

XIAOBING LI

Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam.

Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019. 296 pages.

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The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 344 pages.

In *Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam* and *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War*, military historian Xiaobing Li, who is a veteran of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), makes two significant contributions to the scholarship on China's role during the First and Second Indochina Wars from 1950 to 1973. First, Li argues that Chairman Mao Zedong's strategic culture—that is, his realpolitik thinking about China's national security combined with his belief in ancient China's tributary system—explains Beijing's adoption of a grand “active defense” security policy to defend its security buffer states like North Korea and North Vietnam against US invasion into China's sphere of influence (2019, 4, 6–7). While Mao's geopolitical considerations outweighed ideational factors such as socialist internationalism or fraternity with a communist neighbor, his strategic thinking was consistent with China's traditional worldview dating back to the China-centered tributary system under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). In *The Dragon in the Jungle*, Li further provides an insightful account of how China's military intervention during the Vietnam War modernized their military (2020, chapters 2–4). The number of Chinese primary sources Li draws upon to construct

a meticulous account of Chinese military engagements with the American forces during the Vietnam War is very impressive and certainly provides new insight into an enduring question: Why did the United States lose the war in Vietnam?

Consistent with a realist logic, Li argues that the massive amount of economic and military aid from Moscow and Beijing to North Vietnam played a decisive role in the Vietnamese communists' victory over the United States and its ally, the Republic of Vietnam, between 1965 and 1973. Yet Li's narrative implies that Chinese economic, technical, and military aid to North Vietnam played a much more crucial and direct role than that of the Soviet Union in defending North Vietnam and resisting the superior military power of the United States. Going beyond the existing scholarship on China's intervention in North Vietnam, Li documents in detail Chinese volunteer troops' direct efforts to significantly minimize the effectiveness of the American bombing campaign against North Vietnam and to prevent an American invasion of North Vietnam. Thus, the Chinese military intervention allowed the North Vietnamese army to focus on the battlefield in the South between 1965 and 1970. According to Li, Chinese volunteers were deeply involved in the war against the United States in Indochina, including air defense; defense of critical transportation highways, railways, and seaports; and defense against amphibious landings of American troops on North Vietnam's coasts. Chinese troops' engagements in actual combat against the American forces in North Vietnam is far more extensive than what we have known from the existing scholarship. Li meticulously documents these extraordinary efforts in *The Dragon in the Jungle* (see chapters 5 and 6).

Thus, Li's claim implicitly minimizes the agency of China's small but pivotal ally, North Vietnam, during the Vietnam War; he suggests that North Vietnam's victory over the French colonialists and later the Americans would not have been possible without China's massive aid and sacrifice of Chinese volunteer troops. The mobilizing power of the Vietnamese Workers' Party and Vietnamese nationalism and heroism are missing from Li's narrative.

The evolution of the PLA from a peasant army to a modern military power is a central theme in Li's two volumes. He documents how the

Chinese military, as an institution, transformed itself through the PLA's direct involvement in the First Indochina War, the Korean War, and the Second Indochina War. Li reveals the split between the reformists and the Maoists on the question of military doctrine. While the reformists, especially Grand General Lou Ruiqing, chief of the PLA General Staff, pushed to modernize the PLA to bridge the technological gap with China's chief enemies and rivals, the United States and the Soviet Union, the Maoist faction, led by Marshall Lin Biao, placed almost sole emphasis on the political and ideological indoctrination of the PLA rank and file (2020, 143–144, 147). Although reformist military leaders were purged during the height of the Cultural Revolution, and Lin Biao reigned supreme in the PLA from 1966 to 1970, Li contends, Chinese military activity in Vietnam, learning from direct engagement with advanced American military technology, and observing sophisticated Soviet weapon systems did not stop. Chinese military leaders were able to learn and adapt military strategies and technologies to modernize the PLA. After Lin Biao's downfall in 1970, reformists Zhou Enlai and Marshall Ye Jieying emphasized modernization of the PLA once again. The result, according to Li, was that the PLA was able to translate the battlefield experiences in Vietnam to professionalize and modernize its combat effectiveness and improve its military technology. Li concludes that the Vietnam War became a “lost war” for China and clearly exposed China's military inferiority to the more advanced American and Soviet military technology, but the Chinese military intervention in Vietnam provided the necessary impetus for China to transform from a peasant army to a modern military power. Most importantly, the reformists' strategic idea to professionally train and rapidly modernize the PLA (2020, 156–157) eventually prevailed after the demise of Maoist ideologue and defense minister Lin Biao, who had aggressively promoted Mao's “people's war” ideology until 1971 (2020, 141–145), setting an irreversible course for China's expansive force modernization.

In chapter 5, “Hanoi's Complaints: Rails and Roads,” and chapter 6, “Coast Operation: Combat Engineering and the Navy,” in *The Dragon in the Jungle*, Li shows how Hà Nội's leaders underappreciated the Chinese volunteer force's sacrifices and their construction of and repairs to the transportation networks to support North Vietnam's war efforts. Li

meticulously documents China's massive assistance to the railways, highways, and defense in the North, which freed up the North Vietnamese troops to be sent to the front line in the South (2020, 190, 208). In chapter 7, "Aid and Arms: From Honeymoon to Divorce," Li attributes the Sino-Vietnamese split in the early 1970s to the material forces of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, and therefore concurs with political scientist Nicholas Khoo, who makes a structural realist argument, privileging the great power rivalry as the main cause of the breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance in his book, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (Columbia University Press, 2011). Li writes:

No matter how hard the Chinese tried, however, the Vietnamese moved closer to the Soviet Union in 1970–1972. The economic limits and technology gap handicapped the PLA in a futile competition against the superior Soviet air defense system in North Vietnam. When Russia became more involved in Indochina, Hanoi moved closer to Moscow for better military technology and more economic aid. The Soviet military technology won the Vietnamese by cutting off the Sino-Vietnamese alliance and downgrading the ideological factor. (2020, 245)

Li's realist argument is hardly new and notably does not consider the fallout from the Mao-inspired Cultural Revolution on Sino-Vietnamese relations, especially the consequential responses from the Vietnamese side.

Like David C. Kang, a proponent of a neo-Confucian model of China-centered hierarchical order of which ancient China's tributary system is the organizing principle (*East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, Columbia University Press, 2010), Li provides a Sino-centric analysis of the Vietnam War though he attempted to include a Vietnamese perspective. Li's conception of China's strategic culture encapsulates both modern realism and Kang's model of a China-centered hierarchical world order; thus, his argument concerning China's strategic culture departs from Kang's view that realism fundamentally misses the point of East Asian international relations. Like Kang, however, Li privileges a China-centered geopolitical analysis and reduces Vietnam's agency to the mercy of a correlation of structural forces of the Sino-Soviet rivalry. A return to an analysis of asymmetrical interactions between China and its weaker neighbors like Vietnam, as Brantly Womack does in *Asymmetry and*

International Relationships (Cambridge University Press, 2016), will be necessary for a more accurate analysis of modern Sino-Vietnamese relations. Despite this flaw, Li's two volumes are essential for a comprehensive understanding of China's military role during the Vietnam War and the origins of the modernization of the PLA from a Chinese perspective.

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