

## [\[Review\] China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry by Brantly Womack](#)

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[Anderson, J.](#) (2006) [Review] China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry by Brantly Womack. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 4, no. 3, (Fall 2009).

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### **Article:**

Most scholars of Vietnam are well aware of the complex but significant relationship that rulers of this region have had throughout history with 'leaders of their larger northern neighbor, China. In his clear and insightful examination of the contours of this relationship, 'Brandy Womack reveals several features that have remained in effect through centuries of dynastic change, colonial intervention, and more recently, globalization. Womack has encapsulated his insights in a single observation: "China has always been a much more important presence for Vietnam than Vietnam has been for China, and Vietnam has had a more acute sense of the risks and opportunities offered by the relationship" (2). Womack ascribes the two nations' radically different perspectives on their shared relationship to this underlying principle of asymmetry in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Womack's argument is clear and concise. He lays out the basic tenets of asymmetry in international relations and its specific application to Sino-Vietnamese relations in his introduction. The author takes issue with more conventional schools of international relations, contending that an asymmetric relationship can be a normal relationship, rather than an abnormal relationship that is in need of correction. Moreover, Womack maintains that much scholarship in the West has focused too intently on the affairs of "Great Powers" while ignoring the conditions that dictate the foreign policy choices made by smaller nations. In this manner the author uses the Sino-Vietnamese relationship as a case study for a theory of asymmetry with universal applications.

In the concise and well-articulated second half of the book, Womack finds political asymmetry in various forms in the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations. He contends that pre-imperial Vietnamese communities maintained a loose relationship of "amorphous asymmetry" with northern kingdoms, allowing Lac clan-based society and culture to flourish. Womack maintains that following the defeat of the Trưng Sisters by Han forces in 43 CE, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship became one of "internal asymmetry." While acknowledging that many Vietnamese historians are highly critical of the pre-968 period of "northern subjugation" [*bắc thuộc*], Womack argues that Vietnam's desire for independence was not a persistent feature of the relationship in this period. Instead, the drive for autonomy was the final outcome of "inevitable differences of perspective and interests between the part and the whole, and between local elites and central leadership" (104).

The application of a single "internal asymmetry" model from the first century to the tenth century seems problematic, given the shifting regional spheres of political influence, including the rise of the southwestern Nanzhao Kingdom and the development of Vietnamese relations with other Southeast Asian polities through trade and Buddhist pilgrimage links. Womack acknowledges in this section of the book that he is testing his theory by "[looking] in the historical record for its structure" (95). With that point in mind, this general model of asymmetry should be seen by the reader as a starting point for investigation and not a final descriptor of historical conditions in any given period.

Womack describes the post-968 tributary relationship that held Vietnam closely aligned with China for nearly nine hundred years as a period of "unequal empires." Womack's model rightly challenges both the dated notion

that dynastic Vietnam was a "lesser dragon," operating in the shadow of China's imperial order, and the counter-theory that the indigenous Vietnamese political tradition grew out of a defiant rejection of northern intervention. The author accepts John Whitmore's argument that after the aborted Ming invasion, Vietnamese political identity truly flourished as the Lê rulers, particularly Lê Thánh Tông (1460-1490), participated actively in Chinese tributary protocol and imposed the same political order on Southeast Asian neighbors. Vietnamese rulers borrowed freely from China's imperial tradition because they were confident that their northern neighbor regarded direct control of Vietnamese affairs as too onerous. Although the author's analysis does not reveal much that is new in our understanding of this long era of history, Womack's point that both China and Vietnam had something to gain from this tributary relationship beyond the associated trade is itself a helpful corrective.

Western imperialism introduced new conditions and a new context to the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and this period presents a challenge to Womack's overall argument. Using the terms "disjunctive asymmetry" and "distracted asymmetry" to describe how the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was periodically interrupted and redefined by the intervention of imperialist powers, Womack attempts to adjust the general paradigm to the rapidly ehal Ting political conditions in Asia from the early nineteenth to the mid- twentieth century. These paradigmatic variants require closer scrutiny by modern historians to determine their usefulness. Womack stresses the fraternal nature of party-to-party relations during the rise of communist parties in both countries as a sign that asymmetrical ties were somewhat mitigated by the overall sense of shared suffering at the hands of the West. However, the assistance that the People's Republic of China lent to the Việt Minh in terms of aid and military guidance during the First Indochinese War is seen by the author as a sign of "dependent asymmetry" China saw the Vietnamese anti-imperialist struggle as the next step in world revolution, and the Chinese commitment to this struggle was significant, even if the desired outcome differed somewhat from the Vietnamese leadership's nonnegotiable desire for national reunification. Eventually, Womack argues, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam achieved its goals during the Second Indochina War M part because its dependent relationship with China masked underlying differences and a basic sense of autonomy that the far more dependent Republic of Vietnam never developed in its own asymmetric relationship with the United States (184-185).

Womack effectively applies his model to post-1975 Sino-Vietnamese tensions and the 1979 border war as a means to explain Hà Nội's constant effort to maintain autonomy in interactions with Beijing, and China's assumption that improved Vietnamese relations with the Soviet Union by the mid-1960s was an intended signal of disloyalty. I also accept Womack's conclusion that through a decade of cold hostility, cool reconciliation, and finally the reestablishment of warm diplomatic ties in 1991, Vietnam and China maintained an essentially asymmetric bond. Vietnam still continues to pay more attention to the relationship than China does, and Vietnamese leaders have maintained vigilance in matters of territorial integrity even after military hostilities have subsided.

Womack does not argue that his model of asymmetry remains fixed through all periods of Sino-Vietnamese relations, or that China and Vietnam remain unaltered entities throughout history. I would stress this latter point more emphatically, because the numerous dynastic orders and political spheres labeled "Vietnam" or "China" throughout the book all require careful contextualization. Aside from several tentative observations, the author does not use his model to predict the future of Sino-Vietnamese relations. Changing political contexts and shifting regional conditions in the current era of globalization have strong influences on the nature and function of this relationship. Yet these external factors do not wholly shape the relationship, either. Through the imperial period of "role-based" tributary relations, brotherly solidarity in the era of international socialism, and their unique position as the two largest remaining communist states in an age of transnational capitalism, Vietnam and China have maintained a fundamental bond that reflects the two neighbors' inherent differences. Womack's study provides us with a useful tool for envisioning the larger structure of this important relationship even as the details change with time.