



Southeast Asian Studies at the
University of Freiburg (Germany)

Occasional Paper Series

www.southeastasianstudies.uni-freiburg.de

Occasional Paper N° 33 (September 2016)

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A Re-examination of Three Aspects of Sino- Vietnamese Relations: the Chinese Model, the Chinese World Order, and Conflict Management

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Federal Ministry
of Education
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Abstract

This article re-examines three important issues in Sino-Vietnamese relations, namely, Vietnam's borrowing of the Chinese model, Vietnam and the Chinese World Order, and the management of conflicts between the two countries. It argues that whereas China and Vietnam have maintained a special relationship overall during the historical period, in these three aspects the relationship between the two countries demonstrates various degrees of uniqueness. In evincing the specialness of Sino-Vietnamese relations, the author attaches great importance to comparing and contrasting Sino-Vietnamese relations with relations between China and three other groups, including fellow states from the traditional East Asian Confucian world (Korea and Japan), non-Han minority groups in southern China, and Vietnam's Southeast Asian neighbors. Due attention is also paid to analyzing the continuity and change between the pre-modern and modern periods.

Key words

China; Vietnam; Chinese World Order; Conflict Management; Cultural Borrowing

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* This manuscript is the result of a short-term fellowship awarded to me in 2015 by the Freiburg Southeast Asia research group sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under grant no. 01UC1307. I would like to thank BMBF for this opportunity and the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) and its research focus members for their kind support. I am also grateful to Professors Sabine Dabringhaus and Jürgen Rüländ for reading my paper, for providing very constructive comments and for their hospitality during my stay at the University Freiburg. I would also like to give special thanks to Ms. Cathrin Arenz for her help on numerous matters and Mr. Alec Crutchley for providing very efficient editorial assistance. The author alone bears responsibility for the views and errors in the article.

Introduction

Studies on Sino-Vietnamese relations have tended to highlight the specialness of the relationship between the two countries, emphasizing the long temporal span of that relationship, geographical proximity, cultural similarity, and the huge disparity in physical size between China and Vietnam, as well as the diverse and complex forms that the relationship has taken during different historical periods. The various models, theories and symbols that have been adopted to interpret Sino-Vietnamese relations – including the “complete Sinicization” thesis, the Chinese World Order model, the metaphors of “love and hate,” “lips and teeth,” and “comradeship plus brotherhood,” and the more recent notion of “asymmetrical relationship” – all explicitly or implicitly convey the belief that Sino-Vietnamese relations have followed or generated some special patterns that may not be applicable to other bilateral relationships.

To what extent are these models, theories and metaphors compatible with historical realities, and how special have Sino-Vietnamese relations actually been? In this article I will analyze three important issues in Sino-Vietnamese relations, namely, Vietnam’s borrowing of the Chinese model, Vietnam and the Chinese World Order, and the management of conflicts between the two countries. I argue that the special relationship between China and Vietnam, which has evolved over a long historical period, has been prominently epitomized in these three aspects, demonstrating different degrees of uniqueness. In examining the specialness of Sino-Vietnamese relations, I attach great importance to comparing and contrasting Sino-Vietnamese relations with relations between China and three reference groups including fellow states from the traditional East Asian Confucian world (Korea and Japan), non-Han minority groups in southern China, and Vietnam’s Southeast Asian neighbors. In different time periods, Vietnam has been considered a member of one or all of the three groups. I will also pay due attention to analyzing the continuity and change between the pre-modern and modern periods.

Vietnam and the Chinese Model

French scholars of the French colonial era supported the thesis that Vietnam, through voluntary or forced borrowing of the cultural and political elements of Chinese civilization, became a small replica of China. They believed that the Vietnamese elite was almost completely Confucianized and that Confucian influence had even penetrated into Vietnamese villages (SarDesai 2005, 23). They liked to describe Vietnam as a place that had preserved ancient Chinese customs and traditions which might be dead or dying in China. A British traveler influenced by such ideas did not hesitate to entitle his travel book about Vietnam “Little China” (Brodrick 1942, x). Some Chinese scholars concur that of all China’s neighbors, Vietnam is the most Sinicized or Confucianized (Liang Zhiming 2014, 21; Luo Huai 1956, 143; Zhang Xiumin 1992, 1–9). The Chinese scholar Wei Huilin argues that among the thirty-nine cultural features of Vietnam described in a book written by a thirteenth century Vietnamese scholar, only five are uniquely Vietnamese, while the rest are all

features common to Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, and among the thirty-three cultural features of Vietnam frequently mentioned by French scholars, only four or five are uniquely Vietnamese. Wei also stresses the fact that there are more cultural similarities between Vietnam and southern China than between Vietnam and northern China (Wei Huilin 1956, 138–41). Such assessments were probably more acceptable to pre-modern Vietnamese scholars than they are to modern Vietnamese nationalists.

Whereas most scholars agree that traditional Vietnam did adopt many elements of Chinese civilization, including the Chinese writing system, Confucianism, Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, the Chinese government system, the institution of civil service examinations, and even the Chinese way of dealing with foreign countries, there have been many critics of the complete Sinicization thesis. Joseph Buttinger, who served as a bridge between French and American Vietnamese studies, liked to describe Vietnam as the smaller dragon, implying that Vietnam was a miniscule China. However, he argued that although the Indochinese states, including Vietnam, were strongly influenced by China and India, they were not mere copies of either of these two powerful neighbors (Buttinger 1968, 4).

Alexander Woodside's study of Vietnam's Nguyen Dynasty led him to conclude that the Nguyen Dynasty's borrowing of Chinese institutions was more intensive than that occurring in all previous Vietnamese dynasties. This happened because the Nguyen rulers believed that Chinese institutions were more efficient than Western ones in maintaining social stability. Meanwhile, echoing Buttinger, Woodside asserts that the Vietnamese never succeeded in completely domesticating the imported Chinese institutions, including the court system, the bureaucracy and the civil service examination system, and that the Chinese model never completely stifled "Vietnamese ingenuity." He closely examined the tensions between the Vietnamese context and the imported Chinese institutions and those between the deeply Sinicized Vietnamese elite and the common people who were much less Sinicized and who were more influenced by indigenous Southeast Asian tradition (Woodside 1971).

John Whitmore offers a more explicit criticism of the "complete Sinicization" thesis than Buttinger and Woodside. While agreeing that Vietnam did borrow much from China, he stresses that such borrowing did not turn Vietnam into a replica of China. Vietnam retained its cultural core despite strong Chinese influence. He believes that this cultural core consists of social, cultural, religious, political and economic elements, and many other scholars agree that chewing betel nut, tattooing, totemism and the high status of women are striking indigenous Vietnamese social and cultural traits that survived Chinese influence and domination (Whitmore 1987, 1–21; Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989, 263). Keith Taylor lists the Vietnamese language and the Vietnamese mythic tradition as two other indigenous cultural elements that survived the long Chinese rule of northern Vietnam (Taylor 1983, xvii). Considering the widely accepted belief that in general the Vietnamese elite was more Sinicized than the common people, which contributed to the enlarging gap between the great tradition and the little tradition in Vietnam, it is reasonable to argue that the Vietnamese cultural core survived better among the common people than among the elite.

There are disagreements about how cultural borrowing impacted on the cultural and national

identity of the Vietnamese, or at least the identity of the more Sinicized Vietnamese elite. Did the Vietnamese elite identify with China or a transnational Confucian world because of their acceptance of Chinese culture, or did they maintain a strong Vietnamese national identity despite their conversion to Chinese culture? In other words, did Chinese culture in general and Confucianism in particular play a similar role in pre-modern East Asia to that of pre-modern Christianity in Europe in preventing the various states and ethnic groups under its influence from developing their separate national identities?

Supporters of the influential thesis that in pre-modern China and East Asia there was culturalism but no nationalism would likely argue that there was no such a thing as a pre-modern Vietnamese national identity. There were many cases in which foreigners or members of ethnic minority groups would begin to see themselves as Chinese and be perceived and treated as Chinese once they embraced Chinese culture. The fact that Chinese officials such as Trieu Da (Zhao Tuo) and Si Nhiep (Shi Xie) were recognized as the sage kings and cultural heroes of Vietnam by pre-modern Vietnamese historians indicates that these historians probably did not possess a strong national identity. Liam Kelly's study of the envoy poems left by Vietnam's envoys to China leads him to argue that these envoys did not have a strong Vietnamese national or cultural identity and that they identified with Chinese culture and accepted Vietnam's role in the Chinese world order (Kelley 2005).

While those who study general theories of nationalism often believe that true national identities are of modern and Western origin and that nationalism as an ideology was not introduced into Asian countries such as Vietnam until the modern era, some of those who specialize in Vietnamese and East Asian history have refuted such arguments. David Marr, for example, emphasizes the connections between modern Vietnamese nationalism and the Vietnamese tradition. In reviewing Benedict Anderson's well-known book, *The Imagined Communities*, Marr argues that Anderson underrates the forces at work at both the popular and elite levels in Vietnamese society, which owed little or nothing to Europeans. He thoughtfully states that "local Viet Minh activists of the 1940s drew fully as much inspiration from Buddhist millenarianism and neo-Confucian ideals of righteousness and propriety as they did from French teachings. And the state established by Ho Chi-minh probably owed as much to a thousand years of Vietnamese dynastic experience as to imported precedents from Paris or Moscow" (David Marr 1986, 808). Brantly Womack made a similar criticism of Anderson's argument. He believes that although Vietnamese nationalism underwent some changes in the modern era, it is not of modern origin (Womack 2006, 63). Keith Taylor argues that ancient Vietnamese "had learned to articulate their non-Chinese identity in terms of China's cultural heritage" (Taylor 1983, xxi). John King Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig believe that a local Vietnamese upper class with a strong sense of national identity had solidified by the end of the Tang dynasty (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989, 265). Truong Buu Lam argues that unlike other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam was already a nation in the nineteenth century – and earlier – and Vietnamese resistance to the French conquest was a patriotic or nationalist movement from its very beginning. He criticizes scholars who prefer to reserve the term "nationalism" for the more recent form of anti-colonialism and who argue that

Vietnamese nationalism was a product of Western influence. He declares that “It is not because in Europe, in the nineteenth century, there were nations which strove desperately to be states (e.g. Germany and Italy) or states which endeavored hopelessly to fashion a national soul (the Austrian and Turkish empires) that Oriental countries had to wait one more century to receive a nationalist ideology from Europe” (Truong Buu Lam 1967, 31).

Some Vietnamese scholars would go even further in asserting a pre-modern Vietnamese national identity. An influential history textbook compiled by the Vietnamese Social Science Committee and published in 1971 asserts that the Vietnamese people had already acquired a strong national spirit as early as the era of King An Duong (Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội Việt Nam 1971, 8), who was a semi-legendary figure who ruled present day northern Vietnam before the Chinese conquest of the second century BC. The authors of a more recent history textbook used in universities in Vietnam argue that the ancient Viet people had already developed patriotic feelings and a spirit of solidarity during the period of the Hung Kings and the Van Lang Kingdom primarily because of their need to defend their community against invaders and to create and maintain an irrigation system for agriculture (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc 2007, 26). The influential Vietnamese historian Tran Trong Kim stresses that despite the strong influence of Chinese belief systems, scholarship and government system, the Vietnamese never lost their special ethnic or national spirit and identity during the long period of Chinese rule (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 51).

Most scholars seem to support the conclusion that although Vietnam borrowed a great deal from China in the pre-modern period, it managed to maintain some elements of its indigenous heritage and was therefore not completely Sinicized, and that the intensive cultural borrowing from China did not prevent the Vietnamese from maintaining or developing a separate ethnic, political and/or national identity. For some pre-modern Vietnamese leaders, Vietnam’s adoption of the Chinese model was a reason for the Vietnamese to create and maintain their separate state. For example, Nguyen Trai, a fifteenth century Vietnamese poet, proudly declared that “Our state of Dai Viet is indeed a country wherein culture and institutions have flourished...Since the formation of our nations by the Trieu, Dinh, Ly, and Tran, our rulers have governed their empire exactly in the manner in which the Han, Tang, Sung and Yuan did theirs” (Truong Buu Lam 1967, 56). The argument was that since the Vietnamese courts could rule Vietnam in the truly Chinese way, there was no reason for China to invade and rule Vietnam.

Possibly because of their awareness and recognition of the cultural similarity between Vietnam and China, many other Vietnamese nationalists tended to emphasize the geographical division between China and Vietnam as a more important justification than the cultural factor for creating and maintaining an independent Vietnamese state and a Vietnamese national identity. They believed that since the Vietnamese lived in the south, they had the right to rule themselves rather than being ruled by the Chinese from the north. These nationalists included the seventh century rebel Ly By, who declared himself “King of the South,” the tenth century warlord Dinh Bo Linh, who awarded his son the title of “King of the Southern Viet,” the eleventh century Ly dynasty general Ly Thuong Kiet, who argued that “the mountains and rivers of the southern state should be the residence of the king of the south,” the thirteenth century Vietnamese general Tran Binh

Trong who told his Mongol captors that “I would rather die and become a ghost of the south than live as a king of the north” (Vũ Hồng Lâm 2004, 62–86).² They believed that they deserved the right to have their own southern state despite the cultural similarity between China and Vietnam.

Throughout history Vietnamese nationalists have adopted three different policies toward borrowed elements of Chinese culture. The first involves admitting the Chinese origin of the borrowed elements but treating them as part of Vietnamese culture. Both Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism have been incorporated into the Vietnamese national tradition. The second policy is to treat the borrowed Chinese elements as foreign culture and to try to eliminate them when possible. Both the short-lived Ho and Tayson dynasties attempted to replace the Chinese writing system with the Chu-Nom system, but failed. In the twentieth century, the Vietnamese communists finally succeeded in adopting the Quoc Ngu as the national writing system. The third policy is to adopt the Chinese elements but deny their Chinese origin. As will be discussed below, Vietnam’s *doi moi* is in many ways very similar to China’s open door policy, but the Vietnamese government has been reluctant to acknowledge the connections.

How unique, then, have the process and consequences of Vietnam’s borrowing of the Chinese model been? Japan and Korea, the two other countries in the traditional Confucian world of East Asia, both underwent a similar process of borrowing to that which occurred in Vietnam. John King Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig convincingly argue that among the three countries of Korea, Japan and Vietnam, Korea and Vietnam were more faithful followers of the Chinese model than Japan and that Japan also maintained a more defined separate identity than the other two countries. They attribute the differences to the linguistic barriers between Japan and China, and Japan’s isolated location (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989, 260). It is arguable that since Vietnam was ruled by China for a much longer period than Korea, the Vietnamese process of borrowing should also be different from that of Korea. The more independent status of Korea should have made the Korean process of cultural borrowing more voluntary than the Vietnamese one from the fourth to the tenth centuries. However, the longer period of Chinese rule did not necessarily result in deeper Sinicization in Vietnam, as Korea is closer geographically to the Chinese heartland than Vietnam and because Vietnam has constantly expanded its territory since gaining independence and thus has continually incorporated non-Chinese influences, whereas Korea has not (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989, 266–67). Besides, rulers of independent Korean dynasties could be as enthusiastic as the Chinese officials in Vietnam in promoting Sinicization. Vietnam’s Nguyen dynasty and Korea’s Yi dynasty were both independent, yet they were both ardent borrowers of Chinese culture.

Differences in geographical conditions also contributed to other disparities between Vietnam and Korea in their processes of cultural borrowing. For instance, the existence of many ethnic groups and states around Vietnam allowed the Vietnamese rulers to create a hierarchical international system centered on Vietnam. The system was modeled after the Chinese world order, which will be discussed below. The successful homogenization of the different ethnic groups on the Korean

² For more discussions on the north-south dichotomy, see Vuving (2001).

peninsula in ancient times and Korea's location between China and Japan prevented a similar system from developing in Korea.

It is also illuminating to compare and contrast the Vietnamese example of cultural borrowing with those of some non-Han groups in southern China. Before Vietnam became independent in the tenth century, the Vietnamese were in a similar position to that of many non-Han groups in present day Guangxi, Guangdong and other places. They were all under strong Chinese influence and were either directly or indirectly ruled by successive Han Chinese courts. However, after Vietnam gained independence, the Vietnamese began to take a different path from that followed by the non-Han groups still under Chinese rule. Today the most fundamental difference between the Vietnamese and those non-Han groups in southern China is that the Vietnamese have a very strong political and national identity, whereas those non-Han groups in southern China have not developed their own states and separate political identities. It would be very difficult to determine to what extent such a difference already existed in the tenth century and whether it was a cause or consequence of the different paths taken by the Vietnamese and those non-Han groups of southern China since the tenth century.

Compared with its Southeast Asian neighbors, particularly Cambodia, Thailand and Burma in mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam received much stronger political and cultural influence from China and much weaker influence from India. To a large extent, it is more appropriate to consider Vietnam before the twentieth century an East Asian country rather than a Southeast Asian one. Whereas non-state agents such as merchants and missionaries played an important role in spreading Indian culture in the so-called Indianized states in Southeast Asia, successive state agents from Zhao Tuo (Triệu Đà) to Shi Xie (Si Nhiếp) contributed greatly to promoting Chinese culture in Vietnam. Being similar to China and being a victim of repeated Chinese efforts to re-conquer Vietnam made it conducive for the Vietnamese to develop and strengthen their national identity and, as a result, the pre-modern Vietnamese very likely had a stronger national identity than their neighbors in Southeast Asia.

In the modern era, Chinese models continued to enjoy the recognition and support of the Vietnamese elite, and this sets Vietnam apart from Korea and Japan, the two other major members of the Confucian world. The Japanese elite began to shift their attention from China to the West during the Meiji period, and in the modern era they tended to show contempt rather than admiration toward China. The Korean elite did not have the freedom to choose their model during the Japanese colonial period. After the end of World War II, neither South Korea nor North Korea demonstrated a strong interest in following the Chinese model. North Korea has maintained a very close political relationship with China, but it has not copied China's policies in the way that Vietnam has. Most notably, the North Korean leaders have shown little interest in following the Chinese path of economic reform despite China's economic success and the serious economic problems besetting North Korea in the past few decades.

The Vietnamese elite's interest in the Chinese models has been consistent and persistent in the modern era. The well-known patriotic scholar Phan Boi Chau was initially attracted to the writings of Chinese reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, but he eventually became a believer

in the Sun Yat-sen style of Republicanism (Duiker 1986, 8–9), though he never got a chance to apply the Republican ideal to Vietnam.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Vietnamese nationalists developed a very close relationship with the Chinese Nationalist Party and government. Meanwhile, Vietnamese communists found the Chinese version of communism more attractive than the Russian version. The Vietnam Independence League, or Viet Minh, was based on similar organizations created by the Chinese communists during the war against Japan (David G. Marr 1981, 52). The Vietnamese communists benefitted greatly from the influence of the Maoist strategy of the people's war and Maoist guerilla tactics, but their adoption of the radical Chinese communist policy of land reform caused much damage to the party in the 1950s. The land reform in Vietnam was conducted under the leadership of Truong Chinh, who was familiar with the Chinese practices, with the assistance and advice of a group of Chinese advisers headed by Qiao Xiaoguang, a high-ranking official from China's Guangxi Province, which borders on Vietnam. The group entered Vietnam in 1953 along with a number of Chinese military advisers. The Rectification Campaign in Yenan and the CCP policies towards intellectuals, and literature and arts also had a strong influence on Vietnamese communist policies (Zhou Yi 2010, 54–61). It is worth noting that the Vietnamese communists were not always blind followers of Chinese communism. In the late 1950s and 1960s they wisely decided not to copy China's destructive policies of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

It is remarkable that the Vietnamese leaders adopted these Chinese policies voluntarily without any outside pressure. For instance, Chinese military advisers and land reform advisers were dispatched to Vietnam at Ho Chi-minh's personal request. King C. Chen argues that the Vietnamese communists copied Chinese communist policies between 1950 and 1954 not because of any pressure from the Chinese side, but because the two countries shared similar conditions. Edwin Moise confirms that the reason the Vietnamese communists favored the Chinese version of land revolution in the 1950s was that the social conditions in Vietnam were very similar to those of China (Chen 1970, 234–36; Moise 2012). Ho Chi-minh made a similar argument in 1951. He declared at the Second National Congress of the Workers' Party of Vietnam that "because of geographical, historical, economical, and cultural factors and other reasons, the Chinese Revolution has had a tremendous impact on the Vietnamese revolution. The Vietnamese revolution should learn and has already learned a great deal from the Chinese revolution" (Ho Chi-minh 1962, 154).

Most recently, the many similarities between Vietnam's doi moi and China's open door policy suggest that the Chinese model did not completely lose its appeal to the Vietnamese elite even when the two countries were enemies.³ Despite all the talk about the existence of a pro-China faction within the Vietnamese Communist Party and government, there is no question that even those ardent followers of the Chinese models are primarily pro-Vietnam. It is no longer meaningful to raise any doubt about the Vietnamese identity of these admirers of Chinese models. In fact, the national identity of the borrowers has become so strong that oftentimes they do not even want to

³ For comparative studies of Vietnam's doi moi and China's reform, see Le Huu Tang and Liu Han Yue (2006), Chan, Kerkvliet, and Unger (1999), and Pi Jun (2002).

admit the influence of the Chinese model on Vietnam. This is particularly true if the borrowing took place at a time when the two countries were not on good terms with each other.

The cultural borrowing between China and Vietnam has mainly been a one-way business: Vietnam has borrowed much more from China than China has from Vietnam. This is primarily an issue of perception: it is not that Vietnam has had nothing to offer China, but simply that most Chinese believe that Vietnam has little to offer. The Vietnamese Ly dynasty invented a military formation that combined both cavalry and engineers but separated the ethnic Vietnamese from the non-Vietnamese soldiers. The formation was copied by China's Song dynasty, which greatly surprised both traditional and modern Vietnamese historians (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 70). In recent years, some Chinese commentators have argued that Vietnam has moved ahead of China in political reform and that China should take Vietnam as a model, but so far the Chinese leaders have shown no interest in following that advice.

Vietnam and the Chinese World Order

The model of the Chinese World Order was clearly defined in John King Fairbank's influential edited volume published in 1968. According to the model, the traditional East Asian world system consisted of four concentric circles. At the center of the system was the Chinese empire, which, however, was not always ruled by Han Chinese. Immediately beyond the center was the Sinic or East Asian zone which included Vietnam, Korea and, sometimes, Japan. These countries were close to China both geographically and culturally. Beyond the Sinic zone was the Central Asian zone, consisting of nomadic states that were close to China geographically but not culturally. Farthest from the center was the outer zone, which was composed of countries known to the Chinese but close to China neither geographically nor culturally (Fairbank 1968).

Obviously, according to this model, among all the foreign countries, those in the East Asian zone maintained the closest relations with China, and within the East Asian zone, Vietnam and Korea had a closer relationship with China than Japan. According to this model, the relationship between China and Vietnam was regulated by the tribute system, in which China assumed the nominal superior position and Vietnam showed its submission to China by paying tributes to the Chinese emperors.

Recent studies have shown that the Chinese world order model neglects the perspectives and initiatives of China's neighbors, overemphasizes one aspect of Chinese foreign relations (the tribute system) at the expense of other aspects (for example, warfare), and is insufficient in explaining the temporal and geographical diversity of China's traditional foreign relations. Critics of the Chinese world order model argue that, contrary to the assumptions made by John King Fairbank and the supporters of his model, China was not always the sole dominant power in Asia and there existed alternative world orders in traditional Asia; that very few Asian countries were actually willing to recognize China's self-proclaimed superior status; and that sometimes China did recognize certain foreign countries as China's equals (Reid 2009). These critics agree with Fairbank

and his supporters that China's relations with her neighbors were asymmetrical during most of the historical period, but they believe that the relations between China and her Asian neighbors were more complex and less orderly than is assumed in the Chinese world order model.

The Chinese world order model suggests that Vietnam's relationship with China was most similar to that between Korea and China. However, historical evidence shows that the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was actually very different from the Sino-Korean relationship, largely because of the traditional Chinese perception of Vietnam as China's lost territory, Vietnamese awareness of that perception, and Vietnam's resistance to Chinese policies based on that perception. Chinese efforts to re-conquer Korea ended during the Tang dynasty, when Vietnam was still part of China. After Vietnam became independent in 939 AD, the rulers of China made repeated attempts to re-conquer the land. These rulers included both Han Chinese emperors of the Song and Ming dynasties and non-Han emperors of the Yuan and Qing dynasties. According to some Vietnamese scholars, even modern Chinese leaders such as Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong still saw Vietnam as a lost territory of China. It is true that both Sun and Mao admitted that their reading of the French conquest of Vietnam, which they viewed as China's loss of Vietnam, played a significant role in their respective political awakenings (Sun Zhongshan 1994, 83; Snow 1968, 136). In the Vietnamese perspective, China's attack on Vietnam in 1979 was probably not very different from the pre-modern invasions of Vietnam launched by the aggressive emperors of China. Chinese troops appeared in Vietnam more frequently than in any other of China's neighboring countries. Although on some occasions the troops came at the invitation of at least some Vietnamese, eventually almost all of them were perceived as invaders and had to be driven out by force.

As a result of the repeated invasions from the north, the Vietnamese became more suspicious of the Chinese than did the Koreans. They would ask China for help when they had to, as they did during the early Ming, early and late Qing dynasties, and in the twentieth century, but even when they were taking advantage of Chinese assistance, at least some Vietnamese leaders would continue to suspect Chinese motivations. Koreans were less suspicious of China than the Vietnamese for two reasons: first, as mentioned earlier, China made no further serious attempts at re-conquering Korea after the Tang Dynasty; second, during and after the Ming dynasty, Japan became a threat to Korea and on various occasions China helped Korea resist Japanese invasions.

Obviously, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was even less like the Sino-Japanese relationship than the Sino-Korean relationship. China never ruled any part of Japan and, except for Kubilai Khan, no emperor of China ever showed a serious interest in conquering Japan. Overall, largely because of its geographical location, Japan came into close contact with China much later than Korea and Vietnam, Japan was much more independent of China than Korea and Vietnam, and while both Korea and Vietnam have good reasons to claim to be victims of Chinese invasions, Japan in fact caused much more trouble for China than China did for Japan.

The Chinese world order model places all other Southeast Asian countries in the outer zone, meaning that their relations with China were not as close as those between Vietnam and China, which is a valid assumption and an accurate portrayal. Culturally, the other Southeast Asian countries were much less closely related to China than Vietnam, Korea and Japan were. Politically,

China never ruled these countries and rarely attempted to invade them (again, with the exception of Khubilai Khan).

What some of the more aggressive Chinese rulers really wanted to do with the Vietnamese was to eliminate their state and turn them into a Chinese ethnic minority group. In other words, they wanted to return the Vietnamese to the status they had held before 939 AD, a status still held by many non-Han groups in southern China, several of whom were related to the Vietnamese in culture, language and other aspects. Some of these non-Han groups attempted to follow in the footsteps of the Vietnamese and establish their own states but were not successful. The revolt launched by Nong Zhigao (Nông Trí Cao) during China's Song dynasty is a good example.⁴

Although these non-Han groups in southern China failed to attain independence, their territories did not become integral parts of China either. For centuries, successive Chinese imperial courts adopted the Jimi policy in ruling these regions. The Jimi system, which was developed during the early imperial period and was not abolished until the Ming and Qing dynasties, was a quasi-feudal institution in which the local non-Han lords were granted titles by the imperial court, were required to pay tribute and other services to the emperor, and were permitted to maintain their private armies and pass on their status to their descendants.⁵ In the symbolic system of the Chinese world order, the status of these non-Han lords was very similar to that held by the Vietnamese kings, except that the Vietnamese rulers were granted more honorable titles, ruled larger territories and populations, and maintained more powerful armed forces. Like the tenuous tributary relationship between Vietnam and China, the Jimi system was often interrupted by revolts launched by local leaders like Nong Zhigao. The difference is that whereas the Vietnamese could often defeat troops from the north, most of the time the imperial courts of China could easily crush rebellions staged by the non-Han groups in southern China.

Despite valid criticisms, the Chinese World Order model remains a useful explanatory tool because it at least partially portrays the reality of the traditional East Asian international order, which has survived even in the modern era. In the revolutions of the twentieth century, Korean and Vietnamese nationalists were close allies of Chinese nationalists, and the communist parties of Korea and Vietnam were the two closest junior partners of the Chinese Communist Party and communist China. The Pan-East Asian Confucian order gave way to the transient Pan-East Asian nationalist order and then the more permanent Pan-East Asian communist order, and China remained the center of both the nationalist and communist orders. In Mao's view, Chinese participation in the Korean War was probably not very different from Chinese involvement in the wars against Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592 and 1597 and the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894 to 1895, and the support and assistance China offered to the Vietnamese communists during the Vietnam wars was a reminder of the support Qing China provided to Vietnam during the French conquest of Vietnam. The most fundamental change is that because of the continuous presence of other powers such as France, imperial Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union, China's relations

⁴ For an informative study of the Nong Zhigao revolt, see Anderson (2007).

⁵ For a general introduction to the Jimi system, see Peng Jianying (2004).

with Korea and Vietnam became much more complex in the modern period than they had been in the pre-modern era.

Conflict Management

One criticism of the Chinese world order model is that it overemphasizes the importance of peaceful and orderly tributary relations at the expense of other important aspects of China's foreign relations, including military conflict. This criticism is particularly valid for Sino-Vietnamese relations. Although Vietnam was one of the most important members of the tributary system centered on China, it was very frequently in conflict with China. In fact, among all China's neighbors, Vietnam has had the greatest number of conflicts with China, and the portrayal of the Chinese – or simply “the northerners” – as brutal invaders in modern Vietnamese historiography is in sharp contrast to the image of the Chinese as “a peace-loving people,” which official Chinese media and Chinese scholars have preferred to promote.⁶ Since conflicts always resulted in the interruption of the tributary system, which was perceived to be the “normal” international order in East Asia, conflict management was conducive to the maintenance and restoration of the normal order. Conflict management thus became an essential part of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

The tributary system was both a result and a cause of conflicts between China and Vietnam. The system was first adopted in order to end the conflicts between the two countries. Although some scholars believe that the formal tributary relationship between the two countries was not established until after the Ming invasion of Vietnam, its basic features had already taken shape shortly after Vietnam became independent in the tenth century. For the rulers of both countries, the tributary relationship was a compromise they had to make in order to prevent military action. For the emperors of China, it could be taken as a face-saving excuse for not making further attempts to recover “lost territory,” and for the rulers of Vietnam it was a sacrifice they believed they had to make in order to stave off attacks from China and maintain *de facto* independence.

The tributary system was considered to be only the second best choice by both sides, and because of that it often became the cause of conflict. The best choice for some emperors of China was to reduce Vietnam to one or more provinces of the Chinese empire, and the more ambitious and aggressive Chinese rulers tried to accomplish that when they felt they were powerful enough to subdue Vietnam. After the Han conquest of Vietnam in 111 BC, the Vietnamese revolted many times, and several rebels, including the Trung Sisters, Lady Trieu, Ly By, Mai Thúc Loan and Phùng Hưng were able to interrupt Chinese rule, but eventually the Chinese courts were able to crush all these rebellions. The southern Han made a serious attempt at maintaining control over Vietnam in 938 AD, but failed to defeat Ngo Quan. The Song made another attempt to re-conquer Vietnam.

⁶ For instance, Liang Zhiming's argument that, given that wars between the two countries happened during only 20 out of 1,000 years from the tenth to the nineteenth centuries, peace actually overshadowed conflicts in Sino-Vietnamese relations, is a typical Chinese representation of Sino-Vietnamese relations (Liang Zhiming 2014, 23). An earlier and more detailed version of this argument is presented in Chen Xiuhe (1957). Chen's book focuses on the friendship and cooperation between China and Vietnam and mentions nothing about conflict between the two countries.

After Khubilai Khan conquered China, he sent an envoy to Vietnam to present his six demands to the Tran dynasty king of Vietnam. He required the Vietnamese king to come to China to seek audience personally, to send princes to China as hostages, to have a census conducted, to provide military corvée, to pay taxes to the Mongols, and to allow a Mongol governor to reside in Vietnam and rule the country (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 91). Accepting the six demands would be tantamount to submitting to Mongol rule. After the demands were rejected, the Mongols launched three unsuccessful attacks on Vietnam.

The last effort to reincorporate Vietnam into the Chinese empire was made by Emperor Yongle of the Ming dynasty. After defeating the troops of the Ho dynasty, he ordered that Ho the usurper and his son, as well as many other Vietnamese, be taken to China. He then sent Chinese officials to rule Vietnam. The Vietnamese were forced to join the Chinese army and pay taxes to the Chinese court. He made a special effort to eliminate Vietnamese cultural and national identity by banning Vietnamese religious practices and customs, including betel nut chewing, the Vietnamese male hair style and female dress. He also tried to eliminate the Vietnamese language and destroy Vietnamese historical records (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 144–48). His re-conquest came to an end only after his successor failed to subdue the rebellion led by Le Loi. All these rulers of China accepted the tributary system only after their attempts to re-conquer Vietnam had been defeated.

For the Vietnamese rulers the best choice was to attain complete equality with China by ending the tributary relationship and gaining full independence. When they felt they were powerful enough to deal with China, they ceased to pay tribute and sometimes even attacked China as a pre-emptive measure to eliminate a potential threat or to take land and people. This happened during the Song dynasty when China was militarily weak. Emperor Quang Trung of the Tayson Dynasty also had a plan for an invasion of China before his death in 1792 (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 282). The Vietnamese rulers accepted the tributary relationship only after they realized that it was impossible or would cost them too much to attain complete equality with China.

The tributary system could become a cause of conflict between the two countries for another reason. The tributary relationship required the rulers of China to provide protection for Vietnamese kings when the latter faced the danger of foreign invasions or domestic rebellions. However, these invited peacekeeping missions would often go astray and lead to conflict between China and Vietnam. Emperor Yongle sent Ming troops to Vietnam at the request of members of the royal Tran family, who had been overthrown by usurpers from the Ho family. However, after defeating the Ho family, Emperor Yongle decided not to withdraw his troops. Instead, he wanted to re-establish Chinese rule in Vietnam and, as mentioned earlier, his policies toward Vietnam focused on eliminating Vietnam as a nation. After the Le dynasty was overthrown by the Tayson rebels in the late eighteenth century, members of the Le royal family also asked China for help. The Manchu court again sent troops to Vietnam. These troops failed to accomplish their mission and they were seen as invaders by Vietnamese patriots and were ultimately defeated and driven out by force. About a century later, tributary obligations again motivated the Manchu court to send troops to Vietnam to fight French invaders. As a result, the French war of conquest in Vietnam escalated into a two-front war between France and China involving both land battles along the Sino-

Vietnamese border and naval wars off the coast of Fujian and Taiwan. The Qing troops failed to defeat the French, who succeeded in colonizing Vietnam. We can only wonder what would have happened had the Manchu troops been able to defeat the French. Would the Qing court have withdrawn the troops immediately, thereby fully restoring Vietnamese independence, or would the Qing have kept their troops in Vietnam to re-establish direct or indirect Chinese rule, as Emperor Yongle had? Some Vietnamese historians believe that some Chinese officials did want to use the French invasion of Vietnam as an opportunity to advance Chinese interests in Vietnam (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 392).

In the years and centuries after Vietnam gained independence in the tenth century, patterns emerged in conflict management between China and Vietnam. Events usually took the following course: First, China would send troops to Vietnam to re-conquer the country, to help protect an endangered ruler, or to restore a “legitimate” ruler who had lost his power to a usurper or a rebel. Second, the Vietnamese would begin to resist the Chinese invasions or interventions, and the resistance could be organized either by the ruling court or by people outside officialdom. Third, China would be defeated, sometimes immediately, sometimes after a rather protracted war. Fourth, Vietnam would send envoys to China to pay tribute and sometimes to offer apology for defeating the Chinese troops. The Chinese court would accept the tribute and apology, and would award a title to the Vietnamese ruler, thus restoring the tributary relationship and peace. These scenarios occurred during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The Vietnamese leader Dinh Bo Linh set the pattern for paying tribute to China in order to prevent a Chinese invasion, and his undesignated successor Le Huan was the first to send tribute to China after defeating Chinese troops in order to forestall further Chinese military action. Although Vietnam became virtually independent in 938 AD, the Chinese court did not recognize Vietnam as an independent “state” until 1164 AD (Trần Trọng Kim 1992, 77–78). In other words, from the perspective of the Chinese rulers, the relationship between China and Vietnam between 938 and 1164 AD was that between a central government and a local feudal lord, and the relationship after 1164 AD was that between a lordly state and a vassal state.

These scenarios were first experimented with in relations between Chinese courts and the ancient kingdom of Linyi before they became patterns governing Sino-Vietnamese relations. Linyi was located in the most remote part of the Chinese territory in northern Vietnam during China’s Han dynasty, but Linyi became an independent state during the last years of the Han. Relations between Linyi and China between the second and tenth centuries AD were very similar to those between China and Vietnam between the tenth and nineteenth centuries AD. There are records of many tribute missions sent by Linyi to the various Chinese courts, but there were also quite frequent conflicts between the two countries. China was never able to completely re-conquer Linyi, but nor was Linyi able to take land from China, and most conflicts were resolved when Linyi agreed to resume tribute missions to the Chinese court (Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo 1982, 74-75, 78-80, 90). In general, the rulers of China and Linyi created the precedents and rules for conflict management between China and Vietnam and, to some extent, Linyi taught the Vietnamese how to win independence or autonomy from China and the Chinese rulers how to deal

with an independent Vietnam.

These patterns are less discernible in the relations between China and other countries, largely because there have not been so many conflicts between China and those countries. The peace settlement between Tang and Silla in the seventh century came close to the patterns described above. The two states were initially allies against Paekche and Koguryo. After the elimination of the two rivals, Tang and Silla became hostile toward each other after a territorial dispute. Surprisingly, Silla managed to defeat the Tang army, but peace was soon restored by creating a quasi-tributary relationship between the two. The Mongol domination of Korea was established in a similar manner. The Mongols invaded Korea several times but were never able to completely defeat Korea. Nevertheless, the Korean kings submitted to the Yuan in order to obtain peace. The Manchu conquest of China caused a brief conflict between Qing China and Vietnam, but the tributary relationship was soon restored and it was not completely abolished until after the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. In general, relations between China and Korea involved fewer conflicts than those between China and Vietnam after the Tang Dynasty.

The patterns of conflict management described above were almost completely absent in the history of Sino-Japanese relations, mainly because of the lack of conflicts between the two countries. The brief conflict between the Yuan and Kamakura Japan did not result in Japan's acceptance of tributary status. Vinh Sinh's argument that in medieval East Asia, Vietnam's policy toward China was a combination of "resistance (to military invasions) and acceptance (of Chinese culture)", whereas Japan's attitude toward China combined "respect (to Chinese culture) and rejection (of Chinese World Order)" (Vinh Sinh 1994, 28-30), is interesting and illuminating.

Conflict management between China and Vietnam was very similar to that between China's imperial court and the local lords of the non-Han regions. Sometimes certain local lords would revolt against the central government, but even if they could defeat the armies of the imperial court, they would often sue for peace by offering apologies and accepting a subservient role, and the central government would then restore their previous titles and positions. The court sometimes would also use the excuse of protecting a local lord against rebels or usurpers to establish direct control over his or her territory. These scenarios happened rather frequently between the imperial courts and the non-Han groups in Guangxi, which is adjacent to Vietnam.

Table 1: Conflict Management between China and Vietnam between 938 & 1885 AD (Source: *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo 1982*)

Date	Causes of Conflict	Result	Settlement
938	Ngo Quan revolted against southern Han	Ngo Quan declared independence after defeating southern Han	No settlement was reached
970-972	Potential conflict: Song to re-conquer Vietnam	Conflict avoided	Dinh Bo Linh paid tribute & received a title
981	Song tried to re-conquer Vietnam under the pretext of punishing Le Hoan the usurper	Song troops were defeated	Le Hoan paid tribute and received titles
1075-1084	Vietnam Ly dynasty launched a pre-emptive attack; Song retaliated	Ly troops invaded China; Song troops invaded Vietnam; a stalemate	Ly sent tribute, returned captives & received titles; Song returned land
1284-1285; 1287-1288	Vietnam's Tran dynasty refused to accept Mongol demands	Vietnam defeated Yuan troops	Vietnam sent tribute and received titles
1406-1428	Ming tried to re-conquer Vietnam under the pretext of punishing the usurper Ho Quy Ly	Ming defeated Ho but were expelled by Le Loi	Le Loi paid tribute, offered apologies & received titles
1537-1540	Potential conflict: Ming China to punish Mac Dang Dung the usurper	Conflict avoided	Mac surrendered, paid tribute & received a title
1596-1597	Potential conflict: Ming to invade to protect the Mac court	Conflict avoided	Later Le King paid tribute & received a title
1663-1667	Potential conflict: Qing to attack to exert control	Conflict avoided	Later Le king paid tribute & received a title
1788-1789	Qing sent troops to protect Later Le, causing conflict with Nguyen Hue	Nguyen Hue defeated Qing troops	Nguyen Hue paid tribute and received a title

Conflict management between China and Vietnam in the twentieth century shows some resemblance to the traditional pattern of conflict management between the two countries. When the communist government of North Vietnam, which was a junior partner of the Chinese communist government, was threatened by France, the US and South Vietnam, China offered support and protection by sending in Chinese troops and other aid. However, unlike Emperor Yongle and some other Chinese rulers, the Chinese communist leaders had no intention of utilizing China's aid to North Vietnam as an opportunity to re-occupy Vietnam, although they were obviously interested in maintaining and expanding Chinese influence. Vietnamese leaders had to live with strong Chinese influence from the 1940s to the late 1970s when they were busy fighting their enemies and therefore had to depend on China. Once their enemies had been defeated in the late 1970s, the strong-willed Vietnamese leader Le Duan believed that Vietnam was now powerful enough to deal with China and began to eliminate Chinese influence and to gain complete independence, causing serious conflict between the two countries. Le Duan's policy has many precedents in Vietnamese history. The brief Chinese attack on Vietnam in 1979 was different from Chinese attacks on Vietnam in the pre-modern period in that China voluntarily withdrew its troops after a brief occupation of some Vietnamese areas and Vietnam did not seek peace immediately after the attack. The new international context was an important reason for the two countries moving away from the traditional patterns. China's immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam was carried out in part to prevent unfriendly international reactions, particularly from the Soviet Union, and Vietnam did not try to make peace with China immediately after the war primarily because it enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union. When Mikhail Gorbachev began to normalize relations with China and reduce aid to Vietnam, Vietnam immediately moved back to the traditional pattern by turning to China to negotiate the normalization of the bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship is one of the longest and most complex international relationships in human history. The three salient aspects of that relationship are Vietnam's attitude toward the Chinese model, Vietnam's role in the Chinese world order, and conflict management between the two countries. The influence of the Chinese model on Vietnam has been consistent and long lasting. Unlike pre-modern Japan, which voluntarily borrowed various elements of the Chinese tradition, pre-modern Vietnam's adoption of the Chinese model was not always voluntary. Unlike modern Japan and Korea, which lost interest in the Chinese model, modern Vietnam continued to show a strong interest in learning from China. Vietnam's role in the Chinese world order was also different from that held by Japan and Korea. Whereas Japan rarely submitted to China and tried to create its own order modeled after the Chinese world order and Korea subordinated itself to China and did not attempt to create its own order, Vietnam was subservient to China but at the same time also tried to create its own separate system following the model of the Chinese world order. Finally, among all China's neighbors, none has had more

conflicts with China than Vietnam and because of that, the two countries have developed a range of tactics for conflict management, some of which have been influential even in modern times.

The modern era caused interruptions and changes to the traditional patterns. In the pre-modern era, China offered the Vietnamese the most attractive model for emulation, but in the modern period, the West, Japan, and later the Soviet Union, provided appealing alternatives to the Chinese model. In the pre-modern period, Vietnam rarely moved out of the Chinese world order, but in the modern era, it was in the French world order for about a century and the Soviet world order for over a decade. China completely lost its influence over Vietnam during these two interregnums. In conflict management, the involvement of powers outside the region caused both China and Vietnam to modify their behavior. Vietnam had to stay away from any conflict with China when it was busy fighting one Cold War superpower, but as soon as the fighting ended, it could afford to maintain a conflict with China for a rather extended period because it enjoyed the support of the other Cold War superpower. As punishment, China launched an attack on Vietnam, but it had to withdraw its troops quickly and could no longer entertain the idea of occupying Vietnam for fear of strong international reaction.

Since the 1990s, Sino-Vietnamese relations have been dominated by a new pattern different from those of previous periods. It is different from the pre-modern pattern involving a tribute system and the Chinese world order in that the two countries are now equals, at least theoretically. It is different from the periods of French rule and Soviet dominance in that Vietnam is no longer a dependent of any third country. It is also different from the period of comradeship plus brotherhood, which lasted from the 1950s to the 1970s, in that the relationship is now built more upon national interest than ideology. Vietnam is still learning from China, but China has also begun to learn from Vietnam. One piece of evidence for this is that the number of Chinese students studying the Vietnamese language far exceeds that of any previous period. Another change since the 1990s is that economic relations have become a more important factor in determining bilateral relations, and the volume of goods exchanged across the border has been unprecedentedly large. Finally, the two countries have also successfully demarcated a large portion of their disputed land and sea borders through negotiation, which led to the conclusion of equal treaties. This has set a good example for solving the ongoing disputes over the South China Sea islands. If the two governments can follow this very positive precedent rather than the many negative earlier precedents between the two countries and reach an agreement on the South China Sea disputes through negotiation, then both countries will have the real possibility of moving beyond the cycles of conflict that have brought much destruction and have generated deep ill-feelings between their peoples. It seems that after two thousand years, relations between China and Vietnam are now becoming ever less special because the two governments are increasingly trying to make their policies and actions conform with international norms and regulations.

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