

Chinese military advisors in Vietnam in the early 1950s

Trung T. Nguyen

Ph.D. candidate at UVa

Outline

- Historical background
- Evolution of China's military aids to Vietnam
- How aids were dictated in the battle field
- Chinese perspectives of their aids
- Vietnamese perspectives of Chinese aids
- Some thoughts

Some questions before research

- Was there a division of labor between Mao and Stalin during the early years of China's entanglement in Vietnam?
- What insights about Mao's foreign policy might be gained by a close examination of China's attitudes and conduct toward Vietnam?
- Did China exaggerate their aids to Vietnam when they said that without China's help Vietnam wouldn't have won the first Indochina war?
- Did Vietnam belittle China's help in the 1950s?
- Who had the decision-making power in the battle fields?

North Vietnam's map under French domination (Tonkin)



Brief History background of DRV

- In 1940, during World War II, Japan invaded Indochina
- The Vietnam Revolutionary League (Vietminh) was established by Ho Chi Minh while living in China on the Vietnam border.
- With Paris already occupied by Germany, the French troops decided it was not worth putting up a fight and they surrendered to the Japanese in March, 1945. Ho Chi Minh and his fellow nationalists saw this as an opportunity to free their country from foreign domination. Under the military leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietminh began a guerrilla campaign against the Japanese.
- Sept 2 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam an independent country, but the French wouldn't let go.
- Hostilities broke out between the French and the Viet Minh in December 1946.

Vietnam's requests for aids

- In 1949, Ho Chi Minh wrote to Mao Zedong asking for assistance to expel the French.
- In Jan 1950, Ho Chi Minh himself came to Beijing, reiterating his wish to fight against colonialism with China's help.
- In Feb 1950, he came to Moscow, getting the Soviet recognition of Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from Stalin but not the aid. Stalin passed this responsibility to Mao Zedong.
- In March 1950 Chinese Communist Party Central Committee discussed a plan to help Vietnam: what China can offer and what Vietnam needs.
- In April, 1950 the Central Committee of the Indochina Communist Party formally asked for military advisors from China.



Possible reasons for China's aids

- Mao Zedong's leaning-to-one-side foreign policy: socialist camp.
- His view of proletariat internationalism
- Vietnam used to help China wipe out the Guomingdang (KMT) troops at the end of Chinese Civil War in the border area.
- China needs a secure border area free of Western powers and KMT.
- China wants to be a big brother for Asian communist countries → a sphere of Chinese influence.

Key Chinese players

- Mao Zedong
- Liu Shaoqi
- Chen Geng
- Luo Guibo (1st Chinese ambassador to DRV)
- Wei Guoqing (head of CMAG)
- Zeng Yifan (vice-head of CMAG)
- Mei Jiasheng (vice-head of CMAG)

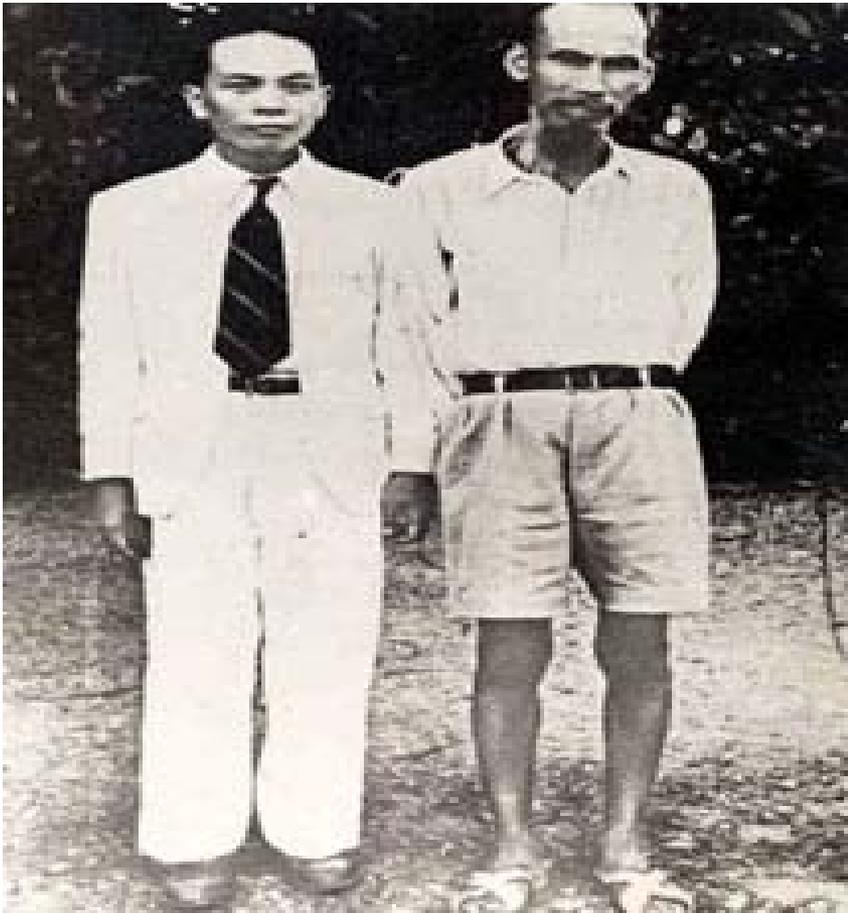


Chinese military advisors in Dien Bien Phu in 1953

From left to right: Mei Jiasheng, Deng Yifan, Luo Guibo and Wei Guoqing

Key Vietnamese players

- Ho Chi Minh
- Vo Nguyen Giap





-Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap and Chinese military advisor, Chen Geng (third from the left).

The formation of the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG)

- Late in July, 1950 the CMAG, composed of seventy-nine experienced PLA officers, was formally established, with General Wei Guoqing as the head, associated with Generals Mei Jiasheng and Deng Yifan.
- Primary task is to work out a generally practical plan based on Vietnam's conditions (including military establishments, politics, economy, topography, and transportation) and on the limits of China's assistance (including, in particular, the conditions for shipping supplies)
- The plan should be practical, and it should be approved by the Vietnamese party Central Committee.



CMAG'S WORKING PROCEDURES

1

- Make field trips to the battle grounds.
- Figure out tactical suggestions

2

- Report to Chinese Communist Party Central Committee
- Wait for the response from CCP, mostly from Mao Zedong, or Deng Xiaoping

3

- Discuss CCP directives with Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh; in some occasions directly to Ho Chi Minh alone.

Advisors' Timeline

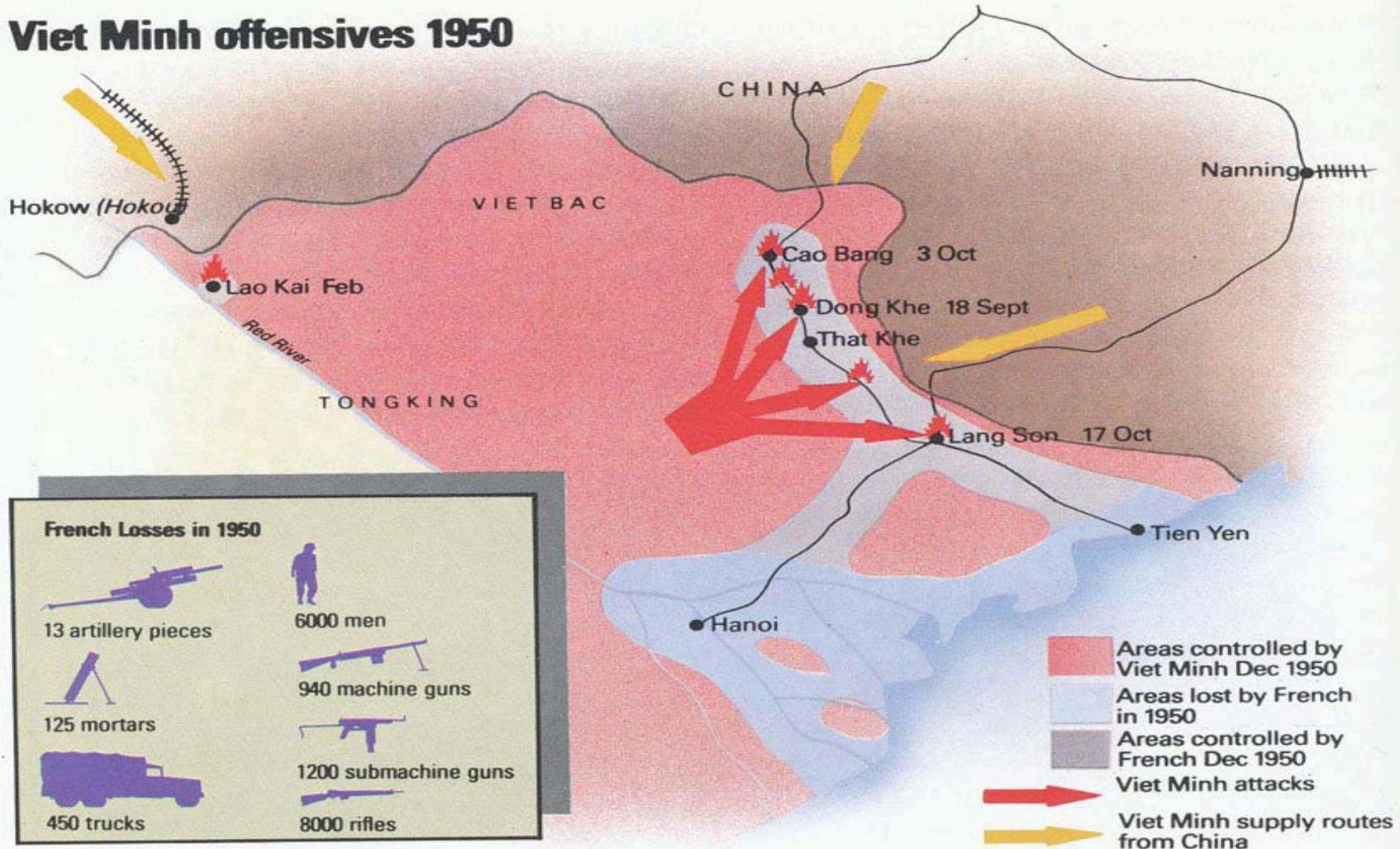
- Luo Guibo arrived in Vietnam in March 1950, acting both as the first Chinese ambassador to Vietnam and advisor.
- General Chen Geng at the personal request of Ho Chi Minh to Mao Zedong, came to Vietnam in July and left in November 1950 to take up responsibility in Korean War.
- The CMAG arrived in Vietnam in August, 1950 and finished their duty in July 1954.

Chen Geng and the Border Campaign

- Chen traveled to the Viet Bac bases in mid-July, 1950. After a series of meetings with Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and other Viet Minh leaders, he suggested that in carrying out the Vietnamese-Chinese Border campaign the Viet Minh should “concentrate [its] forces and destroy the enemy troops by separating them.
- The Border campaign started on 16 September, 1950. After forty-eight hours of fierce fighting, Viet Minh troops seized Dong Khe, a strategically important spot on Route Colonial Four, which linked Cao Bang with Vietnam’s interior

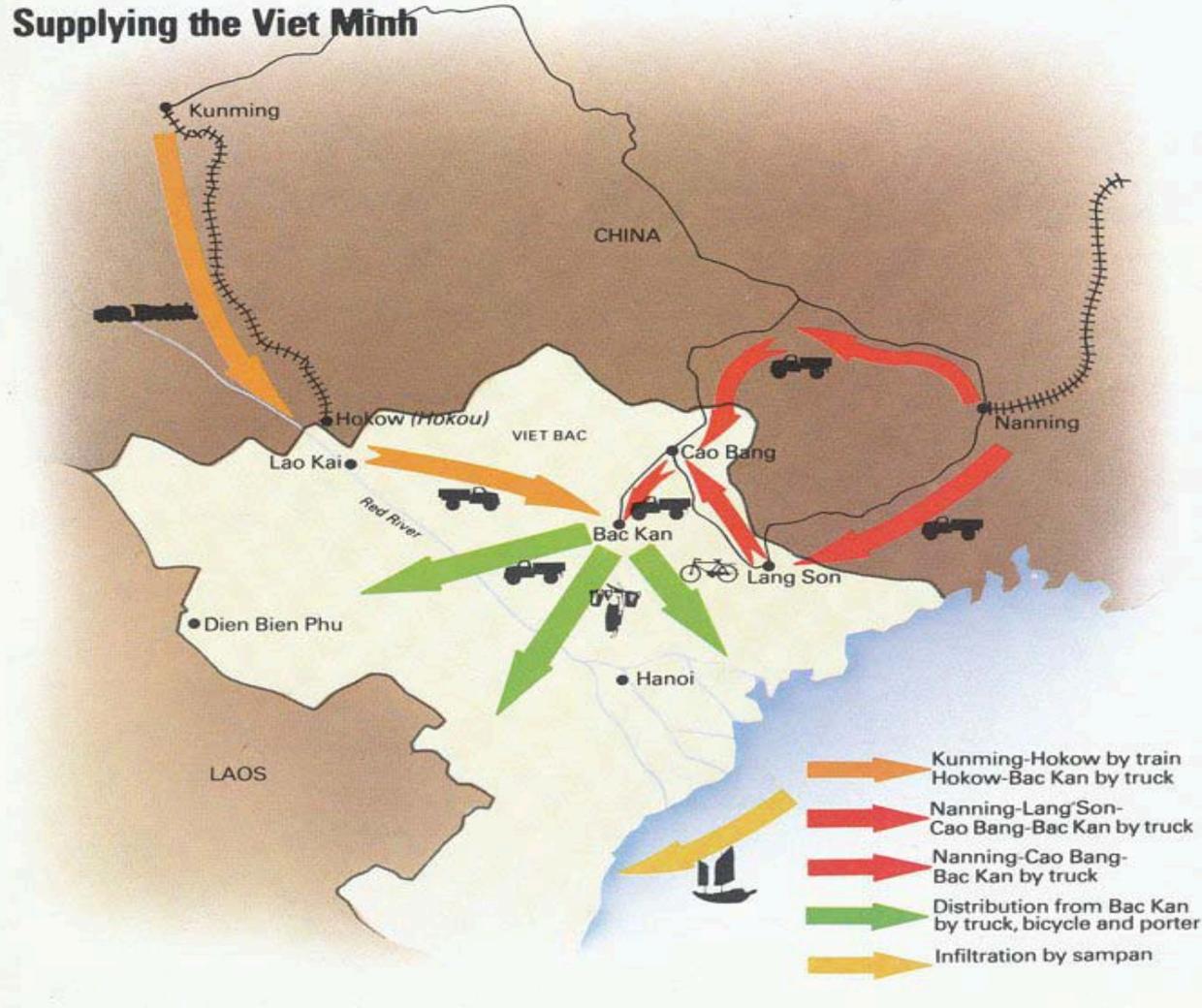
Border campaign

Viet Minh offensives 1950



Significance of the border campaign

Supplying the Viet Minh



- The events of 1950 certainly did much to boost Viet Minh morale and to weaken that of the French.
- The easiest way to supply the Vietnamese insurgents from communist China was through Cao Bang and Lang Son from the railhead at Nanning; and henceforth Viet Minh stockpiles of armaments would continue to grow.

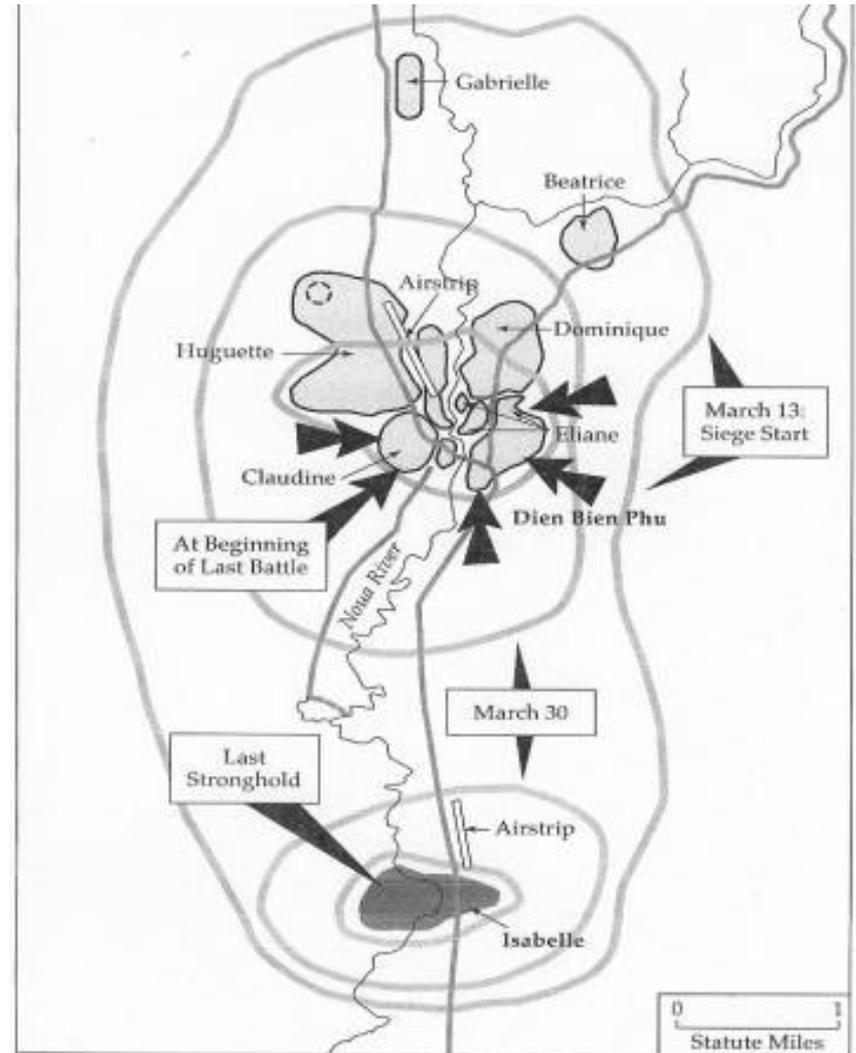
Military logistical aids

- April – Sept, 1950: the Chinese delivered more than 14,000 guns, 1,700 machine guns, about 150 pieces of different types of cannons, 2,800 tons of grains, and large amount of ammunition, medicine, uniforms and communication equipment.
- The support provided was only 10-20 tons a month in 1951, increasing to 250 tons a month in 1952, further increasing to 600 tons a month in 1953 and 1,500 to 4,000 tons monthly during the last year of the war in 1954.
- From a force in 1950 of 3 divisions the PAVN would expand two years later into a force of 7 divisions. All in all the Chinese military aid would arm a total of over 7 PAVN divisions.
- During the Dien Bien Phu campaign, more than 200 trucks, over 10,000 barrels of oil, over 100 cannons, 3,000 pieces of various types of guns, 2,400,000 gun bullets, over 60,000 artillery shells, and about 1,700 tons of grains were provided to the Vietminh troops.
- In terms of personnel, China sent back to Vietnam four Vietnamese anti-aircraft battalions that had been receiving training in China for Dien Bien Phu.

Dien Bien Phu battle



(c) Orbis Publishing



Dien Bien Phu battle

- March 13- May 7 1954: it was estimated that during the battle 7,000 French and close to 20,000 Vietnamese had lost their lives.
- Chinese military advisors claimed that they successfully applied what they got from the battle experience in Korean War into Dien Bien Phu. For instance, digging out into hillside to avoid aerial attack for cannons.
- Giap said that Chinese advisors recommended human wave strategy in Dien Bien Phu, but he refused.

Some debates

Chinese side

- The "order" from the CCP Central Military Commission to the CMAG to pass it on to the Vietnamese command. (Qiang Zhai)
- Decision-making process was clearly dominated by the Chinese advisors.
- Giap made mistakes in Dien Bien Phu battle, and Chinese advisors had to correct him.

Vietnamese side

- It was simply another advice as hundred of others. They might or might not agree with, or they might not implement it when situations changed on the ground.
- Advisors' ideas were just for reference.
- Giap said Chinese advisers made mistakes, not him. Anyway, he did not listen to them.

Chinese advisors' memoir flashbacks

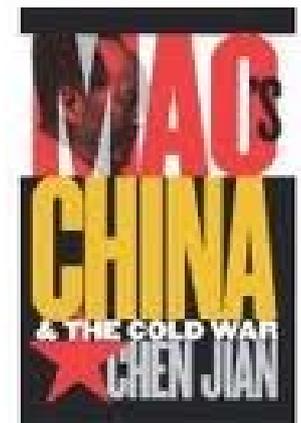
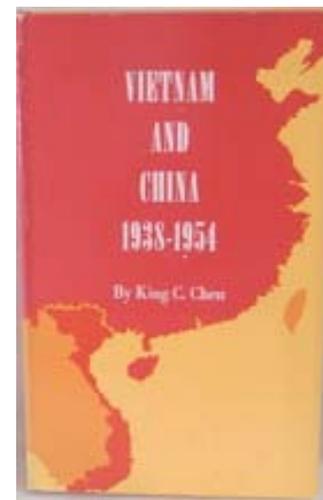
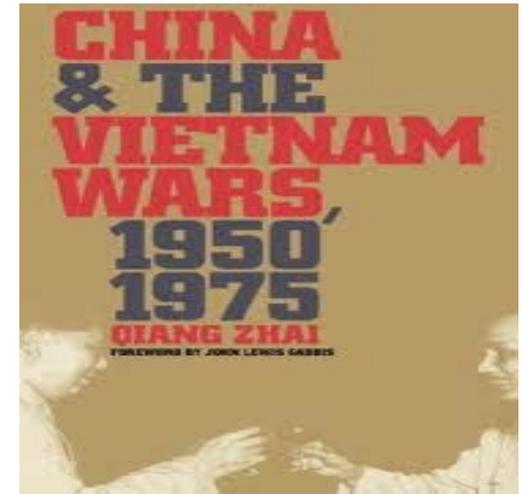
- Chen Geng mentioned in his diary that Vo Nguyen Giap and some other Vietnamese Communists lacked “Bolshevik-style self-criticism” and were unhappy with the Chinese criticism of their “shortcomings.” Chen even described Giap as “slippery and not very upright and honest” in his relationship with his Chinese comrades.
- Chen Geng also claimed his credits for mobilizing women into the war, which Vietnam hadn't done before .
- CMAG's memoirs said that General Vo Nguyen Giap often conflicted with Chinese advisors and they downplayed Ho Chi Minh's roles. According to them, Ho Chi Minh mostly agreed with what CMAG and CCP Central Committee suggested and acted as the mediator between Giap and other CMAG advisors.

Chinese scholars' remarks

- Vo Nguyen Giap's victory is inflated.
- Ho Chi Minh's leadership is exaggerated.
- Chinese military advisors are indispensable to defeating the French.

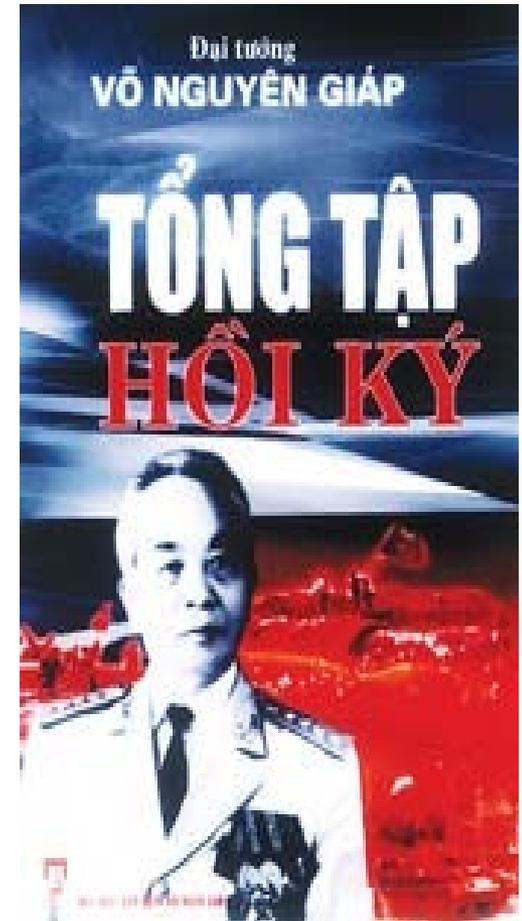
Caveat: their research is based on only Chinese sources, reflecting one-sided view.

→ Do the Vietnamese leaders who are always obsessed by one-thousand-year domination by China easily do exactly as what the Chinese military advisors tell them?



Vo Nguyen Giap's memoir

- Vo Nguyen Giap told that he couldn't sleep on the night of Jan 24 before Dien Bien Phu. Ho Chi Minh had told him : "General, I give you full authority to decide - on one condition- if an attack is made, you must win. If you are not certain of victory, do not launch the attack." This is believable, because not only Giap did not care to ask permission from any Chinese advisor, but didn't ask permission from the Vietnamese politburo either (there was no time left for consultation: the attack order had already been issued for Jan 25)
- Vo Nguyen Giap also responded to Chinese advisors that when he followed Chinese advice and used the human wave strategy, he lost far too many men. He then stopped listening to Chinese advisors and went on to victory.
- He did not give much credit for Chinese advisors in the First Indochina War. He highly underscored the leadership of Ho Chi Minh in the struggle against the French. Throughout the memoir, he mainly described the battles and the courage of Vietnamese soldiers. In the 1,360-page length, there are about 10 pages mentioning Chinese military advisors.



Some thoughts

- It is true that Chinese material assistance, advice (in some cases at tactical levels), and training (on Chinese soil) were more important to the resurrection of Viet Minh fighting capability after 1950 than the Vietnamese have admitted (Shawn McHale).
- It is really misleading to imply that, as some do, that the Vietminh could not have won without outside help. (Duiker, 1981).
- The origin of the 1979 confrontation between China and Vietnam could be traced back to their co-operation during the First Indo-China War. (Chen Jian, 2001)
- Bottom line: Vietnam should evaluate the contribution of Chinese military advisors during 1950-54 period correctly as what the latter really did. Their missions in Vietnam are still unknown to many Vietnamese students.

References

- Chen, King C. *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Chen, Jian. “China and the First Indo-China War.” *The China Quarterly*. No.1 33 (March, 1993): 85-110.
- Chen, Jian. *Mao's China and the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Duiker, William J. *The Communist Road to Power In Vietnam*. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996.
- Tanham, George K. *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong*. Rev. ed. New York: Praeger, 1967.
- Vo, Nguyen Giap. The complete memoir of General Vo Nguyen Giap [Tong Tap Hoi ky i ng Nguyễn p]. Vietnam: NXB QDND, 2010.
- Young, Marilyn Blatt, John J Fitzgerald, and A. Tom Grunfeld. *The Vietnam War : a History In Documents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- “Memoirs of Chinese military advisors,” available at: <http://www.diendan.org/the-gioi/hoi-ki-co-van-trung-quoc-1/>

- Thank you very much!
 - Xin m ǒn!