

Chinese Culture and Foreign Relations Cultural Construction of Identity

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Abstract: *This paper proposes a Cultural Constructivist approach as a theoretical framework to capture how a state's perceived identity of its significant Other is constituted and evolves through social interactions, and how such identity in turn gives meaning to state interactions or interstate relations. It begins with a literature review and critique on Strategic Culture and Constructivism. While both cultural factors and social interactions are important and intertwined in foreign relations, the two IR streams failed to truly integrate the social and the cultural. The Cultural Constructivist approach is a synthesized theoretical framework of the two for us to better understand the role of culture in social interactions among states. Using China's relationship with Vietnam as a referent point for such analysis, the paper argues that China interacts with its significant Other and perceives it through a culturally unique relationship widely known in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and cross-cultural psychology as guanxi.*

Keywords: Culture; China; Foreign Relations; Guanxi; Vietnam; IR

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Introduction and Literature Review

Universal rationality and cultural rationality

Rational choice theorists in IR have long premised their research on “rational political behavior.”¹ The intuition of culture is rarely manifested in mainstream IR theories. Morgenthau argued that in a world of inevitable and perpetual competition, states’ primary and uniform interest is to “protect [their] physical, political, and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations”.² “To say that a country acts in its national interest,” Waltz wrote, “means that, having examined its security requirements, it tries to meet them”.³

However, psychological research confirms that cognitive development is strongly influenced by social and cultural forces.⁴ Although basic intellectual functions (perceiving stimuli, remembering things, solving problems, engaging in social interactions, developing and using tools to support mental activities etc) are shared across cultures, “social and cultural experiences help determine the form these processes take.”⁵ Culture determines the rate and extent to which different cognitive processes develop across cultures.⁶ For instance, as a result of distinct historical developments, Europeans and East Asians are found to understand events in drastically different ways with the former having a strong interest in categorization and the latter attending to objects in their broad context.⁷

Culture, thus, is a cognitive structure that provides a system of logic for human conceptions.⁸ Beliefs and desires are shaped within each of our respective cultural setting. What attitude we take toward the world is essentially meaning and significance that human beings confer on culture.⁹ In other words, “culture is a condition of possibility for power and interest explanations.”¹⁰ Thus, rationality is not a universal and intrinsic human nature, but acquired in each of our cultural settings.¹¹ It was under this milieu that IR theorists began to argue that “the fog of culture” intervenes in a country’s strategic calculation,¹² and even *realpolitik* is socially constructed, or learned from social interaction among states.¹³

Strategic Culture

Culture’s role in IR has increasingly gained attention since the end of the 1970s, as American scholars and policy makers began to realize that their Soviet counterparts were acting under a different set of strategic calculations. This was basically the beginning of Strategic Culture, which later developed into three different generations. Using the concept of Strategic Culture, the first generation initially attempted to explain why different security communities approached strategic affairs differently.¹⁴ For them, Strategic Culture is a context that “gives meaning to strategic behaviour, as the total warp and woof of matters

strategic that are thoroughly woven together, or as both”.¹⁵ (cf: Figure. 1) This generation, however, remains undertheorized and overly deterministic.¹⁶ Criticizing their tautological explanations, the third generation, such as Ian Johnston, concludes that their argument is basically that “everything matters and everything is connected to everything else”.¹⁷

Unsatisfied with the first generation, the third generation focused on the development of falsifiable theories of Strategic Culture.¹⁸ (cf: Figure. 2) However, the cause-and-effect approach by the third generation could be invalid when the independent variable (strategic culture) and the dependent variable (strategic practices) are inseparable. As such, in pursuing a falsifiable theory of Strategic Culture, the third generation risked oversimplifying the relationship between culture and agency.¹⁹

Despite their disagreements, both generations seem to agree on three major points. First, both assume that cultural attributes of a security community, in one way or another, shape its strategic practices. Second, since it takes time for a strategic culture to change, security communities “are likely to exhibit consistent and persistent strategic preferences over time”.²⁰ Third, Strategic Culture research has predominantly focused on security communities’ decisions on warfare.²¹

Based on these common assumptions and borrowing ideas from Constructivist theories, the second generation sets out to bridge the gaps between the first and the third generation. Before discussing such an integrative approach of Strategic Culture and Constructivism, a brief literature review of Constructivism might be necessary.

Constructivism and the Second-generation Strategic Culture

Although Constructivism is still a loosely defined term encompassing drastically different approaches, Constructivists seem to be united under the proposition of mutual construction of state identity and state interactions.²² State identities are “formed and sustained relationally; they depend on others to be realized”²³ (cf: Figure. 3) Understanding the “intersubjectively constituted structure of identities and interests” of states is essential for constructivists.²⁴

The quickly blooming Constructivist works are not without their problems. First, Constructivism pays little attention to culture’s role at the unit national level in identity formation. Wendt’s theory of state perception is based on commonly shared cultures at the international level, when in reality interactions among individuals and groups may exhibit distinct behavior patterns and meanings across cultural boundaries.²⁵ The current international society, for instance, is a hybrid of different types of state with their own systemic norms dictating the basic parameter of rightful state actions.²⁶ Yet, by assuming a

uniform interpretation of interactions that leads to social construction of identities, Constructivists lost culture in their analysis of interaction of the material and the ideational.²⁷

The development of Constructivism enlightened the second-generation Strategic Culture theorists, who came to argue that while influencing strategic practices, strategic culture is also “repeatedly reconstituted through the very practices that it enables and constrains”.²⁸ (cf: Figure. 4) As such, Klein maintains that strategic culture is an intersubjective system of symbols that makes possible political action related to strategic affairs.²⁹ The generation also drastically departed from the first in that it aims to seek how a strategic culture is (re)produced through strategic practices,³⁰ instead of assuming an original one existing ever since the formative years of a particular security community.

However, the Constructivist focus of social interaction became indefinitely blurry in the second generation’s major proposition of mutual constitution of culture and identity. While in Constructivism, *self/other* identity is socially constructed through interactions among actors, the second generation seems to focus on actor’s actions but not interactions among actors. Mutual construction is between strategic practices of the *self* and strategic culture of the *self*. In this sense, the second generation did not really integrate Strategic Culture and Constructivism. The cultural and the social still drift apart.

Despite the conceptual and analytical differences among the three generations of Strategic Culture and Constructivism, they all implicitly define culture in ideational terms. For the first generation, culture is a set of norms and context that gives meanings to behavior; for the second generation, culture is ideas in discourse; for the third generation, culture is causal ideas that entail certain course of policy choices; for Constructivists, culture is a social structure consists of shared ideas.³¹ However, as Johnston correctly points out, it is extremely difficult to establish a cause-effect relationship (or maybe any type of relationship) between a cultural idea and its possible resulting behavior. To put it bluntly as Johnston did, we simply cannot get inside the head of decision makers.

Analytical Framework: A Cultural Constructivist Approach

This paper attempts to synthesize and improve the conceptual frameworks of Constructivism and Strategic Culture. Both social interaction and (strategic) culture matter in constituting states’ *self/other* identity and behaviors. But the social and the cultural cannot function separately from each other, as all social interactions are essentially culturally embedded. China’s perceived identity of its significant Other is culturally constructed through their social interactions, which in turn are a reflection of the very identity that China constitutes (Figure.5). This synthesis must begin with a redefinition of culture, as its ideational epistemology proved to be extremely difficult to maneuver to formulate a falsifiable theory.

Redefining Culture

Culture mainly consists of interrelated ideational and behavioral elements with one forming and causing another.³² Defining it in ideational terms, Weber contends that culture allows one to take a deliberate attitude toward the world, and in this sense we are all culturally embedded.³³ Similar views are found in the Dutch social psychologist Hofstede, who defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from another”.³⁴

On the behavioral end, Sapir argues that culture appears most vividly in human’s behavior pattern.³⁵ Emerging as a result of “frequent repetition of petty acts”,³⁶ culture is the “patterns for behavior characteristic of a particular social group.”³⁷ It is individuals’ practices that replicate culture by imitation and instruction.³⁸ In other words, culture consists of behaviors shared by members of a group and acquired as a result of membership in the group. Each culture is a unique set of characteristics dictating behavior in every aspect of an individual’s life.³⁹ Therefore, behaviors cannot be independent from their sociocultural history and processes.⁴⁰

Comparing the two sets of definition, I argue that the behavioral one is more suitable for the analysis of state identity and interactions. Unlike cultural ideas, cultural behavior patterns do not exist in our heads, but actually, physically and observably take place out there. Taking this perspective is also intuitive, for interstate relationship is essentially the accumulation of state behavior. Thus, in analyzing China’s identity construction and social interactions with its significant Other, we have to first identify the Chinese cultural behavior pattern.

Guanxi as a Cultural Context for Chinese Perception and Behavior Rationale

The Chinese people build a type of highly culturally unique relationship widely known as *guanxi*. As a type of social exchange relationship, *guanxi* is rooted in “everyday social practice and discourse of contemporary Chinese society”.⁴¹ There are two key features in *guanxi*. First, it is a particularistic relationship between two persons.⁴² In contrast to the Western individualistic *self*, the Chinese only exist in their dyad social context within the reciprocal relationship to others.⁴³ The Chinese individual identity is the totality of roles one lives in relation to specific others.⁴⁴ Duties and rights are relational and reciprocal rather than universal.⁴⁵ In this sense, all social matters become moral matters.⁴⁶ If one’s behavior does not live up to the other’s, that behavior becomes wrong (*buidui*—does not match as a pair) and causes moral accusation from the counterpart.⁴⁷ Indeed, when people accuse others in Chinese they would usually use words that mean lack of conscience, such as *mei liang xin*, and when people apologize

they would say *dui bu qi*, which literally means “I don’t match up to you.” Since the criteria that one uses to judge another’s intrinsic property and intentions are based on reciprocity in the realm of a pair relationship, perception of someone’s identity is virtually a function of a subjectively formed historical experience with that person.

Another feature is long-term reciprocity. In contrast to a short-term task based personal relationship as with many Western cultures, *guanxi* is a long-term relationship, formed and sustained through balanced reciprocity.⁴⁸ Favors done for others are often social investments with strong expectation for handsome returns.⁴⁹ Failure to return favor is blame-worthy, leading to serious damage of one’s social standings.⁵⁰

The two characteristics of *guanxi* maintain significant implications for Chinese cultural behavior patterns. Moral righteousness is often earned through providing and returning favors or possibly ostentatious behavior before others.⁵¹ People who fail to reciprocate will be deemed morally wrong and eventually banished from the *guanxi* network.⁵² Also, the more powerful party in a *guanxi* faces pressure to assume moral superiority by providing more investment in the relationship.⁵³ Indeed, *guanxi* often links two persons of unequal ranks, with the weaker party asymmetrically benefits from the stronger counterpart.⁵⁴ Those in positions of power and authority may not be able to reap equal tangible profits from the weaker party,⁵⁵ but the relationship is still reciprocal in that they in return gain moral superiority.⁵⁶

The emphasis on long-term reciprocity implies that equity in a single round of negotiation is not as important.⁵⁷ Fairness and moral obligations are to be fulfilled along the evolvement of *guanxi*. Particularly at the beginning of *guanxi*, the Chinese are said to be flexible and hospitable in order to appear morally superior (or at least not too inferior) and put their counterparts under moral obligations to be utilized in the future rounds of negotiation.⁵⁸

A correct course of behavior is often implicitly assumed based on previous interactions,⁵⁹ without being explicitly discussed or arranged.⁶⁰ In a well-established *guanxi*, generous favors are rendered with the implicit anticipation of reciprocation.⁶¹ The implicit nature of *guanxi* thus pertains to conflict escaping behaviors, which makes the resolution of conflict very difficult and slow.⁶² The more intimate two persons become in their *guanxi*, the less morally legitimate for them to demand reciprocation, for in such a pseudo-familial relationship favors are offered out of responsibility rather than interest.⁶³

When the indebted continuously fails to live up to the other’s expectation of moral conducts, *guanxi* will eventually collapse. When this happens, the two former intimate persons, who once appeared so caring and generous exclusively to each other, often go to the other extreme end by showing strong

antagonism against each other (cf: Figure. 6).

Hypothesis and Analytical Methodology

Based on the behavior patterns in *guanxi*, I hypothesize that during the amity period the Chinese would appear extremely generous and downplay conflicts. While this positive inertia might sustain *guanxi*, it may also disguise conflicts and complicate policy adjustment for a sound relationship. Once *guanxi* collapses, enmity with tremendous negative inertia would sustain hostility and hinder China from a purely cost and benefit oriented policy making for an extended period of time.⁶⁴ In this paper, I use *guanxi*'s behavior pattern as a framework to analyze the PRC's perceived identity of and relationship with Vietnam from 1949 when the PRC came to existence to 1991 when the two countries finally normalized relationship after a long period of enmity.

There might be questions regarding the validity of using *guanxi* – a social concept usually ascribed to individuals, to analyze state political phenomena. But, state is essentially inseparable from its society, in the sense that the former is constituted by the norms and rules of the latter.⁶⁵ If state and society presupposes each other, then it makes sense to pay attention to social concepts in order to know the state, and vice versa. *Guanxi* as a Chinese socio-cultural context contributes to the country's perception of its Other. Sewell's social theory of "transposition" of schemes reveals the possibility of norms learnt in one social context being applied to cases outside the context in which they are initially learnt.⁶⁶ Indeed, states tend to apply domestic ways of behavior to foreign policies.⁶⁷ In her analysis of ontological security in world politics, Mitzen conceptualized the individual level need for ontological security and scaled it to the state level.⁶⁸

Sino – Vietnam Guanxi

The bilateral relationship with Vietnam started propitiously during the first two Indochina wars when China's economic and political assistance became excessively generous. Recognizing its *guanxi* with Hanoi as one of amity, Beijing didn't bother to address bilateral outstanding issues such as Chinese immigration from Vietnam and territorial disputes. Identity of Vietnam in the eyes of Beijing, however, gradually changed toward the end of the 1960s as Hanoi implemented a series of policies construed by Beijing as morally unacceptable. Beijing's antagonism eventually erupted in the form of a large-scale war of punishment in 1979, with both sides incurring tremendous casualties and economic losses. A structure of enmity endured until 1991, with Beijing remaining hostile to Hanoi and oblivious to opportunities for

rapprochement.

Amity and Moral Superiority: 1949 - 1965

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Since the establishment of the PRC, Sino-Vietnamese relationship has evolved on an asymmetrical foundation both in terms of power and morality.⁶⁹ From 1949 to the mid 1960s, China was the major supporter for Vietnam's armed struggle against Western powers. Through their excessive economic aid and political support, the Chinese obtained moral superiority vis-à-vis the Vietnamese. The PRC's altruistic generosity must be understood in the cultural context of *guanxi*, in which the powerful benefactor is to provide protection and help for the weaker beneficiary. The weaker party in return, was expected to indefinitely stand by the benefactor.

In order to morally dominate the *guanxi*, the Chinese went way out of their economic capacity and political necessity to extend generosity to the Vietnamese during this period. Previous studies point out a variety of reasons ranging from historical tradition to revolutionary ideology and national security of China's Vietnam policy, but they also admit that the Chinese sense of superiority dominated their perception of the relationship with Vietnam.⁷⁰ Although Chinese leaders repeatedly stressed that the Vietnamese should be treated as equals, experts observe that such rhetoric *per se* reflected the assumption that "they had occupied a position from which to dictate the values and codes of behavior that would dominate their relations with their neighbors".⁷¹ Instead of explicitly requesting economic repayment from Hanoi for the huge military and material aid, Beijing implicitly expected Hanoi to recognize China's moral superiority and its leading role in national liberation movement in Indochina and the world.⁷²

Since its 1949 establishment, China had invested heavily in its *guanxi* with Vietnam. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was established in September 1945 at Hanoi. But the toddling DRV was quickly surrounded by French army the next year. Upon Hanoi's request for military resources and advisors, Beijing immediately sent equipments and materials in the early spring of 1950. During the first Indochina War from 1950 to 1954, China was the only country that provided support to Vietnam. A total of over 150 thousand guns, 3,700 canons, 57 million bullets, 1 million bombshells, and other rear supports were provided for free. Since China did not have the technology to build some of those weaponries, part of them was from the Korean War, the earlier Civil War, and even bought from Moscow. It is not an exaggeration to say that China's support was a decisive factor for Vietnam's success over the French army.⁷³

Thus began the Sino-Vietnamese honeymoon, in which Hanoi appreciated Beijing's material support and honored its moral superiority. Listing in tandem with Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin in the

Second Indochina Communist Party National Committee in February 1951, the Vietnamese leaders wrote in the Vietnam Labor Party's Article that Maoism was the guideline for every ideological foundation and policy making of the party. During the first half of the 1950s, Ho Chi Minh emphasized over and over that Vietnam should learn from Chinese revolution, Mao Zedong was the leader of Asian revolution, and the war against the French was won only by correctly following his teachings.⁷⁴

China's support continued after the First Indochina War. For instance, Beijing went way out of its capacity to show its moral magnanimity to Hanoi when the latter asked for cooperation to repair the demolished railway from Dong Dang to Hanoi. Although China did not have the technology to build it on its own, Mao removed the entire Shanxi rail and provided it for free. With Chinese engineers' support, the work was completed in a matter of four months in February 1955.⁷⁵

Even when Beijing harbored different strategic preferences, it could not help but come to support Hanoi's cause for unification and revolution. After the Geneva Agreement of the First Indochina War, Beijing desired a peaceful environment to avoid another direct confrontation with the U.S (the first direct military clash was the Korean War) and focus on its own domestic problems. Thus, in summer 1958 the Chinese leadership advised the Vietnamese to promote socialist revolution and reconstruction in the North rather than immediately waging a large-scale campaign in the South. The realization of revolutionary transformation in the South, according to Beijing was impossible at the current stage. Beijing suggested that Hanoi should adopt in the South a strategy of "not exposing our own forces for a long period, accumulating our own strength, establishing connections with the masses, and waiting for the coming of proper opportunities".⁷⁶ Yet, precisely because Beijing was very close to Hanoi in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was inconceivable for China to play too negative a role toward Vietnamese aspiration.

Thus, as a natural ally of the oppressed people in South Vietnam, China continued to provide extensive aid. This policy may not have the highest utilitarian value, but it was probably the most culturally correct choice. From China's perspective, it was most desirable that Vietnam stayed divided and the U.S military campaign focused in South Vietnam. Then all Beijing would have needed to provide was just enough aid to maintain the status quo in Indochina. However, it was difficult for China to turn down Vietnam's request for help, for such behavior may be construed as stingy and tarnish Beijing's reputation as a morally magnanimous partner. To impress Hanoi, Chinese aid went way beyond what was necessary if it was just to maintain the status quo in Indochina. During the 1956-63 period, China's military aid to Vietnam totaled 320 million *yuan*. Weaponry shipments to Vietnam included 270,000 guns, over 10,000 piece of artillery, 200 million bullets of different types, 2.02 million artillery shells, 15,000 wire

transmitters, 5,000 radio transmitters, over 1,000 trucks, 15 planes, 28 naval vessels, and 1.18 million sets of military uniforms.⁷⁷ As Chen Jian correctly points out, Beijing's leaders used these supports to show their comrades in Hanoi their solidarity.⁷⁸ Instead of providing a minimal amount of aid just enough to meet its strategic aim to hold the U.S threat at bay and keep Vietnam divided, China paid an outrageous price to maintain moral superiority.

Also, during this period, China often compromised for the sake of amity as the Bailong case shows. Located slightly to the west of the center of Tonkin Bay, the Bailong Island was originally a Chinese land. During the 1950s, most of its inhabitants were Chinese. But in 1955, Hanoi asked Beijing to concede it to Vietnam, arguing that otherwise the island could fall into imperialist manipulation. Although both sides admitted to each other that the island historically belonged to China, Mao still agreed with Vietnam's request.⁷⁹ It would have been unthinkable for China to concede on territorial issues, had the *guanxi* not been in a stage of strong amity.

In addition, China did not forget to heed to Vietnam's complex feelings toward the two countries' history. When Ho visited Beijing in 1955, Mao admitted that China had invaded Vietnam in the ancient past. Ho responded that both China and Vietnam had a common past of suppression, and now they became partners in the revolution.⁸⁰ Mao also strictly forbade any behavior that may be taken as interference to Vietnam's domestic politics.⁸¹ In the autumn of 1956, Hanoi decided to correct its land policy, which under the advice of Chinese experts was said to have caused violence in some areas. As a result, pro-Beijing leaders were forced to resign. Although Mao was not happy with the decision, he still chose to respect Hanoi's policy.⁸² Upon his visit to Hanoi, Zhou Enlai paid homage to the temple where Trung sisters (female heroines who resisted the Chinese 2,000 years ago) were enshrined.⁸³ Meanwhile, Vietnam relationship with the USSR remained cool. Moscow infuriated Hanoi in 1957 by publically announcing that both the North and South Vietnam should join the UN as two independent nations.⁸⁴

In an effort to further consolidate its moral superiority, China again made commitments to Vietnam in the Second Indochina War. Beijing announced its support for Vietcong as soon as it came to existence in 1960. In the summer of 1962 following a discussion with Vietnamese delegation led by Ho Chi Minh and Nguyen Chi Thanh over the U.S. military campaign in Indochina, Beijing decided to equip 230 Vietnamese infantry battalions for free.⁸⁵

Throughout 1963, the PRC made security commitments to Hanoi. In March, Chinese Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing said during his visit in Hanoi that if the Americans were to attack North Vietnam, China would come to its defense. In May, Liu Shaoqi visited Vietnam and promised Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese leaders that if the war expanded as a result of their efforts to liberate the South, they can

definitely count on China as the strategic rear. As American military involvement expands in Vietnam toward the end of the year, Beijing began to assume the responsibility to help Vietnam strengthen its defensive system in the Tonkin delta area.⁸⁶

China's commitment to Vietnam's security further expanded in 1964. In his meeting with the Vietnamese Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung in June at Beijing, Mao told him that China and Vietnam should unite more closely in the struggle against the common enemy, emphasizing that Vietnam's cause was also China's, and China would offer unconditional support to the Vietnamese Communists. A decision was announced there that China would increase its military and economic aid to Vietnam, help train Vietnamese pilots and, if the Americans were to attack the North, offer support by all possible and necessary means.⁸⁷

While carefully communicating its intention to avoid any direct confrontation with Washington, Beijing was also willing to show the world and especially Hanoi that its backing was firm. The Chinese government issued a very powerful statement at the beginning of August 1964 that America's aggression against Hanoi was also aggression against China, and that China would never fail to come to the aid of the Vietnamese people.⁸⁸ China's political support mounted to even stronger official statements in 1965 when *People's Daily* announced in March that China would offer any necessary material support for Vietnam, including sending its own personnel to fight together with the Vietnamese people in order to annihilate American aggressors.⁸⁹ A few days later in Albania, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai reconfirmed China's position over the Indochina issue.⁹⁰ By issuing these extremely provocative statements and worsening relations with Washington, the Chinese fully exhibited their moral righteousness in its *guanxi* with Vietnam.

China's security commitment incurred tremendous cost. In April 1965 following the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, the CCP Central Committee decided to prepare for any sacrifice in order to assist the Vietnamese people.⁹¹ Mao and Zhou commanded a sharp reduction of central government expenditure on China's own industrial projects and diverted scarce resource to Hanoi.⁹² Zhou also personally informed the North Vietnamese Vice Premier that summer that China would not mind making economic sacrifices in supporting its partner.⁹³ Mao, too, instructed the State Council that to directly support the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam, "Whatever materials the South requests, so long as we are capable of giving these, should be provided by us unconditionally."⁹⁴

As both sides observed the principle of reciprocity, the positive inertia in Sino-Vietnamese *guanxi* maintained momentum. The Vietnamese was grateful to Beijing's outstanding effort during this period and behaved appropriately in the *guanxi* context. In his visit to Beijing to request for more aid, Le

Duan for instance, showed appreciation to Liu Shaoqi. The Vietnamese, he said, had always believed that China was Vietnam's most reliable friend, and that the aid from China to Vietnam was the most in quantity, as well as the best in quality. Liu replied that it was China's consistent policy to do its best to satisfy whatever the Vietnamese needed. Thus, the two sides formally confirmed each other's position in their *guanxi*. As long as the Vietnamese was grateful to China's support and stand by its side, the *guanxi* of amity would hold and China would continue its generous support. Following Mao's instructions, Liu agreed to most of Le Duan's requests. Liu also remembered to stress that the help had no strings attached, and the Vietnamese side would always have the initiative in this matter.⁹⁵

It was not too costly for Hanoi to praise the Chinese moral magnanimity and stay at Beijing's side against another conflicting party. Vietnam stood by China after 1963 as Sino-Soviet split became even more obvious.⁹⁶ Hanoi supported Beijing during the Sino-Indian border conflict, and the two governments jointly criticized LTBT agreed among Washington, London and Moscow. As the U.S. bombing operation Rolling Thunder unfolds and the Soviet continues to pressure Beijing, Vietnam sided with China to boycott the Moscow Conference.⁹⁷

In contrast, for China to maintain its *guanxi* with Vietnam from a superior position required constant generous economic aid and political support. As long as Vietnam's behavior was construed morally correct, China had no justifiable reasons to abandon its "comrade plus brother". When Ho Chi Minh asked Mao to help Vietnam build 12 new roads in May 1965 at Changsha, Mao promised that China would offer whatever support was needed by the Vietnamese and gave his consent immediately. Following Mao's instructions, the Chinese General Staff quickly worked out a preliminary plan to send approximately 100,000 Chinese engineering troops to Vietnam for road construction.⁹⁸

The magnitude of aid and support has to be framed in China's difficult economic condition. Since its economy had been seriously devastated in the early 1960s by the disastrous Great Leap Forward program, Beijing in practice could not afford a robust economic aid. In addition, the Sino-Soviet economic cooperation suddenly broke up in July 1960. In less than two months, Kremlin withdrew all its advisers and experts from China, leaving many important projects on hold. Zhou Enlai addressed to an emergency CCP Central Committee on July 31 that the damage was especially acute on economic construction, technological cooperation, special defense technology, and nuclear technology.⁹⁹ In response to Soviet nuclear contingency, China sought to develop a "Third Front" by establishing inland defense and heavy industrial base. This survival strategy consumed over half of China's national capital during the latter half of the 1960s.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, Beijing made every effort, even at the expense of its own people, to sustain its

supply for Hanoi. In July 1964 when the Chinese economy itself was in a dire situation, Beijing expanded its economic aid. Zhou commanded the State Council that domestic economic projects must yield priority to foreign aid efforts.¹⁰¹ More specifically in the following month, Zhou instructed the Central Commission on Foreign Economic Contacts that China would devote 3 percent of annual state budget and total foreign exchange revenues to foreign aid. The major recipient was Vietnam.¹⁰²

It is also significant that China deliberately refrained from interfering in Hanoi's decision making. It was only out of the Vietnamese request that China sent military and political advisers to Vietnam during the First Indochina War and got involved in the underdeveloped Viet Minh's decision making. As the Communist North Vietnam matures during the Second Indochina War, China pulled itself out of the decision making circle in Hanoi. Mao specifically ordered Chinese personnel to carefully refrain from actions that may appear too enthusiastic to Vietnamese politics and concentrate only on logistical support. As Zhou explained to a Swedish ambassador in April 1961, China's economic aid does not demand special rights and privileges from the recipients, nor would it exercise control.¹⁰³ Obviously, the Chinese were not acting under the logic of a quick *quid pro quo*.

China's generous support may have had a bigger cause beyond the country's bilateral relationship with Vietnam. Chen Jian argues that Beijing's decision to engage in Vietnam War reflected its aim to earn the reputation as the emerging center of the world revolution.¹⁰⁴ Also, China's support for Vietnam may have to be understood in the context of Sino-Soviet conflict when the two countries vied for dominance in the socialist camp. However, we should not overemphasize the pure utility value of Vietnam in the eyes of China as leverage against Moscow. China's generosity toward Vietnam had started long before Sino-Soviet dispute came to existence. The Sino-Soviet split might have given China stronger motivation to support Vietnam, but it did not cause China's generosity at the first place.

In sum, the burden that China took to support Vietnam would appear outrageous if not understood in China's cultural context. According to Chinese scholars, the total amount of support for Vietnam from 1950 to 1978 was over 20 billion U.S. dollars, of which over 93% was provided for free.¹⁰⁵ In the summer of 1954 alone, over a hundred Chinese economic experts were sent to Vietnam to help with urban management, restoration of production, economic planning, and administration of trade, financial and monetary issues.¹⁰⁶ Even the famous anti-Beijing Le Duan said during his 1975 visit to Beijing that it was China, not the Soviet Union that provided the most urgent and crucial support for Vietnam.¹⁰⁷ China's military presence at North Vietnam was an effective prevention against U.S. campaign to the region, and helped Vietcong's operation in the South. In the latter half of 1965 alone China had sent over 100 thousand troops to North Vietnam, enabling the Vietnamese to free their soldiers to the South.¹⁰⁸ The

support was way beyond the necessity to maintain the status quo of a divided Vietnam, and a protracted war in Indochina to tie down America's military forces.

The Waning Positive Inertia and Perception Change: 1965- 1978

As Vietnam's foreign policy began to take a pro-Soviet turn in the mid 1960s, its behavior was also deemed morally inappropriate in the eyes of China. For Beijing, the morally indebted Vietnam was supposed to stand by its side regardless of Hanoi's own national interest. For Vietnam however, the right course of foreign policy that promised the best economic utility was to play to both Beijing and Moscow to its own advantage. While Beijing was keen to each other's moral account based on their historical interaction in the past, Vietnam seems to be more economically rational and utility oriented.

Toward the second half of the 1960s, Beijing became increasingly frustrated with Hanoi's lack of moral responsibility. As Soviet-Vietnam ties strengthen after Khrushchev's fall in October 1964, Moscow began to provide Hanoi with substantial support while at the same time calling on socialist countries, China in particular, to adopt a unified stand in supporting Vietnam. When Mao bluntly refused the Soviet overture, Hanoi had since become silent in its criticism of "revisionism."¹⁰⁹ The second division of the CPVEF (Chinese People's Volunteer Engineering Force) left early in 1966, as a result of the deepening divisions between Beijing and Hanoi.¹¹⁰ The majority of Chinese engineering troops left Vietnam before the end of 1969.¹¹¹ Since late 1965, Beijing's leaders had repeatedly expressed indignation against Hanoi's approach to Moscow.¹¹²

Chinese criticism backfired as now Hanoi drifted further away from Beijing. That both China and Soviet Union had contributed to Vietnam's military struggle had become the dominant view among leaders at Hanoi.¹¹³ By 1968, it became evident to the Chinese that Hanoi was indeed closer to Moscow than to Beijing. Moscow's active support for Hanoi's peace talk initiative with the U.S. stood in sharp contrast with Beijing's harsh criticism.¹¹⁴ In his meeting with Zhou on April 29, Pham Van Dong insinuated to the Chinese side that the Soviet comrades were more supportive for their new strategy.¹¹⁵ Bilateral disputes quickly spread to lower level interactions. Vietnamese authorities usually took the Soviet side when a conflict occurred between the Chinese and Soviet military personnel in Vietnam.¹¹⁶

Although the development of Soviet-Vietnam relationship may have well significantly disappointed China's moral expectation for Vietnam, China once again attempted to impress Vietnam with its moral superiority, hoping to constrain Hanoi's further deviation. In June 1967, extensive agreements were signed and commitments were made between the two allies as if there were no fundamental quarrels between them. Not only did the Chinese cover military equipment for almost 2,000

Vietnamese soldiers, but also provided them with all the daily consumption goods including petty things such as soap bars, toothpaste and even ping-pong balls.¹¹⁷

In addition to disputes over the Soviet Union, Chinese leaders were also upset about Hanoi's U.S. policy. By the beginning of 1966, against Beijing's advice, Hanoi opened the possibility of negotiation while maintaining advantage on the battleground.¹¹⁸ In April 1968, Zhou Enlai criticized the Vietnamese, contending that Hanoi should not have had accepted Washington's proposal of a limited cessation of bombing in the North. However, the Vietnamese did not yield to Beijing's pressure, reminding the Chinese that it was after all the Vietnamese who were fighting against the U.S. at the frontlines.¹¹⁹ Chinese leaders were infuriated when they heard only few hours before the formal announcement on May 3, 1968 that Hanoi would soon start the peace talks with Washington.¹²⁰ Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi harshly criticized Hanoi's acceptance of Soviet proposals for compromise with the U.S.¹²¹ In late October, the suspension of Rolling Thunder presented an excuse for the Chinese to pull back their troops from Vietnam and reduce military aid. Although Beijing claimed that it did so for Vietnam's self-reliance, the real motivation was its anger with Vietnam's defiance.¹²²

However, soon the Chinese reversed criticism to salvage the long invested *guanxi* with Vietnam, realizing that the morally indebted partner was not ready to yield.¹²³ Thus, in mid-November 1968, Beijing's attitude toward the Paris peace talks between Hanoi and Washington changed from outright disapproval to cautious endorsement.¹²⁴ However, the Chinese had in fact accumulated a strong sense of betrayal and insult by a materially indebted and morally inferior partner in *guanxi*, and internally intensely criticized Hanoi's mistake to yield to both American imperialists and Soviet revisionists.¹²⁵

As a result, Chinese enthusiasm for Vietnam cooled down significantly toward the end of the 1960s. In April 1969, Zhou told Vietnamese delegations to the point that now Vietnam was on its own in the military struggles against the U.S.¹²⁶ By July 1970, all Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft units had been pulled out from Vietnam.¹²⁷ China's supply also drastically decreased in the 1969-70 period.¹²⁸

Although China had no moral problems in cutting back on support when Hanoi was defaulting on its reciprocal obligation to stand by China, its quasi alliance with the U.S. made public in 1971 could tarnish its moral superiority vis-à-vis Vietnam. Immediately after the Zhou-Kissinger talk in March 1971, the Chinese attempted to preserve their moral superiority by persuading the Vietnamese that Sino-U.S. rapprochement was not at Vietnam's expense.¹²⁹ It was against this backdrop that China resumed generous support in earnest from 1971.¹³⁰

Although Hanoi's deep suspicion against both the U.S. and China was not soothed,¹³¹ it chose to play to Beijing's guilt for its own advantage. The Vietnamese succeeded in making China allow Soviet

materials pass through Chinese ports and railways for free.¹³² The Chinese, out of their sense of guilt and hope to maintain their moral superiority, basically provided whatever the Vietnamese requested in the 1971-72 period.¹³³ The Vietnamese, on the other hand, saw the sharply increased Chinese aid merely as a manifestation of guilt.¹³⁴ Suspecting that Beijing was holding back on its goods, Hanoi decided to send its own delegation to China after the January 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, in order to directly monitor and rush material transportation, adding insult to Beijing's pride.¹³⁵

Angry at Vietnam's ingratitude, Beijing once again decreased its economic aid and disengaged from Vietnam after the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973.¹³⁶ This stood in sharp contrast with Soviet generous economic support, such that the Soviets believed that 1973 was the year when Hanoi tilted towards Moscow.¹³⁷ Beijing's main explanation for such a curtailment was due to China's economic difficulty and some scholars consider it was indeed the case.¹³⁸ However, China had experienced worse economic disasters but its support had never stopped even during those harshest times. Compared with 1973, China's economic situation was only worse in the early 1960s when the Great Leap Forward devastated the country's economy.

Realist account of China's Vietnam policy during this period left puzzles. For example, Beijing's re-endorsement of Hanoi's negotiation initiative with the U.S. was considered as a direct result of Sino-American rapprochement.¹³⁹ The rapprochement may have exacerbated Sino-Vietnam relationship, and the U.S. presence at Indochina did serve for China's interest.¹⁴⁰ But it did not directly cause mutual hostility between Beijing and Hanoi. In fact, China's approval came in November 1968 before Sino-U.S. rapprochement took shape in earnest.

Perhaps the origin of Sino-Vietnam hostility lies at a deep cultural level. While Vietnam was very future oriented in its foreign policy making, China was more sensitive to past interactions. As Path observes, "Hanoi's perception of Beijing's indifference to Vietnam's most pressing economic concerns was primarily shaped by what China failed to provide rather than what the latter had already given in the past, while Beijing's perception of Hanoi's lack of appreciation and gratitude was largely shaped by the latter's lack of recognition of China's enormous sacrifices for Vietnam over the preceding 15 years and China's current economic hardship."¹⁴¹

As Beijing claims, China already gave enough to Vietnam in the past. Mao told Le Duan at a meeting in September 1975 that Hanoi should not expect further aid from Beijing, because now China was the poorest country in the world, not Vietnam.¹⁴² Deng Xiaoping questioned Le Duan in their September meeting why the Vietnamese media would stress threat from China.¹⁴³ Though Mao and Deng had different political agendas and decision-making styles, their perceptions of the Vietnamese

concluded. After they found out that Beijing was no longer available as a generous donor, the Vietnamese were left with the only choice to turn to Moscow in 1975.¹⁴⁴

In addition, Beijing started to support Pol Pot regime for its independence from Vietnam toward the second half of 1975. Some previous studies argue that China was fairly neutral between Hanoi and Phnom Penh until late 1977 or early 1978.¹⁴⁵ Yet, Beijing seems to have already committed to a pro-Khmer stance in June 1975, when Mao personally met Pol Pot and promised more than \$1 billion of economic and military assistance.¹⁴⁶

Sino-Vietnamese confrontation deteriorated over the Cambodian issue toward the end of the 1970s. Strengthening its ties with Beijing, the Pol Pot regime had become even more aggressive toward Hanoi. To deter Pol Pot's audacity, Hanoi asked Beijing to exert pressure on Phnom Penh, only to find out that Chinese backing was firm.¹⁴⁷ The Vietnamese took actions to counterbalance such development between Beijing and Phnom Penh by approaching Moscow.¹⁴⁸ In summer 1978, Hanoi's leaders approved an outright invasion to Cambodia.¹⁴⁹ The subsequent signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation beefed up Hanoi's confidence. Finally, on December 25, 1978, Hanoi launched its largest military campaign in history against Cambodia, capturing its capital in a matter of few weeks on January 7, 1979.

Previously downplayed during the *guanxi* of amity, territorial issues now became one of the major sources of conflict between Hanoi and Beijing. Armed conflicts had emerged across the border since 1973, and increased in 1974.¹⁵⁰ Both sides claimed that there were over 2,000 land border violations from 1975 to 1978.¹⁵¹ Maritime boundaries also came under the focal point between the two capitals.¹⁵²

Vietnam's mistreatment and the exodus of ethnic Chinese in the spring of 1978 was the last straw that broke the camel's back. Historically, a large number of ethnic Chinese resided in Vietnam. After 1977, Hanoi began to adopt a series of anti ethnic Chinese policies. As a result of this in 1977,¹⁵³ hundreds and thousands of them flooded to southern China,¹⁵⁴ sweeping away whatever positive inertia left in the *guanxi*. After 1978, Beijing's anti-Vietnam policy became public.¹⁵⁵ China's response to the treatment of overseas ethnic Chinese depends on Beijing's overall relationship with the hosting country. Existing research indicates that China has a tendency to react strongly to the treatment of ethnic Chinese in a country only when there is an overall deterioration of bilateral relations.¹⁵⁶

A dispute has to be identified as one in order to exist and draw attention from states. The disputes over land and maritime boundary and ethnic Chinese in Vietnam would have never even existed, had *guanxi* remained at the amity stage throughout the 1970s.¹⁵⁷ When *guanxi* deteriorated to a one of enmity, China took a confrontational position against Vietnam in every issue area.

Beijing's strong resentment toward Hanoi over its unilateral decision to resume negotiation with Washington and its closer approach toward Moscow has to be understood as a function of China's perceived identity of Vietnam. With its extremely generous assistance and enthusiastic political support for the Vietnamese for over two decades, China's hatred of Vietnam grew all the more deep-seated.¹⁵⁸ The identity of an ungrateful Vietnam was also collectively shared among the Chinese general public.¹⁵⁹ Especially those who had direct experience in engaging support for the Vietnamese during the First and Second Indochina War strongly felt betrayed. Once repudiating the Vietnamese for their lack of conscience in the mid 1960s, Deng Xiaoping was one of such leaders who were willing to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson".¹⁶⁰

It would be hard to imagine China's strong hatred of the Vietnamese, had Beijing not provided magnanimous support during the amity phase. As Chen Jian correctly points out, "if Beijing and Hanoi had not been so close, they would have had fewer opportunities to experience differences between them."¹⁶¹ China hardly ever demanded material returns from Vietnam for its generous support, and aid agreements seldom come with formal conditions. But it had been pursuing for something bigger than political and economic control of Hanoi. That is, Vietnam's recognition of China's superior moral position.¹⁶² With its economic clout and better security environment especially after the rapprochement with the U.S and Japan toward the end of the 1970s, China had plenty of choices before heading to a costly war with Hanoi. However, China stubbornly rejected economic help for Hanoi and pushed its erstwhile ally to the Soviet orbit. After rounds of interactions with Vietnam, a punitive war appeared absolutely necessary to the Chinese.

Enmity and the Negative Inertia: 1979 – 1991

In early 1979 China launched a large-scale war against Vietnam, regardless of its high foreseeable costs for the PRC's economic development, international image and security environment. Beijing's leaders made careful preparations both diplomatically and militarily. In early November 1978, Deng Xiaoping officially visited Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in order to seek support from these countries for China's use of force against Vietnam if Hanoi attacked Cambodia.¹⁶³ Deng also took advantage of his visit to the U.S in late January 1979. In Washington, he publically criticized Hanoi that "if you don't teach them some necessary lesson, it just won't do."¹⁶⁴ By making such a statement in the U.S, Deng succeeded in projecting an impression (one that couldn't be erased by the U.S public announcement that President Carter wanted to discourage China from any strong anti-Vietnam action¹⁶⁵) that Washington consented with Beijing's action.

Soviet reaction to the punitive war was China's major concern. To discourage Moscow's engagement and avoid fighting a two-front battle, China voluntarily limited the scale of war. Deng personally confirmed that the war was only designed to punish Vietnam for its aggression and demonstrate that Chinese tolerance had its limits.¹⁶⁶ To prepare for Soviet invasion, the northern front consisting of Xinjiang, Lanzhou, Beijing and Shenyang military regions was established under Li Desheng, the commander of Shenyang Military Region.¹⁶⁷ In addition, Beijing dispatched a navy task force to Paracel to counter possible Soviet naval intervention.¹⁶⁸ Also, perhaps as a message to Moscow that China did not want the war to jeopardize Sino-Soviet relations, Beijing reached agreements on some disputed areas with the Soviets shortly after the outbreak of the border war.¹⁶⁹ Regardless of China's caution, the possibility of Soviet intervention was never ruled out. The avoidance of a wider war was also to a large extent due to Soviet restraint.¹⁷⁰

Beijing attempted to achieve its goal of punishment first through a short and decisive military operation. To ensure victory, the PLA employed an absolute superior force, with over 320,000 troops—more than one quarter of its field armies assembled at the border by mid-January 1979. Chief Commander Xu Shiyou expected his forces to quickly strike all the way to the heart of the enemy and annihilate the opposition.¹⁷¹ In addition to air transport, tens of thousands of militias were mobilized in Guangxi and Yunan provinces for logistical supports. On February 17, 1979, the PLA penetrated through the adjacent Vietnamese territory.¹⁷²

However, the PLA troops proved ill prepared for a modern warfare against the Vietnamese forces. Most of the 1,000 planes used in the war were outdated MiG-17s and MiG-19s.¹⁷³ The number of death varies dramatically with sources; however a "reliable source" told *AFP* that Deng Xiaoping had announced that Vietnam incurred 37,000 deaths.¹⁷⁴ On the other hand, Radio Hanoi claimed 45,000 Chinese dead and wounded.¹⁷⁵ Experts estimate that there were at least 30,000 Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers killed between February 17 and March 15.¹⁷⁶ Although the PLA captured Lang Son, a stronghold that opens the way to the delta, in early March the Chinese troop began its withdrawal claiming that its initial military goal had been achieved.¹⁷⁷

The war was also detrimental to China's reputation as a peace-loving socialist state.¹⁷⁸ First, China was invading Vietnam for the Khmer regime that had little legitimacy to rule Cambodia. The campaign did not resonate well in the international community. Second, it was difficult for Chinese leaders to persuade the Chinese people why a war against its one time ally was necessary. Third, China had to approach the Thai government and cut its ties with Thai communists, which it had previously supported.¹⁷⁹

In addition, the punitive war was a controversial decision in terms of China's domestic politics. After the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in late 1978, Beijing was committed to economy building and modernization. This was also the new political line that Deng evinced to differentiate from Hua Guofeng—Deng's political rival, whose power solely rested upon Mao's obscure designation prior to his death. As Shirk argues, Deng expanded his political power base by addressing China's pressing economic problems and play to provincial leaders' interests. As a result of Deng's strategy, the number of provincial representatives at the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party had steadily increased.¹⁸⁰ It was under this domestic policy guideline that Deng repeatedly emphasized that it was necessary for China to maintain a peaceful international environment to concentrate on its own economic growth and nation building. A large-scale war at this juncture was harmful both for China's economic growth and Deng's political agenda. Indeed, in the wake of the costly war Deng was reportedly criticized.¹⁸¹

If the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War was so costly in both economic and political terms, why did the Chinese choose to initiate it at the first place? Many factors existed between the two capitals when the war broke out. They were mainly the territorial disputes, mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, different Soviet and U.S. policies and conflicting interest in Kampuchea. However, most of them already existed when the "lips and teeth" solidarity "between Beijing and Hanoi remained in its heyday, and they had not directly triggered the relationship's decline". Chen Jian argues that not a single cause or even a combination of them provides sufficient reasons for Beijing to follow a course of total confrontation against Hanoi. Instead of devoting its resources to reform and strengthening its southern borders by cooperating with Vietnam, China chose to wage "one of the most meaningless wars in world history" that "created nothing for the two countries except heavy casualties and material losses".¹⁸²

Even the Vietnamese did not seem to believe that the Chinese would ever attack. The Hanoi leadership did not prepare for a Chinese invasion, despite Beijing's saber rattling for several months. China's attack caught Hanoi off-guard. When massive numbers of Chinese troops crossed the border, Premier Pham Van Dong and Chief of the PAVN General Staff Van Tien Dung were visiting Phnom Penh.

From a long-term perspective of *guanxi*, China's punitive war would not be so hard to understand. China was so convinced of its moral superiority in its *guanxi* with Vietnam that Hanoi's deviation and defiance become totally unjustifiable. As *guanxi* deteriorates and the brotherly comrade turns to an ungrateful enemy, previously accepted sacrifices and compromises were all suddenly no longer acceptable. When Vietnam was expected to follow the line of China's U.S. policy in the late 1960s, it antagonized China by resuming negotiations with Washington. When Vietnam was expected to reciprocate by siding with Beijing against Moscow toward the end of the Second Indochina War, it

disappointed China by gradually leaning toward the Soviet Union. When territorial disputes and ethnic Chinese exodus surfaced, Vietnam did not bother to heed Beijing's concerns and made China lose face by directly challenging China's positions.

According to Zhao, Chinese nationalism reinforced the view that China must punish Vietnam. Chinese people's strong emotional antagonism against the traitorous erstwhile ally was a perfect manifestation of the Chinese cultural sentiment in *guanxi*. The sentiment essentially enabled a broad consensus among Chinese political and military leaders to support Deng Xiaoping's war decision.¹⁸³

From a short-term perspective of relationship, Vietnam was also a rational player. Either to side with Moscow or Beijing in a Sino-Soviet split seemed to be a rather simple choice for the Vietnamese. To a small country in an anarchical world of power politics, foreign policy to a large extent was probably determined by immediate prospect of protection and aid. China might be Vietnam's erstwhile benefactor, but when the Soviet Union became increasingly generous, Hanoi quickly leaned toward Moscow.

This difference in the two countries perception led to mutual misunderstandings. China was so convinced that it could count on its partner in a good *guanxi* that it failed to see it coming when Vietnam was gradually pulled to the Soviet orbit. Until their *guanxi* completely collapsed in late 1978, China's attitude toward Vietnam had remained relatively conciliatory at least in the public arena.

Once in a *guanxi* of enmity, China's perception of Vietnam retained tremendous negative inertia. The 1979 war was only the beginning of China's punishment. There had been at least six major clashes across the border between China and Vietnam during the 1980s (July 1980, May 1981, April 1983, April-July 1984, June 1985, and December 1986-January 1987). In 1984, a major campaign was launched to seize and hold Lao Shan located on the Yunnan-Vietnam border.¹⁸⁴ Under the constant threat of another major attack, Hanoi had to deploy a large army along its northern border at the expense of its economy. Indeed, Beijing aimed to "bleed white" the Vietnamese. As Deng Xiaoping told Japanese Prime Minister Ohira in late 1979, "It is wise for China to force the Vietnamese to stay in Kampuchea because that way they will suffer more and more and will not be able to extend their hand to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore."¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the 1979 war "was most successful when seen as a tactic in China's strategy of a protracted war of attrition."¹⁸⁶

Despite Hanoi's repeated overtures especially after 1985, Beijing remained hostile almost throughout the 1980s. At the Eleventh Meeting of the Indochina Foreign Ministers Conference in Phnom Penh in mid 1985, Hanoi unilaterally announced that: "Vietnamese volunteer forces will conclude their total withdrawal [from Cambodia] by 1990."¹⁸⁷ The Vietnamese side also proposed official talks with Beijing in late 1985, only to be rejected on the ground that the Vietnamese promise to withdraw its troops

“did not merit attention.”¹⁸⁸ When Hanoi announced its withdrawal of troops in 1988, China actually showed little intention of changing its Cambodia policy and continued its hostile line. Zhao Ziyang accused Vietnam’s lack of sincerity and “inventing excuses to delay its troop withdrawals.” Beijing claimed that “an early and peaceful settlement of the Cambodian issue is still beyond our hopes”, because “the Vietnamese authority has no sincerity or whatsoever about settling the Cambodian issue”. China warned, “accommodation will only encourage the arrogance of the aggressors.”¹⁸⁹ Meanwhile, violent border conflict remained unabated until 1987.¹⁹⁰

Sino-Vietnamese relationship also seemed to have developed independently from Sino-Soviet relationship during the 1980s. The Reagan administration’s aggressive Soviet policy relieved Beijing’s fear of superpower collusion against the PRC. Moscow also extended overtures to Beijing. After Leonid Brezhnev made an initiative to improve relations with China in 1982, Beijing sent Yu Hongliang, Director of Soviet and East European Affairs Department of Foreign Affairs Ministry, as a private figure to visit the USSR.¹⁹¹ Gradually, China started to adopt a more conciliatory Soviet policy toward the second half of the 1980s.¹⁹² Toward the mid-1980s, Beijing no longer seemed to worry the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, as Deng Xiaoping indicated that China did not object the Soviet base in the Cam Ranh Bay as long as Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia.¹⁹³ Clearly, Beijing’s grudge at this point was more directed against Vietnam than the USSR. Against new developments in international politics, the negative inertia seems to have constrained China’s change of perception of Vietnam as a treacherous enemy.

Sino-Vietnamese normalization did not occur until November 1991, when Do Muoi and Vo Van Kiet visited Beijing to attend the normalization ceremonies. High-level talks between the two governments were not resumed until 1989. Two factors probably contributed to the rapprochement. First, the Chinese leadership had been passed down to the third generation of Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji, who had little personal experience in foreign affairs during the 1960s and 70s. Second, the Vietnamese government also just finished its seventh Party Congress, which reshuffled its leadership and removed some of its aggressive negotiators such as Nguyen Co Thach. As the Foreign Minister of Vietnam, Thach created a diplomatic stalemate with his Chinese counterpart Liu Shuqing in their unsuccessful Paris conference of July 1989.¹⁹⁴

The new bilateral relationship, however, did not return to what it once was in the 1950s and 1960s. China and Vietnam were no longer brothers and comrades or lips and teeth. In this situational and legal based relationship, short-term cost and benefit analysis is the fundamental criterion for behavior. Vietnam’s continued deference to the Chinese after normalization could be observed in Phieu’s concession in the Sino-Vietnamese border pacts of 1999 and 2000 and the more frequent asymmetric high-level visits from Hanoi between 1998 and 2003.¹⁹⁵ Yet, China appears to be taking a distanced

Vietnam policy. At the beginning of the 1990s when Hanoi pursued solidarity in a deferential manner toward Beijing by persuading it to take the leadership in the socialist camp, the Chinese refrained from forming too close a tie with the Vietnamese.¹⁹⁶ Compromises on boundary questions were no longer available. As a Hanoi radio commentary in May 1998 observes, of all the territorial talks between Vietnam and a foreign party (including Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia and China), those with the Chinese were the most complicated.¹⁹⁷ As Li Peng put it, the new relationship was now based on common interests between the two countries, and there will be limited aid from China.¹⁹⁸

Conclusion

Chinese cultural behavior pattern seems to have constituted the basic confine of the PRC's Vietnam policy from 1949 to 1991. To morally dominate the *guanxi* with Hanoi, Beijing made tremendous effort and sacrifice to show its magnanimity through expensive aid programs and political support. The positive inertia in amity prevented China from efficiently removing bilateral obstacles such as the border and maritime issues, which later added negative momentum in Beijing's perceived identity of Hanoi. As Vietnam continues to fail to live up to China's expectation as the morally inferior partner in *guanxi*, its behavior was deemed wrong and its identity as a friend tumbled. Against conventional wisdom that supposes China would do otherwise, the PRC chose to wage a large-scale punitive war in 1979 against its erstwhile brotherly comrade. The war not only consumed tens of thousands of PLA soldiers' lives; risked China's newly initiated economic programs; but above all also endangered the country's national security vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union. Regardless of new opportunities and overtures from Hanoi, Beijing stubbornly refused to mend fences with its treacherous counterpart for an extended period of time.

Notes

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