

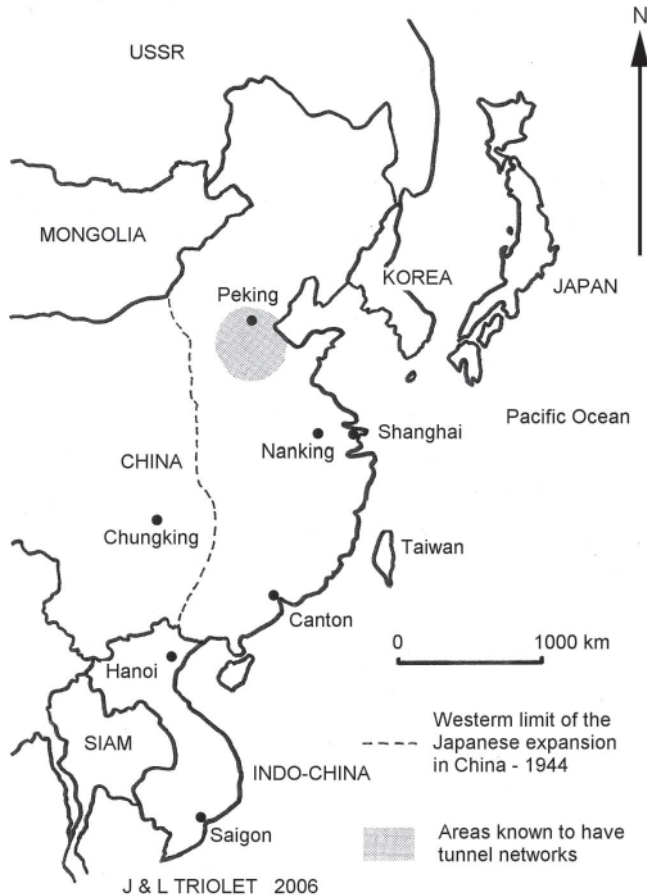
Tunnel Warfare – the Chinese concept of active underground shelters

Jérôme et Laurent Triolet

Translated from the French by Stewart Wild

During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the Chinese people dug tunnels similar to those used later in South Vietnam. In the early 1960s the village of Ranzhuang was the setting for a motivational film entitled *Tunnel Warfare* which promoted the idea of digging and fitting out secret tunnel networks to serve in the struggle of the weak against the powerful. This film, which came out in 1965, at the beginning of the American build-up in Vietnam, became effectively a do-it-yourself manual.

linking an underground infrastructure of command posts, storerooms, sick bays, canteens, toilets and so on. Entry points were hidden down a well, under a pile of hay, in a firepit, and so on. The tunnels were defended by a range of murderous devices like gun-slits, blind corners, and booby traps, plus a system of doors and barriers to counter the ingress of gas or water. Thousands of Chinese are reported to have been gassed by the Japanese.



Map of Japanese occupation of China showing area of tunnel networks

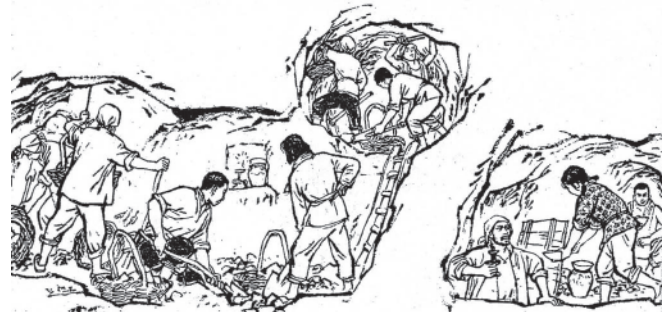
In the war against the Japanese, the Chinese peasants organised an underground resistance network that was the forerunner of the successful secret warfare later waged against the French and then the Americans in South Vietnam. Was this part of Chinese military tradition? Maybe not, but certainly there were more and more references to these tunnels known as

dì dào, or **地道**, a word-structure composed

of the pictogram **地** (earth) plus **道** (pathway), specifically meaning underground tunnels for warfare.

The Chinese tunnels

Vast networks of tunnels 1 to 1.50 m high and 70 to 80 cm wide were dug beneath many Chinese villages,



Ranzhuang 1942. After the initial Japanese offensive, the Chinese strive to turn their defensive tunnel shelters into active resistance networks

These sites today are found within a radius of about 250km around Beijing, and the two best-known, Ranzhuang in Hebei province (not far from Baoding), and Jiaoxuanghu north of Beijing, have been open to the public since the early 1960s.

China in the 1980s, relying no doubt on its vast size and peasant masses, had confidence in the *dì dào* tunnels and millions of men and women in people's militias to defend its territory.

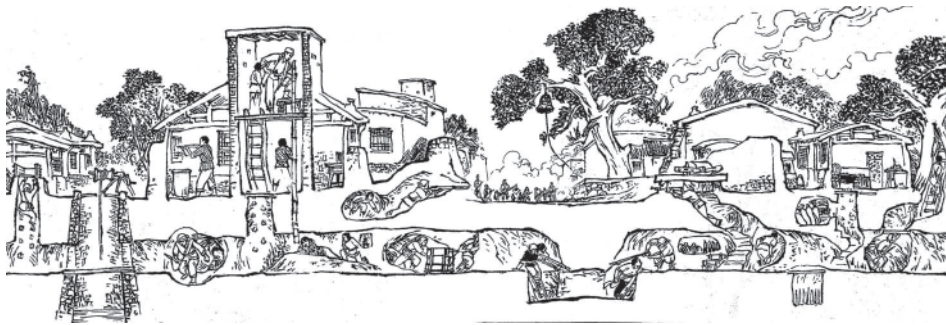
There's documentary evidence – magazines, films – of tunnel networks not only below every country village but also under large towns. And after 1945, plans for nuclear shelters were drawn up to be added to this defence against conventional warfare, rather fancifully given the rustic nature of rural China. From 1969 onwards a separate tunnel network linking metro stations was built under Beijing itself, the air-raid shelters becoming known as The Great Underground Wall of Peking.

The film *Tunnel Warfare*

This cinematic icon of socialist realism starts on 1 May 1942 when a dying man arrives at a village devastated by the Japanese carrying a copy of Mao Tse-tung's *Revolutionary War* handbook. Tchao, the party secretary, has instructions to dig tunnels, as instructed by Mao, in order to resist the enemy and fight back.

We see the beginning and development over time of a network that grows as the enemy's attacks increase. We hear the discussions on methods and tactics, sustained by





Ranzhuang 1942–43. As the Japanese mount a second attack, the Chinese gather underground to fight back

elusive force, and many Japanese are killed before they beat a hasty retreat.

In the last part of the film, time has passed since 1942 and the wheel of fortune has turned. The Japanese have given up attacking Ranzhuang and are increasingly on the defensive; they try to control the territory from their fortified observation towers.



Ranzhuang 1942–43. As the Japanese uncover a tunnel entrance, the Chinese defenders fire on them from a hidden guardhouse

Meanwhile, down below, the Chinese have perfected tunnel warfare with a vast network linking distant villages and enabling surprise attacks on enemy bases that have been undermined.

A training manual for the Vietnamese

In this film, released in 1965 at the start of the American build-up in Vietnam, the parallels are obvious when, for example, district commander Zhao instructs the local Ranzhuang party secretary that he must get his people to “dig tunnels for an underground war... for the Japanese cannot sustain fighting in the long term”.

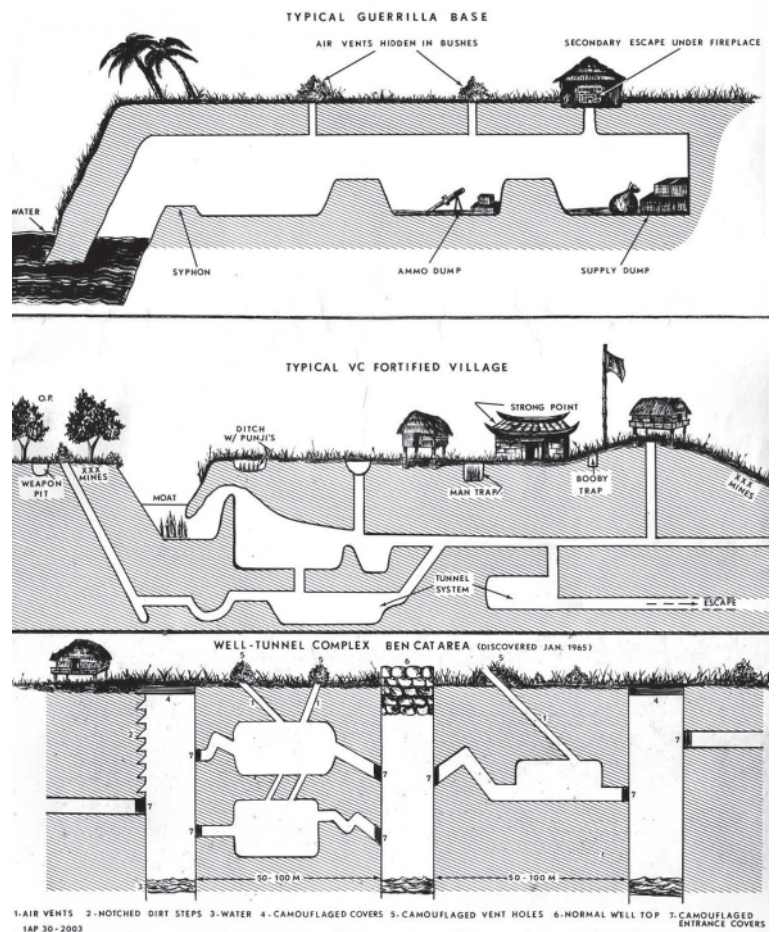
Like many Chinese films of the same period, *Tunnel Warfare* constitutes a training manual for the peasants, and is later revived as a cartoon strip in English (1972) and French (1973). Thus for the Vietnamese communists it's useful for both propaganda and education for the

readings from Mao's *Revolutionary War* that teach the digging methods and use of this underground defensive labyrinth.

The first part of the film shows men, women and children digging tunnels to join up basements and cellars to make a network. They dig with basic tools and carry the earth away in baskets to scatter on the fields and hide what they're doing from the enemy.

During the first Japanese attack, the villagers, huddled and frightened underground, manage to survive being smoked and flooded out until the aggressors move on. They realise that passive resistance is not enough; they must take the fight to the enemy. Motivated by readings from Mao's *Revolutionary War* manual, they decide that the only long-term solution is to kill as many of the enemy as possible; thus the tunnels must constitute not only a shelter but also an attack base for surface fighting.

As a result the network is enlarged and kitted out with sniper positions, and a drain is cut at the lowest point to disperse any flooding. Communication links are established, both above and below ground, using hollowed-out bamboo and toy telephones made from tin cans and string. The tunnel improvements show their worth when the second Japanese attack is repulsed by an



American army poster from 1966 showing a tunnel network based on one discovered near Ben Cat in January 1965





Perfectly camouflaged trapdoor entrance to tunnel in the forest between Ben Dinh and Cu Chi in South Vietnam

masses, showing them how to dig tunnels and wage war from underground.

The South Vietnamese were not slow to get the message. They constructed huge underground corridors, sometimes on several levels, with semi-buried hides using the natural cover of the forest above. The layout, the size and the linked branches showed how important it was to be able to move quickly from one place to another. While the tunnels were useful as air-raid shelters, their prime function was for avoiding discovery, using stealth to mount counter-attacks, and moving resistance fighters around right under the Americans' noses.

The tunnels that exist today between Ben Dinh and Ben Duoc, some fifteen kilometres apart, are just a small part of a vast network. The amount of excavation in the area around Cu Chi is difficult to believe; here and on the other side of the Saigon river in the 'Iron Triangle' there are reported to be up to 300 kilometres of tunnels where local historians believe that more than 16,000 members of the resistance lived or fought underground.

However, moving on from the history of the Sino-Japanese conflict and the wars in Vietnam, this film about underground tunnel warfare brings to mind simply and brilliantly the construction and purpose of the medieval *souterrains* of western France.

The similar architecture, style and usage of these tunnels separated by 8,000 kilometres and several centuries underlines the whole concept of going underground for shelter and defence. The similarities can only add to our understanding of the French shelters and reinforce our interpretation of them as handy local fortresses.

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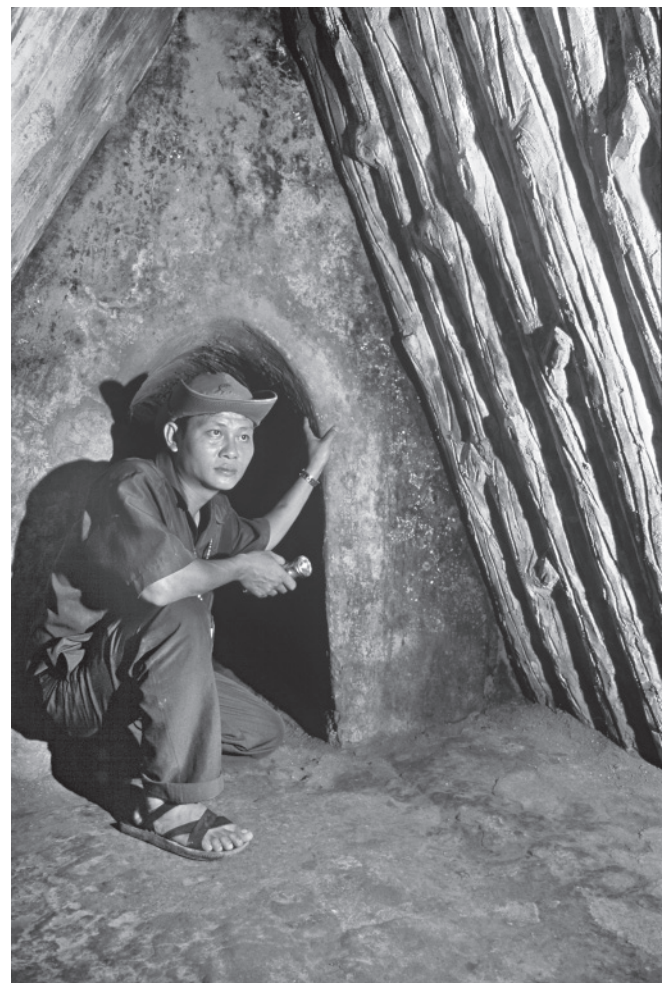
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Tunnel air-raid shelter showing walls reinforced with tree trunks, Ben Dinh and Cu Chi tunnels, South Vietnam