

Research into Practice: Understanding the Vietnam War from the Communists' Perspective

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Most of us are familiar with the narrative of the Vietnam War as it is commonly told in history textbooks: (1) the United States got involved because they were afraid of the possibility of a domino effect of Southeast Asian countries falling to communism; (2) there was a huge public outcry back in the United States as American casualties increased dramatically and the horrors of war were shown in every home; (3) the US eventually withdrew its troops; and (4) North and South Vietnam were reunited. But in this unjustifiably sketchy summary of the typical portrayal of the Vietnam War, it is evident that most students of history only look at materials that, ironically, the losers of this war provide. American versions of these historical events often point to the failings of the South Vietnamese regime (the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem), the failed US containment policy or domestic opposition as the reasons behind the *fall* of Vietnam.

Associate Professor Ang Cheng Guan's work will be of interest to teachers seeking to look beyond the history textbook in enriching students' understanding of the Vietnam War. Currently the Head of the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Dr Ang's research interests include international history of the Vietnam War and post-World War II Southeast Asia. He has written and published extensively on the subject of the Vietnam War, including *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (2002), and its sequel, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (2004). He has also published

another book titled *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (2010).

Dr Ang's book, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective*, analyzes the Vietnamese struggle for independence. The book follows and "attempts to re-construct the evolution of decision-making on the communist side of the Vietnam War, particularly between the years 1954 to 1969, and to show the progression of the Vietnamese communists' struggle from one that was essentially political in nature to a full-scale war" (Ang, 2002, p. 4). *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* examines the motivations and process behind the decisions taken by the Communists during the planning and execution of the armed confrontation with the United States. It also analyzes the changing relations between Hanoi, Moscow and Beijing and its influence on the strategic decisions taken by the Vietnamese communists in their struggle for reunification (Ang, 2002).

This book provides an alternative to the perspective that is available in most history textbooks. Students of history need to understand the communist perspective so that they can better analyze events, issues, and personalities in light of the full evidence available. In particular, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* contributes to students' understandings of the Vietnam War as a struggle for independence and reunification by the Vietnamese. This will add to what students already can gather from history textbooks, which tend to focus more on the regime in South Vietnam or America's containment policy in Southeast Asia.

Why is this period significant?

While most accounts of the Vietnam War begin sometime in 1965, the Geneva Peace Accord of 1954 (in the aftermath of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the end of French colonialism in Vietnam) was, from the Vietnamese communists' perspective, an important juncture in their struggle for independence and reunification of the country. The Vietnamese communist leadership in Hanoi were already fairly certain that the referendum in South Vietnam for reunification that was stipulated under the terms of the agreement was not going to take place and that a military confrontation with the US would be likely (Ang, 2002).

It is important to remind students that just as the US government had been subjected to the domestic political and social divisions, public outcry, as well as international pressure as the war unraveled, the Vietnamese communist leadership also faced similar internal divisions and pressure. It is often convenient to treat "the Vietnamese communists" as a monolithic group. This, however, masks the debates and disagreements that shaped their decision-making. One such recurring debate that was an important source of disunity in the leadership was on the best strategy to achieve the goal of unification. Disagreement centered on the pace and manner of achieving unification, in particular, the different emphasis that should be given to the two-pronged approach of political and military struggle at different times in the course of the war. In Ang's book, he looks at the shape of this debate as events unfolded. He noted how the emphasis changed with key turning points in the war leading up to the famous Tet Offensive that has been often regarded, from the American perspective, as the crucial juncture during which American efforts were severely weakened by Vietnamese guerilla forces (Ang, 2002).

The Promulgation of Law 10/59

Before Diem's promulgation of Law 10/59, "that provided for the establishment of special military tribunals to try anyone suspected to be

involved in communist activities" (Ang, 2002, p. 33), the South Vietnamese communists were already facing immense pressure from the Diem regime who were supported by the Americans. The communist leaders in South Vietnam had consistently pressed the Hanoi leadership "to endorse unrestrained military action in the South" (Ang, 2002, p. 33). Yet, even up to 1959, core elements of the Hanoi leadership were still certain that it would be too early for an intensification of the armed struggle in the South as they did not yet have the capability of withstanding American intervention. They thought that the circumstances in the South were still not ripe and that revolutionaries in the South should focus instead on the political struggle. In North Vietnam, the leadership felt that the immediate concern was to strengthen the socialist society and consolidate its economy first so that it could later serve as the basis for reunification.

The promulgation of Law 10/59 paved the way for massive uprisings across South Vietnam. Subsequently the Lao Dong Party decided that the political and military struggle in the South should be stepped up gradually. But even as massive uprisings increased, the communist leaders continued to exercise great caution in any premature escalation of armed activities. Their concern was that if armed struggle was to get intense too quickly, it might "prematurely spark off a full-scale war" (Ang, 2002, p. 62) with the United States that they were not prepared for. Hanoi's position was that it did not want to provoke the Americans into directly intervening in the war. Le Duan (who was one of the top leaders in Hanoi), in his July 1962 letter to comrades in the South, "cautioned against under-estimating the enemy, who was superior to them in all aspects - in numbers, weaponry, transportation, and modern communication" (Ang, 2002, p. 65). They were also convinced that the struggle (note: they tended to see it as a struggle, rather than war) would be a protracted one in which "American weariness would compel them to withdraw" (Ang, 2002, p. 64). Also, "there was always the possibility that the enemy would 'throw in the towel' at some point when they realised that the cost far exceeded what they were prepared to pay as exemplified in Laos and Algeria" (Ang, 2002,

p. 65). In the meantime, the Vietnamese communist leadership continued to emphasise the modernisation of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA), knowing that war was inevitable.

Death of Ngo Dinh Diem

The assassination of Diem was soon met with the convening of the 9th Plenary Session of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee and the decision was taken to push war preparations into full swing in both North and South Vietnam. As a North Vietnamese researcher explained during the US-Vietnam Dialogue in 1998, the Hanoi leadership was unnerved by Diem's unexpected death "because it substantially raised the odds of a direct American intervention" (Ang, 2002, p. 75). As such, leaders at the plenary session had decided that it would be best to step up military efforts and win the war quickly before the Americans could effectively establish control of the situation. This led to a lot of infiltration of party cadres and soldiers from the North into the South to aid in the political and military struggle there. However, despite this decision taken at the plenary session, "there were still differences within the leadership as to the degree and extent the military struggle should be intensified at that stage. The disagreements were sufficiently serious for Ho Chi Minh to convene a Special Political Conference three months later on 27-28 March 1964 to re-affirm the December 1963 decision." (Ang, 2002, p. 80)

The Tonkin Gulf Incident, August 1964

There had been an exchange of fire between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and the US destroyer Maddox which had intruded into North Vietnam's waters in the Tonkin Gulf. This resulted in the death of four Vietnamese sailors. A second alleged attack by the Vietnamese (which the Vietnamese strongly denied and declassified American reports subsequently confirmed) never happened but it provided the Americans with the pretext for retaliation. The next day, "as a reprisal for the torpedo attack in the Tonkin Gulf, US aircraft destroyed an estimated 25 North Vietnamese PT boats, an oil storage

depot at Phuc Loi as well as seven anti-aircraft installations at Vinh." (Ang, 2002, p. 81)

For the Vietnamese communists, the Tonkin Gulf incident confirmed their suspicions that the United States "was plotting on destroying the North and on intervening directly in the war" and this "inadvertently strengthened the position of the 'pro-escalation' lobby" (Ang, 2002, p. 81). In order to deal with the US, the VPA had to be built up rapidly. The number of forces more than doubled within one year in 1965 from 195000 to 400000. In particular, there was a strong emphasis on air defence capability, a priority no doubt reinforced by the events of the Tonkin Gulf incident and its aftermath (Ang, 2002). And so they did, to considerable success. It was "recorded that between February and June 1965, the air-defence units of Military Region IV shot down more than 300 US planes. By the end of 1965, they had shot down a total of 834 American aircraft." (Ang, 2002, p. 97) But even while military struggle was stepped up significantly, the Hanoi leadership continued to emphasise the importance of using armed struggle in conjunction with the political and diplomatic struggle.

Increasing Stalemate and the Tet Offensive

Subsequently, the war expanded rapidly and the number of American soldiers in Vietnam swelled from 360,000 at the end of 1966 to 535,000 in 1967 (Ang, 2002). Despite the pouring of American resources into the war in Vietnam, there were few signs that this had a dampening effect on Vietnamese military efforts. General Nguyen Chi Thanh argued that such a stalemate and a prolonged war would allow the United States to pull together its vastly bigger resources and therefore it was imperative for the Vietnamese to achieve a quick victory. He proposed "a series of surprise attacks in places where the enemy least expected" such as Saigon and Danang as well as capturing strategic locations like the Central Highlands (Ang, 2002, p. 117). This was known by the Vietnamese as the "General Offensive General Uprising", later dubbed by the West as the Tet Offensive.

Mobilisation and preparation for the "General Offensive General Uprising" got underway in mid-1967. But while it was often depicted as a singular, once-off event, it in fact occurred in several phases because the expected success did not occur. With the first launch on 30 January 1968, simultaneous uprisings began all over South Vietnam and this lasted for about two months before the Hanoi leadership decided that their goal of a decisive victory would not be achieved and there had been heavy losses for the Communists. At the same time, they continued to express willingness to negotiate with the US on the condition that the Americans stop the incessant air strikes in North Vietnam. But the capacity to negotiate on their own terms required that the Vietnamese communists were victorious in their military struggle. Phase 2 of the offensive was therefore launched on 4 May 1968, ending on 17 August 1968: "The communists attacked 31 cities, 58 districts, 30 airfields and 20 operation staging bases chiefly in Saigon and Gia Dinh; they suffered high casualties in the process. On 12 June, they withdrew from Saigon." (Ang, 2002, p. 132) The heavy casualties incurred and the lack of decisive victory prompted a third phase but this too ended in no significant victory for the communists. A second stalemate ensued. In retrospect, numerous observers noted that the Tet Offensive might not have been as successful as it was made out to be. Vietnamese resources were worn thin though the subsequent American withdrawal in 1969 allowed them time to regain their strength.

Foreign Influences: Hanoi-Sino-Soviet Relations

As mentioned earlier, international pressure on the United States (US involvement in the Vietnam War was largely perceived by the international community as running counter to its purported claims of being anti-imperialist and their support for freedom of self-determination) might have influenced the US government to abandon its containment policy in Vietnam. Similarly, it is essential to understand foreign influences on decision-making in Hanoi. While it would be folly to treat Hanoi as merely a puppet of Sino or Soviet interests during the Cold War, it would

be equally foolish to disregard the influence that they and the Sino-Soviet relationship had on decision-making in Hanoi, given that Beijing and Moscow were the two main, supporters of the Vietnamese communists.

The Vietnamese communist leadership was strongly concerned with the growing differences within the communist camp as the Cold War progressed. But while Hanoi sought their backing in its reunification struggle, Beijing and Moscow had opposing ideas of what Hanoi's strategy should be. Beijing's perspective was that a protracted struggle was necessary and supported the anti-colonial liberation struggle in Vietnam by supplying the Vietnamese communists with all sorts of modern weaponry. On the other hand, Moscow was of the view that peaceful co-existence (between the communists and the West) was possible. They argued that Hanoi should focus their efforts on strengthening the socialist society and economy in North Vietnam first, and when capitalism eventually failed due to its inferiority to the communist system, reunification could occur. Hanoi therefore found it increasingly difficult to obtain support from the Russians as "Krushchev's strategy of peaceful coexistence with the West, specifically the US, could not be squared with Hanoi's reunification aspiration" (Ang, 2002, p. 78). It was only much later on after the Tonkin Gulf incident that made Moscow realise more firmly that military war between North Vietnam and the US was inevitable. Vietnam-Soviet relations improved subsequently.

Conclusion

The book, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side*, therefore highlights the changes in strategy that the Vietnamese communists had as events unfolded and as certain influences were brought to bear on their decision-making process. Teachers can utilise Ang's work here in different ways. For example, they can focus on Ho Chi Minh and other key Vietnamese personalities that were at the helm of the Hanoi leadership. Ang's book shows that while Ho remains a larger-than-life figure in the Vietnamese nationalist movement and was well-respected in both Beijing and Moscow,

his deteriorating health through the course of the Vietnam War meant that other Vietnamese Communist leaders had taken over the running of day-to-day affairs. This is noteworthy as most depictions of the Vietnamese Communist leadership are centered around Ho to the exclusion of other actors.

In addition, there is a wide range of movies on the Vietnam War that can be used to enhance student learning and stimulate their interest in the subject. The majority of these movies provide an American perspective and focus on the bravery of American soldiers fighting in a war against faceless enemies. This can be used to reinforce Ang's point that it occurs not only in academia but also in popular culture that is dominated by US depictions of the war. Lastly, teachers can also draw on Ang's careful distinction of the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese

communists to highlight the different interests and power they had vis-a-vis the United States and how that might have influenced the decisions taken in relation to their political and military struggle for reunification. Similarly, teachers can also make use of Ang's argument that Hanoi was firmly in control of their own decision-making and was not a stooge despite their dependence on Beijing and Moscow for support (Ang, 2002). Teachers can also get students to discuss the influence of Beijing and Moscow, as well as the bilateral and trilateral relationships between Beijing-Hanoi-Moscow, in terms of how the Vietnamese Communists perceived their strategic position in their struggle for independence and reunification.

Associate Professor Ang Cheng Guan's *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* can be found in all major bookstores and libraries.

Teaching Resources

Focus: Ho Chi Minh

The case studies of Vietnam in earlier parts of the 20th century attach great importance to Ho Chi Minh and his preeminent role in the rise of nationalism and communism in Vietnam prior to World War II, during the Japanese occupation, and in declaring independence and leading the fight against the French colonialists after the war. After the Geneva Peace Accord of 1954 granted independence to the DRV, Ho Chi Minh continued to be the undisputed leader of the nationalist/communist movement in both North and South Vietnam. By 1964, however, Ho Chi Minh's health had begun to deteriorate and he was often away for long periods while seeking treatment in China. Therefore, the day-to-day decision-making process was instead being managed by others within the Hanoi leadership.

But given the rift within the communists between North and South Vietnam, and often within the communist leadership itself, Ho continued to be a powerful source of unity in the party and the country. He was well aware of the power of his stature, and he made use of that in various efforts to unite the nationalist movement and to prevent any significant split within the leadership that could undermine their cause. Furthermore, while Ho (or Hanoi) had not been able to influence or prevent growing Sino-Soviet discord, he was regarded with high esteem by both Beijing and Moscow, which was crucial for Hanoi in getting support whether political or material. His declining health throughout the latter part of the 1960s when the war with the United States was escalating, and his eventual death in 1969, therefore "weakened the solidarity of the Vietnamese communist leadership and Hanoi's finely calibrated relations with Moscow and Beijing and would have consequences for the subsequent years." (Ang, 2002, p. 142)

Teaching Suggestions:

1. As a point of entry into discussing the Vietnam War from the communists' perspective, prepare selected clips of popular films on the Vietnam War, e.g. Full Metal Jacket (1987), Hamburger Hill (1987), Platoon (1986), We Were Soldiers (2002). We Were Soldiers is one of the very few that

attempts to show more than just the American side to the war, although it should still be viewed with caution. Teachers should preview the films first and select the most appropriate clips from the film for viewing in the classroom. Trailers of these movies can also be easily found on the internet.

Before or after showing the clips, discuss with students the importance of looking at different perspectives when seeking to understand or analyse historical events. Engage the class in a discussion over the following key questions:

- a. Why are communist accounts of the Vietnam War so rare? (Possible reasons: (i) many scholars subsumed the Vietnam War into the Cold War big-power rivalry, as such many deemed that the Vietnamese communist perspective was not worth looking into; (ii) difficulty of access to archives)
 - b. What types of sources might be available to historians seeking to study the Communist perspective of the Vietnam War? (Possible sources: Vietnamese language sources, official communist histories, interviews, autobiographies etc.)
 - c. What might be some of the limitations of such sources? (Surely, propaganda would be raised as a limitation of communist sources. Perhaps it would be prudent to encourage students to consider whether this applies to non-communist sources as well.)
2. While Ho Chi Minh was the recognised figure of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, there are other key personalities as well that had in fact run the show since Ho's health started declining in 1964 and eventually took over upon his death in 1969. Direct students to research on the contributions of these key personalities in the Vietnamese communist leadership and share their findings with the class. Examples of key personalities include: Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Vo Nguyen Giap, Tran Van Tra. For example, Le Duan features prominently in Ang's book as being constantly involved at the top-level decision-making process of the Vietnamese Communist Party.
3. One tool that students can use to analyse and understand historical events/ a particular policy etc. is by using a concept/tool that considers the **actors** involved, their **interests** in the particular issue, and the **power** that they have to pursue their interests (Actors, Interests, Power = AIP framework).

For a general exercise, divide the students into five groups and assign each group to work on each of these parties directly (or remotely) involved in the Vietnam War: North Vietnam communists, South Vietnam communists, the United States, Beijing and Moscow. Students should use the AIP framework to analyse the interests of these parties in Vietnam's reunification struggle and the power they have to influence outcomes. Give them sufficient time to discuss before bringing all the groups together to discuss as a class how these factors work with each other and subsequently resulted in the withdrawal of the American troops and reunification of Vietnam. This exercise might be a challenge to weaker students and teachers should be on hand to give adequate guidance in the group discussions.

Questions to guide students in identifying Interests:

1. What do they want the outcome to be? Why?
2. What is at stake for them? What do they seek to lose?

Questions to guide students in identifying Power:

1. What kind of power do they have? Is it political, economic or military? How much of it do they have? How does it compare to other parties?
2. Does the power stem from support from foreign parties? Do they have international backing? Is international opinion in support of their cause?