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Chinese soldiers in Laos: Covert revolutionary support during the Second Indochina War

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This article explores the large-scale deployment of Chinese soldiers during the Vietnam War as part of China's aid to Laos, especially its logistical and military support for the Pathet Lao, in the geopolitical context of competition with America in mainland Southeast Asia. This article spotlights the history of China's clandestine campaign in Laos in the late 1960s to 1970s, based on recent articles, books, unpublished or informally published memoirs by and interviews with ex-servicemen, mainly lower-ranking officers, soldiers and army engineers who found themselves in an unknown Southeast Asian country. While the Chinese troops were spurred on by their sense of patriotism and socialist internationalism, they also desired peace so that they could return home. Many of the then young soldiers struggled to adjust to a campaign fought in the unfamiliar environment of northern Laos, and were traumatised by the sight of fallen comrades. It is these very same Chinese soldiers who fought in Laos who have become the main advocates of the declassification of China's secret war through their publications and social media postings, although their accounts are not officially endorsed or published for the mass market and this knowledge remains largely within their circles.

On 2 December 2021, several Chinese war veterans forwarded a message regarding the commencement of a rail link between Boten and Vientiane (part of the China–Laos railway line)¹ via social media, expressing their joy at the progress of the railway project. These Chinese ex-servicemen who took an interest in Laos were road construction engineers and combat troops who had been sent to Laos by the Chinese government half a

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1 Boten in Laos is located in Luang Mantha province, right across the border from Mohan, in Yunnan province, China.

century earlier. The completion of the 414 km Boten–Vientiane railway once again thrust the spotlight on Sino-Lao relations. The earliest interaction between these two countries since the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 dates back to the First Indochina War in the 1950s. As a secondary battlefield of the war against French colonialism, Laos became a site of intervention by multiple external powers.

From 1961 to 1978, following the escalation of the Vietnam War or Second Indochina War, the Pathet Lao, an umbrella term for the communist forces in Laos and a close ally of the Vietnamese revolutionaries, received substantial assistance from China in the form of military support and road construction.² During this period, more than 100,000 Chinese troops secretly entered Laos as ‘road engineering teams’ (*Zhulu gongcheng dui*). A large number of air force, army, medical and logistics personnel and units were sent to Laos too. Political and military sensitivities dictated that the entire operation of China’s dispatching of troops to Laos be entirely covert. China termed this war ‘Resist US (Aggression) and Aid Laos’ (*Yuanlao kangmei*); comparable terms are used to refer to PRC’s support of North Korea and successive Vietnamese regimes.

It was not until over half a century later that China made official mention of these events when President Xi Jinping, in 2017, referenced the assistance that Chinese troops afforded Laos in a diplomatic statement:

In the 1960s–1970s, the Chinese military and people actively supported the cause of Laos’ national independence and liberation. More than 200 Chinese martyrs [soldiers killed in battle] slept in this hot land where they fought and built an indelible monument to the friendship between China and Laos with their lives.³

This was the first time a top Chinese leader publicly acknowledged the Chinese soldiers who had given their lives in the battle for Laos a half-century earlier. Due to the protracted period of confidentiality, researchers have been able to uncover only scant Chinese sources about the ‘Resist US Aggression and Aid Laos’ campaign. In a 1970 study, Lee Chae-Jin focused on China’s earlier policy towards Laos between 1954 and 1967, contending that China used diplomatic means to try to maintain Laos’ neutrality, while its limited assistance to the Communist forces in Laos represented an auxiliary means. This perspective reflected the situation at the time of his writing, before Beijing escalated its involvement.⁴ More recently, Zhang Xiaoming has provided a picture of the diplomatic infighting between China and North Vietnam on the Laos issue, and also described China’s military and logistical assistance to the Pathet Lao from 1961 to 1975 based on secondary Chinese publications.⁵ However,

2 The year 1975 is a crucial milestone, marking the end of the Vietnam War/Second Indochina War, the birth of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Khmer Rouge victory, and the reunification of Vietnam. However, China’s road construction in Laos continued until 1978.

3 Xi Jinping, ‘Xieshou dazao zhonglao juyou zhanlue yiyi de mingyun gongtongti’ [It is of strategic significance to jointly build a community of common destiny between China and Laos], *People’s Daily*, 14 Nov. 2017.

4 Lee Chae-Jin, *Communist China’s policy toward Laos: A case study, 1954–67* (Lawrence: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1970). See also Brian Crozier, ‘Peking and the Lao crisis: A further appraisal’, *China Quarterly* 11, 11 (1962): 116–23.

5 See Zhang Xiaoming, ‘China’s involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, 1963–1975’, *Journal of Military History* 66, 4 (2002): 1141–66. See also Shu Quanzhi, ‘Vietnam–Laos communist relations and China, 1949–1975’ (PhD diss., National University of Singapore, 2020).

research on the Lao civil war in particular and China's support for revolutionaries in Southeast Asia during the Cold War in general remains sparse due to a lack of available sources.⁶

It is only in the last twenty years that the Chinese ex-servicemen who participated in the *Yuanlao Kangmei* began to break their silence, gradually opening up by self-publishing articles and books, and sharing their recollections of their experiences during the campaign via social media. Their first-hand accounts offer valuable insights and a research data source on China's assistance in Southeast Asia's revolutions, especially in light of the fact that available official archives include little information about the government's military activities in the region at that time. These new Chinese materials supplement our knowledge of China's role at the frontline operational level of the Second Indochina War. Based on these newly discovered published and informal sources, supplemented by interviews with veterans of the campaign, this article examines their information on Chinese troops in Laos, whether they were involved in front-line combat, as medics, in road construction or logistics.

This study illustrates that although Chinese troops began to infiltrate Laos on a large scale only in 1968, China had begun assisting Laos around ten years earlier, by way of trained military translators, launching infrastructural investigations, etc. China's decades-long aid to left and neutralist forces in Laos was all-encompassing, including as it did, in augmenting the latter's military capability, the construction of better roads in the border area, logistics, and medical care. Military deployment in Laos was directed by Mao Zedong and other leaders. The sizeable contingent of Chinese troops in northern Laos provided a bulwark for the Pathet Lao and contributed to the movement's ultimate victory. But the lower-ranking officers and soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at the front also show individual and diverse perspectives in the face of a cruel war and their discomfort in the unfamiliar landscape and environment of northern Laos.

Postwar geopolitics and revolution in Indochina

France sought to reassert itself in the region after the Second World War, when Japan's invasion of Southeast Asia had destroyed the Western colonial system—although only for a few months in the case of Indochina. An upsurge of nationalism saw the indigenous population clamouring for independence, especially Vietnam—declaring its independence and establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in August 1945—with its opposition to France's designs, which later led to the First Indochina War. French plans for a very gradual and incomplete handover of power were endorsed by the United States in the name of protecting the 'free world' and stymying the spread of communism.⁷ In February 1950, China, the

6 See also Zhou Taomo, *Migration in the time of revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), which looks at Cold War-era Chinese migrants and migration to Indonesia and China–Indonesia relations.

7 John Marciano, *The American war in Vietnam: Crime or commemoration?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), p. 47.

USSR and the DRV met in Moscow, and reached a consensus that China should dispatch military advisers and provide resources to help Vietnam resist France.⁸

From the start of hostilities with France, Vietnamese communists also began to train some Lao cadres, including Kaysone Phomvihane, who became a key Lao communist leader, to resist both the French and the Royal Government of Laos.⁹ The Vietnamese organised anti-French Lao elements into the Pathet Lao in 1950. Over the next few decades, the Vietnamese slowly and surreptitiously nurtured their Lao allies, sending military advisers and providing training and equipment to the Pathet Lao.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the newborn People's Republic of China, created in late 1949, found itself facing a geopolitical triptych assembled by the United States in the early 1950s, comprising Thailand, southern Vietnam and the Philippines. Considering its position and national security in particular, Beijing resolved to start providing some assistance to the anti-colonial war effort in Laos. Accordingly, in March 1952, China permitted the Pathet Lao troops to cross the border into Yunnan for training.¹¹ That same year China also sent military advisers to northern Laos. The purpose of China's active support for the campaign in northern Laos was to strengthen the strategic link between that region and northern Vietnam as the conflict increasingly spread through Indochina.¹²

France's humiliating defeat to the DRV in Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 marked the complete failure of their mission to reassert power in Indochina. However, French defeat brought not peace, but rather the beginning of another longer and more brutal war in Indochina, which drew in more countries. To prevent Indochina from becoming a communist region and maintain American hegemony in Southeast Asia, the United States took over the reins from France with its own strategic blueprint. Laos was to become a secondary battlefield of the Vietnam War, where external powers locked horns, despite the fact that the small sovereign state was an impoverished one with little in the way of tangible spoils for the victor. Still, as US President Eisenhower said in 1956, '[If Laos is lost] we will likely lose the rest of Southeast Asia and Indonesia.'¹³ Lao political forces were divided between rightwing royalists endorsed by the United States, the Pathet Lao endorsed by China and North Vietnam, and neutralists who later split into leftist and rightist factions.

On 9 August 1960, Captain Kong Le staged a coup as his neutralist army seized control of Vientiane, the nation's capital, in a move aimed at heading off foreign interference and also to strike back against corruption.¹⁴ However, the coup only served to

8 Niu Jun, 'Zhongguo yuanyue kangfa zhengce zai tantao' [Analysis of China's policy to aid Vietnam and resist France], *Waijiao pinglun* [Foreign Affairs Review] 29, 3 (2012): 60–62.

9 Joseph J. Zasloff, RAND Corporation, *The Pathet Lao: Leadership and organization*, report for Defense Advance Research Projects Agency (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1973), pp. 12–13.

10 James E. Parker, Jr, *Battle for Skyline Ridge: The CIA secret war in Laos* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2019), p. 5.

11 Shi Weitong, 'Zhongguo dui laowo yuanzhu zhengce de yanbian jiqi dongyin (1956–1965)' [The evolution and motivation of China's aid policy to Laos (1956–1965)], *Shijie lishi* [World History] 6 (2021): 72.

12 Niu, 'Zhongguo yuanyue kangfa zhengce zai tantao', p. 73.

13 Quoted in Parker, *Battle for Skyline Ridge*, p. 4.

14 Timothy N. Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam: U.S. military aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 20.

aggravate the major powers in Laos, for with US support, the rightists in Laos recaptured Vientiane, while the neutralist coup forces formed an alliance with the Pathet Lao and retreated to the Plain of Jars.¹⁵ The war in Laos started to escalate and the nation's crisis in the early 1960s was aggravated and prolonged by the intervention of outside powers.

Laos had been strategically important to Vietnamese revolutionaries ever since the First Indochina War. It became even more so when in order to support military operations in the south, the Communist Party of Vietnam (at that time called the Lao Dong or Workers Party) invested considerable manpower and resources to develop and maintain the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The DRV's close alliance with the Pathet Lao meant that the Royal Lao Government (RLG) could not block the Ho Chi Minh Trail.¹⁶ In 1960, the CIA also began to train Hmong troops in the highlands of Laos who were already highly motivated to fight against the communists. Throughout the Second Indochina War, Laos became a 'secret annexe to the main Vietnam theatre', where on the ground pro-American troops were guided by the CIA, and the Pathet Lao-controlled areas were bombed by the US air force.¹⁷

China, in a similar vein, sought to check the expansion of American geopolitical power in Southeast Asia. China's particular fear was that a pro-US Laos would jeopardise its security in the southwest. China also held the unshakeable belief that assistance to Laos was vital in ensuring that North Vietnam could hold off US designs. Thus, China built several key roads in northern Laos during the conflict to enable a flow of personnel, logistics and other assistance. In effect, China and North Vietnam, representing the socialist bloc, squared off against the capitalist alliance of the United States, South Vietnam and Thailand, in a clandestine war that was played out in Laos over decades. However, all the external powers involved in Laos maintained a tacit understanding after learning the lessons of the Korean War (1950–53), deliberately avoiding developing the war in Laos into an arena of direct conflict between the superpowers. The United States, which conducted extensive secret bombing campaigns in Laos during the Vietnam War, did not introduce ground troops there, nor did it take the risk of bombing near the Sino-Lao border.

Early support for the Laos revolution

As one of the significant participants in Laos' secret war, China had commenced comprehensive assistance to the Pathet Lao since the 1960s. There were four distinct aspects to the assistance that China afforded the Pathet Lao: the supply of military equipment, training the Pathet Lao combat troops, the construction of strategic roads, and air defence operations.¹⁸ Between 1961 and 1974, the PLA military

15 Roger Warner, *Back fire: The CIA's secret war in Laos and its link to the war in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 32–4.

16 William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A concise political and military history*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), pp. 66–7.

17 Warner, *Back fire*, p. 17.

18 *Zhandi junhun: Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun yuan kongjun gaoshepaobing di shiwu shi jinian huace* [The soul of the army on the battlefield: An album of the PLA 15th division of the air force anti-aircraft artillery], ed. Wu Aikui (Beijing: Zhongguo kexue wenhua, 2017), p. 15. See also Ai Lingyao, 'Zhongguo yuanlao kangmei de guanghui pianzhang' [A glorious chapter of China's aid to Laos and resistance against the United States], *Junshi lishi* [Military history] 1 (1990): 37–41.

academies trained about 2,000 Pathet Lao commanding officers and military technicians, who became the backbone of the Lao communists revolutionary forces in the civil war.¹⁹ Available sources show that China's direct military assistance to Laos dated back to April 1961. In that year, China sent the 39th Division of the 13th Army, which was skilled in tropical jungle warfare, to assist the Pathet Lao in the campaign to capture Luang Namtha, Oudomxay and Phongsaly provinces in northern Laos.²⁰ It remains unclear whether the PLA sent actual combat troops or just advisers.

In order to prepare for Chinese military involvement in Laos, the PLA began to systematically train Lao language translators as early as 1959. The Intelligence Bureau of the General Staff (IBGS), the PLA's principal military intelligence department, ordered the Infantry College of Kunming Military Area Command (*Kunming buxiao*) to prepare for foreign language training in 1956. Subsequently, the *Kunming buxiao* commenced foreign language courses on 15 October 1959.²¹ This military college soon became the training centre for PLA military translators for Southeast Asia, establishing a 'Training Brigade for Abroad' (*Waixun dadui*) in 1962, also named the Third Brigade, where all Lao language translators were trained as part of a programme that lasted three to four years.

The selection of personnel and investigation of students' backgrounds was rigorous since these future translators would work abroad.²² But the military's demand for Lao language translators still could not be filled, so on 11 November 1965, the Kunming Military Area Command established a 'Fast Foreign Language Translation Training Brigade' (*Jianyi waixun dadui*) in Jianshui, Yunnan province. This military unit, which was given the code designation K166 as shown in [fig. 1](#), was tasked with quickly churning out military translators of Southeast Asian languages. When a large number of Chinese troops entered Laos in the late 1960s, these trained translators were dispatched to various PLA regiments.

In 1963, in order to assist the communist revolution in Laos, Beijing decided to send a 'Laos Working Group' (*Laowo gongzuozu*) to assess the military situation in the Pathet Lao-controlled areas. Zhou Enlai nominated Major-General Duan Suquan of PLA as group leader.²³ On 29 September 1963, Kaysone Phomvihane, general secretary of the Lao People's Party (LPP, later LPRP),²⁴ sent a telegram to the Central Committee of the CCP, expressing his gratitude for China's revolutionary assistance, stating:

Our party [LPP] and our people have always received hearty and active assistance from the fraternal Communist Party of China and the Chinese people, both in the

19 Zheng Yunchang, 'Teshu shiming yuanlao kangmei' [Special mission to help Laos resist the United States], in *Republic will never forget*, ed. Shang Yian (Beijing: Zhongguo shici yinglan, 2021), pp. 92–4.

20 Liu Peiyi, *Laowo zhandi lueying* [Photographs on the battlefield in Laos] (Hongkong: Dadao, 2018), pp. 1–2.

21 Guo Yuanming, 'Yi junlv shengya li nanguo miyun' [Recalling the experience of joining the army and the secret history of a country in the south]. Manuscript, 2019.

22 Du Jiang, 'Zhandou zai laowo de zhongguo fanyiguan' [Chinese military translator on the battlefield in Laos]. Manuscript, 2019.

23 He Libo, 'Xin zhongguo yuanlao kangmei de qianqian houhou' [The process of China's assistance to Laos to resist the United States], *Dangshi Zhongheng* [On party history] 7 (2007): 30–31.

24 The LPP was renamed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in 1972.



Figure 1. Group photo of translation officers of the First Squadron of K166, taken on 28 April 1969. (Collection of Guo Mingyuan).

anti-colonial war of resistance in the past and now in the long and arduous revolutionary struggle against American imperialist aggression and its lackeys in Laos. This valuable assistance [from China] is a great encouragement to the Lao people to achieve peace, neutrality, independence, and build a unified and prosperous Laos. [China] has made great contributions to the national liberation and revolution of Laos.²⁵

In January 1964, the 'Laos Working Group' entered Vietnam from Pingxiang, Guangxi province, later secretly shifting to Xam Neua, which was home to the LPP's Central Committee.²⁶ In July 1964, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi all agreed that China should further strengthen its military assistance to the Pathet Lao.²⁷ On 3 December 1965, Kaysone, accompanied by Duan Suquan, met with Mao in Shanghai. Kaysone told him, 'We have made some progress by learning from the [revolutionary] experience of China and Vietnam. The Working Group led by Duan Suquan gave us a lot of specific assistance', to which Mao replied, '[the Pathet Lao] must win over the masses, you the Pathet Lao will survive only when the masses stand with you the Pathet Lao ... Still, China is the strong backing and reliable rearguard.'²⁸

Between 1964 and 1966, China provided the Pathet Lao with about 24,000 guns, 600 cannons, 3 million rounds of ammunition, 200,000 grenades, 1,300 radio sets and

25 Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MOFA), National Day Congratulatory Message from Lao People's Revolutionary Party, 29 Sept. 1963, no. 117-01363-09.

26 He Libo, 'Xin zhongguo yuanlao', pp. 30–32.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

telephones, 60 surplus cars and 600,000 military uniforms.²⁹ Initially, China's support for the Pathet Lao comprised mainly of military equipment, food and other supplies. It was not until 1968 that large-scale Chinese engineering and combat troops entered northern Laos.

On 28 February 1968, China and the LPP signed 'the Minutes of the Meeting between China and Laos on Road Construction' in Beijing. To improve its reconnaissance in northern Laos and prepare for further road construction, China's Ministry of Communications sent a group of experts comprising key cadres from the Engineer Corps of the PLA, Operations Departments of Kunming Military Area Command, and Navy General Staff, to conduct detailed field research in northern Laos on 14 May 1968.³⁰ The main objective of this small group was to reconnoitre the road infrastructure of Bokeo, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Phongsaly. China also dispatched 400 soldiers from the Third Battalion of the First Frontier Ethnic Minority Division of Kunming Military Area Command to implement security for this operation. The Pathet Lao sent Intelligence Director Kham Sung (*Yan Song*) and a battalion to the border to welcome the Chinese experts.³¹

Sun Chunfu, a soldier of the First Frontier Ethnic Minority Division, recounted that the Chinese soldiers were all wearing Pathet Lao uniforms as they set out in a camouflaged car under cover of night to escort the Chinese experts into Laos in May 1968. Sun recalled, 'On 28 June 1968, when we were about to cross the Nam Ou River, four American F-104 bombers came to bomb the ground forces, killing or wounding eight people, including the deputy platoon commander.'³² The next day, the US propaganda radio station, Voice of America (VOA), broadcast the news that 'A Chinese army of more than 400 soldiers was bombed by Lao aircraft in Khoua District in Laos, and none survived.'³³ Regardless of the actual toll, after the experts completed their reconnaissance of northern Laos, a large number of Chinese troops and engineers began to flood into Laos in September 1968.

On 16 August 1968, Mao Zedong issued an order to the Fifth Division of Shenyang Military Area Command to deploy 20,000 soldiers to the road construction headquarters in Laos.³⁴ The Chinese soldiers entering Laos no longer sported their PLA unit numbers, and instead used the code name of 'Road Construction Team' (*Zhulu gongcheng dui*). Each team comprised officers and soldiers from different

29 Ma Jinan, *Yuanyue yuanlao kangmei jianwen* [Experience of assisting Vietnam and Laos to resist the United States] (Hongkong: China International Culture, 2013), p. 221.

30 The experts included Liu Derun who was the leader of the 5th Engineer Corps, Fang Nanrong who was section chief of the Operations Departments of Kunming Military Area Command, Li Qiuwu from Navy General Staff, Sun Xuecheng from the 1st Frontier Ethnic Minority Division of Kunming Military Region. See, *Gonghe guo buhui wangji* [The Republic will never forget], ed. Shang Yian (Beijing: Zhongguo shici yinglan, 2021), p. 68.

31 Sun Chunfu, 'Bei yiwang de zhanzheng: yuanlao kangmei' [Forgotten war: Helping Laos resist the United States], *Yuanliu* [Origins] 13 (2011): 78–83.

32 Sun Chunfu, 'Kangmei Yuanlao qinli ji' [Personal experiences of the war in Laos], *Wenshi tiandi* [Literature and History] 9 (2010): 44–50.

33 Shang Yian, *The Republic will never forget*, p. 70.

34 Ma Jinan, *Yuanyue yuanlao*, p. 222. From April 1972 to April 1978, the Kunming Military Area Command took over the Shenyang Military Area Command to establish a new headquarters for Chinese troops in Laos.

units such as the ‘303 Detachment of the Road Construction Team’ (*Zhulu gongcheng dui 303 zhidui*), which was made up of the 43rd and 44th regiments of the 15th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division of the Air Force, the 55th regiment of the 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division, the Independent Battalion of the 32nd Army Division, and the Second Field Hospital of the Air Force.³⁵ The command headquarters for the Chinese engineering and combat troops was set up on China’s side in Shangyong village, Mengla County, Yunnan, across the border from Laos.³⁶ The headquarters was camouflaged by the forest and well concealed, along with the Pathet Lao representative office located there too.³⁷

The Chinese units entering Laos were given the following code names as replacements: from ‘division’ (*shi*) to ‘main detachment’ (*zhidui*), ‘regiment’ (*tuan*) to ‘large detachment’ (*dadui*), ‘battalion’ (*ying*) to ‘middle detachment’ (*zhongdui*), and ‘company’ (*lian*) to ‘small detachment’ (*fendui*).³⁸ Since the troops entering Laos undertook multiple tasks from road construction to air defence, the size of these units greatly exceeded that of corresponding domestic PLA units. Table 1 details the code names and personnel numbers of some of the PLA units in Laos.

Currently available sources indicate that the Chinese troops who served in Laos were mostly new recruits and emanated from several different military area commands (table 1). China’s military operations in Laos were meant to be entirely covert, which meant that troops being dispatched there were not told where they were going—at least not initially. In the decade of China’s large-scale military and infrastructure assistance to Laos, tens of thousands of newly recruited soldiers were sent to Laos secretly from several provinces. On 15 December 1969, a grand send-off ceremony was held in Echeng county, Hubei province for 1,061 young people who had just signed up to the PLA, with crowds of well-wishers thronging the 5 km-long main street of the small provincial town. At that moment, none of those recruits would have known that they were to be sent to Laos, a country that few had even heard of. Zheng Yunchang, a veteran from Echeng, recalled that:

At 3:00 p.m., a boxcar with more than 40 carriages carrying all the recruits, left the Echeng railway station. After five days in a boxcar, we arrived in Kunming on 19 December and then were then assigned to several towns around Pu’er City in Yunnan for military training.³⁹

35 *Zhandi junhun*, p. 14.

36 Ma Jinan, *Yuanyue yuanlao*, p. 230.

37 *Ibid.*

38 The PLA replaced the regular names with these code ones for two main reasons. First, aid to Laos was confidential, hence Beijing wished to conceal the fact that it was sending such large numbers of troops to Laos. Second, to alleviate Hanoi’s concerns about China’s involvement in Laos, Beijing called the units ‘engineering teams’ to indicate that it had no intention of competing with Hanoi for military leadership in Indochina.

39 Zheng Yunchang, ‘Women zai laowo de zhandou licheng’ [Our battle experiences in Laos], in *Teshu shiming: Hubei ezhouji laozhanshi yuanlao kangmei huiyilu* [Special mission: Memoirs of veterans in Ezhou, Hubei province, who helped Laos resist the United States], ed. Chen Yunhuo (Beijing: Zhongguo shici yinglian chubanshe, 2018), p. 8. Boxcars were frequently used to transport military personnel because of the shortage of regular trains.

Table 1. Selected Chinese units and code names in Laos during the Second Indochina War

Original PLA unit	Code name in Laos	No. of people	Date of entry into Laos	Affiliation
15th and 19th Division of Antiaircraft Artillery	303 Main Detachment	8,409	Dec. 1970	Kunming Military Area Command
307 Regiment	701 Large Detachment	4,300	Sept. 1968	Shenyang Military Area Command
179 Regiment	719 Large Detachment	3,932	Sept. 1971	Second Artillery Corps
146 Regiment	726 Large Detachment	2,991	Nov. 1973	Beijing Military Area Command

Sources: Interview with Wu Aikui, Yang Qinghai, 'Yuanlao kangmei zhanzheng canzhan budui xulie yilan biao [List of troops participating in the 'Resist US (Aggression) and Aid Laos']', manuscript, and Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, pp. 425–26.

These recruits could only speculate from the direction of their movement that they were headed to a neighbouring country in the south.⁴⁰ Wang Xinhua and Cao Xiangren were two other recruits from Echeng, who were assigned to Mojiang County (Yunnan) for training. On the way from Kunming to Mojiang, Cao said to Wang: 'The road is so steep and there are no people after crossing so many mountains. Probably [the Army] is going to send us abroad.'⁴¹ During the two months of military training in Yunnan, some recruits wondered why they didn't have a unit number like other PLA recruits. Platoon leader Tan Qiongfang told his soldiers sternly, 'This is an army secret. From now on, you guys should remember not to ask these questions. You will know the reason at the right time.'⁴² Hu Yingchun, who was assigned to the 311th Regiment of the PLA combat engineering troop recalled that the drillmasters were all wearing grey outfits, which made them resemble workers. The drillmasters' outfits led the recruits to believe they would be sent to be workers instead of soldiers, therefore, the recruits collectively remonstrated with their officers that they had signed up not to be defence workers, but soldiers. In response, the officer in charge of receiving the recruits was forced to repeatedly emphasise that they still belonged to the PLA regardless of their uniforms.⁴³

It was not until late February 1970, after two months of military training, that the army officially informed the soldiers of the true nature of their mission in Laos. Liu Xuanlin wrote the following in his diary in February 1970: 'the regimental

40 *Zhanyou yuanlao kangmei sishiwu zhounian huimou* [Comrades in arms' recollections on the 45th anniversary of helping Laos resist the United States], ed. Wangjun (Guangzhou: Zhujiang wenyi, 2016), p. 19.

41 Wang Xinhua, 'Laowo zhanji' [Battlefield in Laos], in Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, p. 49.

42 Zhou Dayan, 'Lizhi congjun baoxiao zuguo' [Enlist in order to defend the country], in Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, p. 14.

43 Hu Yingchun, 'Guanghui de zhandou licheng' [Glorious battle history], in Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, p. 181.

commander came to our new army company, announcing that we are a special army, implementing the proletarian revolutionary line of Chairman Mao and the internationalist obligation, which is resisting US aggression and supporting revolution in Indochina.⁴⁴ All recruits received about ten days of ideological and political education before entering Laos; as [fig. 2](#) shows, the main content related to proletarian internationalism and folk customs, and the political situation in Indochina. The second document, the PLA's code of conduct for its troops in Laos, replaces 'Laos' (*Lao*) with 'X' because the Laos mission was a secret.

After several days of study and discussion, each recruit had to vow to fulfil the obligations of proletarian internationalism.⁴⁵ The last thing the soldiers did before entering Laos was to change their uniforms, removing all items with Chinese lettering. The troops in Laos wore two kinds of uniforms: engineering troops wore grey, while combat forces donned the uniforms of the Lao Peoples' Liberation Army (the Pathet Lao forces). Yang Qinghai, a military engineer of the 117th Regiment of Kunming Military Area Command dispatched in 1972, recalled:

After the intensive training, we recruits took off the PLA uniforms that we had only worn for less than two months, and then changed into plain grey civvies. Everyone wrapped up their PLA uniforms, wrote their names, and placed farewell letters in their knapsacks, which were handed over to the army. It was forbidden to make contact with outsiders. We could only use the code name of our military unit in Laos instead of the formal unit number. From then on, our families in China had no idea where we were. Each person carried a backpack, a gun, 120 bullets, two grenades, five days of dry food, and a pick-shovel.⁴⁶

As mentioned, the soldiers came from different domestic PLA units and were then reorganised in Yunnan to better suit the situation in Laos. Li Xilin, originally from the 44th Division of the 15th Army PLA Air Force Airborne Corps, was assigned to the 43rd Regiment of the 15th Division of Anti-Aircraft Artillery, which was responsible for air defence operations in Laos. Because Li's unit belonged to the combat forces, the military uniform they wore was that of the Lao Peoples' Liberation Army, which differed from that of the engineers.⁴⁷

Most of the Chinese soldiers were drafted into the engineering detachments involved in road construction. As [fig. 3](#) shows, the Chinese soldiers built seven main transport arteries through northern Laos. Road construction operations were only completed in April 1978—more than two years after the Pathet Lao victory and three years after the end of the Vietnam War—and totalled 822 km of new roads,⁴⁸ providing the Pathet Lao-controlled areas in northern Laos with improved links as well as forming a sturdy infrastructure for China to transport resources as part of the country's assistance for the revolutions in Laos and Vietnam, as well as

44 Liu Xuanlin, 'Yuanlao kangmei zhandi riji zhailu shier pian' [Twelve war diaries of Laos]. Manuscript, 1970.

45 Xiong Fenghua, 'Cong xinbing dao banzhang: yuanlao kangmei de junlv shengya' [From recruits to squad leaders: military career in the battlefield in Laos], in Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, pp. 31–2.

46 Interview with Yang Qinghai, Tangshan City, Hebei province, China, 25 Sept. 2021.

47 Interview with Li Xilin, Ha Erbin City, Heilongjiang province, China, 14 Nov. 2021.

48 Chen Yunhuo, *Teshu shiming*, p. 1.

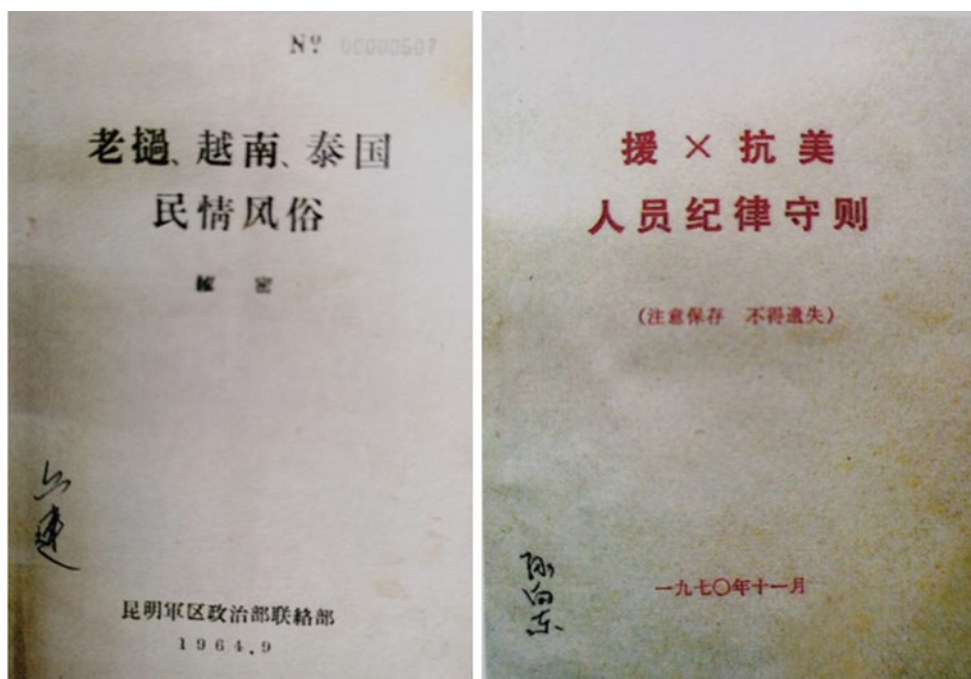


Figure 2. (Left) Teaching material to introduce the folk customs of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam for the Laos assistance campaign published by the Kunming Military Area Command in 1964. (Right) Handbook on disciplinary rules for troops entering Laos. (Collection of Wu Aikui).

the communists in Thailand. It should be noted that the earliest road, measuring 81,476 km, was built between February 1962 and March 1963 in Phongsaly, which was before Chinese soldiers entered Laos in large numbers.

Combat, sickness and survival

Details of the mobilisation and command of troops entering Laos at the Central Military Commission (CMC)⁴⁹ level remain classified, hence as yet there are no available archival sources that can offer further details. However, we can still derive a rough outline of the operations in Laos based on extensive interviews with the Chinese ex-servicemen. The supreme order to mobilise troops usually came directly from Mao Zedong as Chairman of the CMC. The 11.18 CMC Order has been referenced by many ex-servicemen of the 15th and 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Divisions of the Air Force as their first military order from Chairman Mao, who signed and issued it on 18 November 1970. This order mainly related to the designated mission of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery troops and their deployment in Laos, stating:

Order the 15th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division of the Air Force and the 19th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division ... enter Laos on 28 December [1970] to take over the

49 The CMC is China's supreme national defence body and supervised its troops in Laos.



Figure 3. Overview of roads constructed by China in Laos, 1961–78. (Collection of Wu Aikui).

defence of the 72nd Division of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division of the Air Force. Undertake the combat task of covering the air safety of the Chinese road construction forces at Hongsa [Sainyabouli], Muang Xay [Oudomxay], Muang Khoua [Phongsaly] ... and accept the command of the Kunming Military Area Command. Hoping [all the soldiers] hold the great red flag of Mao Zedong Thought, highlight proletarian politics and complete tasks.⁵⁰

50 11.18 Operation Order (CMC), cited by Liu Peiyi, *Laowo zhandi*, p. 12.

The 11.18 Order (CMC) also showed that Laos had become a training ground for the PLA. At any given time during this period, a large number of Chinese troops were sent to fight in Laos, typically replacing others who were sent back home after their stint.⁵¹ It was the CMC that supervised the deployment of each army unit, including their individual stations in Laos.

The campaign in Laos was harsh for China's military conscripts as the air defence operations were difficult and exhausting. Although the details of the operations in Laos are not known to the public, some information about their combat conditions were incorporated into the internal reference materials of the PLA. Those experiences formed indelible memories for each and every Chinese soldier who fought in the arena. A PLA Air Force internal publication stated that air defence operations were conducted by two battalions of the 15th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division from 21 December 1971 to 30 December 1971 at Pak Beng, close to the border with Thailand. In those ten days the Chinese anti-aircraft division downed four US aircraft, including a C-45 Expeditor, a Douglas C-47 Skytrain, a Fairchild C-123K Provider, and an OV-10A Air Tactical Aircraft.⁵² Figure 4 shows that the Chinese troops also recovered the identify cards of American pilots whose planes were shot down in air defence operations in Laos.

A military intelligence document from the 303 Detachment in 1972 showed that a large number of US Air Force planes carried out reconnaissance and bombing missions in the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) of the PLA and the Pathet Lao from Thailand.⁵³ There were two air routes for US aircraft entering the PLA and the Pathet Lao-controlled areas from Thailand: the eastern air route passed through the Plain of Jars while the western route passed through Sainyabuli province.⁵⁴ As a US ally, the Thai government of Thanom Kittikachorn (1963–73), which had deployed troops in Laos to fight the Pathet Lao, had intended to capture several strongholds in Pak Beng to cut off the road connection with northern Thailand and mitigate threats to air routes.⁵⁵ However, probably in order to avoid direct conflict with the PLA, the Thanom government did not carry out military operations in the end.

In their oral history accounts, Chinese veterans recorded an air raid which they called the '5.14 battle' on 14 May 1971 at the Muang Khoua defence area in Phongsaly province. The battle is considered common knowledge among veterans but has never been acknowledged in the PLA's official publications or public archives. During the

51 According to the author's interviews, some troops served in Laos for more than two years because of the Lin Biao incident. On 13 September 1971, following increasingly strained relations with Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, CMC's vice chairman and highest-ranking military officer, flew out of Shanhaiguan Airport without authorisation. He died when his plane crashed close to the border of Mongolia and the Soviet Union. The incident caused serious disruptions within the PLA and delayed the replacement of troops in Laos in 1971.

52 'Bannamao fangqu gaoshepaobing budui kangji meidi OV-10A xing duo yongtu feiji dikong zhencha de zhandou' [The battle between anti-aircraft artillery forces in the Bannamao defence zone against low-altitude reconnaissance of American OV-10A aircraft], in *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun kongjun gaoshepaobing zhanli xuanbian* [Selected combat cases of anti-aircraft artillery of the Air Force of the Chinese People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: PLA General Headquarters of the Air Force, 1975), pp. 69–71.

53 'Yijiu qiye nian diqing zonghe' [Comprehensive analysis of enemy military intelligence in 1971], Chinese Road Engineering Team 303 detachment, 15 Jan. 1972, p. 2. Collection of Wu Aikui.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., pp. 5–6.



Figure 4. Identity cards and flight logs of American and allied pilots seized by Chinese soldiers in Laos (Photograph by Liu Peiyi, collection of Wu Aikui).

Second Indochina War, Muang Khoua was the eastern terminus of the No. 4 Road built by the Chinese army and was also the transport hub for China's aid to Laos and North Vietnam. It was for this reason that the Kunming Military Area Command stationed around 1,000 combat forces there, including the Independent Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion of the 11th Army, the Second Battalion of the 44th Regiment, and the Anti-Aircraft Machine Gun Company of the 15th Division.

After more than two months of aerial reconnaissance, US aircraft bombed the Chinese troops in the Muang Khoua defence zone on 14 May 1971 when three groups of fighter-bombers (McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II) attacked the defence position of the 44th Regiment, a strike that accounted for more than half of the casualties in the Fourth Company and the Fifth Company.⁵⁶ The PRC could not, of course, mention the attack in its public media since the PLA presence in Laos was secret. Wang Yufu, an army engineer stationed next to the anti-aircraft men, recalled:

Because there were spies on the ground who cooperated with their command, the American pilots dropped their bombs very accurately. The first round of bombs destroyed the artillery radar command vehicle, while the second round of bombs made a direct hit on the artillery ammunition depot. Then [the bombers] dropped countless cluster bombs on the defensive positions.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Zhandi junhun*, pp. 49–52.

⁵⁷ Wang Yufu, 'Nanwang 5.14 zhandou jiuyuan de xuese' [Unforgettable 5.14 battle rescue], in *Teshu shiming*, pp. 64–5.

Shen Jinshun, the squad leader of the Fourth Company, stated: ‘Countless shiny dots were constantly displayed on the fluorescent radar screen, and the commands from headquarters were garbled by radio waves and noise.’⁵⁸

The soldiers were deeply distressed upon surveying the extent of damage that they had suffered from the shelling. As Wang recalled:

We ran to the artillery position to rescue the wounded. We observed scenes of devastation. Hundreds of officers and soldiers were injured and killed. There were corpses and blood everywhere, and some limbs and organs hung on the branches ... The whole river was dyed red.⁵⁹

It was also on this day that Wu Aikui, the leader of Troop Truck Company of the 15th Division Headquarters, received an order from his superiors to build dozens of coffins and to transport the remains from Muang Khoua. Wu said:

We placed our comrades’ bodies of into coffins and carried them to a cemetery in Laos for burial. Every coffin was carried by eight people. Blood kept flowing out of the coffins. It was difficult to walk uphill. Miss Jia, a head nurse dressed in the military uniform of the Lao People’s Liberation Army, also came to help carry the coffins. All our clothes were stained red with blood.⁶⁰

The trauma of war that besets veterans is both physical and psychological. Ma Jinan recorded that in October 1969, a Chinese soldier walking along a newly built road suffered a sudden, serious injury following a US air raid. He was immediately sent to a nearby army field hospital but his leg had been blown off and he was covered in shrapnel. He was devastated and felt that he was a disabled person. He kept crying and refusing treatment. He contemplated suicide, relenting only thanks to the calming words and patience of the hospital’s doctors and nurses.⁶¹

Li Xisheng, originally a soldier of the 15th Army of Airborne Forces was assigned to the 15th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Division in Laos in August 1971 because of the casualties in the battle of the 15th Division which was responsible for the air defence operations in Laos. He wrote:

Every time I see the scene of war on TV, I cannot help lamenting why there is war in the world. I was a soldier who personally experienced the cruelty of war. This is a lingering memory throughout my life ... What I saw on the battlefield were burning trees and dismembered bodies of comrades. Those young people who were only 18 or 19 years old died in another country. They did not even have the chance to wear the real PLA uniform. From then on, I have prayed for world peace and no more war.⁶²

Besides ruthless battles, these soldiers in Laos also suffered from the unforgiving climate, malnutrition and tropical diseases. The Chinese soldiers who found

58 Shen Jinshun, ‘5.14 zhandou jishi’ [5.14 battle record], in *Zhanyou*, p. 214.

59 Wang Yufu, ‘Nanwang 5.14 zhandou jiuyuan de xuese’, pp. 64–5.

60 Interview with Wu Aikui, Taiyuan City, Shanxi province, China, 24 Sept. 2021.

61 Ma Jinan, ‘Yuanyue yuanlao kangmei qinliji’ [Personal experience of helping Laos and Vietnam resist the United States], *Crossroads: Southeast Asian Studies* 10 (2002): 15.

62 Li Xisheng, ‘Chuanguo zhanhuo xiaoyan de suiye’ [Through the years of war], in *Zhanyou*, pp. 207–9.

themselves in Laos were unaccustomed to the country, particularly the oppressive weather, which caused many to lose their appetite. They struggled too with the dearth of fresh vegetables in their diet, finding themselves forced to eat canned beef and mutton, which resulted in nutritional imbalances. The Logistics Department of the PLA transported pigs, cattle, fresh eggs, and vegetables from Kunming once a week but sending vegetables to Laos took at least five days. Most of the fresh vegetables rotted en route due to the hot weather.⁶³ Therefore, Chinese soldiers were generally weak and physically not very fit. Infectious diseases such as fulminant hepatitis, malaria, leptospirosis, and dysentery were also rampant in the army.⁶⁴ Yuan Shili recalled that 'Once Chinese soldiers in Laos were infected with acute icteric hepatitis, they would lose their lives if they were not rescued in time. Eating more white sugar can prevent acute jaundice and hepatitis, so the PLA gave everyone two kilograms of white sugar every month.'⁶⁵ Leptospirosis was mainly transmitted through water. The 143 Field Hospital in Laos once received some recruits with a high fever from the same unit who were all infected by leptospirosis.⁶⁶

To maintain the health of the Chinese troops in Laos as well as that of the Pathet Lao forces, between 1968 and 1978, the PLA set up ten large military field hospitals (see table 2) and numerous field medical stations along the newly constructed roads. The 139 Field Hospital, the first of its kind in Laos, established a 100-bed hospital in secret in Namong district, Oudomxay province in 1968, some 53 km from the border with China.⁶⁷ In 1968, Guo Yuanming, a translator, entered Laos covertly, with about 100 medical and nursing personnel of the 139 Field Hospital to work in Namong. The 139 Field Hospital at that time attended mainly to wounded patients from Vietnam, Laos, and China. The hospital was semi-closed which imposed restrictions on access by external personnel, and there were special transportation channels for daily necessities and medical supplies. Guo recalled that most patients in the hospital were suffering from malaria, which was one of the most serious diseases that caused non-combat attrition in the army.⁶⁸

The huge number of Chinese soldiers involved in infrastructure construction, ground security, and air defence operations in Laos meant that the PLA's logistics supply chain had to be robust. The Pathet Lao also needed a lot of supplies for its civil war campaign in Laos. The operation was run by the 22nd Branch of the PLA General Logistics Department,⁶⁹ in Mengla County in China, and comprised more than 2,600 transport vehicles and over 900 mules and horses, travelling frequently between China and Laos.⁷⁰ After the automobile brigade of the 22nd Branch unloaded

63 Zheng Shiyong, 'Fu laowo xiuqiao zhulu jianwen' [Experience of road construction in Laos], *Zhongheng* [Across time and space] 11 (2002): 26–8.

64 Ibid.

65 Yuan Shili, 'Wode yuanlao kangmei shengya' [My experience of helping Laos resist the United States], *Wenshi tiandi* [Literature and History] 6 (2015): 75–6.

66 Ibid.

67 Guo Yuanming, 'Yi junlv shengya li nanguo miyun'.

68 Ibid.

69 Interview with Wu Aikui.

70 Su Ziling, 'Zai yuanlao kangmei de rizi li' [In the days of helping Laos resist the United States], *Wen Shi Jing Hua* [Culture and History] 3 (2005): 49.

Table 2. List of Chinese field hospitals in Laos

Name of hospital	Service period in Laos	Area of responsibility	Code unit in Laos
138 Field Hospital	N/A	N/A	N/A
139 Field Hospital	Sept. 1968–Apr. 1978	No. 1 Road; No. 3 Road	N/A
142 Field Hospital	Nov. 1968–Apr. 1978	No. 3 Road; New East Road	N/A
143 Field Hospital	Sept. 1971–May. 1974	No. 1 Road; No. 3 Road	N/A
144 Field Hospital	1975–May. 1978	New East Road	N/A
145 Field Hospital	Dec. 1973–Apr. 1978	New East Road	82 Detachment
61 Field Hospital	N/A	N/A	N/A
62 Field Hospital	N/A	N/A	N/A
80 Field Hospital	Mar. 1970–76	No. 1 Road	
2nd Air Force Field Hospital	Dec. 1970–Jan. 1972	No. 1 Road, No. 2 Road	303 Detachment

Sources: Yang Qinghai, 'Yuanlao kangmei,' interview with Wu Aikui and Guo Yuanming, 'Yi junlv shengya'.

supplies in Mengla, PLA trucks then transported these materials into areas controlled by the Pathet Lao, a journey that took another two to three days.

Wu Aikui's transport company, which was responsible for transporting guns, ammunition, food, and other supplies to the 15th and 19th divisions of the Anti-Aircraft Artillery (303 Main Detachment), had 8,409 personnel in Laos. Wu's truck company commuted between China and Laos everyday laden with food and ammunition. Each transport platoon comprised 36 trucks with normally two platoons being dispatched for each transportation task, taking around 150 tons of goods on each journey.⁷¹ Wu said:

Our supplies are given to both Chinese soldiers and the Pathet Lao. All the guns, ammunition, uniforms, cars, and even the towels of the Pathet Lao were provided by China. Each of our truck transport teams was led by two platoon leaders and a company commander. The soldiers were each equipped with a submachine gun.⁷²

Wu added that the biggest risk during the transportation phase was aerial bombardments, which forced their vehicles into the jungle in order to evade the overhead attacks.

Gong Lijun, deputy director of the PLA General Logistics Department, who was in charge of supplies to Laos, lamented that:

The Pathet Lao had a very close and friendly relationship with us [PLA], but they often wasted bullets ... Their supplies came too easily to be used responsibly. We [PLA] provided cars to the Pathet Lao. These cars were made in Nanjing and were adapted for the

71 Interview with Wu Aikui.

72 Ibid.

complex weather and geographical environment [in Laos] ... But they [the Pathet Lao] never repaired cars. Whenever a new car was delivered, they just drove it. Whenever a car broke down, no matter how major or minor the problems, [the Pathet Lao] discarded it and asked for a new one. I visited the shops in Laos ... almost all the products were provided by China.⁷³

Ethnic minorities in China's southwest frontier also played a role in the campaign in Laos. Since the border zone between Laos and Yunnan had several ethnic minority groups living in both countries, the PLA recruited many minority soldiers to undertake ground operations and policing in northern Laos. The army of ethnic minorities was mainly composed of Dai (Tai Leu), Jingpo (Kachin), and Lisu, of which Dai (Tai Leu) accounted for the vast majority. Currently available sources show that these soldiers were from PLA 0435 unit, which was a frontier force in Yunnan, and were incorporated into the 723 Detachment after entering Laos.⁷⁴

These ethnic minority units were adept at fighting in the tropical jungles of Southeast Asia. And more importantly, their languages and cultures shared similarities with those of the local people. The advantage that their language afforded them meant that these ethnic soldiers were also able to play the role of translators for the army. Yang Qinghai recalled that there were many ethnic minority soldiers from Guangxi and Yunnan provinces in his regiment, who not only resembled Lao people but could communicate with the local Lao too.⁷⁵ Several Tai languages would have been close enough to Lao that a certain degree of mutual intelligibility was possible, and other groups like the Jingpo or Lisu would often speak a Tai language as a *lingua franca*.

However, for Han soldiers, the folk customs and natural environment in Laos were particularly bewildering. Most Chinese soldiers from the north found the variety of trees in the forests of Laos dazzling. They were particularly awestruck by *Bombax ceiba*, commonly known as the red cotton tree, which grows up to an average of 20 metres high. The earliest book about China's role on the battlefield in Laos, titled *Red Cotton Tree*, was written by Liu Shaoliang, an ex-serviceman, and published in 2004.⁷⁶

Cultural differences occasionally caused misunderstandings between the Chinese and Lao people. Zheng Shiyong recalled that the Lao climbed mountains in search of little mice nests, placed them on banana leaves in bamboo tubes before adding rice wine and roasting them over a fire for the Chinese soldiers to eat. However, the Chinese soldiers did not dare to eat such food. The Pathet Lao's foreign affairs department felt compelled to complain to the PLA leaders, decrying the Chinese soldiers as disrespectful and impolite. After learning of the brouhaha, the PLA leaders instructed their troops to respect the lifestyles and habits of Laotians and to gradually adapt to these habits and improve their relations with the locals.⁷⁷ Another cultural

73 He Libo, 'Xin zhongguo' [The process of China's assistance], pp. 33–4.

74 Shang Yian, *The Republic will never forget*, pp. 299–308.

75 Interview with Yang Qinghai, Tangshan City, Hebei province, China, 25 Sept. 2021.

76 Liu Shaoliang, *Mumian hong: zai laowo shangliao zhandou de riri yeye* [Red cotton tree: Days and nights of fighting in northern Laos] (Hongkong: Dadao, 2004).

77 Zheng Shiyong, 'Fu laowo', p. 27.

misunderstanding recorded by the Chinese soldiers was that the rivers and streams in northern Laos were abundant with fish, yet some locals regarded fish as sacred and so refrained from eating them. Some of the malnourished Chinese soldiers resorted to using detonators to blast the fish in the river—incurring the wrath of the PLA headquarters on grounds of cultural insensitivity.⁷⁸

In addition, Chinese soldiers also had operational-level interactions with Vietnamese soldiers, a significant force that had deeply penetrated Laos. Qiao Shulin, who served at the 513 Radar Station at No. 1 Road, often encountered squads of Pathet Lao soldiers in the village near the radar station. The local interpreter told him that each squad had a Vietnamese military adviser.⁷⁹ The North Vietnamese had been distrustful of China's involvement in Laos since the early 1960s, fearing that China would squeeze the DRV's revolutionary leadership on the battlefield.⁸⁰ To be able to coexist harmoniously with DRV troops, there was a strict delineation of stationed areas and activity range between the PLA and the Peoples Army of North Vietnam (PAVN). The PLA had strict rules on contact and even social interactions with the Vietnamese in Laos. According to Article 27 of the Foreign Affairs Regulations issued by the PLA Headquarters to its troops in Laos, soldiers were allowed to participate in Vietnamese festivals or entertainment by invitation, but if the Vietnamese talked about the political affairs of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and China, the Chinese were to refrain from expressing their views but report on their conversations to superiors.⁸¹

As part of a combat force, on 23 September 1971, Zhou Xianping led nine Chinese soldiers into an area controlled by the Vietnamese army to search for the wreckage of an American aircraft shot down by the Chinese. The PAVN company commander and commissar were all trained in Nanning, Guangxi, and warmly received Zhou and his party.⁸² However, not all the interactions between the Chinese and Vietnamese soldiers in Laos were harmonious. Chinese and Vietnamese soldiers' sentiments towards each other were also profoundly influenced by domestic and international politics. As a logistics officer, Wu Aikui recounts an unsettling encounter with the Vietnamese army when he travelled to Laos. Wu explained:

At that time, Nixon visited China [in 1972], and the Vietnamese were dissatisfied with us. I drove a car with other soldiers on a small road in Laos. There was a jeep in front, with a few Vietnamese soldiers sitting on it, holding guns. They would not give way to us and refused to let us pass. They were prejudiced against us. One of my soldiers from Taishan, Guangdong, was impetuous. He loaded a submachine gun, and it scared the Vietnamese and drove [them] away. At that time, the Vietnamese hated us very much.⁸³

78 He Libo, 'Xin zhongguo yuanlao', p. 34.

79 Qiao Shulin, 'Zai naxie rizi li' [Those days in Laos], in *Zhanyou*, p. 141.

80 Shu Quanzhi, 'Vietnam–Laos communist relations and China, 1949–1975', p. 248. In addition, the DRV and China also disagreed on the approach to the Laos revolution. *Ibid.*, pp. 230–47.

81 Road Construction Team 301 Main Detachment, 'Guanyu yuanlao zhulu zhong waishi gongzuo ruogan juti wenti chuli de zanxing guiding' [Interim provisions on the handling of specific issues concerning foreign affairs work in the process of assisting Laos in road construction], 11 Oct 1973. Quoted in *Teshu shiming*, p. 431.

82 Zhou Xianping, 'Yike zidan zai fei' [Firing bullets], in *Zhanyou*, p. 301.

83 Interview with Wu Aikui.

Generally speaking, however, the Chinese forces recognised the Vietnamese ‘sphere of influence’ within Laos and did not seek to challenge it. Although there were sometimes differences of opinion between Vietnamese and Chinese advisers as to what strategy the Pathet Lao should follow, the PLA men tended to defer to their PAVN counterparts, and there are no known examples of clashes between the two forces during the Second Indochina War.⁸⁴

At the end of a long tour of duty in Laos, the Chinese soldiers yearned for the news that they would soon be going home. Indeed the soldiers hoped that the war would end early, so they could go home as soon as possible. Chinese troops stationed in Laos were rotated, with each company spending one to two years in the country before being replaced by the next. Yu Ping recalled the day in 1972 when his division received the CMC order to return to China:

We couldn’t believe it was true when we heard this information, everyone was super excited, we asked and confirmed again and again with one another, we were so longing to return home at that time ... The moment we stepped across the Chinese border, our excitement could not be expressed in words. We had finally got away from the war and returned to the motherland.⁸⁵

The last contingent of Chinese soldiers only left Laos in April 1978 after the completion of the New East Road (Xin dongxian), marking the end of China’s wartime assistance to Laos. The last Chinese troops to leave Laos included 3,318 soldiers attached to the 143 Regiment of the Nanjing Military Area Command, 820 from the Fourth Independent Battalion of the Kunming Military Area Command, and 300 from the First Battalion of the 86th Regiment of the Kunming Military Area Command.

From top secret campaign to publicity

Chinese soldiers who returned from Laos adhered to a vow of silence about their operations for decades. It was not until the early twenty-first century that some ex-servicemen first began to break their silence, opening up about the *Yuanlao kangmei* campaign in three ways: publishing books and articles, social media postings and podcasts, and organising livestreamed commemorations on the Internet. As mentioned, Liu Shaoliang’s *Red Cotton Tree* was the earliest publication of its type, written in 2004.⁸⁶

Some three years later, Chinese soldiers who had fought in Laos were officially included in the preferential treatment programme for war veterans by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs. The Chinese government defined these individuals as those who were drafted to Southeast Asia to provide military assistance and perform internationalist missions during the Cold War, and as such qualified for state welfare.⁸⁷ Although there was still no official acknowledgment of *Yuanlao kangmei*,

84 Beijing and Hanoi differed on their approaches to revolution in Laos. For one thing, the Chinese emphasised the importance of class analysis in mass mobilisation and land reform. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, preferred a more moderate approach. See Shu, ‘Vietnam–Laos’, pp. 240–45.

85 Yu Ping, ‘Bei yiwang de zhanzheng’ [Forgotten war], in *Zhanyou*, pp. 88–9.

86 *Zhandi junhun*, p. 54. See also Liu Peiyi, *Laowo zhandi*, p. 152.

87 Archives of the Department of Civil Affairs of Guangdong Province, ‘Sheng minzhengting guanyu

this was nevertheless the Chinese government's way of rewarding and compensating military personnel who had served overseas during the Cold War. Since then, ex-servicemen have gone on to publish more than thirty books about their experiences in Laos, though most of these books were circulated largely among fellow former soldiers.

At the time of writing, it was the very same veterans who fought in Laos who have shed light on a hitherto opaque period. Of the 19 journal and magazine articles about Chinese soldiers in Laos found in the National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI),⁸⁸ 18 were penned by ex-servicemen themselves. Given that China, has to date, not published or made available any official transcripts of the episode, the depiction of China's involvement in Laos during the Cold War is derived almost exclusively from personal recollections, particularly those of lower-ranking former soldiers—those closest to the battleground, in accounts that are inevitably personal and emotional. Nevertheless, Chinese officials have patently acquiesced in the former soldiers' disclosures—and have done so for three main reasons. First, the Pathet Lao were, ultimately, victorious in Laos. Therefore, the disclosure of this history would not prejudice diplomatic relations between the two countries—and could even enhance bilateral relations. Second, the ex-servicemen were well organised, in large numbers, and a strong enough social force that the government could not completely ignore their desire for public recognition of their Cold War-era missions. Third, the relationship between China and Vietnam was generally good by 2000, so China did not worry about angering Vietnam with accounts of its own historically significant role in Laos.

The soldiers who served in Laos have organised numerous unofficial commemorative activities to bring their stories into the public domain. 'For more than 40 years, we have adhered to the discipline of the army, that is, state secrets. We had no soldiers abroad. We must keep it a secret. The reason for speaking out now is to let people know the past and a history that the people know little of. It is time to make it public,' said Wang Jianguo.⁸⁹ His sentiments were echoed by Yang Qinghai: 'Our mission in Laos was confidential before 2007, and we were not allowed to speak out. Now, from 2007, we are the objects of preferential treatment for ex-servicemen, we finally could talk about it openly.'⁹⁰

During the Laos campaigns, many fallen Chinese soldiers were buried in the martyrs' cemeteries in Laos.⁹¹ In May 2009, a group of ex-servicemen came together to sweep the tombs of the Chinese soldiers in Laos, an initiative that attracted the attention the Chinese media. Wang Jun, the organiser of the tomb-sweeping activity, said:

kaizhan bufen jundui tuiyi renyuan shenfen rending gongzuo de tongzhi' [The Provincial Civil Affairs Department carried out the identification of military retirees], Archive no. 006940175/2007-00074, 6 Aug. 2007.

88 CNKI is a key national research and publishing institution in China, led by Tsinghua University.

89 Interview with Wang Jianguo, Zhuhai City, Guangdong province, China, 29 Nov. 2021.

90 Interview with Yang Qinghai, Tangshan City, Hebei province, China, 25 Sept. 2021. 2007 was the 80th anniversary of the PLA. The government likely took this opportunity to increase military loyalty through preferential treatment for veterans and recognition of past exploits.

91 There are three Chinese PLA martyrs' cemeteries located in the former battlegrounds of northern Laos, in Phonsavan (Xiangkhouang province), and Muang Xay and Namou (in Oudomxay province).

We went to Laos to sweep the graves of Chinese soldiers, which attracted the attention of the media. It was at that point that we shattered the silence of history, revealed a military secret, let the families of many martyrs trace the remnants of their relatives, and fully understand that they died not in any engineering accident, but in the service of their country.⁹²

In the ensuing ten years, Chinese ex-servicemen have made several visits to the Laos and renewed the martyrs' cemeteries to keep the graves neat and tidy. In 2016, Chinese ex-servicemen in Shanxi province raised funds through private donations to build a memorial park for the Chinese soldiers from the province who were killed in battle in Laos. This was reported by China News Service (CNS), the second largest state-owned news agency after Xinhua. On 14 May 2016, more than 400 former Chinese soldiers and their families from all over China gathered in the new Yuanlao Kangmei Memorial Park on the outskirts of Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi, to jointly commemorate their compatriots who were killed in Laos 40 years earlier.⁹³ 'In the past, we didn't have a place to hold a memorial ceremony for our relatives who gave their lives in Laos. Now we have finally fulfilled the wishes of our parents and our generation,' said Li Linping, in a CNS interview.⁹⁴

In recent years, a large number of ex-servicemen have turned to social media to tell their stories of their time in Laos. These postings and broadcasts have attracted a lot of attention especially on *Kwaishou*, a popular video-sharing phone app used by the ex-servicemen. In 2021 Yang Qinghai the military engineer in the 117th Regiment of Kunming Military Region introduced earlier, had nearly 30,000 followers on *Kwaishou*. His show has attracted many veterans of the Laos campaigns, who chat online on his live broadcast every week, remembering their warime experiences.⁹⁵

In general, the middle- and lower-ranking ex-servicemen have become the main group promoting the declassification of China's secret war in Laos. The commemorations, publishing, and fundraising for the construction of martyrs' cemeteries and museums are all unofficial activities organised by the veterans themselves. Since neither China nor the United States officially declared their involvement in the war in Laos, the Chinese government has also kept silent but acquiesced to relevant commemorative activities for veterans. In the absence of an official narrative, these former soldiers have constructed a multi-perspective and personalised history of the secret war.

Americans who were also immersed in the battlefields of Indochina, both in Vietnam and Laos, have published many books, articles, and documentaries in recent decades, that have shaped the depiction of the war in Indochina in the American collective memory. The narratives written by US soldiers constitute an extremely important part of the historical collective memory of and public response to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War and this wellspring of literature has also

92 Zhou Zhenfu, 'Laobing huijia qishilu' [Revelation of veterans returning home], in *Zhanyou*, p. 43.

93 Fan Lifang, 'Sibai duoming kangmei yuanlao laobing shanxi shouju zichou yuanlin ji zhanyou' [More than 400 Shanxi veterans who helped Laos resist the US gathered in Taiyuan for the first time to build a memorial cemetery at their own expense], *China News Service (CNS)*, 14 May 2016, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/mil/2016/05-14/7870650.shtml>.

94 Ibid.

95 Interview with Yang Qinghai, Tangshan City, Hebei province, China, 25 Sept. 2021.

provided significant material for historians and other scholars.⁹⁶ As Chinese veterans were not at liberty to relate their experiences for a long time, their experiences were omitted from Cold War historiography.

Since the mid-2000s in particular, Chinese ex-servicemen began to collate their personal stories, which they have disseminated via both in print and online, in an effort to shed more light on the wars in Indochina. It is particularly noteworthy that this material, focused on a still largely taboo subject, has been published informally and at the veterans' own expense, without official permission. In stark contrast to the situation in the United States, these publications have not reached the mass market. Therefore, the memoirs of Chinese veterans are, unsurprisingly, quite different from those of their American counterparts. Most of the Chinese publications wield little social influence and have had minimal commercial success, being limited in circulation to fellow veterans. Unlike that of their American counterparts, the literature of Chinese veterans has not shaped public perceptions about China's role in the Indochina wars: their writings are not well known and as a result seldom referenced by Cold War historians.

In fact, these recent personal reflections on the war continue to support China's wartime policy on Laos. For American veterans on the other hand, the war in Indochina was waged in a distant and unfamiliar corner of the world. It was fought against enemies of whom little was known, and many appear unconvinced that it was truly in the United State's interests to have fought the war. Once again, this is in stark contrast to the Chinese veterans, who seem to have no doubts about the need to go to war and about the roles they played. They had and have little trouble in identifying the enemy and felt, unequivocally, that the main goal was to extirpate US hegemony from Southeast Asia. These soldiers also made it very clear that if Laos, which borders China's Yunnan province, had fallen into the hands of the Americans, it would surely have posed an existential threat to China's national security. Therefore, Chinese veterans appeared united in the belief that assisting Laos was the right strategy to safeguard national security.

The writings of American veterans and some high-ranking military officers and civilian leaders reveal more doubts and critical views of the Second Indochina War.⁹⁷ This highlights a weakness of Chinese literature on the war in Laos to date: the lack of works written by high-ranking political and military elites meant that there is also little strategic analysis, and this literature is limited to the circumscribed range of individual experiences. Nevertheless, these new sources also provide a valuable glimpse into China's role in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and reveal some details about the scale of the PLA's operations on the Southeast Asian frontlines.

Conclusion

Laos became a part of the battlefield of the Vietnam War, or the Second Indochina War. Although this period is often known as the Lao Civil War, it was not a civil war in the conventional sense, but a result of the struggles between several

96 John A. Wood, *Veteran narratives and the collective memory of the Vietnam War* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), pp. 4–5.

97 Wood, *Veteran narratives*, p. 97.

external powers, East and West. As the most influential communist country in the East, China was one of the significant external powers deeply embroiled in Indochinese affairs in the Cold War against the United States. China's strategy in Laos was aimed not at reining in the country's right-wing royalist forces, but at the greater objective of holding the United States in check. Accordingly, the name that China used for its military operations in Laos was *Yuanlao kangmei*, by analogy with its support for the anti-American conflicts in North Korea and Vietnam.

The PLA entered Laos en masse only in 1968 although it had already been offering various forms of assistance to anti-Western revolutionary elements in the wider region for ten years. The PLA's training of Lao language translators was an initial step albeit one that proved time-consuming. During 1961 and 1962, China also sent some troops to assist the Pathet Lao forces to take over and consolidate areas of northern Laos. When China stepped up its support for Laos in the late 1960s, a large number of PLA engineers and combat troops entered the Pathet Lao-controlled areas in northern Laos to help improve the strategically important road infrastructure connecting North Vietnam and northern Thailand with Laos. This road network became a vital conduit for China to transport resources and personnel in support of the Communist forces across mainland Southeast Asia. Because Laos was a small, impoverished nation lacking the resources and capacity to support China's massive military presence, a large number of PLA field hospitals were set up in Laos and a logistics network centred in Kunming, Yunnan province. China provided the Pathet Lao with military and matériel, including guns, ammunition, military vehicles, and uniforms. It is an irrefutable fact that China's involvement in Laos was an important factor in the Pathet Lao's military victory.

However, China's deployment of soldiers in Laos was highly confidential and was not, therefore, disclosed to the public. In fact, China and the United States both became engaged in a conflict in Laos without any formal declaration of war from either side and with a high degree of secrecy on both sides. (This was the case for North Vietnam's DRV as well.) Chinese soldiers were responsible for building roads, providing air defence, and ground security in northern Laos. Most of the Chinese soldiers sent to the battlefield in Laos were new recruits. After only two months of training in Yunnan, they marched to Laos in grey civvies or the Pathet Lao uniform. They battled not only the enemy but also various tropical diseases in Laos with many also traumatised by the intensity of combat. It would be several decades before the Chinese government issued any acknowledgement of these military operations.

In recent years, the very same Chinese ex-servicemen who had fought in Laos and witnessed the terrible loss of life there have spearheaded the de facto declassification of the campaign. Their books, journals, articles and social media postings have provided an exposé of China's assistance to revolutionaries in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. As the years passed, these so-called 'aid programmes' to Laos are no longer seen as confidentially sensitive information. Therefore, the Chinese government tacitly allows the recent revelations of its ex-servicemen through informal channels. Accordingly, a considerable amount of detail about China's assistance to the Pathet Lao is now in the public domain, which provides a valuable source of research on the history of China's assistance to Southeast Asian communist

revolutions during the Cold War. However, the literature by these Chinese ex-servicemen is not endorsed by the state, nor is it readily available to the general public. Its influence is largely limited to the circle of former soldiers. While the Chinese public in general remain unaware of the PLA's role in Laos, this literature clearly shows China's revolutionary assistance to Southeast Asia at the operational level.