China and Vietnam

The Politics of Asymmetry

In their three thousand years of interaction, China and Vietnam have been through a full range of relationships. Twenty-five years ago they were one another’s worst enemy; fifty years ago they were the closest of comrades. Five hundred years ago they each saw themselves as Confucian empires; fifteen hundred years ago Vietnam was a part of China. Throughout all these fluctuations the one constant has been that China is the larger power and Vietnam the smaller. China has rarely been able to dominate Vietnam, and yet the relationship is shaped by its asymmetry.

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship provides the perfect ground for developing and exploring the effects of asymmetry on international relations. Brantly Womack develops his theory in conjunction with an original analysis of the interaction between China and Vietnam from the Bronze Age to the present. The value of asymmetry theory is demonstrated in its illumination of the dynamics of the relationship.

Brantly Womack is Professor of Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia and has been named an honorary professor at Jilin University in Changchun and East China Normal University in Shanghai. He is the author of Foundations of Mao Zedong’s Political Thought and Politics in China (with James Townsend) and the editor of a number of books, including Contemporary Chinese Politics in Historical Perspective (Cambridge University Press, 1991). He has made frequent visits to China since 1978 and to Vietnam since 1985, and he has published articles comparing their politics and exploring their relationship in World Politics, Government and Opposition, China Journal, Asian Survey, Pacific Affairs, and elsewhere. His articles on asymmetry in international relations have appeared in Journal of Strategic Studies, Journal of Contemporary China, and Pacific Affairs.
China and Vietnam

The Politics of Asymmetry

BRANTLY WOMACK
University of Virginia
For Ann, David, and Sarah
Contents

Tables, Figures, and Maps  page ix

Preface

Introduction  1
The Book in Brief  4

1 General Overview  8
  Relational Attitudes: The Rock and the Giant  9
  China and Vietnam in Comparison  10
  Asymmetry and International Relations Theory  17
  The Phases of the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship  23

PART ONE: BASIC STRUCTURE

2 The Parameters of China’s External Posture  33
  Size  35
  Centricity and Localism  39
  Resource Sufficiency  48
  The Challenge of Sustenance  51
  History  52

3 Vietnam’s Basic Parameters  56
  Geography  57
  Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism  62
  Resource Imbalance  65
  Integration and Diversity  69
  History  71

4 The Politics of Asymmetry  77
  Symmetry and Asymmetry  78
  The Politics of Inattention  80
  The Politics of Overattention  82
Deference, Autonomy, and Misperception 84
Stalemate and Normalization 85
Managing Asymmetry 89

PART TWO: THE RELATIONAL DYNAMIC
5 From the Beginnings to Vietnamese Independence 95
   Before China and Vietnam: Pre-imperial Relationships 95
   Vietnam as Part of China 104
   Asymmetry before Independence 114
6 Unequal Empires 117
   Establishing Autonomy and Deference: Song to Ming 120
   Unequal Empires, 1427–1858 129
   The Chinese Empire as an International Political Order 139
7 The Brotherhood of Oppression: 1840–1950 142
   The Western Collision, 1840–1900 143
   Fates Compared: China’s Total Crisis versus Colonialism in Vietnam, 1900–1950 148
   Revolutionary Comradeship 153
   Asymmetry Distressed 160
8 Lips and Teeth: 1950–1975 162
   Intimate Comradeship, 1950–1965 164
   Clenched Teeth, 1965–1975 174
   Dependent Asymmetry and the Two Vietnams 183
   Illusions of Victory 1975–1979 189
   Hostile Isolation, 1979–1990 200
   The Cycle of Systemic Misperception 209
10 From Normalization to Normalcy 212
   Normalization, 1991–1999 213
   Normalcy 225
   Mature Asymmetry 235
11 Change and Structure in Asymmetry 238
   Varieties of Asymmetry 239
   Asymmetry’s Deep Structure 247
   Challenges to Normalcy 252
Appendix: Glossary of Terms 257
Bibliography 261
Index 275
Tables, Figures, and Maps

Tables

1.1 China and Vietnam: Some comparative data ........................................... page 13
1.2 The general phases of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship ......................... 23
5.1 Chinese and Vietnamese pre-unification history ..................................... 97
5.2 Vietnam as part of China chronology ..................................................... 105
6.1 From Vietnamese independence to the Ming occupation ......................... 121
6.2 Ming occupation to French arrival ....................................................... 131
7.1 China, Vietnam, and the West ............................................................... 144
7.2 Chaos and colonialism ......................................................................... 149
8.1 Lips and teeth ......................................................................................... 165
8.2 Clenched teeth ....................................................................................... 175
9.1 Illusions of victory ................................................................................. 190
9.2 Stalemate ............................................................................................... 201
10.1 Normalization ....................................................................................... 214
10.2 China’s Vietnam trade ........................................................................... 216
10.3 Normalcy .............................................................................................. 226
10.4 Sino-Vietnamese trade in the normalcy era ............................................ 230
11.1 Varieties of Sino-Vietnamese asymmetry ............................................. 240

Figures

2.1 Percentage of Han by province ............................................................... 41
2.2 Population density by province ........................................................... 42
2.3 Circles of influence .............................................................................. 46
4.1 Asymmetric attention ........................................................................... 79
4.2 Factors moderating structural misperception ...................................... 89
9.1 The cycle of systemic misperception .................................................... 210
Maps

3.1 Vietnam 58
3.2 Fifty percent of population 59
3.3 Dimensions of dispersion 60
3.4 Regional disparities and dynamics 68
From 1985 to 1991 I made a number of visits to China and Vietnam and talked to some of Vietnam’s China experts and to some of China’s Vietnam experts. By that time the hostility that had emerged during the 1970s had become embedded. Not only did I hear different “sides” of the conflict in each country, but the perceptions that each had of the other side struck me as profoundly distorted. The problem was not a lack of information. Each set of experts that I talked to had more information than I did. But the Vietnamese China experts seemed hypersensitive to every gesture and action emanating from China, while the Chinese Vietnam experts seemed overly concerned with “big picture” questions and out of touch with the realities of the place that I had just visited.

After the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991, the distance between the two viewpoints diminished, but the disparity remained and grew more complicated. Now both countries were concerned about developing a peaceful relationship, but “off the record” and in concrete areas of confrontation, the Chinese disparaged the Vietnamese as unreliable, while the Vietnamese were alert to Chinese malevolent inscrutability and bullying. The attitudes were not simply the residual effects of previous hostility. The issues were the peacetime problems of border trade, bridges, rail connections, and so forth, not problems of history. But there was a continuity of roles. Vietnam tended to be overly sensitive to China’s actions, while China tended to be insensitive to the effects of its policies on Vietnam.

It would have been easy for me simply to assume that my situation of disengaged observation allowed me to rise above the biases of each side, that I was right and they were wrong. But I have a great deal of respect for the knowledge and judgment of my colleagues in both countries. Moreover, they were directly involved in an interaction to which I was only a bystander. So the question occurred to me, what aspect of the reality of Sino-Vietnamese relations led to the characteristic juxtaposition of viewpoints.
that I witnessed? Having thought of the question, the answer became obvious.

The great disparity of capacities between China and Vietnam created an asymmetric framework for the relationship that shaped every aspect of it and every phase. Asymmetry was a structural influence so fundamental to the relationship that its influence did not attract conscious notice, but it put the two countries in basically different situations vis-à-vis one another. Vietnam is vulnerable to China, and therefore quick to react to perceptions of risk. China has nothing to fear from Vietnam except in combination with other powers, and thus its perspective was rooted in general strategic concerns. Each perspective was appropriate to the different situation of each country, but by the same token each also tended to misperceive the other. And yet despite the continuing misunderstandings and tensions, the relationship progressed from a cold peace in 1991 to thick and confident ties by 1999. Successful management of the relationship required China to respect Vietnamese autonomy, and required Vietnam to show deference to a mighty neighbor.

Since my background was in the comparative politics of China and Vietnam rather than in international relations theory, I did not know at the time whether my discovery of the importance of asymmetry was really new or was simply the re-discovery of something that was common knowledge. But as I explored international relations theory, I found a pervasive concentration on wars and the competition of great powers, and very little on the structural effects of asymmetry on the interaction of large and small states. Most theorists assumed that such relationships would simply be dominated by the more powerful state, despite the contrary evidence of the American war in Vietnam. Those who did take the situation of small states more seriously were more interested in the room to maneuver available to these states in a world defined by big states. They were addressing the puzzles left unsolved by the paradigm of competitive great powers rather than taking a new approach based on asymmetry. Despite the fact that most international relationships most of the time are asymmetric, and that in the post–Cold War world all of America’s relations are asymmetric, there was no sustained reflection on the structural implications of asymmetry.

This book attempts to introduce a general theory of asymmetry on the basis of a sustained analysis of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship from its beginnings to the present. I hope that it will contribute to a better understanding of China and Vietnam, and that it will stimulate other scholars to examine other relations in this light. Although the bilateral, dyadic relation is the basic unit of analysis for asymmetry, I plan to explore more complex patterns as well as regional and global systems of asymmetry in future research, and I invite other scholars to join me in this enterprise.
As the foregoing paragraphs imply, this project has been long in gestation, and many have contributed to its formation and completion. The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University made possible my first trips to Vietnam and my study of Vietnamese, and the University of Virginia took up the general burden of supporting my research since 1992. The Luce Foundation and the Social Science Research Council have funded activities that in retrospect were essential to this project. Most important were friendly interactions with institutions and individuals in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Nanning, Beijing, Kunming, Changchun, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, especially the late Vice Minister Le Mai, Ho Hai Thuy, and Nguyen Huy Quy in Hanoi; Gu Xiaosong and Wei Shuxian in Nanning; Lin Zhonghan, Ding Kuisong, Wu Baocai, and Qin Yaqing in Beijing; Liu Debin in Changchun; Feng Shaolei and Guo Xuetang in Shanghai; and Wang Gungwu in Singapore. Most of my friends in Asia were not able to review the book manuscript, however, so they are certainly not responsible either for its viewpoints or for its mistakes.

Many friends, colleagues, and students have helped to shape this manuscript. The analysis of Vietnam was much improved by John Whitmore, Bill Turley, Alex Woodside, and Alex Vuving. Allen Lynch and Paige Johnson Tan provided particularly fine-toothed critiques that led to many emendations. Jeff Legro and John Echeverri-Gent labored to raise my theoretical level, and the comments as well as the encouragement of Mark Selden, Ben Kerkvliet, and especially Chen Jian were vital for both the project and my confidence in it. Alex Vuving provided invaluable help with the glossary, as did Myungsik Ham with the bibliography and the index. The support of Cambridge University Press, incarnate in Lew Bateman, has been a deeply appreciated sine qua non.

My students in many classes have not only provided a patient forum for the emergence of these ideas, but also useful feedback and further stimulation. Especially Sophie Richardson, Leng Tse-kang, Alice Ba, Chen Weixing, Cho Hui-wan, Lin Teh-chang, Ray Hervandi, and Myungsik Ham have been most helpful and encouraging.

Most gratitude expressed to spouses and children in prefaces is in terms of their forbearance at being displaced by a long and lonely project. Not so in my case. I am quite sure that my wife Ann and my children David and Sarah could each give a stimulating disquisition on asymmetry at the drop of a hat. Throughout my research, Ann’s expertise in family systems psychology has added a parallel universe of asymmetric relationships between individuals that has been stimulating to my understanding of international relations. David’s depth as a thinker and talents as an editor have been of great help. Sarah has contributed as a distinguished historian of Vietnam countering the blunders of her sinophilic father. More important, however, her research on the interactive character of colonial politics in Vietnam provides the basic
Preface

insight for my treatment of the colonial era, and more generally for my analysis of subjugated asymmetry.

It takes a village to produce an idiot as well as a healthy child, and it is up to the reader to decide whether this book is worth the efforts that have gone into it. Although I can absolve my friends, students, and family of any guilt for the weaknesses that remain, I could not have done it without them.