



# Three Structures of Vietnam-China Relations: a View from the Structural Constructivist Theory

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## Abstract

In this essay, an attempt is made to use Alexander Wendt's structural hypothesis to test the structures of Vietnam–China relations from the beginning up to the present. The results show that Vietnam–China relations have undergone three cultures: Hobbesian culture, Lockean culture, and Kantian culture. In 113 B.C, without any restraint, the expansionist identity of China formed Vietnam–China Hobbesian culture and then nourished it up to the late twelfth century. Then, the external restraints changed Vietnam–China Hobbesian culture into the Lockean culture in 1164. There was an alternation of Hobbesian and Lockean culture in the period of 1164–1885. The transitions of these two cultures were created by external restraint and self-restraint. In the period of 1885–1949, the foundations for the Kantian culture was laid. From 1950 to July 1978, Communist ideology helped the Kantian culture to dominate Vietnam–China relations. Though, from 1968 self-interests created a shift from Kantian culture to Lockean culture. Without self-restraint, the identities of Vietnam and China changed the Kantian culture into the Lockean culture in late 1978, and this culture has been dominating Vietnam–China relations up to the present.

**Keywords** Vietnam–China relations · Structural constructivist theory · Hobbesian culture · Lockean culture · Kantian culture

## Introduction

The long relationship between Vietnam and China has stretched for more than 2000 years and can be described as a combination of hostilities and friendship, or struggle and cooperation. Up to now, a lot of research works basing on the Realist theory have been conducted with an effort to explain Vietnam–China relations. Some

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good explanations have been offered but I think the issue is still in need of clarification, using other theories to explain the issue because each theory may capture some important aspects of world politics, and “our understanding would be impoverished were our thinking confined to only one theory” [31]. Though Realism remains the most compelling general framework for understanding international relations [37], Constructivism has been able to explain main issues of Asian international relations [1]. Given this reason, I would like to offer one more explanation for Vietnam–China relations. My explanation is based on Social theory of international politics of Alexander Wendt, a structural Constructivist. In the title of this essay, I put “Vietnam” before “China” to mean that I would take Vietnam as the point of departure to view the relations of the two countries.

This essay includes three main parts. The first part will propose a testing hypothesis which will be applied to examine Vietnam–China relationship, explains the meaning of “Vietnam” and “the Vietnamese” used in this essay, and discusses the formation of the state of Vietnam and the emergence of Chinese empire. The second part will chronologically discuss the formations and transitions of three cultures: Hobbesian culture, Lockean culture, and Kantian culture. The last part will first give a short summary of the main contents of the essay and then will briefly discuss what should be done in the next research on Vietnam–China relations.

## Theoretical Basis

### Three Structures of Anarchy

Different from Realists and Liberalists who persist in assuming that the nature of international system is anarchy and has only this given structure, Wendt argues that most important structures in which states embedded are made of ideas, not material forces. The shared ideas or culture of an anarchic system is its structure [38]. According to Wendt, the structure of international system is determined by type of relations (culture) between states themselves, which depends on how states represent each other, or anarchy is what states make of it [39]. Because the relations between states vary in type, so, according to the orientation of the Self toward the Other with respect to the use of violence, there are at least three kinds of structure based on what kind of roles—enemy, rival, and friend—dominate the system [38]. Wendt named these three cultures as Hobbesian culture, Lockean culture, and Kantian culture.

*Hobbesian culture* is the high violent structure. In this culture, states see each other as enemy. They do not recognize each other’s life and liberty as a right and will not willingly limit their violence toward their enemy. This enmity has four implications for state’s foreign policy:

- i. State will try to destroy or conquer enemies on the principle of “kill or be killed.”
- ii. Worst-case assumption affects the decision-making process.
- iii. Relative military capabilities will be crucial, power is the key to survival on the principle “if you want peace, prepare for war.”
- iv. State will not limit the violence against other and ready to preempt.

The interactions based on this policy between states of this culture lead to the logic. “war of all against all”, and four tendencies are generated as (1) without external constraints and self-restraint, endemic and unlimited warfare is usually selected; (2) the elimination of “unfit” actors: those not adapted for warfare, and those too weak militarily to compete; (3) states powerful enough to avoid elimination will try to balance each other’s power for being dominant but balancing power is a “knife’s edge” quality because it enables a tendency toward concentrating power to dominate [39]; and (4) non-alignment or neutrality is very difficult because Hobbesian tends to suck all its members into the fray of “war of all against all” for survival. But in the seventeenth century, European states started to resolve their conflicts on principle of the mutual recognition of sovereignty. After World War II, states’ sovereignty was institutionalized and then became global. In the late twentieth century, the international system is undergoing another structural change, to a Kantian culture of collective security [39] which put an end to Hobbesian culture.

*Lockean culture* is the low violent structure. In this culture, states see each other as rival and expect each other to act as if they recognize their sovereignty (life and liberty) as a right so try to revise only their behavior or property rather than to destroy or dominate them [39]. Because disputes might be a territorial issue, states will define which property is acknowledged as a right or enough to “live,” and which property may be disputed, sometimes by force. Modern inter-state rivalry is constrained by the structure of sovereign rights recognized by international law but it does not mean that violence is excluded in disputes as long as within “live and let live” limits, and therefore, relative military power is still important [39]. Under the Lockean culture:

- i. States adopt a status quo fashion toward sovereign.
- ii. States express less anxiety for security, the future matters more, the absolute gains can be more important.
- iii. Relative military power has a different meaning because the institution of sovereignty changes the balance of threat.
- iv. States limit its violence on the principle of “life and liberty” right.

In the Lockean culture, four tendencies can be observed. The first is that warfare is simultaneously accepted and constrained because, different from enmity, states have to choose actions that will not take away rival’s institutionalized life and liberty which leads to the second tendency that limited warfare underpins a second tendency, which is for the system to have a relatively stable membership or low death rate over time. Power balance is the third tendency but balance is for order, not for survival, because sovereignty was recognized as a right. The final tendency is that non-alignment or neutrality becomes a recognized status because states have potential to resolve conflicts without posing a serious threat to their sovereignty which causes “mutual indifference” to become “a stable outcome in a live and let live system” [39]. After World War II, for security reason some states operated as a security team basing on the rules of non-violence and mutual aid. Wendt called this structure of relations of the Kantian culture.

*Kantian culture* is based on a role structure of friendship in which states see each other as friend, which implies that there is a process of self-identification with the Other to formulate a We-ness feeling or a common identity. Within this role structure, states expect each other to observe two basic rules:

- i Non-violence (disputes will be settled without war or the threat of war)
- j Mutual aid (fight as a team if the security of anyone is threatened)

Three points about these two rules should be noted. First, these two rules are independent and equally necessary. Within non-violence rule, friends might show indifference to the fate of others by agree to live in peace but go separate ways” while mutual aid against outsiders could accompanied by force within the framework of friendship, as in the “care” of husband who beats his wife but protects her from violence by other men [39]. Second, friendship concerns national security only, so friends might have considerable conflicts in other issues. Finally, unlike alliance which is “a temporary, mutually expedient arrangement within rivalry, or perhaps enmity”, friendship is “temporally open-ended,” and despite occasional falling out, friends always expect their friendship to continue. These two rules generate the macro-level logic and tendencies associated with “pluralistic security communities” and “collective security” [39]. “Pluralistic security communities” concerns disputes between members within a group. There is real assurance coming from shared knowledge of each other’s peaceful intentions and behavior that the members will not fight each other physically. So disputes will be handled by negotiation, arbitration, or the courts, even when the material cost of war to one or both parties might be low [39]. “Collective security” concerns disputes between a group and outsiders. Collective security is based on the principle of mutual aid, or “all for one, one for all” despite the fact that there is no direct or immediate return. Collective security is neither threat-specific nor time-specific because they see themselves as a single unit for security purposes. So its members pledge mutual aid but it is not a problem that when, by whom or whether they might be threatened [39].

### **Vietnam, Vietnamese, and the Formation of the State of Vietnam**

**Vietnam and Vietnamese** “Vietnam” as a national name officially started in early nineteenth century [23], but before this territory of Vietnam had been constantly expanded which led to the difference in size at different times. So in this essay, “Vietnam” is national general name which refers to not only modern Vietnam country but its precursor which sometimes in the past was only a part of the territory of modern Vietnam as well. And the term “Vietnamese” is used to refer to the modern Vietnamese people and the people regarded as the origin of the modern Vietnamese who were born and resided in “Vietnam.”

**The Formation of the State of Vietnam** It is said with some unclarity that the Van Lang (2524–258 B.C), which was located at currently Northern Vietnam and ruled by Hung kings, is the first state of Vietnam. Though, there is still some unclarity. But the Au Lac state of Vietnam (257–179 B.C), the capital of which was located at currently Northern Vietnam and ruled by Thuc Phan king, undoubtedly did exist. “Lac” of Au Lac is the earliest recorded name for the Vietnamese people [32]. The Au Lac territory consists of the northern part of modern Vietnam, and Guangdong and Guangxi province of China [23]. In 214 B.C., the Au Lac was occupied by China under the Qin (秦) and then was converted into Tuong district (Quan Tuong). In 208 B.C., China rapidly declined,

the Au Lac state was restored but its territory was only the now in currently northern part of modern Vietnam.

### **The Emergence of the Chinese Empire**

According to China's historical records, the first two Chinese dynasties had built an international system called Tianxia. But "some scholars are reluctant (because of the absence of definitive evidence) to accept the existence of a Xia dynasty at all. The Shang dynasty undoubtedly did exist, but the extent of its territorial control is still unclear, as is the nature of its relations with its neighbors" [20 pp. 6]. After replacing the Shang in 1046 B.C, to realize the idea of constructing an international system for security and hegemony, the Zhou allotted land and gave title to his siblings, relatives, and leaders of defeated tribes to build their own vassal states [48]. This system is called Tianxia(天下, All under heaven) in which the Chinese empire played hegemonic role, protected vassals, and gave title to vassals. Vassal states tributed to the Chinese empire [17].

China under the Zhou dynasty had an advanced agricultural civilization and a complete administration while the tribes around were very backward, clothed body with tree leaves and lived by hunting, so China supposed itself as a superior and distinguished itself from barbarians. This is why the Chinese named their country Central Kingdom [50]. With hegemonic identity, China had interests in expanding its dominant scope, then it proved to be very aggressive and expanded its area enormously. Neighboring peoples were conquered and assimilated into the central kingdom. In less than three centuries, China conquered and absorbed 42 other states [8]. In this way, the Chinese established an unprecedentedly mighty empire with hegemonic and expansionist identities in the China Central Plain (中原). I argue that the role of a hegemonic and expansionist empire that China under the Zhou had acquired by conquering and imposing domination on others has been deeply internalized by all political groups in China Central Plain and represented by "the ambition to unify vast region, it is a powerful cultural factor that drives the ambitious monarchs of the Central Plain to unify the Central Plain" [58 pp.15]. "Identities and interests are acquired by imitation when actors adopt the self-understandings of those who they perceive as 'successful'" [39 pp.325]. Imitation and promotion of achievements of previous generations have become tradition of all ruling class in China. Chinese Dream (中国梦) getting started in 2013 with the aim of restoring China's lost national greatness can be seen as the latest example. It is noted that the standards of measurement of success are size of territory and number of vassals which led to the conclusion that "the Chinese are the most expansionist in All under heaven" [44 pp.18], and East Asia has consistently become the main stage for China's imitation behavior.

### **Over the First 1000 Years of Vietnam–China Relations: the Domination of Hobbesian Culture**

Hobbesian culture dominated Vietnam–China relations from 113 B.C to 1164 A.D. Under the Hobbesian culture:

- China tried to conquer Vietnam by unlimited wars.
- Vietnam by all means fought against China but its survival depended on its military capability.
- Facing China's threat, Vietnam sometimes launched preemptive attacks against China.

From 221 to 210 B.C, China by force expanded its territory toward four directions in which the expansion into the South is the largest, from currently Chinese Southern Zhejiang (浙江) to currently Northern Vietnam [45]. In 210 B.C., the Chinese empire rapidly declined and finally fragmented. Taking this opportunity, Zhao Tuo (趙佗), a Chinese military commander, established Nan Yue (南越) kingdom in Southern China and declared himself king. Zhao Tuo then occupied Vietnam under the Au Lac in 179 B.C and converted it into two districts of the Nan Yue as Giao Chi (交趾) and Cuu Chan (九真). Because China under the Qin (221–206 B.C.) had annexed Vietnam under the Au Lac as a district for 6 years (214–208 B.C.) and then Zhao Tuo, a Chinese military commander, occupied and converted Vietnam into two district of his kingdom Nan Yue, so China did not recognize Vietnam as a sovereign state. In 206 B.C., China under the Han wanted to conquer Nan Yue for territorial expansion and occupation of Nan Yue's abundant [natural resources](#) [41] and important geopolitical location where there were prosperous commercial ports connecting South China Sea islands [27] but “because the Central Plain was in war, the people were tired and suffering, so spared Zhao Tuo, did not conquer Nan Yue” [54 pp.1369]. From 113 B.C., there was a conflict in Nan Yue court between the force of Chinese origin led by empress Cu (繆太后) and king Trieu Hung (趙興) with the force of Vietnamese origin led by prime minister Lu Gia (呂嘉). While the former wanted Nan Yue to become a part of China, the latter, who in fact controlled Nan Yue court at that time, wanted Nan Yue to be an independent kingdom [22]. China regarded the force of Vietnamese origin as obstacle in need of being destroyed [54] while the force of Vietnamese origin saw China as threat to its existence. The enmity or the Hobbesian culture between the Vietnamese and the Chinese started. In 112 B.C., China sent an army to come to support the force of Chinese origin. Facing China's threat, the force of Vietnamese origin decided to preempt by first killing empress Cu, king Trieu Hung, all Chinese envoys, and then the head of Chinese army in late 112 B.C. With superior military capability, China destroyed Nan Yue kingdom and killed all of the representatives of Vietnamese origin in Nan Yue court in 111 B.C. [54]. China then carried out the Sinification of Nan Yue by a combination of its military power, regular settlement and an influx of Chinese immigrants, and cultural spread but the Vietnamese showed their indomitability by maintaining their own customs [33]. The Vietnamese then gathered forces to resist China and succeeded in 40 A.D. China then re-occupied Vietnam by unlimited war in 43 A.D. With indomitable identity, the Vietnamese tried to fight against China in 248 and 468 but failed due to the asymmetry of military capability. In 543, Vietnamese defeated China to restore its life. China then tried to conquer Vietnam in 545 but was defeated. In 602, China succeeded in occupying Vietnam by force. All attempts of the Vietnamese against China in 687, 722, 791, and 820 failed. In 905, the Vietnamese defeated China to restore Vietnam's independence. China under the Song (宋) conquered Vietnam in 981 but was defeated. To prevent China's conquest, Vietnam under the Li dynasty launched preemptive attacks against China in 1059 and 1060. Vietnam's behaviors in turn generated China's thought of conquering Vietnam [55 pp.7482]. China then conquered Vietnam in

1076 and 1077 but was defeated. It is notable that, for the purpose of prevention, Vietnam had launched preemptive attacks before China launched these two attacks [22].

In twelfth century, Vietnam–China relations experienced a big change when China under the Song faced a serious threat from the Jin (金), an enemy on Northern frontier. From March 1123, the Jin repeatedly attacked the Song “with the aim of capturing Song emperor and eliminating the Song court” [43 pp.98]. To 1127, the Song had lost the Northern half of its territory for the Jin but threat was not over yet. While the Song became more and more weakened, Vietnam had a significant increase in strength to become a hegemonic with at least two vassals as Chiem Thanh and Chan Lap (Chenla). Though, Vietnam persistently paid respect to the Song by repeated tribute. Knowing that it was impossible to conquer Vietnam and that it would be better to reduce threat on the Southern frontier to focus on the Northern frontier, the Song chose the solution of self-restraint by recognizing Vietnam as a sovereign state in 1164.<sup>1</sup> The Hobbesian culture of Vietnam–China relations thus changed into the Lockean culture.

### **Over Next 700 Years: the Alternation of Lockean Culture and Hobbesian Culture**

There was an alternation of the Lockean culture and the Hobbesian culture in the period of 1164–1885.

After the Lockean culture dominated Vietnam–China relations, Vietnam faced no fatal threat from the Song but it had to join Tianxia as vassal. From 1206, Eurasia witnessed an unprecedented event that was the expansion of the Mongolian. Before conquering Chinese mainland, the Mongolian by force had established the largest contiguous land empire in history with violent and expansionist identities. Mongol empire occupied the Jin in 1234 and the Dai Li (大理), a kingdom in Southern China, in 1253. At that time, there were two agencies (Song and Mongol) on the Chinese mainland, but Vietnam–Song relations were ritualistic. Mongol empire’s biggest goal was occupation of the Song. For this goal, the Mongol empire decided to annex Vietnam first to pave the way to conquer the Song from the Southern border. “In the orders of submission customarily sent to neighboring states before initiating hostilities, the Mongols claimed the right, if not the duty, to bring all the world under their dominion.” [2] In late 1257, Mongol troops sent envoys to demand Vietnam to surrender. Vietnam under the Tran dynasty imprisoned all envoys and prepared for war [36]. The Hobbesian culture between Vietnam and Mongol was formed. As a consequence, in early 1258, Mongol troops conquered Vietnam and quickly occupied Vietnam capital. But shortly after that Mongol troops had to withdraw due to the summer heat, the lack of food, and Vietnamese’s guerrilla warfare. The failure in conquest, Vietnam’s repeated tribute, and the goal of occupation of the Song all together forced Mongol empire to recognize Vietnam as a sovereign state in 1260. The Hobbesian culture of Vietnam–Mongol relations changed into the Lockean culture. Mongol emperor forbade its troops from attacking Vietnam. The Mongol then required Vietnam to sever ties with the Song but Vietnam refused. In 1271, the Mongol established Yuan (元) imperial court in Beijing (北京) and then eliminated the Song

<sup>1</sup> As recorded in *Dai Viet su ki toan thu*, but according to *Book of Song* (宋史) it is 1174.

to unify China in 1279. In 1283, China under the Yuan demanded Vietnam to support it to conquer Chiem Thanh, a vassal of Vietnam, by supplying food and letting its troops across Vietnam to march to Chiem Thanh. Basing on the representation of China's expansionist identity, Vietnam regarded China's demand as a pretext to kill it. Therefore, Vietnam refused China's demand and prepared for war [37]. There was an asymmetry in roles, and "the result will be a quick descent into a Hobbesian world" [39 pp.282]. The lack of institution of sovereignty pushed Vietnam and China into entering the logic of enemy. China then launched two unlimited wars against Vietnam in 1285 and 1287 but was defeated.

In 1368, China under the Ming (明) recognized Vietnam's right to life [56]. China showed no fatal threat to Vietnam but wanted Vietnam to obey Tianxia's rules. Vietnam under the Ho dynasty expressed refusal by conquering China's vassal Chiem Thanh and repeatedly violating China's frontier [56]. In 1406, China sent an army to escort a descendants of the former Vietnamese dynasty to come back to reign Vietnam. As in 1283, Vietnam represented this as China's pretext to annex it [22]. A Hobbesian culture between Vietnam and China was formed. Vietnam then launched a preemptive attack against Chinese troops and killed the descendants. Without the institution of sovereignty, China launched an unlimited war against Vietnam in late 1406 and then occupied it as Giao Chi province in 1407. With indomitable identity, the Vietnamese immediately gathered forces to fight against China and gained victory in 1427. Like previous dynasties, Vietnam repeatedly paid tribute to China. China then recognized Vietnam as a sovereign state in 1431 [56]. From that time to 1858, the Lockean culture dominated Vietnam–China relations. There was no Chinese fatal threat to Vietnam. Vietnam–China rivalry focused on their status in Tianxia. While China tried to force Vietnam to fully obey Tianxia's rules to confirm its absolute hegemony, Vietnam tried to break these rules to raise its status in Tianxia. For this goal, from seventeenth century, Vietnam continuously expanded its territory to the South and the South China Sea ('the East Sea' as the Vietnamese often call it), including the Paracel Islands (Hoang Sa) and the Spratly Islands (Truong Sa) [25] and then violated China's Southern frontier which created a threat to China. At the end of 1788, China under the Qing (清) dynasty attacked Vietnam to change Vietnam's behavior but was defeated. Vietnam–China rivalry lasted until 1858 when the French colonialists occupied Vietnam and China was bullied by some Western empires. Chinese Tianxia became more narrowed and finally broke in 1895 by the Shimonoseki treaty (马关条约). Both Vietnam and China became semi-feudal colonies in which there were various actors competing with each for dominion. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) won in August 1945 and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa, DRVN) in September of the same year. In China, the Chinese Communist Party gained victory and established the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国, PRC) in October 1949.

## Years of Bright Spot in Vietnam–China Relations: the Domination of Kantian Culture

The Kantian culture dominated Vietnam–China relations in the period of 1950–1978 when both Vietnam and China were all threatened by Western imperialism, or the



common Other, which reduces the ability to meet corporate needs unilaterally and increases the extent to which actors share a common fate [40]. Under the Kantian culture:

- They fought as a security team.
- They gave mutual aid.

### The Foundation of Kantian Culture

Now, it is officially said that the friendship between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China started in 1950 by Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong (毛泽东). But the foundation had been laid in early twentieth century. In 1858, the French empire invaded and dominated Vietnam while China was being tormented by other Western empires. The French empire then not just ended China's influence on Vietnam, but posed serious threat to China's sovereignty [16]. Vietnam and China suffered the same plight. In the early twentieth century, some patriots of China such as Kang Youwei (康有为), Liang Qichao (梁启超), and Sun Zhongshan (孙中山) and patriots of Vietnam such as Phan Boi Chau and Dang Thai Than had a cooperation and mutual aid. The cooperation and mutual aid of this first group completely ended when Sun Zhongshan was forced to resign by Yuan Shikai (袁世凯) in 1912, and Phan Boi Chau was arrested by France in 1925. But they laid the groundwork of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual aid for the next groups of patriots, as well as the two countries, in the struggle against the common Other for security. If the first groups of patriots belonged to Bourgeoisie and wanted a revolution to establish a modern nation state in the form of a Republic, the next groups belonged to Proletariat and wanted a revolution to establish a modern nation state in the form of a Socialist. So, they had more reasons to become friends in the times that Imperialism and Capitalism prevailed in the international political system. The next groups of patriots, such as Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap of Vietnam, and Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and Zhou Enlai of China, not just deepened friendship but made the Kantian culture between Vietnam and China reach its peak in the period of 1950–1975 [42].

As early as 1922, the relations between the two Communist parties got started when Ho Chi Minh and Zhou Enlai lived and acted in Paris [53]. Ho Chi Minh led Zhou Enlai into the revolutionary path. Zhou Enlai called Ho Chi Minh “brother” and the friendship between these two people represents the harmony relations between communist parties of China and Vietnam in history [46]. In 1924, Ho Chi Minh went to China Guangzhou (中国广州) where he organized “Youth Education Classes” for young Vietnamese revolutionaries living in Guangzhou. He and leaders of the Communist Party of China as Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), and Li Fuchun (李富春) gave socialist lectures to these young people. Then, with the help of Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh selected and sent excellent young Vietnamese to Chinese Huangpu Military Academy (黄埔军校) for training. These people would become the seeds of a Vietnam revolution several years later. Ho Chi Minh, in turn, side-by-side with the Communist Party of China fought against invaders [47], and when China fought against Japanese empire, Ho Chi Minh did a lot of works for China [52]. In 1944, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam from China to lead the revolution of Vietnam. After the success of the

revolution, in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and held the position of Chairman. But at the end of September, 1945, French troops attacked Sai Gon which started the second invasion of Vietnam. In late 1946, the full-scale war broke out between the DRVN and the French colonialists. Vietnam then was divided into two parts: the Northern part was controlled by the DRVN and the Southern was governed by a Feudal state of Vietnamese manipulated by France. Since 1955, the USA replaced the French's role in Southern Vietnam by supporting the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) ruling the Southern Vietnam until the DRVN reunified the country in 1975.

### The Birth of Kantian Culture

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established by Communist Party of China in October 1949. In 1950, the DRVN and the PRC established official diplomatic relations. As has been known, after World War II, some countries became linked by adherence to the ideology and practice of Communism, which developed by Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin and their successors in the Soviet Union. In 1949, the Soviet Union and seven countries (Albania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and the German Democratic Republic) established the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) which encouraged mutual aids between all Communist countries. The Soviet Bloc therefore was formed. Then, facing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s threat, in May 1955, they decided to sign a mutual defense treaty, known as the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Warsaw of Poland (the Warsaw Pact) [3]. The members of the Warsaw Pact pledged to defend each other if one or more of them came under attack [26]. The Warsaw Pact then expanded into collective defense mechanism of all communist countries, including the DRVN and the PRC. The Kantian culture between Communist countries was formed. So, the DRVN regarded "the People's Republic of China as a big and powerful friend by side" [11 pp.42], China regarded helping Vietnam as helping itself [49]. When being requested assistance by the DRVN, Mao Zedong (毛澤東) said, "the 700 million Chinese people are the strong backing of the Vietnamese people, and the vast Chinese territory is the reliable rear of the Vietnamese people" [57]. From 1950, China started its aid to Vietnam "in a spirit of all for aid to Vietnam, what and how much Vietnam needs for war, try the best to provide the fastest" [15]. According to the *Quan doi Nhan dan* [28] (the newspaper of the army of Vietnam) from 1955 to 1975, Vietnam received 2.362.581 tons of military goods worth 7 billion Rubles from 10 socialist countries, of which China's aids was 1.594.724 tons, accounting for 67.499% in weight. "China declared its aid to Vietnam in the period of 1950–1978 exceeded \$20 billion in total" [10 pp.6]. China sent 320,000 volunteers to help Vietnam against the French and the American, of whom 1446 volunteers sacrificed [52]. Vietnam–China relations in the period of 1950–1975, especially in the period of 1950–1965, involved a complex interplay of ideology and national interest, and as "close as lips and teeth" or "comrade plus brother" [34] China's aid contributed a part to the victory of Vietnam over the French and the American [13].

It can be argued that there is little chance of it degenerating into Hobbesian one, and similarly for a Kantian into a Lockean because people have internalized the privilege of voting, they will fight hard to keep it, making regression too costly [39] which was

drawn from Western democratic societies is uncertainly right for all Asian societies. Vietnam–China relations in fact witnessed a regression which will be discussed below.

## 1978-Now: the Degeneration of Vietnam–China Relations

The Lockean culture replaced the Kantian culture in May 1978 and has dominated Vietnam–China relations up to now. Under Lockean culture:

- Vietnam and China recognized each other's sovereignty.
- Limited wars were launched for disputes settlement.
- Power balance took place.

### The Shift from Kantian Culture to Lockean Culture

The Lockean culture has officially dominated Vietnam-China relations since 1978. But before this, there had been a shift from the Kantian culture to the Lockean culture. This shift can be divided into three stages: 1968–1969, 1970–1972, and 1973–1978.

In the first stage, the shift got started with the split created by self-interests in 1968 [5]. First, in 1967, American President Richard Nixon pushed for a rapprochement with China by regarding China as an important factor in the world. China then showed its positive response by demanding the DRVN to launch only limited war against the USA to promote the burgeoning Sino-American rapprochement [6]. The DRVN therefore was suspicious about China's motive. The DRVN then still launched three full-scale offensive wars against the USA from January to September of 1968 which made China dissatisfied. After 1968, the DRVN tended to have peace talks directly with the USA despite China's strong protest [24]. Also in 1968, the power competition for hegemony in the Communist bloc between China and the USSR became more fierce. For this, the PRC wanted the DRVN to support it by reducing ties with the USSR, but the DRVN decided to play a neutral role which also made China uncomfortable. Though, the external restraint (threat from the USA) and the self-restraint promoted by Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were strong enough to protect their friendship. The split developed into conflict in the second stage due to two main factors: (1) Le Duan, a pro-Soviet [6], came to power after the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969 which strongly reduced the DRVN's self-restraint; (2) the DRVN represented Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and then the USA's strong attacks on the DRVN in late 1972 as the betrayal of China [9]. Though the USA's threat and China's self-restraint successfully prevented the Lockean culture from dominating Vietnam–China relations, the third stage got started in early 1973 by the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam (shortened as "Paris Agreement"). In January 1973, the Paris Agreement was signed by the DRVN and the USA which officially ended the Vietnam–US war. The DRVN's sovereignty was recognized by the USA which made it feel less anxious for security. After the Paris Agreement, the DRVN claimed sovereignty over the Paracel Islands (Hoang Sa) and the Spratly Islands (Truong Sa) in the South China Sea according to the 1887 Treaty which had been signed by the French colonialists and the Chinese Qing empire in 1887, known in French as "*Convention relative à la*

*délimitation de la frontière entre la Chine et le Tonkin*". In 1974, China attacked and occupied the Paracel Islands governed by the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) who had lost the USA's support. China then claimed sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands which started territorial disputes between Vietnam and China. Though, the threat from the RVN to the DRVN and the self-restraint of China promoted by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai maintained their Kantian culture. The situation changed after the DRVN reunified Vietnam in April 1975 and then Deng Xiaoping came to power after the death of Zhou Enlai and then Mao Zedong in 1976 which led to the power struggle in Chinese leadership [6]. There was not any restraint to them, but the Lockean culture only replaced the Kantian culture when Vietnam and China saw each other as threat to their security, and with violent identity China decided to use violence against Vietnam. Since 1977, China used Cambodia as a main instrument to contain Vietnam [6]. Vietnam accused China of being expansionist and hegemonic [9]. With China's support, Khmer Rouge troops repeatedly invaded Vietnam. In Vietnamese's eyes, China was a serious threat to Vietnam's security. Vietnam, on the one hand, moved closer to the USSR, who even had planned to make a preemptive atomic bomb attack on China [3], to balance China, on the other hand, made an effort to strengthen solidarity as well as its leadership position in Indo-China for its security [21]. These two factors made China feel threatened. China then accused Vietnam of being a small hegemonic [6]. In May 1978, Chinese troops started to violate Vietnam's land border and then China cut off its aids to Vietnam in July 1978. The Kantian culture officially changed into the Lockean culture. Vietnam and China then have engaged in power competition.

### **Vietnam–China Rivalry**

In late 1978, with the USSR's support, to reduce Chinese threat, Vietnam attacked Cambodia and then established a new Cambodian government in early 1979, which completely eliminated China's influence in Cambodia. Rivalry means limitation rather than exclusion of violence for dispute settlement. To force Vietnam to change its behavior, China launched a limited war (called the Border war by the Vietnam and the Defensive war by the China) against Vietnam on February 17, 1979, to "punish Vietnam" or "teach Vietnam a lesson" [51]. The 1979 Vietnam–China war broke their official relations until 1991. In this period, Cambodia and the South China Sea were two main disputes between Vietnam and China. With superior military capability, China launched maritime war against Vietnam in 1988, "PLAN ships clearly overpowered Vietnamese forces, sinking all Vietnamese ships within half an hour and killing 74 Vietnamese lives. As the result of the victory, China occupied six reefs and atolls in the Spratly group by the end of 1988" [18 pp.154].

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the late disintegration of the USSR, which led to the breakdown of the Kantian culture of the Communist bloc, made Vietnam and China feel threatened directly by Western Capitalism. This threat increased the extent to which Vietnam and China shared a common fate. There was a positive identification in which Vietnam and China conceived of each other as an extension of themselves. The collective identity therefore was formed. Vietnam–China diplomatic relations were officially restored in 1991. They then have had a lot of positive moves such as signing cooperation agreements in all important fields,

peacefully settling land border and Tonkin Gulf disputes, and committing to settle the South China Sea dispute peacefully in 2011. Though, with hegemonic and expansionist identities, China has been looking for hegemony in Asia in short term and then in the world in the long term [33]. For these purposes, China, on the one hand, has tried to “integrate neighboring countries into a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations” [31] and to “keep Hanoi within its own sphere of influence” [12], on the other hand, officially submitted a controversial map to the UN Secretary General containing the “nine-dash” line “covering an estimated 80 per cent or more of the maritime area. The claims appeared to have little basis in international law” [35] and then was confirmed illegal by the judgment of the international tribunal in The Hague in 2016, but China has maintained its view of “everyone except China are baseless legally” [19]. With superior military capability, China has been acting more and more aggressively and repeatedly violated Vietnam’s territorial waters in the South China Sea [30]. China’s 2014 violation of Vietnam’s territorial waters is a typical example in the twenty-first century. In early 2020, China established two new districts belonging to Sansha city, “the expansion of China’s South China Sea administration” [14], which covers islands claimed sovereignty and occupied by Vietnam. All of these have been seriously threatening Vietnam. With indomitable identity, “most nations are reluctant to antagonise Beijing because of its economic power but Hanoi, however, appears committed to confronting Beijing” [4].

### **Power Balance and Security Dilemma**

Under the Lockean culture, Vietnam and China have taken very different approaches to advance their respective claims [7]. They have shown their determination and will in the South China Sea dispute issue. China said it would peacefully solve the South China Sea dispute issue, but under the Lockean culture, limited military solution is accepted to gain advantage over rival. History indicated that with superior military capability China had solved disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines by force in 1974, 1988, 1995, and 2012. Therefore, China’s militarization on artificial islands that has started since 2013, as Joseph Dunford remarked, “had achieved the military capability China required of them” [29], actually has created a big threat to Vietnam. Due to military capability asymmetry, Vietnam had to try to balance China by buying more weapons, applying strategic policy of multilateralization and internationalize in South China Sea dispute issues, and strengthening ties with China’s rivals as the USA, Japan, and India which in turn encouraged China’s militarization. As a consequence, the Vietnam–China security dilemma was formed.

### **Conclusion**

This essay chronologically tested the structures (cultures) of Vietnam–China relations from beginning to the present by using the patterns of interaction between Vietnam and China under three cultures developed in Alexander Wendt’s theory. The results indicated that Vietnam–China relations have experienced all cultures: the Hobbesian, the Lockean, and the Kantian. Before 1164, the Hobbesian culture dominated Vietnam–China relations because in this period China did not recognize Vietnam as

a sovereign state and, for this reason, tried to conquer Vietnam by unlimited war. Vietnam by all means fought against China. Military capability was a crucial factor. From 1164 to 1858, there was an alternation between the Lockean culture and the Hobbesian culture. Because in this period, China sometimes recognized Vietnam's sovereignty, there was war but without threat of "kill or be killed." Sometimes, China did not recognize Vietnam as a sovereign state, and so it tried to kill Vietnam by unlimited war. The Kantian culture dominated Vietnam–China relations from 1950 to July 1978. In this period, Vietnam and China fought as a security team and gave mutual aids. Since July 1978, the Lockean culture replaced the Kantian culture. Vietnam and China recognized each other's sovereignty but they have engaged in power competition. There were limited wars launched by China to change Vietnam's behavior and property.

It is clear from my essay that Wendt's structural hypothesis is relevant for the study in both theory and practice. Theoretically, Wendt's structural hypothesis, though drawn from Western society, is suitable for interpreting structures of Vietnam–China relations in different stages. And in my view, it is also suitable for interpreting the relations between other Asian countries. However, as this essay indicated, Vietnam–China relations witnessed several structural transitions, including positive transitions (from the Hobbesian to the Lockean culture and from the Lockean culture to the Kantian culture) and the negative transitions (from the Kantian culture to the Lockean culture) that were not interpreted fully by this hypothesis. This is the drawback of this hypothesis.

Practically, by employing Wendt's structural hypothesis to interpret Vietnam–China relations, the essay helps us understand the complexity of Vietnam–China relations. The essay, to a certain extent, provides some suggestions on how to settle issues of Vietnam–China relations. However, it would be better if structural transitions of Vietnam–China relations were fully discussed. This should be the topic for a future research.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

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