

**Xiaobing Li.** *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xv + 320 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-068161-6.



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The Vietnam War has long been one of the most-studied topics of the Cold War. In recent years, the use of multinational and multilingual archives has filled many gaps in the scholarship and increasingly put the Vietnam War into a much broader historical context. Yet China's military involvement in the Vietnam War remains a relatively understudied subject. Historians agree that support from Beijing and Moscow played a crucial role in the final victory of Hanoi, but the details of China's aid to North Vietnam have yet to be fully examined. In this regard, Xiaobing Li's book, *The Dragon in the Jungle*, is a much-needed contribution to the Vietnam War scholarship.

China's overall involvement in the Vietnam War has been well established by historians. Qiang Zhai's *China and the Vietnam Wars* (2000), for example, is the first major English-language monograph that uses Chinese archives to examine Beijing's policies toward Vietnam from the 1950s to the 1970s. Chen Jian, Yang Kuisong, and others have also used extensive Chinese sources to explore China's ideological and strategic motives be-

hind the conflicts in Indochina.[1] Li's book, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the operational details of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. Drawing upon a wide range of materials including Chinese archives, memories, and interviews, Li aims to provide "a comprehensive coverage of China's foreign war-fighting experience, including Beijing's decision-making, mobilization, command and control, cooperation and interactions with the Vietnamese and Russians, reinforcement and rotation, and combat performance assessment" (p. 2). While his book allows a more accurate assessment of China's economic and military aid to North Vietnam, Li also demonstrates "the Vietnam experience as the defining moment in the history of the PLA modernization" (p. 8). In addition, *The Dragon in the Jungle* should be read together with Li's *Building Ho's Army* (2019), which examines China's aid to North Vietnam during the French Indochinese War, and his *Voices from the Vietnam War* (2010), which is based on Li's interviews of American, Asian, and Russian veterans.

In the first two chapters of *The Dragon in the Jungle*, Li provides an overview of China's decision to support Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam. Vietnam was an important part of the Chinese tribute system before the twentieth century. He argues that China's decision to help North Vietnam in its struggle first against France and then against America "reflected a new strategic culture that advocated concepts of an active defense to protect the newly established [Chinese] Communist state from both a possible foreign invasion and a potential Western threat" (p. 23). Geopolitically, Vietnam was considered as a crucial buffer zone for China's national security along its southern border. The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Li argues, did not change those historical and geopolitical calculations in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders. According to Mao Zedong, the supreme CCP leader, China had to ensure the survival of Ho Chi Minh's friendly regime in order to better defend China's southern border.

Besides those historical and geopolitical factors, Li identifies several other motives behind Beijing's Vietnam policy. Ho's personal relationship with top CCP leaders certainly helped his case when he asked for China's help to defend North Vietnam. Ho was actively involved in the rise of the CCP during the 1920s and 1930s, and he was considered a loyal friend by Mao Zedong. But Beijing did not decide to help North Vietnam just because of Ho's personal connections. The developing Cold War played a more important role. The newly established PRC believed that its primary enemy, the United States, would invade China from three fronts: Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina. Once the Korean War broke out, Beijing immediately escalated its aid to Hanoi in order to avoid a potential two-front war with Washington. China's relationship with the Soviet Union played an equally important role in Beijing's calculation. During the 1950s, Mao argued that it was China's international obligation to help North Vietnam, since China was responsible for helping fellow Communist regimes in Asia according to the divi-

sion of labor implied by the new Sino-Soviet alliance. Ironically, once the Sino-Soviet split emerged, China felt more compelled to help North Vietnam, because now Beijing had to compete against the Soviet Union for the international Communist leadership.

After establishing the broad Cold War context of China's Vietnam policy, Li devotes the next four chapters to examining the operational details of Beijing's aid to Hanoi. Li first examines the performance of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) divisions in Vietnam. From 1965 to 1967, China sent nine AAA divisions into North Vietnam, which provided air defense for North Vietnam in response to America's Rolling Thunder airstrikes. Li discusses the command structures of the Chinese AAA division, their weapons, combat tactics, and other operational issues in great detail. In late 1965, the objective of the Chinese air defense shifted from protecting Vietnamese facilities to shooting down as many American airplanes as possible. While this more proactive tactic satisfied Hanoi's desire to defeat Rolling Thunder, it also exposed the Chinese troops to high casualties. Gradually, the Chinese government moved toward a more cautious air defense to reduce casualties. Until China withdrew its AAA division from Vietnam in 1969, Li argues, "it was their ability to preserve their forces that may have been their greatest success" (p. 123).

Li points out that the combat effectiveness of Chinese AAA divisions declined over time. Once American pilots became familiar with Chinese tactics, the huge technology gap between the two armies started to expose PLA weaknesses. But Li believes that the presence of Chinese AAA divisions in North Vietnam served China's strategic goals quite well: "The Chinese anti-aircraft artillery guns were not superior, but they were effective enough to help the Vietnamese survive Rolling Thunder" (p. 128). The Chinese AAA divisions also clearly signaled to America that Beijing was determined to support Hanoi, which successfully de-

tered America from expanding the ground war into North Vietnam. At the same time, the technology gap forced the Chinese to modernize its own military forces. Thus, the Vietnam War proved to be a turning point in Chinese military history.

Another important component of China's aid was the Chinese engineering troops dispatched to North Vietnam. Among the different Chinese troops in Vietnam, the engineering command "had the largest force, including four divisions totaling 117,700 troops" (p. 165). The Chinese engineering troops were responsible for building, repairing, and maintaining railroads and highways in North Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As Li shows, the engineering troops suffered greatly from American airstrikes, shortage of supplies and building materials, and an oppressive environment of intense heat and humidity. Those difficulties led to casualties and low troop morale, but Li argues that the Chinese troops learned to adapt. Li concludes that "although Beijing's support may have been short of Hanoi's expectations, if it had not been provided, the course, and even the outcome, of the Vietnam War might have been different" (p. 190).

Besides building railways and highways, China provided engineering troops to build a coastal defense for North Vietnam. The Chinese navy was also involved in minesweeping operations to keep the sea route open. Li offers a detailed description of this relatively untold aspect of China's aid to North Vietnam. The coastal defense protected Hanoi from possible American amphibious landings, and the Chinese navy gained an opportunity to learn from its technologically superior opponent. Li argues that the Chinese navy "developed rapidly during the Vietnam War, from a coastal fleet in 1965 to a modern ocean-going naval force in 1975" (p. 215).

Li clearly demonstrates the crucial role played by China's economic and military aid in Hanoi's final victory. The irony, as Li shows, is that China's massive aid to Vietnam ultimately led to a worsen-

ing Sino-Vietnamese relationship and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war. The Sino-Soviet split, Li argues, was the main reason behind this ironic twist. Under the intensified Sino-Soviet split, the two big Communist powers competed against each other to provide aid to Hanoi. China, however, was not able to provide advanced military aid that the Soviet Union could offer to North Vietnam. The Vietnamese, who were constantly complaining that China's aid was not enough, soon moved closer to the Soviets. As the Soviet influence in Vietnam grew, Sino-Vietnamese relations quickly declined. China withdrew its troops from North Vietnam in 1969, and the bilateral relationship continued to worsen, which eventually produced a war between the two Communist allies in 1979. In conclusion, China's aid to North Vietnam was a short-term success but a long-term failure. While China successfully prevented a potential direct confrontation with America in Vietnam, Beijing's Vietnam policy helped to intensify the Sino-Soviet split and turned Hanoi into an enemy.

Li's research is meticulous and well organized. Although he does not fully address the issue of the PLA as a social institution—one of his research goals—and he only mentions the impact of the Sino-American rapprochement on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in passing, Li's book is a valuable contribution to the scholarship of the Vietnam War.

#### Note

[1]. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochinese War, 1949-1973," Cold War International History Project Working Paper 34 (2002); Priscilla Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

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