Chapter 8

Sustainable International Leadership: Lessons from the Sino–Vietnamese Relationship, 968–1885*

Although the post-Cold War era began at least eighteen years ago[1] and the United States is unquestionably the central power of the unipolar world order that has emerged, uncertainty concerning the direction and future of the new era has increased. Problems such as the Asian financial crisis and terrorism contribute to the uncertainty, but the major questions revolve around American leadership. How effective can American power be? How will the United States use its power? Is American power sustainable? Is the US-centered world order sustainable? These are questions of fundamental importance for the world because the United States is at the apex of a complex and interactive order.

The post-Cold War global situation is unprecedented in global history or in American history. The earlier pre-eminence of Great Britain was much more a situation of first among equals, and earlier empires, because they were not global, had to cope with peripheries of influence and occasionally with powers outside their sphere.

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[1] The collapse of the Soviet in 1991 marks the definitive end of the Cold War, but it has been argued by Allen Lynch that the situation of bipolar competition actually ended much earlier. See Allen Lynch, *The Cold War is Over — Again* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Although the United States has been clearly the most powerful country in the world since 1945, it defined its world role in terms of confronting the Soviet threat. The collapse of the Soviet Union was viewed by the US as a triumph, but it also marked the end of the familiar situation of bipolar competition. For the past dozen years, the United States has stood like a lone boxer in the center of the world ring. It no longer has an opponent, but it does not know what to do next.

The problem of sustainable international leadership is thus the key challenge of the current era. It is most immediately an American challenge, but the rest of the world is a participant as well as an interested onlooker in the evolution of world order. Unfortunately, the predominant modes of understanding the current era are American theories of international relations, and these derive mostly from competitive models of international leadership that matured in the Cold War era. In effect, these theories advise the lone boxer to prepare for the next fight because they do not have a theory of action other than fighting. The problem of sustainable international leadership is reduced to the task of preventing the emergence of a powerful opponent. The possibility of sustainable peaceful leadership is overlooked.

Is an asymmetric unipolar world order simply a situation of domination by the current hegemon, to be ended by the arrival of the next hegemon? Can an asymmetric international order serve the interests of all parties, and be sustained without domination, even though the capacities and interests of the various parties are different? These are important questions. And even though there are major differences between the traditional and modern worlds, the history of the Chinese Empire is arguably the global experience most relevant to these burning contemporary questions. The East Asian international order centered on China not only lasted longer than Western examples, but more importantly it was resilient. Although there was variation in China's external influence, it did not show one grand cycle of flourishing and decay, but rather a series of ebbs and flows that did not usually challenge the basic structure of the relationship. Only the intrusion of a much more powerful force with much more aggressive intentions ended the traditional East Asian order. If the Chinese

experience with empire does not hold lessons for the present era, then we are indeed not only starting a new chapter in world history, but a new book.

Given the diversity of China's external relations and the limits of my own knowledge, I will concentrate on the example of Sino-Vietnamese relations from the time of Vietnam's formal independence during the Song to the treaty of Tianjin in 1885 that ended China's claim to suzerainty over Vietnam. I do not claim that the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was typical for China; certainly the more fluid relations with nomadic groups in Central and Northern Asia were quite different. But for the search for lessons in sustainable international relations, Sino-Vietnamese relations (and Sino-Korean relations) could be expected to be especially useful. Vietnam was a relatively settled state, and it had a similar political economy as well as ideology. The Ming dynasty had attempted to re-annex it to China. The failure of the Ming attempt did not produce chaos, but rather an acceptance by China of the autonomy of its neighbor to the south, and a formal acknowledgment by Vietnam of China's superiority. The basic structure of these unequal roles remained remarkably stable from 1427 to 1885.

Since this chapter is premised on the inadequacy of contemporary Western theories of international relations, I will begin with a historical critique. I argue that the situation of the emergence of competitive states in the modern era (the Westphalian system) concentrated the attention of Western diplomacy on military victory and hence on relative power. In this context, to be less powerful was to be at risk. Although from the beginning there were Western theories of world order as well as theories of power, they both assumed that unequal relations among states were unstable. The competitive model seemed to fit America's situation of competition with the Soviet Union after the Cold War, and it was refined into a theory of "structural realism" or "neo-realism" which argued that competition for power among great powers was the only significant reality of international relations. In my opinion, this model is most inappropriate for the current era.

The historical heart of the chapter is in two parts, first a general sketch of the Sino-Vietnamese traditional relationship, and secondly a

more concentrated consideration of the Ming occupation of Vietnam and its consequences. The first contrasts the Chinese experience of discovering the limits of its dominion through lessons of failure rather than through defeat by more powerful opponents. The model of the relationship was a patriarchal one of unequal but stable roles that guaranteed China's recognition of Vietnamese autonomy and Vietnam's deference to China's superiority. Although differences of interests and even military clashes continued, the framework of unequal roles remained remarkably resilient.

The stability of the relationship was not the product of a smooth application of a theoretical model, but rather it evolved as a learning experience. The most intense part of the learning experience was the Ming occupation of 1407–27. Chinese and Vietnamese interpretations of the occupation are radically different, and they highlight the different perspectives of the stronger and the weaker sides in an asymmetric relationship. Ultimately, prudence on China's part combined with deferential diplomacy on Vietnam's part produced a durable restoration of a peaceful asymmetric relationship.

Of course, a patriarchal model of role-based international order could not fit the contemporary relationship of China and Vietnam, much less that of other countries. The chapter discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional order. Its major strength was its assurance of Vietnam's autonomy within an international order centered on China. This provided a framework in which each could pursue other interests — and even conflict with the other — without endangering basic security. The major weakness of the traditional model was its premise of unequal roles of superiority and inferiority. While each side accommodated the other, there was no venue or opportunity for negotiation.

The chapter concludes by generalizing some of the lessons of the Sino-Vietnamese experience for the present era. Perhaps the most important lesson is that relative power does not equal absolute power. Power can be overextended even if there are no challenging competitors present. Moreover, even morality can be overextended. The Ming discovered that even a common good cannot be imposed by force. Thirdly, differences in interests and perceptions will persist

between larger and smaller states. Lastly, because it is difficult to sustain domination over smaller states, victory is rarely a solution in asymmetric relations. Normal asymmetric relations must be managed rather than forced. The task of sustainable leadership in international relations is the appropriate management of international problems.

The Western Competitive Model of International Relations

The emergence of the modern state in the West is a well-known story, but it is useful to recall it here both because of the contrast to the Chinese path of external relations and because it constitutes the cultural and historical horizons of current theories of international relations. I will sketch the development in bold colors in order to highlight the contrast.

As the Roman Empire disintegrated and finally collapsed under the pressure of nomadic movements and internal misrule, a situation of total chaos prevailed in Europe. Gradually, however, two trends emerged that would shape a new order, both of which we can date from the coronation of Charlemagne in 800. First, the Catholic Church established a broad ideological hegemony in the West, with an ambiguous claim to political power. Secondly, as the nomadic groups settled down, their power and identity evolved from being clan based to being territorially based. By 1300 the tension between the universal authority and sacred weapons of the Church as opposed to the located power and armies of the secular lords became apparent, and by 1450 it led to the breakup of Church authority into Catholic and Protestant realms. The resulting wars of religion produced a second era of acute chaos, but one in which the existing system of territorial units managed to maintain its integrity and assert its priority, at least in this world, over religion. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 marked the confirmation of an era of secular competition within a realm of competitive and familiar states.[2] Until Napoleon states were

[2] See 刘德斌, 主编, 国际关系史 (高等教育出版社: 高等教育出版社, 2003), pp. 44–86.

rarely destroyed in this process, but Europe was shaped by a pecking order based on military victories and the constant search for the men and treasure necessary for war. With Napoleon, the stakes and the costs of national security increased, and competition between the largest and strongest states increased the urge for amalgamations (Germany and Italy) and alliances as well as for external empire.

In the context of these developments, Western thinking about external relations concentrated first on the contestation of the Church's claims to secular authority and then, beginning with Machiavelli, on the logic of international competition and the prerequisites of victory. For Machiavelli, virtue (*virtú*) was the opportunistic and daring expression of competitive manliness. He argued that it was realistic to view external relations as a totally secular struggle for power. From the beginning, however, there were contrary theories arguing for harmonious world orders. Perhaps the best early exponent was Hugo Grotius, who argued that the inherent sociability of humans leads to a common desire for regulated and mutually beneficial interaction.[3] A third category of theories that were common in the West preached a mission of enlightenment and salvation toward inferior peoples and justified domination over them. One can view this urge toward righteous domination as a remnant of the Church's claim to universal authority, except that superiority was often claimed in the name of Western civilization rather than in the name of religion. The civilizing mission was more comprehensive than the religious mission since it required economic and political transformation.

It is a long leap from the emergence of modern Europe to contemporary American theories of international relations, but the roots are visible. The bipolarity of the Cold War simplified the framework of competition, but the basic dilemma remained that of whether to struggle for victory in international conflict or to try to resolve conflict through supranational order. Hans Morgenthau argued that the

[3] Hugo Grotius, *Prolegomena to the Law of War and Peace* tr. Francis Kelsey (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1957, originally published in 1625).

struggle for power was the essence of human interaction, and therefore he preached realism in international relations.[4] Kenneth Waltz criticized Morgenthau for extrapolating a theory of international behavior from assumptions concerning individual behavior, but his own theory of structural realism ("neo-realism") was even more concerned with the competition for power among major states.[5] According to Waltz, anarchy prevails among states and each pursues its own security. The "structure" in "structural realism" does not refer to an international order, but rather to the number of major powers in competition for domination.[6] The "realism" of "structural realism" is its assertion that the behavior of states is dictated by their struggle to maximize security, which in turn requires them to dominate their competitors.[7]

There have also been American theorists who have followed in the footsteps of Hugo Grotius in proposing international orders that would minimize the risks and costs of international conflict. After an initial flurry of interest in world government, however, attention turned to regimes of self-control by the United States and to the preemption of conflict by economic interdependence. Some argued for the moral self-control of American power,[8] but the most interesting of the cases for self control is John Ikenberry's argument that the strategic restraint of victorious powers, that is, their creation of postwar constitutional structures that admit the interests and participation of others, has been the key to American success since the Second World War.[9] Meanwhile, others argued that increased economic interdependence changed the cost-benefit ratio of conflict and also led to

[4] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973).

[5] Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

[6] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[7] For an even more aggressive interpretation of realism, see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[8] See for instance Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

[9] John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

new mechanisms for resolving international disputes.[10] In each of these theories there is a notion of an effective world order, whether moral, constitutional, or economic. While realists dismiss them as idealist, each, like Grotius, assumes that there is a reality more basic than the struggle for power.

A third strand in American international relations theory is "democratic peace," which argues that war is less likely between democratic regimes than between democratic and non-democratic (or liberal and illiberal) regimes.[11] Although not as blatant as imperialist theories of superiority, there is nevertheless a clear implication that the cause of war is a structural defect in the non-Western state. Moreover, if war with a non-democratic state leads to a replacement of that regime with a democratic one, then the result will be lasting peace rather than long term resentment and hostility. The democratizing mission felt by many American and British politicians is reflected in the vision of democratic peace.

The sketch above highlights the cultural and historical roots of some major Western and especially American streams of thinking about international relations.[12] Both the power-based theories associated with realism and the international order theories are attempting to cope with the dangerous interaction of states capable of defeating one another that emerged in Europe and was radically simplified in the Cold War. A situation of inequality is assumed to be in disequilibrium. Unless there is an effective world order, either the strong will dominate the weak or the weak will conspire against the strong.

[10] See for instance Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977).

[11] See for instance John Owen, *Liberal Peace, Liberal War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[12] This sketch neglects the important strand of constructivist theories of international relations, which arose primarily as a critique of realism and stresses the dialectical relations of actors in international relations. Constructivism is neglected here because the focus here is on asymmetric leadership, which it does not address. See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Without a world order, domination is determined by victory, victory is determined by power, and power is determined by capacity. The more powerful dominate the less powerful. With a political world order the problem of enforcement looms large; with economic integration the constraints against war do not need to be enforced because they are inherent in the increasing cost of violence and emerging capacities for negotiated solutions.

In my opinion, however, the post-Cold War situation presents an international context that calls into question the fundamental assumptions of these theories. The United States is in a position of world leadership that it achieved not through victory, but through the peaceful and internal collapse of its opponent. No one surrendered. Except for the European post-communist states, no states were even disadvantaged by the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War. The United States became the unquestionable military, economic, and political center of the world, but the rest of the world does not owe its security or prosperity to the United States. The US is relatively more powerful than all other states, but it is not absolutely powerful. The willingness of other states to comply with the United States relies more on a perception of common interests and the utility of the current world order than on the implicit threat of coercion. Thus the key task of the US at present is sustainable international leadership in a non-competitive environment.

Theories founded on the assumption of competition tend to overlook the unique challenges of the present leadership situation. Structural realism is least able to comprehend this task. It views the problem of sustaining leadership as the prevention of other states attaining military parity with the US, which it assumes is their strategic goal. Sustaining leadership on the basis of acknowledged authority rather than on the basis of power is out of the question. Theories of international order are also problematic. Theories that present the task of leadership as a moral problem of the US are less reassuring to other states because there is no guarantee of moral consistency and, more importantly, the US remains the sole judge of the morality of its behavior. Ikenberry's theory of "strategic restraint" comes closest to dealing with the problems of non-competitive leadership, but it

emphasizes the establishment of an inclusive order by the victorious state rather than the continuing challenges of unipolar leadership. Theories of economic interdependence are reassuring in their forecasts of peace, but they do not acknowledge the serious political problems created by vast asymmetries among states. Regardless of war and peace, states are at risk to one another, and the less powerful states are more vulnerable. Theories of democratic peace are alienating to non-democratic states and ignore the tensions caused by asymmetric relations among democratic states.

To the extent that the prolonged management of an asymmetric matrix of states is problematic, that is, possible but neither obvious nor self-correcting, then an awareness of non-competitive international relations must be developed. There is no ready formula for success in this new chapter of world history, but there are earlier chapters that may contain valuable lessons.

Overview of Sino–Vietnamese Relations, 968–1885

In general China's premodern international experience was quite different from that of the West. Its relationship with independent Vietnam from 968 to 1885 was not an average or typical relationship — Vietnam was the only former province of China to achieve and maintain independence — but it is an excellent case for our purposes. There was no major change in relative power or in shared boundaries over these nine centuries, and yet the relationship was tested and transformed a number of times before it reached a situation of relative stability after the Ming occupation in 1407–27. Although the form of a tributary relationship 宗藩朝贡 existed throughout the era, there was considerable evolution in the content of the relationship.

The history of China's relations with independent Vietnam can be divided into two phases, with the Ming occupation as the watershed. In the first 450 years China acknowledged its lack of control of Vietnam, but it continued to harbor a sense of entitlement to rule. Meanwhile, in its conflicts with China, Vietnam gradually developed a sense of itself as a state and culture different from China. The twenty years of Ming occupation and the eventual defeat of these forces did

not end Chinese suzerainty, but it marked the beginning of China's de facto acknowledgment of Vietnamese autonomy. For its part, Vietnamese national and cultural development no longer focused on differentiating itself from China, but rather China became the model for Vietnamese notions of governance and power. From the perspectives of both China and Vietnam, the relationship was more stable and beneficial in the second phase.

The first phase of Vietnamese independence was characterized by contradictory notions of the Sino–Vietnamese relationship, and military power determined the outcome. As the Tang dynasty began to lose control of the periphery in the ninth century, political and military forces in the prefecture of Jiaozhi 交趾 (now northern Vietnam) became autonomous.[13] During the Five Dynasties interregnum (907–960) between the Tang and the Song, Vietnam was nominally part of the Nan Han (Yue) kingdom centered in Guangzhou, but in 938 the Nan Han had been defeated by local Vietnamese forces. The person who declared Vietnamese independence and became the first emperor of Vietnam, Dinh Bo Linh 丁部领, defeated local rivals and consolidated the territory but never had to confront a Chinese army. He declared himself emperor of Dai Co Viet 太瞿越 in 966, and inaugurated his reign period of Thai Binh 太平 in 970.

As the Song consolidated its rule in the south in 973, it could anticipate the difficulty of reconquering a territory that had withstood the Nan Han army, and it was clear that the dynasty's major military problems lay in the north. Meanwhile, Dinh Bo Linh did not want to confront the Song armies unnecessarily, and therefore he sent tribute to Kaifeng.[14] Officially, Dinh was only requesting acknowledgement of his rule of a part of China (内附), not of an independent kingdom. Clearly, however, the purpose of Dinh's deference was to have his

[13] The classic work in English in Vietnam's pre-independence period is Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[14] See James Anderson, "From Tribute to Trade: Examining a Pivotal Period in Middle Period Sino-Vietnamese Relations," paper presented at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Southeast Council of Association for Asian Studies, Jekyll Island, GA, January 2003.

autonomy acknowledged by the Song. The Song recognized him as "king of Jiaozhi prefecture 交趾郡王" and his son as military governor in 975. The gap between the title the Vietnamese leader claimed for himself within the country and the official title granted by China was an important symbolic indicator of the difference in perspectives. The Song attempted and failed to regain control of Vietnam by invading in 981, and failed again in 1077, after Vietnam had invaded, seized, and sacked Nanning in 1076. The basic shape of the current border between China and Vietnam was set after the second failure.

The Song dynasty was noted for a realistic foreign policy and a disciplined domestic order. Vietnam benefited from Song's realism. The titles granted to Dinh Bo Linh were not those of Emperor, but they did suggest an ambiguous recognition of political autonomy rather than merely the status of a local official within China. Song did not invade until the murder of Dinh and his son in 979 offered the formal and practical occasion, and then it discovered that the invasion united everyone behind the Dai Co Viet army and its commander, rather than splitting the local elite into pro-Song and anti-Song factions. The Song did not invade again until one hundred years later when uprisings on the border and the Vietnamese invasion of Guangxi raised the questions of border control to crisis levels.

For China, the transition from Song to Yuan to Ming was an exploration of national identity. The Song was careful about controlling its territory, which required it to be prudent in assessing the limits of its capabilities. For the Song, the conservation of central power was the highest priority. In total contrast, the Mongols succeeded in establishing the largest empire in world history by relying on an overwhelming margin of power at the periphery. They despised the Song (and in general the sedentary Chinese) for their caution, and they certainly felt no obligation to respect the agreements made by the Song with Vietnam. The Yuan pursuit of the margin of power eventually led to defeats on the periphery and to a decay of order at the center. The Ming began as a Chinese rebellion against Mongol rule, but its notions of China's horizons were tantalized by Mongol conquests, and it began its diplomacy in a mood of triumphalism quite different from the caution of the Song.

The Mongols first invaded Vietnam in 1257 as part of a southern offensive against the Song. They occupied and destroyed Hanoi (Thang Long 升龙), but then withdrew. After the defeat of the Song in 1279, the Yuan decided to install a member of the Vietnamese mission to Beijing as king, and sent him back to Hanoi with an escort of a thousand soldiers. The escort was defeated and the pretender captured. In 1283 a large army was landed in Champa 占城, and in 1284 an army of 500,000 crossed the northern border under Kubilai Khan's son Toghan. In a series of battles the Mongols were defeated, and Kubilai gave up plans for a second invasion of Japan in order to prepare for revenge against Vietnam.[15] In late 1287 Toghan again crossed the frontier with 300,000 troops in coordination with a fleet of 500 ships. The fleet was destroyed in one of Vietnam's famous river battles, and Toghan retreated. Kubilai died in the midst of plans for a fourth invasion, and his successor Timur abandoned the project.

Vietnam's military resistance was accompanied by diplomatic deference, though not to the satisfaction of the Yuan. The Tran 陈 ruler in Hanoi treated Mongol envoys as if he were ruler of an independent kingdom (which, of course, he was), and Kublai sent a threatening message in 1270. The Vietnamese response avoided claiming independence, and said merely that the treatment of the envoys was simply in accord with the customs of the country.[16] The rejection of the Mongol-appointed king in 1279 confirmed Kublai's suspicions of Vietnamese insubordination, and thus the scene was set for the second and third invasions. Upon the defeat of the third invasion, Vietnam sent a mission to China offering tribute, and the captured generals and officers were returned the following year.

The confrontations with the Mongols sketched above cover a period of intense crisis for Vietnam, and the crisis required a

[15] Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam A Long History*, pp. 42–46. See also Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter Vella, tr. Susan Cowing (Honolulu: East West Center, 1968), pp. 192–193.

[16] W. O. Wolters, "Historians and Emperors in Vietnam and China," in Anthony Reid and David Marr, eds., *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 69–70.

fundamental rethinking of Vietnam's identity. Besides the need to survive massive invasions, Kublai's demands for submission required the Vietnamese court to face the questions of the grounds for Vietnamese autonomy and of the proper relationship of Vietnam to China. Both of these questions pointed at a deeper one of Vietnamese identity. There was no answer at hand, and so the court demanded that Le Van Huu 黎文休 write a history of Vietnam, and that he should start with the Nan Viet kingdom of Zhao Tuo 赵佗 (Trieu Da, 207–111 BC), crossing from there on the stepping stones of various uprisings against Chinese rule to the Dinh dynasty of 968. The point of Huu's history was that Vietnamese independence did not depend on Song recognition, but rather that Vietnam had been independent from of old, and the Song merely recognized the fact. Thus Huu's history — and succeeding Vietnamese histories — has a subtext of nationalist polemic. As the historian Nguyen The Anh puts it eloquently:

> "The intention was to demonstrate that the founders of Van Lang, the ancestors of the Vietnamese kingdom, were the Vietnamese equivalent of Huang-di [the Yellow Emperor], and their cultural innovations were comparable to those of the latter...the concern was to affirm the equality of North and South, according to the political and cultural criteria already used by China to proclaim its superiority over other peoples."[17]

The twenty years of Ming occupation of Vietnam was a turning point for both China and Vietnam. For China, the defeat brought the horizons of ambition back to the established boundaries of China. Although the subsequent Qing dynasty brought additional territories from the nomadic periphery into China and it occasionally involved itself in internal struggles in Vietnam, it did not consider Vietnam a lost province to be regained. For Vietnam, the struggle against the Ming required the mobilization of the population in protracted war

[17] Nguyen The Anh, "La frontière sino-vietnamienne du xi^{e} au xvii^{e} siècle," in *Les frontières du Vietnam: histoire des frontiers de la pénninsule indochinoise* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), p. 66.

against the invader, and decisive victory put Le Loi 黎利, the founder of the Le dynasty, at a historic cusp at which he could define both the significance of the victory and the new direction Vietnam should take.

For the next four hundred years the Sino–Vietnamese relationship was usually routinized into tributary exchange, and it became less a matter of concern for either side than it had been for the previous 1500 years. As the contemporary scholar Li Gu 李谷 put it, "In the Qing, of China's neighbors Vietnam was one of the states most intimately involved in tributary relationships."[18] Freed from the fear of China, Vietnam copied more closely the Chinese model of domestic governance. It also expanded its domain and regional influence, successes that encouraged regional conflict with Southeast Asian neighbors, but not with China. Indeed, the expanding southern part of Vietnam was in fact independent of Hanoi's control and several times requested recognition from Beijing as a separate kingdom, but Beijing refused, refraining from a golden opportunity to "divide and rule."[19] Ultimately regionalism and internal decay brought about another failed Chinese invasion in 1788 and afterwards a second Vietnamese attempt at applying a Chinese model, both of which were pale reflections of fifteenth century originals. Meanwhile, as China accustomed itself to being the middle kingdom among other kingdoms that were inferior but not subordinate, Southeast Asia became less interesting. In a situation of bounded superiority it was natural that China turned inward.

It should be emphasized that Vietnam's self-sinification was premised on Vietnam's independence from China. If China were still an active threat, then the political task would have been military cohesion, and the intellectual task would have been one of differentiation

[18] Li Gu, *Cong en en yuan yuan dao pingdeng huli: Shiji zhi jiao de Zhong yue guanxi yanjiu* 从恩恩怨怨到平等互利：世纪之交的中越关系研究 [From mercy and resentment to equal benefit: research on Sino-Vietnamese relations at the turn of the century](Hong Kong: Hong Lan 红蓝 Publishers, 2001), p. 33.

[19] See Philippe Langlet, "La frontière sino-Vietnamienne du xviii^{e} xix^{e} siècle," in *Les frontières du Vietnam: histoire des frontiers de la pénninsule indochinoise*, pp. 70–71.

from China. But the historian Le Van Huu had accomplished the basic task of differentiation, and Le Loi had confirmed Vietnam's independence. Therefore his successor the great emperor Le Thanh Ton 黎思诚 could face the no less daunting problem of how best to rule. And for that, a comfortably distant — but clearly successful — China provided useful lessons.

Before looking more closely at the Ming occupation of Vietnam, several related observations can be made about the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in general. First, China and Vietnam never faced one another as "great powers," that is, each potentially capable of defeating the other in a general war, and each worried that the other might grow stronger than itself. There was no imaginable increase in Vietnam's forces that would make it the equal of China, nor any imaginable alliance that Vietnam could make that could challenge China's central role in Asia. Vietnam could not aspire to more than autonomy vis-à-vis China.

Second, nevertheless, Vietnam frustrated China's attempts at occupation and control time and again. China continued its attempts not because of an insatiable expansionist drive, but because it is extremely difficult for a state to finally acknowledge that it has lost territory and cannot recover it.[20] Through repeated invasions, China and Vietnam achieved a stalemate in which China could not succeed in permanently defeating Vietnam but Vietnam could not eliminate China's capacity for future attempts. Vietnam was deferential to China because its security required China's good will. China gradually acknowledged Vietnamese autonomy because the costs of subduing Vietnam exceeded the benefit. The asymmetric relationship was not a relationship in disequilibrium that could be balanced or solved. It was a normal relationship that both sides had to live with.

Third, the successful management of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was not based on equality, but rather on ritual arrangements that embedded and confirmed Vietnam's deference to China and China's acknowledgment of Vietnam's autonomy. The tribute system

[20] The Mongols were certainly expansionists, but they were not Chinese.

was based on a patriarchal model in which there was a clear hierarchy but also well defined roles and expectations for the participants. Each Vietnamese emperor had to ask Beijing for his seal of office, and usurpers ran the risk of incurring a Chinese punishment expedition.[21] China's recognition did not imply that it would defend Vietnam against other Southeast Asian rivals, but it did imply that China would respect the authority of the Vietnamese emperor within Vietnam. Both sides upheld a framework in which their quite different interests in autonomy on the one hand and deference on the other could be secure.

Lessons from the Ming Occupation, 1407–27

A sketch of 900 years of history can illustrate the general structure of a relationship, but not the interactions of intentions and events that make up each step of the historical process. Since there are lessons in the detail of the relationship as well as in its general structure, we will look more closely but still briefly at the Ming occupation. The lessons we will highlight are the differences in perception between stronger and weaker sides in an asymmetric relationship and the importance of skillful leadership.

The following description written in 1947 by a Chinese scholar gives a Chinese version of the Ming occupation:

> "The Emperor Ming Chengzu [Yongle], angered at Annan's Le Quy Ly 黎季嫠 father and son [Ho Quy Ly 胡季嫠 and Ho Han Thuong 胡汉仓][22] because he usurped power, killed officials and envoys and was utterly

[21] The last Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1788 was at the request of an emperor threatened by the Tay Son rebels, and the Chinese withdrawal was occasioned both by a military defeat and by the decision by China that the emperor in question was unworthy. Truong Buu Lam, "Intervention versus Tribute in Sino–Vietnamese Relations, 1788–1790," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 165–179.

[22] The author refers to them as Le 黎 because Ho changed his name from Le to Ho after seizing power.

> despotic, ordered General Zhang Fu to lead the army to punish the tyrant and comfort the people. Within eight months he restored order to the country...and captured the two Les. Because Annan was from ancient times Chinese territory and the Tran lineage had been destroyed by Ho so that there was no successor, the populace requested to again be included among the provinces of China, as the stories from the Han and Tang described. The emperor approved their request, and changed the false name of "Yu Kingdom" to Jiaozhi, and established the three offices of general administration, justice and military affairs. Thereupon the southern lands that had been lost for more than 400 years, and in olden times had been prosperous, were regained, and several million Annan brethren, happy and enthusiastic, returned to the bosom of their ancestral country. For this accomplishment Zhang Fu was made a duke, an honor greater than that given to General Ma Fubo [Ma Yuan, who pacified Vietnam in 45 AD]."[23]

As one might expect, Vietnamese historians have a different view of the Ming occupation. According to Nguyen Khac Vien, contemporary Vietnam's most prominent historian:

> "Towards the end of the 14th century a great crisis shook the country. The Ming court, then reigning in China, took advantage of this to invade Dai Viet and impose on it a form of direct rule which was to last for twenty years (1407–1427). However, the invaders encountered stiff resistance right from the beginning, and national independence was eventually wrested back in 1427 by Le Loi, the founder of the Le dynasty."[24]

Although these two views of the occupation are clearly incompatible, neither is simply false. The eminent Vietnamese historian Le Thanh Khoi admits that the Ho dynasty's radical reforms were so unpopular that the Ming pretext of restoring the Tran was quite

[23] Zhang Xiumin, "Ming dai jiaozhi ren zai Zhongguo neidi zhi gongxian" [The contributions of people from Jiaozhi inside China during the Ming dynasty], in Zhang Xiumin, *Zhong Yue guanxi lunwen ji* [Collected essays on Sino–Vietnamese relations] (Taipei: Wen Shi Zhe, 1992), p. 45. It should be noted that contemporary mainland scholarship takes a more objective viewpoint. The entries for Le Loi (Li Li 黎利) and Le Than Tong (Li Sicheng 黎思诚) in the Chinese encyclopedia *Ci Hai* (Shanghai, 1999) are quite laudatory. See vol 3, pp. 4984, 4986.

[24] Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam a Long History*, p. 64.

successful in placating opposition.[25] Indeed, a recent prize-winning Vietnamese historical novel entitled *Ho Quy Li* paints a complex picture of a figure somewhat like Cao Cao 曹操, who combined great ability with ruthless ambition.[26] After Ho had ambushed the bodyguard of 5000 troops sent with the Tran pretender and killed him, General Zhang Fu came with armies of more than 215,000 troops, a force as large as the contemporaneous Ming expeditions against the Mongols.[27] Once the Red River delta was under control, Zhang Fu gathered all of the remnants of the Tran court and received their petition to return Vietnam to its status as a Chinese province. Because Chinese culture had continued to provide the backbone of Vietnamese intellectual life, Vietnamese scholars and artisans were quickly integrated into imperial service. For example, the Vietnamese architect Nguyen An [Ruan An 阮安] played a key role in designing the new Ming capital in Beijing.

On the other side of the coin, General Zhang Fu's initial efforts to welcome Vietnam back into the mainstream of the empire were quickly superceded by the sort of neglect, incompetence, and rapacity typical in peripheral areas. While Zhang Fu was one of the Ming's leading generals, his civilian counterpart and successor, Huang Fu, had problematic relations with the Chinese court. Alexander Woodside mentions that sons of army officers who failed their military examinations were banished to Vietnam. In 1420, a regional inspector reported that most of the Chinese officials in Vietnam were inept and untrained southerners who had failed higher examinations.[28] Clearly Vietnam was not a plum location: it was dangerous, pestilential, and full of barbarians. With an incompetent administration and continuing unrest, the Vietnamese economy could not

[25] Le Thanh Khoi, *Le Vietnam* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955), pp. 203–205.

[26] The novel by Nguyen Xuan Khanh 阮春庆 (Hanoi, Vietnam Women's Press, 2001) is the subject of a lengthy review by Lin Ziping 林子苹 in *Dongnanya Zongheng* 东南亚纵横 [Around Southeast Asia] 2003:5 (May), pp. 25–29.

[27] Woodside, "Early Ming Expansionism (1406–1427): China's Abortive Conquest of Vietnam," *Papers on China* 17:4 (1963), p. 11.

[28] Woodside, "Early Ming Expansionism," pp. 16–17.

support the army, and rice for the army had to be brought in from China. Meanwhile more entrepreneurial Chinese, such as the eunuch Ma Chi, were scouring Vietnam for gold, gems, and pearls.

When the Ming intention of annexing Vietnam became clear to the Vietnamese, there were a series of rebellions led by Tran pretenders. From 1418, a superb guerilla leader, Le Loi 黎利, began to emerge, and he began to be victorious against the Chinese in 1424–27. Complementary to Le Loi's reliance on the people for military support, his advisor and spokesman Nguyen Trai 阮廌 refashioned the claims of Vietnam to autonomy that had been formulated in the previous century against the Mongols into a ringing patriotic message.

The costs and trend of the war in Vietnam gave rise to a peace faction in Beijing that included the new emperor, who came to the throne in 1425.[29] After Le Loi's victories in 1426 against both the occupying army and the forces sent to relieve it, it was decided to recognize a Tran restoration in Vietnam (ostensibly the initial objective of Ming involvement). 86,000 defeated soldiers were evacuated to China in 1427–28, along with several thousand horses. Vietnam resumed tributary relations. After a decent interval Le Loi deposed the Tran place-holder, sent an expiatory effigy to Beijing, and was invested as the ruler of Dai Viet.

The above events were of course profoundly significant for Vietnam. However, there is too little appreciation of how important the withdrawal from Vietnam was for China's history and idea of itself. The Ming dynasty had to defend itself in the north. While it was self-confident enough to move its capital to Beijing, it also restored the Great Wall, launched a series of expeditions against the Mongols, and, two centuries later, lost to the Manchus. The south was the direction of opportunity. Vietnam's past as a part of China created an entry for territorial expansion that was complemented by maritime exploits. But Vietnam's defeat of China's re-annexation turned the tide of the Ming from expansion to retrenchment. By doing so, it set

[29] *Ibid*., pp. 30–32.

China's boundary in the south at the Southern Gate between Vietnam's Lang Son 凉山 and China's Pingxiang.[30] Although China remained suzerain of Vietnam and occasionally interfered in its politics, it no longer aspired to its territory. As far as maritime commerce and Southeast Asia are concerned, China's great turn inward had begun, to be broken only by British gunboats in 1840.

The circumstances of the Ming frustration in Vietnam were essential to the historic effect. First, China decided for itself not to persist; there was no mortal threat from Vietnam, but simply disillusionment with re-annexation and frustration with the cost of war and the defeat of forces already committed. As a Chinese decision rather than an external imposition, it expressed an internal redrawing of national horizons. Secondly, Vietnam prevailed against the Ming at the peak of Chinese strength. Future Chinese leaders could not tell themselves that Vietnam had emerged at an ebb tide but could be rejoined to a stronger China. Thirdly, just as the Tran had been careful not to offend the Mongols, Le Loi refrained from vengeful and insulting behavior in his moment of triumph. Had he massacred the captured troops or demanded recognition as an equal from China, China would have felt honor-bound to treat Vietnam as an enemy. As it was, the diplomatic basis for unequal empires was confirmed, with China emphasizing the "unequal" and Vietnam emphasizing "empire."

The first aspect of the Ming occupation that deserves attention is the profound difference in perception between China and Vietnam. There is little difference in the factual accounts. China does not dispute the attempt to annex Vietnam, and Vietnam does not dispute the usurpation of Ho Quy Ly. Nevertheless, the moral basis for the Ming incursion, presumably built on shared principles and within an existing structure of enforcement, was and is dismissed as mere talk by the Vietnamese side. Even the Vietnamese novel about Ho treats

[30] According to the historical marker at the gate, some claim that the gate was first established in the Han dynasty, while others claim it was established in the early Ming. Certainly its function as one of the nine gates marking the boundaries of China dates from the Ming. It has been "Youyi Guan" [Friendship Gate] since 1965.

the Ming as aggressive schemers rather than as rescuers of the Tran. Clearly the Ming occupation was a mortal threat to Vietnam's existence as a community, and thus any reason given by China for the incursion would seem inadequate to the Vietnamese. It was the sustained feeling of mortal threat that gave Vietnam the strength to resist the occupation. By contrast, Vietnam was of limited interest to China, and when the costs of occupation continued to mount, China withdrew.

The second aspect to be highlighted is the importance of sensitivity to the perspective of the other side in arranging a mutually acceptable solution. The military success of Le Loi against the Ming army was a necessary condition for China's withdrawal, but it was not sufficient. If Le Loi had not permitted a face-saving solution, or had he celebrated his triumph by insulting China and humiliating the captured troops, the effect of his military victory would not have been long-lasting. After all, even though Vietnam defeated the occupying army, Vietnam suffered more from the occupation than did China. If Vietnam's behavior had forced China to concentrate on vengeance rather than on a calculation of its own advantage, then the pain that another military action would cause to Vietnam would be more gratifying to China than the cost of hostility. On the other side, the behavior of the Ming court in accepting a false restoration of the Tran and acknowledging Le Loi probably seemed hypocritical and weak to many officials in Beijing, but in fact it saved China the needless expense of further attempts to continue the occupation. Prudent leadership on both sides was essential for the end of hostility, and it can easily be imagined that different leadership could have produced different results.

Role-Based Sustainable Leadership

The story of China's relationship with independent Vietnam is one of a process of learning to acknowledge and to live with the limits of power, even if one's power is not confronted by an equal or greater threat. The process had similarities and differences with each major strand of Western theory. Certainly there was a kind of realism. Force

was used repeatedly, but neither side could claim national victory over the other. The significant military event was not victory, but rather stalemate between a stronger power with limited objectives and a mortally threatened weaker power. Chinese realism was concerned with maintaining the deference of neighboring countries rather than dominating them, because domination was difficult to sustain.

There was also a kind of international order and the assumption that hostility was costly and risky. However, the Chinese international order was neither a constitutional order based on the presumptive equality of states, nor was it an international legal order, nor was it based on economic integration. Rather, the tribute system was a matrix of unequal states, personalized by the formal interaction of their rulers with the emperor.[31] It was based on the central status of China, and there were few rules beyond the rituals of succession and tribute. Economic ties were thin. Rather than play the role of the metropolitan power exploiting its colonies, China restricted maritime trade in the late Ming and Qing. Having instituted peaceful relationships with neighbors, China withdrew into a self-centeredness that verged on isolationism.

The Chinese empire was also notorious for having a sense of its own moral and civilizational superiority, rather like the West dealing with "the rest" in the modern era. And as we have seen with the Ming occupation, its high moral posture was viewed as a cloak for more self-interested motives by other states. However, China's claim to superiority was based on its presumption of inclusive centricity in an international order. Usually the empire did not stir itself to missionary activity on behalf of Chinese civilization, but rather it expected China to be sufficiently attractive to awake the admiration and emulation of others. By the time of the Qing dynasty Vietnam had no problem with the idea of the superiority of Chinese civilization, though ironically its envoys to Beijing often complained of the corruption of Chinese civilization in China itself, and the Nguyen 阮

[31] See James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

court of the early nineteenth century prided itself on being closer to the Tang model than China itself was.[32]

The major strength of China's role-based international order was that it provided for the different relational needs of both sides. Vietnam needed assurance that China would respect its autonomy. Before the Ming, this assurance was conditional on China's estimate of its own strength. If the Song had considered Vietnam within its grasp after defeating Nan Han, it would have done so. To Vietnam, China always looked strong, and therefore China appeared to be a constant threat. After the Ming occupation, the disparity between China and Vietnam remained and the history of invasions was remembered, and therefore Vietnam was aware of the possibility of threat, but did not have to be on constant alert. Moreover, the value of the relationship with China in cultural, economic, and domestic security terms exceeded the residual risk. As a result, Vietnam supported the role-based international order even though it occupied an inferior position. With its East Asian front secure, it pursued expansion to the south, and it did not try to organize its southern rivals into an alliance against China.

Although China was the apex of its role-based international order, the utility of the order for China is perhaps less obvious. At most, Vietnam was occasionally troublesome at the border, but it was never seen as a threat. The exchange of goods involved in the tribute process was neither so large in volume nor so unequal that it would constitute a sufficient economic motive for maintaining the order. But the deference that Vietnam and other tributary states showed to China was important for security as well as for psychological gratification. Even though Vietnam could not threaten China, trouble with Vietnam would commit a significant portion of China's resources. Therefore at the very least a non-deferential Vietnam would limit China's ability to deploy security resources elsewhere or would require greater military expenditures. At worst perhaps China would

[32] See Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

thereby become fatally vulnerable to a threat from some other direction. The rituals of deference involved in the tribute system created a pattern and expectation of peaceful relations. They also helped to form a China-oriented elite of envoys and former envoys in Vietnam — in contemporary terms an "epistemic community" — whose notion of Vietnam's place in the world was shaped by their experience in Beijing. The influence of "soft power" from Beijing made the thought of, say, an alliance with Thailand against China an extreme adventure that only the most pressing threat or opportunity would justify. The tribute system routinized and institutionalized an expectation of peaceful though unequal relations between China and Vietnam.

The fundamental weakness of the traditional East Asian international order was its patriarchal character. The implicit model was that of the family. The Chinese emperor bore responsibility for the welfare of the whole, and there was a presumption of a harmony of interests. The mode of international discourse was petition and gracious response, not negotiation. States like Vietnam had to accept a posture of submissive inferiority — the status of permanent children — in their official dealings with Beijing. The order may have served the interests of both sides, but it was not based on a "social contract" of sovereign states, but rather on self-restraint articulated in ritual. In the context of the extended international family, the virtue of the superior was not to take offense, and the virtue of the inferior was not to be vengeful.

Not only was the humiliation resented by other states, but it conflicted with the domestic claim to ultimate majesty and authority that rule at home required. As we have seen, the challenges from China during the Yuan required Vietnam to develop a counter-history of its own civilizational autonomy and equality. It was also a common practice in Vietnam to designate a child as ruler for the purposes of dealing with the Chinese, while the father did not have to subjugate himself and remained the "senior emperor 太上皇" in power. When Le Loi deposed the transitional Tran emperor in 1428, he sent a golden effigy of himself to Beijing to receive punishment. After the Tay Son 西山 rebels defeated the Qing expedition of 1782, a double was sent

to Beijing to receive the new seal, and the double was treated as the guest of honor at the eightieth birthday celebration of Emperor Qianlong. Such evasions were a necessary part of living with the contradiction of domestic authority and international inferiority.

There were deeper consequences of role-based inequality. First, since there was no venue for frank negotiation over differences of interest, interaction was normally a process of practical action and then awaiting the reaction. The margins at which China's and Vietnam's interests touched one another — most obviously the land border — were frontiers of practical pushing and shoving. Both courts had a long-term national interest in harmony, but no venue for articulating or reconciling short-term and localized interests. Second, since China's goal was harmonious management, it tended to withdraw into itself rather than deal with persistent problems. Thus, the problem of piracy did not lead to the buildup of naval forces for the protection of commerce, but rather the prohibition of water transport. China's cost-minimizing approach to empire was undoubtedly more peaceful than Western imperialism, but it also reduced the possible advantages of an international order. Last and possibly most importantly, because other states were treated as inferiors in the Chinese order, they did not feel any responsibility for defending it. In the language of contemporary marketing, they could not "buy into" the Chinese empire; the empire was Chinese, it was not theirs. The Vietnamese emperor turned to China for protection against the French, but he did not see himself as the first line of defense of the Empire. Hence the East Asian international order centered on China may have been sustainable because it did not engender its own challenger, but, as the challenge of the West demonstrated, it was tradition-bound, thin, and weakly supported.

General Lessons for the Present Era

The understanding of a complex course of events such as Sino-Vietnamese relations has an intrinsic historical value that cannot be reduced to "lessons." To point out "lessons of history" not only involves an interpretation of history that might be disputed, but also

an interpretation of the present that is a matter of opinion as well as fact. Nevertheless, we must use what resources we have to understand the present in order to shape a more desirable future, and history provides the richest resource. I will use examples from the current era with the expectation that many readers will disagree with my perspective, but that all readers are likely to be familiar with current events.

Regardless of the sustainability and success of traditional Sino-Vietnamese relations in their own time, no one — including contemporary China and Vietnam — would want to recreate a role-based international order at the present time. On the other hand, to the extent that sustainability and peaceful relations remain contemporary values, there are lessons to be learned. The major lessons that I would point to are four. First, that relative power does not imply absolute domination; second, that notions of common good and common values are not easy to impose; third, that there are major differences in perspective between stronger and weaker powers; fourth, that asymmetry usually must be managed rather than resolved through victory.

First, relative power does not equal absolute domination. When relations between countries are conceptualized as a game that will be decided by victory, then it might appear that a significant difference in capacity between two states would be decisive, and that the weaker state must either submit to the stronger in order to avoid losing a war, or it will be forced to submit as a result of defeat. This may be true in extreme cases, such as the American invasion of Grenada. However, the history of Sino–Vietnamese relations demonstrates that when a stronger power threatens the mortal interests of a smaller power, the resistance of the smaller power may eventually overcome the limited interests in domination that the larger power is trying to enforce. Contemporary examples would be the American experience in Vietnam from 1950 to 1975, and also the American occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Second, the larger power often professes motives of common morality or common interest in justifying interventions, but regardless of the sincerity or even the truthfulness of the allegations, the intervention will be viewed as an exercise of power by the weaker

state. The larger power may be correct in its assertion of common values, but its intervention threatens the weaker community as a community, and violates its autonomy. Ho Quy Li may have been a rascal, but to the Vietnamese he was their rascal. China's intervention was unwelcome, and China's motives were suspect. Saddam Hussein also was clearly a bad ruler, and he was opposed by many Iraqis as well as by the US. But American intentions of promoting democracy in Iraq are naturally suspect because they involve a violation of the autonomy of the Iraqi people. If democracy means "the power of the people," they must ask themselves, the power of which people, ourselves or the Americans?

Third, there are major differences in perspective between stronger and weaker powers, and these differences persist. Even when Sino–Vietnamese relations were at their most stable, Vietnam's greater vulnerability to China and China's relative indifference to Vietnam gave rise to quite different points of view. Even if relations are peaceful and primarily economic, the greater vulnerability of the weaker side makes it more sensitive and anxious about the relationship.[33] If a crisis develops, the larger power may be tempted to bully the weaker state back into line, but the weaker state is likely to interpret the bullying as a general attack and therefore to respond with desperate measures rather than to comply with the wishes of the larger power. The obvious current example would be the conflict between the United States and North Korea concerning nuclear weapons. But even a longstanding and peaceful relationship, such as that between the US and Canada, clearly displays differences of perspective related to asymmetry.

Fourth, asymmetry must be managed. If the more powerful cannot simply prevail (lesson one), and if it cannot act on behalf of the weaker power (lesson two), and if misunderstandings are likely to arise (lesson three), then the task of managing an asymmetric relationship is a difficult one. The traditional Chinese approach was to position it in a matrix of unequal roles and to avoid areas of conflict, but this is not an option in the contemporary world. Management

[33] This idea is developed at length in Chapter 17.

requires a structure in which the autonomy of the weaker state is secure, but the greater capacity of the stronger state is respected. In the contemporary world, the relationship is not between equals, but it is also not between superiors and inferiors. Both sides must have an awareness of the interests of the other side, and must affirm the importance of the relationship through diplomatic rituals such as the visits of heads of state. A good example of the successful management of asymmetric international relations in the present era is China's relations with Southeast Asia since 1990.

These four lessons are too simple compared to the richness of historical experience that has been sketched in this chapter. But their simplicity is deceptive. They may seem obvious in the context of Sino-Vietnamese relations, but they are counter-intuitive to a mentality shaped by the Western experience of competitive states and by international relations theories based on the normalcy of symmetric competition and cooperation.

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