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*.

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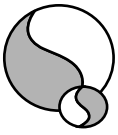

BRANTLY WOMACK
University of Virginia

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For Ann, David, and Sarah

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Preface

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

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.