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Malipo Journal; Was the War Pointless? China Shows How to Bury It

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

After a walk up a steep stone staircase, first-time visitors are astonished when the veterans' cemetery just outside this town finally pops into view: as far as the eye can see, the curving arcade of hillside is lined with row after row of crypts, each with its concrete headstone emblazoned with a large red star, a name and an inscription.

Long Chaogang and Bai Tianrong, though, had both been here before. The two men, veterans of China's war with Vietnam, which began with intense combat in mid-February of 1979, return from time to time looking for lost friends. And for more than an hour this day, they climbed up and down the deserted mountainside near the Vietnam border searching in vain through the names of the 957 soldiers buried here, stopping now and then to light a cigarette and place it on a tomb in offering to a comrade.

The silence that prevails here, disturbed only by a gentle breeze rustling through the cemetery's bamboo groves, is fitting for a war that is being deliberately forgotten in China. By official reckoning, 20,000 Chinese died during the first month of fighting, when this country's forces invaded Vietnam in the face of spirited resistance, and untold others died as the war sputtered on through the 1980's. There are no official estimates of Vietnamese casualties, but they are thought to have been lower.

Sixteen years on, China has produced no "Rambo," much less a "Deer Hunter" or "Platoon." There have been a few movies, novels and memoirs about the suffering of the soldiers and their families. But no searing explorations of the horror or moral ambiguity of war. There are no grander monuments than cemeteries like these, found mostly in this remote border region. China, in short, has experienced no national hand-wringing, and has no Vietnam syndrome to overcome.

Many of the veterans themselves are hard-pressed to say why they fought the war. Most are reluctant to discuss it with an outsider, and even rebuff their families. Asked what the war was about, Long Chaogang, a reticent 42-year-old infantryman who saw heavy combat, paused and said, "I don't know." Asked how he explained his past to his family, he said that when his 12-year-old daughter had once inquired he simply told her it was none of her business.

Forgetting on such a great scale is no passive act. Instead, it is a product of the government's steely and unrelenting efforts to control information, and history in particular. Students reading today's textbooks typically see no mention of the war. Authors who have sought to delve into its history are routinely refused publication. In 1995, a novel about the war, "Traversing Death," seemed poised to win a national fiction award but was suddenly eliminated from the competition without explanation.

If the Chinese authorities have been so zealous about suppressing debate it is perhaps because the experience, which effectively ended in a bloody stalemate, runs so contrary to the ruling Communist Party's prevailing narratives of a China that never threatens or attacks its neighbors, and of a prudent and just leadership that is all but infallible. The ungainly name assigned to the conflict, the "self-defense and counterattack against Vietnam war," seeks to reinforce these views.

That China initiated hostilities is beyond dispute, historians say, and the conflict was fought entirely on Vietnamese soil. It is also generally held that if the war did not produce an outright defeat for China, it was a costly mistake fought for dubious purposes, high among them punishing Vietnam for overthrowing the Khmer Rouge leader of Cambodia, Pol Pot, a Chinese ally who was one of the 20th century's bloodiest tyrants.

Since then, some historians have speculated that the war may also have fit into the modernization plans of China's former paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, by highlighting the technological deficiencies of the Maoist People's Liberation Army, or P.L.A. Others say the war was started by Mr. Deng to keep the army preoccupied while he consolidated power, eliminating leftist rivals from the Maoist era.

Today, veterans often cling to these explanations but also fume about being used as cannon fodder in a cynical political game. "We were sacrificed for politics, and it's not just me who feels this way -- lots of comrades do, and we communicate our thoughts via the Internet," said Xu Ke, a 40-year-old former infantryman who recently self-published a book, "The Last War," about the conflict. "The attitude of the country is not to mention this old, sad history because things are pretty stable with Vietnam now. But it is also because the reasons given for the war back then just wouldn't stand now."

Mr. Xu, who now works as an interior designer in Shanghai, said he had traveled the country at his own expense to research the book and found that at library after library materials about the war had been removed. A compendium about the 1980's so complete as to have the lyrics of the decade's most popular songs said nothing of the conflict. "It's like a memory that's been deleted, as if it never even happened," Mr. Xu said. "I went to the P.L.A. historians for materials, and they said 'Don't even think about it.' The attitude of China is like, let's just look toward the future and get rich together."

The war did produce one star of popular culture. A singer named Xu Liang, who lost a leg in combat, became a hero and idol when he appeared on national television seated in a wheelchair in uniform and sang about the virtues of personal sacrifice. Mr. Xu (who is unrelated to the author of "The Last War") went on to give more than 500 pep talks around the country before disappearing from public view around 1990, just after the war's end.

Today, he is so disillusioned that he tells people who recognize him on the streets of Beijing that they must be mistaken. Asked whether the war was just, he said China's leaders used Vietnam as a convenient enemy to quell internal conflict.

"Propaganda is in the government's hands," he said. "What does a worthless ordinary man know? When they want to do something, they can find a thousand justifications, but these are just excuses. They are not the genuine cause."