

Remembering a forgotten war: The Vietnamese state, war veterans and the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979–89)

Martin Grossheim

This article argues that in the last few years the Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese Communist Party have upgraded the commemoration of a Sino-Vietnamese War (1979–89) that had fallen into oblivion after the normalisation of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991. The first part of the article analyses the way in which Vietnam officially commemorated the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the war against China in 2019. Vietnamese authorities such as the Department of Propaganda and Education stepped up the commemoration of the war, but in comparison with that of the war against the Pol Pot regime it was much more subdued and low-key. The second part of the article shows that the veterans of the Vĩ Xuyên battle in Hà Giang province where fierce battles had taken place between 1984 and 1989 have actively shaped the commemoration of the war by organising commemorative activities on the old battlefield and reaching out to state media and social media. This highlights the significance of ‘agents of remembrance’ in Vietnam who, along with the official Vietnamese ‘memory machine’, also make important contributions to the commemoration of the past.

When I was in Vietnam for the first time in 1987/88, I visited the Museum for US War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City—later renamed the War Remnants Museum. At the time, an exhibition was being held in a special room there displaying pictures showing war crimes that the ‘Chinese expansionists’ had committed during China’s invasion of Vietnam in 1979—in grim detail. When I returned to the museum in 1992, the exhibition room was still there, but it was empty—the pictures of Chinese war crimes had been removed—and I was even told that there had never been an exhibition on Chinese war crimes there.

Martin Grossheim is an Associate Professor at Seoul National University. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: mgrossheim@snu.ac.kr. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and my colleague Christopher Goscha for all their useful and helpful comments on my manuscript. I also thank the College of Humanities, Seoul National University, for giving me a generous grant from the Research Resettlement Fund for new faculty members, which made this research project possible. My thanks also go to the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences, Vietnam National University, that provided the necessary institutional support during my research in Vietnam. I am especially grateful to my wife, Ngô Thị Bích Thu, and her family in Hanoi, who helped me tremendously during my field trip in Vietnam in 2019. Last but not least, I thank the Hà Giang veterans who shared their information and experiences with me.

This commemorative turn reflected a change in Sino-Vietnamese relations: during the Second Indochina War (1964–75)¹ Hanoi usually had characterised the relations with Beijing as close as ‘lips and teeth’. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) had been one of the main suppliers of military and economic aid to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). However, in spite of official announcements since 1968, relations started to get strained because the DRV did not comply with China’s advice to wage a protracted struggle and to show an uncompromising attitude towards Washington. When in the last war years Hanoi did not completely side with Beijing and continued to cultivate relations with the Soviet Union, its second main provider of military and economic assistance, distrust between the DRV and China increased. After the end of the war in 1975, when Hanoi increasingly leaned towards Moscow, joined the COMECON in June 1978 and later that year even signed a treaty of cooperation and friendship with the Soviet Union, Beijing’s worst fears seemed to come true. Now China, which regarded the USSR as its ‘enemy number one’, classified Hanoi as a Soviet satellite and ‘Cuba of the East’. In order to counter Vietnam’s ‘hegemonistic policy’ in Indochina the PRC provided massive assistance to the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. When in December 1978 Hanoi decided to launch a full-scale offensive against the Khmer Rouge and topple the Pol Pot regime as a reaction to Cambodian incursions into Vietnamese territory, relations with Beijing further deteriorated and finally broke down. In February 1979, China’s leader Deng Xiaoping ordered about 200,000 Chinese troops to invade the Vietnamese border provinces in the North to ‘teach Hanoi a lesson’. Although militarily Vietnam prevailed and in early March 1979 China had to withdraw its troops, the PRC managed to isolate Vietnam diplomatically. Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1980s were at a low ebb—Hanoi routinely called the Chinese leadership an ‘expansionist gang’ (*bọn bành trướng Trung Quốc*).

All that, however, changed when in 1986 the Vietnamese leadership embarked on a reform policy, withdrew its troops from Cambodia, and in 1989/90 had to witness the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the virtual disappearance of almost all its close political and economic allies. Against this background in November 1991 Hanoi and Beijing officially normalised relations.²

1 In this article I use the terms ‘First Indochina War’ (1945–54) and ‘Second Indochina War’ (1964–75) instead of First or Second ‘Vietnam War’ to emphasise that the whole of Indochina was a battlefield during both wars.

2 For an overview of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the First and Second Indochina wars see Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). On the Sino-Vietnamese War, see the classic studies by Nayan Chanda, *Brother enemy: The war after the war* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); and King C. Chen, *China’s war with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, decisions, and implications* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987); Edward O’Dowd, *Chinese military strategy in the Third Indochina War* (London: Routledge, 2007); *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–79*, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London: Routledge, 2006). For a good overview of the literature on the War, see Q. Yin and K. Path, ‘Remembering and forgetting the last war: Discursive memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War in China and Vietnam’, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 9, 1 (2020): 2–3. For a typical official Vietnamese-language work published during the low point of relations between Hanoi and Beijing and thus full of derogatory terms for China, see *Sự thật về quan hệ Việt Nam—Trung Quốc trong 30 năm qua* [The truth of relations between Vietnam and China in the last 30 years] (Hanoi: NXB Sự thật, 1979).

After 1991, Hanoi had to play a delicate balancing act in its relations with China. Due to its asymmetric relationship with China, Vietnam cannot afford an openly anti-Chinese stance. At the same time, Vietnamese authorities have to accommodate and manage an anti-Chinese nationalism that has flared up regularly in the last two decades on several occasions: in 1999, when Vietnam settled its land border disputes with China in a controversial Treaty of Land Border; in 2007 the Vietnamese government announced plans to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands region and offer a contract for that project to a Chinese company; in 2014 when Beijing sent an oil rig into the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea claimed by Vietnam; and in 2018 when the Vietnamese government compiled a draft law that would allow foreign investors—probably Chinese companies—to lease land for up to 99 years in three new Special Economic Zones.³

After the normalisation of relations with China in 1991, the war with Vietnam's northern neighbour almost completely fell into oblivion, despite it having been previously presented in the Vietnamese media as an invasion by the 'Chinese expansionists'—in museums, school history textbooks, and films and songs.⁴ The Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) kept on celebrating the victorious war against the French (1946–54) and the ensuing struggle for unification of the country, which officially ended up as 'heroic' and 'just' wars in 1975. In contrast, they systematically silenced the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War.⁵ Consequently, the state's media channels usually kept silent whenever anniversaries

3 On Sino-Vietnamese relations and the flare-up of anti-Chinese nationalism in Vietnam see Dien Nguyen An Luong, 'The growing salience of online Vietnamese nationalism', *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 11 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021); Frances Yaping Wang and Brantly Womack, 'Jawing through crises: Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies in the South China Sea', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, 119 (2019): 712–28; Jason Morris-Jung, 'The Vietnamese bauxite controversy: Towards a more oppositional politics', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, 1 (2015): 63–109; and Phuong Hoang, 'Domestic protests and foreign policy: An examination of anti-China protests in Vietnam and Vietnamese policy towards China regarding the South China Sea', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 6, 1 (2019): 1–29.

4 Đoàn Trang, 'Những bài ca biên giới không thể nào quên' [Unforgettable songs about the border], *Nhịp cầu Thế giới*, 16 Feb. 2009, <http://nhipcauthegioi.hu/Van-hoa/NHUNG-BAI-CA-BIEN-GIOI-KHONG-THE-NAO-QUEN-1767.html> (last accessed 8 Jan. 2020); Dân Trí, 'Nhìn lại chiến tranh biên giới 1979 qua các tác phẩm điện ảnh' [Looking back to the war of 1979 through movies], *Petrotimes*, 16 Feb. 2019, <https://petrotimes.vn/nhin-lai-chien-tranh-bien-gioi-1979-qua-cac-tac-pham-dien-anh-528045.html> (last accessed 7 Jan. 2020). There is even evidence that the Vietnamese leaders had assured their Chinese counterparts at an earlier meeting in September 1990 in Chengdu (Thành Đô) that they would play down the commemoration of the border war in the media in future. For details, see Martin Grossheim, 'Đổi Mới in the classroom? How national and world history are portrayed in Vietnamese textbooks', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, 1 (2018): 163. On the meeting at Chengdu, see also Duong Danh Y, 'Hậu quả tai hại của Hội nghị Thành Đô' [The disastrous consequences of the conference in Chengdu], *BBC Vietnamese*, 25 Oct. 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum-45580658> (last accessed 10 Jan. 2020). See also Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Speaking out in Vietnam: Public political criticism in a Communist Party-ruled nation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 74.

5 In this article, I have deliberately chosen the term 'Sino-Vietnamese War' to refer to the event and combatants. This war was part of the Third Indochina War, which also included the war between Cambodia and Vietnam. On the commemoration of the first two Indochina Wars, see Shaun Kingsley, 'The fatherland remembers your sacrifice: Commemorating war dead in North Vietnam', in *The country of memory: Remaking the past in late socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 46–76; and Edward Miller, 'Across the Pacific and back to

of the war occurred; any journalists and other independent groups who dared to commemorate the war were censored. An article that the journalist Huy Đức had written on the 30th anniversary of the war that went online on the *Sài Gòn Tiếp Thị* website on 9 February 2009 was removed after just a few hours, for example.⁶ He was one of the few who had addressed the taboo topic. What was certainly not helpful for the article's reception was that Huy Đức had also mentioned the huge losses that the Vietnamese People's Army (PAVN) had suffered in the battle of Vĩ Xuyên in the mid-1980s, and made a remark at the end of the article saying that the war had fallen into oblivion. Similarly, it was no coincidence that the memoirs of the former Vietnamese diplomat Dương Danh Y on the war were published by BBC Vietnamese in the same year, not by the Vietnamese media.⁷

Against the backdrop of assertive Chinese actions in the South China Sea such as in 2014 Vietnamese state media increasingly stepped up coverage of the Sino-Vietnamese War.⁸ The so-called oil rig crisis in 2014 constituted a turning point in the commemoration of the war. The moving of a Chinese oil rig to waters near the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea led to a deterioration in mutual relations, to anti-Chinese demonstrations in Vietnam, and to an enhanced interest among many Vietnamese in past military clashes with their northern neighbour.⁹ For example, many Vietnamese started to complain that the history textbooks used in schools around the country only covered the war of 1979 to 1989 in a few lines and they even criticised the authors of the contested textbooks.¹⁰ As a result of this public outcry, Vietnamese historians called for an overhaul of the school textbooks.¹¹

Vietnam: Transnational legacies and memories of the Vietnam War', in *Asia Pacific in the age of globalization*, ed. Akira Iriye and Robert David Johnson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 172–84.
6 Huy Đức, 'Biên giới Tháng hai (2009-1979)' [The border in Feb. (2009–1979)], *Facebook*, Osin HuyDuc, 15 Feb. 2011, <https://vi-vn.facebook.com/notes/truong-huy-san/bi%20C3%AAn-gi%E1%BB%9Bi-th%C3%A1ng-hai-2009-1979/189934721029764/> (last accessed 7 July 2020).

7 Dương Danh Y, 'Nhớ lại đêm 17 tháng 2 năm 1979' [Remembering the night of 17 Feb. 1979], *BBC Vietnamese*, 18 Feb. 2009; https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/indepth/story/2009/02/090216_duongdanhdy.shtml (last accessed 10 Jan. 2020).

8 See for example, Anonymous, 'Remembering a forgotten war', *Thanh Niên*, 23 Feb. 2013, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/remembering-a-forgotten-war-3449.html> (last accessed 1 Mar. 2017); and Anonymous, 'Vietnam remembers martyrs of 1984 border war', *Thanh Niên*, 15 July 2013, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnam-remembers-martyrs-of-1984-border-war-1844.html> (last accessed 17 July 2020).

9 See Christina Lai, 'A coercive brotherhood: Sino-Vietnamese relations from the 1990s to 2018', *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, 123 (2020): 479–82.

10 Vũ Dương Ninh, the editor of one of the history textbooks that had only reserved 11 lines for the military conflict, said in an interview that he was contacted personally by Vietnamese readers and criticised for this inadequate coverage (Vũ Dương Ninh, interviewed by the author, 21 June 2019); see Grossheim, "'Đổi Mới" in the classroom', p. 167. More recent criticism of the way in which the war is presented in Vietnamese history textbooks can be found in Quốc Phong, 'Chúng ta vẫn còn biết rất ít về cuộc chiến tranh biên giới ấy' [We still only know a bit about that border war], *Dân Việt*, 17 Feb. 2020, <http://danviet.vn/kinh-da-trong/danh-bai-60-van-quan-xam-luoc-khong-the-chi-la-cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-1059623.html> (last accessed 20 Feb. 2020).

11 Grossheim, "'Đổi Mới" in the classroom', pp. 166–9. Phạm Hồng Tung, director of the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences, Vietnam National University, promised that the new school history textbooks would cover the Sino-Vietnamese War adequately; see Phạm Hồng Tung 2019, 'Chiến tranh biên giới 1979 được dạy thế nào trong chương trình mới' [How the border war of

The second half of the 2010s witnessed a further upsurge in the efforts to recall and commemorate the Sino-Vietnamese War in Vietnam. The state media there published articles that openly criticised Chinese propaganda for presenting a distorted view of the war.¹² Furthermore, Vietnamese TV channels also began to broadcast documentaries about the Sino-Vietnamese War and addressed one legacy of the war that the Vietnamese state had not paid attention to in recent decades: the need to trace the remains of thousands of fallen Vietnamese soldiers in the border provinces of North Vietnam and ensure that their loved ones could perform the proper mourning rituals.¹³ In the same vein, Vietnamese TV programmes on the Vietnamese War Invalids and Martyrs' Day on 27 July have increasingly commemorated the war against China.¹⁴ Similarly, more and more articles in the Vietnamese press directly emphasised that the commemoration of the war had been neglected for a long time. Thus, one article from 2017 was entitled 'The border war of 1979: Not fearing the enemy, only fearing oblivion.'¹⁵ Foreign observers also took note of the commemorative turn in Vietnam.¹⁶

In the following, I will analyse the way in which the Vietnamese state and the VCP commemorated the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the war against China in 1979. I argue that the official Vietnamese 'memory machine'¹⁷ directed by the VCP's Department of Propaganda and Education (Ban Tuyên Giáo Trung ương) has upgraded the commemoration of the war significantly, but it is still trying to keep things firmly under control by issuing meticulous guidelines on how to organise anniversary events. By comparing the official commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Sino-Vietnamese War and that of the war against the Pol Pot regime, I will show that the former was much more subdued and low-key.

In the second part of my article, I will show that Vietnamese veterans have actively shaped the commemoration of the war against China over the last few years. My case study focuses on the remembrance of the second part of the Sino-Vietnamese War when fierce battles were fought in the border district of Vị

1979 is presented in the new curriculum], *Zing News*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://news.zing.vn/chien-tranh-bien-gioi-1979-duoc-day-the-nao-trong-chuong-trinh-moi-post916438.html> (last accessed 17 July 2020).

12 Tùng Đình and Ngọc Anh, 'Báo Trung Quốc tung video dối trá cuộc chiến 1979, tướng Lê Mã Lương: 'Tôi còn lạ gì' [A Chinese newspaper spreads a video lying about the war in 1979; General Lê Mã Lương: 'I am not surprised at all.'], *VTC*, 6 Mar. 2015 (last accessed 7 Mar. 2015).

13 VTC1, 'Vì sao Trung Quốc phát động chiến tranh xâm lược Việt Nam 1979' [Why the Chinese launched the war of invasion against Vietnam in 1979], *YouTube* video, 5 Mar. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brhnj4oQ8mE> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020); and VTC1, 'Giàn nan hành trình tìm hài cốt chiến sỹ vùng biên ải' [A hard journey to find the remains of the border soldiers], *VTC1 Documentary*, 26 July 2017, <https://vtc.vn/truyen-hinh/gian-nan-hanh-trinh-tim-hai-cot-chien-sy-vung-bien-ai-ar338398.html> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020).

14 Personal observation.

15 Đức Hoàng, 'Chiến tranh biên giới 1979. Không sợ kẻ thù, chỉ sợ lãng quên' [The border war of 1979: Not fearing the enemy, only fearing oblivion], *VnExpress*, 17 Feb. 2017, <https://vnexpress.net/interactive/2017/02/quoac-chien-khong-the-quen> (last accessed 20 Apr. 2017).

16 Doan Xuan Loc, 'Breaking a taboo, Hanoi recalls war with China', *Asia Times*, 23 Feb. 2017, <https://asiatimes.com/2017/02/breaking-taboo-vietnam-recalls-war-china/> (last accessed 17 July 2020); David Hutt, 'Vietnam's new view of an old war', *Asia Times*, 20 Feb. 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/02/article/vietnams-new-view-of-an-old-war/> (last accessed 20 May 2020).

17 See Martin Grossheim, 'Celebrating the socialist past: The Vietnamese "memory machine" at work', *Journal of Humanities* (Seoul) 77, 2 (2020): 327–56, on the term 'memory machine', its origin and its inner workings in Vietnam.

Xuyên in Hà Tuyên province (now Hà Giang province); these began in 1984 and ended in 1989. The short and massive invasion of Chinese troops in February and March 1979 had long overshadowed the ‘Second War against China’, as Vietnamese veterans call the military clashes in Hà Giang. In this article, I highlight the agency of the veterans who benefited from the commemorative turn of 2013/14 and contributed to it at the same time. Thus, it was not the Vietnamese collectively, but the veterans among them who broke the silence of war memory. They did this by organising commemorative activities on the old battlefield in Vị Xuyên district and by reaching out to state media and social media. The Vietnamese state with its ‘memory machine’ only reacted to these initiatives belatedly, but then stepped up its commemoration of the battles in Hà Giang. So in a nutshell, the veterans of Hà Giang are one of the groups of non-state actors and ‘agents of remembrance’ in Vietnam that have managed ‘to claim a piece of the past’.¹⁸

This article is also a contribution to the growing literature in Vietnamese memory studies.¹⁹ The commemoration of the Second Indochina War has been widely studied.²⁰ This is also true of research on the commemoration of the war dead in Vietnam.²¹ In sum, there is a clear focus on the memory of the ‘Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation’ (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước*), as the Second Indochina War is officially called in Vietnam. The study of the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War has been neglected so far, however.²²

Official 40th anniversary commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War, 2019

Guidelines and ceremonies

In Vietnam, the Central Department of Propaganda and Education is in charge of disseminating an orthodox master narrative that presents Vietnam’s modern history

18 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ‘Introduction: Situating memory’, in *The country of memory*, p. 7. On the term ‘agents of remembrance’, see Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, ‘Setting the framework’, in *War and remembrance in the twentieth century*, ed. J. Winter and E. Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3–39; Jay Winter, ‘Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War’, in *ibid.*, pp. 40–60. I challenge the view presented in Yin and Path, ‘Remembering and forgetting’, p. 15, that ‘[t]he Vietnamese state has ensured that no other actors besides the party-state dominate the space of memorialising the 1979 war’.

19 The classic study is Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *The country of memory*, which includes chapters on different aspects of the commemoration of Vietnamese history. For a good overview of the way socialist Vietnam makes use of history, see Christoph Giebel, ‘Revolution, war, and memory in contemporary Viet Nam: An assessment and agenda’, in *Ruptured histories: War, memory, and the post-Cold War in Asia*, ed. Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 307–21; and the more detailed monograph by Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New histories of the national past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

20 See Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in contemporary Vietnam: Transnational remembrance and representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Viet Nguyen Thanh, *Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), for example, which also analyse the transnational dimension of war memory.

21 See Malarney, ‘The fatherland remembers your sacrifice’; Shaun K. Malarney, *Culture, ritual, and revolution in Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Heonik Kwon, *After the massacre: Commemoration and consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). On the cult of war heroes, which is closely linked to the memory of war dead in Vietnam, see Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and revolution in Vietnam* (Singapore: NUS Press; IRASEC, 2012).

22 For a comparison between the commemoration of the war in China and Vietnam, see Yin and Path, ‘Remembering and forgetting the last war’.

as a succession of victories achieved under the correct leadership of the VCP. The Department has a whole range of instruments at its disposal to enforce ideological orthodoxy.²³ One means is to control the official calendar of festivities. Thus, in a December 2019 speech Võ Văn Thường, the Chairman of the Department of Propaganda and Education, reviewed the work of that year and emphasised that one of the main functions of the Department had been to provide guidelines for celebrating important anniversaries. He admitted that some of the anniversaries in 2019 had been ‘sensitive’ (*nhạy cảm*), such as the 40th anniversary of the war to defend the southwestern border, that is, the war against the Khmer Rouge in 1978, and the anniversary of the struggle to defend the northern border, that is, the war against China in 1979. In this respect, the Department of Propaganda and Education has the task of holding back ‘hostile forces’ and ‘reactionary elements’ and suppressing any wrong or poisonous news that is spread by social media. It classified the 40th anniversary of the war between Vietnam and China as ‘sensitive’.²⁴

Seen against this backdrop, it is understandable that the Department attached so much importance to monitoring and controlling the commemoration of the anniversary. At the end of 2018, for example, the Department issued detailed guidelines on ‘the celebration of great anniversaries and important historical events’ in the coming year (as it usually did).²⁵ This document only provided guidelines on celebrating the 40th anniversary of the ‘Victory Day of the war to defend the southwestern border’, however, and announced that the Department of Propaganda and Education would provide further guidelines on the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the war against China in a separate document. Unfortunately, that document is not

23 Grossheim, ‘Celebrating the socialist past’, pp. 329–30. Richard J. Evans, ‘Introduction: Redesigning the past: History in political transitions’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, 1 (2003): 5–12, provides a good overview of how authoritarian regimes have tried to monopolise and control the representation of the past.

24 Quỳnh Vinh, ‘Ngành Tuyên giáo phải là lực lượng nòng cốt đấu tranh ngăn chặn tin xấu, độc’ [The Propaganda and Education branch must be the core force in the struggle to stop fake and poisonous news], *Công an nhân dân Online*, 23 Dec. 2019, <http://cand.com.vn/Su-kien-Binh-luan-thoi-su/Nganh-Tuyen-giao-phai-la-luc-luong-nong-cot-dau-tranh-ngan-chan-tin-xau-doc-575230/> (last accessed 18 May 2020). This is in line with Central Committee Resolution No. 4 from 2016, which demanded ideological rectification of the VCP and propagated the struggle against the ‘self-evolution’ of Party cadres. See Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng, Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, ‘Nghị quyết hội nghị lần thứ 4 Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng khóa XII về tăng cường xây dựng, chỉnh đốn Đảng; ngăn chặn, đẩy lùi sự suy thoái về tư tưởng chính trị, đạo đức, lối sống, những biểu hiện ‘tự diễn biến’, ‘tự chuyển hóa’ trong nội bộ’ [Resolution No. 4 of the Party Central Committee, Twelfth Term, on Strengthening the Building and Reorganisation of the Party: Preventing and Reversing the Decline in Political Ideas, Morals, and Lifestyle, and Internal Manifestations of ‘Self-Evolution’ and ‘Self-Transformation’], *Tuổi Trẻ*, 30 Oct. 2016, <https://tuoitre.vn/toan-van-nghi-quyet-trung-uong-4-khoa-xii-1211059.htm> (last accessed 3 Sept. 2019); Nguyễn Huy Hiệu and Trần Nam Chuân 2019, ‘Tăng cường bảo vệ nền tảng tư tưởng của Đảng, đấu tranh phản bác các quan điểm sai trái, thù địch trong tình hình mới’ [Strengthening the protection of the ideological basis of the Party: The struggle to refute wrong and hostile allegations in the new situation], *Tuyên Giáo*, 6 Dec. 2019, <http://tuyengiao.vn/bao-ve-nen-tang-tu-tuong-cua-dang/tang-cuong-bao-ve-nen-tang-tu-tuong-cua-dang-dau-tranh-phan-bac-cac-quan-diem-sai-trai-thu-dich-trong-tinh-hinh-moi-125763> (last accessed 21 May 2020).

25 Ban Tuyên Giáo, ‘Hướng dẫn tuyên truyền, kỷ niệm các ngày lễ lớn và sự kiện lịch sử quan trọng trong năm 2019’ [Guidelines for propaganda in commemoration of the great anniversaries in 2019], *Tuyên Giáo*, 14 Dec. 2018, <http://tuyengiao.vn/ban-can-biet/huong-dan-tuyen-truyen-ky-niem-cac-ngay-le-lon-va-su-kien-lich-su-quan-trong-trong-nam-2019-117309> (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019).

available,²⁶ so we have to rely on other sources in order to understand exactly how the Department wanted the celebrations for the anniversary to be carried out (in contrast to those for the anniversary of the victory against the genocidal Pol Pot regime in 1979).

An outline written by the Hải Phòng party committee contains essential information on the official policy to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the war against China.²⁷ According to this document, one of the main aims of the commemorative activities should be to prevent ‘hostile forces’ from misusing the anniversary by distorting historical facts, organising anti-Party activities and inciting hatred against China, thus negatively influencing Sino-Vietnamese relations. The commemorative activities should be in line with the official policy towards China ‘to put the past behind ourselves and look forward to the future’ (*khép lại quá khứ hướng đến tương lai*).

In the same vein, a programmatic article published in the newspaper of the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture warns against misuse of the anniversary and provides further information on the main thrust of the commemorative policy.²⁸ It denies assertions made by critics at home and abroad that the VCP and the Vietnamese state have dodged and forgotten the war of 1979 and not paid due attention to the veterans and others who were involved in the war. According to the author, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the war against China, Vietnamese mass media had published many articles that correctly emphasised that the VCP and the Vietnamese state had always cared for veterans, war invalids and families of martyrs. The article repeats the claim that the Party and the Vietnamese state had never forgotten the ‘heroic war to defend the northern border in 1979’ over and over.

If we compare how the VCP and the state commemorated the victory against the Khmer Rouge in January 1979 and the war against China from 1979 to 1989 in 2019, the differences are striking.

According to the guidelines of the Central Department of Propaganda and Education, a huge ceremony was to be held at state level in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of ‘the victory day of the war to defend the southwestern border of the country and of the joint victory against the genocidal regime together with Cambodian soldiers and civilians’, as the war against the Khmer Rouge in December 1978/January 1979 was officially called.²⁹ This ceremony took place in

26 Another document available online provides a historical outline of the war to be propagated: UBND Thành Phố Hà Nội, ‘Đề cương tuyên truyền 40 năm Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc của Tổ quốc (17/02/1979–17/02/2019)’ [Outline for propaganda of 40 years of struggle to defend the northern border of the fatherland (17/2/1979–17/2/2019)], 14 Jan. 2019, <http://hn-ams.edu.vn/en/node/32902> (last accessed 20 Jan. 2020).

27 Hải Phòng, ‘Kế hoạch tổ chức tuyên truyền, kỷ niệm 40 năm cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc của Tổ quốc (17/02/1979–17/02/2019)’ [Plan to organise propaganda and the commemoration of 40 years of struggle to defend the northern border of the fatherland (17/2/1979–17/2/2019)], *HaiPhong.gov.vn*, 25 Jan. 2019, http://www.haiphong.gov.vn/Portal/Detail.aspx?Organization=QLC_Pnn&MenuID=7174&ContentID=142054 (last accessed 6 Jan. 2020).

28 Nguyễn Đức Độ, ‘Cảnh giác với những luận điệu sai trái, lợi dụng cuộc chiến tranh biên giới phía Bắc để xuyên tạc, kích động chống phá’ [Being vigilant about wrong allegations: Misusing the war at the northern border to distort (and) incite subversion], *Tổ Quốc*, 15 Feb. 2019, <http://toquoc.vn/canh-giac-voi-nhung-luan-dieu-sai-trai-loi-dung-cuoc-chien-tranh-bien-gioi-phia-bac-de-xuyen-tac-kich-dong-chong-pha-20190215092256847.htm> (last accessed 7 Jan. 2020).

29 Ban Tuyên Giáo, ‘Hướng dẫn tuyên truyền’; and Ban Tuyên Giáo, ‘Đề cương tuyên truyền kỷ niệm 40 năm Ngày Chiến thắng chiến tranh, bảo vệ biên giới Tây Nam của Tổ quốc’ [Outline for propaganda

Hanoi at the beginning of January 2019. Almost the entire Party and state leadership attended it: Party chairman and state president Nguyễn Phú Trọng, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and several other Politburo members, ministers and other high-level politicians.³⁰ The Vietnamese prime minister and the vice-chairman of the Cambodian Senate both gave speeches there.

In contrast, during the 40th anniversary commemorations of the war against China, which was closely related to the war against Pol Pot's regime, the Vietnamese authorities kept a low profile: instead of organising a meeting at state level with representatives of the Party and state leaders, a small meeting was held in Hanoi on 23 January 2019. It was chaired by the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs in conjunction with other ministries and the Fatherland Front. Trần Thanh Mẫn, the Chairman of the Front and highest representative of the VCP at the meeting, gave a speech at the event. No representative of the Party and state leadership attended, however. In his speech, he emphasised that the VCP and the Vietnamese state should always remember those who had contributed to the 'struggle to defend the northern border'. He also mentioned that one of the most urgent tasks was to find the remains of fallen Vietnamese soldiers, especially on the Vị Xuyên battlefield. Both Trần Thanh Mẫn and the second speaker, the deputy minister of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, consistently avoided using the term 'China' and 'Chinese'.³¹

Conferences

Following the guidelines laid down by the Department of Propaganda and Education, the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam) and the Vietnamese Association of Historians (Hội Khoa học Lịch sử Việt Nam) jointly organised a national conference in January 2019 entitled 'The Struggle to Defend the Northern Border of the Country—Looking Back after 40 Years'. This scholarly event presented a sanitised version of the war.³² First of

in commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the victory day of the war to defend the southwestern border of the fatherland], *Tuyên Giáo*, 14 Dec. 2018, <http://tuyengiao.vn/ban-can-biet/de-cuong-tuyen-truyen-ky-niem-40-nam-ngay-chien-thang-chien-tranh-bao-ve-bien-gioi-tay-nam-cua-to-quooc-117308> (last accessed 18 May 2020).

30 Thảo Nguyễn and Trọng Hải, 'Lễ kỷ niệm 40 năm Ngày chiến thắng chiến tranh bảo vệ biên giới Tây Nam của Tổ quốc và cùng quân dân Campuchia chiến thắng chế độ diệt chủng' [Ceremony in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the victory day of the war to defend the southwestern border of the country and of the joint victory with Cambodian soldiers and civilians against the genocidal regime], *Quân đội Nhân dân*, 4 Jan. 2019, <https://www.qdnd.vn/40nam-chien-thang-chien-tranh-bao-ve-bien-gioi-tay-nam/tin-tuc/le-ky-niem-40-nam-ngay-chien-thang-chien-tranh-bao-ve-bien-gioi-tay-nam-cua-to-quooc-va-cung-quan-dan-campuchia-chien-thang-che-do-diet-chung-559699> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

31 The Vietnamese Fatherland Front comprises all mass movements in Vietnam aligned with the VCP. Q. Vinh, P. Hoat, and X. Trường, 'Đảng, Nhà nước không bao giờ quên đồng bào, CBCS đã chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc' [The Party and the State will never forget that the compatriots and soldier-cadres have fought to defend the northern border], *Công An Nhân dân*, 23 Jan. 2019, <http://cand.com.vn/Su-kien-Binh-luan-thoi-su/Dang-Nha-nuoc-khong-bao-gio-quen-dong-bao-CBCS-da-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-Bac-530608/> (last accessed 15 July 2020).

32 The Vietnamese Association of Historians wanted to organise a conference on the 35th anniversary of the war in 2014, but it was not allowed to do so. Instead of doing that, it decided to hold an alternative conference on the question of historical sites during the war—a topic that sounded much less sensitive

all, as the title indicates, the conference presented Vietnam's ten-year-long military conflict with the People's Republic of China as a 'military fight', not as a war. Articles on the conference in the Vietnamese state media followed the tendency to play down the historical significance of the war, and emphasised that one of the main aims of the conference was to criticise the attempt to distort and misuse the event for anti-Party and anti-state activities and damage relations with China. This is completely in line with the overall framework of the commemorative policy on the anniversary set by the Central Department of Propaganda and Education.³³ In contrast, the title of an earlier conference on the Cambodian conflict had included the term 'war'.³⁴

A historian who attended the conference on the war against China remembers that many of the participants had taken issue with the title of the event. However, members of the Organising Committee who were directly criticised said off the record that they did not have any choice, as 'higher authorities' had made a decision on the conference title. In February 2019, the Military Headquarters of Hà Giang province and the Veterans' Organisation in Hà Giang organised a talk on the Sino-Vietnamese War with the same title.³⁵ This suggests that the Vietnamese authorities—most probably the Central Department of Propaganda and Education—had previously issued a guideline to avoid the term 'war'.

The same participant at the conference in Hanoi told a second story that confirms the restricted framework for the official commemoration. In interviews during the break, he repeatedly used the term 'war against China'. However, on the same evening when Vietnamese state television reported about the conference, it only showed interviews with participants who had stuck to the official wording and only talked about 'the enemy' (*địch*) or the 'other side' (*bên kia*).³⁶ Other documentaries that were shown on Vietnamese TV on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the war showed the same tendency.³⁷

The way the national conference on the Sino-Vietnamese War was organised irritated many veterans. Consequently, the Nationwide Liaison Committee of the Veterans of the Battle of Vị Xuyên-Hà Tuyên sent a letter of protest to the

than the war itself, which was still more or less anathema in 2014. The conference had to be organised on a much smaller scale and without inviting the mass media. Anonymous interview, Hanoi, July 2019.

33 Thái Bình, 'Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc: 40 năm nhìn lại' [The Struggle to Defend the Northern Border: Looking back after 40 years], *T/c Cộng sản*, 15 Feb. 2019, <http://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/Home/Thong-tin-ly-luan/2019/54155/Cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-Bac-40-nam-nhin.aspx> (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019).

34 Phạm Hồng Tung, 'Cuộc chiến biên giới Tây Nam trong chương trình phổ thông mới' [War at the southwestern border in the new public school curriculum], *Vnexpress*, 10 Jan. 2019, <https://vnexpress.net/giao-duc/cuoc-chien-bien-gioi-tay-nam-trong-chuong-trinh-pho-thong-moi-3864804.html> (last accessed 20 May 2020).

35 Sơn Lâm, 'Hồi ức về những năm tháng chiến đấu trên mặt trận Vị Xuyên' [Recollections about the times at the Vị Xuyên battlefield], *VOV*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://vov.vn/xa-hoi/hoi-uc-ve-nhung-nam-thang-chien-dau-tren-mat-tran-vi-xuyen-875725.vov> (last accessed 28 May 2019).

36 Interview, Vũ Dương Ninh, 21 June 2019.

37 AnNinhTV, 'Kỷ niệm 40 năm cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc của Tổ quốc' [40th anniversary of the struggle to defend the northern border of the fatherland], *YouTube* video, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APyUd0Bt-d8> (last accessed 20 July 2020).

Organising Committee, the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Central Department of Propaganda and Education.³⁸

Firstly, the letter argued not only on behalf of many veterans, but also on behalf of many ‘genuine historians’ (*nhà sử học chân chính*) and journalists, claiming that the title of the conference did not fully reflect the character of the war as a ‘just war’, and proposed to change the original title from ‘The struggle to defend the northern border of the country’ to ‘The war to defend the country against China’s invasion’ (*Chiến tranh bảo vệ Tô quốc chống xâm lược của Trung Quốc ở phía Bắc tháng 02/1979*). Furthermore, the letter emphasised that after the war in 1979 there had been a second war called ‘The war to defend the country against encroachment at the northern border, 1980–85/1989’ (*Chiến tranh bảo vệ tổ quốc chống lấn chiếm biên giới phía Bắc*). The mass media, it said, should distinguish between the war of 1979 and the latter war and in particular highlight the significance of the battlefront of Vị Xuyên (February 1984 to May 1989).

In addition, the letter criticised that no witnesses of the war such as generals and officials in charge of the six border provinces had been invited to the conference. Witnesses of the war, it went on, should be invited to draw historical lessons from the war.

In an interview, Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy, chairman of the Liaison Committee of the Veterans of the Vị Xuyên Front, added that the Committee itself had suggested that a conference should be organised on the 40th anniversary of the war, but no representative of the veterans had been invited to participate.³⁹

Books

A number of books were published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the war, but interestingly, all of them were edited by journalists or veterans’ organisations.⁴⁰ So far, no monograph on the Sino-Vietnamese war has been published by a Vietnamese historian, and the Institute of Military History (Viện Lịch sử Quân sự), which would be in charge of conducting a research project about the war, has not published any work on the topic either.

Furthermore, any books edited by veterans’ organisations are usually only for internal circulation.⁴¹ It is certainly no coincidence that the title of one of the books published in 2019 ‘*The Struggle to Defend the Northern Border (1979–1989): From the perspective of the press*’, clearly shows that this was only meant to be a

38 Ban Liên Lạc Cựu Chiến Binh Toàn Quốc Mặt Trận Vị Xuyên–Hà Tuyên, Letter to Thường trực Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam [Permanent Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party], 16 Apr. 2019.

39 Interview with Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy, Hanoi, 8 July 2019.

40 Ban Liên Lạc Cựu Chiến Binh Toàn Quốc Mặt Trận Vị Xuyên–Hà Tuyên, *Chiến thắng Vị Xuyên. Ký sự lịch sử: Văn học, Tập 1* [The victory of Vị Xuyên: Historical and literary chronicle, vol. 1] (Hà Giang: n.p., 2018); and Nguyễn Đức Lương, ed., *Sư đoàn 356 và ký ức Vị Xuyên* [Division 356 and memories of Vị Xuyên] (Hanoi: NXB Dân Trí, 2018).

41 Lương Kết, ‘Vị tướng tuổi 90 và ‘Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên’ vừa xuất bản’ [A 90-year-old general and his ‘Vị Xuyên War Memories’, which have just been published], *Dân Việt*, 16 Feb. 2020, <http://danviet.vn/tin-tuc/vi-tuong-tuoi-90-va-hoi-uc-chien-tranh-vi-xuyen-vua-xuat-ban-1059213.html> (last accessed 22 Feb. 2020).

modest contribution to the field and not an official history of the war.⁴² Interestingly, the book launch did not take place on the 40th anniversary of the war itself, but on the much less politically sensitive anniversary of the ‘Vietnam Revolutionary Press Day’ on 21 June.⁴³ Many veterans of the war against China attended the event—most of them displaying all the medals they had earned during the war against China—partly to show their dissatisfaction with the official commemoration of the day.⁴⁴

The latest book published at the time of writing this article is Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy’s memoirs on the war in Vị Xuyên district, Hà Giang province, from 1984 to 1989.⁴⁵ According to the author, it took the authorities in charge a long time to allow the book to be published. Other manuscripts that he had submitted for publication were initially declined, but eventually they were published by the provincial authorities of Hà Giang, albeit only for internal circulation. Nguyễn Đức Huy’s book is not available in Vietnamese bookshops; it was mainly intended to be distributed among fellow veterans and friends.⁴⁶

Many newspaper articles covered the 40th anniversary of the war in 2019 in line with the VCP’s guidelines.⁴⁷ Similarly, the same year, Vietnamese state television broadcast several documentaries on the war.⁴⁸

Museums

The Vietnamese Museum of Military History (*Viện Bảo tàng Lịch sử Quân sự*) in Hanoi used to present the Sino-Vietnamese war in a rather remote and dilapidated exhibition room. In 2015, the exhibition was entitled ‘Military history of Vietnam in the period of reconstructing and defending the country, 1975–2011’. The sign

42 *Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc (1979–1989): Góc nhìn báo chí* [The struggle to defend the northern border (1979–1989): From the perspective of the press], ed. Đồng Xuân Thu and Lê Quang Long (Hanoi: NXB Thông Tin và Truyền Thông, 2019).

43 Hoàng Huy, ‘Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc (1979–1989) - Góc nhìn báo chí’ [The struggle to defend the northern border (1979–1989): From the perspective of the press], *Hội Nhà báo Việt Nam*, 19 June 2019, http://hoinhabaovietnam.vn/Cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-Bac-1979--1989---Goc-nhin-bao-chi_n51154.html (last accessed 24 July 2020).

44 Interview, Vũ Dương Ninh, 21 June 2019.

45 Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên* [Memoirs of the war in Vị Xuyên] (Hanoi: NXB Thông Tin và Truyền Thông, 2020).

46 Lương Kết, ‘Vị tướng tuổi 90; and Anonymous, ‘Ký ức Vị Xuyên và tâm nguyện của vị Tướng già’ [Memories of Vị Xuyên and the wishes of an old general], *Yên Bái Online*, 17 Feb. 2020, http://www.baoyenbai.com.vn/11/188327/Ky_uc_Vi_Xuyen_va_tam_nguyen_cua_vi_Tuong_gia.aspx (last accessed 17 Feb. 2020).

47 See, for example, Hoàng Dân, ‘Ký ức chiến tranh năm 1979: Quân Trung Quốc cướp phá khiến cả TX Cao Bằng chỉ còn 1 ngôi nhà cấp 4’ [Remembering the war of 1979: The Chinese soldiers looted and destroyed the whole town of Cao Bằng so that only one house was left], *Soha News*, 16 Feb. 2019, <http://soha.vn/ky-uc-chien-tranh-nam-1979-quan-trung-quoc-cuop-pha-khien-ca-tx-cao-bang-chi-con-1-ngoi-nha-cap-4-20190130080947781.htm> (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019); Thanh Hòa, ‘40 năm Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc: Ký ức của những người trong cuộc’ [40 years of struggle to defend the northern border: Memories of insiders], *T/c Công Sản*, 17 Feb. 2019, <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/An-ninh-quoc-phong/2019/54170/40-nam-Cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-Bac-Ky.aspx> (last accessed 20 Feb. 2019).

48 VTC1, ‘Đó là cuộc chiến tranh xâm lược’ [That is a war of invasion], *YouTube* video, 5 Feb. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGdTfeMrDeM> (last accessed 20 Aug. 2020); and VTV4, ‘Kỷ niệm 40 năm cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc’ (English subtitles) [The 40th anniversary of the Struggle to Defend the Northern Border], *YouTube* video, 9 Mar. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fG6TrWB0NQ> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020).

introducing a few pictures about the war between Vietnam and China just said ‘Defending the northern border in 1979’, thus avoiding both the terms ‘war’ (*chiến tranh*) and ‘struggle’ (*chiến đấu*). The exhibition displayed 11 pictures of battle scenes and a visit by a student delegation from Hanoi University to Quảng Ninh province in March 1979. In addition to that, some historical items such as weapons and uniforms were on show. The exhibition did not provide any further historical background, though, and the term ‘China’ (*Trung Quốc*) did not appear in it at all.

When I went there again a few years later in July 2019, the same exhibition hall had been completely renovated and upgraded on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the war—no doubt upon orders from higher authorities in Hanoi. At the entrance, there was a wall chart that explained the historical context of the event. The text—also entitled ‘Defending the northern border in 1979’—used the phrase ‘war to defend the northern border’ (*chiến tranh bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc*) and celebrated the heroism of the soldiers, militia and civilians who fought from 1979 to the end of the 1980s. It also mentioned that they suffered major losses, but it systematically avoided the taboo word—‘China’. The curators stuck to this principle throughout the exhibition. Whenever they had to mention whom the Vietnamese were fighting at the northern border in explanations of photos or other exhibits, they simply used the unspecific terms ‘địch’ and ‘thù’ (enemy). While most of the Vietnamese visitors to the exhibition would know who the enemy was between 1979 and 1989, some foreign visitors would certainly be at a loss, not knowing whom the Vietnamese were actually fighting in those years.

In addition to showing ten or so pictures and several other exhibits, the new exhibition highlights the feats of heroic martyrs such as Lê Đình Chinh. He was the first Vietnamese soldier to sacrifice his life at the northern border in a skirmish with Chinese provocateurs in Lạng Sơn on 25 August 1978. The fact that his fate is highlighted in the upgraded exhibition of Vietnamese military history in Hanoi exemplifies a shift in the way the Vietnamese state has officially commemorated the war against China. A few months after this first violent clash at the border, the Vietnamese propaganda apparatus had started to celebrate Lê Đình Chinh’s life and heroic death, and children were even encouraged to emulate his example. Since the normalisation of Vietnamese–Chinese relations at the beginning of the 1990s, however, it has no longer been appropriate to portray him as a folk hero, so he has fallen into oblivion. When Lê Đình Chinh was reburied in 2013, Vietnamese state media covered the story about the martyr, but did not mention exactly who had killed him.⁴⁹ The restrictions seem to have been dropped a few years later—at least in the media. An article from February 2019 covers the exact circumstances of Lê Đình Chinh’s death in detail.⁵⁰ The text on the wall chart in the

49 Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The struggle for power in Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 157.

50 Lê Đức Sảo, ‘Chiến sĩ công an Lê Đình Chinh—người đầu tiên bị sát hại trong cuộc chiến bảo vệ biên giới 1979’ [The soldier and policeman Lê Đình Chinh—the first to be killed in the struggle to defend the border in 1979], *Soha.vn*, 15 Feb. 2019, <http://soha.vn/chien-si-cong-an-le-dinh-chinh-nguoi-dau-tien-bi-sat-hai-trong-cuoc-chien-bao-ve-bien-gioi-1979-20190215104002281.htm> (last accessed 16 June 2020).

Military History Museum only speaks vaguely about ‘*quân xâm lược*’ (invading soldiers) and ‘*kẻ địch*’ (enemies), however.

In 2019, the Museum of People’s Public Security (Bảo tàng Công an Nhân dân) in Hanoi also displayed some pictures and various other exhibits such as weapons and pieces of equipment about the war. Again, the explanations only referred to the phrase ‘struggle to defend the northern border’, and strictly avoided using the word ‘China’. An article on the museum’s website highlights the fact that it keeps valuable pictures that illustrate the ‘just struggle’ (*chiến đấu chính nghĩa*) that took place in 1979.⁵¹

The Vietnamese National Museum of History in Hanoi, which is Vietnam’s most important museum of national history, did not organise any special exhibitions on the 40th anniversary of the war between Vietnam and China. When I went there in 2019, there was only one picture on the war on display, showing a bridge in Lạng Sơn destroyed by the ‘invaders during the northern border war’—the same picture that had been on show in 2015. In contrast, the Museum of the Border Guard in Hanoi (Bảo tàng Biên phòng) has a permanent exhibition entitled ‘The struggle to defend the northern border’ (*Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc*).⁵² The museum was closed for renovation in 2019, however, and so did not play any role in the commemoration of the anniversary.

In sum, the Department of Propaganda and Education obviously chose the Vietnamese Museum of Military History to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the war between Vietnam and China. The museum upgraded its own rather meagre exhibition on the war and emphasised the heroic struggle at the northern border, but—in line with guidelines from the Party—it managed to completely avoid using the term ‘China’, which is quite an accomplishment.

Commemoration of the ‘Second War of Invasion’

Battles in Vị Xuyên district, Hà Giang province (1984–89)

On 18 March 1979, Chinese troops withdrew from Vietnam. This was not the end of the war, however. In fact, the fighting continued for ten more years in the northern border provinces (until mid-1989), with the mountainous district of Vị Xuyên in Hà Tuyên province becoming the hotspot.⁵³

Although the Chinese forces retreated, the border region still witnessed some major flare-ups again afterwards, such as the shelling of Cao Bằng in July 1980, land-grabbing by Chinese troops in Lạng Sơn and Hà Tuyên provinces in May 1981 and even a ‘symbolic offensive’ again in April 1983. These military skirmishes, which were all minor, did not involve any regular People’s Liberation Army (PLA) units, but just

51 Anonymous, ‘Lực lượng CAND: Lưu lại thời khắc lịch sử chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc của Tổ quốc năm 1979’ [The People’s Public Security Forces: Keeping the historic moment of the Struggle to Defend the Northern Border of our fatherland], *Bảo tàng CAND*, 19 Feb. 2019, <http://baotangcand.vn/luc-luong-cand-luu-lai-thoi-khac-lich-su-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-bac-cua-to-quooc-nam-1979.htm> (last accessed 10 Apr. 2019).

52 See the museum’s website, <http://btlsqsvn.org.vn/Introduction/Army-Museum-System/bai-viet/bao-tang-bien-phong-299> (last accessed 21 July 2020).

53 The province of Hà Tuyên was formed in 1975. It was dissolved in 1991 and the former provinces of Hà Giang and Tuyên Quang were re-established.

border troops; China was clearly not prepared to engage in a major attack on Vietnamese territory on a scale like that of 1979.⁵⁴

In April 1984, the military conflict escalated again, however; the border district of Vị Xuyên suffered heavy shelling from Chinese artillery (the heaviest since 1979, in fact) and regular PLA soldiers subsequently invaded Vietnamese territory and occupied several hills in the area. This change in Chinese tactics was due to the fact that previous attacks on Vietnamese territory did not have any major impact on Hanoi's military operations in Cambodia, as Beijing had hoped.⁵⁵ The Chinese chose Vị Xuyên carefully.

This district in Hà Tuyên province is located in a remote area far from the strategic heartland of the Red River Delta and Hanoi, the capital, and thus did not pose a serious threat to Hanoi, unlike an attack on Lạng Sơn. Its remoteness also caused the Vietnamese side great logistic difficulties. In addition, according to Nguyễn Đức Huy, who became deputy-commander/chief of staff of Military Zone 2 and was thus one of the Vietnamese commanding officers on the Vị Xuyên battlefield, the isolated geographical location also allowed the Chinese to carry out land-grabbing operations on Vietnamese territory without attracting any major international interest.⁵⁶

The Chinese offensive in Vị Xuyên in 1984 was closely linked to the ongoing military activities of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in Cambodia: it was intended to tie down Vietnamese forces in the North while Hanoi was attacking the Khmer Rouge troops in Cambodia. The overall aim of the Chinese was to exert military and economic pressure on Vietnam to withdraw its forces from Cambodia.⁵⁷

The 'Laoshan Offensive', as it was called by the Chinese side, met with stiff resistance from the Vietnamese troops. After sending large numbers of reinforcements to the battlefield—the Vietnamese army in the area now amounted to a total of 40,000 men—the PAVN launched a major counteroffensive early on 12 July 1984, which is now known as 'MB84' in Vietnamese. This constituted 'the largest Vietnamese offensive operation since the beginning of the military confrontation between Vietnam and China in 1979'.⁵⁸ The Vietnamese assault on the hills occupied by PLA troops, which lasted for almost a day, did not achieve its aim, however; hundreds of Vietnamese soldiers were hit by Chinese shells as they charged forward in waves, while many others were killed or wounded by Chinese artillery equipped with night-vision devices and ground moving-target indicator radars in the staging area.⁵⁹

54 Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Security issues in Southeast Asia: The Third Indochina War', paper presented at the Conference on security and arms control in the North Pacific, Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPAS), Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, 12–14 Aug. 1987, pp. 8–17.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

56 Nguyễn Đức Huy, interview, Hanoi, 8 July 2019; Trương Quý Hải, interview, Hanoi, 1 July 2019. See also Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, p. 46.

57 Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's long war: The military conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), pp. 147–50; and Thayer, 'Security issues in Southeast Asia'. Xiaoming Zhang's assessment of the war in Vị Xuyên in the 1980s—'Vietnam was neither a victim nor a passive actor [on] the border' (*Deng Xiaoping's long war*, p. 161)—is quite a claim. Without taking sides, it is indisputable that the Chinese invaded Vietnamese territory in Hà Giang province.

58 Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's long war*, p. 155.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

By the end of the day, 600 soldiers from PAVN Division 356 alone had sacrificed their lives and 1,200 were wounded. All in all, about 1,000 Vietnamese soldiers died.⁶⁰ The MB84 campaign was one of the fiercest and bloodiest battles fought at the Vị Xuyên front. Because of the high number of casualties on 12 July 1984, the veterans of Division 356 remember the day as the ‘death anniversary of the battle’ (*ngày giỗ trận*).⁶¹

When Major General Hoàng Đan took over as commanding officer after the setback in July 1984, he only said one sentence to his predecessor, who had been in charge of the MB84 campaign that had cost so many lives: ‘If you keep on fighting like this, then the heroic Vietnamese mothers won’t be able to bring children into the world fast enough.’ He proposed that the Vietnamese troops should return to the kind of trench warfare they had already practised so successfully against the French in the famous battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954.⁶² This warfare offered Vietnamese soldiers better protection from Chinese artillery shells than the risky tactic of attacking the fortified Chinese positions in waves. In addition, after spring 1986 the PAVN itself increasingly relied on heavy artillery bombardment, making use of a Soviet multiple rocket launcher system.⁶³

Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers were now fighting in close proximity in the trenches—sometimes as little as 10 metres away from each other. Due to a change in tactics in May 1985, the Vietnamese troops managed to reoccupy Peak A6B, which was a turning point of the war in Vị Xuyên because the Vietnamese side had proven that it could hold its position against fierce Chinese counterattacks.⁶⁴ The PLA suffered heavy casualties in further clashes in September 1985 and from then on focused on holding its positions and making small-scale attacks.⁶⁵

The Chinese launched a broad attack for the last time in January 1987, but the PAVN had taken pre-emptive measures beforehand and managed to repel the assault. After that, the intensity of the military clashes between Chinese and Vietnamese troops decreased.⁶⁶ According to Xiaoming Zhang, the Chinese army increasingly saw the battlefield of Vị Xuyên as a testing ground for the PLA troops to gain combat experience. Chinese troops were therefore rotated;⁶⁷ between 1984 and 1989, a total of

60 Tô Lan Hương, ‘Cái đấm tay đầu đón của tướng Hoàng Đan’ [The painful fist-bump of General Hoàng Đan], *Soha News*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://soha.vn/chien-tranh-bien-gioi-viet-trungcai-dam-tay-dau-don-cua-tuong-hoang-dan-lich-su-la-gi-ma-lam-linh-toi-kho-the-20190214205427515.htm> (last accessed 7 Jan. 2020). Xiaoming Zhang refers to a much higher number of Vietnamese casualties: 3,000 (*ibid.*, p. 156). The lower number of Vietnamese casualties was given by Nguyễn Đình Tác in an interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019.

61 Tô Lan Hương, ‘Cái đấm tay đầu đón’.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s long war*, pp. 159, 162.

64 Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, pp. 70–73.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–87; Ban Thời sự, ‘Diễn biến 10 năm cuộc chiến biên giới phía Bắc’ [The border war in the north], *VnExpress*, <https://vnexpress.net/dien-bien-10-nam-cuoc-chien-bien-gioi-phia-bac-3881788.html> (last accessed 3 Aug. 2019); and Mai Thanh Hải, ‘35 năm cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ Vị Xuyên (Hà Giang): Nằm lại núi đồi Vị Xuyên’ [35 years of struggle to defend Vị Xuyên (Hà Giang)], *Thanh Niên*, 12 July 2019, <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/35-nam-cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-vi-xuyen-ha-giang-nam-lai-nui-doi-vi-xuyen-1102255.html> (last accessed 12 July 2019).

67 Interview, Nguyễn Đình Tác, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019. See also Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s long war*, p. 157.

180,000 Chinese troops fought on the battlefield of Vị Xuyên. The last Chinese soldiers left it in October 1989.

According to Major General Nguyễn Huy Đức, who had been an officer during the First and Second Indochina wars, the ‘Second war of invasion’, as he called the clashes in Vị Xuyên, was an intense conflict whose scale even surpassed the bloody battle of Quảng Trị (June–September 1972) in which he had participated. While about 100 PAVN soldiers were killed per day in Quảng Trị, ten times that number lost their lives in Vị Xuyên on 12 July 1984 alone. The PAVN had to commit nine divisions in Vị Xuyên—more than in Quảng Trị—and suffered many more casualties on 12 July 1984 than in 1972.⁶⁸ The fighting was more intense as well because it took place on a very small battlefield, in stark contrast to the Chinese invasion of several border provinces in 1979. The PLA artillery fired between 30,000 and 50,000 shells on a daily basis and a total of two million shells between 1984 and 1989.⁶⁹ The war in Vị Xuyên was also as fierce as the infamous battle of Quảng Trị in terms of artillery bombardment, the only exception being that the US forces also made massive use of naval artillery at the latter.⁷⁰

The artillery bombardment in Hà Giang in the 1980s was so intense that some of the limestone mountains on the battlefield were levelled out—about three metres of the top of Peak 685 were simply blasted away—and became completely white as a result. The Vietnamese soldiers therefore called the area the ‘lime-kiln of the century’ (*lò vôi thế kỷ*).⁷¹ And because of the intense Chinese shelling and the high number of casualties that caused, the Vietnamese soldiers called the fiercely contested Peak 772 a ‘meat-grinder’ (*cối xay thịt*) and ‘Hamburger Hill’ (*đồi thịt băm*).⁷²

According to Vietnamese sources, 4,000 or 5,000 PAVN soldiers were killed and 9,000 wounded on the Vị Xuyên battlefield—far fewer than the Chinese claimed; official Chinese sources declared that Vietnam suffered 33,500 casualties and the Chinese themselves 4,100, about half of which were deaths.⁷³ Contemporary observers called the military clashes in Vị Xuyên district a ‘phony war’ as if only minor military

68 C&V Channels, ‘Xúc động—ký ức mặt trận Vị Xuyên qua lời kể cựu chiến binh’ [Moved—Memories about the Vị Xuyên battlefield through the accounts of veterans], *YouTube* video, 28 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1KGBgAKyPI> (last accessed 17 July 2020); and VTC1, ‘Quyết giữ biên cương’ [Determined to hold the border], *YouTube* video, 9 Mar. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0WCBmOPbKU> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020).

69 VTC1, ‘Máu đỏ bi hùng cao điểm Vị Xuyên’ [Tragic red blood at the high peak of the Vị Xuyên (battle)], *VTC1 Interview*, 13 Feb. 2019, <https://vtc.vn/truyen-hinh/mau-do-bi-hung-cao-diem-vi-xuyen-ar457291.html> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020).

70 Interview, Nguyễn Đức Huy, Hanoi, 8 July 2019; and Vĩnh Huy, ‘Tướng Nguyễn Đức Huy và những lời nhắn nhủ: Đừng quên ngày 17/2/1979’ [General Nguyễn Đức Huy and his advice: Don’t forget 17 Feb. 1979!], *Cựu chiến binh Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*, 20 Feb. 2017, http://cuuchienbinhthphcm.vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3030:

tng-nguyen-c-huy-va-nhng-li-nhn-nh-ng-quen-ngay-1721979&catid=77:ky-niem-ve-chien-tran&Itemid=187 (last accessed 5 Aug. 2020).

71 Interview, Nguyễn Đức Huy, Hanoi, 8 July 2019.

72 Hải Minh, ‘Cuộc chiến khốc liệt ở Vị Xuyên: Từ chiến bảo vệ biên giới’ [The fierce struggle in Vị Xuyên: Dying during the struggle to defend the border], *VTC News*, 16 Feb. 2019, <https://vtc.vn/phong-su-kham-pha/nhung-chuyen-khoc-liet-o-vi-xuyen-cuoc-tu-chien-bao-ve-bien-gioi-ar457661.html> (last accessed 19 May 2020).

73 Hoàng Cư, ‘40 năm chiến tranh biên giới phía Bắc: Nỗi đau dai dẳng ở mặt trận Vị Xuyên’ [40 years of war at the northern border: The persistent sorrow at the Vị Xuyên front], *eMagazine Soha.vn*, 14 Feb.

skirmishes had taken place, presumably due to the lack of sources of information at that time.⁷⁴

For the Vietnamese soldiers who fought under very harsh conditions in that remote place, food and drinking water were extremely difficult to obtain. This was often only possible at night because of the Chinese artillery fire during the day. The Vietnamese soldiers mostly subsisted on a diet of dried fish and water. The memory of fierce battles with the Chinese troops, shelling by Chinese artillery and the death of so many of their comrades, especially on 12 July 1984, still haunt Vietnamese veterans to this day.⁷⁵

Digging up the past: Commemorating the war in Vị Xuyên

It seems the Chinese invasion in 1979 had almost been forgotten by the beginning of the 2010s. The war that broke out in Vị Xuyên in 1984 was more recent, but even that fell into oblivion as time passed because the Vietnamese authorities hushed it up. Nowadays, many veterans complain that younger Vietnamese and even quite a few high-level Party cadres and PAVN officers have little or no idea of the military clashes that took place in Hà Giang between 1984 and 1989 and still think that the war against China ended in March 1979. Many people also erroneously think that the battles in Vị Xuyên occurred during the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February/March 1979; others do not even know where Vị Xuyên is. Many veterans felt and still feel frustrated and upset (*bức xúc*) that the VCP and the Vietnamese state has not adequately commemorated all those who sacrificed their lives or were wounded in that remote place at the border when defending Vietnamese territory against Chinese assaults in the 1980s.⁷⁶

Like the commemoration of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, which was played down when Sino-Vietnamese relations normalised in 1990, but has been revived in recent years, interest in the war against China in the 1980s has gradually increased and commemorative activities have been stepped up, mainly on the initiative of the veterans themselves, not of the VCP or the Vietnamese state.

Small groups of veterans of the war in Vị Xuyên started to return to the old battlefield to commemorate their fallen comrades in the first decade of the 21st century. As of 2010, a number of veterans from Hà Giang itself and neighbouring provinces such as Yên Bái started to meet in Vị Xuyên on 12 July to commemorate those comrades who had died that day in 1984 during the MB84 campaign.⁷⁷ In the

2019, <http://soha.vn/40-nam-chien-tranh-bien-gioi-phia-bac-noi-dau-dai-dang-o-mat-tran-vi-xuyen-20190213140733203.htm> (last accessed 11 Apr. 2019).

74 Thayer, 'Security issues in Southeast Asia', p. 22.

75 Hoàng Thế Cường, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019; Nguyễn Đình Tác, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019; Trương Quý Hải, interview, Hanoi, 1 July 2019.

76 Nguyễn Đức Huy, interview, Hanoi, 8 July 2019. See also *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 'Tưởng niệm các liệt sĩ Vị Xuyên' [Commemorating the heroes of Vị Xuyên], YouTube video, 12 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzjC4K-RRMQ> (last accessed 21 Dec. 2020); VTC1, Quyết giữ biên cương; VTC1, 'Cuộc chiến chống Trung Quốc xâm lược năm 1979: Day dứt Vị Xuyên' [The war against the Chinese invaders in 1979: Feelings of guilt about Vị Xuyên], VTC Documentary, 14 Feb. 2019, <https://vtc.vn/truyen-hinh/cuoc-chien-chong-trung-quoc-xam-luoc-nam-1979-day-dut-vi-xuyen-ar457545.html> (last accessed 21 Sept. 2020); and VTC1, 'Máu đỏ bi hùng.

77 Many veterans of the battle of Vị Xuyên decided to stay in Hà Giang province after the war and married local women. Trương Quý Hải, interview, Hanoi, 1 July 2019. See also Anonymous, 'Vietnam remembers martyrs'.

following years, more and more veterans from all over the country flocked to the old battleground in July to commemorate the anniversary of the battlefield deaths, which was also covered by Vietnamese media for the first time.⁷⁸ State-run Vietnamese newspapers also started to introduce their readers to the war in Vị Xuyên although at this time the articles still presented a toned-down version of events.⁷⁹

The veterans who revisited the battlefield near the Chinese border became increasingly dissatisfied with the circumstances under which they had to perform rituals such as burning incense and making offerings for their fallen comrades; there was no proper memorial site on the battlefield. Instead of that, veterans had to commemorate their fallen comrades ‘in secret, like a thief, in front of a small incense burner like one for a victim of a traffic accident’, as one veteran complained in retrospect.⁸⁰ Other veterans remembered that they simply did not know where to perform rituals in commemoration of their fallen comrades.⁸¹ Furthermore, they were deeply saddened by the fact that the remains of many of their fellow soldiers were still scattered around the old battleground or buried, but not identified, so their tombstones did not have their names on them. These feelings were especially intense when the survivors accompanied family members of fallen comrades to the battlefield.⁸²

The emotional bond among the veterans of the war in Vị Xuyên and with their fallen comrades is still very strong today, 35 years later. The surviving soldiers of Division 356 and other units who fought in Hà Giang in the 1980s feel a special moral obligation towards their fallen comrades. This is why many veterans spend much of their free time and their financial resources on returning to Vị Xuyên on a regular basis and trying to find their fallen comrades themselves—on their own initiative.

This special bond is expressed in the song *Về đây đồng đội ơi* (‘Come back here, dear comrades!’), which is sung by the veterans of Vị Xuyên whenever they visit the old battleground and remember their comrades.⁸³ The song also expresses the

78 Email, Nguyễn Đình Tác, 20 July 2020. See also Đon Thương, ‘Chiến tranh biên giới 1979: Những hoài niệm không quên’ [The border war of 1979: Unforgettable memories], *VTC*, 16 Feb. 2014, <http://vt.vn/chien-tranh-bien-gioi-1979-nhung-hoai-niem-khong-quen.394.475843.htm> (last accessed 7 Mar. 2015); and Hà Hương, ‘Tuởng niệm các liệt sĩ Vị Xuyên’ [Commemorating the martyrs of Vị Xuyên], *Tuổi Trẻ*, 12 July 2015, <https://tuoitre.vn/tuong-niem-cac-liet-si-vi-xuyen-776364.htm> (last accessed 16 July 2015).

79 This was registered by BBC Vietnamese (BBC Vietnamese, ‘Báo Việt Nam viết về mặt trận Vị Xuyên’ [Vietnamese newspapers write about the battle of Vị Xuyên], *BBC Vietnamese*, 13 July 2015, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2015/07/150713_laoshan_anniversary (last accessed 29 Apr. 2019). See Hoàng Thùy, ‘Hàng nghìn chiến sĩ thương vong ngày cao điểm trận chiến Vị Xuyên’ [Thousands of soldiers died during the peak days of the battle of Vị Xuyên], *VnExpress*, 25 July 2014, <https://vnexpress.net/thoi-su/hang-nghin-chien-si-thuong-vong-ngay-cao-diem-tran-chien-vi-xuyen-3022565.html> (last accessed 19 Sept. 2019); and Thanh Thảo, ‘Khúc tưởng niệm Vị Xuyên’ [Memories about Vị Xuyên], *Thanh Niên*, 27 Feb. 2012, <http://www.thanhnien.com.vn/chao-buoi-sang/khuc-tuong-niem-vi-xuyen-60609.html> (last accessed 20 Apr. 2015).

80 Hoàng Cương, ‘Công trình tri ân các anh hùng liệt sĩ Mặt trận Vị Xuyên’ [Project as a tribute to the heroic martyrs of the Vị Xuyên battlefield], 9 July 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=643302672811517&id=100013953696303 (last accessed 20 Mar. 2020).

81 Trương Quý Hải, interview, Hanoi, 1 July 2019.

82 Hoàng Thế Cương, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019.

83 The song was written by Trương Quý Hải; Hoàng Thế Cương, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019. See also Hiền Hương and Thu Hiền, ‘Cuộc chiến 1979 và bức thư gửi mẹ kính yêu nhờ máu’

torment they feel (*day dứt*), as they know that the remains of around 2,000 of their comrades are still scattered across the battlefield.

The local war cemetery that was built in 1991 and upgraded in 2004 does not offer a proper alternative for commemorating the fallen soldiers as it is located in the district town of Vị Xuyên about 20 km south of Hà Giang City and 40 km from the old battlefield near Thanh Thủy commune.⁸⁴ The lack of a proper memorial site to perform commemorative rituals for their fallen comrades was not the only thing the veterans worried about, however. When Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy and other commanding officers involved in the battles in Hà Giang returned to the former battlefield and Vị Xuyên War Cemetery for the first time in 2013, they were ‘particularly shocked’ (*đặc biệt bất ngờ*) and upset when they realised the following: only 1,700 fallen soldiers had been buried and about half of those men still had not been identified yet,⁸⁵ and after 30 years, the remains of just 20 or 30 fallen soldiers had been discovered on the battlefield. This was because the military headquarters of Hà Giang province had not assigned the task of finding soldiers’ remains to a specific unit of the army, but had delegated it to a non-military company that had mainly cleared landmines and unexploded shells there.⁸⁶

As a result of this negligence and lack of interest, the remains of approximately 2,000 soldiers who fell at Vị Xuyên are still unaccounted for.⁸⁷ Since the Vietnamese state had not paid due attention to finding and burying the fallen soldiers, many of their surviving comrades felt deeply obliged to fill the gap and consequently set about the task of finding fallen comrades themselves using their own limited resources.⁸⁸ Finding the remains of their comrades and building a site where they could be commemorated in an adequate way were two closely related issues, of course.

The veterans first made progress in building a proper memorial site: several veterans of Division 356 from Hà Giang and Yên Bái decided to make a small incense burner in 2010 to provide a more adequate environment for the commemoration of their fallen comrades. They chose Peak 468 (*điểm cao 468*) in the middle of the old battlefield near the commune of Thanh Thủy as the location for a small memorial site. It took two more years to gather enough donations to start implementing the plan. There was no paved road there at that time, so all the construction material had to be carried uphill to Peak 468.⁸⁹ The incense burner was finally inaugurated

[The struggle of 1979 and the bloodstained letter sent to my beloved mother], *Zing News*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://zingnews.vn/cuoc-chien-1979-va-buc-thu-gui-me-kinh-yeu-nhoe-mau-post916478.html>.

84 Trường Phong and Xuân Ân, ‘Thăm nghĩa trang Vị Xuyên đầu xuân 2019’ [Visit to the Vị Xuyên cemetery at the beginning of spring 2019], *Tiền Phong*, 5 Jan. 2019, <https://www.tienphong.vn/hanh-trang-nguoi-linh/tham-nghia-trang-vi-xuyen-dau-xuan-2019-1363737.tpo> (last accessed 20 Mar. 2019).

85 According to an article from 2019, 1,797 soldiers were buried in the Vị Xuyên war cemetery: 1,500 of them had participated in the war against China (1979–89); 330 of the remains that were found were still unidentified. Mai Thanh Hải, ‘35 năm cuộc chiến đấu’.

86 Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, pp. 123–4.

87 Mai Thanh Hải, ‘35 năm cuộc chiến đấu’.

88 Hiền Hương and Thu Hiền, ‘Cuộc chiến 1979’.

89 Kiên Trung, ‘Mặt trận Vị Xuyên: “Hãy về đồng đội ơi! Còn nằm khe đá hay thung sâu”’ [The battlefront of Vị Xuyên: Come back, fellow soldiers! Still lying in rock crevices or deep valleys], *Vietnam.net*, 26 July 2016, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/mat-tran-vi-xuyen-hay-ve-dong-doi-oi-317015.html> (last accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

in November 2013. The commemoration site was entirely financed by donations made by war veterans; the state was not involved in any way.⁹⁰

According to one of the initiators at the time, the veterans did not submit a proposal (*đề xuất*) to the authorities because nobody there would have dared to agree and sign it. The veterans carried out the project themselves instead, in secret (*làm chui*). Fortunately for them, the commune turned a blind eye to what was going on at Peak 468.⁹¹

The site was further enlarged for the 30th anniversary of the MB84 campaign in 2014, and what was initially a modest place to burn incense and make offerings was gradually transformed into a more fitting war memorial (*đài tưởng niệm*). As luck would have it, Trương Tấn Sang, then president of Vietnam, had heard about the activities of the veterans of the battle of Vị Xuyên and invited representatives of Division 356 to his office for a talk. During the discussion, the veterans made four suggestions to the VCP and state authorities in charge:

1. Take measures to clear any remaining mines on the old battlefield of Vị Xuyên so that the local people can farm the land safely;
2. Find and collect the remains of fallen soldiers;
3. Help veterans who have lost their papers to assert any financial claims to which they are entitled; and
4. Allow a memorial site to be built on the battlefield for the fallen soldiers.

President Trương Tấn Sang agreed to these points and proposed that the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and the Province of Hà Giang should comply with the veterans' requests.⁹² As a result, in 2015 the province of Hà Giang agreed that the veterans should go ahead with the project of enlarging and upgrading the memorial site and use 'socialised funding' (*nguồn vốn xã hội hóa*) for the project, which simply meant 'private funding' or donations. When the first donations arrived, the veterans used the money to pave the road on the site, which made the construction of the memorial on Peak 468 much easier.

The mid-2010s clearly marked a watershed in the commemoration of the war in Vị Xuyên. Popular interest in Vietnam's wars with China in the past, such as the invasion of February/March 1979 and the fierce battles between 1984 and 1989, has intensified in view of Beijing's increasingly aggressive attempts to enforce its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The turning point in the public commemoration of these events was the 'oil-rig crisis' in mid-2014, which refers to tensions between Vietnam and China after Beijing sent an oil rig to the waters near the Paracel Islands, which Hanoi also lays claim to. This incident caused widespread anti-Chinese protests and demonstrations in Vietnam.

Consequently, the repressed memory of past military clashes with Vietnam's northern neighbour resurfaced and veterans of the Vị Xuyên battlefield started to push

90 See *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 'Tưởng niệm các liệt sĩ Vị Xuyên'. The donors' names are engraved on a plate in front of the incense burner. See also Hoàng Phương, 'Ước nguyện của những cựu binh mặt trận Vị Xuyên' [The wishes of the veterans of the battle of Vị Xuyên], *VnExpress*, 12 July 2015, <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/uoc-nguyen-cua-nhung-cuu-binh-mat-tran-vi-xuyen-3247214.html> (last accessed 16 July 2015).

91 Hoàng Thế Cương, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019.

92 *Ibid.*

their agenda of achieving a more pronounced commemoration of the war they had fought 30 years earlier. Veterans such as Nguyễn Đức Huy emphasise this strong connection between the development of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the mid-2010s and the growing interest in the forgotten military clashes between the two countries.⁹³ Thus, on 7 May 2016, around 20 mostly high-ranking officers involved in the battles in Hà Giang in the 1980s established the ‘Nationwide Liaison Committee of the Veterans of the Battle of Vị Xuyên-Hà Tuyên’ (Ban Liên Lạc Cựu Chiến Binh Toàn Quốc Mặt Trận Vị Xuyên-Hà Tuyên). This organisation was set up in Hanoi with official permission from the Vietnamese minister of defence, Ngô Xuân Lịch.⁹⁴

The decision to establish such a body was sparked by the general disinterest in the war in Hà Giang, as Nguyễn Đức Huy explains in his memoirs. According to him, for about a quarter of a century the war to defend the border in Vị Xuyên was rarely mentioned because of ‘a foreign-policy issue’ (*vì một lý do đối ngoại*); official Vietnamese histories and school textbooks were not even allowed to mention the event, and a national ceremony to pay tribute to the ‘heroic martyrs’ of the Vị Xuyên battlefield was never organised.

Since the war had almost been forgotten, former officers such as Nguyễn Đức Huy and other veterans understood that it was necessary to establish an organisation that could serve the veterans as an official mouthpiece, enabling them to ‘have a voice’ (*có tiếng nói*) and help to promote their demands of the Party and the state, such as stepping up the task of finding and burying the remains of fallen soldiers.⁹⁵

Approximately 600 delegates representing the veterans of the Vị Xuyên battlefield held the first meeting of the Liaison Committee in Hanoi on 14 July 2016.⁹⁶ Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy acted as chairman of the Committee. In his inaugural address, he made various recommendations to the VCP and the Vietnamese state in the hope that they would do the following:

1. Propagate the ‘victory of the war for the defence of the border in Vị Xuyên-Hà Tuyên’.
2. Clear landmines and other unexploded ordnance so that the area can be used safely for agricultural production.
3. Find the remains of fallen soldiers still lying on the battlefield and identify the remains of unknown martyrs in the Vị Xuyên War Cemetery.

93 Nguyễn Đức Huy, interview, Hanoi, 8 July 2019. See also Trung Hiếu, ‘Tham mưu trưởng mặt trận Vị Xuyên: Nhiều hài cốt đồng đội đang nằm lại ở khe núi, hốc đá’ [Chief of Staff of the Vị Xuyên battlefield: Many remains of comrades are still lying in ravines and mountain folds], *Thanh Niên*, 26 July 2017, <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/tu-lenh-chien-truong-vi-xuyen-nhieu-hai-cot-dong-doi-dang-nam-lai-o-khe-nui-hoc-da-859333.html> (last accessed 5 Aug. 2020); VTC1, ‘Quyết giữ biên cương’; and VTC1, ‘Máu đỏ bi hùng’.

94 Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, pp. 126–7. The chapter of the Liaison Committee in Hanoi had around 700 members in 2019. See Thu Thủy, ‘Tháng Bảy, trở lại Vị Xuyên ...’ [July, returning to Vị Xuyên ...], *Tiền Phong*, 14 July 2019, <https://www.tienphong.vn/hanh-trang-nguoi-linh/thang-bay-tro-lai-vi-xuyen-1440126.tpo> (last accessed 19 May 2020).

95 Nguyễn Đức Huy, interview, Hanoi, 8 July 2019. See also Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, p. 126; and VTC1, ‘Cuộc chiến chống Trung Quốc’.

96 Nguyễn Đức Huy, *Hồi ức chiến tranh Vị Xuyên*, pp. 124–8; Hoàng Phương, ‘Hon 4.000 chiến sĩ hy sinh bảo vệ biên giới Vị Xuyên’ [More than 4,000 sacrificed their lives defending the border at Vị Xuyên], *VnExpress*, 14 July 2016, <https://vnexpress.net/40-nam-cuoc-chien-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-bac/hon-4-000-chien-si-hy-sinh-bao-ve-bien-gioi-vi-xuyen-3436441.html> (last accessed 14 June 2019).

4. Get those units that had engaged in the battle of Vị Xuyên to write a history of the war.
5. Get museums and memorial sites to display exhibits about the war in order to commemorate the sacrifices of those who fought in it.
6. Transform the war cemetery of Vị Xuyên into a national war cemetery worthy of the large number of soldiers killed on the battlefield there.
7. Organise an academic conference on the war.⁹⁷

In June 2016, the memorial site known as *Đài hương 468* ('House of Offerings 468') or *Đài tưởng niệm 468* ('Memorial Site 468') was inaugurated, just in time for the 'death anniversary' of the MB84 campaign (fig. 1). The memorial site not only has a temple and a number of incense burners for praying, but also a stone carving 'in commemoration of the heroic martyrs of Division 356 at the Vị Xuyên front'. At the top of the stone carving there is a further inscription that says 'When [you are] alive, hang on to the stones. When [you are] dead, [you will] become a stone [and be] immortal'.⁹⁸ This is the unofficial 'oath of the soldiers of Vị Xuyên'; a private called Nguyễn Việt Ninh had carved these words on the butt of his rifle before he was killed.⁹⁹

The inauguration ceremony sparked off a whole series of newspaper articles, not only on the event itself, but on the almost forgotten war in Vị Xuyên.¹⁰⁰ State media also started to report about the pressing issue of the great number of unaccounted fallen soldiers.¹⁰¹ All this happened at the same time as the upsurge in coverage of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

The staging of the inauguration ceremony did not mean that the problems had all been solved, though. On the contrary, in August 2016 the Construction Department in Hà Giang announced it would visit the memorial site to check whether the architectural plan that had been agreed on had actually been implemented properly. During the on-site visit, the provincial cadres who were also attending it claimed this was not the case because the main building with the incense burner 'interfered with the beauty of the area' (*phá vỡ mỹ quan khu*). In the end, the veterans gave

97 Ban Liên Lạc Cựu Chiến Binh Toàn Quốc Mặt Trận Vị Xuyên-Hà Tuyên, *Chiến thắng Vị Xuyên*, p. 15.

98 'Sống bám đá, chết hóa đá, bất tử.'

99 Trương Quý Hải, interview, Hanoi, 1 July 2019. The singer and Vị Xuyên veteran Trương Quý Hải composed a song in commemoration of Nguyễn Việt Ninh entitled 'Lũy đá bất tử' (Immortal Wall of Stones). See Tạ Hà Phú, 'Nhạc sĩ Trương Quý Hải hát 'Lũy đá bất tử' trước đồng đội Vị Xuyên' [Musician Trương Quý Hải sings 'The wall of stones is immortal' in front of the Vị Xuyên comrades], *Chúng Ta*, 15 Mar. 2019, <https://chungta.vn/nguoi-ftp/nhac-si-truong-quy-hai-hat-luy-da-bat-tu-truoc-doi-vi-xuyen-1124170.html> (last accessed 5 May 2020).

100 Anonymous, 'Vị Xuyên những ngày tháng 7' [Vị Xuyên in the days of July], *Infonet*, 25 July 2016, <https://infonet.vn/vi-xuyen-nhung-ngay-thang-7-no-di-la-di-mat-den-gio-cha-thay-ve-post204260.info> (last accessed 2 Aug. 2019); Thái Bình, 'Khánh thành nhà tưởng niệm anh hùng liệt sĩ mặt trận Vị Xuyên' [Inaugurating the memorial house for the heroic martyrs of the battle of Vị Xuyên], *Vietnam.net*, 25 June 2016, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/chinh-tri/khanh-thanh-nha-tuong-niem-cac-anh-hung-liet-sy-chien-tranh-bien-gioi-312225.html> (last accessed 8 July 2019); Kiên Trung, 'Mặt trận Vị Xuyên'; Văn Hương, 'Đài hương trên núi Nậm Ngật' [The house of offerings on Mount Nậm Ngật], *Quân đội Nhân dân*, 15 July 2016, <https://sknc.qdnd.vn/dia-chi-do/dai-huong-tren-nui-nam-ngat-500216>. (last accessed 21 Nov. 2020).

101 VTC1, 'Gian nan hành trình'.



Figure 1. Memorial Site 468 in Thanh Thủy, Vị Xuyên, Hà Giang province, July 2019 (© Martin Grossheim)

in to their arguments and the whole building was subsequently pulled down, leaving only the four main pillars behind.¹⁰² The provincial authorities obviously wanted to put obstructions in the veterans' way, although it is not clear why. Thus, the veterans had to start the construction project again. In July 2018, the Liaison Committee of the Vị Xuyên veterans handed over the management of Memorial Site 468 to the Department of Work, War Invalids and Social Affairs of Hà Giang province.¹⁰³

The commemoration of the previously forgotten war in Vị Xuyên continued to expand. During the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the war against China in February 2019, the battles of the 1980s in Hà Giang saw unprecedented media coverage in Vietnam: a whole series of articles, documentaries about the war and interviews with veterans appeared in the Vietnamese state media.¹⁰⁴ Several articles and films focused on the pressing issue of locating the remains of fallen soldiers on the old

102 Interview, anonymous informant, July 2019.

103 Phan Mạnh, 'Lễ bàn giao Nhà tưởng niệm Liệt sỹ Mặt trận Vị Xuyên' [Ceremony to hand over the Memorial House for the Martyrs of the Vị Xuyên battlefield], *Báo Hà Giang*, 27 July 2018, <http://hagiangtv.vn/tin-tuc-n13332/le-ban-giao-nha-tuong-niem-liet-sy-mat-tran-vi-xuyen.html> (last accessed 5 July 2019).

104 See, for example, Hiền Hương and Thu Hiền, 'Cuộc chiến 1979'; VTV, 'Cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới phía Bắc: Vị Xuyên hồi sinh' [The struggle to defend the northern border: Vị Xuyên revived], *VTV News*, 17 Feb. 2019, <https://vtc.vn/thoi-su/cuoc-chien-dau-bao-ve-bien-gioi-phia-bac-vi-xuyen-hoi-sinh-ar458007.html> (last accessed 19 May 2020); and Hoàng Cư, '40 năm chiến tranh biên giới phía Bắc'.

battlefield of Vị Xuyên.¹⁰⁵ In a long interview, the chairman of the Liaison Committee, Nguyễn Đức Huy, said he welcomed the fact that the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence had provided Military Zone 2 with 200 billion Đồng to finally set up a special group in charge of finding the remains of fallen soldiers in Hà Giang.¹⁰⁶ This is exactly what the Liaison Committee of the Vị Xuyên veterans had suggested in 2018. Some of the soldiers' remains had already been located by the time the interview was shown. In a later documentary, the former commander nevertheless reminded his interviewer that no large-scale or systematic attempt had been made to find the remains of the fallen martyrs in the 34 years since the bloodiest battle was fought in Vị Xuyên.¹⁰⁷ Other veterans are even more outspoken today, expressing their astonishment about why it took the Vietnamese state 30 years to start looking for the remains of its fallen soldiers at Vị Xuyên when it had tackled the same kind of task as soon as the First and Second Indochina Wars ended, especially in view of the fact that finding the remains of fallen soldiers gets harder and harder from day to day.¹⁰⁸

In contrast to the veterans' criticism, a documentary made by a local TV station in Hà Giang in 2019 claimed that the provincial authorities had focused on implementing tasks such as finding the remains of fallen soldiers and were continuing to do so.¹⁰⁹ This is simply not true, as Hà Giang province had done nothing in this respect until 2018. The self-congratulatory tendency of the TV documentary is in line with the false claim that the VCP and the Vietnamese state had always commemorated the war against China and always taken care of the veterans and fallen soldiers.¹¹⁰

In July 2019, the veterans of Vị Xuyên celebrated the 35th 'death anniversary' of the MB84 campaign. The same year witnessed celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the war against China in 1979 and the bloodiest battle against Chinese troops in Hà Giang in 1985. On 11 July 2019, thousands upon thousands of veterans came to Hà Giang from provinces all over Vietnam. Many of them were previously part of Division 356, which had suffered the highest casualties back in July 1984, but representatives of all the military units that had participated in the battles from 1984 to 1989 set out for the old battlefield near the Chinese border.

The ceremonies on the 35th anniversary of the MB84 campaign consisted of two parts. First of all, the veterans met at Memorial Site 468 on 11 July 2019 to

105 See for example, Hà Giang TV, 'Về đây đồng đội ơi—Mặt trận Vị Xuyên Hà Giang ngày 12_7_2019' [Come back my comrade—the Vị Xuyên Hà Giang battlefield on 12 July 2019], *YouTube* video, 12 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWHJxvuIqjY> (last accessed 8 Mar. 2020); and Lê Hiệp, 'Vẫn còn 4.000 hài cốt liệt sĩ dọc biên giới phía Bắc chưa thể tìm kiếm' [4,000 remains of martyrs along the northern border still have not been found], *Thanh Niên*, 16 Feb. 2019, <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/van-con-4000-hai-cot-liet-si-doc-bien-gioi-phia-bac-chua-the-tim-kiem-1052230.html> (last accessed 19 May 2020).

106 VTC1, 'Quyết giữ biên cương'. In 2019 this sum was equivalent to about US\$8.5 million.

107 VTC1, 'Quyết giữ biên cương'; and VTC1, 'Cuộc chiến chống Trung Quốc'.

108 Vũ Tân Long, 'Lời tri ân muộn màng' [Belated words of gratitude], 30 Dec. 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/254028305333217/permalink/629609677775076/> (last accessed 20 Feb. 2020); and VTC1, 'Gian nan hành trình'.

109 Hà Giang TV, 'Về đây đồng đội ơi'.

110 Nguyễn Đức Độ, 'Cảnh giác với những luận điệu sai trái'.

commemorate their fallen comrades (fig. 2).¹¹¹ Veterans from different military units and different provinces who had come to Vị Xuyên together gathered in front of the incense burners to make offerings. A former officer gave a short speech in commemoration of the fallen men. After the ceremony, some of the groups visited the border gate of Thanh Thủy and then returned to Hà Giang to have dinner. On that day, then, the veterans performed their commemorative rituals alone at the memorial site financed solely by private donations; no official representatives of the VCP or Hà Giang province were present.

Interestingly, since 2018, the term ‘death anniversary’ has been criticised by some veterans as being too ‘compassionate’ (*thuong*), presumably because it paints a bleak picture of the war instead of emphasising the heroic feats and sacrifices of the Vietnamese soldiers. One suggestion was to call 12 July the ‘Opening of the MB84 campaign’ to make it sound more positive (*Ngày mở đầu Chiến dịch MB84*).¹¹² However, the old term ‘death anniversary’ still prevails.¹¹³

Secondly, on 12 July 2019, another ceremony took place at Vị Xuyên’s war cemetery to commemorate the soldiers who fell in the war against China from 1984 to 1989. Former president Trương Tấn Sang visited the war cemetery the day before the event together with the chairman of the VCP Committee of Hà Giang province in order to make offerings and burn incense, but he also attended the ceremony at the war cemetery the next day together with the Vị Xuyên veterans.¹¹⁴

The fact that the country’s former president had made the long trip to Hà Giang to attend the ceremony was welcomed by the veterans, many of whom still remembered that it had been Trương Tấn Sang who had actively supported their cause in 2014. However, the fact remains that he attended the ceremonies as the former president of Vietnam and not as the acting one; no high-level representative of the VCP or the Vietnamese state went to Hà Giang to take part in the ceremony.¹¹⁵

Phạm Minh Chính, head of the [Central Organising Commission](#) of the VCP, did visit Memorial Site 468 at the beginning of July 2019, but the coverage of his visit was rather restrained; it was not linked to the 35th death anniversary of the MB84 campaign, but to Veterans’ Day on 27 July when Vietnam commemorates its fallen

111 Gia Tường, ‘Vị Xuyên—35 năm máu và hoa. Kỳ 1: Tháng 7, ngày giỗ trận của Sư 356’ [Vị Xuyên—35 years of blood and flowers. Part 1: July, Death Anniversary of Division 356], *Dân Việt*, 12 July 2019, <https://danviet.vn/vi-xuyen-35-nam-mau-va-hoa-7777996003.htm> (last accessed 5 May 2020); and Thu Thủy, ‘Tháng Bảy, trở lại Vị Xuyên’. Regarding the coverage of ceremonies in July 2018, see VTC1, ‘Vị Xuyên những ngày tháng 7’ [Vị Xuyên during the days of July], *YouTube* video, 26 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csx6mA5593o> (last accessed 6 May 2020).

112 See Thu Thủy, ‘Tháng Bảy, trở lại Vị Xuyên’. Even Major General Nguyễn Đức Huy seems to be at odds with the term ‘death anniversary’; Nguyễn Đức Huy, interview, Hanoi, 8 July 2019.

113 One veteran uploaded a poem in defence of the term ‘death anniversary’ in a Facebook discussion group. See Phương Minh, ‘Ngày giỗ trận’ [Death anniversary], 14 July 2018, https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100016470344917&__tn__=%2CdlCH-R-R&eid=ARCAxHdHu_8el1yS0YWqzNF_V8YxiY2JGOoelP1tsEr3Qsb9KOODeY1ihTx3NZEadqFmDDWg28KELXPzV&hc_ref=ARRCCKc4kV-3MghPiCWCQoSsN5rXCRV2_m3zi33xQwBparMEN_J6l3Op-196azfeLcG (last accessed 20 Jan. 2020).

114 Mai Thanh Hải, ‘35 năm cuộc chiến đầu’; and Việt Tuấn, ‘Nguyên Chủ tịch nước Trương Tấn Sang dâng hương ở nghĩa trang Vị Xuyên’ [Former state president Trương Tấn Sang offers incense at Vị Xuyên Cemetery], *VnExpress*, 11 July 2019, <https://vnexpress.net/thoi-su/nguyen-chu-tich-nuoc-truong-tan-sang-dang-huong-o-nghia-trang-vi-xuyen-3951318.html> (last accessed 19 May 2019).

115 Vũ Dương Ninh, interview, 21 June 2019.



Figure 2. 'Death Anniversary' at the Memorial Site 468 in Thanh Thủy, Vị Xuyên, Hà Giang province, July 2019 (© Martin Grossheim)

soldiers.¹¹⁶ Thus, when commemorating the war in Vị Xuyên, the Party and the state kept an even lower profile than when it commemorated the war against China in 1979. What took place in Vị Xuyên on 12 July 2019 was certainly not a ceremony at state level commemorating the soldiers who fell on the battlefield in Hà Giang, which is what many veterans had called for.

The Vietnamese state has pledged to enlarge the war cemetery of Vị Xuyên and the works are currently in progress. In addition, in response to proposals made by the Liaison Bureau of the Vị Xuyên veterans, there are now plans to erect a triumphal column in the war cemetery in commemoration of the whole war against China at the northern border and in recognition of the fact that the war in Vị Xuyên lasted from 1979 until 1989.¹¹⁷ An official decision has also been made by the VCP and the state to the effect that the whole former battlefield of Vị Xuyên should become a national memorial site. However, apart from Hà Giang province announcing back in 2016 that it would build a historical site to commemorate those who had

116 VietnamPlus, 'Trưởng ban Tổ chức TW làm việc với Ban Thường vụ Tỉnh ủy Hà Giang' [Head of the Central Organising Commission works with Standing Committee of the Provincial Committee of Hà Giang], *Hải quân Online*, 7 July 2019, <https://haiquanonline.com.vn/truong-ban-to-chuc-tw-lam-viec-voi-ban-thuong-vu-tinh-uy-ha-giang-107626.html> (last accessed 6 Aug. 2020).

117 Hoàng Thế Cương, interview, Thanh Thủy/Vị Xuyên, 4 July 2019.

previously fought there, nothing concrete has been done yet and veterans are concerned, as they feel the plans will be difficult to implement.¹¹⁸

The special team in charge of finding the remains of fallen soldiers continues to do its task. Some remains have now been found, but those of thousands of other soldiers are still lying on the old battlefield of Vĩ Xuyên.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

The Vietnamese state and the Vietnamese Communist Party are still trying to control the commemoration of historical events in the country. The case of the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War, however, shows that non-state actors in Vietnam such as former soldiers are also actively shaping the commemoration of the war. It attests to the multivocal character of remembrance in Vietnam.

The toning down of the remembrance of past military clashes with China that started with the normalisation of relations with Beijing in 1991 ended about twenty years later when China's more aggressive stance in the South China Sea led to greater interest in the Sino-Vietnamese War among many Vietnamese and ultimately triggered a commemorative turn in their country. Veterans of the Vĩ Xuyên battlefield whose memories of the conflicts had been marginalised in previous decades benefited from this change. They managed to break the silencing of the war by organising commemorative activities such as building a proper memorial site in the remote province of Hà Giang and by carrying out yearly pilgrimages to the former battlefield of Vĩ Xuyên in July, which is not part of the official state-sanctioned ceremonies. In other words, the veterans of the Hà Giang battlefield commemorated the war in their own ways. They succeeded in keeping the memory of the Sino-Vietnamese war alive by avoiding a confrontational approach and by reaching out to political leaders such as former president Trương Tấn Sang and enlisting their support. Furthermore, they reached out to state media and also made wide use of new communications technologies, particularly social networking sites like Facebook® that present new opportunities and spaces for airing and discussing their war memories. It certainly also helped that the Vietnamese authorities could not challenge the nationalist or political credentials of the veterans—many of the leading activists are party members and fully support the leading role of the VCP in Vietnamese society.¹²⁰

118 Email, Nguyễn Đình Tác, 20 July 2020. See Kiên Trung, 'Mặt trận Vĩ Xuyên'; and VTC1. Máu đỏ bi hùng.

119 Thế Đồng, 'Tỉnh Hà Giang truy điệu và an táng 7 hài cốt liệt sỹ' [Hà Giang organises a memorial service and a burial for the remains of seven martyrs], *Quân Khu 2*, 9 May 2020, <http://quankhu2.vn/tinh-ha-giang-truy-dieu-va-an-tang-7-hai-cot-liet-sy/> (last accessed 11 May 2020).

120 Thus the Hà Giang veterans' movement differs from the activities of the so-called Club of Former Resistance Fighters (*Câu lạc bộ Kháng chiến cũ*) established in the south in 1986. According to Carlyle Thayer some of the Club's activities took place without VCP guidance and thus posed 'a direct threat to the party's mono-organizational grip on society'. See Carlyle Thayer, 'Political development in Vietnam: From the Sixth to the Seventh National Party Congress', Regime change and regime maintenance in Asia and the Pacific, Discussion paper no. 5 (Canberra: Dept of Social Change, RSPAS, ANU, 1992), p. 15. The veterans' journal *Truyền thống Kháng chiến* (Tradition of Resistance) was banned by the security apparatus and leading Club members imprisoned or put under house arrest.

Although social media platforms have eroded the Vietnamese state's ability to dominate the agenda on war memory, the Vietnamese 'memory machine' run by the Department of Propaganda and Education has not kept silent; it has stepped up the official commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War—the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the war in 2019 is clear evidence of this. At the same time, it is obvious that on this occasion, the state and the VCP also tried to circumscribe the remembrance of the war by keeping it low-profile and presenting it as a patriotic struggle for the defence of the fatherland without mentioning 'China'.

Recent developments, however, indicate that the Vietnamese 'memory machine' might favour a bolder approach when it comes to the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War: at the beginning of 2020, the official TV channel of the Party newspaper, *Nhân Dân TV*, started to upload documentaries on *YouTube* that were each dedicated to one year in Vietnam's history in the second half of the twentieth century. It is certainly no coincidence that the documentary on 1979, which mainly covers the Chinese invasion, has received the most views so far.¹²¹ In fact, it has been praised highly by many Vietnamese viewers. It was shown by VTV1 in August 2020 at prime time.¹²² Half of the documentary covers the war against China, and although phrases like 'war to defend the northern border' are used, it mainly quotes from contemporary newspaper articles, resolutions and other material that frequently refer to 'invading Chinese troops' (*quân xâm lược*). Thus, the documentary is quite outspoken and lacks the restrained tone of the 40th anniversary celebrations in 2019. The documentaries on the years 1984 and 1985 also cover the ferocious fighting at the battlefield of *Vị Xuyên*.¹²³ The latter documentary commemorates those soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the battles against China and shows *Vị Xuyên War Cemetery* and the memorial site built by the veterans in *Thanh Thủy*.

It seems that 40 years after the end of the war, the veterans of the *Hà Giang* battlefield who have 'fought' to break the state-sanctioned silence for decades as agents of remembrance have achieved a victory on the commemorative front.¹²⁴

121 *Nhân Dân TV*, 'Việt Nam thời đại Hồ Chí Minh—Biên niên sử truyền hình: Năm 1979' [Vietnam in the era of Hồ Chí Minh—TV chronicle: The year 1979], *YouTube* video, 29:22, 11 Aug. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H38riyDwlyo> (last accessed 21 Dec. 2020).

122 The series started in February 2020 with five parts entitled 'The thirst for independence and freedom' (*Khát vọng Độc lập—Tự do*). See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I14i9ZbFzly&list=PLXgK7xsVpqrRAP19w6Qm2HnZAbs6AVIXt&index=1> (last accessed 20 Sept. 2020). Also see Đinh Hoàng Thắng, 'Giải mã một hiện tượng truyền thông' [Decoding a propaganda phenomenon], *RFA*, 15 Aug. 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/blog/decipher-a-media-signal-08152020095638.html> (last accessed 23 Dec. 2020).

123 *Nhân Dân TV*, 'Việt Nam thời đại Hồ Chí Minh—Biên niên sử truyền hình: Năm 1984' [Vietnam in the era of Hồ Chí Minh—TV chronicle: the year 1984], *YouTube* video, 25:02, 29 Sept. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic-a-9uqo38> (last accessed 20 Dec. 2020); and *Nhân Dân TV*, 'Việt Nam thời đại Hồ Chí Minh - Biên niên sử truyền hình: Năm 1985' [Vietnam in the era of Hồ Chí Minh—TV chronicle: the year 1985], *YouTube* video, 27:41, 2 Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eebt3tWV9XY> (last accessed 19 Dec. 2020).

124 Đinh Hoàng Thắng, 'Giải mã một hiện tượng truyền thông' [Decoding a propaganda phenomenon], *RFA*, 15 Aug. 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/news/blog/decipher-a-media-signal-08152020095638.html> (last accessed 23 Dec. 2020) argues that the documentary was just shown for tactical reasons before the 13th National Congress of the VCP in 2021. One should always bear in mind how carefully the Department of Propaganda and Education orchestrates the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese War.