

The Tale of the Conqueror: Historical Memory and Its Impact on Sino-Vietnamese Relations

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“The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history.”

Mao Zedong

“Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.”

Ho Chi Minh

Introduction

A respected Vietnamese historian, Duong Trang Quoc, once said, “China thinks it is at the center. The conqueror. It wants to turn everybody else into its subordinates.”¹ This is the tale of the conqueror that Vietnam tells about its northern neighbor; it is a cornerstone of the small Southeast Asian country’s collective memory, bolstered by a strong sense of history that claims not decades of conflict with China, but *centuries*, even millennia. It is also a dominant reason why relations between the two have long suffered; there is a surfeit of historical memory that each country carries into the relationship, predisposing them to conflict. As

¹ Michael Sullivan, “Ask the Vietnamese About War, and They Think China, Not the U.S.,” NPR, 2015.

Duong says, “the Vietnamese have had too much experience with the Chinese. The Vietnamese can’t trust the Chinese. We’ve had too much practice.”² When asking why relations are so adversarial, there is little better answer than the full breadth of history that is woven into each of their interactions.

China, Vietnam, and their relationship with each other is a fantastic case study for how historical memory can play a key role in politics, particularly given the advent of China’s rise. While China does claim to seek a peaceful rise, this has not assured those skeptical of the Asian power, especially ones historically primed to be suspicious, like Vietnam. Thus, examining the roots of Sino-Vietnamese relations’ long-standing difficulty can provide valuable lessons for the Southeast Asian conflicts to come. My hypothesis is that Sino-Vietnamese relations are so difficult because of historical memories which influence them both and how Chinese methods of influence only serve to deepen Vietnam’s historical prejudice towards China. Throughout this paper, I will examine this hypothesis through the historical memory paradigms of both China and Vietnam, their inability to smoothly incorporate the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war into their state narratives, and how the South China Sea is a hotbed of historical tension waiting to flare up.

Variables and Definitions

Before the paper begins, each variable of the hypothesis should be explicitly defined since notions of history, influence, and relations have many definitions. For historical memory, I will be using the research of Zheng Wang, a foremost scholar in the field. He states in his article “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China” that historical memory is a ‘historical myth’ that is “at the root of conflicts, prejudice, nationalism, and cultural identities.”³ Historical memory is a collective memory that is formed and negotiated by a society, often in conversation with the political needs of that society at the time. Thus, through the lens of collective memory, “the past is reconstructed with regard to the

² Sullivan, “Ask the Vietnamese About War.”

³ Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008), 783–806: 785.

concerns and needs of the present.”⁴ This appears to suggest that historical memory is inherently constructivist and therefore created by elites of the state, but Wang contends that memory can also be the result of “primordial ties of blood, kinship, language, and common history.”⁵ The two lenses need not be mutually exclusive, but instead laid on top of each other, intermingling and at times even challenging each other. Societies create themselves from the memories of their citizens as well as the curated narrative put forward by the state.

Indeed, historical memory is not objective at all, but subject to the subjective needs, be they elite or everyman, of the present. Moreover, it consists of a “‘chosen trauma’ (the horrors of the past that cast shadows onto the future) and a ‘chosen glory’ (myths about a glorious future, often seen as a reenactment of a glorious past).”⁶ These two halves help to visualize how historical memory becomes a key factor in society. However, it should be mentioned that memory studies have not been explicitly applied to the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in a meaningful way, but this is no surprise, since historical memory in international relations remains a developing field.⁷ This paper, through its operationalization of historical memory as a variable, hopes to encourage further discussion.

Then, there is the concept of influence. I take my definition from Evelyn Goh’s work, “The Modes of China’s Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia.” In it, she defines “influence [as] the act of modifying or otherwise having an impact upon another actor’s preferences or behavior in favor of one’s own aims.”⁸ China’s method of influence has three main categories: preference multiplier, where preferences are aligned, often in the economic sense; persuasion, wherein preexisting preferences are debated as China attempts to sway a country’s position; and ability to prevail, which occurs when China possesses opposing preferences with a certain country.⁹ The tools that China uses to meet its influence

⁴ Wang, “National Humiliation,” 785-6.

⁵ Ibid., 785

⁶ Ibid., 785.

⁷ Ibid., 784.

⁸ Evelyn Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia,” *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 (2014), 825–48: 824.

⁹ Ibid., 827.

goals (namely coercion, inducement, and persuasion) are prevalent in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship,¹⁰ though they usually fail to achieve their ends.

Possible Explanations: Asymmetry or Escape

Though the Sino-Vietnamese relationship offers many meditations on the topic of historical memory and influence, not every scholar attributes the issues between the two countries to the burden of memory. Rather, the prevailing Western literature on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, sparse though it is, often states that the imbalance between the two emanates from asymmetry, not instilled collective consciousness. Asymmetry is characterized by Brantly Womack, a noted American political observer of China, as “the larger power always looms more importantly to the weaker than the reverse... weaker states are ‘prone to paranoia.’ Conversely, the stronger power is less attentive to the details of the bilateral relationship with a weaker state. These contrasting views often lead to misperception.”¹¹ This concept of asymmetry is even hinted at in Goh’s work when she comments that “in contrast to China’s relations with the major Asian powers, Sino-Southeast Asian relationships are more asymmetrical, because many of these states are smaller, less developed, and more dependent upon China.”¹² It is from this state that tension in the relationship arises, but that tension does not always spark hostilities.

In fact, Carlyle Thayer in his article, “Vietnam and Rising China: The Structural Dynamics of Mature Asymmetry,” contends that China and Vietnam are poised to avoid outright military conflict because they have moved from a period of ‘hostile asymmetry’ to ‘mature asymmetry.’¹³ Mature asymmetry is when the power imbalance, like that observed in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, is perceived as ‘normal’ and maintained through various diplomatic means.¹⁴ Thayer is the proponent of a school of thought which claims that a state of mature asymmetry is simply how Sino-Vietnamese relations function and how, if they are both

¹⁰ Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 828.

¹¹ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam and Rising China: The Structural Dynamics of Mature Asymmetry,” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2010, 392–409: 392.

¹² Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 827.

¹³ Thayer, “Vietnam and Rising China,” 394.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 393.

smart, they will both continue to act within. He states that “both have too much at stake to allow the present period of mature asymmetry to revert to hostile asymmetry. For Vietnam, the weaker party, the ‘tyranny of geography’ dictates that it judiciously apply the levers of cooperation and struggle through various party, state, military, and multilateral structures in order to manage its relations with China under conditions of mature asymmetry.”¹⁵ Simply put, Vietnam has too much to lose, so it will not push China too far or allow relations to break down too much. This has historically been the conclusion of political theorists when contemplating the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

However, there is a second school of thought which has become more popular recently. It holds that Sino-Vietnamese relations are more fragile than they seem, and, in fact, mature asymmetry cannot be sustainably maintained. This perspective finds voice in Huong Lee Thu, who wrote that while Vietnam has endeavored to ‘compartmentalize’ its disputes with China over maritime interests and land borders so that the two countries can engage in other areas like economic development, this position has grown increasingly difficult to uphold.¹⁶ The quarrel over the South China Sea has begun to dominate the relations of the two, eliminating the policy of compartmentalization that had worked so well.¹⁷ The viewpoint professed by Thu has the benefit of public opinion as well, since anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam has spawned the so-called *Thoát Trung* or Escape from China movement, which is a fixture in modern Vietnamese political discourse.¹⁸ This attitude is also reflected in a study by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in 2020 which found that 88.2% of Vietnamese respondents chose “increased military tensions arising from flashpoints such as the South China Sea as their highest security priority.”¹⁹ Though asymmetry can be stable, facts like this offer the crucial observation that it is not the reality for the Sino-

¹⁵ Thayer, “Vietnam and Rising China,” 406.

¹⁶ Huong Lee Thu, “Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nguyen Manh Hung, “Vietnam in 2017: Power Consolidation, Domestic Reforms, and Coping with New Geopolitical Challenges,” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2018, 407–28: 424.

¹⁹ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, “The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report,” ASEAN Studies Centre, 2020: 7.

Vietnamese relationship at the moment. It is this school of thought which points out the weakness of asymmetry that my paper will seek to add to via the incorporation of historical memory as a valuable variable.

Whose Memory?

In order for the confluence of asymmetry, relations, historical memory, and influence in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship to be considered, the content of the collective memory which binds each country together should be discussed. Sino-Vietnamese history reaches back centuries; modern versions of their history usually begin with, as the Vietnamese call it, “the advent of national independence (in 938)” when the Vietnamese broke away from China (which had ruled them since 179 BCE) to become their own country.²⁰ For Vietnam, the historical narrative has always been one of ‘repeated wars,’ many of them involving China.²¹ The Vietnamese insist that their national consciousness has taken root as a direct *result* of foreign invasion and the need for independence.²² This historical evidence often drives Vietnamese collective memory to perceive China as a quintessential enemy. Tellingly, in the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute study, absolutely no Vietnamese respondents said that their “country’s political culture and worldview are compatible with China’s” or that they “respect China and admire its civilisation and culture.”²³ It was the only country surveyed that did not agree with these statements in any amount. In return, the Chinese government and state media has claimed Vietnam is a ‘troublemaker.’²⁴

China has long harbored a sense of cultural superiority towards its southern counterpart that dominates the relationship.²⁵ Though communist ideology did unite them for a time, Sino-Vietnamese insistence that they are “good neighbors, good

²⁰ Phạm Minh Hạc, *Vietnam’s Education: The Current Position and Future Prospects*, (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1998): 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

²² *Ibid.*, vii.

²³ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, “The State of Southeast Asia,” 44.

²⁴ Thu, “Rough Waters Ahead.”

²⁵ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 30.

comrades, good friends, and good partners” to each other has often been an empty sentiment.²⁶ This embattled history demonstrates how, of all the categories of influence available to China, it must often use ability to prevail when interacting with Vietnam. In this category, China attempts to influence countries to change their political preferences and goals because they conflict with its own. This typically means taking a ‘tough stance’ that results in military stand-offs and tense, terse political exchanges.²⁷ However, Goh notes in her piece that ability to prevail is also China’s least successful strategy of influence due to its confrontational nature.²⁸ Thus, as a result of their historical memories of conflict and struggle, both China and Vietnam find that this tactic of ability to prevail, with all its coercion and inducement, does more harm than good.

The Chinese Approach: Changing the Narrative

The Chinese approach to historical memory went through a massive shift in recent history that has only served to cement their political tactics of influence. In 1991, as a result of the Soviet Union’s breakup and the demonstrated fallibility of the communist historical mythos as well as lingering animosity emanating from the Chinese Communist Party’s brutal repression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democratic movement,²⁹ a new narrative had to be drafted in order to validate the CCP. No longer could it be a ‘class struggle’ narrative; it was now a ‘patriotic’ one.³⁰ In addition, the CCP began to emphasize that it was not a ‘victor’ that had won its wars easily, but an avatar of all China, which was itself a ‘victim,’ demoralized by the century of humiliation (1839-1949).³¹ This was a radical reimagining of how Chinese history should be viewed and it was an immense undertaking. A key element of this reorientation was the modification of the state education system. This was a natural step to take since education is a time-honored

²⁶ Thu, “Rough Waters Ahead.”

²⁷ Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 844.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 846.

²⁹ Alessandro Uras, “The South China Sea and the Building of a National Maritime Culture: A New Chinese Province in the Making,” *Asian Survey* 57, no. 6 (2017), 1008–31: 1014.

³⁰ Wang, “National Humiliation,” 791.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 789, 792.

method of encouraging the public to incorporate a state's 'essential values.'³² It teaches a new generation how to behave and approach situations, often using the history of the country as a guiding force. Its textbooks 'chronicle relations with others' as much as they describe internal history,³³ so it is an essential progenitor of historical memory that has deep political ramifications. Part and parcel with the redesign of textbooks was the cultivation of 'patriotic education bases,' museums and public monuments meant to educate the Chinese people on events that contribute somehow to the chosen glory or trauma of the state.³⁴ That historical memory was inherently patriotic and deeply nationalist under China's new system.³⁵ By extensively describing the experience of China under Western and Japanese imperialism and playing into the concept of chosen trauma, the patriotic education system reconditioned children to see the CCP as identifiable with China as a whole and therefore take on an identity as a sympathetic victim that should not be questioned.³⁶ Thus, uprisings like Tiananmen Square at home and the ones abroad which toppled the Soviet system would be forestalled before their leaders even grew up.

The other half of historical memory that China encouraged in its education, the chosen glory element, envisioned a China in the past, one which was a global power and will be again. The tributary system, which China used to uphold strict regional order for thousands of years by requiring neighbors (who could more accurately be termed vassals) to show hierarchical deference to the 'center' of the system, China, is the glorious historical memory that has proven most enthralling.³⁷ It has encouraged the Chinese populace to support the CCP as they continue to extend China's regional reach into the South China Sea, to commit human rights atrocities in Xinjiang, and to challenge the status quo of the world. Historical memory is intoxicating. When it is used effectively, a collective consciousness can give the government unprecedented power. This is part of why it is a core element of nationalism; it

³² Wang, "National Humiliation," 786.

³³ *Ibid.*, 787.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 794.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 790.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 791.

³⁷ Michael Schuman, "China's Inexorable Rise to Superpower Is History Repeating Itself," Bloomberg, 2020.

binds a group together like no other as they devote themselves to their perceptions of particular chosen traumas and glories. However, this rise in state-encouraged nationalism is also dangerous, because while it allows “authorities to consolidate its power and promote political solidarity,” the state also struggles at times “to retain control over the nationalist discourse.”³⁸ Thus, the CCP has often found itself at the whim of ‘a more demanding citizenry’ that calls on the government to be increasingly ‘assertive.’³⁹ Historical memory can be a political motivator all its own, not just a tool. A further complication remains in how China does not always perceive how its actions will be interpreted outside its own borders. For instance, though it views the return to the tributary system to be a good thing, as China exerts influence in the manner Goh outlines and in the pursuit of its own ends, it invokes intense memories of past confrontations that leave Vietnam continually assured that the moniker of ‘conqueror’ is well earned.

The Vietnamese Approach: Generational Traumas

Historically resonant memories are embedded in Vietnamese collective consciousness by using the same techniques as China. The Vietnamese educational system is a mirror of the Chinese one. Like China, Vietnam’s government controls and directs its educational system.⁴⁰ There was a similar dramatic shift in 1991 when all students began to be taught from “a single program and with a single set of textbooks.”⁴¹ However, the essential core of Vietnamese history education has long remained the same, as is outlined by a survey of the Vietnamese education system authored by Phạm Minh Hạc in 1998 after his stint as the Minister of Education of Vietnam, called *Vietnam’s Education: The Current Education and Future Prospects*. A cornerstone of the attitudes that the Vietnamese government wished to promote in its people was always ‘national and traditional values,’⁴² the greatest of these being “patriotism (loyalty to the country, piety to the people), national spirit and national pride... a high will of self-reliance, independence,

³⁸ Wang, “National Humiliation,” 800.

³⁹ Uras, “The South China Sea,” 1030.

⁴⁰ Phạm Minh Hạc, *Vietnam’s Education*, 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ix.

sovereignty, integration without merging, self-development.”⁴³ It is imperative that every secondary student be able “to understand the history of national foundation and defense, the national and cultural identity, the fine traditions of the nation and the revolution.”⁴⁴ Those ‘fine traditions’ often revolve around resistance, independence, and freedom. Chosen trauma and glory go hand in hand; the trauma is the invasion of foreigners, while the glory is the successful banishment of those would-be conquerors.

Outside of schooling, communal commemorative narratives often involve some element of heroism to further tie the chosen trauma and glory together. An emphasis on heroism is a long-standing tradition of Vietnamese history; specific figures, like the Trung Sisters (who fought against Chinese domination in 40 CE) or Ho Chi Minh himself, are practically deified for the patriotism they exhibit in their fight for independence from foreign incursion.⁴⁵ The memory of these heroes has immense power to sway public perception on an issue. For example, Ho Chi Minh, though communist like his Chinese counterparts, “...never gave up on the idea that China posed a potential threat to Vietnam’s independence and freedom.”⁴⁶ Thus, he has allowed the citizens of Vietnam to remember him fondly and be suspicious of China all at once. The historical memories do not clash but support each other. Heroes, through their culturally resonant narratives, pave the way for this possibility.

Vietnam is an example of how a historical memory intensifies over time with the repeated application of similar events, like heroes resisting subjugation, with all its different faces, over the millennia. Vietnamese history is truly a recitation of foreign invasions, and they know it; it has become a key element of their cultural identity, deeper than communist ideology or other momentary political movements. It is their shared trauma, never far from their minds. In the 1990s, twenty percent of all foreign imported books were about history; of these, many were about war, particularly with China (contrast the 17 books on China with the 7

⁴³ Phạm Minh Hạc, *Vietnam’s Education*, 199.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁵ Edyta Roszko, “Commemoration and the State: Memory and Legitimacy in Vietnam,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, no. 1 (2010), 1–28; 5, 17.

⁴⁶ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 16.

books on the American War).⁴⁷ Monuments express “...long-standing traditions of ‘protecting ancestral land’ dating back to the very origins of Vietnam.”⁴⁸ History has become a common defense for the Vietnamese collective consciousness to use, particularly when they feel threatened on the international stage. This comes as no surprise once one acknowledges that a traumatic event can be incorporated into group consciousness, creating a historical memory that fosters the “intergenerational transmission of historical enmity.”⁴⁹ This association is made stronger when the trauma is repeated, so a collective narrative begins to take root. Thus, as Vietnam continually pays homage to the traumas it has suffered under conquering aggression and deifies the glories of the heroes who resisted it, it ritually reincorporates the idea of resistance and the pursuit of independence at all costs. This becomes a potent historical memory that, when tapped into, can motivate the populace like nothing else.

The 1979 War: Memory Run Amok

The 1979 war and the sentiments its memory evokes in the citizenry is a case study in how both China and Vietnam are subject to the power of historical memory, even though it can at times prove inconvenient. The war, called variably the Third Indochina War or the Sino- Vietnamese conflict, though unremarked upon in most Western analysis of Southeast Asian recent history, is a powerful nexus for Sino-Vietnamese historical memory. In fact, the war was so impactful that it led to a protracted conflict; throughout the 1980s, the border of China and Vietnam saw many skirmishes as relations between the two countries suffered.⁵⁰ Relations were not normalized until 1991.⁵¹ It is both the Chinese military’s last great engagement and Vietnamese military’s last grand attempt to assert the country’s unified boundaries.

⁴⁷ David G. Marr, “History and Memory in Vietnam Today: The Journal ‘Xu’a & Nay,’” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000), 1–25: 1. N.b. The ‘American War’ is the Vietnamese term for what Americans call the ‘Vietnam War.’

⁴⁸ Roszko, “Commemoration and the State,” 2.

⁴⁹ Wang, “National Humiliation,” 785.

⁵⁰ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 141.

⁵¹ Thayer, “Vietnam and Rising China,” 392.

The war and its consequences are little mentioned in official Chinese or Vietnamese documents, but this actually belies its importance. For example, wars are faithfully remembered on their anniversaries in China. “The anti-Japanese war, the liberation war against the Nationalists, and the war assisting North Korea against America and its UN allies” are all commemorated, but not the 1979 war.⁵² It is, in fact, “the least commemorated and memorialized of all conflicts in modern Chinese history, mentioned only in terms of the bloodshed, loss, and suffering that it caused.”⁵³ It is not listed as having any kind of patriotic education base in China, as all the other wars do.⁵⁴ It therefore offers nothing to the narrative of chosen glory and likewise nothing to that of chosen trauma, since it is easy to cast China in the role of imperialist aggressor, not colonized victim. China, wary of Vietnam’s ‘imperial dreams’ to pursue hegemony in Southeast Asia,⁵⁵ undertook the 1979 war to “‘teach’ Hanoi to take Chinese warnings seriously or pay a heavy price.”⁵⁶ This sense of pedagogy taken to the point of violence pervades Sino-Vietnamese history and likely will continue to. It is even alluded to by Goh, who defines coercion, a tool of influence within the Chinese purview, as an “action designed to compel another actor to do something by credibly signaling the costly consequences of his failure to comply.”⁵⁷ It is the pedagogic, coercive history that the Vietnamese choose to remember best when considering the impact of China on their country, so it is the one that most directly informs their politics. In contrast, on the Chinese side, old fears can easily appear validated once more as Vietnam pursues its goals that are separate from China’s. CCP leaders believed in 1979 that letting Vietnam challenge it unfettered would deprive China of the ‘safe, reliable environment’ it needed to pursue the Four Modernizations.⁵⁸ As China now rises and seeks to reassert its historical control over Southeast Asia and as Vietnam continues to subvert that control, it is easy to see how military confrontation may occur, supported by the instilled memory of the 1979 war.

⁵² Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁴ Wang, “National Humiliation,” 796.

⁵⁵ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁷ Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 828.

⁵⁸ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 55.

The major obstacle to this caustic reassociation of the war with current conflicts is the behavior of the states themselves. As discussed, China has failed to incorporate the border disputes into their state narrative of victimization, so they have left the war unremarked upon. In turn, the elites of Vietnam have also tried to maintain historical distance, despite how easily the 1979 war fits into their own narrative of foreign incursion and the heroic repelling of it. Vietnamese scholars remain reticent to discuss the 1979 war publicly; commentary on it is noticeably absent from prominent publications.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in official Vietnamese documents, the war is not called the Third Indochina War or the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, but simply ‘the war to defend the border,’⁶⁰ a title chosen to be obliquely nondescript in order to avoid the political tension still surrounding the event. This lack of rapprochement on the subject of past wars is not the default in Vietnam; in fact, the United States and Vietnam have made reconciliation over the American War a key cornerstone of their path towards normalization since 1995,⁶¹ a feat all the more notable since the two have an obviously asymmetric relationship. The reason for this failure is simple: China and Vietnam have never been able to integrate their historical memories of the war in any meaningful sense, so they have both attempted to remove it from public discourse. There has simply been no opportunity for true, thoughtful reconciliation. The Soviet Union’s collapse was the major impetus behind Sino-Vietnamese normalization; with no clear communist ally to hedge against China with, Vietnam was forced to admit that it could not endure protracted military conflict for much longer.⁶²

However, the manner in which the war and its subsequent skirmishes ended does not lend itself naturally to long-term peaceable relations. Rather, the unceremonious end to hostilities after thirteen years has simply been laid into the foundation of Vietnamese historical memory, strengthening the sense of China as a natural enemy that is already so strong. Intriguingly, this has all developed without much elite support. Though collective memory has long been recognized as a tool for focusing public sentiment in

⁵⁹ Marr, “History and Memory in Vietnam Today,” 17.

⁶⁰ Phạm Minh Hạc, *Vietnam’s Education*, viii.

⁶¹ Le Hong Hiep, “US-Vietnam Relations: From Reconciliation to a Relationship of Substance,” *The Diplomat*, 2021.

⁶² Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 210.

Vietnam, its use is still subdued on the national level, particularly when discussing Sino-Vietnamese events, because of the state's 'self-consciousness' about its history and its capability.⁶³ Collective memory buttressed by history (real or imagined) is a powerful political weapon that can even harm the government that uses it; Vietnamese elites know this, so they hesitate to exercise its full reach. However, they cannot stop public opinion completely, so the everyday citizen remains steadfastly against China, seeking to escape it.⁶⁴ The specter of the 1979 war hangs over the Sino-Vietnamese relations, influencing it even as the two governments refuse to acknowledge it. It remains a painful reminder for both that while historical memory is influenced by the state, it is not wholly dictated by it.

The South China Sea: Inventing a History

A more recent conflict that has borne the weight of Sino-Vietnamese historical memory is the series of territorial disputes in the South China Sea over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. This geopolitical struggle has come to dominate Southeast Asian politics. In contrast with the 1979 war, in which memory developed irrespective of elite direction, the conflict in the South China Sea has been primarily motivated by Chinese elites who have chosen to emphasize that the sea is a part of China's chosen glory. A reclamation of the South China Sea has been folded into the state mandate that Chinese citizens must achieve "the great revitalization of the Chinese nation."⁶⁵ The time that China is referencing with its claims of 'revitalization' is one when "...the Chinese Empire viewed itself as the center of a universal state which 'oversaw a hierarchy of tributary states.'"⁶⁶ The equation is simple: if China wants a return to the glory days of the tributary system, it needs to enact broad influence over the South China Sea.

However, as previously discussed, not many Southeast Asian countries are keen to return to this imperial vision. For them, it can easily be remembered as less of a golden age and more as an era of ruthless control. Still, China will not abate in its insistence.

⁶³ Roszko, "Commemoration and the State," 2-3.

⁶⁴ Sullivan, "Ask the Vietnamese About the War."

⁶⁵ Uras, "The South China Sea," 1016.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1019.

The islands of the South China Sea have been folded into China's narrative of recovery from the trauma of the anti-Japanese war since 1951, when Minister Zhou Enlai claimed that "The Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands are inherently Chinese territory, just like the whole of the Pratas Islands and Macclesfield Bank. They fell during the war of aggression waged by Japanese imperialists but were fully recovered by the then Chinese Government upon Japan's surrender."⁶⁷ Through claims like these, the South China Sea has been successfully installed as a remedy to China's chosen trauma. It has been recast as a territory lost during the century of humiliation that must be returned. China cannot be whole and recovered from its losses without it.

The sea also has a distinct chosen glory aspect to it. In discussions on the dispute, China will often pull from the history of Zheng He, an early fifteenth century admiral who made historic voyages across the world, to claim a maritime culture.⁶⁸ However, Zheng He's journeys were more aberration than norm in the history of China, for "the eunuch admiral's expeditions were China's only attempt at sea power..."⁶⁹ However, Zheng He is a powerful and politically innovative symbol for China to cultivate, since his voyages were not made in the spirit of colonization, but peaceful exchange and 'harmony.'⁷⁰ Thus, Zheng He fits nicely into the CCP's chosen glory of a harmonious, powerful China long past that is going to come again as China reestablishes itself on the world stage. The narrative is clear: the character of Chinese maritime influence is pacific, not rapacious. The fact that Zheng He is an outlier and not the standard of Chinese maritime history does not matter. This is an important point: not every historical memory must be entirely truthful. Sometimes, it is assembled from half-truth and legend, collated for a specific purpose. This purpose is usually meant to encourage group cohesion and 'galvanize' the people to support a political end,⁷¹ which is exactly the process occurring in the midst of the very real conflicts in the South China Sea.

For Vietnam, the South China Sea has become a geopolitical dilemma that brings forth questions of national defense,

⁶⁷ Uras, "The South China Sea," 1020.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1009.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1012.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1026.

⁷¹ Wang, "National Humiliation," 787.

strategy, and the ever-present influence of historical memory. Vietnam has used a ‘hedging’ strategy against China since the Cold War, but its ability to use other international actors, like the United States, to keep China at bay has waned.⁷² The United States has been noticeably distracted and difficult to predict since President Trump’s election in 2016, so Vietnam has been forced to rely on itself more than ever, an uncomfortable position for it.⁷³ Concerns over Chinese expansion can no longer be deferred. Vietnam’s strategy of hedging has transformed into one of ‘cooperating and struggling.’⁷⁴ Though Vietnamese elites remain wary of challenging China outright, they have seen their options to counter China rapidly decrease. This entire situation is complicated by how there is precedence for a maritime conflict; in 1988, during the last period of intense Sino-Vietnamese confrontation, there was a bloody battle over the Gac Ma Reef in the South China Sea, resulting in dozens of Vietnamese casualties.⁷⁵ This remains one of the few times China has physically clashed with a country over the South China Sea dispute and the bitter taste of it lingers in Vietnamese mouths.

Moreover, from Vietnam’s perspective, the islands of the South China Sea have fallen under its purview since their exploration by the Vietnamese in the sixteenth century; their presence on the islands was rudely interrupted by French colonization, during which time China began to show interest.⁷⁶ Indeed, this is the period in which China experiences its first formal act of sovereignty over the islands; in 1876, China’s ambassador to the UK marked the Paracels islands as within Chinese territory.⁷⁷ It is easy to see how, under this historical narrative, Vietnam has come to stringently oppose China’s claims of sovereignty. To the Vietnamese, the Chinese moved in while Vietnam was weak to wrest control of the islands from them; the tale of the conqueror writes itself.

Not only has the South China Sea come to consume Vietnamese political discourse on China, but also public perception. When asked how China could improve its standing with Vietnam,

⁷² Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 841.

⁷³ Hung, “Vietnam in 2017,” 418.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 423.

⁷⁵ Thu, “Rough Waters Ahead.”

⁷⁶ Roszko, “Commemoration and the State,” 9.

⁷⁷ Uras, “The South China Sea,” 1020.

the Vietnamese respondents in the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute study stated that two policies should be enforced: first, “China should resolve all territorial and maritime disputes with regional states peacefully in accordance with international law,” and second, “China should respect my country’s sovereignty and not constrain my country’s foreign policy choices.”⁷⁸ Obviously, China’s current implementation of ability to prevail (seen in weeklong stand-offs between Vietnamese and Chinese crafts in disputed areas in 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2019),⁷⁹ meant to press Vietnam to reconsider its choices by taking a hard line on territorial conflicts, has in reality only deepened opposition to China on the issue. Vo Cao Loi, a Vietnamese citizen living in Đà Nẵng on the Vietnamese coast, had these succinct words to say on the South China Sea controversy, “They want to spread their control. They will never give back what they took. Vietnam wants to take it back, but the Chinese are strong. So our struggle will last a long time. How long? I can’t tell.”⁸⁰ Indeed, in the South China Sea, there is perhaps no time in which China has failed more to alter a state’s behavior; instead, it has played into the narrative written for it by Vietnam, because the tactics of ability to prevail can be easily perceived as more evidence of the tale of the conqueror, so that ordinary citizens like Vo Cao Loi and even hesitant Vietnamese politicians are encouraged to more strongly oppose Chinese objectives.

Conclusion

No history is independent or self-contained. Every country builds its identity from historical memory that is itself formed from interactions with other countries as much as it is gleaned from the country’s essential values. In China, that memory is built upon a foundation of a fondly remembered imperial past and a carefully vilified era of victimization. In Vietnam, it is constructed from a long history of foreign incursion resisted and the ever-present tale of the conqueror. However, historical memory is not inescapable, though the 1979 war demonstrates how embedded it can become; memory can be manipulated, twisted by elites to meet their political goals, as we have seen with the South China Sea disputes.

⁷⁸ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, “The State of Southeast Asia,” 38.

⁷⁹ Goh, “The Modes of China’s Influence,” 844.

⁸⁰ Sullivan, “Ask the Vietnamese About the War.”

Therefore, if China and Vietnam did recognize how their historical memories encourage conflict and not reconciliation, there might be hope for the two to reconfigure their collective thinking to allow for a truly amicable relationship not based on platitudes, but this has not been the case. The modes of influence which China uses to achieve its ends serve only to remind Vietnam of China's worst characteristics; cooperation is stifled because of an intimate association with history in every one of their interactions. The past complicates the future, since they have not truly changed their behavior towards each other, not after independence in 938, the advent of colonialism, the incorporation of communist philosophy, or the 1979 war. Historical memory remains a guiding force, now often institutionalized by the state in monuments, textbooks, and grandiose commemoration. It has grown so powerful that it sometimes runs amok, detached from the elites that sought to control it. It is a fickle political tool, but the pervasive tale of the conqueror that dictates the rhythms of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship reveals just how powerful it is.

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