

## Why Won't Vietnam Teach the History of the Sino-Vietnamese War?

**Vietnam is reluctant to include the 1979 conflict in history textbooks, continuing a decades-long silence.**

By Travis Vincent

The exam period at Vietnamese colleges often falls in late January, a few weeks before the commemoration of the Sino-Vietnamese war, known in Vietnamese as *Chiến tranh biên giới* (the border war). The end of the semester thus “would be a perfect time to reflect upon the 1979 war, but I cannot lead my students to discuss it at length,” said Hang, a lecturer of international politics at a high-ranked college in Hanoi.

In response to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and its conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1978, China launched an incursion into Vietnam in February 1979 and captured several border cities. The diplomatic relations between two Communist erstwhile allies hit a nadir. Between February 17 and March 16, the war claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Chinese and Vietnamese soldiers, though the precise number of casualties remains debatable. The Chinese army withdrew after three weeks, announcing that its punitive mission had been fulfilled.

But over four decades since the war ended, Vietnam's schools are strangely hesitant to teach about the conflict. Hang, who asked to use a pseudonym, has been unable to incorporate the event either into an exam for her students or even into her own syllabus.

The silence over the war on campus is only slightly better than when she was a sophomore student at the same college in 1979.

“My teacher said in our lecture that a war [between China and Vietnam] would be impossible because we were comrades and brothers. Then China shelled the border the next day. But he never corrected himself. Nobody dared to utter a word about it,” said Hang.

Meanwhile, mainland Chinese peers refer to the same war as the Self-Defense War Against Vietnam (对越自卫反击战), as depicted in the popular 2017 movie “Fanghua” (“Youth”), which is set during the conflict.

In fact, the Vietnamese government has been reluctant to teach youths at all levels of education about the Sino-Vietnamese War – a curious lacuna, given that Vietnamese students are familiar with a history teeming with anti-China warfare. From Grade 6 to Grade 7, students learn about almost a millennium under Chinese occupation until 938 as well as sporadic fights between different dynasties against different Chinese lords. Those wars are studied more deeply from Grade 10 to Grade 11. Yet the full-scale state-to-state war in 1979 is obscured in history classes. The 2001 version of the Grade 12 History textbook in Vietnam recounted the war in 24 lines at the end of the book, while the 2018 edition reduced the description to 11 lines only.

Experts' calls for reforms to history textbooks, especially to provide detailed accounts of the 1979 clash, have so far fallen on deaf ears. While the government might allow more open

discussions of the war in state-run media, a more comprehensive teaching of this war is far from underway, and remains unlikely. Rewriting and remembering the war would necessitate an overhaul of Communist Party-directed history textbooks.

### **The Short and Significant War**

Hang finds herself between a rock and a hard place, as she is not able to practice what she often preaches. “I told students to discuss and ask questions in class, but then I cannot engage them in this very topic,” said the teacher.

To solve the dilemma, Hang suggested that her students read “Memories and Thoughts,” a well-known and virtually-circulated memoir by senior diplomat Tran Quang Co, which has been widely considered the most authoritative document on Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1980s. She also encouraged students to discuss the memoir with her informally.

This is what many lecturers in other universities have been doing to fill the knowledge gap.

Phạm Kim Ngọc, a third year student in international relations in Ho Chi Minh City, said that her teacher mentioned the war in a short lecture, and welcomed questions after class hours. Yet there was no textbook for her to study further.

“We are taught that China is the most important country to study for Vietnamese students, but such an event still remains sensitive,” said Ngọc.

Nguyen Ngọc Tram, a history teacher at a private high school in Hanoi, found the top-down approach to teaching the war very superficial. In the teacher’s book, there is no elaboration on how to teach it. “The border war was mentioned at the end of the textbook, which is supposed to be taught at the end of the school year. Nobody would pay attention to it,” said Tram.

In addition, Tram is also tutoring Year 12 students focusing on history to prepare for national university entrance exams. The Ministry of Education does not include the war in the content of the exam preparation.

“Since it [the border war] will not be in the exam, my students do not have any incentive to study it,” said Tram.

This scant instruction on the war has surprised Tram, given that students at primary, secondary, and high schools have to take a specific module called “education on islands and seas” that stresses Vietnam’s territorial sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, which has been a bone of contention between Vietnam and China.

A history major, Tram had the chance to learn about the war at her university, albeit to a limited extent. Yet many of her friends were not aware of it.

Dang Ngọc Oanh, a junior student at National Economics University, said that she is knowledgeable about the war thanks to her father. Oanh was shocked that she never learned about it at school. “My father used to be a soldier. He did not participate in that war, but he told me about it,” said Oanh, who later learned more about the war via English books.

### **Top-Down Agreement to Forget the Past**

Though China supported Vietnam in its wars against both France and the United States, relations between the two countries went downhill in the 1960s. By launching the 1979 war,

China sought to teach “the aspiring small hegemon” Vietnam a lesson, after the latter ousted the China-backed Khmer Rouge regime following its invasion of Cambodia.

Such was the Vietnamese Communist Party’s animosity toward China afterward that the preamble of Vietnam’s 1980 Constitution referred to China as “the direct and dangerous enemy of Vietnam.” Nonetheless, the phrase was removed from the 1980 Constitution in 1988 to pave the way for bilateral normalization.

From 1980 to 1987, Hanoi made numerous official and secret moves to resume negotiations on normalization with the northern comrade, but to no avail. In March 1988, China forcefully occupied features in the Spratly Islands under Vietnamese jurisdiction.

Yet Beijing, internationally isolated in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, initiated a secret 1990 meeting in Chengdu, China, where two countries agreed to “forget the past, orient towards the future.” As a result, the Vietnamese state chose not to commemorate the 1979 war officially, and it fell into oblivion. Top leaders announced the official normalization of bilateral relations at both state and party levels in 1991.

Another decade later, the two sides concluded a Joint Statement on Comprehensive Cooperation. In 1999, during the visit of Secretary General Le Kha Phieu to Beijing, a motto, otherwise known as “16 golden words” was adopted for their relationship: friendly neighborliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future-oriented vision. At the same time, Nguyen Co Thach, who was well-known for his tough stance on China issues and promotion of closer ties with the United States, was removed from the Politburo and the Central Committee and even lost his position as foreign minister.

In many museums, the word “war” was avoided and “China” was not even mentioned when referring to the 1979 event, unlike descriptions of the “heroic and just struggles against French colonialists, the American imperialists, and the South Vietnamese puppet army.” For a long time, Vietnam did not recognize those fallen in the border war as heroes. Soldiers who died in the war against China were referred to as “defending the fatherland” only, unlike their counterparts in wars against France and the United States.

While Vietnam successfully forced the Chinese to retreat in 1979, neither the mainstream media nor the country’s history textbooks mentioned this as a military victory. While Vietnam has repeatedly requested war reparations from the U.S., it has been completely silent on the 1979 war atrocities perpetrated by China.

### **“Reactive” Remembrance of the War**

Yet the government changed its mind against the backdrop of China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, known in Vietnamese as the East Sea. In 2014, tensions between the two countries escalated as China moved a Chinese oil rig to waters near the contested Paracel Islands. Anti-Chinese protests sprung up across Vietnam. Many began to express interest in past armed conflicts with their northern neighbor. The war was thereby resurrected in public memory.

According to Professor Tuong Vu from the University of Oregon, the Sino-Vietnamese war still divides Hanoi’s leadership today. One faction puts the blame on Le Duan, a former party leader known for being anti-China, while the other faction believes the party was wrong all along for having trusted China too much.

“Allowing any discussion of the war threatens to deepen that rift and the survival of the party and would expose the mistakes of party leadership,” Vu said via email. “Teaching children about this war might over time create public pressure that forces the party to move away from China and closer to the U.S., which it does not want to.”

In a 2018 interview with the BBC, Duong Danh Dy, former consul general of Vietnam in Guangzhou, China and a leading authority on China studies in Vietnam, said it remained unknown who had masterminded the silence over the war.

But it is clear who played a major role in reopening the discussions and commemoration: Vietnamese veterans of the conflict. In particular, those involved in the Battle of Vi Xuyen and Ha Giang were the most vocal ones.

State-owned TV channels began to broadcast documentaries about the war. Numerous artworks on the war began to circulate. More than 30 years after the war ended, the state launched an initiative to look for the remains of the fallen soldiers in Vi Xuyen.

In February 2016, President Truong Tan Sang paid a special visit to Vietnam’s northern border provinces to commemorate the war, becoming the first Vietnamese president to do so.

Not until the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the war in 2019 did Vietnam’s domestic media talk about it openly, albeit with censored narratives. The 2019 book “Defenders of Border,” published by the Information and Communications Publishing House under the Ministry of Information and Communications, is one of few official publications on the war in Vietnamese. It still referred to it as the war in defense of the northern border, avoiding naming China.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chinh paid a visit to a memorial in northern Quang Ninh Province to pay respect to soldiers who lost their lives during the 1979 war. Yet compared to Vietnam’s annual celebrations of glorious victories over France and America, the triumph over China is commemorated in a low-profile manner.

Also, some topics remain completely off limits, such as the death toll and the execution of ethnic minority people in northern Vietnam who supported the Chinese army during the war.

### **Textbook Overhaul Needed**

As a teacher, Tram has to strike a balance between telling students about the largely “unremembered” war and not overstepping the unspoken boundary.

“I have to coach everything in a euphemistic language,” said Tram. “I have to teach little by little, otherwise parents will complain that what I teach is different from the textbooks.”

Tram, making use of her relatively open pedagogical environment in a private school, also strives to teach her young students about other important milestones in history that are missing from textbooks.

“It is important to teach them that Vietnam back in 938 was not the same as Vietnam today,” said Tram. “I still have to teach my students that there are multiple histories of what they call ‘Vietnam’ today, not just one single Vietnam defined by the national textbook.”

Even prominent general Vo Nguyen Giap, the chief leader behind the critical communist victory over the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, is excluded from official history textbooks.

Rewriting the history of the Sino-Vietnamese War would also require more detailed presentations of the 1978 invasion of Cambodia, which the Vietnamese side still alludes to as “liberation of Cambodia from Khmer Rouge.” That conflict is mentioned in 13 lines as “the war in defense of the southwestern border” in the current history textbook.

The Communist state has also never acknowledged the southern Republic of Vietnam as a legitimate government. In other words, it has never recognized the two Vietnams that co-existed in the 20th century, but rather frames Vietnam as one country partitioned by foreign invaders and Vietnamese traitors. The fall of Saigon is depicted in the textbook as representing the inevitable unification of the country.

As a result, the military engagement between the naval forces of China and South Vietnam in the Paracel Islands in 1974 has also fallen into oblivion. All national history textbooks for students across the country focus on North Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the Education Publishing House under the Ministry of Education and Training has held a monopoly over publishing textbooks used nationwide for decades. Since 2019, the government has licensed a few more publishing houses to do the task. Schools now can choose which books to be used. In 2021, new textbooks for Grade 10 were released. 2023, several versions of Grade 12 textbooks will be circulated. But unless the Communist Party agrees to loosen its grip on the narrative, the history textbooks will be just old wine in a new bottle.

## AUTHORS

### GUEST AUTHOR

Travis Vincent

Travis Vincent is a social activist based in Vietnam.