lao Cai. They also enthusiastically

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\(^{184}\) Zhen Zhang, *Zhang Zhen Hui Yi Lu (Memoirs of Zhang Zhen)*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Chinese People’s Liberation Army Publishing House, 2003), 166.
proposed several modifications to the original war plan, advocating for deploying two additional armies to attack the historic Dien Bien Phu from Mengla, Yunnan, via Laos, thus posing a more direct threat to Hanoi.185

Following the intensified Cambodian-Vietnamese War, Deng's 'punitive' war started on February 17, 1979. During the interviews, in accordance with ethics review guidelines, veterans were not asked about their war experience. However, in coming together as a group the veterans spoke spontaneously about the battles they had fought. These comments helped me identify some challenges in constructing an official historical narrative. War is brutal, away from the aesthetic plays on films, songs and literature. This is what veterans summarized after they entered and crossed the destroyed Vietnamese cities, towns and villages as PLA Logistics automobile troops.

Veteran 4:

"After we entered Vietnam, there was an overwhelming stench of dead livestock and human corpses. Any surviving livestock were collected to detect landmines. In Vietnamese cities, most hospitals were located by the riverside, where all sorts of deceased creatures and medical waste were disposed into the river, leading to a literal 'river of blood'."

Veteran 1:

"To avoid Vietnamese booby traps and landmines, most people were forced to relieve themselves on the roadways. During such times, if a female medic needed to use the restroom, all the male soldiers had to look away. This was unavoidable, as drivers and passengers in the automobiles following behind could still see."

The veterans' descriptions of the brutality they witnessed may relate to events like the Tỗng Chấp massacre. On March 9, 1979, Chinese soldiers murdered 43 Vietnamese people, mostly women and children, at a pig farm in the Tỗng Chấp area. This massacre highlights the brutality of the conflict.186

After veterans spontaneously shared their war experiences, they told me that as part of the automobile troops, they transported only ammunition and medicine to the frontline due to the limited number of trucks. On the return journey, they carried only wounded soldiers and corpses. The message is clear: from mobilization to crossing the Sino-Vietnamese border, all infantries had to march on foot.

Compared to the fabulous achievements of today's China, which include military modernization, it seems delusional to think that China's last war was no different from any other early twentieth-century conflict, such as the Second Chinese Civil War. It became somewhat awkward to acknowledge that PLA logistics were significantly outdated when the War started in 1979.

Veterans further advised me that to truly understand the firsthand brutality of the War, I should interview the infantry, who suffered the most due to the highest casualty rates on the frontline. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to do so.

Veteran 3:

"Overall, utilizing Mao Zedong's Thought to arm the military played a crucial role in stabilizing soldier’s panics and mentality during the mobilization."

Veteran 5:

"I still remember the military mobilization oath-taking ceremony; the political commissar vividly told us the escalated Vietnam's anti-Chinese sentiments, including Vietnamese troops violating our border and attacking our civilians."

Veteran 5 continued:

"Before mobilization, we had known this for quite a while from radio and newspapers, like the People's Liberation Army Daily (PLA Daily)."

Me:

"Is there anything special beyond the propaganda about Vietnam's aggression and anti-Chinese sentiment? I mean about Cambodia."

Only Veteran 3 remembered this from the mobilization:

"Supporting Cambodia is mentioned with Kangmei Yuanyue, the "Resist America and Assist Vietnam" campaign and Kangfa Yuanyue, the "Resist France and Assist Vietnam" campaign."

In fact, Deng Xiaoping met with Prince Sihanouk on January 6, 1979. Sihanouk had been released from house arrest by Pol Pot due to the intensifying Cambodian-
Vietnamese War. Pol Pot hoped that Sihanouk would represent the Khmer Rouge at
the United Nations Security Council to condemn the Vietnamese invasion of
Cambodia. During the welcome dinner, Deng stated that the Chinese government and
its people would continue to support the Cambodian people in their fight against the
invaders, and he expressed the belief that the plight of the Cambodian people would
win sympathy and support from peace-loving people worldwide. Deng affirmed that
the Chinese people would always stand with the Cambodian people.\textsuperscript{187}

Certainly, Cambodia, one of the main catalysts of the Sino-Vietnamese War, is
merely mentioned in Chinese propaganda at the micro-level alongside other Chinese
aid campaigns to Vietnam. This approach aims to highlight Vietnamese ingratitude
rather than acknowledging that Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime was our ally. The
limited propaganda focus on Cambodia is likely based on the fact that Cambodia's
capital, Phnom Penh, had already fallen into Vietnamese hands prior to the Sino-
Vietnamese War.

The final two questions I posed regarding the memory of the Sino-Vietnamese
War were:

1. Do you agree that the primary objective of the 1979 Sino-
Vietnamese War was to 'teach Vietnam a lesson'?
2. Relations between China and Vietnam were fully normalized in
1991. Do you believe that this normalization has limited public
commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War?

\textsuperscript{187} Rong Leng and Zuolin Wang, 鄧小平年譜 \textit{Deng Xiaoping Nianpu (Chronicle of
Deng Xiaoping)}, vol. 1 (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2004), 467.
For the first question, veterans unanimously agreed that it was a lesson, describing it in one word: "ingratitude." Vietnam invaded China's borders, killed border residents, and abandoned China in favour of aid from the Soviet Union.

A veteran answered the second question:

"No, because from the outset, apart from the official burial ceremony for the martyrs, there has been no public commemoration orchestrated by government officials. At least in the Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery, we, the veterans, spontaneously organize events to honour our fallen comrades. Additionally, if we intend to use firecrackers at the cemetery, we must report our visit plans to the Longzhou public security authorities in advance."

In addition, veterans are aware of Deng Xiaoping's visit to the United States prior to the Sino-Vietnamese War, as well as his decision to cease supporting communist guerrillas in all Southeast Asian countries in exchange for cultivating pro-China international public opinion.

This also highlights an awkward moment in the narrative of the Sino-Vietnamese Self-Defense Counterattack, noting that this conflict was part of the Sino-American Rapprochement, even though the United States is currently portrayed as the primary antagonist in official Chinese narratives, and vice versa. Additionally, the veterans are well aware that China was seen as the invader in the conflict with Vietnam.

Yunnan, Malipo (Fieldwork and individual interview with artillery veteran)

My visit to Malipo County served two primary purposes. First, I planned to visit Laoshan's main peak, which has been developed into a tourist attraction for patriotic
education; here, I intended to immerse myself in the harsh wartime environment that veterans once described to me. Second, I visited the Malipo Cemetery, the most notable cemetery from the Sino-Vietnamese War. This site is important not only because it holds the remains of martyrs from the 1979 war and subsequent battles in the 1980s but also because it often appears as a backdrop in various artistic productions, films, and songs about the war. However, following internal political struggles within the CCP leadership, most of these films and songs were labelled 'spiritual pollution' by Deng Xiaoping. This classification has made it difficult to align with the current CCP historical narrative, rendering government-led public commemorations impossible.

Additionally, the cemetery includes a two-story war memorial dedicated to the war, one of the only of its kind in China. Outside the border regions, it is difficult to find collections that introduce the Sino-Vietnamese war. For example, in the Chongqing Jianchuan Museum (the largest private museum in China), the only collection from the Sino-Vietnamese War, is two cannons displayed outside the museum's main entrance. The accompanying descriptions note their widespread use during the Sino-Vietnamese War. Moreover, the chronological timeline section of the Chongqing Jianchuan Museum has listed each year of PRC history from 1949 to 2023. The main focus of the year 1979 was Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the United States and his role as the 'chief engineer of China's opening-up.' The Sino-Vietnamese War is only briefly mentioned in a minor section, with a short description noting that the war started on February 17 and ended on March 16, 1979, involving fronts in Guangxi
and Yunnan. The collections include a pillow protector and a teacup titled 'For commemorating the Self-defensive Counterattack against Vietnam by the Central Military Advisory Group. These two collections are ubiquitous among my interviewees.

Figure 4.2 From Chongqing Jianchuan Museum.

**Geography of Malipo**

Malipo County is a special place in the memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War. It is not the main battlefield of 1979 China's invasion of Vietnam. Instead, it is better known for the following battles of the 1980s, namely, the Laoshan/Vi Xuyen battle of 1984.

The county seat of Malipo, situated in the southernmost part of Wenshan Autonomous Prefecture, is nestled among mountain chains, just a step away from the
Vietnamese provincial capital of Ha Giang. The most striking feature I encountered was the city center of Malipo town, which is split by a mountain into two halves, connected by a channel that spans over two kilometres. Of course, the county seat is situated in the lowest part of the river valley. Although a highway leads to Malipo, navigating the extremely mountainous region makes the drive challenging before arriving at the county seat.

Beyond the frontlines of the Sino-Vietnamese War, the geographical factors in Malipo, which has a population of 240,000—less than 50,000 of whom reside in the county seat—have significantly constrained its development. A comparison of panoramic photos of Malipo’s town center from the 1980s and 2023 reveals that, unlike many other Chinese cities, it has not undergone dramatic changes; some buildings and streets from the past still exist today. In 'Deng Xiaoping’s Long War,' Zhang Xiaoming noted that Malipo, along with Maguan and Hekou, ranks among the most underdeveloped counties in Southwest China. After visiting Malipo in the summer of 2023, while it is difficult to substantiate his claim that thousands of residents live below the poverty line, the city’s urban development lags behind that of many other county-level cities.

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Visit the Cemetery

The Malipo Martyrs Cemetery is nestled against a mountain. The cemetery is at the entrance of the county seat, where every car will pass if they plan to visit the county seat of Malipo. This time, I had the opportunity to visit the cemetery before my interview with an artillery veteran. From right to left, the cemetery features two entrances: an older, steeper entrance with limited parking on the right, likely constructed in the 1980s, and a newer, larger entrance with broader stairs.

What differed from my interview with veterans from the 49th Automobile Regiment is that, aside from veterans' voluntary visits, the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery also attracts local officials, typically ranging from county to prefecture level, who come to pay their respects to the martyrs.
Upon entering the cemetery through the main entrance, time seems to stand still at this solemn site where the martyrs rest in peace. The tomb of the First-Class Combat Hero is prominently situated in front of the People's Heroes Monument. The tombs of the other martyrs are distributed in a terraced fashion, descending from the top downward. Notably, the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery contains a few graves that predate and postdate the Sino-Vietnamese War period.

Figure 4.4 Old gate of Malipo Martyrs Cemetery.
Figure 4.5 New gate of Malipo Martyrs Cemetery.

Figure 4.6 Monument to the People’s Heroes at Malipo Martyrs Cemetery.

According to university regulations, the artillery veteran will be referred to as Veteran 0 to protect interviewee privacy and ensure maximum confidentiality.

Me:
"In the first two group interviews that I had, many veterans mentioned the harsh post-war living conditions that some veterans and martyrs' families suffered."

Both group interviews mentioned PLA's prisoners of war and missing persons, but due to their educational level, they could only indicate their greatest disappointments rather than the essence of such a phenomenon. However, veteran 0 was high school educated and considered well-educated at the time; Therefore, veteran 0 could narrate the story.

I continued:

"The PLA's 448th Regiment contributed more than half of the total prisoners of war. According to veterans from the 49th Automobile Regiment, at least 332 of them fought to the bitter end and were ultimately killed by the Vietnamese. However, for over four decades, the government labelled them only as missing persons, not as martyrs. It was only very recently that their status was changed from missing persons to martyrs. Were you aware of this?"

Veteran 0:

"I know the tragedy of the 449th Regiment, but it is a historical issue."

In *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, Zhang attempts to reconstruct the moment when the 448th Regiment of the 150th Division of the 50th Army was surrounded and captured, with 332 members subsequently executed by the Vietnamese forces. He
attributes the tragedy of the 448th Regiment to their unpreparedness for war, particularly regarding retreat strategies and poor communication within the PLA.\textsuperscript{190}

The remains of most members of the 448 Regiment are buried in Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery. According to the interview with the PLA Logistics 49th Automobile Regiment, for veterans, what is most infuriating is that, for over 40 years, these martyrs from the 448 Regiment were only acknowledged on a wall in the Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery; the CCP had recognized them only as missing persons, and their parents never received the benefits due to martyrs' families. It was not until 2019, during the 40th-anniversary visit organized by the veterans to the Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery and Youyiguan, that, at the veterans' insistent demand, these 332 individuals were finally recognized as martyrs. When the families of these over 300 martyrs came to the Longzhou Martyrs Cemetery, many wanted to take the photos engraved on the tombstones, as for many, these were the only photos they had of their loved ones.\textsuperscript{191}

For these families, the transition in status from missing person to martyr represents not only a spiritual but also a pragmatic victory. According to the 烈士遗属相关政策一览 (policies related to the families of martyrs) from the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of the People's Republic of China (退役军人事务部):


\textsuperscript{191}Kunji Wang, Veteran Group 1 (1979 Automobile Troop) Guangxi, Longzhou 广西，龙州县, personal, July 18, 2023
1. **Martyr Commendation Payments**: Since August 1, 2011, the state has established a system providing a payment equal to 30 times the previous year's average disposable income of urban residents nationally. This amount may be increased for martyrs killed in combat.

2. **One-Time Compensation**: Calculated as 20 times the previous year's average urban disposable income plus 40 months of the individual's salary.

3. **Regular Pension for Families**: Starting January 1, 1985, families of martyrs who meet certain conditions receive a regular pension. This includes non-working, income-less spouses or parents, children under 18 or those older but disabled or in education, and dependent siblings under 18 or in education without income. As of August 1, 2019, this is standardized at 27,980 yuan per year.

4. **Regular Living Allowance for Some Martyr's Children**: From July 1, 2011, the state provided a regular living allowance to martyr's children over 60 years old who lived in rural or urban areas without a job and had not received regular pension benefits before turning 18. After August 1, 2019, this allowance is 5,880 yuan per year.

5. **Preferential Treatment for Martyrs' Families** includes:
   - **Education**: Children of martyrs receive priority in school admissions and may have score requirements reduced for higher education.
   - **Military Service and Employment**: Volunteering siblings and children of martyrs who meet conscription standards are given priority for active duty and government employment.
   - **Retirement Care**: Martyr's elderly relatives can choose to live in veterans' homes once reaching retirement age (60 for men, 55 for women).
   - **Housing**: Their benefits are not counted as income in eligibility assessments when applying for housing assistance.
   - **Healthcare**: They are eligible to participate in urban and rural medical insurance schemes according to local regulations.

Forty years encompass too much heartbreaking suffering endured by the families of these martyrs to recount fully. However, within the official CCP narrative, events like the capture of the 448th Regiment's soldiers as prisoners of war are undeniably

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viewed as shameful. To avoid becoming prisoners of war, further tragedies occurred. For example, the Deputy Political Commissar of the 150th Division withdrew his troops on March 16, yet he did not return to Chinese territory until late March. Additionally, a small number of soldiers, injured and crippled, crawled for days to return to the Chinese side. The war was undoubtedly brutal.

Veteran 0:

"of course, I bet they probably also tell you the tragic stories about some martyrs' relatives."\(^{193}\)

Me:

"The story of Martyr Zhao Zhanying (赵占英) was frequently mentioned in both group interviews. Veterans recounted that for at least two decades, Zhao's mother, Zhao Doulan (赵斗兰), was unable to visit her son's grave at the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery due to her inability to afford a bus ticket (20 Yuan) from her hometown, Songming County (嵩明县), about a four-hour drive to Malipo."

After the first interview, I diligently gathered all available information about Zhao Zhanying to reconstruct his history accurately. Generally, the veterans' accounts were correct. Zhao Doulan's second visit to her son's grave occurred in 2004, more than twenty years after he was killed in the 1984 Laoshan/Vi Xuyen battle. Her trip was made possible by donations from many netizens after her plight was shared online. The online article titled "Mom, I have Waited Twenty Years for You" captures

a poignant moment with a photograph of Zhao Doulan embracing her son’s tomb and crying. Her story touched many who were learning about the stories of the martyrs from the Sino-Vietnamese War for the first time. This narrative is heartbreakingly sad, but it is important to note that Zhao Doulan had previously visited the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery in 1984 for her son’s burial ceremony, along with many other martyrs’ relatives. Since Zhao Doulan's second visit to Malipo in 2004, she has garnered more attention and received increased support from the government. She passed away in 2018 and was featured in The Paper (澎湃新闻), a well-known government-owned digital newspaper based in Shanghai.

Veteran 0 countered:

"For forty years, it was only us, self-funded, to the cemetery to commemorate our lost comrade-in-arms. But how can we expect others to respect us if we do not commemorate ourselves and deny our worth?" (original: 如果我们自己都不去纪念，自己都否定自己，还能渴望别人来尊重我们吗?)

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194 CHINAHERO ORGANIZATION, “赵占英 Zhao Zhanying Martyr’s Biography,” 赵占英-英雄网 抗战英雄 人民英雄网 英烈网, accessed April 4, 2024, http://www.chinahero.org/show/OWVhNmUxNGMxMTkzNDQ1OQ.

Veteran 0's words highlight the difficulties faced by veterans and the families of martyrs. Their struggles shed light on the government's awkwardness and uncertainty in handling such sensitive historical narratives.

**Yunnan, Maguan (war experience as an artillery soldier)**

Returning to the topic of the Sino-Vietnamese War, Veteran 0 spontaneously shared his firsthand experiences as an artillery soldier, involving two battles fought during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

Veteran 0 enlisted in 1978 and served as an artillery soldier in the Independent Second Regiment's artillery company within the Yunnan Provincial Military District. The Kunming Garrison Command oversaw this unit and was primarily responsible for guarding major government institutions in Yunnan Province.

Veteran 0 can clearly explain the shift from Kangmei Yuanyue's "Resist America and Assist Vietnam" to the betrayal by the Vietnamese authorities, particularly under the leadership of Le Duan and the Vietnamese Communist Party, who abandoned China for the Soviet Union. Through newspapers and broadcasts, he gradually learned about Vietnam's aggression along our border, including attacks that killed and injured our civilians, starting in 1978. This is what he calls betrayal, as Vietnam's provocations began to escalate from that year.

Veteran 0:

"The political instructors primarily emphasized Vietnam's betrayal and ingratitude for siding with the Soviet Union and betraying China, which fueled
everyone's hatred towards Vietnam. They urged us to embody the spirit of dedication, *Fear Neither Hardship nor Death.*

Me:

"When did you realize that this was a war against Vietnam?"

Veteran 0:

"So, we left Kunming probably in late October or early November 1979, were mobilized and settled down in Dulong Commune in Maguan County, about 2 to 3 hours walk to the China-Vietnam border. But the entire unit was unaware of the forthcoming war; maybe only the political commissar had received the notification earlier.

On February 16, the day before the war began, none of the ordinary soldiers knew that a battle was imminent. The unit's political commissar simply told everyone to rest early, get their backpacks in order, and label them with their names. Around 11 p.m. that evening, we were loaded onto trucks and driven towards the front lines, though we were not aware of our destination at the time. After a long march, we finally reached the China-Vietnam border."

Me:

"Is this a hidden attack?"

Veteran 0:

"You cannot comprehend in this way because it was the Vietnamese who opened the fire at first."

Me:
"How?"

Veteran 0 dedicated himself to sharing details of his first battle.

"The first battle occurred from the night of February 16 to the morning of the 17th. That day, dense fog limited visibility to less than 30 meters. As the fog gradually lifted between 9 and 10 a.m. on the 17th and visibility from the mountaintop cleared, we heard the political commissar order a full-scale attack against Vietnam.

The Vietnamese forces were not unprepared; they held a geographical advantage (positioned higher than the Chinese side), and their artillery fire reached our positions first, although no one was hit. After firing about ten shells, we were unprepared and began to retreat to the barracks at Dulong Commune. Soon after, a heavy barrage of Vietnamese artillery fire swept over us. It was only after the battle that we understood this had been a feint, meant to create the impression of a comprehensive assault on Vietnam."

According to the Military Chronicle of Yunnan, the main attack directions were Jinping and Hekou counties, with Maguan positioned to the left of Hekou County. The objective in Jinping was to cross the Panlong River (known in Vietnam as the Lô River, one of the largest tributaries of the Red River) to threaten Ha Giang, the provincial capital of Ha Giang province. In Hekou, the goal was to occupy Lao Cai,
the provincial capital of Lao Cai province. The county seat of Hekou and the city of Lao Cai are twin cities divided by the Red River.\textsuperscript{196}

The question of which side opened fire first should be left here, but Veteran 0's war experiences make one thing clear: the PLA was not fully prepared, and the Vietnamese were not entirely unaware of the potential Chinese invasion. Neither side could convincingly claim complete innocence or victimhood.

**Visiting Laoshan battlefield**

Following the Fall of the Berlin Wall, a year later, in June 1990, Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh met with the Chinese ambassador in Hanoi, signalling that Vietnamese leaders were ready to visit China to restore the fractured Sino-Vietnamese friendship. During the meeting, Nguyen recalled his visits to China before the border dispute and his meetings with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping.\textsuperscript{197} In early November 1991, newly elected Vietnamese party leader Do Muoi and Premier Vo Van Kiet's official visit to Beijing symbolized the restoration of China-Vietnam relations and included a request for China's economic assistance for Vietnam's Đổi Mới reform.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{196}Cuiping Sun and Zhiqiang He, eds., 云南省志 军事志 (Yunnan Chronicle: Military Chronicle), vol. 49 (Kunming, Yunnan: Yunnan People’s Publishing House, 1997), 404.


Following the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991, the Laoshan battlefield became a tourist attraction for patriotic education, especially its main peak.

It is difficult to define the function of the Laoshan main peak’s battlefield as a tourist attraction since I was the only individual tourist during my arrival. The site lacked memorials, tourist facilities, and guides and was left solely for personal exploration.

Figure 4.7 The building in the photo was an entrance to the wartime trenches on the mountain, yet it was empty inside.
Figure 4.8 A monument:艱苦奮戰, 無私奉獻 (Hard-fought battle, selfless dedication).

In one of the core areas on the main peak, a monument is inscribed with the words: "艱苦奮戰, 無私奉獻 (Hard-fought battle, selfless dedication)," endorsed by the Yunnan Provincial Military District and the Malipo County Government.

Notably, this monument was erected in 1992, after the war had ended. Nevertheless, at least within the PLA, the spirit of altruistic selflessness continues to be vigorously promoted. At least in July 2023, when I visited the Laoshan Main Peak battlefield, I encountered several restrictions. Despite being designated as a tourist attraction, there were no visitors. I parked near the tourist attraction gate and walked to the plaza for over half an hour. The plaza now houses a barrack for a group of soldiers who appear to be responsible for maintaining the site.

I am not denying the significance of border guarding, but on the China-Vietnam border, guarding becomes unnecessary because there are endless landmine signs almost everywhere I go.
Figure 4.9 Landmines remain on Laoshan Mountain’s main peak.

Figure 4.10 Landmine signs.
Veteran 0 explained that these landmines were made of plastic to enhance their functionality in Laoshan's humid and hot tropical monsoonal climate, making the task of mine clearance exceptionally difficult. Many soldiers were killed during the landmine clearance operations after the war.

Me:

"China unilaterally declared that the mission to punish Vietnam was completed on March 5, 1979. From the GLD 49th Automobile Regiment, I learned that most casualties occurred during the retreat. What can you tell me about the second battle?"

Veteran 0:

"My second battle on March 5 was much clearer than the first battle. The objective was to enter Vietnamese territory to conduct a holding action, facilitating the withdrawal of our field armies back into Chinese territory. The slogan propagated among the heroes remained: 'Better to advance half a step and die than retreat half a step and live.'" (宁可前进半步死，绝不后退半步生)

Me:
"The slogan is similar to the combat hero story of Wang Jie's *Fear Neither Hardship nor Death*. What was the actual situation when China declared its withdrawal?"

Veteran 0:

"It was not until my time at the Jinan military academy that I understood this tactic is known as interspersed tactics.

Logistics were extremely challenging: crossing the China-Vietnam border on foot and marching with combat engineers clearing the path to avoid landmines at night. The troops moved in a single-file formation to maintain consistency in the formation.

Eventually, we reached the designated position, only to be ordered to immediately retreat across the border due to reports from scouts that the Vietnamese were organizing a major counterattack. It felt like a disorganized retreat; only later did we learn about China's official declaration of withdrawal on March 5."

Me:

"What is the worst part of the retreat?"

Veteran 0:

"There were still casualties from landmines. Everyone had to pass stretchers along, and by dawn on March 5, the troops had not yet reached their intended positions when the Vietnamese forces began firing. Many militiamen, lacking basic combat knowledge, mistakenly entered minefields, resulting in significant casualties."
Veteran 0 told me that he watched some militiamen die from bleeding in front of him after being hit by landmines. The cries of these wounded militiamen were very distressing. None of his comrades-in-arms could save them under Vietnamese machine-gun attacks.

Me:

"That is extremely unfortunate; brutality is the essence of war."

Veteran 0:

“The following day, the disorganized retreat was proved a false alarm, and we returned along the same route to occupy the Vietnamese-held Manmei Highlands (满镁高地). We took a precious photo there, holding Manmei Highlands to cover the infantry's retreat until March 15, when we finally withdrew back into Chinese territory.
Figure 4.12 Manmei Highlands, Vietnam. Photo provided by Veteran 0.

(Note: Communication within the PLA was extremely difficult. This photo was taken by a war correspondent, which was extremely precious.)

Seeing the bodies of comrades who had triggered mines the previous day, now being consumed by ants and maggots in the northern Vietnamese tropical jungle, was
profoundly saddening. The grief was twofold: sympathy for the fallen comrades and outrage at the Vietnamese."

Me:

"I understand your heartbreaking frustration and outrage of the Vietnamese. Malipo Martyrs Cemetery has a small war memorial; I checked that place. There is a long list of presentation of photographs and descriptions in chronological order, introducing the escalation of Vietnamese violence against Chinese civilians."

Veteran 0 countered:

"Why were these photos never seen again except in Malipo? We should respect the truth, respect history."

Me:

"Perhaps they temporarily do not fit the current CCP historical narrative."

I continued:

"Do you know the casualties on the Vietnamese side?"

Veteran 0 told me a story about defending Manmei Highlands:

"Subsequent battles were fierce, but we were not on the front line as artillery troops. The casualties were heavy. For instance, after occupying Manmei Highlands, we had to dig 猫耳洞 (foxhole) to protect against Vietnamese artillery, and in the process, we unearthed many Vietnamese corpses."
Another example would be on March 16 after I backed to Dulong Commune's barrack. Before the war, next to the Dulong Commune was a small martyrs’ cemetery with only eight graves from the Liberation War era (Second Chinese Civil War). These martyrs died from anti-bandit operations. After returning to Dulong Commune following the second battle, there were at least 40 new graves in this small martyrs’ cemetery."

**Conclusion**

Chapter 4 concludes by reflecting on the complex interplay of memory and politics through the narratives of the Chinese veterans of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. Despite not fully grasping the political dynamics during their mobilization, these veterans, from both the 49th Automobile Regiment and the Yunnan Independent Second Regiment's artillery company, emphasize the importance of recognition over monetary compensation. Their stories underscore a poignant truth: while they may have been pawns in a larger geopolitical strategy, their sacrifices demand respect and acknowledgment.
This chapter has illuminated the forgotten memories and obscured truths that do not align with the official, state-sanctioned historical narrative. The tragic experiences of the veterans, compounded by the unprecedented shifts in the international situation, underscore the complexity of reconciling these memories with the established historical accounts promoted by the government.

Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution was intended to eliminate the deep-rooted selfishness towards public property, a trait that sociologist Fei Xiaotong highlighted in his studies. However, the veterans, who often recited the slogan "Sacrifice one for the happiness of a billion (亏了我一个，幸福十亿人)," inadvertently became both participants and victims of Mao's romantic idealism. Unknown to them, the Mao era would come to an abrupt end. This idealism sharply contrasts with the money-oriented priorities of post-Mao China, marking a significant shift from collective sacrifices to individual gain. The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist regime stems from historical narratives rather than ballots, highlighting the pivotal role of state narratives in shaping the perceptions of its governance.

The chapter serves as a sobering reminder of the costs of war—not just in human lives but also in the legacy it leaves behind. By presenting these "forgotten" memories, the chapter contributes to the historical record and critically reflects on how societies remember and what they choose to forget. In the end, this reflection invites readers to consider the role of memory in shaping not just history but also contemporary political and social identities. The chapter reaffirms the necessity of
respecting and acknowledging all truths of history, even those that are uncomfortable or problematic, as essential to the integrity and maturity of any society.
Chapter 5

Echoes of Veterans: Advocating for Change

The primary motivation for dedicating a separate chapter to this part of the thesis lies in the distinctiveness of veterans' voices. Their perspectives, whether rational or unrealistic, deserve to be heard. This chapter extends the micro-level analysis introduced earlier, utilizing fieldwork and interviews to explore the evolution of China's 退伍义务兵安置条例 (Regulations on the Resettlement of Demobilized Conscripts) and its practical application. Unlike Chapter 4, which separated responses to understand war memory comprehensively, this chapter integrates these perspectives into a unified discussion. It facilitates a comparative analysis of the diverse experiences and views of the veterans, with a particular focus on how these experiences highlight the contrasts between personal narratives and the CCP's official historical narrative.

Visiting Laoshan War Memorial

Attached to Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, the Laoshan War Memorial is distinctly separated from the cemetery primarily due to its thematic focus on patriotic education. However, this theme diverges from the current official Chinese narrative in which Vietnam is no longer labelled an enemy. This discrepancy helps elucidate why the Sino-Vietnamese War remains 'forgotten' in official discourses and public memory.

In late July 2023, amidst the peak of tropical monsoonal heat, Malipo experienced some of its hottest days of the year. Positioned at the far-left corner of the cemetery, the museum is nearly invisible from the old and new entrances of the
Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, hidden by dense forests. Upon entering the Laoshan War Memorial, my initial curiosity centred on the absence of students at a site designated for national and provincial patriotic education.

This question was quickly answered as I explored the first floor. The exhibits, arranged chronologically, featured photographs and detailed descriptions that narrated the extent of Vietnam's anti-Chinese actions and the perceived infringements on Chinese sovereignty.

In front of the memorial hall, there is a visitor registry (which is entirely voluntary). Before departing, I browsed through the entries and noted that most were veterans from various regions nationwide, with a noticeable absence of the younger generation.

Figure 5.1 Laoshan/Vi Xuyen War Memorial within the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery.
Building a Chinese Victimhood

It was not until my visit to the Laoshan War Memorial that I could fully comprehend the anti-Vietnamese sentiments expressed by the veterans. The memorial has different sections that introduce the intensified China-Vietnam relations.

The best summary of Chinese victimhood comes from the first section's description:

"Since 1975, it has been the enemy who betrayed the traditional friendship between our two nations by adopting anti-China (反华), Sinophobic (排华), and anti-Chinese policies (仇华). Despite repeated warnings, they deployed troops to occupy
our territory, destroyed our villages, and killed our soldiers and civilians. As a result, our national territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national dignity have been severely compromised. The border residents and military could no longer tolerate these provocations, prompting our border defence forces to mobilize to Laoshan and launch a counterattack in self-defence."

Figure 5.3 Laoshan War Memorial photograph presentation section 1.

In the Laoshan War Memorial, no mention was made of Cambodia, once China's most important ally. When asked about the additional aim of assisting the Khmer Rouge regime during the conflict with Vietnam, Veteran 0 replied:

Note: the enemy here means Vietnamese.
"These are secondary; war serves as a tool for politics."²⁰⁰ He referenced Carl von Clausewitz's assertion that "War is the continuation of policy with other means" without mentioning Cambodia.²⁰¹

Putting the authenticity of the claim aside, this introduction effectively justifies the reasons why China actively initiated a war against Vietnam. The exhibit is structured to evoke a strong emotional response through its thematic organization and visual presentation.

The first section features a series of photographs under various subtitles related to patriotism. On the left, a list of photographs labelled "homeless" captures the plight of Chinese civilians made homeless by Vietnamese persecution. Adjacent to this, under the subtitle "angry accusation," there is a series of photos showing wounded Chinese civilians, illustrating their grievances and direct appeals to the PLA for justice and protection.

Figure 5.4 Laoshan War Memorial photograph presentation: The Spirit of Patriotism. Left: Homelessness. Right: Angry Accusation

Another photograph in the exhibit focuses on the casualties inflicted upon Chinese civilians, presenting a stark visual of those wounded and killed.
Figure 5.5 Laoshan War Memorial photograph presentation: The Spirit of Patriotism, Killing civilians.

Further emphasizing the devastation, another photograph under the subtitle "Destroying My Homeland" shows the damaged Tianbao farm and rockets and chemical weapons fired by the enemy, highlighting the tangible impacts of the conflict on civilian lives and property.

During my trip to Malipo, I also visited Tianbao town, where the damaged Tianbao farm from the photograph above is located. Interestingly, there were no
visible signs of the past conflict. Instead, I found a thriving market along the China-
Vietnam border, bustling with activity and commerce. This contrast highlighted the
area's transformation from a war-torn landscape to a vibrant commercial hub.

Figure 5.6 Photograph of damaged Tianbao farm during the battle of Laoshan.
Figure 5.7: Tianbao Port of Entry, illustrating the Vietnamese gate.

Figure 5.8: Tianbao Port of Entry in July 2023.
Notably, similar to the practice in Vietnamese commemorations where 'the enemy' is used, the Laoshan War Memorial also omits any mention of Vietnam, opting instead to use 'the enemy.' These sentiments effectively initiate public hate, yet it is clear that the current Chinese historical narrative does not wish to list Vietnam as an enemy. This choice of terminology generalizes the opposition and depersonalizes the conflict in the memorial's narrative. This approach can simplify the narrative, making it easier to instill a unified sentiment among the populace while avoiding the direct political implications of naming a current diplomatic partner as a former adversary.

The veterans' resentment is not a result of irrationality. Instead, it originates from an indoctrinated hatred towards Vietnam, entrenched through patriotic education and propaganda. Nevertheless, this hostility no longer fits the current historical narrative sanctioned by the CCP, illustrating the profound and lasting effects of systematic indoctrination. Indeed, if anyone were systematically exposed to such educational practices, their reactions would likely mirror those of the veterans. It is noteworthy that while these veterans harbour no personal animosity towards the Vietnamese people, they express no regrets about their participation in the war.

In the context of the Sino-Vietnamese War, veterans often find themselves caught between the larger geopolitical narratives and their personal experiences. Official history and public memory might not always reflect individual truths, which can lead to disillusionment or betrayal.

*Post-Mao Era Military Reforms in China*
From Deng's era, where the military was required to endure hardships to achieve the Four Modernizations, to the current era under Xi Jinping, where the goal is to make the military a respected profession in society, there has been a significant shift in the role and expectations of the Chinese military. Since the military's withdrawal from the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign, it has gradually distanced itself from political involvement. At the same time, the military has had to accommodate the broader goal of achieving the Four Modernizations.

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping emphasized the importance of achieving the Four Modernizations—agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology—as essential for China's development. He highlighted the need for hard work, unity, and the utilization of advanced global technologies. Deng acknowledged the challenges but remained optimistic about China's potential, stressing that China should never seek hegemony but always belong to the Third World. The background for Deng's call for military reductions was set after the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, where Deng emphasized that national defence and military construction needed to support the development of the national economy and move towards modernization and regularization. The Sino-Vietnamese War exposed serious issues within the Chinese military. Despite the PLA's obedience to the Party's command, the decade-long Cultural Revolution had severely impacted its combat

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effectiveness due to factional struggles. The PLA, having experienced decades of peace since the Korean War, found its weakened combat capability starkly exposed during the conflict with Vietnam.

In a significant speech at the Expanded Meeting of the Central Military Commission in 1985, Deng discussed major military reductions, reducing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by one million personnel, which he saw as necessary for improving combat effectiveness and contributing to world peace. He highlighted the challenges of resettling demobilized military personnel and emphasized that the military should adapt to economic development and modernization goals.203 Deng focused on streamlining the military to enhance its operational capability and redirect resources toward economic development.

Furthermore, Deng Xiaoping's focus on streamlining the military to enhance combat effectiveness was evident in his 1980 speech, where he addressed the necessity of reducing the bloated structure of the military. He pointed out that the overlapping and excessive non-combat roles hindered the military's operational capability and stressed the need to allocate more resources to economic development and modernization.204 This restructuring was part of the broader national strategy to direct more resources towards achieving the Four Modernizations.

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In contrast, Xi Jinping's era emphasizes strengthening the military through comprehensive reforms. In his report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, Xi emphasized the importance of enhancing the professionalization of military officers and civilian personnel systems. He stressed the need for technological innovation and the development of new combat forces. Xi also highlighted the goal of making the military a respected profession in society, aligning with his broader vision of a powerful and modern military.205

The shift from Deng Xiaoping's era to Xi Jinping's era has had profoundly negative impacts on the welfare of veterans. Under Deng Xiaoping, the rapid downsizing and restructuring of the military led to inadequate resettlement policies for demobilized soldiers. In Deng's era, the 1987 退伍义务兵安置条例 (Regulations on the Resettlement of Demobilized Conscripts) resulted in poor treatment of veterans. The focus on economic development and the need for the military to endure hardships led to significant cuts in military personnel and the prioritization of economic resources over military welfare. This streamlining and modernization effort left many demobilized soldiers facing significant challenges in their resettlement and reintegration into civilian life.

Xi Jinping's reforms focus on modernizing the military and enhancing its professional status, including improving the welfare of military personnel and ensuring their rights and benefits are protected. Xi emphasizes the importance of technological advancements and developing new combat capabilities, reflecting a shift towards a more modern and capable military force. However, the transition has been gradual, and many veterans still feel the effects of earlier policies. Under Xi's leadership, there have been tremendous efforts to address the welfare issues faced by veterans, but the legacy of Deng Xiaoping's policies continues to impact their lives.

**Hukou System**

The interviews generally agree that the differing statuses within the Hukou system (户口/household registration) are the root of the inequality. In China, the hukou system is an essential document that identifies a person or family’s address, name, date of birth, and other personal details. This system categorizes registrations into ‘urban hukou' and 'rural hukou,' significantly affecting access to social services, educational opportunities, and employment, reflecting the distinctions between urban and rural residents regarding rights and benefits. Moreover, the hukou system substantially impedes the integration of the country’s hundreds of millions of internal migrants by effectively excluding those without local registration from accessing a comprehensive range of public services in their current localities. These services

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206 Note: The formal name of the system is 'huji,' where 'hukou' denotes an individual’s registered residency. Colloquially and in English, 'hukou' also refers to the entire system.
include healthcare, subsidized housing, pension schemes, and education, thus reinforcing socio-economic disparities between residents and migrants.\(^{207}\)

Taking the interview with the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment as an example, regarding Hukou, only one veteran managed to change his household registration from rural to urban. This process is commonly referred to as Nongzhuanfei (农转非). Some readers may find it perplexing that individuals with a rural Hukou must exert considerable effort in work and education to elevate their status to that of urban areas.\(^{208}\)

The tremendous benefit of Nongzhuanfei is evident from PRC's 1987 退伍义务兵安置条例 (Regulations on the Resettlement of Demobilized Conscripts).

**Article 8:** Demobilized conscripts initially holding rural household registrations must be resettled by local veterans' resettlement agencies according to stipulations: those who have earned second-class merits (including and above) during service shall be arranged employment.

**Article 9:** Demobilized conscripts with urban household registrations who were not employed before their service shall be allocated jobs by the state through a centralized distribution system. This system assigns tasks by sector and implements a quota fulfillment approach, with all receiving entities required to make proper arrangements.

**Exceptions:** Resettlement agencies are not responsible for arranging employment for those who request early discharge without valid reasons, those dismissed or expelled from military service, or those convicted of a criminal offence (excluding negligence) punishable by fixed-term imprisonment or more severe penalties during or after their service. These individuals are to be treated as unemployed civilians.\(^{209}\)


In short, if you are a soldier with urban household registration, you will automatically receive a tenured, governmental-hired job after your discharge from military service, except if you have a criminal record. In contrast, soldiers with rural household registration are automatically considered unemployed civilians, similar to urban residents with criminal records.

The military chronicle of Gong County elucidates the value of urban household registration from a different perspective. In 1978, the year when veterans from the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment and an artillery veteran enlisted in the PLA, the demobilization statistics table (退伍军人统计表) listed a total of 227 individuals. Of these, 211 were registered under rural hukou, while only 16 possessed urban household registrations.210

Reflecting on Fei Xiaotong's differential mode of association (Chaxu Geju/差序格局), veterans from the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment appear to exhibit a moderate acceptance of the de facto class division imposed by the urban and rural household registration system.

However, having an urban household registration does not guarantee an ideal life. Veteran 0, who held an urban household registration and was educated through high school, was considered well-educated during his military service. Despite his advantages, many of his fellow veterans with rural registrations envied him.

210Gong County People’s Armed Forces Department, Military Chronicles Compilation Leadership Group, 珙县军事志 (The Military Chronicles of Gong County) (Gong County, Sichuan, 1986), 23-24.
Nevertheless, Veteran 0's experiences reveal a different perspective on the inequalities he encountered.

Me:

"Is there a significant difference between the post-service placement of soldiers from rural and urban backgrounds?"

Veteran 0:

"My understanding is that during combat, everyone's life is equal—there is only one life to live, and no distinctions of rich or poor. However, post-war, particularly after the economic reforms (citing the 1987 Military Service Law), the differences in resettlement between urban and rural soldiers are stark, which I believe stirs up conflicts between them.

Soldiers from rural areas, even those awarded third-class honours or with disabilities up to the fifth degree, typically became peasants again, whereas urban soldiers were assured employment."²¹¹

Veteran 0 considers this a historical issue that should not be addressed within the current context.

It seems reasonable if the story ends with the conversations with artillery veteran 0 or GLD 49 Automobile Regiment veterans since they willingly or unwillingly accepted their inequality.

However, a different perspective emerged in a group interview with veterans who served between 1986 and 1989. Among the four veterans interviewed, only one successfully transitioned from a rural to an urban household registration through the Nongzhuanfei process. This change was attributed to a disability he acquired during the war.\textsuperscript{212}

Unlike the prior two interviews, which emphasized public recognition over monetary compensation, this group of veterans appears primarily driven by self-interest. There is almost no advocacy for the recognition of the war’s legacy in this discussion, replaced instead by massive dissatisfaction among the veterans. A focal point of their grievances is the revision of the \textit{Regulations on the Resettlement of Demobilized Conscripts}. By 2011, these regulations had undergone significant revisions. The most controversial aspect of this revision emerged from Article 12:

Demobilized soldiers meeting any of the following conditions may, upon their application, have their place of resettlement determined by the competent authorities for demobilized soldier resettlement work at the provincial level or above, by principles favourable to the demobilized soldiers’ livelihood:

1. Those disabled due to combat;
2. Those who received second-class honours or higher during peacetime, \textit{or third-class honours or higher during wartime, while in active service};
3. Those who are children of martyrs;

4. Those whose parents are deceased.\footnote{213}

This group of veterans highlighted their profound dissatisfaction with their earlier resettlement, with some undertaking petitioning efforts (Shangfang) in hopes of securing tenured, government-appointed positions despite an average age exceeding 55. Adding a layer of irony to their advocacy is the possibility that they may not thoroughly review the latest revisions of the resettlement regulations. This is because, in the end, Article 53 stipulates: "These regulations shall take effect from November 1, 2011."

This interview illustrates a significant challenge within Chinese rural communities and, by extension, Chinese society at large, as conceptualized by Fei Xiaotong in his theory of Chaxu Geju. Fei posits, "Once you mention something as belonging to the public, it is almost like saying that everyone can take advantage of it."\footnote{214} Regrettably, veterans of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War represent perhaps the last group to resist exploiting public resources for personal gain.

**Opinion on the Ministry of Veteran Affairs**

Following the establishment of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs (退役军人事务部) on April 16, 2018, corresponding Veteran Affairs Bureaus at the provincial, municipal, and county levels were instituted.\footnote{215}


\footnote{215}Mengmeng Wang, ed., "'中华人民共和国退役军人事务部正式在北京挂牌' (The Ministry of Veterans Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Officially
Despite the skepticism expressed by a group of veterans who served between 1986 and 1989, who generally perceive no tangible benefits from establishing the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, veterans from the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment and the Artillery Regiment hold a contrasting view. They concur that the creation of the Ministry represents a significant advancement in safeguarding veterans' benefits. This structural expansion reflects a formal acknowledgment and enhances the state’s commitment to addressing the needs and upholding the rights of its military veterans.

Though generally reserved, the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment veterans poignantly expressed their feelings, stating, "At last, we have a home."216 Veteran 0 clarified this shift in detail:

"The most infuriating and disappointing aspect following the economic reforms was the introduction of combat subsidies. Before establishing the Veterans Affairs Bureau in 2018, the Ministry of Civil Affairs held the authority to adjudicate eligibility for these subsidies rather than the determination being made by the Central Military Commission. This led to a substantial number of non-combatants infiltrating the ranks of subsidy recipients, a situation that persists to this day, representing a profound betrayal of those who truly served in combat. The Civil Affairs Department could easily rectify this by verifying individuals against military records and facilitating verification through fellow service members within the same unit. For

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instance, there are cases within the same military unit where individuals who were not deployed to the battlefield managed to secure combat subsidies through nepotism or backdoor dealings, which is a grave insult to the genuine veterans who did participate in combat."

Corruption is undoubtedly the most despised topic for veterans. In addition to artillery veteran 0's appeal, GLD 49 Automobile Regiment members desired improved medical care. Veterans are entitled to subsidies for medical treatments and medications. However, due to collusion between hospitals and pharmaceutical representatives, if veterans utilize their subsidies, they are restricted to purchasing lower-quality, cheaper medications. Conversely, paying out of pocket grants them access to higher-quality drugs.

However, in the end, veteran 0 has the most rational conclusion for the veteran's calling.

Me:

"During Mao's era, the military was indoctrinated with Maoist ideology, which emphasized collectivism, such as sacrificing one for a billion's happiness (亏了我一个，幸福十亿人). This contrasts with the period after the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, which brought issues like unfair treatment. What are your thoughts on this?"
Veteran 0:

"Everyone has their view of life and death. At that time, I truly did not contemplate it much. But when facing death, who is not afraid? Everyone values their life."

Obedience to orders is the fundamental duty of a soldier. Joining the army was about defending the homeland rather than about post-war benefits or subsidies. Inequities are issues of national policy, but it is unreasonable to expect that after serving two or three years as a conscript, the state should support you for life. I firmly
oppose those veterans who unreasonably demand rights; everyone should be self-efficient, but legitimate grievances should be addressed.

There have always been class differences among people, a reality that persists. After the reforms, the wealth gap between rural and urban soldiers and among urban soldiers has grown. For urban soldiers, retiring a year early can mean a monthly pension that's 900-1000 RMB (yuan) less. Addressing these disparities is a legitimate grievance." (Note: For rural soldiers, veterans from the GLD 49 Automobile Regiment receive a monthly war pension of approximately 1300 yuan. Veterans who served from 1986 to 1989 receive about 900 yuan monthly, with 70% of this pension funded by the national government and 30% by municipal and county authorities.)

**The Sino-Vietnamese War in Arts**

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was a minor climax in "scar literature" that critically addressed corruption, including backdoor dealings (Zouhoumen). However, this movement rapidly declined with Deng Xiaoping's campaign to cleanse spiritual pollution.

The film *Wreaths at the Foot of the Mountains* (高山下的花环), a seminal production from the Sino-Vietnamese War period, marks a departure from traditional Chinese military cinema. Zhang Xiaoming contends that, in contrast to earlier portrayals of Chinese soldiers as transcendent heroes, this film characterizes them as authentic human beings, replete with passion and compassion. Since 1986, war cinema has had a discernible trend toward a more profound exploration of humanity.
These films increasingly probe the complexities of human nature and emotions within peace and war, life and death, and honour and dishonour.\textsuperscript{217}

The film Wreaths at the Foot of the Mountains profoundly influenced the veteran group that served from 1986 to 1989. During interviews, they persistently argued that China was justified in launching this punitive war to teach the ungrateful Vietnamese a 'lesson.' However, as the conflict extended into the 1980s, the initial anti-Vietnamese sentiments that had fueled Chinese military engagement in 1979 were no longer palpable among ordinary soldiers. The rhetoric that had effectively mobilized soldiers at the beginning of the conflict appeared increasingly fragmented and less compelling by the 1980s. Consequently, films like \textit{Wreaths at the Foot of the Mountains} emerged, primarily aiming to sustain enthusiasm among Chinese soldiers by reshaping and reaffirming the narrative of the war.\textsuperscript{218}

Zhang explains that economic reform in China introduced a robust commercial consciousness within society while undermining the entrenched communist political tradition that had long emphasized contributions and sacrifices. During the fighting on Laoshan, PLA soldiers experienced a stark disparity between their difficult, isolated lives on the front lines and the vibrant, contented lives coupled with economic prosperity back home. Veterans recounted that their monthly subsidy was merely 8


yuan, at least fifty percent lower than the national average. In this context, the song "The Blood-Stained Valor" (血染的风采) adopts an elegiac approach to portray a distinctly positive narrative, aiming to elucidate for audiences the motivations behind the soldiers’ continued fight against Vietnam. This song seeks to bridge the gap between the challenging realities faced by soldiers and the nationalistic fervour that justified their sacrifices:

Perhaps I will bid farewell, never to return,
Can you comprehend?
Do you understand?
Perhaps I will fall, never to rise again,
Do you still want to wait forever?
If it is to be like this,
Please do not be sad; the republic's flag has our blood-stained valour.219

These films and songs, known for their high quality and emotionally resonant content, are now inaccessible in China. Notably, the song "The Blood-Stained Valor" is unavailable on any Chinese platform. This restriction highlights a significant disconnect between the cultural artifacts that memorialize the Sino-Vietnamese War and the public's ability to access them within the country.

What puzzled the veterans who served from 1986 to 1989 was the prohibition of films and songs themed around the Sino-Vietnamese War. They also expressed frustration regarding their inability to pass the review process on Douyin (known internationally as TikTok) when attempting to share personal photographs. These veterans sought to share their experiences yet found themselves censored, highlighting a broader issue of restricted expression related to this historical context.

Zhang concludes that the military conflicts along the Vietnamese border during the 1980s provided Beijing authorities with a convenient means to control the populace's mindset, particularly that of the youth. This period was marked by a campaign against "spiritual pollution," initiated at a time when Western values—introduced through Deng Xiaoping’s policy of openness—seemed to pose a significant threat to the entrenched socialist traditions and the strict ideological framework of the PRC.

The direct answer to the prohibitions of these songs and films could be found in *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan*. In volume 3, on the topic of *Urgent Tasks for the Party in Organizing the Front Lines and Ideological Front Lines* (October 12, 1983):

The essence of spiritual pollution lies in the dissemination of various bourgeois and other exploitative classes' decadent and declining ideologies. It involves

220 For a detailed explanation of the campaign against "spiritual pollution," see Jisheng Yang, *Political Struggles in China’s Reform Era* (中国改革年代的政治斗争) (Hong Kong: Excellent Culture Press, 2004), 247-248.
spreading distrust towards the socialist and communist endeavours and the leadership of the Communist Party. The message is unequivocally clear: regardless of the quality of these artistic productions, if they are perceived to threaten the survival of the CCP’s regime, they will be prohibited.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the differences between the personal narratives of veterans and the CCP’s official historical narrative. The accounts from the Laoshan War Memorial, alongside veterans' calls for change, reveal profound divergences from the state-sanctioned depictions of the Sino-Vietnamese War. These inconsistencies emphasize the CCP's selective historiography, which often simplifies or ignores the complexities and adversities faced by veterans. Such advocacy and experiences challenge the CCP's legitimacy, which relies on a flawless historical narrative. This demand for reevaluation emphasizes how history is remembered and presented in contemporary China.

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Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

In Chapter 1, a comprehensive analysis based on diverse primary and secondary sources clarifies that the Sino-Vietnamese War, which both China and Vietnam claimed as a decisive victory, was essentially a lose-lose situation. The divergences between China and Vietnam were not isolated conflicts but a cumulative process of distrust, misunderstandings, and misestimations. For Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam is seen not as a colonized nation but as a colonizer. The idea of building the Indochinese Union was not delusional, as many Vietnamese believed it could be achieved by continuing Albert Sarraut's proposal. The rapid changes in Chinese foreign policy were reactions and results of China's international and domestic political dynamics. Ultimately, Hanoi gained de facto control over Laos and Cambodia, but the Chinese invasion caused significant damage to Vietnam’s northwestern and northeastern regions, leaving them impoverished and underdeveloped. For Beijing, the political victory in this war far exceeded the military victory, and the military victory far exceeded the battlefield victory. However, it is condemnable that supporting the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian-Vietnamese War was one of the primary motivations for the conflict. The PRC's support for the Khmer Rouge complicated its historical narrative, particularly as China sought to distance itself from Mao's influence.

In Chapter 2, after extensive analysis and research on the PLA's involvement in the Cultural Revolution and the fall of Mao's apparatchiks, it is evident that the PLA's elevated status during the Cultural Revolution was due to political turmoil and the
eradication of the existing administrative system, a status that was inevitably short-lived. Both bureaucrats and ordinary Chinese people temporarily agreed to send their descendants to the PLA to avoid the harsh political struggles of the Cultural Revolution. Notably, the deep involvement of the PLA in politics through the Three Supports, Two Militaries campaign granted it social and economic status and honours far beyond their professional duties of homeland security, a situation that was unsustainable. The spirit of collectivism, a core element of the Cultural Revolution, did not fully translate into the current CCP historical narrative, and the idea of military intervention in politics remains highly taboo in CCP doctrine beyond the Cultural Revolution's exceptional context.

Chapter 3 re-examined post-Mao China's ideological shift and the road to the Sino-Vietnamese War. The Deng Xiaoping era extended Mao's legacy, particularly the policy of Lianmei Kangsu, though it excluded some elements from the Cultural Revolution. This chapter also analyzed the fall of Mao's apparatchiks, including Hua Guofeng and Chen Yonggui, and their failure in the CCP's internal power struggle, contributing to the diplomatic failure of continuing Mao's foreign policy line. This failure explains another reason why the Sino-Vietnamese War does not fit into the current CCP historical narrative. Most importantly, it reconstructed the concept of Vietnamese victimhood from a Vietnamese perspective. However, through extensive analysis of the origins of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and the Sino-Vietnamese War, it is evident that Vietnam is undeniably a victim of the former and plausibly a victim of the latter. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese victimhood narrative cannot
adequately explain the decade-long de facto Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989.

Chapter 4 consists of extensive fieldwork conducted in Malipo County, including visits to the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, Laoshan War Memorial, and Laoshan Main Peak battlefield. This fieldwork provides the thesis with the most emotional and tangible understanding of the Sino-Vietnamese War. The presence of endless landmine signs and numerous photographs depicting the brutality of the People's Army of Vietnam (PVAN) against Chinese civilians vividly convey the war's brutality and reality. Simultaneously, two group and one individual interviews with veterans who served in automobile troops, artillery troops, and infantry units reveal the realistic disappointment about the post-war lives of veterans in a money-oriented society. Ultimately, this chapter offers a micro-level perspective on the Sino-Vietnamese War, highlighting the violence, disappointment, and sacrifices that remain unpraised and unrecognized.

Chapter 5 re-examines the evolution of veteran benefits in China and further explains Fei Xiaotong's concept of selfishness, Chaxu Geju. This chapter constructs a narrative of Chinese victimhood based on the challenges faced by veterans. However, similar to the narrative of Vietnamese victimhood, it is flawed and cannot seamlessly fit into the current historical narrative. The veterans' experiences highlight the inadequacies of the benefits system, reflecting broader issues within the socio-political framework. It highlights the necessity that such a group should not be left disheartened and forgotten.
Addressing the Research Questions

The intentional forgetting of the Sino-Vietnamese War can be summarized by the lack of a flawless and cohesive historical narrative, making it difficult to integrate this conflict into the mainstream narratives of both China and Vietnam. The war's complexities and the political motives behind it do not fit neatly into the current historical narratives promoted by either country.

The marginalization of veterans is deeply rooted in the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the political reforms of the post-Mao era. The Cultural Revolution emphasized collectivism and the honour of sacrificing for the nation. In contrast, the post-Mao era's shift towards a market-oriented society left many veterans feeling abandoned and unrecognized. Their sacrifices, though significant, are overshadowed by the flawed historical narrative and the political struggles that prevent their stories from being acknowledged in mainstream discourse. Consequently, these veterans are left as "martyrs alive," their contributions largely forgotten by the society they served.

Highlighting Contributions

One of the most significant contributions of this thesis is its systematic exploration of the veterans' narratives, revealing how they understand the reasons behind their war and post-war life being forgotten. The thesis argues that neither Vietnam nor China could eliminate the complexities of the Sino-Vietnamese War to fit it into their current historical narratives. At the micro-level, despite witnessing the death of comrades, none of the veterans regret their participation in the war. They repeatedly emphasize that their sacrifice in defending their homeland should be
honoured and remembered by the public. This perspective is influenced by the patriotic education they received, which fostered hostility against Vietnam. From the veterans' viewpoint, Vietnam is seen as an ungrateful nation that betrayed and cheated China and, most importantly, killed many Chinese civilians. However, their claims, while based on facts, do not tell the whole story. The Soviet-Vietnamese military alliance might signal betrayal, but it was years of China's radical and inconsistent foreign policy during the Cultural Revolution that eventually pushed Hanoi to align with Moscow.

Another significant contribution is the fieldwork conducted at Malipo County, including visits to the Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, Laoshan War Memorial, and Laoshan Main Peak battlefield. These visits were essential for the completion of this thesis. The tombstones of hundreds of young martyrs at Malipo Martyrs Cemetery, the endless landmines and foxholes at Laoshan Main Peak battlefield, and photographs of martyrs killed and wounded soldiers and civilians at Laoshan War Memorial provided an emotional and realistic perspective that reinforced the veterans' stories. Such an immersive experience was crucial to understanding the war's impact on a personal level.

**Implications for Chinese Society and Historiography**

The CCP's historical narrative, which justifies its rule, requires historical events to appear almost flawless to emphasize solidarity and positivity. Thus, historical events in this narrative carry more political significance than factual accuracy, as they serve to legitimize the CCP's authority.
For veterans, the Sino-Vietnamese War does not align with the current historical narrative, contributing to their ongoing struggles in post-war life. These struggles are partly due to the tragic legacy of Mao's China and the rapid transformation in post-Mao China, which left many, including veterans, behind. Despite significant improvements in veteran benefits, these have not adequately addressed the needs of Sino-Vietnamese War veterans because their service and mobilization were not included in recent policy updates.

**Future Research Directions**

Based on my findings, further theoretical research is recommended to re-examine the trilateral relations between China, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union, as well as between China, Vietnam, and the United States. Both Vietnam and China engaged in complex negotiations with the Soviets and Americans, blaming each other as traitors and claiming victimhood.

For fieldwork and interviews, visiting Vietnamese memorials and martyrs' cemeteries for both the Sino-Vietnamese War and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War is highly recommended. Vietnamese commemoration of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War is more public and widely acknowledged, whereas the Sino-Vietnamese War remains censored. Such visits would provide a comprehensive understanding of how Vietnam chooses to remember and forget the Sino-Vietnamese War.
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2018-2022 B.A. (Dean’s List)
The University of Western Ontario
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2022-2024 M.A.

Honours and awards:
Western Graduate Research Scholarship
2022-2024

Related Work Experience:
Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2022-2024
Teaching Assistant
King’s University College (affiliated to The University of Western Ontario)
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Tutorial Leader
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2023-2024
Guest Lecturer
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