

Building force: Asian origins of twentieth-century military science in Vietnam (1905–54)

Christopher E. Goscha

This article examines the Asian channels through which foreign military knowledge flowed into Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century. Using the Vietnamese opposition to the creation of the French colonial state of Indochina between 1905 and 1954, it is argued that there is an Asian context that needs to be taken into consideration when studying twentieth-century military and technical transfers and adaptations in Vietnam.

Here I am now a prisoner of these little Vietnamese, the same ones our army used to think were only good for being nurses or drivers. Though these men of extraordinary morale started with nothing in 1945 but an ideal, to get rid of the French, in nine years [General Võ Nguyên] Giáp had undeniably defeated our Expeditionary Corps . . . There are lessons to be learned from this. . .¹

This article examines the Asian channels through which foreign military knowledge flowed into Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century, in spite of or even because of the creation of the European colonial state called French Indochina. It builds on the preceding articles by Sun Laichen and Frédéric Mantiennne on earlier military transfers to Vietnam.² Surprisingly little work has been done on the history of military science in Southeast Asia for the twentieth century and even less on its specifically Asian dimensions, and staunch nationalist and colonial historiographies have not made the task any easier. Focused on the modern nation-state, nationalist histories seek to downplay foreign borrowings and transfers in favour of the ‘authentic’, the ‘real’ and the ‘autonomous’. Colonial historiography and even many ‘post-colonial studies’ focus mainly on the European side of the imperial equation and, increasingly, on the ‘modern’ impact of the colonial state on the ‘colonised’ Asians. While the introduction of Western military science was most certainly important in the development of modern armed forces throughout Southeast Asia, the entry and adaptation of this foreign knowledge did

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1 Marcel Bigeard, *Pour une parcelle de gloire*, 2nd edn (Paris: Plon, 1997), p. 179. Bigeard was wrong, for French officers had extolled Vietnamese discipline and bravery in battle during World War I. A battalion of Vietnamese *tirailleurs* went over the top during the battle of the Chemin des Dames in 1917; Charles Régismanset, *Le miracle français en Asie* (Paris: G. Crès et Cie., 1922), pp. 43–4.

2 See Frédéric Mantiennne, ‘The transfer of Western military technology to Vietnam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: The case of the Nguyễn’ and Sun Laichen, ‘Military technology transfers from Ming China and the emergence of northern mainland Southeast Asia (c. 1390–1527)’ in this issue.

not always occur along Western colonial lines. Similarly, while few would deny the crucial role Southeast Asian nationalisms played in forcing Europeans to decolonise their Asian states in favour of nation-states, it would be disingenuous to think that modern military knowledge developed in a national vacuum. If Europe is any guide, science – especially military science – flows across borders in a myriad of ways.

Using the Vietnamese opposition to the creation of the French colonial state of Indochina between 1905–54, the article argues that there is an Asian context that needs to be taken into consideration when studying twentieth-century military and technical transfers into eastern continental Southeast Asia, as well as its adaptations and rejections on the ground. To get at this for Vietnam, the study uses two Asian channels reaching across two time periods: Japanese and Chinese contributions to the development of modern military science and armed forces in communist Vietnam. The first time period opens with the Japanese military victory over the Russians in 1905 and ends with Tokyo's defeat by the Allies in 1945; the article examines the transfer of modern military knowledge through China and Japan to Vietnamese anti-colonialists determined to turn their imaginary Vietnam pushed outside French Indochina into a national reality. The year 1905 represents an important watershed in the history of military science in Asia. For one, Meiji Japan's victory showed that an Asian nation could defeat a Western power militarily, explicitly undermining European arguments of Darwinian superiority and the validity of their licence to colonise. Second, the victory made it clear to others confronting the colonial tide that obtaining and adapting modern Western military science would be key to putting colonised nations back on the map as independent states. Studying Western modernity and searching out new political ideologies to explain a world spun out of control often went together with acquiring the keys to building force, the modern military power capable of reversing the colonial state of events and putting the nation-state in its place.

The second part of the article focuses on the period of decolonisation (or nationalisation) and the impact of Chinese and Japanese military science, assistance and advisors inside the budding Vietnamese nation-state. More than ever, access to foreign military knowledge and armed force was essential to ensuring that the nation-state declared a reality by Hồ Chí Minh on 2 September 1945 would still be there when the Franco-Vietnamese war ended in a bloody valley called Điện Biên Phủ on 7 May 1954. Like the Japanese victory of 1905, the Vietnamese triumph at Điện Biên Phủ is a milestone in the history of modern military science. Not only had the Asian 'colonised' defeated the Western 'coloniser' in a set-piece battle, but the Vietnamese had also created a modern army from scratch in a time of war. If the French Expeditionary Corps was not the first Western army to be defeated in a major battle by an Asian state in the twentieth century (the Russian one was), the Vietnamese victory offered a powerful model to anti-colonialists across the globe and made it clear that military modernisation and the building of armed force were essential to achieving independence. The Vietnamese case is also noteworthy in that it shows that the colonised did not always build their modern military forces by borrowing exclusively from the Western coloniser, as post-colonial studies tend to stress. Nor did they go it all alone, as ferocious nationalists would still like us to believe today.³

3 In the Museum of the People's Army of Vietnam on Điện Biên Phủ Street in Hanoi, one strains to find mention of Chinese assistance to the Vietnamese in the wars against the French 'colonialists' and the American 'imperialists'.

Vietnamese anti-colonialism and the quest for military science in Asia (1905–45): Japan and the *Đông Du* movement

The French creation in 1887 of a colonial state called ‘Indochina’ spelled the end of the formerly independent state once known as ‘Đại Việt’ and more recently as ‘Đại Nam’ or ‘Việt Nam’. The Nguyễn monarchy was hobbled and the army was placed under colonial direction. The French ran the court’s diplomacy, not the Vietnamese, and ‘French Indochina’ appeared on the world map, not ‘Vietnam’. The Dutch, British and Americans did similar things across the region running from India to Shanghai. Not without difficulty, the Japanese, the Thai and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese maintained their independence in Asia and set to building modern nation-states; Meiji Japan led the way. Japanese nationalists also learned fast how to play the Western imperial game, colonising Korea in 1910 and then moving determinedly into China. It was only in 1949 that the Chinese communist victory ended decades of divisive wars and established a unified, independent and communist-led nation-state. The Thai navigated the first half of the twentieth century quite adeptly, doing their best to ‘regain’ territories they had ‘lost’ during the French construction of colonial Indochina. Siam, Japan and even Republican China stood out as three independent states in an Asian region dominated by the colonial powers, and Asian anti-colonialists looked to them for refuge, support and ideas.

Those Vietnamese who continued to believe in and fight for an independent Vietnam were forced to go abroad to keep it alive or to risk imprisonment, marginalisation or worse. French colonisation and colonial repression pushed this imaginary Vietnam and the handful of nationalists backing it deep into Asia. For Vietnamese anti-colonialists, those nearby independent Asian states – China, Siam and Japan – became crucial refuges. Many a Vietnamese nationalist admired Siam (which the Nguyễn state had traditionally considered as a barbarian, non-Confucian country) and especially Japan for their ability to keep their nations independent.⁴ Meiji rulers had shown that an Asian state could modernise in Western ways without having to be colonised, implicitly undermining civilisational and Darwinian justifications for creating and running colonial states across the region. Vietnamese continued to place their historical hopes in a special relationship with China, but this time in an independent Chinese republic which would support their opposition to French domination.

As noted, the Japanese military defeat of the Russians in 1905 was a turning point in Asian anti-colonialism. Chinese, Korean, Indian and Vietnamese nationalists flocked to Japan in the wake of this reassuring Asian military victory over a Western power. More than ever, they were convinced that Meiji Japan held the keys to a modern Asian future and a roadmap for getting there independently. Phan Bội Châu, the most famous Vietnamese anti-colonialist at the time, began sending Vietnamese youths to Japan to study modern ideas. His ‘Go East’ (*Đông Du*) movement began in 1906 and mobilised around 200 Vietnamese youth for study abroad in Japanese schools. Phan Bội Châu was deeply interested in what was going on in China, Korea and the world beyond. He met Meiji leaders to discuss the fate of his ‘lost country’ (*vong quốc*), as well as with Chinese nationalists opposed to the Qing like Sun Yat-sen and Liang Qichao. Western colonisation of the region had effectively triggered a regionalisation of anti-colonialism and stimulated a

4 A number of post-1945 Vietnamese military officers had been trained in the Thai army.

new set of Asian connections anchored in the independent Asian states. At different times, Japan, Siam and China would be important intersections for anti-colonialists in East and Southeast Asia and important sources of and conduits for foreign knowledge banned in the colonial states.

The political nature of these connections has been well covered elsewhere. What is important for our purposes here is that 1905 also saw a wide variety of Asian anti-colonialists begin studying Western military science via a successful Asian broker, Meiji Japan. The Vietnamese travelling in the *Đông Du* were part of this wider reorientation. Prince Cường Đệ, one of Phan Bội Châu's royalist partners, studied at the Shimbu Gakko (Academy for the Promotion of the Martial Spirit) along with five other Vietnamese students.⁵ Tokyo's establishment of modern diplomatic relations with the French made it difficult for the Japanese General Staff to extend overt military training to these Vietnamese youths opposed to the reality of French Indochina. Nevertheless, General Fukushima Yasumasa agreed to teach military techniques to them within the confines of the 'Common East Asia Culture Society'. A handful of young Vietnamese studied in the Tao Dobun Shoin (Common East Asian Culture Institute), where Lt. Colonel 'Tamba', a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War, taught the military courses. In 1908, three Vietnamese graduated from the Shimbu Gakko. One of them moved on to China, was admitted to the Guangzhou School of Munitions, and then entered the Beijing Military Academy.⁶ Another Vietnamese youngster, Hồ Học Lãm, studied military science at the Imperial University in Japan. There, he developed a lifetime friendship with a young Chinese nationalist named Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi), a connection which would facilitate the military training of a generation of young Vietnamese cadets outside Indochina.⁷

While Vietnamese anti-colonialists counted on obtaining modern military training in Japan, Meiji support did not last long. Indeed, rather than supporting uprisings against the European colonial powers, the Japanese followed the Western colonial lead. By 1909, they had expelled both Sun Yat-sen and the *Đông Du* movement, had normalised relations with the French in Indochina, and would transform Korea into a colony about a year later. While they maintained a royal trump card in the person of Cường Đệ, Japanese leaders preferred pushing their intelligence services into French Indochina after World War I rather than overtly supporting a nationalist like Phan Bội Châu. This was especially the case after the Allied defeat of Germany and the failed Vietnamese anti-colonialist attempts to take Indochina from the outside. The Japanese were more interested for the moment in China, where they sent technical and military advisors. As the Qing governor of Zhejiang had already written to the Emperor before the Russo-Japanese war, 'the Japanese military is now so advanced as to be on par with

5 Phan Bội Châu, *Overtaken chariot: The autobiography of Phan-Boi-Chau*, trans. and annotated by Vĩnh Sinh and Nicholas Wickenden (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), p. 109. The Shimbu Gakko was created by the Japanese General Staff in 1903 'as a specialised preparatory school for youths who wished to enter the Rikugun Shikan Gakko (Military Academy), then the leading institution for officer training in Japan' (p. 99, note 29). For the broader context of Asian students in Japan, see also Paula Harrell, *Sowing the seeds of change: Chinese students, Japanese teachers, 1895–1905* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

6 Phan Bội Châu, *Overtaken chariot*, pp. 136–50.

7 'Plusieurs Annamites sont à l'honneur en Chine', *Le Journal de Saigon*, 7 Feb. 1938.

Europe. Our two countries moreover share a common writing system and culture, facilitating instruction while saving us money on salaries.⁸

In the end, Vietnamese military education in Japan in the early 1900s was scant at best. Many students lost heart and returned home, others later died from illness during their demanding voyages, and still others were tracked down by the combined colonial police forces operating throughout Asia. No Vietnamese national officer corps ever emerged on the outside from these Japanese military connections. Yet, no matter how limited these early twentieth-century military connections most certainly were, the influences of modern military science had begun to seep into this ‘Vietnam abroad’; it was a small but important shift.

The southern Chinese origins of modern Vietnamese military science

China became the main route by which modern military science reached Vietnamese anti-colonialists circulating outside French Indochina when the Chinese Revolution of 1911 created favourable conditions for such exchanges. Significantly, Sun Yat-sen had based his headquarters in southern China, closely linked to Vietnam by overland and maritime routes. Expelled from Japan, Phan Bội Châu’s *Đông Du* set up camp in southern China after a short stint in Siam. A rapidly developing sense of nationalism, common opposition to Western domination of Asia and a desire to build modern nation-states and contacts from Japan were at the root of a new set of Sino-Vietnamese connections. Phan Bội Châu formed the Vietnamese Restoration Society (*Việt Nam Quang phục hội*) in southern China in 1912, based on the Chinese republican model. He saw this association as a veritable nationalist government-in-exile, complete with a president, ministers, ministries and, theoretically, a national army. However, it was still located outside Vietnam, and like the Chinese nationalists upon whom he modelled this organisation, it remained badly organised and without a clear political programme.

Meanwhile, a second important revolution had occurred further to the north when Russian communists took power in what soon became known as the Soviet Union, and began supporting Asian anti-colonialists as part of a larger internationalist undertaking against capitalist and colonial domination. The formation of the Comintern (Communist International) in 1919 was an accurate reflection of this. The Comintern felt that the most favourable conditions for potential revolution now existed in southern China, and from its headquarters in Moscow it began dispatching European advisors to support Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*, or GMD), both politically and militarily. Among these foreign advisors were such names as General Vasili K. Blücher (V. Galen), Gregorii Voitinsky, Mikhail Markovich Borodin and Otto Braun. A number of Asian converts to communism, not least of all Li Lisan, Zhou Enlai and Hồ Chí Minh, left Western Europe via Moscow to work in southern China. Chinese nationalists were elated to receive military training and even Soviet arms at a time when no other Western power was willing to risk its own colonial interests, let alone reverse the carving-up of China in favour of a united, modern Chinese state like Meiji Japan. The Soviet Union, by

8 Quoted in Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese warfare, 1795–1989* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 139. German instructors were also attached to the Baoding Military Academy, established in 1912 near Beijing.

contrast, supported a nationalist alliance between the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), formed in 1921 with considerable help from the Comintern.

Hồ Chí Minh was thus part of a larger revolutionary network extending into Asia by way of southern China.⁹ Between 1923 and 1927, thanks to the entente between the GMD, the CCP and the USSR, Hồ used Guangzhou as a revolutionary laboratory and a recruiting ground for young patriots coming either from colonial Indochina or from the nationalist Vietnam that the Đông Du was still pushing from the outside. Indeed, Hồ wanted to exploit these favourable conditions in southern China and pre-existing anti-colonialist immigration networks in Asia to begin creating and training a group of youths who would constitute the foundation of a Vietnamese communist party and a modern army to run the projected nation-state. Revolution and military science went together.

Nowhere is the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary military connections better seen than in the classrooms of the Politico-Military Academy of Whampoa in Guangzhou. Formed in 1924, this Chinese officer training school was run by the GMD and, to a lesser extent, the CCP. Soviet advisors oversaw much of its organisation, administration and training; indeed, they played an essential role in transferring modern Western military science to China via this institution, given the reluctance of Western powers to do so. Based on the Soviet military academy created by Leon Trotsky in Russia, Whampoa sought to train political elites and military officers to run China's nationalist government and army.¹⁰ In 1924, the main group of Soviet military advisors arrived in southern China under Blücher's command; there were twenty-five of them in Guangzhou in June 1924 and fifty-eight by April 1926. Their presence would be essential to administering a modern and unified state and defeating the powerful warlords still controlling large parts of China. Communist or not, Vietnamese anti-colonialists studying there found much needed nationalist sympathy and support from the GMD, the CCP and Soviet, German and even Japanese officers working in Whampoa. The chief advisor to the Whampoa Academy was a Russian named V. I. Poliak. Joined by others, he taught discipline, tactics, communications and ciphering, army engineering, modern espionage and counter-espionage.¹¹ Thanks to this revolutionary Chinese connection, by 1925 notions of Soviet military methods had begun to reach Vietnamese students in southern China.

In firm colonial control of Vietnam, the French were obviously opposed to the idea of creating hundreds of nationalist-minded military elites keen on regaining Vietnamese independence. This first took place outside the colonial state, in southern China, and it occurred before World War II. Between 1925 and early 1927, Hồ Chí Minh and others enrolled at least 200 Vietnamese students in the Whampoa Academy to study politics

9 On Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary connections, see Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Hồ Chí Minh: The missing years (1919–1941)* (London: Christopher Hurst, 2003).

10 Richard B. Landis, 'Training and indoctrination at the Whampoa academy', in *China in the 1920s: Nationalism and revolution*, ed. F. Gilbert Chan and Thomas H. Etzold (New York: Frank Watts, 1976), pp. 73–93; and Roderick L. MacFarquhar, 'The Whampoa military academy', *Papers on China*, 9 (1955): 146–72.

11 Elleman, *Modern Chinese warfare*, pp. 154–63, and in particular Vladimir Nikolaïevitch Ouzov, 'Le renseignement soviétique en Chine, 1925–1927', *Communisme*, 65–66 (2001): 81–3, which is based on recent Russian sources and archives.

and military science.¹² The names of those selected by Hồ read like a ‘Who’s Who’ of the future Vietnamese communist party and its army: Lê Hồng Phong, Phùng Chí Kiên, Lê Thiết Hùng, Hoàng Văn Hoan, Lê Hồng Sơn, Trương Văn Lĩnh, Hoàng Đình Gióng (Vũ Đức), Năm Long, Lê Quảng Ba, Nguyễn Sơn, Hoàng Văn Thái and others. Budding Vietnamese communists in Guangzhou also heard lectures from CCP leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Li Fuchan, Chen Yannian and Peng Pai, all of whom would become ranking members of the CCP ruling elite.¹³ However, these same Vietnamese cadets were also following lectures from Chinese GMD, German and Soviet officers, such as Borodin.

Chiang Kaishek ran the academy, and in May 1925 he became Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese Nationalist Army. Vietnamese and Chinese cadets received the basics of officer training; studied the fundamentals and finer points of commanding troops; and learned how to plan military operations, read maps and operate more sophisticated Western arms and technologies being imported from the Soviet Union. Soviet military advisors oversaw drills, weapons firing and tactical preparations. Students received valuable political training as cadres and learned the important Leninist organisational and party-building skills imported into the GMD from the Soviet Union. Discipline was part of the curriculum, and so was nationalism, as Vietnamese cadets in Whampoa were able to develop and voice their anti-colonialist sentiments among their equally nationalistic Chinese colleagues, without fear of being expelled or arrested by French security forces. Ironically, the French crackdown on student strikes inside Vietnam in 1925–6 sent a number of nationalist youths fleeing to Whampoa to continue their studies abroad in China and the Soviet Union. Some of those in southern Vietnam arrived in Guangzhou via overseas Chinese networks linking Saigon to Hong Kong. New connections were built on pre-existing ones.¹⁴

While it would be a serious mistake to exaggerate the sophistication of the Whampoa-based politico-military training, it would be equally misguided to write it off as a mere sideshow during the colonial period. To illustrate this point, before turning to the post–1945 period it is worth considering two Vietnamese cadets trained in China and the roles they would play in bringing modern military science to the new nation-state called Vietnam.

The GMD and Lê Thiết Hùng

Lê Thiết Hùng is a good example of how Vietnamese communists could tap into military modernisation occurring in southern China before World War II. Like so many other Vietnamese youth studying in Guangzhou, he came from the province of

12 According to Alexander Cherepanov, who was involved in military training at Whampoa, Hồ Chí Minh ‘maintained relations with the Vietnamese cadets in the Whampoa school and supervised their education’; A. I. Cherepanov, *As military advisor in China*, tr. Sergei Sosinsky (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), p. 83.

13 Thanh Đạm, ‘Các nhà cách mạng Việt Nam thăm gia khởi nghĩa Quảng Châu’, *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, 253 (1990): 72–5.

14 On the role of the overseas Chinese, see the interrogation of a Vietnamese student in Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer [hereafter CAOM], Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire [hereafter SPCE], box 371, ‘Interrogatoire’, 23 Sept. 1931, box 371. In May 1928 an agent reported to the French Sûreté the names of twenty-four Vietnamese in the Whampoa academy; among them was a certain Nguyễn Văn Châu, a political prisoner who had escaped from a colonial jail in Guyana (CAOM, SPCE, box 368, Mission Noël, ‘Envoi no. 441, Rapport de l’agent Pinot’, 25 May 1928).

Nghệ An in upper-central Vietnam. In 1923, he travelled to northeast Siam to make his way to Bangkok and then caught a boat to southern China. In late 1924, he arrived in Guangzhou, where Hồ Chí Minh recruited him and admitted him into the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League (formed there in 1925), instructed him to learn Chinese fast and enrolled him in the Whampoa academy. Of the 700 students studying in his Whampoa class, Hùng claims that there were around 100 Vietnamese.¹⁵ At ease in this revolutionary ‘study abroad’ programme, Hùng forged contacts with Chinese from both the CCP and the GMD. Indeed, many of these young Vietnamese were members of both parties, given the logic of the First United Front. Lê Thiết Hùng was himself first a member of the GMD; thanks to his position within the party and his fluency in Chinese, he survived the violent breakdown in relations between the CCP and the GMD in 1927. He moved to Nanjing where he finished his military training and graduated as an officer in the Nationalist Army. His secret hopes of travelling to Moscow were dashed, however, when the Army assigned him to a command in northern China and when he received instructions from Hồ ordering him to stay put in China, hold on to his Nationalist party card, and simultaneously help the CCP as a mole inside the GMD military machine. After service as a regimental leader on the Sino-Soviet border, Lê Thiết Hùng returned to Nanjing where he could be of more use to the CCP. In 1930, just before his capture, Hồ inducted Lê Thiết Hùng into what had now become the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).¹⁶

Following the outbreak of the Chinese civil war in 1927, Chinese communists needed all the information possible on imminent GMD attacks on the ‘Soviets’ and the provisional government they had set up in Jiangxi province. Lê Thiết Hùng’s espionage activities relied on earlier anti-colonial connections, above all on the person of Hồ Học Lãm. When we first met Lãm in the 1910s, he was a member of Phan Bội Châu’s Đông Du. He had first received his military training at the Japanese Imperial University and had become a trusted friend of Chiang Kaishek. Both subsequently left Japan for China and studied together in the Baoding Military Academy near Beijing (where several other Vietnamese had also studied). In the early 1930s, thanks to his close friendship with Chiang Kaishek, Hồ Học Lãm was now a colonel and a high-ranking member on the Nationalist General Staff based in Nanjing; he was also Lê Thiết Hùng’s father-in-law. Through a complex network of family relations and patriotic arguments, Hùng convinced Lãm, as a member of the Operational Section of the GMD General Chiefs of Staff, to provide the secret military plans for Chiang Kaishek’s upcoming attacks on the Jiangxi Soviets. Lãm served as a mole well into the 1930s, with his son-in-law passing the military intelligence on to the CCP.¹⁷ Even though Chiang’s final, massive attack on the CCP in Jiangxi in 1934 was successful, sending the communists on their perilous Long March far to the north in Yan’an, the intelligence provided by Lãm and Hùng may well have played an important role in helping the Chinese Red Army to avoid earlier destruction.

15 ‘Chuyện về người được phong hàm tướng đầu tiên của quân đội ta’, part I, *An ninh Thế giới* [henceforth *ANTG*], 11 May 2000, p. 28. (My thanks to Professor Vĩnh Sinh for bringing this series of articles to my attention.) Whampoa classes tended to number 500 cadets. It would be interesting to consult this school’s archives.

16 *Ibid.*, part I, p. 29 and part II, *ANTG*, 18 May 2000, p. 28.

17 *Ibid.*, part II, p. 28 and Hoàng Thanh Đạm, *Đời nổi đời vì nước* (Vinh: NXB Nghệ An, 1996), pp. 89–91. Hồ Học Lãm had been involved in the organisation of the Northern Expedition(s) of 1926–8.

The CCP and Nguyễn Sơn

If Lê Thiết Hùng and Hồ Học Lãm could work for the ‘Revolutions’ from within the highest levels of the Chinese nationalist army, the work of Hùng’s compatriot Nguyễn Sơn points up how young Vietnamese could rise to the upper levels of the Chinese Red Army. Sơn’s real name was Vũ Nguyên Bác; he was born near Hanoi in 1908 and introduced into Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary circles by 1925. Like Lê Thiết Hùng, Sơn received his first military and revolutionary training at Whampoa, where he also joined the GMD, though in August 1927 he left it for its competitor, the CCP. This political switch, his participation in the CCP’s ‘Canton Uprising’ in late 1927 and its bloody repression by the GMD forced him to flee Guangzhou. After a short time spent mobilising the Vietnamese in Siam, in 1928 he returned to Hong Kong determined to hone his skills for the Chinese communists. A year later, he was back on the mainland working as a politico-military commissar in a CCP regiment active in the guerrilla zones of Dongjiang. In 1931, he adopted the name ‘*Hồng Thủy*’ (Red Tide) and collaborated with such Chinese figures as Peng Bai and Gu Dacun. He was later transferred to Fujian province, where he became a political commissar in the 34th Division of the 12th Army and then a high-ranking political instructor in the Chinese Red Army. He was actively involved in questions of mass mobilisation, propaganda and revolutionary cultural mobilisation – and all of this in Chinese. His services were sufficiently important that in January 1934 he joined the Executive Central Committee of the Chinese Soviet Republic in Jiangxi and eventually became a full member of the CCP’s Executive Central Committee (even though he ran into some serious internal Party discipline problems in the 1930s).¹⁸

Few other Vietnamese communists could boast such an impressive internationalist *curriculum vitae* and knowledge of the upper levels of Chinese political and military practices. Sơn made the Long March with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and General Zhu De (with whom he was apparently close). In Yan’an, he continued to work as an influential political commissar in the army, wrote in internal Chinese politico-military journals and was a master political organiser and propaganda mobiliser for the 8th Route Army. He married a Chinese CCP cadre and studied at the CCP’s Central Committee Party School. He was also present during Mao’s rectification campaigns at Yan’an in the early 1940s. Before the end of the Pacific War in 1945, he had become a high-ranking officer in the Red Army and counted among the important members of the CCP’s military elite. He would be named general by Mao in the early 1950s before returning to Hanoi, where he passed away on 21 October 1956.¹⁹

If Western observers have long been attracted to General Võ Nguyên Giáp’s famous anecdote about how he walked into a Hanoi colonial library in 1945, checked out Clausewitz’s classic on war and transformed himself into a military genius, much less

18 Biographical material on Nguyễn Sơn is drawn from Hoàng Anh, ‘Lời diếu đồng chí Nguyễn Sơn’, *Nhân dân*, 23 Oct. 1956, p. 1; Minh Quang, *Nguyễn Sơn: Vị tướng huyền thoại* (Hồ Chí Minh City: NXB Trẻ 2001), pp. 19–46; *Từ điển bách khoa quân sự Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1996), p. 566; *Tướng Nguyễn Sơn*, 2nd edn (Hanoi: NXB Lao động, 1995), pp. 25–7, 129–51; and ‘Tướng Nguyễn Sơn’, *Ngày nay*, 1 July 1999, pp. B3–B6.

19 *Nhân dân*, 22 Oct. 1956. Lê Thiết Hùng headed the organising committee that paid homage to the deceased general. Officials of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi also attended; ‘Lễ an tang Thiếu tướng Nguyễn Sơn’, *Nhân dân*, 23 Oct. 1956. The summary of his career is based on Minh Quang, *Nguyễn Sơn*, pp. 47–54.

attention has been paid to a handful of Vietnamese military officers who spoke Chinese flawlessly, had been trained in Chinese military academies and on some battlefields, and knew much more about the art of war than Giáp did in late 1945. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Nguyễn Sơn and Giáp were rivals. Giáp appears to have sealed his authority in 1950, following Sơn's 'return' to the CCP. That said, Sơn also had serious discipline and personal problems during his service in what became known as military Interzone IV (Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh and Thanh Hoá provinces).

Decolonisation and Sino-Japanese transfers inside Vietnam (1945–54)

The Japanese overthrow of the French in March 1945 and the subsequent Allied defeat of Japan a few months later allowed this Vietnamese state-in-waiting (called the Việt Minh by the ICP since 1941) to constitute itself inside the country. Hồ Chí Minh made this official on 2 September 1945, when he declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) a reality. However, the nationalist defenders of the new nation-state would have to go to war to put it on the map in opposition to the colonial one the French counted on rebuilding in its Indochinese or associated forms. As war with the French moved from southern to northern Vietnam between September 1945 and December 1946, military science, trained officers and experienced technicians were in extraordinary demand. Even after overthrowing the French in March 1945, the Japanese had hardly had enough time before their own defeat in August to train more Vietnamese officers and cadres. Because of the Franco-Japanese condominium during World War II, Vichy colonial troops never fought any real battles (except for a brief sideshow with the Thai in 1941).

Nevertheless, colonial-trained Vietnamese soldiers possessed a solid military training and discipline. They were thus in great demand in the new state fighting for its life in 1945–6. While this essay focuses on the Asian context, it would be a serious mistake to think that only Asian-trained officers developed the Vietnamese national army, as there were many French-trained crossovers. Phan Phác was one such case; he had apparently been trained at Saint-Cyr before World War II and attained the rank of sub-lieutenant. French officers considered him 'the best Indochinese officer in the French army'. Wounded and captured by the Japanese in March 1945, he joined them and then the Việt Minh, becoming a colonel in the DRV army and a ranking member of its General Staff, at least until Chinese advisors began to sideline him in 1950.²⁰ Phạm Phùng Đạm had been a sergeant in the French colonial army who spoke both French and Chinese; in 1946–7 he joined the 'Mixed Military Commission' under Lê Thiết Hùng. A former officer of the French army, Vũ Hiến, was the chief-of-staff of Zone Three.²¹

The DRV drew many of its early and top intelligence and communications technicians from the French-trained Vietnamese pool of colonial mathematicians, telegraph and radio operators and quite often from the Boy Scouts. These cadres played essential

20 Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre [hereafter cited as SHAT] (France), file 7, box 10H530, CSTFEO, EM/2B, no. 3975/2/OP/Y, 'École d'aviation vietnamienne à Tong', 22 Aug. 1946; and file 13, box 10H532, CSTFEO, EM/2B, no. 804/2, 'Notes sur les principaux chefs de l'armée Việt Minh', 23 Feb. 1947.

21 SHAT, box 10H2966, translation of intercepted document, 'Ministère de la Défense Nationale, Service Politique, no. 2632/TD, Circulaire', signed by Văn Tiến Dũng, 7 Jan. 1947 (file 1947) and Commandement de Haiphong, no. 4609/EM2, fiche de renseignement, 3 Sept. 1953 (file 1953).

roles in developing the encrypting, decrypting, radio communication and intelligence services in the DRV's armed forces. Hoàng Đạo Thủy, a former Scout during the Vichy period, later became the head of the DRV military communications and ciphering service. These French-trained nationalists provide a nice example of how the 'colonised' turned Western science against the 'coloniser' and point out just how diverse the origins of Vietnamese military science were. However, no study of this question will ever be complete without examining in detail the Vietnamese side and how it adapted and rejected foreign military knowledge to fit local conditions (see below).²²

Chinese-trained Vietnamese officers had military training, battle experience and solid nationalist credentials. In 1945, Lê Thiết Hùng and Nguyễn Sơn returned to Vietnam to put their military talents and knowledge in the service of building of a modern Vietnamese army and officer corps in the emerging war with the French. Since 1941, Hồ Chí Minh had already instructed Hùng and another China-trained officer, Lê Quảng Ba, to form the first armed group of Vietnamese 'troops', consisting of only twelve individuals. They helped Giáp create the nucleus of what would become communist Vietnam's national armed forces. In mid-1945, Hùng served as the first director of the Cao Bằng Military Academy.²³ Following the August Revolution, Hồ sent his former student to upper-central Vietnam to command Interzone Four. There, he quickly went to work selecting and training troops, cadres and officers according to the Chinese nationalist model he had used for two decades. Following the Franco-Vietnamese agreement of 6 March 1946, the DRV recalled him to Hanoi to represent the new government in a mixed military commission with the French to oversee the withdrawal of GMD troops. Interestingly, this task required a Vietnamese officer with the rank of general; in 1946 Hùng received this honour when he was named Major General.²⁴

Lê Thiết Hùng remained in the north to concentrate his work on establishing, staffing and running new military academies. He trained military officers and cadres, drilled them, taught them the basics of combat – how to use arms, command and manoeuvre – and instructed them in military tactics and strategy. By late 1946, he had become the DRV's first General Inspector of the Army and was concurrently in charge of the General Directorate for the Military Education Bureau. He was named the Head of the Trần Quốc Tuấn Army Officer Training Academy, and then ran the Vietnamese Army Academy.²⁵ His role in transmitting and building modern military science and training in Vietnam is clear.

22 On this subject, see Greg Lockhart, *Nation in arms: The origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989). The development of Vietnamese cryptography is chronicled in *Essential matters: A history of the Cryptographic Branch of the People's Army of Viet-Nam, 1945–1975*, ed. and trans. David W. Gaddy (Fort Meade, MD: National Security Agency Center for Cryptologic History Special Series, 1994); on these cadres, see pp. 2–4.

23 'Chuyện về người được phong hàm tướng', part III, *ANTG*, 25 May 2000, p. 29 and *Từ điển bách khoa quân sự*, p. 468. OSS officers also provided early military training to the Vietnamese.

24 'Chuyện về người được phong hàm tướng', part III, p. 28 and Bộ Tổng tham mưu, *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu trong kháng chiến chống Pháp (1945–1954)* (Hanoi: Bộ Tổng tham mưu, 1991), p. 60. A picture of the copy of Lê Thiết Hùng's military identity card reproduced in 'Chuyện về người được phong hàm tướng', Part I shows that as of 24 Sept. 1946 he held the rank of Major General. This series of articles seems to be taking an ever so subtle 'anti-Giáp' line.

25 'Chuyện về người được phong hàm tướng', part III, p. 29.

If General Lê Thiết Hùng helped funnel Chinese-adapted Western military techniques into Vietnam, Nguyễn Sơn would bring the CCP's politico-military model specifically to the central region. Sơn returned to Vietnam from Yan'an in late 1945. Worried by the rapid French military expansion in southern Vietnam in late 1945, the DRV assigned him to the lower-central provinces, where he became president of the Resistance Committee for the Southern Region of Vietnam and began work creating officers and training soldiers to fight the French moving rapidly northwards. In June 1946, Sơn and a group of Japanese officer crossovers (see below) founded the Army Military Academy in Quảng Ngãi; at this time, 400 students were trained under Sơn's leadership. In late 1946, he served briefly as the director of the Trần Quốc Tuấn Academy in the north and then became head of Interzone IV (taking over from Lê Thiết Hùng), serving concurrently as political commissar until his recall to China in 1950.²⁶ He was named Major General in the DRV army in 1948.

This transfer of Chinese military ideas to central Vietnam was facilitated by Nguyễn Sơn's excellent translations of major Chinese political and military documents, including *On protracted war* and *The Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*. Based on his experiences in the Red Army during the Sino-Japanese war, Sơn wrote military treatises in the late 1940s for Vietnamese officers, such as *Tactics* and *The People's Militia, a strategic force*. (The latter study would be republished in late 1964 and diffused in South Vietnam as the war with the Americans heated up.)²⁷ Thanks to these translations, young officers in central Vietnam were already studying the experiences of the Chinese Revolution and Sino-Japanese war well before the arrival of Chinese military advisors in northern Vietnam in 1950. By 1948, Nguyễn Sơn had already introduced and applied revolutionary models such as 'self-criticism' and 'rectification' into central Vietnam; in this sense, Maoism first entered Vietnam via Interzone IV.²⁸ Sơn and Hùng were not the only Chinese-trained officers to play determining roles in developing modern military science in Vietnam. Vương Thừa Vũ, the legendary commander of the 308th Division and defender of Hanoi in early 1947, had been trained in a GMD military academy in Yunnan in the 1930s.

Belated Japanese military transfers to Vietnam, 1945–50

Ironically, if the hollow promises of 'Asia for the Asians' had disappointed Asian anti-colonialists since Meiji Japan had begun playing the imperial game, a number of defeated Japanese officers and soldiers would try to make good on it on an individual basis by joining the DRV army as technicians, officers and military instructors. Indeed,

26 Information on Nguyễn Sơn is drawn from *Từ điển bách khoa quân sự*, p. 566; *Tướng Nguyễn Sơn*, pp. 25–27, 39–48, 91–93, 130–7, and 140–51; *50 năm Trường Lục quân Trung học Quảng Ngãi* (Quảng Ngãi: Ban Liên lạc Bắc, Trung, Nam, 1994); Minh Quang, *Nguyễn Sơn*, pp. 47–93; and 'Lưỡng quốc tướng quân, Nguyễn Sơn', in Phan Hoàng, *Phông vấn các tướng lĩnh Việt Nam*, vol. 2 (Hanoi: NXB Trẻ and Kiến thức Ngày nay, 1998), pp. 111–26.

27 Nguyễn Sơn, *Militia, a strategic force*, first written in 1948 and subsequently revised and reprinted on 24 Nov. 1964; NARA (US Government Archives), Combined Intelligence Center Bulletin 1164, Log 09–2649–66, captured document. My thanks to Jay Veith for sharing this source with me.

28 Hoàng Văn Chí, *From colonialism to Communism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 124–38 and Georges Boudarel, 'L'idéocratie importée au Vietnam avec le Maoïsme', in *La bureaucratie au Vietnam*, ed. Georges Boudarel et al. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983), pp. 62–83.

the DRV turned to around 1,000 Japanese ‘deserters’ to help make up for the dangerous gap between the weakness of the revolutionary state’s own military possibilities at the outset of the war and the need to fight a war against a technically and militarily superior adversary, the professional French Expeditionary Corps. Given the fragile state of the Vietnamese army in the early days of the war, there is nothing strange about the use of these particular foreigners, whom the Vietnamese attempted to nationalise as ‘(ngườ*i*) Việt Nam mới’ (new Vietnamese).²⁹ While some Vietnamese have tried to play down this Japanese contribution on nationalist grounds, they need not, since European and Asian history provides scores of examples of foreign soldiers and officers working for other crowns or states than their own precisely because of the sought-after skills they could provide.

It is therefore not surprising that the Việt Minh recruited Japanese soldiers and officers in 1945–6. This was particularly the case in southern Vietnam, where the Indochinese War first broke out in September 1945. Reports made by returning Japanese officers to their French and Japanese interrogators leave no doubt as to their early contributions to the southern Vietnamese at war with the Expeditionary Corps. Japanese officers who stayed on directly advised such key southern military leaders as Nguyễn Bình, Năm Lửa, Nguyễn Giác Ngộ, and Hoàng Đình Gióng in the rapid – if superficial – training of hundreds of young Vietnamese recruits in late 1945 and 1946. They joined in and sometimes led early efforts to stop the return of French armed forces to the southern region, and they played important roles in early operational, tactical and strategic planning. Ranking Japanese officers such as Ishii Takuo, Toshihide Kanetoshi and a certain Nishikawa were directly involved in Việt Minh military operations against the French between 1945 and 1947. Kanetoshi was for a while ‘Chief-of-staff’ of Nguyễn Giác Ngộ’s troops in the 9th Zone. Assisting him, Shida Shigeo helped train three classes of young Vietnamese soldiers, in all 550 men. In the north, Ngô Văn Chiêu, a young Vietnamese combatant, studied in one of the first officers’ academies (located in Hanoi) in 1945–6. In his memoirs he reveals that a ‘former Lieutenant-Colonel in the General Staff of the 38th Japanese Army’ worked as a ‘technical advisor’ for the Vietnamese instructor of this school.³⁰

Japanese crossovers played a particularly important role in the running of the Army Academy of Quảng Ngãi from 1946 to 1949. Created by Nguyễn Sơn, this officers’ school employed at least six Japanese officers as military instructors; they were known by their Vietnamese names: Đông Hưng, Minh Tâm, Minh Ngọc, Nguyễn Văn Thông, Quang and Tống. Of the forty-six Japanese officers present in the Việt Minh ranks in lower-central Vietnam in 1948, thirty-six worked as military instructors – 78 per cent of

29 See Christopher E. Goscha, ‘Belated allies: The technical contributions of Japanese deserters to the Việt Minh (1945–1950)’, in *A companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 37–64. Similar cases in China are discussed in Donald G. Gillin with Charles Etter, ‘Staying on: Japanese soldiers and civilians in China, 1945–1949’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 42, 3 (1983): 497–518.

30 Ngô Văn Chiêu, *Journal d’un combattant viet-minh* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955), p. 94. Information on other Japanese officers is from Christopher E. Goscha, ‘Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco-vietnamienne: Réseaux, relations et économie’ (Thesis, EPHE/Sorbonne, 2000), Japanese section.

the total number.³¹ The Japanese–Vietnamese Association reveals that Đông Hưng (Kikuo Tanimoto) led the 1st Company in Quảng Ngãi, Minh Ngọc (Mitsunobu Nakahara) the 2nd, Phan Lai (Kazumasa Igari) the 3rd and Phan Huệ (Tokuji Kamo) the 4th. Thông was Ishii Takuo. Nguyễn Việt Hồng, a former Vietnamese military cadet trained by the Japanese at Quảng Ngãi, confirms that in 1946 Nguyễn Sơn confided the direction of these first four companies to these Japanese officers. That same year he recruited four more Japanese, including Shoichi Igawa of the General Staff of the 34th Mixed Infantry Brigade in the region of Huế–Đà Nẵng, who became a close advisor to Nguyễn Sơn.³² In Vietnam, then, Japanese military contributions extended beyond the 1945 divide.

In recollections recently published in Vietnam, Nakahara Mitsunobu (Minh Ngọc) confirms his role in the Quảng Ngãi Academy and his military collaboration with Nguyễn Sơn. It was Sơn himself who convinced Nakahara and other wandering Japanese officers to work for the Vietnamese cause by providing military training in the new academy.³³ In early 1946, Nakahara and Shoichi Igawa went to Tuy Hoá to help the Việt Minh fight against the Expeditionary Corps, which was then attacking lower-central Vietnam. Nakahara provided crucial advice to Sơn concerning command operations before going north as a special advisor to the DRV's general staff preparing for all-out war against the French. Indeed, he fought in the battle of Nam Định when war broke out in December 1946. In 1948, Nakahara once again saw Sơn in Interzone IV, where the Japanese crossover was busy training more military cadres.³⁴

Japanese instructors taught young Vietnamese cadets how to sabotage, organise smash-and-grab-attacks and plan effective ambushes – in short, how to fight against a militarily superior foe. They provided the basics of officer training and military science. They organised and directed company and battalion exercises, all the while drilling in assault, attack and night combat. They gave instruction in commanding, tactics, navigation, orienteering, battle communications and movements, etc. In 1945–6, Japanese instructors in the south trained hundreds of Vietnamese officers in these matters. Japanese soldiers sometimes accompanied Việt Minh troops into battle and commanded troops against the French; they also helped in developing radio communications and military intelligence gathering.³⁵

In many ways, the defeat of the Japanese and the desertion of these soldiers and officers after World War II provided the DRV with an invaluable, internal Asian foreign

31 The figures are from SHAT, box 10H600, CSFFEO, EM/2B, no. 3741/2, 'Note de renseignements sur le 6ème secteur du Vietnam,' Aug. 1946, p. 10. For the names of the various officers, see CSTFEO, EM/2B, no. 3787/2, 'Rapport sur la collusion nippon-Việt Minh,' 9 Aug. 1946, p. 6; *50 năm Trường Lục quân*, pp. 31–32, 50; and *The Association of Viet Nam in Japan*, 96, no. 1 (1996); my thanks to Kyoichi Tachikawa for kindly providing this latter document in English translation. The Vietnamese publicly recognise the Japanese contribution, as shown in *50 năm Trường Lục quân*, pp. 31–2, 45, 52–3.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 50 and *Association of Viet Nam in Japan*. On Sơn and Igawa see also *Tướng Nguyễn Sơn*, pp. 74–5.

33 An engaging and romanticised account of one such crossover is in Oka Masamichi, 'Love in the Annam jungle', in *Stories of the 'floating world' of Postwar Japan*, ed. Jay Gluck (Ashiya: Personally Oriented Ltd., 1963), pp. 107–21.

34 Minh Ngọc-Nakahara, 'Nhớ tướng Nguyễn Sơn', *Xưa và Nay*, 38 (1997): 9–10 and 'Gặp Nakahara Mitsunobu', in *Cảm ơn các bạn*, ed. Mạc Văn Trọng and Nguyễn Văn Khoan (Hanoi: NXB Lao động, 2000), pp. 81–5.

35 Goscha, 'Le contexte asiatique', Japanese section and 'Những người Nhật tại Quảng Trị', in Trọng and Khoan ed., *Cảm ơn các bạn*, pp. 161–4.

source for learning modern military science at a time when they needed it most. The technical contributions of Toshio Komaya and Koshiro Iwai are particularly instructive. Between 1947 and 1949, Toshio Komaya worked as an advisor to the 59th Regiment in northern Vietnam and to the ranking Vietnamese officer, Năm Long. As the Chinese communist victory approached, he was transferred to the operations section of the general staff of the newly formed Việt Bắc Interzone. He played an important role in helping to organise and plan a new level of military operations against the French, thanks to the aid provided by the Chinese to the DRV (see below). He participated in organising the frontier battles designed to open the border to China via Cao Bằng in mid-1950. Vietnamese officers who worked with him are most grateful for his training of cadres and officers, his help in developing Việt Bắc's military intelligence, and his much-needed operational work in the planning and mapping of major northern battles.³⁶

Koshiro Iwai, called Sáu Nhật at the time, made similar technical contributions. Beginning in 1947, he had led small Vietnamese units into battle against the French in Lạng Sơn and conducted special operations behind enemy lines; by 1949 he had been named battalion deputy commander. He was most appreciated, however, for the technical training he provided in general staff work, battle preparation and military intelligence. The Vietnamese army no longer hides the important advisory and intelligence role he played during the frontier battles against the French in 1950 as a member of the famous 174th Regiment. He also solved problems that allowed the Vietnamese to employ their newly acquired Chinese artillery more effectively against French positions.³⁷

That said, it would be a grave mistake to conclude that these Japanese volunteers explain everything, for they do not. What is important here, though, is the extraordinary degree to which the Vietnamese could tap such foreign military knowledge, particularly in the early days of the war. By 1950, however, the DRV began to discard these Japanese advisors as it nationalised its ranks. Confidence in many of them had always been lacking, and the military and technical transfers that occurred did so on an individual or local basis, rather than on an organised one as happened with assistance from the CCP between 1950 and 1954.

Moreover, the military knowledge imparted by these Japanese officers was not always well adapted to the needs of the Vietnamese army. General Vương Thừa Vũ reveals in his memoirs that a high-ranking Japanese officer named 'Ái Việt' ('he who loves Vietnam') served in the DRV General Staff in December 1946 as a 'military delegate'. Revealingly, a heated debate broke out on the eve of full-scale war with the French between this Japanese officer, who advocated a classical defence of Hanoi, and Vũ's General Staff, which stressed the strategic importance of using self-defence forces and guerrilla tactics. (Giáp had pulled his main troops out of Hanoi, not wanting to risk their annihilation by the French at this critical point in time.) Given the superior firepower of the French, Vũ (rightly) considered Ái Việt's defence plan to be suicidal, 'not at all in harmony with the technical and tactical level of the [Vietnamese] forces of the time', and

36 Đỗ Văn Tuấn, 'Chiến sĩ Việt Nam mới: Toshio Komaya-Nguyễn Quang Thục', *Sự kiện và Nhân chứng*, 70 (1999): 27.

37 'Anh Koshiro Iwai-Đồng chí Sáu Nhật của Trung đoàn 174', in Trọng and Khoan ed., *Cảm ơn các bạn*, pp. 260–4 and Đặng Văn Việt, *La R.C. 4: Campagne des frontières (1947–1950)* (Hanoi: Éditions en Langues étrangères, 1990), pp. 66–7, 73.

insisted on guerrilla tactics for the time being.³⁸ Foreign military knowledge could not be applied magically in Vietnam; it had to be adapted to local realities and conditions. *Ái Việt's* modern battle methods could only be applied once the DRV army began to make the transition from a guerrilla army to a classic one. This only happened when Chinese military aid and training allowed Giáp's army to go beyond guerrilla and urban warfare to engage the French army on the battlefield.

Chinese aid and the modernisation of the Vietnamese army

The victory of Mao Zedong's army in October 1949 had the most important impact on the modernisation of Vietnamese military science. On the diplomatic front, pre-World War II links between Vietnamese and Chinese communists helped the DRV gain international recognition from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and a suspicious USSR.³⁹ Militarily, China was the main source of external aid to the *Việt Minh* during the war against the French. In giving aid, the Chinese not only sought to protect their southern flank in Indochina, they also saw helping the ICP-DRV as an internationalist duty in the wider revolutionary war in Asia. From this point, the DRV's military forces and their modernisation would be much more closely tied to Sino-Soviet military science, whereas the budding armies of the French-backed Associated States of Indochina began to look towards the United States for military training and assistance.

Chinese communist aid began to reach the DRV in May 1950. For the remainder of that year, the DRV received a total of 3,983 tonnes of aid, including 1,020 tonnes of arms and ammunition (some of which were provided to Vietnamese units outfitted in southern China), 20 tonnes of medicines and medical instruments, 71 tonnes of materials for making arms, 30 Molotova vehicles and 2,634 tonnes of rice. One Vietnamese publication claims that from May 1950 to June 1954, total external aid amounted to 21,517 tonnes. According to a recent Vietnamese thesis on Soviet–Vietnamese relations, the Soviet Union provided 76 37 mm anti-aircraft guns, 12 H6 multitube rocket launchers (*Katyusha*), a large number of K50 submachine guns, and 685 of the total of 745 vehicles sent to the DRV. Chinese sources reveal that between April and September 1950 the Chinese delivered 14,000 guns, 1,700 machine guns, 150 pieces of different types of cannons, 2,800 tonnes of grain and 'large amounts of ammunition, medicine, uniforms, and communication equipment'.⁴⁰ *Võ Nguyên Giáp* claims that half of the arms provided to the Vietnamese were 'new' while the other half consisted of outdated arms taken from defeated GMD troops. In 1951, the DRV army required 1,200 tonnes of arms, but the

38 Vương Thừa Vũ, *Trường thành trong chiến đấu: hồi ký* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1979), pp. 79, 92–3.

39 Christopher E. Goscha, 'La survie diplomatique de la RDVN: Le doute soviétique effacé par la confiance chinoise (1945–1950)?', *Approches Asie*, in press.

40 Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 126 (quotation) and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 20. Data on weapons is from Lê Văn Thịnh, 'Quan hệ giữa cách mạng Việt Nam và Liên Xô trong giai đoạn 1930–1954' (Ph.D. dissertation, History Department, Vietnam National University, 1999), pp. 160–1 and also *Sự thật về những lần xuất quân của Trung Quốc và quan hệ Việt-Trung* (Đà Nẵng: NXB Đà Nẵng, 1996), p. 42. Tonnage figures are from *ibid.*, pp. 21 and 42 (note 1), citing documents from the army logistics archives. This assistance can be established annually as follows, according to Vietnamese statistics from this source: 1950: 3,983 tonnes; 1951: 6,086 tonnes; 1952: 2,160 tonnes; 1953: 4,400 tonnes; 1954: 4,892 tonnes.

Chinese could only provide 20 per cent of that; the Vietnamese compensated with their own arms manufacturing led by Trần Đại Nghĩa (trained in Germany) and captured French weapons. The Chinese could not always provide much-needed anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.⁴¹ It must be remembered, of course, that Beijing was fighting a war against superior American artillery and airpower in Korea at this very time.

As had happened in the 1920s, changes in Chinese and international politics opened a southern Chinese rear base to the Vietnamese anti-French resistance. From 1950, this allowed the DRV General Staff to send soldiers and cadres to southern China for training. The Ministry of Defence did not lose any time, and in April it began dispatching the majority of the military academy's personnel to safe havens in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces. There, Vietnamese students studied modern military tactics and strategy, the organisation and direction of units in the battlefield, how to use artillery in pitched battle, the basics of artillery calibration and the manning of anti-aircraft cannons, as well as the finer points of shooting, using grenades and dynamite, and how to plan and carry out attacks on fortified enemy positions. Lê Thiết Hùng himself went to Yunnan to oversee the DRV's military academy.⁴² Chinese instructors such as Zhou Xihan and Wu Shaowen provided military training to Vietnamese officers in Guangxi. Interpreters were recruited from the large Vietnamese communities in southern China, the crucial intermediaries for transferring Chinese ideas and instructions. Indeed, many of these new recruits were from peasant backgrounds and had only begun studying *quốc ngữ* (written Vietnamese) upon being drafted into the army.⁴³

The number of Vietnamese trained in military matters in southern China reveals the importance of this Chinese channel in the modernisation of the Vietnamese army. In June 1950, 3,100 Vietnamese cadres received advanced military training – producing, among others, 1,200 cadres for infantry, 400 for artillery, 150 for communications, 200 for cryptography, 300 for the air force and 200 for the navy.⁴⁴ While the training was often very rapid and could be cursory, it marked an important shift in the modernisation of the Vietnamese armed forces. Vietnamese officers were no longer studying guerrilla war, but rather the finer points of modern warfare, both its Soviet and Chinese variants. The French estimated that around 30,000 men were trained in southern China in the early 1950s, making up 30 infantry battalions and 6 'heavy' battalions.⁴⁵

Chinese military outfitting marked an important step in the modernisation of the Vietnamese army. Chinese training and material aid helped the Vietnamese put together at least seven operational divisions by 1951 (though many were still incomplete). They were the 308th, 304th, 312th, 316th, 320th, 325th and 351st; at least five of these were

41 *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, pp. 414–15.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 324–5, 331–2, and 407–8 and Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, 2nd edn (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2001), pp. 14–16. Hùng is mentioned in Hoàng Văn Hoan, *Giọt nước trong biển cả (Hồi ký cách mạng)* (Beijing: Bản tin Việt Nam, 1986), p. 347.

43 Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, p. 15. On the Chinese instructors and interpreters see Qian Jiang, *Zai shenmidi zhanzheng zhong – Zhongguo junshi guwentuan fu Yuenan zhengzhanji* (Zhengzhou: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p. 44. Excerpts of this and the other Chinese sources cited in this article were kindly translated by Joseph Lee.

44 *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, pp. 331–2.

45 SHAT, box 10H288, HCFIC, CCEO, EMIFT/2B, no. 1443/EMFT/2S, 'Note sur la collaboration sino-vietminh période du 1 septembre 1950 au 1 février 1951', 7 Mar. 1951.

outfitted by the Chinese. A Vietnamese military history reveals that most of the 308th Division was outfitted with ‘new weapons’ and trained in China, including the redoubtable 174th Regiment. ‘For the first time’, this history reveals, ‘the 308th was able to be fully armed’. There can no longer be any doubts as to the military transfers that took place in Yunnan. The 308th studied wave tactics, methods for taking fortified positions, shooting and aiming exercises, utilisation of grenades, coordinating artillery with infantry movements, drawing the enemy out into the open to attack, etc. Thanks to the Chinese 13th Army, the 308th had hands-on training in operating 70 mm and 57 mm artillery cannon. The CCP sent General Chen Geng to help with the training of this division in modern military tactics and techniques, as well as in Chinese military experiences.⁴⁶ The Vietnamese could once again go north to seek out new knowledge and techniques from abroad.

Translation was essential to facilitating these transfers of foreign military knowledge, as we have already seen in the case of Nguyễn Sơn in Interzone IV in the late 1940s. From 1950, the systematic translation and publication of scores of Chinese, Soviet and Western military science manuals were accelerated for use in training courses and military units. A recent perusal of a wartime collection at the National Library in Hanoi reveals over one hundred such foreign military texts in translation, running from Clausewitz to Mao Zedong by way of Stalin and General Fabre; Chinese military texts dominate by far. By 1950, the Vietnamese military academies in the north and possibly the centre (thanks to Nguyễn Sơn) could read many of the works of Mao Zedong and Zhu De. This methodological translation of Chinese materials into Vietnamese during the war deserves a separate study in itself. The Vietnamese resistance presses (worthy of yet another study) translated scores of Chinese treatises on guerrilla warfare, war economics, mobilisation techniques, armed propaganda work, strategy and tactics, major battles against the Japanese, attacks on rightists, rectification campaigns, ‘new art’ and, of course, the history and decisions of the CCP. Thanks to Chinese translations, the Vietnamese General Staff was even able to learn of and incorporate the general staff rules of the Soviet Red Army.⁴⁷

The results of the transfer of foreign military techniques and knowledge to Vietnam from 1950 were remarkable. While it is tempting to conclude that the arrival of Chinese aid is the sole explanation for why the Vietnamese were able to defeat the French in 1954, it should be pointed out that learning how to conduct a modern war with the mastery of complex weapons was just as important. Without competent Vietnamese specialists and officers, familiarised with and trained in modern military techniques, Chinese and Soviet artillery would have been a waste of time. Calibrating artillery, coordinating the movements of divisions and planning and executing modern battle tactics and strategy represent no small feat. A General Staff that could run several divisions over half of Vietnam and into Laos and eventually southern central Indochina demanded real technical,

46 *Lịch sử Sư đoàn 308 quân Tiến phong*, rev. edn (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1999), pp. 58–60. Ranking Chinese officers such as Zhou Xihan, Commander of the 13th Army Corps, and Wu Huiwen, Deputy Commander of the 7th Division, also trained Vietnamese troops and officers. The new divisions are listed in *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, p. 414.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 408. I located easily over one hundred translations of Chinese works into Vietnamese in the National Library; many of the Chinese originals are available as well.

military and radio skills. Again, whatever the difficulties (and there were many), this was a remarkable achievement to pull off in a time of war and within such a short amount of time. The Vietnamese organisational, educational, historic and cultural capacity to absorb this military training and implement it so quickly must have been key. As Mao Zedong reminded his advisors leaving to help the Vietnamese:

While the French control the big cities, transportation routes and coastal towns, the [Vietnamese] revolutionaries have to establish themselves in the countryside. The situation is similar to what we had experienced during the anti-Japanese war period. However, your duty is not only to teach the Vietnamese about guerrilla warfare, but also to help [them] to fight a *modern war* against the French. You have to teach them how to organize a *professional army*, use modern weapons, and provide military aid.⁴⁸

Adaptations and rejections inside Vietnam

China's dispatch of political and military advisors to northern Vietnam was the other channel through which Chinese military science entered the country. As we have seen, Hồ Chí Minh and others had long-established contacts with Chinese leaders now in power. Hồ knew Zhou Enlai from the 1920s, and thanks to his Guangzhou days, also knew the top-level advisor sent to Vietnam to help him in 1950 – Chen Geng. During his visit to China in early 1950, Hồ asked the CCP leadership to send advisors to help in the war against the French. Luo Guibo, Wei Guoqing, Mei Jiasheng and Ma Xifu were among the most important to go. On 7 July 1950, Chen Geng led a team of a dozen or so advisors to Vietnam, including political and military experts, technicians, radio broadcaster-communicators and medical staff. In 1950, the CCP and ICP agreed to the formation of the Military Advisors Group, a group of 79 Chinese under the direction of Luo and Wei. Chinese advisors were attached to the DRV Ministry of Defence, its General Staff and its army divisions – even down to battalion level in some cases. Wei was assigned to the Ministry, while Mei, his deputy, advised Giáp's General Staff and Ma served as an expert on supply questions. Despite some absences, Wei served as the main Chinese advisor to Giáp and his staff between 1951 and 1954.⁴⁹ Chinese advisors attached to divisions and regiments played a particularly important role in modernising operational tactics and developing military intelligence capacities, essential to taking the battle to the French. They also played important roles in introducing more orthodox socialist economic, currency and banking policies.⁵⁰

Chen Geng helped the Vietnamese to conceptualise the border campaign of 1950 in order to open a supply route to China and score a needed first victory against the French. Chinese advisors would be personally present in all the major battles in northern Vietnam, except that of Hoà Bình in 1952. Chinese historian Qiang Zhai has discussed

48 Qian Jiang, *Zai shenmidì zhanzheng zhong*, p. 58; emphasis added.

49 Information on these various advisors is found in Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, pp. 13–15; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars*, pp. 19–29; and Xu Beilan and Zheng Peifei, *Chen Geng [Chen Geng] Jiangjun zhuan* (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1988), p. 581.

50 *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, pp. 324–5, 407; *Sự thật về những lần xuất quân*, pp. 21–2; Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, pp. 15, 23; and *Zhong-Yue guanxi yanbian sishinian*, ed. Guo Ming (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p. 42; Goscha, 'Contexte asiatique', China section.

the role Chen Geng played in planning and executing the victory of Cao Bằng in the autumn of 1950.⁵¹ At the time, Giáp himself described the impact of Chinese advice as follows:

The military thinking of Comrade Mao Zedong served as the basis for our directives. During the border battle, communist China assisted us, not only in material terms, but also with her morale. In the operational directives, [Chinese] comrades were to be found at our side as part of an advisory group, sharing their experiences with us and they backed us up in our propaganda work. Their collaboration was of great use to us. The battle for the liberation of the border has been crowned with success, because we carefully respected the fundamental directives. These principles, instituted by Mao Zedong, will be related in this paragraph so that all cadres can become filled with it. Had we admitted the thesis that by attacking the main forces of the enemy at the border [Cao Bằng], we would weaken our own force, and by attacking Cao Bằng we would obtain openings to route no. 3, we would have committed a fatal error. For to attack Cao Bằng, a city that was very strongly reinforced, would have brought about a massive destruction of our forces without a doubt. On the contrary, we have adopted the second thesis that consisted in attacking other, peripheral points. This was equally effective in destroying the adversary's main forces, while requiring less [loss for us]. Thanks to this fact, the enemy was obligated to abandon Cao Bằng, which, by extension, could not be defended.⁵²

Following the Cao Bằng victory, Chen Geng, Hồ and Giáp discussed the weaknesses of the Vietnamese army. Hồ asked his Chinese friend to make a list of the improvements to be made in the army. It is revealing that the first point of Chen's report stressed the importance of lessening the damage inflicted by French air power. He also underscored the need to improve communications and discipline, and to train better political cadres for the army, criticising its corruption and lack of courage. He called for the mobilisation of women in the war effort as well.⁵³

While Giáp's recently published memoirs refuse to address some of the major weaknesses for which General Chen criticised him, he makes it clear that there were great difficulties in adapting Chinese military models to Vietnamese specificities. Chinese advisors were applying Vietnam ideas from the Sino-Japanese war and their civil war, introducing such concepts as 'encircling the enemy's post while attacking its rescue forces'. This had been at the heart of the strategy used to take Cao Bằng by attacking the outposts of Đông Khê and Thất Khê and then wiping out the arriving French rescue forces. Chinese advisors introduced another strategy called *bôn tập*, a tactic that staged a forced march and then turned it into a surprise attack designed to overrun a fortified

51 Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars*, pp. 19–29. Until more evidence emerges from both sides, I am not convinced that Chen Geng actually directed the entire battle for the Vietnamese General Staff. Vietnamese remarks on the presence of Chinese advisors are in *Sự thật về những lần xuất quân*, pp. 22–3.

52 SHAT, box 10H2372, 'Rapport lu par le général, commandant en chef devant la conférence récapitulative des opérations frontalières', 27 Nov. 1950.

53 Xu and Zheng, *Chen Geng*, p. 595 and Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars*, p. 28. Internal Vietnamese military documents from the time confirm parts – though not all – of this account; *Tài liệu quân sự, chiến dịch biên giới* (Hanoi: NXB Quân chính, 1950), vol. I, in the Resistance Collection, Annex of the Vietnamese National Library, KC3850.

French post or outpost. Following the Cao Bằng victory and excited by the prospect of marching to Hanoi in late 1950, Wei Guoqing introduced this plan to Giáp as a way of taking posts from the French in the lowlands. Troops would attack at night and overrun the fortified position as quickly as possible, before the French could fix their artillery and call in air strikes. Giáp argues in his memoirs that this had been suited to early Việt Minh guerrilla actions in the hills, but not to the battles they had to fight in the delta.⁵⁴ The French posts were located far from safe mountain bases, with little cover to protect Việt Minh troops, not to mention supply problems.

All this was part of the Chinese introduction of wave tactics in a bid to overwhelm the French positions as the Red Army had learned to do against the GMD. However, such wave tactics were extremely risky when applied in Vietnam. For one, the French Expeditionary Corps was a professional army superior to Chiang Kaishek's armed forces, and both Giáp and Chen conceded that it was no pushover. Though France's air force in Indochina had serious problems well into the early 1950s, it was more modern and effective than the GMD's had been, having received important American aid, including Dakotas, Bearcats, B-26s and C-47s.⁵⁵ Not only did the French have more advanced artillery, they were also good at using it in complex and coordinated ways and at night. Moreover, compared to China and its armies, the Vietnamese population was so much smaller that it could not support such costly wave tactics without risking the depletion of a relatively small army (around 250,000 in the early 1950s, including 115,000 regular troops). Lastly, the Korean War forced the Chinese to funnel their best artillery, anti-aircraft, anti-tank weapons and military leaders (including Chen Geng) to Korea. In other words, the Vietnamese were applying a Chinese military model against a superior enemy equipped with modern firepower, in different Vietnamese circumstances, in a much smaller (and narrower) country and at an increasingly important international conjuncture which obligated them to score a big victory against the French rather than return to guerrilla tactics.

Wave tactics showed their limits in the Vietnamese battles in the delta in 1951 and even in the uplands. The bloody Vietnamese failure to take Vĩnh Yên was a painful case in point; Na San was an equally costly defeat in 1953. French air power and artillery were often devastating even at night, inflicting heavy casualties on Giáp's army and calling into question Chinese methods designed to overwhelm the enemy's positions. Giáp concedes that 'French imperialist artillery was extremely good', adding that 'I thought it was necessary to find another, more effective way' to engage the French army.⁵⁶ 'Of particular importance', he notes:

The imperialist French were patently better than Chiang Kaishek's army when it came to launching coordinated artillery strikes during both the day and the night. In Korea, the Korean army and Chinese volunteers had Soviet airplanes reinforcing them, but the main reason for their victories against the enemy was their sheer numbers. Vietnam did not have planes and still did not have air defence weapons. Fighting the enemy in the Delta was hard against airpower and artillery. But most difficult was that Vietnam still had a small army!⁵⁷

54 Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, pp. 41, 13; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars*, p. 28; and Chen, *Mao's China*, pp. 124–6.

55 *Regards sur l'aviation militaire française en Indochine, 1940–54* (Vincennes: Service historique de l'Armée de l'Air), 1999.

56 Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, pp. 169–70; on Vĩnh Yên, see p. 153.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Giáp wrote this paragraph well after the Franco-Vietnamese war ended; indeed, one must be very careful with his memoirs, which he has been churning out in several volumes over the last ten years. Chinese sources reveal that he was perhaps not as opposed to wave tactics and Chinese military ideas as he would like us to believe today, claiming that it was *they* who had to convince *him* to give up such attacks in the delta. Chinese internal documents hold that in mid-1953 Giáp wanted to shift Vietnamese attacks back to the delta but that the CCP vigorously opposed his plan, arguing the importance of remaining focused on the northwest in light of defeats in the delta in 1951. Hồ apparently favoured the Chinese plan. Chen Jian's use of Chinese party sources and cables suggests that the Chinese played the determining role in choosing to take the French on at Điện Biên Phủ to score a major military and international victory, though General Giáp says nothing of this in his memoirs.⁵⁸

The case of Điện Biên Phủ and the dangers of modern military failure

Having moved to the mountains after the French reinforcement of the northern delta, the Vietnamese were looking for a major military victory to reinforce their position in discussions under way to end the war. Stalin had died in early 1953 and a truce to the Korean War had been signed by July.⁵⁹ Whatever the reasons (for they are still contested), in November 1953 the French selected the valley of Điện Biên Phủ to begin building a large entrenched position. Determined to wipe out this large French camp to score that major victory in the battlefield, the Vietnamese Politburo approved an attack plan against Điện Biên Phủ in December, in concert with Chinese military advisors. Giáp would command, backed up in his General Staff by Mei Jiasheng, Wei Guoqing and his Vietnamese officers, most importantly his Chief-of-Staff Hoàng Văn Thái. The plan was to attack early, before the French could reinforce their camp. In his most recently published memoirs on the campaign, Giáp claims that he secretly disagreed with the plan 'to attack fast in order to win fast' [*đánh nhanh, thắng nhanh*], a clear reference to Chinese wave tactics. Worried, he secretly asked his closest Vietnamese military advisors to inform him of the smallest details of French reinforcements.⁶⁰ If it failed, Giáp said, such wave tactics could inflict terrible damage on the army, reduce its capacity to carry on the 'long resistance' and provide the French with a strategically important military and above all diplomatic victory.

For the time being, however, the number of French battalions was still low and the fortifications not yet too strong. The DRV had apparently received more artillery and even some anti-aircraft weapons. In early 1953 the Soviet Union had provided six

58 Chen, *Mao's China*, pp. 130–3; *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, p. 604, claims the Chinese agreed with the Vietnamese idea to move into the northwest. Vietnamese historians can no longer remain silent on these matters, any more than they can simply wish away these Chinese documents and recent publications. It is in their interest to publish their documents and their side of the story or risk having this part of their military history written for them by others.

59 See the excellent (and little-known) military history penned by Pierre Rocolle, *Pourquoi Điện Biên Phủ?* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), pp. 241–81, 325–30.

60 Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Điểm hẹn lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2001), pp. 93–4. Georges Boudarel and François Caviglioli first picked up on the cancellation of the January attack in an excellent analysis: 'Comment Giáp a failli perdre la bataille de Dien Bien Phu', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 8 Apr. 1983.

anti-aircraft battalions (37 mm), which became the 367th Regiment in April. In June the DRV created its first heavy artillery regiment (the 45th).⁶¹ The quality and sophistication of the external aid to the DRV thus seems to have improved significantly in 1953. Accurate French intelligence about the arrival of these new weapons led General Henri Navarre to balk, informing his government that ‘faced with the arrival of new possibilities which very serious intelligence has been announcing for two weeks (37 mm AA [DCA] and perhaps heavy artillery and motorised vehicles), I can no longer – if these materials truly exist in such numbers and *above all if the adversary succeeds in putting them to use* – guarantee success with any certainty. . .’⁶² Navarre clearly understood that the battle that was shaping up was a very modern one and that his enemy might well be able to master the military and technical science needed to hand the French a defeat.

While the Vietnamese side was now capable of delivering a new level of force to the war, they had to know how to execute a large-scale battle. On 5 January 1954, Giáp went to the front in the company of Wei Guoqing. Before leaving, Hồ had told his commanding general that the battle absolutely had to be won but that if there was any doubt that it could not be a 100 per cent victory, then Giáp was to wait. As of 14 January, it was still agreed to attack swiftly in order to wipe out entirely the French encampment; the Vietnamese attack on Điện Biên Phủ was set for 25 January at 5:00 in the evening. However, on 24 January, a Vietnamese soldier of the 312th Division fell into French hands, allowing military intelligence to learn of the exact time and date of the imminent attack. Việt Minh radio monitoring of the French picked up on this leak, and the attack was postponed and pushed back 24 hours.⁶³

Those 24 hours were fateful. Giáp was under pressure from the Chinese advisors, his own mobilised troops and officers, and some of his General Staff to attack resolutely, before it was too late. They argued that everything was in place and that a cancellation of the attack would seed dissension among the troops and tens of thousands of exhausted porters. Giáp, however, was not sure that the Vietnamese could win for sure; for him – and apparently for Hồ as well – that was enough to call off the January attack. Giáp has provided three main reasons for his fateful decision. First, the Vietnamese army had never taken on such a huge post, manned by so many French battalions and protected by tanks, heavy artillery and air power. Second, this would have been the first time that Vietnamese artillery would have to execute coordinated calibration and firing on a grand scale from protected but unfavourable aiming sites. He was worried by the fact that one artillery regiment commander had recently admitted that he did not know how to use his cannon. Third, Vietnamese soldiers had never attacked in waves in broad daylight.⁶⁴

The French camp at Điện Biên Phủ stretched over 15 km in length and 6–7 km in width. Accurate and coordinated artillery fire would be crucial to knocking out French positions and allowing Vietnamese troops to attack. Moreover, the Vietnamese needed

61 Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ*, p. 16; Hoàng Văn Thái, *Điện Biên Phủ chiến dịch lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1994), pp. 15–16.

62 Quoted in Rocolle, *Pourquoi Điện Biên Phủ?*, p. 243; emphasis added.

63 Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Điểm hẹn*, p. 101; *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, pp. 747–50; *Sự thật về những lần xuất quân*, pp. 33–4; and Hoàng Minh Phương, ‘Về một cuốn sách xuất bản ở Trung Quốc viết về Điện Biên Phủ’, *Xưa và Nay*, 3 (1994): 14.

64 Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Điểm hẹn*, p. 103, confirmed in part by *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, p. 749.

not only sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons, but also the right guns to shoot down French planes to lessen the chances of carnage in the valley. Sources suggest that not all of the Vietnamese artillery had arrived in place by the January attack date, and in the meantime the French had, in the Vietnamese view, considerably reinforced their fortifications in Điện Biên Phủ. The stakes were even higher as the Berlin Conference on Indochina opened at this very time; defeat would have been catastrophic. Giáp cancelled the attack, switching the plan to ‘attack surely and advance surely’ (*đánh chắc, tiến chắc*); Wei Guoqing agreed.⁶⁵ The attack on Điện Biên Phủ would not start until 13 March and would last until 7 May 1954. The Vietnamese came much closer to military failure there than has been recognised.

As Navarre said, the Vietnamese victory depended on their knowing how to use that foreign military knowledge effectively in order to knock out French air cover and artillery fire on the ground. Although the Vietnamese were having trouble in January 1954, a few months later they had mastered most of these high-tech weapons and inflicted a massive military defeat on the French Expeditionary Corps, as General Marcel Bigeard himself admitted in the quotation at the beginning of this article.⁶⁶ Part of it was Chinese wave tactics, part of it was extraordinary Vietnamese mastery of modern military science, part of it was the arrival of Soviet weapons on the spot in early May and much of it was based on a diplomatic imperative that made defeat an impossible alternative, whatever the cost in lives.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The Battle of Điện Biên Phủ was a modern military engagement and a victory for what had only a few years earlier been a guerrilla army.⁶⁸ It was not so much that the French Expeditionary Corps was teleologically or nationally weak in 1954 – indeed, the Americans had almost been overrun in Korea by Chinese and Korean wave tactics – but

65 Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Điểm hẹn*, p. 103 and *Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, p. 750. The official Chinese position on ‘attacking surely to advance surely’ is not clear; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam wars*, pp. 46–7 and Chen, *Mao’s China*, p. 134. The French 2B intelligence service, however, knew that a major change in strategy had occurred; see the astute analysis in Rocolle, *Pourquoi Điện Biên Phủ?*, pp. 247–56. However, such a strategy had apparently already existed as a backup plan if a quick wave tactic victory could not be 100 per cent guaranteed (*Lịch sử Bộ Tổng tham mưu*, p. 747). Giáp’s decision was thus not necessarily taken ‘against’ Chinese advice, a point confirmed by the man who translated for his discussion with Wei on this very subject on 26 Jan. 1954 (Phượng, ‘Về một cuốn sách’, p. 14).

66 The Vietnamese army has recently revealed that during the ‘third wave’ attack on the French at Điện Biên Phủ they used the Soviet-built Katyusha six-barrelled rocket launchers supplied by the Chinese and transformed by the Vietnamese army into Rocket Battalion 224 in late April 1954. However, it appears that they were only used in battle on 7 May, firing almost 1,000 rockets into Mường Thanh (the town where Điện Biên Phủ is located) and the French command post before the latter capitulated that afternoon; ‘Tiểu đoàn hỏa tiễn 224’, *Tạp chí Lịch sử Quân sự*, 4 (1997): 58–60. In early May, Chinese instructors gave the Vietnamese crash courses in using this new weapon. While this Vietnamese document does not say whether Chinese technical experts were manning the Katyusha on 7 May, it seems possible.

67 One cannot but help asking what would have happened at Điện Biên Phủ in January 1954 had that soldier of the 312th Division not been captured by the French. In June, French military intelligence estimated the DRV had lost 23,000 men in the battle; Service de l’Armée de l’Air (France), box C2130, ‘Le Viet-Minh et la campagne de Điện Biên Phủ’, p. 8 and annex no. 4, 15 June 1954.

68 The only significant prior experience in conventional warfare was the series of attacks by Nguyễn Bình in 1950; Christopher E. Goscha, ‘“La guerre par d’autres moyens”: Réflexions sur la guerre du Việt Minh dans le Sud-Vietnam de 1945 à 1951’, *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, 206 (2002): 29–57.

rather that the DRV had put together a real army and succeeded in executing a modern battle, using both Chinese wave tactics and modern artillery and anti-aircraft weapons in a coordinated fashion. As a ranking French intelligence officer opened his 17 June study of the Điện Biên Phủ campaign:

For the Việt Minh, Điện Biên Phủ marked a peak never before attained. For its army, this first modern-styled battle pointed up its indisputable rise to maturity [as a modern army]. . . . Psychologically, this victory has had an impact not only on local opinion, but also at the French and international levels. From a political point of view, Điện Biên Phủ is a major phenomenon, because it occurs precisely at the time when the Việt Minh is making contact for the first time with international instances in Geneva, with a view to gaining its official recognition and above all the establishment of its [national] rights.⁶⁹

Force had clearly helped put this Vietnamese state on the map of nations. The modern military power of which Đông Du leaders had dreamed at the outset of the twentieth century had finally become a reality. The Vietnamese case sheds light on the transition from a guerrilla force to a modern army and shows how a Western colonial power's own 'colonised' borrowed foreign military knowledge and aid from abroad – but not necessarily all of it from the coloniser – to defeat that power in a classic military battle. In this sense, the Vietnamese defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 is as important as the Japanese defeat of the Russians at Tsushima in 1905.

As for the further spread of 'revolutionary' military techniques and knowledge into mainland Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese, like the Chinese, began sending hundreds of 'internationalist volunteers' into Laos and Cambodia in 1950 to graft the Sino-Vietnamese military (and communist) model onto western Indochina. They would set up military and ideological academies for the Lao and Khmer revolutionaries, train and often lead their armies, and expand the revolutionary model further into the region.⁷⁰ Vietnamese, not Chinese, would be the new language of cooperation, and the Vietnamese themselves would help filter Chinese and Soviet military and revolutionary ideas into Laos and Cambodia as part of the Indochinese internationalist model. The Vietnamese used 'armed propaganda' teams, 'mobilisation' techniques, and even notions of 'proselytising the enemy' (*địch vận*).⁷¹ It was also a complicated transfer, especially when it encountered a Theravada culture and social organisation foreign to many Vietnamese cadres, and a revolutionary past that had none of the special characteristics

69 'Le Viet-Minh et la campagne de Điện Biên Phủ', p. 1. While much of the literature on the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and many biographies of Võ Nguyên Giáp tend to portray this victory as the natural outcome of the war of national liberation, a close reading of the Vietnamese sources makes it clear that things were anything but sure. The DRV army had suffered serious defeats in the delta since 1951, logistics were problematic, and in 1953 the General Staff was very worried by the Navarre plan; Hoàng Văn Thái, *Cuộc tiến công chiến lược Đông Xuân, 1953–1954* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1984), pp. 20–52.

70 If Vietnamese communists played an important role in building modern armies for their Lao and Khmer allies, anti-communist Taiwanese military specialists in 'counter-revolutionary' warfare played important advisory roles in the Republic of Vietnam and in Lon Nol's Cambodia; see the interesting chapter on 'Counterrevolution exported' in Thomas A. Marks, *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 197–237.

71 Goscha, 'Le contexte asiatique', Indochinese section.

of the Sino-Vietnamese relationships flowing out of the early twentieth century, say, in Tokyo, Guangzhou or Yan'an. The structural and cultural lack of Khmer and Lao revolutionary interest would see Vietnamese advisors and volunteers effectively running the military affairs of 'revolutionary' Laos and Cambodia, something which they would never have allowed the Chinese to do in Vietnam. There is a logic to this – and it is not simple 'Vietnamese historical imperialism' – but the complex spread of Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary ideas and military science further into mainland Southeast Asia deserves a separate study.