

Distinguishing between China and Vietnam: three relational equilibriums in Sino-Vietnamese Relations

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Abstract:

Premodern Sino-Vietnamese relations may be described by three systems of engagement that I have labeled Strong China/Weak Vietnam, Weak China/Strong Vietnam, and Strong China/Strong Vietnam. These three states of interaction appear at various points, beginning with Vietnamese encounters with the Qin empire (221–206 b.c.e.) through the early modern era. Brantly Womack has already described the historical Sino-Vietnamese relationship as politically “asymmetrical” with China playing the strongman role, and the three relational equilibriums described here do not contradict Womack's thesis. Instead, I explore how the generally asymmetrical states of affairs were molded by historical context and the specific ambitions of elite in the frontier region. While the general conditions of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship were asymmetrical, the choices available to Chinese and Vietnamese leaders in different periods varied widely.

Keywords: China | Vietnam | premodern | relations | tribute system | equilibrium

Article:

Well before US military planners feared Beijing's intervention in Vietnam's second Indochinese war, relations between Vietnam and China held a great regional significance. As reflected in Ho Chi Minh's blunt 1946 comment to scholar Paul Mus that enduring a little more French malodor is worth avoiding a lifetime of the same from China, fears of northern domination have long shaped Vietnamese foreign policy (Duiker 2000, 361). Examining the nature of Sino-Vietnamese relations throughout the premodern period, however, one finds a flexible but durable system of engagement. Within this generally stable system of relations, one may isolate three political equilibrium conditions, labeled in this article as Strong China/Weak Vietnam, Weak China/Strong Vietnam, and Strong China/Strong Vietnam, respectively.¹ These three states of

¹ I wish to thank Stephan Haggard (UCSD) for suggesting this framework of analysis during our 2011 workshop at the University of Southern California, "Was There a Historical East Asian International System? Impact, Meaning,

interaction appear at various points, beginning with Vietnamese encounters with the Qin empire (221-206 B.C.E.) through the early modern era. Brantly Womack has already described the historical Sino-Vietnamese relationship as politically "asymmetrical" with China playing the strongman role, and the three relational equilibriums described here do not contradict the general trend described by Womack (2006, 4-7). Instead, I wish to explore here how the generally asymmetrical states of affairs were molded by historical context and the specific ambitions of the elite in the frontier region. While the general conditions of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship were asymmetrical, the choices available to Chinese and Vietnamese leaders in different periods varied widely.

The larger narrative of Sino-Vietnamese relations has long revolved around border negotiations, either in terms of territory or spheres of political authority, by the designated leaders of Vietnamese and Chinese polities.² This narrative could, in fact, be constructed in alternate ways: focusing on the rise and fall of frontier trade, for example, as a source of anxiety for rulers of both northern and southern regimes. Officially sanctioned trade between the two central courts respected the political division at the frontier, while unofficial trade among subaltern communities flowed easily through the region when restrictions were lifted. Moreover, cultural exchange and the flow of ideas passed easily across a border invisible to most frontier inhabitants, but these ideas, such as Buddhism, would in turn lead to social structures and political practices that reinforced the separation between northern (Chinese) and southern (Vietnamese) polities. The frontier as a line of division and the frontier as a contact zone existed simultaneously between China and Vietnam after the late eleventh century (Anderson 2007). The dual nature of the frontier, in turn, affected conditions in the three equilibrium conditions mentioned above.

I will demonstrate that many aspects of Sino-Vietnamese relations changed with the outcome of tribute missions sent north to Chinese courts by Vietnamese envoys. The gift-based diplomatic protocol of the tribute system, as China's imperial-period foreign policy is best known in the West, had shaped the outer relations of polities located on the North China Plain since the Zhou period (ca. 1122–256 B.C.E.), and a similar framework for peripheral relations had been expanded southward with the initial expansion of the Qin empire (221-206 B.C.E.). Sino-Vietnamese tributary bonds may suggest to some readers an imperialistic relationship when viewed through the lens of the more recent past, but tribute missions were much more fluid opportunities to negotiate the balance of status and authority existing between the Chinese and Vietnamese rulers. The Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*) may have regarded his role as maintaining a universal political authority with himself at its pinnacle, but there was room in the system for adjustment based on local circumstances. At the start of the three political equilibrium conditions examined here, Strong China/Weak Vietnam, Weak China/Strong Vietnam, and Strong China/Strong Vietnam, we have evidence of tribute missions sent north to recalibrate the relationship. The titles granted Vietnamese rulers by Chinese emperors were

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² Please note that prior to the twentieth century modern names for the countries examined in this article and their inhabitants are not relevant. However, as a shorthand to simplify our discussion of various geographical regions, I have used the terms *Vietnamese* and *Vietnam* to describe persons and places located near or to the south of the Red (Hồng) River delta, and the terms *Chinese* and *China* to describe persons and places associated with courts and political centers north of the Red River delta.

cumulative, indicating the varying degrees of association the two courts had shared throughout their histories. The titles and honorific fiefs of land offered with each visit by Vietnamese envoys also affected the local standing of southern rulers among their southern neighbors. In this manner Vietnamese leaders negotiated their status within the Chinese tribute system in such a way as to establish regional independence while maintaining a check on Chinese incursions.

Table 1. Periods in Sino-Vietnamese Relations

| Period | Equilibrium | Characteristics |
|--|---|---|
| Pre-Qin empire, before 221 B.C.E. | Strong China/Weak Vietnam | Formal relationship undeveloped, autonomous polities with little interaction |
| Qin-Han period, 221 B.C.E.–220 C.E. | Strong China/Strong Vietnam (207-111 B.C.E.), Strong China/Weak Vietnam | Nam Việt autonomous but weaker than Han empire (early tributary ties), trade and economic exploitation were primary factors in relationship |
| Period of northern disunion, 220–581 | Weak China/Strong Vietnam | Weak northern regimes less influential, autonomous polities emphasized trade over tributary relationship |
| Sui-Tang period, 581–907 | Strong China/Weak Vietnam | Vietnam annexed by Chinese empire, political institution developed within tributary context |
| Five Dynasties period of disunion, 907–960 | Weak China/Strong Vietnam | Absence of strong northern regimes allowed for the emergence of autonomous base of political power in Vietnam |
| Đinh-Trần period, 968–1400 | Strong China/Strong Vietnam | Vietnamese regimes continued to maintain tributary ties to protect local autonomy; trade and tribute both important |
| Ming annexation, 1407–1427 | Strong China/Weak Vietnam | Vietnam absorbed by Chinese empire, tributary bond suspended |
| Latter Lê-/mid-Nguyễn period, 1427–1886 | Strong China/Strong Vietnam, Strong China/Weak Vietnam | Lê court strong domestically while remaining active in tributary engagement with China, relations more complex in "Southern and Northern Courts" (1533-1592) period; Opium War aftermath and French colonization of Indochina resulted in Weak China/Weak Vietnam; modern period brings changes |

It is important to note that Chinese and Vietnamese rulers seldom administered their states on the basis of an idealized world order, but instead considered both ideological and non-ideological factors in their decisionmaking. Trade and access to trade items from the South Seas (Nanhai/Biển Đông) region through Vietnamese channels had long been an important factor in the relationship. As Kenneth Hall notes, "early Chinese political interest in Vietnam was a consequence of the desire among China's rulers to secure southern trade routes and to gain access to southern luxury goods, which included pearls, incense, drugs, elephant tusk, rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshell, coral, parrots, kingfishers (and) peacocks" (Hall 1999, 261). From the third century B.C.E. through the eighth century C.E., Jiaozhi (a collective term for the maritime ports of northern Vietnam and coastal Guangxi), and not Guangzhou, was the primary conduit for all maritime trade arriving from Southeast Asia (Li 2011, 40). Tributary missions were not thinly veiled attempts to promote trade, as earlier scholars of the Chinese tribute system once argued (Fairbank and Teng 1941, 137). Nonetheless, there were trading opportunities present during the ritual performance of tributary protocol. Moreover, managing the Sino-Vietnamese frontier involved the development of relations with many independent ethnic groups, which resided on their respective sides of the imprecise borderline in the rugged mountain region that separated the Đại Việt kingdom from the Chinese empire. For the Vietnamese leadership, control of their northern frontier involved more than simply promoting trade or flexing military muscle. In periods of regional dominance, particularly during the early Lê (1428-1788) and early Nguyễn (1803-1945) dynasties, the Vietnamese court established a network of tributary ties with

neighboring kingdoms and principalities as its vassals. Therefore, within the three equilibrium frameworks one must take into account various practical elements, involving trade objectives, frontier security, and domestic political considerations. Table 1 summarizes these equilibrium conditions.

Below I will offer examples from the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations to illustrate the three equilibrium conditions mentioned above. The principles of harmony and hegemony are at play in all three equilibrium conditions, but the choices available to leaders of the larger northern regimes and local chieftains along the frontier differed widely. In these differences we can discern the characteristics of the relationship that allowed a smaller power such as the premodern Vietnamese state to survive on the periphery of various Chinese empires.

Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Strong China/Weak Vietnam

The periods of Strong China that had an impact on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship include the most well-known periods of dynastic rule: the Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. These are the periods of political "asymmetry" of the sort Brantly Womack describes in his work, and there is little reason to argue with this general framework (Womack 2006). However, this broad category hides as much about the relationship as it reveals. Within these periods we find Chinese and Vietnamese leaders responding more often to domestic or purely personal political concerns than they are simply addressing each other's strengths or weaknesses. China was rarely the weaker partner in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, because northern regimes often wielded greater resources and larger populations to mobilize. However, there were periods of relative strength and weakness that would affect relations.

The asymmetrical relationship between China and Vietnam within the Chinese tribute system was based on the assumption that the emperor wielded universal authority, and Vietnamese leaders sought to establish local authority in the context of this tributary relationship. However, as noted above, the Chinese imperial leadership could ignore the particulars of ideological purity to adopt a more flexible approach in specific foreign policy and frontier management decisions. Wang Gungwu has contended that Chinese rulers in the Song period, designated in this study as a Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium, were required to disregard realpolitik to allow room for the idealized world order at the core of the tribute system (Wang 1983, 62). I have argued that emperors of Strong China frequently assumed that "adherence to a universalistic notion of rulership actually required hegemonic expression" (Anderson 2007, 25). In periods of imperial strength, such as the height of the Tang Dynasty (618–906), regional peace remained in effect as long as it was supported by the central authority's potential for coercive intervention; regional harmony could justify military conquest, as well as territorial expansion, for the sake of regional pacification (Pan 1997, 22). Strong Chinese rulers found the source of their authority both in leading by virtuous example and in employing coercive force. Weak Vietnamese leaders would not openly reject this Chinese position of universal superiority, thus avoiding direct confrontation. Yet the reality of premodern lines of communication regularly offered the Vietnamese leaders plenty of time between encounters with northern authorities to consolidate a local power base without overtly undermining adherence to the prevailing world order.

The traditional relationship between Vietnam and China was a long time in the making. Its earliest incarnation involved the emergence of autonomous polities that grew out of political arrangements initially put in place by a distant and more powerful Chinese court. The period of state-building that resulted in the Âu Lạc kingdom (ca. 220-180 B.C.E.) was necessarily influenced by events to the north of the modern Sino-Vietnamese border region. The Âu Lạc kingdom's founder, Thục Phán, who was likely an outsider from the north, allied with several upland neighbors and led the military conquest of his lowland neighbor the Văn Lang kingdom, which was home to northern Vietnam's indigenous elite known in the sources as the Lạc lords (Abadie 2001, 16; Ngô 1993 [1497], 1: 5a). A contributing factor to Thục Phán's victory was the Qin (221-206 B.C.E.) military campaign into the borderlands region in 219 B.C.E. shortly after the founding of China's first empire (Taylor 1983, 17). Fierce fighting during the Qin military advance had devastated the region's old political order, and in the political chaos Thục Phán overcame the local elite and set up his own kingdom without completely driving the Lạc lords out of the region (Taylor 1983, 20). The Văn Lang kingdom had no time to develop a lasting relationship with the northern Chinese court, because in 180 B.C.E. Thục Phán relinquished control of the region to Zhao Tuo (V. Triệu Đà, r. 207-137 B.C.E.), the Qin-appointed military commissioner for South China. I have included Zhao Tuo's Nanyue (V. Nam Việt) kingdom (204-111 B.C.E.) under the third equilibrium examined in this article, although the Nanyue was most assuredly weaker in absolute power than was the Han empire (206 B.C.E.-221 C.E.), successor to the Qin.

Following the 111 Han defeat of Nanyue and the absorption of this territory into the northern empire, Chinese authorities planned to introduce into the region, which is today northern Vietnam, administrative practices modeled on the rest of the empire, but the regional rule was adjusted to produce maximum political stability and to minimize disturbance to the flow of trade through the region. Han authorities likely recognized the local authority of the Lạc lords as prefectural and district officials (Taylor 1983, 33). The Lạc lords in turn accepted titles from the Han court to enhance their prestige. By submitting tribute from their region, they built up an institutional relationship with the central court. Although the greater strength of the Han empire was evident, it mattered much less at the local level in Vietnam. Demographic changes originating in the north had a greater impact. An increasing number of elite families (officials, scholars) arrived in the south during the interim reign of Wang Mang (r. 9-23 C.E.). These immigrants, bearers of North China Plains culture, upset the laissez-faire policy established among Chinese settlers, officials, and the indigenous aristocracy, the Lạc lords (Holmgren 1980, 2). The Lạc lords had drawn their own resources from the products the Han court wished to tax. Their regional authority also was challenged by social changes after the adoption of Chinese marriage practices. Eventually, they opposed the changes with force, resulting in the Trưng sisters (Hai Bà Trưng) rebellion of 39-43 C.E. (Ngô 1993 [1479], 3: 1b-3a). The failure of the Trưng sisters rebellion points to a lack of cohesion among the local aristocracy, a cohesion that didn't fully develop until centuries of contact with successive northern regimes had passed. In this phase, Weak Vietnam was unable to use the larger tributary relationship to any advantage, but was instead reacting to change implemented by outside authorities.

In this category of Strong China/Weak Vietnam one must also consider the early Ming occupation of Vietnam, a period in which the Ming emperor Zhu Di (also the Yongle emperor) (1360-1424) for personal reasons exercised an aggressive frontier policy completely at odds with

the more cautious policy of his father, the dynasty's founder. By the end of 1407 Ming forces had occupied most of the Đại Việt kingdom, although sporadic uprisings were not put down until 1414. The Ming court made the mistake of sending mediocre officials to fill special posts in Vietnamese administration. However, leading Vietnamese families also provided many of the most able officials to serve in the Ming occupation government (Whitmore 1977, 64-65). These families faced harsh judgment in official Vietnamese historical accounts once the Chinese were driven out of Vietnam. Appointed Ming administrators also treated the occupation as an occasion for economic exploitation, which did not win them popular approval. The local resistance, led by Thanh Hóa native landholder and former official Lê Lợi (1385-1433), launched a series of attacks in 1418 on Chinese garrisons and supply lines, gradually wearing down Ming resolve. When Zhu Di died, his next two successors followed his occupation policy. However, by 1427, Ming court advisers recommended abandoning the occupation effort, citing the Ming founder's own opposition to military expeditions against the empire's neighbors. In 1428, Lê Lợi's supporters established a new court at Thăng Long, renamed Đông Kinh ("The Eastern Capital"), and the Ming court had recognized Lê Lợi as the legitimate ruler of a new dynasty. The Lê dynastic rulers would soon revive tributary relations with the Ming and adopt certain Ming court practices in the administration of the Lê state, but only after the threat of outside interference had been eliminated. As Keith Taylor has argued, the Ming court's dilemma was as follows. Vietnam had once been part of China and so should be able to be civilized; however, Chinese officials had come to the agreement that local Vietnamese would not accept this civilizing mission (Taylor 1999, 150). The strong Ming empire seemingly had the resources to force its political will on Vietnam, but the materially weaker Đại Việt kingdom was not willing to accept this change in the relationship for long. Reviving tributary relations provided a more practical solution, and this "civilizing" issue was ultimately left undecided.

Another example of the Strong China/Weak Vietnam equilibrium was the period marking the rise and fall of the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1677). The Mạc, which occupied the northernmost section of the Lê-controlled Đại Việt kingdom, competed directly with the Lê for resources and regional recognition. Shortly after the establishment of the Mạc, the Ming emperor sent a battalion of troops, calling for the capture of the kingdom's founder Mạc Đăng Dung (1483-1541). Mạc Đăng Dung immediately decided to seek Ming support for his rule, and he rushed a mission to Beijing to gain recognition. The Ming court showed little interest in fully abandoning tributary links with the Lê, but Mạc Đăng Dung persisted. In 1540, sources note that he and his assistants crawled barefoot to the frontier camp of a Ming delegation as a sign of submission, offering records of his administration in five frontier prefectures near Lạng Sơn in exchange for peace at the border. The Ming court finally recognized this frontier region as the "Annan Protectorate Colonial Secretariat" (*Annandu tongshisi*) and Mạc Đăng Dung as a local magistrate (Zhang 1974, 321: 8334; Guangxi 1992, 96). This anachronistic use of the Tang period term "Annan" (the Pacified South) for Mạc territory reveals the heavy-handed manner with which the Ming court laid claim to this portion of the borderlands for inclusion into the Ming empire. However, Mạc Đăng Dung in 1530 had already abdicated his position of authority to his son, instead taking the title Thái thượng hoàng ("Ruler Emeritus") (Zhang 1974,321: 8330-8331).

While his son continued to rule as "king" of Đại Việt kingdom, Mạc Đăng Dung served as a Ming frontier administrator, in effect claiming his territory existed both within and beyond the authority of the Ming court. Despite protests from the Lê court, the Ming court decided that the

Mạc and the Lê should continue to rule Vietnam as co-vassals of the Ming empire. Thus began the period of Nam Bắc Triều ("Southern and Northern Courts") (1533-1592). Exiled Lê leaders found support from Nguyễn Kim (1476-1545) and his son-in-law Trịnh Kiểm (1503-1570), members of powerful Thanh Hóa clans that hoped to take all of Vietnam from the Mạc. In 1532 the Lê set up a court-in-exile in Laos. In 1540, the Lê rulers moved to Thanh Hoa and began to actively resist Mạc claims to national control. Nguyễn Kim was murdered during this same year, but the struggle continued. It took the Lê court forty-seven years before it was able to drive the Mạc out of the capital at Thăng Long in 1592. Even at this point, the Mạc lingered in the northern border region until 1677, and the territorial struggle between the now rival Nguyễn and Trịnh clans during the Tây Sơn Rebellion (1771-1802) eclipsed any political relevance the Mạc continued to muster. In the context of the Strong China/Weak Vietnam equilibrium, the weaker southern regimes navigated within the framework of the tribute system imposed by stronger northern regimes, without effectively challenging the political will of the dominant Chinese leadership. The conditions for the relationship were set by the Chinese. The Vietnamese leadership, even in the midst of local political competition, had to adapt to these external conditions.

Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Weak China/Strong Vietnam

In this second equilibrium, absent undue influence from a dominant northern neighbor, local Vietnamese leaders turned frequently to local expressions of power and authority. The imperial model of Chinese dynasts was not the only source of political status; local leaders turned to upland communities of the frontier region for additional support. During periods of strong northern administrations, overwhelming military might from the north eventually defeated southern leaders who relied only on indigenous support to challenge imperial representatives. During periods of imperial decline, local leaders could briefly carve out independent polities, but these spheres of power would only last as long as the vacuum of military strength from the north remained unfilled.

With the decline of the Han Dynasty, northern power and authority were greatly diminished. The effective independence of the Vietnamese region under Shi Xie (Sĩ Nhiếp) (137-226) flourished in this period. Shi Xie's family had earlier fled the Han usurper Wang Mang's reign (9-23), so he was an example of the region's Sino-Vietnamese elite. When Zhu Fu, the Eastern Han inspector of Jiaozhi (Giao Chi) the frontier territory located in modern-day northern Vietnam, was murdered in 196 in a local insurrection, Shi Xie took advantage of the turmoil to take effective control of the region, including Jiaozhi, Curu Chan (the northern portion of central Vietnam), and the South China coastline, serving formally as the new inspector, but actually exercising autonomous control through several family members (Chen and Pei 1959,49: 1191). The territory under his control, reaching across Lingnan (modern-day Guangdong and Guangxi) to central Vietnam, closely resembled Nanyue's dimensions before this southern kingdom succumbed to early Han expansion. At this point, the late Han Dynasty was no longer strong enough to overcome assertion of local autonomy. The court attempted to reassert central control by dispatching another official and by promoting Jiaozhi to the status of a province in 203, but Shi Xie continued to hold real power (Taylor 1983, 72). With the final disintegration of the Han and the emergence of the intense political rivalry of the Three Kingdoms period, the Weak China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium entered a new phase, and a loose tributary bond was

reintroduced in the relationship. Shi Xie chose to ally with Sun Quan (182-252), founder of the Eastern Wu Dynasty (229-280), and when the Wu's founding was announced in Nanjing, Shi Xie sent a large tribute mission north. By doing so, Shi Xie likely spared Jiaozhi direct attack from the expanding Wu, and gave the region time to develop independently for a while longer. Charles Holcombe notes that Shi Xie acted in a manner similar to the Northeast Asian Gongsun clan, which in this same period controlled the Liaodong Peninsula and issued tribute to the Wei court in an effort to stave off direct intervention (Holcombe 2001, 15).

The Wu kingdom initially fostered good relations with Jiaozhi, and Sun Quan issued numerous titles to Shi Xie and his brothers. The Wu court also accepted luxury items from Jiaozhi, such as incense, bird feathers, and ivory, including items traded with other Southeast Asian maritime kingdoms. In 226, Shi Xie died, and his son Shi Hui (Sī Huy) (165-227) also received Wu patronage for a time. However, Sun Quan, acting on a memorial from his military commander Lu Dai (161-256), soon decided to divide the Shi clan's region of Jiaozhi into two domains: all northern territory along the coast of the important maritime entrepot Hepu was designated as Guangzhou, and all territory south of this point was designated as Jiaozhou (Chen and Pei 1959,49: 1193). Lu Dai became the governor of Guangzhou, and another Wu official was appointed governor of Jiaozhou, effectively undermining the Shi family power base. Losing access to the important maritime trade passing through Hepu would have been a devastating blow by itself. Shi Hui attempted a revolt, but his forces were put down by Wu troops and the entire Shi clan was massacred in the aftermath (Chen and Pei 1959,49: 1193). Shi Xie and his clan had been favorably positioned to benefit from regional trade as long as the northern regime remained weak or distracted with other conflicts. Shi Xie had accepted titles of the Eastern Wu court, but the continued relationship between the Wu and the Shi clans does not appear to follow strict tributary protocol; instead it depended more on direct trade and personal patronage. Once these conditions changed, so did the Wu court's acceptance of this semiautonomous polity.

Another historical example that fits the conditions of the Weak China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium developed with the fall of the Tang imperial house in the early tenth century. The Five Dynasties period was marked by the struggle in the post-Tang period for regional reunification under a state that could claim the authority the Tang rulers once wielded. As the Five Dynasties period progressed, however, reunification of the region seemed increasingly difficult, and "rulers focused on their own military and political experiences as they searched for solutions to the establishment of a strong central authority and loyal administration at the borders" (Anderson 2007, 41). In this political environment, various local military strongmen of the Red River delta struggled for control, and from this group emerged Ngô Quyền (r. 939-944). Ngô Quyền's title of authority, inherited from the late Tang period, was military commissioner (*jiedushi*), which implied some degree of autonomy. As a military commissioner, Ngô Quyền claimed a source of political authority without relying on tributary ties, but he was also fortunate to amass a strong enough military force to fend off regional challengers. The northern Vietnamese territory was also claimed by the nearby Southern Han kingdom, administered from Guangzhou, the ancient power base of the Nanyue ruler Zhao Tuo and later Shi Xie. In the autumn of 938, Liu Hongcao, son of the Southern Han ruler Liu Gong (r. 917-942), led a military expedition against Ngô Quyền's forces, and Liu was soundly defeated in the Battle of Bạch Đằng River (Sima 1969,281: 9193). This famous battle proved to be a turning point in Sino-Vietnamese relations, because an autonomous, or at least semiautonomous, Vietnamese polity

would remain, with few exceptions, a reality for the Red River delta through the early modern era.

Following his victory against the Southern Han forces, Ngô Quyền dropped all references to the title military commissioner, adopting the title of king (*vwong*), and establishing his court at Cổ Loa, the ancient capital of the aforementioned lowland Vietnamese Âu Lạc kingdom. The Ngô clan continued to maintain their stable control of the region from 939 to 965, until a rival local military leader, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, wrested control of the region away from the Ngô and in 968 founded Vietnam's first fully independent kingdom, the Đại Cồ Việt (Ngô 1993 [1479], 1: 2a-2b). Under the conditions of this second equilibrium, local leaders attempted, at times unsuccessfully, to establish local political order without seeking accommodation within the framework of China's developing tribute system. With the fall of the Eastern Han court came an extended period of political disunion, and Chinese administration of the southern region had become ineffective by the late fifth century. In this environment a new class of local elites claiming control of Vietnam soon emerged. With the fall of the Tang, another shorter period of disunity resulted in the Five Dynasties period, and the period of Weak China resulted in a legacy of Vietnamese self-rule in the Red River delta that persisted through the premodern period.

Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Strong China/Strong Vietnam

Within the Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium in relations, tributary bonds continued to provide the basis for court-to-court negotiations. However, under these conditions, the weaker (in an absolute sense) Vietnamese partner had the means for adapting tributary constraints to its own advantage. As mentioned above, the Nanyue kingdom along the southern frontier of the Qin and early Han empires was a strong example of this category of Sino-Vietnamese encounters and the border created by this southern polity provided a point of anxiety for successive northern regimes. Nanyue, although short-lived, would serve as a guide to future generations of Vietnamese leaders who sought to ground their own political autonomy in the glorious past (Anderson 2007, 35). Zhao Tuo, the first ruler of Nanyue, had originally been dispatched to the south by the Qin court, but sources note that he soon gained widespread support for his administration, despite his lack of lineage ties. Once his local backing was strong enough, and northern rulers were preoccupied with the violent Qin-Han dynastic transition, Zhao Tuo named himself martial king of Nanyue (*nanyue wuwang*), and later emperor of the territory, without seeking approval from any Chinese authorities (Sima 1969, 12: 394). As noted above, Zhao Tuo sent military forces into the Âu Lạc kingdom in 180 B.C.E., thus extending his influence over a territory that stretched from Guangzhou to the northern border of the modern-day Vietnamese province of Nghệ An (Sima 1999, 2976). Zhao Tuo's name for his kingdom, "Nanyue," suggested the ancient ethnonym "the Hundred Yue" (*bai yue*), a collective term for the various peoples south of the Yangtze River to the coastline of the Tongking Gulf. The Nanyue kingdom shared a border with several other smaller states, including the Minyue kingdom (334-110 B.C.E.), later annexed into the eastern region of Nanyue; the Changsha kingdom, a Han protectorate along the Nanyue's northern frontier; and the autonomous Yelang kingdom (third century B.C.E.–first century C.E.) to the southwest. These kingdoms engaged in court-to-court relations with the more powerful Han court and they all received titles from the Han emperor, but the proximity of Nanyue and that kingdom's greater military strength was sufficient for Zhao Tuo to demand recognition from or the submission of these kingdoms (Zhang 1995, 130-131).

However, the balance in relations between these southern kingdoms depended in part on the strength of the northern court.

The militarily stronger Chinese court was never completely reconciled to the existence of a strong state on its southern frontier. In 196 B.C.E., the newly established Han empire had acknowledged Zhao Tuo's leadership by granting him the title king of Nanyue (*nanyue wang*), but in 185 B.C.E. the Han empress Lü, fearing Nanyue's growing regional strength, broke off trade links and had troops sent to the south (Ngô 1993 [1479], 2: 3a). Zhao Tuo responded by declaring himself emperor and seizing firm control of his neighboring kingdoms. The Han force was eventually recalled with the death of Empress Lü, and formal relations resumed with Nanyue, but the Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium did not allow for the type of stable but asymmetrical relationship described by Brantly Womack. Ultimately, Nanyue would not survive Zhao Tuo's death in 137 B.C.E. and the transfer of power to his son in the face of the Han court's concerted effort to bring the region under northern control. In 112 B.C.E. the pro-Han ruler Zhao Xing, whose father had once served in the Han court, was killed by anti-Han courtiers (Taylor 1983, 28). The Han emperor Wudi (r. 141-87 B.C.E.) had already assembled a large military force near the border, and this force attacked in response to the court turmoil, effectively putting an end to Nanyue's independence. However, the local elites, the Lạc lords, remained in power even after the Han took administrative control of the region, and, as noted earlier in this article, Lạc power was only eradicated following the Trưng sisters rebellion in 43 C.E. This period of a strong and wealthy southern polity would remain an inspiration to Vietnamese leaders and a point of concern for Chinese rulers. Its vivid memory would shape the early nineteenth-century debate over an acceptable name for the newly unified kingdom of the Nguyễn court (1802-1945). The Qing court's refusal of the Nguyễn choice "Nam Việt" and the coining of the entirely new term "Việt Nam" were a direct result of the Strong China/Strong Vietnam legacy of this ancient state.

A second example of the Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium may be found in the mid-eleventh century between the Song empire (968-1279) and the Đại Việt kingdom under the Lý court (1009-1225). From the fall of the Tang Dynasty in the late ninth century through the founding of the Song, a strong, independent polity emerged and developed under local leadership from the Red River region. Local elites from three successive Vietnamese ruling families, the Đinh (r. 968-980), the Lê (r. 980-1009), and the Lý clans, consolidated their regional control by maintaining relations with the Song court within the tributary framework while competing with others, even their own kinsmen, for local dominance. Chinese efforts to increase their regional influence through military intervention in 980 ended in failure. Eventually, the Chinese court acceded to the new political landscape. At that point, the founder of the Lý Dynasty, Lý Công Uẩn (r. 1010-1028), would initiate a very different style of rule. Early on Lý rulers had enthusiastically modeled their court on the Chinese imperial example, but they would eventually rename their kingdom without seeking Chinese approval. When Lý Công Uẩn in the late summer of 1010 established his new capital at an ancient citadel renamed Thăng Long, on the site of modern-day Hà Nội, the Vietnamese ruler signaled a shift in the center of power away from the coastal focus of the Đinh-Lê capital Hao Lu in the lower delta region. At the same time the Lý leadership expanded into the northern region, coming into closer contact with the upland communities in the frontier areas.

These encounters would finally bring Chinese and Vietnamese interests together in a period of conflict by the mid-eleventh century. Growing tensions at the frontier were largely the product of shifting demography and local disturbances (Hoàng and Hà 2003, 127). Chinese settlers were streaming south at the same time that the Lý rulers consolidated control over native borderlands settlements (Anderson 2007, 123-124). Political events at Thang Long seemed to indicate that the Lý leadership was anxious to firm up a physical divide before the Song empire extended any farther south. By 1069, Lý Nhật Tôn (r. 1054-1072) felt confident enough to change the official name of the kingdom from Đại Cồ Việt to the strictly Sino-Vietnamese Đại Việt, a name that Vietnamese rulers would retain until the end of World War II, and he dropped all references to the Song reign periods in his court proclamations (Toght et al. 1983, 488: 14069). Such behavior was deemed provocative by the Song court and within a few years, China and Vietnam were on the brink of war. In 1075, anticipating an attack from Song forces, the court regent and military commander Lý Thường Kiệt (1019-1105) led an attack on two fronts, sea and land, against southern China. Thường Kiệt laid siege to the Yongzhou garrison (modern-day Nanning) and captured it, causing many of its defenders to commit suicide. When the Song court launched a counterattack in late 1076, Lý Thường Kiệt set up his defenses to the north of Thăng Long and prevented invading armies from occupying the capital. By 1086 a clear border had been mapped out between the two states—the first such court-negotiated border in China's history. After the establishment of this court-negotiated border, there would still be challenges to the Đại Việt's insistence on self-rule. However, the existence of a formal border between the two polities was successfully challenged only once in the next eight hundred years.

As David Kang mentions in his recent book, the one Great War between Vietnam and China in the last six hundred years was the early Ming invasion of the Đại Việt kingdom (Kang 2010, 99). It was in this period of relative peace that the founders of both the Lê Dynasty (1428-1788) and the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) engaged with their northern neighbor under the conditions of the Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium. One might debate whether the early Lê state should be placed in this category, but the strong Vietnamese state-building efforts after thwarting the Ming's occupation efforts are indicative of this third equilibrium. It is generally accepted in modern Vietnamese scholarship that the founders of the Lê Dynasty saw essential differences between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures, suddenly as plain as the mountains and rivers that divided the two regions. I agree with Liam Kelley that the new leadership at Đông Kinh regarded its mandate to rule as a validated intellectual and moral order shared by northern and southern regimes alike (Kelley 2005, 19-20). Even if proclamations of the early Lê court presented Chinese and Vietnamese political pasts as clearly separated, common values such as those expressed through the performance of tributary protocol, for example, held the two regions together in a special bond. The early Lê leadership accepted that Chinese norms of rulership shaped regimes both north and south of the existing frontier. The same conditions held true with the founding of the Nguyễn Dynasty, although external forces would eventually undermine the foundations of the existing relationship. In June of 1803, the Qing court granted Nguyễn Ánh, the Gia Long emperor (r. 1802-1820) to his own subjects, ritual investiture as king. The Vietnamese ruler had, late in the previous year, sent an envoy to Beijing for formal acknowledgment of his new realm. The Qing court had famously given the Nguyễn permission to call their dominion Việt Nam, and not Nam Việt, but this innovative title for the new kingdom, and future name for the nation-state, would be subsequently ignored by both parties. When the Nguyễn established its court at Huế, the new government proceeded to refer to its

realm domestically as "the Great South" (Đại Nam), while the Qing court, as Alexander Woodside noted, revived the anachronistic term "the Pacified South" (An Nam) (Woodside 1988, 120-121). Nguyễn Ánh had, with Western-including French-assistance, successfully defeated the lingering Tây Sơn defenses to once again unite the northern and southern territories of the kingdom. This foreign assistance came at a price, and by the mid-nineteenth century the French were more involved in Vietnam than any European power in the region. In 1884 French authorities at the signing of the Treaty of Huế took the imperial seal given Nguyễn Ánh by the Qing emperor and melted it down, marking an end to the 2,000-year-old special bond between China and Vietnam. The Sino-Vietnamese tributary relationship had been brought to an end by an outside power, and the new relationship, while still bearing traces of the old order, would be subject to new political pressures and regional challenges.

The premodern Strong China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium, including the institutions of tributary relations that stemmed from a common political culture, had once allowed the resilient, and hardly fool-hardy, Lê leaders to reject direct intervention from the Ming emperor while opting to remain within the historical relationship that informed the authority expressed in both courts. The early Nguyễn court, before unrelenting pressure from French colonial expansion, could locate themselves within the political hierarchy dictated by Qing tributary practices in a manner that enhanced their local authority to rule. Under the conditions of the third equilibrium, Vietnamese rulers often returned to the framework of tributary ties even when the Vietnamese polity was able to present a formidable military defense in the face of northern aggression. The Đinh, former Lê (980-1009), and Lý courts had all entered into tributary relations with the Chinese court, but each Vietnamese leadership approached this relationship somewhat differently. As the recipients of a long, varied history of political interaction with northern powers, these leaders from the northern Vietnamese region all understood the variety of roles available to satisfy the expectations of distant emperors. Yet when all options within the tributary relationship were exhausted, Vietnamese leaders would ultimately amass forces for adequate military responses.

Conclusion

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship was both an element of the larger Chinese tribute system and also a separate and self-contained relationship following its own logic of development. In a study of this relationship, the researcher is obliged to consider two dimensions of analysis: the temporally specific court-directed acts construed as *tributary* behavior in a ritual context, and localized frontier-situated competitions for political and economic control. Moreover, the historical documents that recorded these events were passed to us with their own interpretative problems. Citing the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Bell notes that the context of practice rarely comes to us as a clear picture, but instead is presented to us "full of indeterminacy, ambiguities, and equivocations" (Bell 1993, 83; Bourdieu 1977, 5-6, 14-15). In both the Chinese and Vietnamese historical records, the Sino-Vietnamese relationship played an important role in shaping the cultural identities of these two societies even through the modern age. However, the dynamic nature of this relationship is found well below the surface of its existing record.

Under the conditions of the Strong China/Strong Vietnam and Strong China/Weak Vietnam equilibriums, hierarchical relations and a schedule of interaction dictated by tributary protocol were both important factors. Concerning the Weak China/Strong Vietnam equilibrium, these

factors played a less important role in the decision-making of the Vietnamese leadership, but even then a Vietnamese leader could not completely disregard the self-image of the Chinese court. In this article we have observed that the Chinese emperor and his advisers viewed themselves as guardians of an ideal system of state-to-state relations preserved in the ritual elements of Confucianism's imperial cult. This ancient court culture contained within it a hierarchical element. For the term *hierarchical*, I turn to Louis Dumont's work *Homo Hierarchicus*, in which Dumont defines the term as a "principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole" (Dumont 1966, 66). Dumont notes that most societies professing this view of the whole are religious in nature. Because the role of a Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven was quasi-religious, this distinction still satisfies the conditions of the traditional Chinese notion of world order. As the guardian of presumably ancient practices thought to have universal appeal, the Chinese court placed itself at the forefront of a system of states and lesser polities extant at any particular time beside and beyond its borders.

Moreover, there was the issue of the temporal order established when the Chinese emperor followed his calendar to schedule the regular submission of tribute by the various vassal states. As Alexander Woodside notes in a more modern context, "the command of time, and the definition of time, can be as significant a part of the development of power as the command of space or money" (Woodside 1998, 191). The emperor ordered time with the regular performance of his duties just as he ordered space with the positioning of his person. Therefore, the adoption of reign periods and localized calendars by supposedly subordinated neighboring states was a gesture of impertinence, perhaps even a negation of the emperor's own position. Vietnamese rulers who took this course of action did so at their own peril. In this context, tribute was the organizational focus of court-to-court relations that functioned through centuries of evolution and development as a method of ordering and harmonizing interchange between political bodies. However, as the defender of this system, the Chinese court itself was under the constraints of the ideal order it espoused. The hierarchical whole of the tribute system, of which each participating tributary state was a part, also encircled the Chinese court. Because the ultimate authority of the Chinese emperor expressed itself in the achievement of regional peace and harmony, the emperor needed the regular performance of tribute missions from each participating state to promulgate his own legitimacy.

The modern Sino-Vietnamese relationship shares a dynamic quality with its premodern incarnation, even if the diplomatic principles underpinning the relationship have fully changed. The modern relationship is also shaped by the recent emergence of China as a regional power. Southeast Asian nations, to confront China's growing influence in the region, are choosing at times to ally with, and at other times to line up against, their northern neighbor (Roy 2005, 305-322). China does not currently claim a "Monroe Doctrine" for the region. Instead, Beijing claims historical precedent as reason enough to reassert claims to southern territories and southern resources—for example, see the regional controversy surrounding China's territorial claims involving the "Nine Dash Line" in the South China Sea (Nan Hai)/Biển Đông. China also has one of the fastest growing military forces in the world, and Beijing recently acquired an aircraft carrier to assist in establishing a blue-water navy. The impact of direct military intervention from China would be substantial and likely destabilizing in Southeast Asia (Mearsheimer 2010, 395). Sea routes through the region have become more and more important for trade, as the lifeblood of these growing economies. China understood the importance of these routes in the early

fifteenth century. With increased technological-military capabilities, the Beijing government could exercise greater control, unless the United States brokers some cooperation between the PRC and ASEAN.

As for the future of Sino-Vietnamese relations, arguments have been made since earlier in the decade that Vietnam could serve as a "buffer zone" between China and Southeast Asia. The Bush administration and now the Obama administration have shown interest in building up Vietnam's military, particularly naval, capability to a point just strong enough to monitor Chinese activity in the region and ultimately slow a Chinese intrusion (Cheng 2011,387). However, Sino-ASEAN relations have in general steadily improved and the relationship between China and Vietnam has remained consistently cordial. In November 2009, Beijing and Hanoi signed agreements to culminate over three decades of border negotiations (Cheng 2011, 385-386). Despite popular protest in Hanoi, Vietnam and China have made some progress in addressing disputes over the Paracel and Spratley islands, although fundamental differences remain. A Strong China/Strong ASEAN equilibrium may be on the rise, with maximum flexibility for all actors involved. Although such predictions are well beyond the scope of this study, the varied nature of the historical Sino-Vietnamese relationship presents options.

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