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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS
AT THE BORDER OF
CHINA AND VIETNAM

An Introduction

Brantly Womack

The geographic differentiation of economic interests within states with regard to international trade has been a neglected object of study in international political economy. The neglect is probably due to the fact that regions have become less distinct and less salient in developed countries, so the focus in this field is on products rather than places. Yet, location is a basic dimension of economic activity, and if any region can lay claim to a special and characteristic situation concerning international trade, it would be a region contiguous to a neighboring state. The three articles that follow present a sustained study of the Sino-Vietnamese border region over the past 55 years. Together, they represent a “best case” for the significance of border studies, because it is difficult to deny the special role that this region has played in one of the most intense and volatile bilateral relations in Asia.

A key characteristic of border areas is that they are the places where non-hostile international relations most easily yield a thick web of relationships that are international even if the parties concerned are only a few kilometers apart and the merchandise exchanged is only a basketful of local produce. These are the places for which the closest city may be in a different country, and where cross-border paths may be the most natural and convenient ways to market. If one adds to the natural web of local relationships the special opportunities presented by differentials of two national economies, then what appears at the national level to be an abstract expression of the political

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will—international relations—is realized at the border as the relatively spontaneous emergence of particular connections that are either indifferent to nationality or aim at mutual opportunities created by all manner of national differences. These international relationships are the subject of our study.

The border between China and Vietnam (see Map 1) provides a remarkable spectrum of border activities in different policy environments. It has also been an important, though not determining, element in bilateral relations. In the past half-century, the border has been the scene of revolutionary collaboration, national alliance, armed hostility, and normalization. In order, the border region has been vital to the revolution and the defensive geography of North Vietnam, and then border violations became the official casus belli in 1979 and the venue of brief but bloody and destructive war. With normalization in 1991, the border regions of both countries have responded vigorously to new economic opportunities.

The border regions have endured these wild rides on the end of the pendulum of Sino-Vietnamese relations despite the fact that the demarcation of the border itself has been rather stable for the past thousand years. Although details of the demarcation have been contested, especially from the 1970s to the present, there are no significant counterclaims of population (like the European disputes over Alsace and Lorraine or the Sudetenland), no feeling that the entire location of the border is illegitimate (as Pol Pot felt about "Lower Cambodia," also known as southern Vietnam) nor are there stirrings of independence among the many cross-border ethnic minorities. It is not surprising, therefore, that China and Vietnam wrapped up a final agreement on the border on December 30, 1999, almost exactly 50 years after the establishment of relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

Despite the stability of the border's location, however, cross-border influence has been strong and usually reflected the existing preponderance of power. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Chinese irregulars known as the Black Flags played an important role in resistance to the French in northern Viet-

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2. In 1978 there were severe conflicts over the treatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and hundreds of thousands were forced across the border into China, but the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese is in the south rather than on the border. See Paomin Chang, Beijing, Hanoi, and the Overseas Chinese (Berkeley: University of California, Center for Chinese Studies, 1982).

3. The largest cross-border minority is the Zhuang, but there is little cooperation between the Zhuang in Yunnan and those in Guangxi, let alone across the border with related groups in Vietnam and Laos. See Katherine Kaup, Creating the Zhuang (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000).
nam, backed up by the regular Chinese military. One of the precipitating crises of the Sino-French War of 1885 was a French demand that Chinese forces vacate the Vietnamese border town of Lang Son. After the French colonization of Vietnam, the direction of influence swung the other way. The French built the Haiphong-Kunming railroad in 1910 to facilitate their penetration of southern China. Catholic churches and French political and economic outposts sprouted throughout the Chinese side of the border region. As Graham Peck observed in his classic 1937 travelogue Through China's Wall, the social pinnacle occupied by British jockey clubs in coastal cities of China was taken in Kunming by the Cercle Sportif de Yunnan-fu, and the only foreigners who weren't French were a few desultory missionaries. The Japanese inherited the French influence. Their surrender in 1945 occasioned a confusing situation of a brief, U.N.-sanctioned occupation of northern Vietnam by the Chinese Guomindang (GMD) army while the Chinese communists were growing stronger in Guangxi. The Viet Minh declared independence and the French attempted to reestablish their control. It is at this point that the narrative of the three articles presented here begins.
Christopher Goscha’s article details the relationships between China and the Vietnamese revolution during the late 1940s. Besides giving a detailed account of the multifaceted relationship between the Viet Minh in their border area bases and both the GMD and the Chinese Communists, he presents a comprehensive picture of other frontiers between China and Vietnam. He describes the relationship between Chinese coastal traders and the Viet Minh in central Vietnam, and also the contributions to the revolution of ethnic Chinese in southern Vietnam and Cambodia. Goscha’s research demonstrates the continuity between traditional patterns of contact and patterns of revolutionary support. In the process, he illustrates the importance of the ecology of zones of contact with China for the early course of the Vietnamese revolution.

After 1949, the PRC became much more directly and officially involved in supporting the Viet Minh against the French. In January 1950, China was the first country to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the PRC became heavily involved in every aspect of promoting the revolution. After 1954, China remained the DRV’s patron. Trade relations were established in 1951 and formalized in 1952 by a protocol, but material transfer between the two countries was overwhelmingly from China to Vietnam and mostly aid rather than trade, especially after the 1950s.

China’s wartime patronage of Vietnam was of dubious benefit to the Chinese side of the border. On the positive side, it did encourage the development of logistical infrastructure and perhaps some supporting industry in the hinterlands of Guangxi and Yunnan, and small-scale border activities must have benefited. On the negative side, Vietnam’s precarious position induced China to maintain military control over Guangxi with Wei Guoqing in command. During the Cultural Revolution, various groups broke into arsenals where weapons bound for Vietnam were stored. General Wei’s suppression of the Red Guards made Guangxi one of the bloodiest venues of the domestic upheaval. General Wei continued to be in charge of Guangxi until 1978 and was succeeded by his lieutenants until the 1990s.

By contrast, the Vietnamese border areas in the 1960s were a rather peaceful haven from both the air war in northern Vietnam and the Cultural Revolution in China. In 1979, the situation reversed itself, and the border areas, which had been the only parts of northern Vietnam that had been safe from American airplanes, were thoroughly devastated by the advance of the People’s Liberation Army. War with China was serious business for all of Vietnam, but for border towns such as Lang Son and Lao Cai it meant not only

devastation, but devastation with no immediate incentive for recovery as long as relations with China remained hostile.

Clearly, peace is preferable to war, but Christopher Roper’s research on the political economy of the Vietnamese border areas from the 1960s to the 1990s suggests that the effects of war and peace are more complex than simply war being bad and peace good. Productivity in Vietnamese border provinces actually was inversely related to peace. One might expect that local productivity would rise under the pressure of increased demand due to prosperity, but in fact the unavailability of Chinese goods in wartime stimulated the production of local substitutes, while the restoration of trade in peacetime brought back the familiar brand names from China and undercut domestic production of many items. This was a problem throughout Vietnam, but it was particularly acute in border areas. Part of the advantage to Vietnamese consumers of trade with China was at the cost of domestic production.

The 1990s have been a time of great prosperity for both China and Vietnam, and especially so for the border regions. The article by Gu Xiaosong and Brantly Womack details developments on the border. On both sides, economic relations have been accelerated by national policies of economic openness, but with a difference. For Guangxi, international openness had been delayed for 10 years by hostilities with Vietnam and conservative domestic politics, so there has been rapid development of favorable policies and considerable investment in infrastructure supporting border region growth. In Vietnam, normalization with China was roughly simultaneous with increasing international openness in general and expansion of relations in the rest of Asia. The global economy has seemed more attractive and less threatening to Hanoi than the possibility of dependence on its large neighbor. Moreover, in addition to the problems that trade causes for local production, the imbalance of trade between Vietnam and China acts as a brake on the rate of trade expansion. At the border, local governments on both sides see their interests in continued growth and cooperation despite the difficulties that trade might entail at an international level.

If one generalizes the Sino-Vietnamese experience, it is clear that a border region is not simply a microcosm of the nation as a whole. The very intensity of the bilateral relation at the border creates a difference. The current condition of the relationship—hostility, indifference, or friendship—sets the economic and political season for the border, while the bilateral ties’ many dimensions and momentary ups and downs determine the weather. Elsewhere in the two nations there will be individuals directly affected by bilateral policy, but it would be rare for a more distant region to be as sensitive to a specific relationship as one on the border.

The national political economy often seems far away from border areas, not only in location but also in interests. While trade with the neighboring
country is the major concern of the border area, it is only a minor part of two intersecting policies for the nation as a whole: general trade policy and overall foreign relations with the bordering country. However important or profitable border trade is for the frontier area, from a national perspective it can be sacrificed to a general trade policy that calls for more regulation of trade and protection of domestic production. It also can be reduced as a form of economic sanction against the neighboring country as part of a larger foreign policy. Thus, border trade is vulnerable to policy change at higher levels that do not relate specifically to the issue of border trade itself. Consequently, the political economy of border areas remains dependent on external factors that influence its national policy context. The cross-border relationships that proliferate in times of peace are an increasingly large and valuable peace dividend, though they may never become too thick to be cut by the big knives of national policy.