
History Repeating Itself

Chineseness in Premodern Vietnam and Its Influence on Contemporary Vietnam's Policy toward China and Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT This article analyzes Chineseness in premodern Vietnam and its influence on Vietnam's foreign policy toward China and Southeast Asia both past and present. The term *Chineseness* refers to the practice and preservation of Confucian ideas and values in Vietnam, which arguably consists of the *Mandate of Heaven* and *Confucian Orthodoxy* concepts and their subsequent orthodox lineage issue. Being considered culturally closer to China than Korea and Japan, Vietnam, throughout history, has relied on these concepts to position itself strategically and navigate its relations vis-à-vis China and other smaller countries in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese courts used to question the legitimacy and orthodox lineage of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty because they imagined themselves as part of the Sinic world. The sense of superiority over Manchus and of being the guardian of Sinic civilization reached a climax during the Nguyen dynasty, in part shaping Vietnam's foreign policy toward China and other Southeast Asian countries at that time. In addition, this deep-seated Chineseness also helps Vietnam's decision-makers to understand contemporary China, and subtly guides the creation of Vietnam's foreign policy today.

KEYWORDS Chineseness, Confucian Orthodoxy, the Mandate of Heaven, orthodox lineage, Vietnam's foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

Premodern Vietnam¹ was highly ranked in the China-centric tributary hierarchy, as demonstrated by the number and frequency of the tribute missions that Vietnam sent to China. In the 16th century, the tribute frequency that China allowed for Joseon Korea was once a year, once every three years for An Nam (Vietnam), once every four years for Siam (Thailand), and once every ten years for Japan (Kang, 2010b, p. 59; Nguyen, 2021, pp. 122–123).² Although the tribute number and frequency of Vietnam were both less

1. To denote premodern or ancient Vietnam, the terms *An Nam* (pacifying the South), *Đại Việt* (Great Viet), or *Đại Nam* (Great South) are used throughout this article. The term *An Nam* was first used in 679, when Vietnam was under Tang rule. Meanwhile, the name *Đại Việt* was used from the mid-11th to early 17th centuries. The name *Đại Nam* was officially used in 1839 under the reign of the Nguyen Emperor Minh Mạng. Although these names denoted different periods, they were often used interchangeably during the Nguyen dynasty. In particular, *An Nam* was used more commonly than *Đại Việt* and *Đại Nam* in premodern Vietnam, in both the official communications between Vietnam and China and the personal exchanges between Vietnamese envoys and envoys from other vassal states (Vu, 2016, p. 39).

2. Statistically, Joseon Korea dispatched 391 envoy missions to the Ming dynasty, about seven times per year, and 435 special embassy missions to the Qing dynasty, with an average of 1.5 times per year (Clark, 1998, p. 280;

than those of Korea, it was still regarded as one of the most important tributary states of ancient China (Nguyen, 2021, pp. 122–123). Additionally, as a part of the East Asian cultural sphere, the political rulers in ancient Vietnam displayed great admiration for Chinese civilization, and substantially emulated Chinese ideas (adopting Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, among others) and imperial practices (organizing the central administration around six specialized ministries) to maintain their domestic legitimacy and govern the country (Woodside, 1998; Nguyen, 2021).

When the Qing dominated China, there was an extensive debate within China and its surrounding Sinic states, such as Joseon Korea and Vietnam, regarding whether the Qing dynasty was legitimate and Confucian (Kang, 2010a, pp. 609–610). Feudalistic rulers in Vietnam proudly regarded their country as a highly civilized state in the Sinic world, ranked above other nomadic tributes, such as the Xiongnu and Manchu people (Cha, 2011, p. 41; Tran, 2013, pp. 28–29). As a result, like Joseon Korea, the Nguyen dynasty of Vietnam questioned the legitimacy and orthodoxy of the Qing dynasty formed by Manchus, and regarded itself as a better guardian and practitioner of Chinese culture and civilization than the Qing (Tran, 2013; Nguyen, 2021).

The Nguyen dynasty's sense of superiority over the Manchu-led Qing dynasty is closely associated with the embedded Chineseness at the Vietnamese courts. Chineseness, as discussed in this article, entails the practice and preservation of Confucian ideas and values in Vietnam, which specifically includes the *Mandate of Heaven (Tianming)* and *Confucian Orthodoxy (Daotong)* concepts and their resulting orthodox lineage issue. Being deeply influenced by and intertwined with Chinese civilization, practicing a high level of Chineseness was often praised and regarded as a prerequisite in order for the Vietnamese courts to acquire and maintain their superior position compared to other tributary states in the China-crafted hierarchical tribute system as well as other countries in the region (Nguyen, 2019, p. 62; Nguyen, 2021, pp. 121–122). Also, performing Chineseness was of great significance to the Vietnamese courts in their dealings with dynastic China and other smaller countries. Given this, the article will address how Vietnam's sense of superiority over the Manchus, and assumed status as the legitimate successor of Chinese (East Asian) civilization during the post-Ming era, influenced its practice of Chineseness in ancient times in particular and its contemporary policy toward China and Southeast Asia in general.

This article posits that, due to their perception of being the legitimate heir of Chinese civilization, the Nguyen dynasty displayed a strong sense of responsibility by practicing and preserving the customs, rituals, attire, and the like from the Ming dynasty, and striving to distance themselves from those of the Qing dynasty. At the same time, this strong sense of Chineseness as well as pervasive skepticism regarding the Qing dynasty during the Nguyen's reign contributed to the gradual separation of Nguyen Vietnam from Qing China in terms of politics and culture, and in part affected the Nguyen's

Kang, 2010b, p. 59). In comparison, ancient Vietnam sent 74 tribute missions to the Ming dynasty, averaging one every 3.7 years, and 42 missions to the Qing dynasty, averaging one every 4.6 years (Kang et al., 2019, pp. 912–913).

attitude and policy toward its northern suzerain and other smaller countries in Southeast Asia. Regarding Qing China, the Nguyen sought to reduce reliance on the Qing to reach an equal status with the northern dynasty. Many major domestic and foreign policies were made without prior consultation with or approval from the Qing. Regarding Southeast Asia, the Nguyen demonstrated their cultural superiority over smaller countries and established the *Đai Nam* world order, with specific rules and restrictions for vassal states, modeled after the Chinese tributary system.

History repeats itself as this enduring Chineseness also delicately influences and shapes Vietnam's policy toward China and Southeast Asia today. That said, the contemporary Vietnamese leaders possibly view China through the lens of the *Mandate of Heaven* and *Confucian Orthodoxy*—two crucial components in Vietnam's perceived Chineseness. Whether China can live up to these two components based on the assessment of Vietnam may fundamentally affect Hanoi's attitude and policy toward Beijing. In practice, a majority of Vietnamese leaders recognize Vietnam's subordinative position vis-à-vis China by constantly displaying deference to Beijing. As such, the Vietnamese side also expects China to act responsibly and treat Vietnam well in return. When China fails to do so, Vietnam tends to behave in a resentful, disobedient, or even confrontational manner. As for Southeast Asia, Vietnam demonstrates its leadership in strengthening the centrality and role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in regional affairs. Hanoi also takes the lead in ASEAN's agenda-setting with a particular focus on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS, *East Sea* in Vietnamese), where it has lingering conflicts with China.

The methodology adopted in this article is narrative analysis. The data used for the analysis include both primary and secondary sources. The former refers to historical annals, records on the Nguyen dynasty's feudalistic practices and rituals, political elites' speeches, and interviews with Vietnamese scholars. The latter includes existing scholarly works regarding the history of Vietnam-China relations and Vietnam's foreign policy. It is worth noting that the majority of the extant studies on the history of Vietnam-China relations employ the historical analysis methodology and focus on narrating the static legacies of history (Woodside, 1998; Kelly, 2003; Feng, 2019; Kang et al., 2019; Tran, 2020; Nguyen, 2021), but there is an obvious lack of thorough investigation into how these historical legacies can be dynamically translated into specific impacts on contemporary Vietnam. This article thus seeks to fill these gaps and contribute to the literature on Vietnam's foreign policy as well as Vietnam-China relations.

The next section discusses the embedded hierarchy in premodern Vietnam-China relations and conceptualizes the term *Chineseness* in Vietnam. In the third section, an in-depth analysis of the influence of Chineseness during the Nguyen dynasty is conducted. The fourth section elaborates on how Chineseness in ancient Vietnam can subtly affect and shape Vietnam's current policy toward China and other Southeast Asian countries. The last section summarizes the key findings of this article.

EMBEDDED HIERARCHY IN PREMODERN VIETNAM-CHINA RELATIONS AND CHINESENESS IN VIETNAM

Scholarship on the international system of historical East Asia has become increasingly popular among international relations scholars in recent years. Some have argued that premodern East Asian politics must differ from that of the Westphalian system (Kang, 2010a; Cha, 2011). David Kang (2010a) contended that there existed a so-called “tribute system” in East Asia from the 14th to the 19th centuries between China—a hegemon—and several secondary Sinic states, including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. It was formalized via two key institutions: recognition by the superior state, often known as “investiture” (*cefeng*), and the dispatch of embassy envoys to the superior state, known as “tribute” (*gong*) (Kang, 2010a, p. 603).

In contrast to the Westphalian ideal of equality among nation-states, the basis of the tribute system is the “hierarchy” or “inequality” between China and its neighbors. Hierarchy is regarded as the natural order of things according to Confucian thinking (Wang, 2013). Being the dominant state in the system, China crafted a set of rules, norms, and institutions (i.e., the rules of the game) derived from Confucian ideas. These rules of the game, which defined how interstate relations should work in the region, were widely practiced, replicated, and viewed as legitimate by the tributary states (Kang, 2010a, p. 593; Wang, 2013, p. 210). For this reason, the relations between China and several tributary states were generally stable between the 14th and 19th centuries. For example, the Sino-Vietnam tributary relations were said to be stable most of the time due to the Vietnamese court’s recognition of its unequal status in its relations with China and its enthusiastic emulation of Chinese civilization and practices (Kang et al., 2019). If China fulfilled its Confucian obligations, Vietnamese loyalty to it was natural and inevitable. Further, and contrary to conventional wisdom, wars and conflicts were relatively rare in Sino-Vietnam relations;³ plus, Vietnam did not invest heavily in fortifications and preparations for conflict with China (Vu, 2016; Kang et al., 2019, p. 915).

Within the accepted hierarchy of the China-centric tribute system, practicing investiture-tribute diplomacy is mutually beneficial in consolidating the legitimacy of the rulers in both China and other Sinic states. For China, the tributes from secondary states helped to strengthen the legitimacy of *all-under-heaven* (*Tianxia*) status of Chinese rulers; whereas recognition and investiture from dynastic China helped to enhance the legitimacy of the local rulers and helped them to achieve other practical goals, including promoting stability and trade benefits (Kang, 2010a, p. 592; Wang, 2013, p. 212). However, dynastic China constrained the number and frequency of tributary visits that each vassal state was allowed to pay. The more highly Confucian states, such as Korea and Vietnam, were ranked higher in the Chinese’s eyes, and thus were granted more

3. According to the historical annals, *Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet* (*Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục*), of the 279 total incidents of violence from 1365 to 1789, 31.2% were external, while 68.8% were related to internal violence. Regarding who was listed in this set of historical annals, China featured in 8.4% of the entries, Champa in 5.4%, and Laos in 1.1% (Kang et al., 2019, pp. 907–908).

diplomatic, trade, and access privileges related to China (Kang, 2010a, p. 605; Cha, 2011, p. 48; Kang et al., 2019, pp. 912–913).

To rank higher in the Chinese-crafted hierarchy, the secondary states strove to adhere to the Chinese rules and norms and adopt similar civilizational identities as China. In Vietnam's case, it systematically imported Confucianism, the handwriting system, and institutional and discursive practices from China. Given this, ancient Vietnam's political and social values rested upon a mixture of Confucian ethics and law, such as the “three bonds” (*San Gang*) and “five constant virtues” (*Wu Chang*). The Vietnamese rulers also organized the central administration into six ministries, including personnel and appointments, finance and taxes, rites and education, war, justice and punishment, and public works (Woodside, 1998).

Vietnam's emulation of China's civilizational practices was assumed to be voluntary, which contributed to not only stabilizing its relations with China but also ramifying the Chinese-dominated order. Premodern Vietnam was regarded as being located on China's southern frontier, which made many premodern Vietnamese literati feel pride at being part of the Sinicized world. When the Vietnamese conquered the south, they even attempted to impose Sinological institutions and cultures on neighboring Cambodia in the 19th century (Vu, 2016). From the 15th to 19th centuries, Confucian scholars in Vietnam held the view of “no inferiority to Chinese” (*Vô Tồn Trung Hoa*) as they widely assumed that they were the descendants of *Shennong* (*Thần Nông*)⁴ and of the same blood lineage as the “Han people” (Tran, 2020, p. 167).

Due to its acceptance and practice of Confucianism, Vietnam, like Korea, achieved a higher position and was closer to the center than other secondary states within this China-derived tribute system (Cha, 2011, p. 41). This, in turn, gave Vietnam a sense of pride and superiority over other secondary states in the system. At times, the Vietnamese courts were so keen to internalize Confucianism that they even claimed to be a better guardian of Confucian/Chinese civilization when China was occupied by other nomadic states (Tran, 2013, 2020). This mentality gives rise to the question of orthodox lineage or legitimacy in the relationship between the Vietnamese courts and dynastic China. At the same time, ancient Vietnam's consistent adherence to and practice of Confucian values to maintain its high position in the hierarchical system also contributed to its possession of a relatively high level of Chineseness (Shih, 2018).

According to Shih Chih-yu, Chineseness can be understood in two ways. One is the difference among different ethnic Chinese groups residing in different regions or

4. In the historical annals, the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt* (*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*) written by the Vietnam Le dynasty's historian Ngô Sĩ Liên in 1479, the origin of the Viet people was said to derive from Han genealogies. Specifically, Kinh Dương Vương, the king of Vietnam (*Yue Nan*) and primordial ancestor of the Hundred Yue (*Baiyue*), was a fourth-generation descendant of Thần Nông (*Shennong*). Kinh Dương Vương married Dongting Lake Dragon King's daughter Thần Long and fathered Lạc Long Quân. Lạc Long Quân married Âu Cơ and gave birth to Hùng Vương. Hùng Vương became the king of Văn Lang—the very first ancient Vietnamese nation. He later passed on the rulership to the 18 generations of descendants, all of whom took the same title of “Hùng Vương” (Hùng Kings). The 18 Hùng Kings are now widely considered as the traditional founders of the Vietnam nation (VASS, 1998). In honor of these 18 Hùng Kings, a festival known as the “Hùng Kings' Temple Festival” (Giỗ Tổ Hùng Vương) is held annually in Vietnam today.

countries, also known as the “characteristics of the Chinese diaspora” (*Huarenxing*) in a Chinese-language setting. Chinese people in Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, might possess substantially different views on Confucianism, China, and Chinese culture. The other dimension of Chineseness refers to the issue of orthodox lineage or centrality in Confucianism. Since Confucianism spread to many countries, Confucian scholars and literati in each country developed their own interpretation and understanding of what Confucianism was and should be. As a result, this sparked a lingering debate among local Confucians in several countries regarding which form of Confucianism was the most original and purest. In this sense, Chineseness can be characterized as the “characteristics of Zhonghua” (*Zhonghuaxing*) in Mandarin Chinese (Shih, 2022, pp. 106–107). This article addresses the second dimension of Chineseness, the practice and preservation of Confucian ideas and values in Vietnam. Broadly speaking, Chineseness in Vietnam consists of two main concepts, the *Mandate of Heaven* and *Confucian Orthodoxy*, which presumably had a far-reaching influence on the Vietnamese courts of the past (Tran, 2013).

The Mandate of Heaven was widely used to explain the legitimacy of the replacement of an old regime by a new one. This had existed during the Western Zhou period but was then modified by the Han Confucians after the Han dynasty dominated China and inherited the Qin system to solve the question of legitimacy (Lee, 2020, p. 89). According to this concept, there is only one Son of Heaven, or an emperor all-under-heaven (*Tianzi*). The Son of Heaven is considered legitimate and gains support from Heaven as long as he abides by moral rules, treats his people well, and lives up to their expectations. In their relations with China, while the Vietnamese rulers managed to stick to this concept by fulfilling their role as a vassal state to the center—China—they repeatedly still called themselves an emperor (*di/dê*), or the Son of Heaven in the South on an equal footing with the Son of Heaven in the North (Vuving, 2009; Nguyen, 2019, p. 62).

The fact that the Vietnamese rulers declared themselves emperor means that they could, according to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, enjoy all the privileges and rituals reserved for the Son of Heaven, which were not inferior to those of their Chinese counterparts (Tran, 2013, p. 20). Most of the time, the Chinese courts tolerated this rebellious act by the Vietnamese courts, yet this was also used as an excuse for the former to wage a punitive war against the latter. As during the Ming dynasty’s invasion of *Đại Việt* in the early 15th century, the Ming dynasty listed 20 crimes that the Ho dynasty of Vietnam committed. Among those, the Ming dynasty accused the Ho dynasty of “not following the Ming reign dates, changing the dynasty’s name without permission, and falsely claiming the title.” In the eyes of the Vietnamese rulers, the Chinese rulers’ use of force against a tributary state like *Đại Việt* simply strengthened the perception that they had failed to act as a legitimate Son of Heaven as enshrined in the concept of the Mandate of Heaven (Tran, 2013, p. 21). The Mandate of Heaven accordingly represents the issue of legitimacy that must be widely recognized by both sides.

Meanwhile, Confucian Orthodoxy refers to whether or not the ruler adopts the “righteous way” (*zhengdao*), and follows authentic, pure Confucianism. Due to absorbing the Confucian values and tenets based upon Mencius’s advice to “use Chinese to change

barbarians” (*yong xia bian yi*), the Vietnamese courts gradually built the belief that *Đại Việt* had already become a highly civilized state, which was not inferior to the Han and Tang dynasties (Tran, 2013, p. 24). In reality, after gaining autonomy from China during the 10th century, the Vietnamese literati worked hard to prove that their state was a “*Văn Hiến Chi Bang*” (Domain of Manifest Civility / Wen Xian Zhi Bang). According to Confucian thinking, “*Văn*” refers to “institutional records” while “*Hiến*” indicates the “wise men” who maintain these records. The Vietnamese literati proudly claimed that their kingdom had both “institutional records” and “wise men” to practice these records and rituals (Kelly, 2003, pp. 67–68). In fact, throughout history, the Vietnamese literati had to comprehend and teach the Confucian classics and Confucian thought. Given this, the Vietnamese Confucians constantly claimed that Confucianism in Vietnam was the same as and not inferior to that in China. This also acted as an important way for the Vietnamese to affirm their position in their relations with other regional countries (Nguyen, 2019, p. 62).

Confucian Orthodoxy also entails a center-periphery model that is derived from the “*Hua-Yi*” concept (inside are the Han/Chinese, outside are the barbarians). Specifically, despite being regarded as lying on China’s southern frontier, Vietnamese courts still felt proud of being part of the civilized Sinic world. For premodern Vietnam, being on the frontier did not mean being marginal or insignificant but, rather, being implicitly “closer” to the center than at the periphery. It also meant a vanguard status or the agents of civilization (Vu, 2016, pp. 41–42). As a result, Vietnamese kings and Confucians even at times used “Central Domain” (*Trung Quốc*), “Central Strength” (*Trung Hạ*), “Regional Strength” (*Khu Hạ*), or “Efflorescence Strength” (*Hoa Hạ*) to refer to their own country throughout history (Tran, 2013, pp. 25–26). Probably, these names were simply used to highlight the fact that *Đại Việt* lay at the center of civilization, in stark contrast to other surrounding barbarians, rather than indicating a particular geographic location (Tran, 2020, p. 170).

By positioning itself as the center of civilization, premodern Vietnam sought to show its superiority over the surrounding savages or barbarians. Vietnam’s well-known late-15th-century story collection, the *Arrayed Tales of Collected Oddities from South of the Passes* (*Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*) drew a clear distinction between the assumed readers of the tales and certain savages (*man*) in the realm. Many stories in the collection ended with savages being transformed or overtaken by the Vietnamese ways of life, which helped to consolidate a sense of superiority over the savages among the readers of the tale (Kelly, 2015, p. 164). Vietnamese rulers at that time might have felt a mission or obligation to expand southward to help to civilize other uncivilized states and barbarian peoples (Vu, 2016).

Additionally, the Mandate of Heaven and the Confucian Orthodoxy, crucial components of Chineseness, essentially carry expectations that impose a duty to perform on both Chinese and Vietnamese rulers (Shih, 2022, pp. 104–105). From the perspective of the Mandate of Heaven, the Son of Heaven in the South, or the weaker side, expects the Son of Heaven in the North, or the stronger side, to recognize its position. When the stronger side fails to live up to this expectation, the weaker side tends to behave in

a resentful, disobedient, or even confrontational manner. One example showing how ancient Vietnam confronted China directly is the Ly's attack on South China during the Song dynasty. The attack in 1075, led by Lý Thường Kiệt, the commander of all forces in the Ly dynasty of Vietnam, was prompted by a number of factors, including the Song's harsh and aggressive policy regarding the Ly-Song border in its attempts to expand the Chinese southern frontier; competition for influence and loyalty from upland chieftains along the Ly-Song border; the Song's substantial war preparations alongside the Ly-Song border, which posed an immediate threat to the Ly's survival (Taylor, 2013, pp. 80–86). From the Ly, the weaker side's perspective, the Song had not acted in a kingly and generous manner regarding the above-mentioned three matters. That said, the Song was not only mean in dealing with the border demarcation issue but also broke a promise by meddling with the Ly's vassals (upland chieftains). Thus, the Song clearly did not live up to the Ly's expectations and failed to fulfill the role of the stronger side. The Ly were indignant at how badly they were treated by the Song, and so a preemptive war was inevitable.

From the perspective of Confucian Orthodoxy, the weaker side expects the stronger side to fully follow and comply with the above-mentioned “righteous way” and orthodoxy of Confucianism. The weaker side, for its part, is willing to accept and comply with its subordination in accordance with the Confucian ethics, which grants the stronger an absolute power over the weaker (Tsang & Nguyen, 2020, p. 219). Yet, once the Confucian norms and values appear to be violated by the stronger side, the weaker will criticize the stronger party and strive to prove that it itself is the better champion of pure Confucian ideas and values (Nguyen, 2019). More important, the legitimacy of the Chinese rulers was questioned the most when they were considered to be barbarian-rooted, as in the case of the Qing emperors (Tran, 2020). In this case, they would be regarded as neither a legitimate Son of Heaven nor an adequate practitioner of Confucianism, which is supposedly evaluated through the lens of the Mandate of Heaven and Confucian Orthodoxy.

Taken together, both the Mandate of Heaven and the Confucian Orthodoxy enshrined within the Chineseness in ancient Vietnam, are closely related to the legitimacy or orthodox lineage issue as well as the embedded hierarchy in East Asian politics, which assumedly serve as key components within Confucianism. These two concepts were inextricably linked and had mutual effects on the Vietnamese courts, the Vietnamese worldview as well as premodern Vietnam's policy toward dynastic China and other Southeast Asian countries, especially during the Nguyen dynasty (Nguyen, 2019; Tran, 2020). The following section analyzes specific evidence to testify to the influence of Chineseness on the Nguyen court's foreign policy in general and its policy regarding China in particular.

THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESENESS ON PREMODERN VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY

As mentioned above, the Vietnamese courts often assessed whether or not a particular Chinese ruler was a legitimate Son of Heaven through the lens of the Mandate of Heaven

concept. From this perspective, since the Manchus, a nomadic people living on the periphery of the Sinic civilization, wielded power by means of force, the Nguyen dynasty often doubted that the Qing emperors were a legitimate Son of Heaven. Even though the Qing adopted Confucianism and the Qing emperors proudly claimed to be the orthodox Son of Heaven, the Nguyen still believed that the Qing were simply “barbarians turning into Chinese” (*yi yi bian xia*) (Feng, 2019, p. 474). Apart from suspecting the Qing, the Nguyen emperors and Confucians claimed that they themselves were the legitimate descendants of the Han people and the orthodox successors of Chinese civilization. This discourse was consolidated by the blood lineage, historical traditions, authority traditions, state models, and Confucian ideology (Tran, 2020, pp. 169–170).

With this in mind, the Nguyen may have believed that the center of the civilized world had thus moved to Vietnam (Tran, 2020, p. 171), and the Nguyen emperors took pains to prove that it was they who deserved to be called the legitimate Son of Heaven. For example, in 1835, Emperor Minh Mạng sought to turn the capital city—Thừa Thiên Huế—into a new Central Domain in Southeast Asia by constructing nine bronze urns at his ancestral temple, denoting that he was the actual successor of the mythic cultural hero who had once presided over the world’s nine primordial regions, as shown in “The Tribute of Yu” (*Yu Gong*) section in the *Class of Documents (Shangshu)* (Woodside, 1998, p. 198).

Once the Nguyen emperors claimed to be the legitimate Son of Heaven in the South, they tended to be more independent in making crucial decisions simply to seek a more equal status in their dealings with the Qing. One example is that the Nguyen emperors changed their kingdom’s name without the full endorsement of the Qing. After Emperor Gia Long or Nguyễn Ánh, the founder of the Nguyen dynasty, defeated the Tây Sơn warlords, he wished to change the name of the country to represent the power of his new realm by jettisoning the old name, *Đại Việt*. In 1804, Emperor Gia Long sent envoys to China to beseech an investiture and ask the Qing to accept the new name, *Nam Việt* (Nan Yue). However, *Nam Việt* reminded the Qing of Zhao-tuo’s Nan Yue Empire in 204–111 BCE, which encompassed Guangdong, Guangxi, and Northern Vietnam. The Qing thus rejected Gia Long’s request, fearing his intentions. Nevertheless, Emperor Gia Long insisted, and claimed that he had not received an investiture from the Qing if the name were not accepted. Finally, a compromise was reached when both Qing Emperor Jiaqing and Nguyen Emperor Gia Long accepted the name *Việt Nam* (Yue Nan) in the same year (Vien Su hoc, 2007a, Vol. 1, pp. 530–531). Despite this compromise, the Nguyen were dissatisfied with the name *Việt Nam*, and thus the name *Đại Việt* remained in common use until 1813. Consequently, in 1839, the second emperor of the Nguyen dynasty, Emperor Minh Mạng decided to change *Việt Nam* to *Đại Nam* (Great South) without formal approval by the Qing (Phan, 2009, p. 337).

The Nguyen’s rulers also followed the “emperor at home, king abroad” (*trong đế ngoài vương*) principle of previous Vietnamese dynasties in their dealings with the Qing. Vietnamese envoys to China often modestly addressed their kingdom as “a tributary state” (*Hạ Quốc*) and the Qing as “the celestial empire” (*Thiên Triều*) during tribute missions to China but, domestically, the Qing was simply called the “Northern Dynasty”

(*Bắc Triều*) or “Great Qing” (*Đại Thanh*), in reference to the “Southern Dynasty” (*Nam Triều*, referring to the Nguyen) (Feng, 2019, p. 475).

From the perspective of Confucian Orthodoxy, the Nguyen made efforts to maintain the orthodoxy of Confucianism by practicing Han music and rites, observing Tang regulations, preserving the caps and gowns, and following the Confucian classics (Tran, 2020, pp. 169–170). To show knowledge of Chinese culture to the Qing, the Nguyen had to choose their envoys to China with care. For example, Emperor Minh Mạng told his statesmen in a royal court in 1840 that “envoys to the Qing dynasty must be knowledgeable about literature and language. If a greedy and vulgar envoy is dispatched, (we) will be despised by their country” (*Vien Su hoc*, 2007b, Vol. 5, p. 924). However, to the Nguyen’s disappointment, many Confucian rites and institutions were forbidden or performed improperly by the Qing. For instance, in 1840, Emperor Minh Mạng was furious when the Nguyen’s Ministry of Rites reported that the Nguyen envoys were put behind envoys from *Cao Li* (today Korea), *Nam Chường* (today Laos), *Xiêm La* (Siam), and *Lưu Cầu* (Liu Qiu) during their tribute mission to the Qing in the previous year. Minh Mạng regarded it as a blunder by the Qing’s Ministry of Rites and threatened to withdraw from the Qing’s tributary system if the same thing happened again (*Vien Su hoc*, 2007b, Vol. 5, p. 967).

Consequently, the Nguyen’s rulers and Confucians during that time widely assumed that they followed a purer tradition and were more Confucian than the Qing dynasty (Tran, 2013; Nguyen, 2019; Tran, 2020). Following the mentality of “no inferiority to Chinese” of Vietnamese Confucian literati in previous dynasties, the Nguyen also sought to demonstrate that they grasped a higher level of Chinese civilization than that of the Qing in terms of Chinese literature and Confucian ethics, caps and gowns, among others. Emperor Minh Mạng, who was greatly proud of his knowledge of Confucianism, presumably looked down on poems composed by Qing Emperor Qian Long. In a poetry discussion session with his attendants in January 1840, Minh Mạng bluntly said that “most of the poems composed by Qian Long are awkward, superficial, and not worth mentioning...until now, they read like a joke” (*Vien Su hoc*, 2007b, Vol. 5, p. 933).

Another critical point in the Nguyen’s self-proclaimed successor of Chinese civilization is that they still strictly followed caps and gowns and imperial dressing style, which had been learned and imitated from China’s pre-Qing dynasties. Meanwhile, the Qing changed many of them and followed Manchurian hair and clothing styles, which were considered offensive to the established aesthetics and traditions. The *Private Recordings of the South’s History* (*Nam sử tư ký*) during the early stages of the Nguyen dynasty wrote that “as the Qing Emperor Shun Zhi ascended the throne and ruled over the whole of China, Chinese dressing style was subsequently changed. Meanwhile, the dressing style of our country remained consistent. Later, when our country’s envoys arrived in Yanjing, Chinese elders there burst into tears as they saw our envoys’ clothes” (Tran, 2013, p. 31). Emperor Minh Mạng’s sense of cultural superiority was even higher as he openly displayed disdain or repulsion regarding Manchurian clothing and customs. According to the Nguyen’s historical annals, *Veritable Records of the Great South* (*Đại Nam thực lục*), in 1830, Emperor Minh Mạng deeply regretted that “the Qing’s caps and gowns and

imperial clothes all followed barbarian custom, completely different from the predecessors' dress style. It thus cannot be emulated" (Vien Su hoc, 2007b, Vol. 3, p. 126).

Another critical influence that the Confucian Orthodoxy exerted on the Nguyen's foreign policy was largely driven by the *Hua-Yi* concept and its resulting center-periphery worldview. To clarify, one popular perception during premodern Vietnam was that the Manchus were barbarians living on the steppe while the Annamese were the descendants of Shennong and of the same blood lineage as the "Han people," and hence culturally superior to the Manchus. After Manchus took over the Central Plain from the Han people and established the Qing dynasty, this signified that China had already been lost to the barbarians (Tran, 2020, pp. 170–171). Being ruled by barbarians, the Qing court could no longer be regarded as a "central kingdom," so the emperors and Confucian scholars of the Nguyen dynasty subsequently called their kingdom a "central efflorescence" (*Trung Hoa*), "central plain" (*Trung Châu*), or "central kingdom" (*Trung Quốc*), and claimed to be "Han people" (*Hán Nhân* or *Hán Dân*), as found in several historical annals from the Nguyen dynasty (Tran, 2013, p. 29).

In addition, the Nguyen's emperors and Confucian scholars also used derogatory language to refer to the Qing dynasty and sometimes bluntly expressed their dissatisfaction if the Qing behaved inappropriately (Tran, 2013, p. 29; Nguyen, 2019, p. 68). According to the *Veritable Records of the Great South*, Emperor Ming Mang stated that "the ancestors of the Great Qing were Manchu people, but Manchus are barbarians. Our South country is a domain of manifest civility, which must not be compared to the Manchus" (Vien Su hoc, 2007b, Vol. 2, p. 335). Since the Nguyen claimed to be the "Han people," they felt angry about being referred to as "*Di/Yi*," or barbarians, by the Qing. According to the historical annals, *The Missing Parts of National History* (*Quốc sử di biên*), written by a historian during the Nguyen dynasty—Phan Thúc Trực—during a tribute mission to the Qing in 1841, the Nguyen dynasty's envoy—Lý Văn Phúc—grew extremely angry when he saw four words, "*Việt Di Hội Quán*" (Guesthouse for Viet barbarians) hanging outside the Vietnamese delegation's accommodation. Later, he asked his escorts to tear off the word "*Di*" (barbarian) before he was willing to step into the house (Phan, 2009). Besides Lý Văn Phúc, other Vietnamese envoys also felt offended when their country was marked as "*Di/Yi*." In 1868, Nguyễn Tư Giản, another Vietnamese envoy, was unhappy when he found that Vietnam was marked as *Yi* on *The Atlas of Guangxi* (*Yue Xi diyu tushuo*). That prompted him to compose *On Identifying Yi* (*Biện Di Thuyết*), which read "Regarding Yi, I hope that anyone who keeps saying it would change immediately, only by doing so can fairness be attained, and helps to improve our relationship" (Tsang & Nguyen, 2020, p. 218).

All things considered, the Nguyen had every reason to believe that they were the legitimate successors of the Han civilization, in terms of both their bloodline (descendants of *Shennong*) and their culture/politics (studying Confucian, Mencian, and Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy; following the regulations of the Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song dynasties) (Tran, 2020, pp. 170–171). Thus, the Nguyen believed that they should stand on an equal footing with the Qing, in which Vietnam was a southern imperial with its own Mandate of Heaven. And the Nguyen emperors should be naturally conferred the title of

the Son of Heaven. This can be manifested by the inscription on the imperial jade seal of the Nguyen's emperors. After changing the country's name to *Đại Nam* in 1838 without prior notification or approval from the Qing, Emperor Minh Mạng ordered the creation of a new imperial jade seal in the following year. The jade seal was engraved with six characters, *Đại Nam Thiên tử chi tỷ*, meaning "the imperial jade seal of the Great South's Son of Heaven." In 1844, Emperor Thiệu Trị also ordered the creation of a similar jade seal, which read as *Đại Nam Hoàng đế chi tỷ*, literally meaning "the imperial jade seal of the Great South's Emperor." These jade seals were used on both domestic and diplomatic documents (Vien Su hoc, 2007b, Vol. 5, p. 528; Vien Su hoc, 2007c, Vol. 6, pp. 688–689). These new jade seals, as their names suggested, demonstrated the power and legitimacy of the Nguyen rulers, who were the Son of Heaven in the South exercising their own Mandate of Heaven, similar to that of Qing China's emperors.

Against this backdrop, the Nguyen sought to reduce reliance on the Qing to reach a substantially equal status with the northern dynasty. It thus became increasingly independent in making major domestic and foreign policies without prior consultation with or approval from the Qing. Regarding domestic issues, the Nguyen did not inform the Qing of its critical domestic events such as changing the country's name from *Việt Nam* to *Đại Nam* as mentioned above during the Minh Mạng era, or the naming of the reign title of the Nguyen's emperors, among others. To illustrate, Emperor Gia Long did not seek approval from the Qing regarding his ascension to the throne or the designation of his reign title, except for the naming of his country (Yu, 2009, p. 102).

Regarding foreign policymaking, despite still claiming a vassal state in its dealings with the Qing court, domestically, the Nguyen started using "*bang giao*" (*bangjiao*), which means state-to-state diplomatic relations when referring to its relations with the Qing. The Nguyen's historical annals such as the *Veritable Records of the Great South* used the term "*bang giao*" throughout the records (Vien Su hoc, 2007b, Vol. 5, p. 669). This specific term bears no hierarchical connotation, and thus serves to achieve the Nguyen's desired equal status with the Qing. Furthermore, although the Nguyen still conformed to the suzerain-vassal relations vis-à-vis the Qing, they suspected the latter's willingness to fulfill the suzerain's role in protecting its vassal states in accordance with Confucian requirements (Tsang & Nguyen, 2020, p. 221). Thus, when their country faced external threats from the French, the Nguyen still kept it confidential and did not seek the Qing dynasty's help when the French first invaded *Đại Nam* in 1858. In 1862, the Nguyen dynasty under the reign of Emperor Tự Đức signed the Treaty of Saigon (*Hòa ước Nhâm Tuất*) with the French in the first year of Qing China's Tongzhi reign to cut three provinces in the south including Biên Hòa, Gia Định, and Định Tường without prior approval from the Qing. A renewal of the treaty was signed in 1874, again without informing the Qing (Vien Su hoc, 2007d, Vols. 7–8). It was not until 1884 that a late notification was made during the trip of Phạm Thân Duật, the Nguyen's minister of justice, to Qing China to seek aid from the Qing against the French (Tsang & Nguyen, 2020, pp. 226–227).

The mentality of being the legitimate successor of Chinese civilization also in part contributed to the decentralization or centrifugal tendency from the Qing-orbit center of

the Nguyen. In other words, the Nguyen dynasty worked hard to establish a new “Central Plain” in the South, of which Vietnam lay at the center, with other small Southeast Asian states at the periphery. This new Central Plain gradually grew independent of the northern court in terms of both politics and culture, as it was strengthened by two factors. First, as the asymmetry of interests in the relationship between the center (the Qing dynasty) and the periphery (the Nguyen dynasty) increased, and the responsibility of the center for the periphery decreased, the periphery would seek to reduce their dependence on the center, change the current order, and set up a new center in the South (Nguyen, 2019, p. 75). Second, the Nguyen dynasty’s strengthening relations with other peripheral countries weakened China’s central position and consolidated Vietnam’s central position in the region (Nguyen, 2019, p. 70).

To this end, the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty adopted the “using Chinese to change barbarians” motto, which was previously proposed by Mencius to help to civilize other surrounding minorities and tribes and forced them to follow the Han style (*Hán phong*) (Vien Su hoc, 2007b, Vol. 4, pp. 356–357). From this foundation, the Nguyen gradually formed a Vietnam-centered tribute system and demanded tributes from several small states and tribes. More specifically, during the first half of the 19th century, several small states and tribes in southwest Vietnam, including Chenla (modern Cambodia), Van Tuong (part of central Laos), and Hoa Xa (modern Phu Yen province in Vietnam) used to conduct tribute-investiture practices with the Nguyen dynasty (Nguyen, 2019, p. 70).

Within this Vietnam-centered world order, Vietnam’s relations with its vassal states were also based on a set of principles and concepts. In particular, the Nguyen’s emperors regarded themselves as the Son of Heaven in the South, and other smaller states had to recognize Vietnam’s moral values and greatness just as the Nguyen did regarding the Qing court. The Nguyen court might punish its vassal states when they failed to offer tribute or behave properly. For example, the Vietnamese courts used to bring troops to fight Champa when it failed to fulfill the role of a vassal state but, at the same time, the Nguyen also managed to fulfill the role of a suzerain by protecting its vassal states from invaders or internal rebellions. Proof of this was the fact that the Nguyen sent troops to save Champa when the latter was invaded by Siam (Nguyen, 2019, pp. 71–72). During the Ming Mạng era, the Nguyen opened stockpiles of food and delivered rice to the hungry people of Chenla when they suffered a severe famine in 1822. Also, the Nguyen dispatched troops to help Chenla to fight against the Siamese and escorted the Chenla king back to his country (Nguyen, 2019, p. 73).

There is little doubt that the discourse about Vietnam’s being the legitimate successor of Chinese civilization during the post-Ming era was ubiquitous under the reign of the Nguyen dynasty. This had far-reaching impacts on the Nguyen’s policy toward Qing China and other smaller surrounding states. Specific evidence can be found about how the Nguyen rulers strove to prove that they were the Son of Heaven; their efforts to practice and maintain Confucian rites, institutions, imperial clothing; the use of derogatory language toward the Qing dynasty; and the establishment of a Vietnam-centered tribute system, as analyzed above. The following section elaborates on how Chineseness

in premodern Vietnam could be subtly handed down and continues to affect Vietnam's foreign policy today.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM'S POLICY TOWARD CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: A REFLECTION OF THE PAST

Vietnam's national school curriculum has largely focused on the 1,000-year period when Vietnam was under Chinese rule (normally known as *Bắc thuộc* in Vietnamese), and how the Vietnamese, throughout history, have courageously resisted Chinese invasions and expansionism. In this historiography, China was often depicted as a bully who sought to encroach upon Vietnam's territory, but eventually failed to subjugate the Vietnamese's unyielding spirit (Vu, 2016, pp. 39–40). The majority of Vietnamese people would surely have learned about this nationalist narrative at school, yet few are aware that many Vietnamese rulers and Confucian scholars throughout history perceived themselves as the legitimate descendants of Chinese civilization. Saying that the Vietnamese have the same blood lineage as the Chinese or perceiving Vietnam or the Vietnamese as Chinese is considered irrelevant in Vietnam nowadays (Shih, 2022, p. 113). People might be subjected to grave criticism if they make statements of this nature. To illustrate, Nguyễn Huy Quý, a well-known Vietnamese Sinologist, was targeted vehemently by Vietnamese netizens after stating, during an interview with a Chinese tabloid—the *Global Times*—in 2010, that Vietnam and China had the “same culture, same origin and Communist comradeship” (*Global Times*, 2010).

During the process of national identity construction, like other East Asian states, Vietnam has endeavored to exclude Chineseness from its culture. Building contemporary Vietnam's national identity began by denying its China-centered worldview, political order, and cultural legacy. To some extent, Vietnam's national identity primarily derives from deliberately excluding the perceived cultural components that are shared with China (Shih, 2018, p. 45). However, it is difficult to erase Chineseness from Vietnam completely, given Vietnamese worldviews, as of today, are still influenced by many Sinitic ideas, many of which have been so internalized that the Vietnamese people take these ideas and values for granted. Some Vietnamese Sinologists even believe that understanding Chinese culture helps one to gain deeper insights into Vietnamese history and culture (Huang, 2020b, p. 254; Shih, 2022, p. 122).

At the same time, a considerable number of Vietnamese political elites remain confident that Vietnam's rich traditional culture, being closer to that of China, enables them to comprehend China and might help to facilitate interaction with contemporary China (Huang, 2020b). Given their cultural and ideological affinities, Vietnamese political elites and China scholars nowadays often talk to each other in an unofficial way that Vietnam understands China better than any other country in the world except for Chinese-dominated areas such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.⁵ According to a Hanoi-based scholar, who studies Vietnam-China tributary relations, cultural/

5. This assessment is popular among Vietnamese, both elites and ordinary people.

Confucian commonalities between Vietnam and China help Vietnamese people understand what the Chinese think and do. This is also the reason why many Vietnamese could proudly make such a claim.⁶

Ironically, the Vietnamese, on the one hand, stress that they are different from the Chinese but, on the other, proudly claim to understand China better than other countries (Shih, 2018, p. 52), which seems contradictory. Further, despite the Vietnamese people's hostile attitude toward China, many Vietnamese Sinologists still devote themselves to shaping Vietnamese policymakers' understanding of China by playing the roles of consultant and mediator for the Vietnamese authorities (Huang, 2020b, p. 263). As for the Vietnamese leaders, they often stress the cultural commonalities that Vietnam shares with China and consider this a driving force for enhancing the Vietnam-China relations in other realms (Le, 2017).

Many Vietnamese leaders in exchanges with their Chinese counterparts often refer to their relations with China as “comrades plus brothers,” who share a similar political system and cultural affinity. For example, following the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyễn Phú Trọng was the first foreign leader to visit China in October 2022. This demonstrates Vietnam's priority for bilateral relations with its “northern brother” and its support for Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping. Particularly, Trọng placed a strong emphasis on “brother affection” when speaking with Xi. Following the visit, Trọng wrote Xi a letter of gratitude in which he used the word “brothers” (*anh em*) twice to refer to either Chinese people or Vietnam-China relations (Bao Chinh phu, 2022).

By “brothers,” Vietnam expects to denote the cultural connectedness between Vietnam and China, similar to affection between brothers in a family, which is embedded in Sinitic ideas. As brothers in a family, the younger brother would expect his elder brother to take care of his interests. Once the elder fails to meet this expectation, the younger might get disappointed and even resentful. Yet, the younger brother is also well aware that he needs to show respect to and keep his elder brother's face to maintain his interests in times of conflict. Vietnam's behavior during conflicts with China in the SCS best exemplifies this mentality. As Vietnam and China spiral into a conflict in the disputed waters, Vietnam tends to condemn Chinese actions and sometimes overreact to simply let China know that it is truly antagonized. However, Vietnam also takes the initiative to de-escalate tensions with China and shows deference to Beijing by dispatching special envoys to reconcile with its elder brother. Sometimes, the inner evaluation of the Vietnamese high officials tends to show empathy toward the Chinese side, and even compares Chinese aggressive acts toward Vietnam to “a father's tough love for his child” within a family (Vu, 2017, p. 285).

For instance, when referring to China's deployment of an oil rig to Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in May 2014, late Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phùng Quang Thanh stated at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 31 May 2014 that the

6. Interview with a Vietnamese scholar, Hanoi, 26 August 2022.

Vietnam-China SCS conflict is like the “conflict between brothers within a family” (*Nguoi Lao dong*, 2014). As China withdrew its oil rig, Vietnam sent Lê Hồng Anh, the special envoy of Nguyễn Phú Trọng, to Beijing in August 2014 to repair relations with China. Two months later in October, 12 Vietnamese military generals led by Phùng Quang Thanh also visited China to strengthen military-to-military cooperation (BBC Vietnamese, 2014). Although Vietnam’s actions in response to conflicts with China might seem weak, they are learned from historical lessons when ancient Vietnam often released Chinese prisoners and showed a willingness to reconcile with Chinese dynasties to prevent prolonged wars and conflicts (Tsang & Nguyen, 2020). Clearly, understanding and capitalizing on Sinitic ideas have helped Vietnam to handle its relations with China.

Nevertheless, the importance of historical and cultural legacies on the dynamics of contemporary Vietnam-China relations is frequently overlooked in extant studies. There have been many prior works by both Western and Vietnamese scholars, yet a majority of these studies rely on geopolitical and realist approaches. For example, in *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, Brantly Womack analyzes Vietnam-China relations through the lens of power asymmetry. Womack (2006) argued that there is an asymmetry of power existing between Vietnam and China, in which relative capabilities are in favor of China, the larger side. This power asymmetry can affect the expectation, degree of attention, and policymaking of Vietnam toward China and vice versa. Given China’s much greater material capabilities, which can pose an existential threat to Vietnam, Vietnam tends to be overattentive and overreactive to even the most minor actions by China.

Another example is in *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam’s Relations with China under Doi Moi*, where Le Hong Hiep indicated that the interplay of geographic proximity, power asymmetry, and domestic developments has considerably shaped and constrained Vietnam’s China policy. Particularly, Le (2016) argued that Vietnam’s relationship with China is largely driven by its need for economic development, which is in turn a critical foundation for the legitimacy of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Given this, Vietnam has pursued a hedging strategy toward China since 1991 to balance against China’s threats and aggressiveness on the one hand, while still benefiting from deeper economic relations with China on the other.

Womack’s and Le’s studies are both critical and thought-provoking in understanding Vietnam-China relations (Womack, 2006; Le, 2016). Despite still a structure-based realist approach, Womack (2006) went beyond the static structure by arguing that policymakers’ perceptions of the asymmetric structure could dictate how they formulate a diplomatic policy. Meanwhile, Le (2016) combined structural and domestic factors to provide an in-depth analysis of Vietnam-China relations. Overall, both Womack (2006) and Le (2016) shared similar views that material capabilities—either country size, economic power, or military—could dictate the development of Vietnam-China relations. Yet, their research has not moved beyond the geopolitical and realist approaches and failed to explain changes and inconsistencies in Vietnam’s China policy given the unchanged asymmetric structure between the two countries. In many cases, to reach

a stable and long-term relationship with China, Vietnam even sacrifices its immediate and apparent interests (Huang, 2020a). Alternatively, as stated previously, when China fails to meet Vietnam's expectations, Vietnam might challenge China despite the risks of a conflict with its northern neighbor. In such cases, historical and cultural aspects can offer a different but feasible perspective to capture the full picture of Vietnam's relations with China.

Among a plethora of deep-seated cultural resources, the above-mentioned Mandate of Heaven and the Confucian Orthodoxy are of great importance and a typical reflection of the past, which still affect how the Vietnamese view the world and navigate Vietnam's relations vis-à-vis China and other countries in a nearly parallel manner with the past. Due to practicing and even owning particular kinds of Chineseness, contemporary Vietnamese intellectuals rely on these cultural resources in order to comprehend and define China (Shih, 2022, pp. 104, 107). These intellectuals accordingly tend to describe the image of modern China and its leaders through the lens of the Mandate of Heaven concept, which is a key component of Chineseness in Vietnam. It is thus inferred that the Vietnamese policymakers may assess whether China under the leadership of a particular leader fits the Mandate of Heaven or not. The criteria for their assessment rest largely on how China treats Vietnam during a particular period, or China's policies, behaviors, and actions toward Vietnam regarding a specific issue, such as the border demarcation, the SCS disputes, and so on. In this case, if a Chinese leader is perceived as kindhearted, helpful, and generous toward Vietnam, he may be regarded as having a "kingly manner" (*Vương Đạo / Wangdao*). In contrast, if a leader is aggressive and intolerant toward Vietnam, he might be addressed as having a "hegemonic manner" (*Bá Đạo / Badao*).⁷ Ostensibly, these two terms originated from Confucian thinking, manifested in a Mencius saying: "those who use force to govern are hegemonic, while those who use virtue to govern are kingly" (Li, 2017). Yet, while the kingly manner is preached and praised in many Chinese classics, the hegemonic manner is often subjected to criticism.

In exchanges with Vietnamese scholars,⁸ Mao Zedong was said to have treated Vietnam in a kingly manner, as he supported Vietnam during its revolution and resistance wars, and was even said to "truly apologize" to Ho Chi Minh for dynastic China's actions toward Vietnam in the past. Meanwhile, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping were generally categorized as having a hegemonic manner, since they both seemed aggressive and hostile toward Vietnam. Deng Xiaoping sacrificed Vietnam's interests by gradually cutting aid to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War and later waging a border war against Vietnam in 1979, simply to achieve a rapprochement with the United States. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping escalated the maritime disputes at the expense of Vietnam, with a plethora of aggressive acts in the SCS, such as incursions into Vietnam's continental shelf and exclusive economic zone, land reclamation, and artificial islands' militarization. Moreover, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were located somewhere in between the kingly manner

7. Exchanges with Vietnamese scholars and former diplomats, Hanoi, July 2014.

8. Interview and corresponding exchanges with Vietnamese scholars and former diplomats, Hanoi, July 2014 and March 2021.

and hegemonic manner, for their actions might be beneficial to Vietnam regarding some issues while detrimental regarding others. It should be noted that although these assessments are unofficial, they are, to some extent, broadly accepted by the Vietnamese decision-making elite.⁹

Furthermore, when China does not perform properly or fails to fulfill the Mandate of Heaven as perceived by Vietnam, Hanoi might feel disappointed and even seek to take the leadership role from China. Vietnam's positioning of itself as a guardian of the true communist ideology attests to this proposition. In the wake of the formation of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Vietnamese communists once enthusiastically absorbed the ideological and policy guidance from Soviet and Chinese communists. However, in their dealings with their Chinese counterparts, they realized that Chinese communists often prioritized their "narrow-minded" national interests at the expense of communist internationalism. As a result, several Vietnamese leaders used to imagine their country as the center of the socialist bloc according to recently declassified archival documents (Vu, 2016, p. 57).

The declassified documents revealed that an ambitious Vietnamese leader—Lê Duẩn—even claimed superiority over China. In meeting with Chairman Mao in 1963 in Beijing, Lê Duẩn was offended by Mao's request to send an army to southern Vietnam to liberate Southeast Asia. Duẩn was also reported to have repeatedly belittled the Chinese revolutionary experiences in his political reports, such as calling the CCP's *Long March* "running around" (*trường chinh chạy quanh*). Moreover, Duẩn dismissed Mao's theory of three stages of guerrilla warfare as irrelevant and inferior to his own strategy of "three kinds of forces," which entailed division-level main forces for the mountainous areas, battalion-level forces for the delta, and militia forces for the urban centers. After the 1968 Offensive in South Vietnam, the Vietnamese leaders not only thought of themselves as an outpost in the socialist bloc, but also imagined that they were on the frontier and at the vanguard of world revolution (Vu, 2016, p. 58). During a visit to Moscow in 1975, Lê Duẩn stated that Vietnam had fought selflessly for the world revolution and thus deserved the Soviet Union's help to achieve more victories for socialism. He claimed bluntly that Vietnam would become the center of socialism in Southeast Asia (Vu, 2016, p. 59).

The concept of Confucian Orthodoxy, in the same vein, also has a subtle impact on Vietnam in terms of the perception of its national cultural positioning and efforts to forge a united front in the region to meet the challenges posed by China. First, in the official propaganda, Vietnam's national culture is frequently depicted as being rooted in Southeast Asia but bearing East Asian cultural characteristics due to the long Chinese domination and its cultural imposition on Vietnam (Vietnam National Academy of Public Administration, 2022). Despite stressing repeatedly that Vietnam's local culture was not totally assimilated by Chinese culture, modern Vietnam surprisingly attaches great importance to the concept of "East Asian Culture" or "Asia East Culture" (*Văn hóa*

9. Interview and corresponding exchanges with Vietnamese scholars and former diplomats, Hanoi, July 2014 and March 2021.

Á Đông). In the view of many Vietnamese cultural researchers, it is Vietnam that represents “Asia East Culture.” Several Vietnamese Sinologists even declare their superior grasp of Chinese culture compared with that of their Japanese and Korean counterparts. For instance, Phan Văn Các, a well-known Vietnamese scholar of China, proudly revealed that, even today, many Vietnamese can still compose *Tang poetry* in eight-line regulated verse in Vietnamese, while Koreans and Japanese cannot do this in their own language.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, Vietnamese Sinologists’ attempt to demonstrate their better understanding of Chinese culture than other countries resembles the Nguyen dynasty’s effort to prove that Vietnam was more Confucian than Qing China in the past.

Second, the mentality of being at the center in the Confucian Orthodoxy concept also affects Vietnam’s dealings with other Southeast Asian countries and efforts to establish a united front in the region. A Vietnamese scholar, Pham Quynh, in an article in the *Magazine of the Southern Custom* (Nam Phong Tạp Chí) published in 1931, argued that Vietnamese ethnicity was a “nucleus” in the Sinic world. Hence, this race had a heaven-appointed destiny to expand and colonize the whole of Indochina (Tran, 2020, pp. 178–179). Although his view was not shared by most Vietnamese scholars at that time, the discourse on Vietnam as the center of the region has been popular since then.

Strategically positioning itself as the center of the region, Vietnam often senses a mission or obligation to unify the Southeast Asian countries. During the Indochina War against the French between 1946 and 1954, Vietnam unified and supported the communist forces in Laos and Cambodia, who were former members of the Indochinese Communist Party. After acceding to ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has worked hard to consolidate the unity and build up the identity of this organization. Hanoi has been so enthusiastic about the establishment of the ASEAN Community that its implementation rate of the goals of the ASEAN Community is nearly 95%, the highest among the ASEAN member countries (VOV, 2017). In 2020, under Vietnam’s chairmanship, ASEAN first released a document titled *The Narrative of ASEAN Identity*, which detailed the constructed values and inherited values enshrined in the ASEAN Identity (ASEAN, 2020). Additionally, though the majority of Vietnamese people claim to be culturally East Asian, they join the Vietnamese elite in embracing the idea of unifying ASEAN. When asked how ASEAN should respond to the US-China competition over influence in the region, 71.4% of the Vietnamese, ranked top in ASEAN in 2021, would prefer ASEAN to enhance its own resilience and unity to withstand external pressure (Seah et al., 2021, p. 32).

At the same time, Vietnam has been highly proactive in ASEAN’s agenda-setting, particularly the discussions on the SCS disputes. Vietnamese strategists believe that only when all members make concerted efforts can ASEAN act as a constraint on China’s aggressiveness in the region. Thus, it has invested much time in rallying round the flag to forge a united front that can stand up to China.

10. Oral history of Phan Văn Các, accessed 16 December 2022. The Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross Taiwan-Strait Relations, National Taiwan University, <http://www.china-studies.taipei/act02.php>.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that, although Vietnam has devalued many components of Chineseness during its national identity construction, the concepts of the Mandate of Heaven and Confucian Orthodoxy still exert a subtle impact on Vietnam's culture and politics, especially its foreign policy toward China. The ways in which these two concepts affect Vietnam's behaviors and actions bear a striking similarity to their influence on dynastic Vietnam. Vietnam may assess the legitimacy of a Chinese leader based on whether or not he treats Vietnam properly, as embodied in the Mandate of Heaven concept. Additionally, Vietnam's efforts to promote a similarly united front in the region are similar to the Nguyen's attempts to establish a new Central Plain, centered in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

Despite the shared religious and cultural beliefs between the Vietnamese and Chinese people, China is constantly perceived as a bully who seeks to encroach on Vietnam's territory. Contemporary Vietnam's history textbooks largely focus on covering Vietnam's struggle to gain independence from Chinese rule, as well as the wars and conflicts that occurred between these two countries in the past. Although this type of nationalist narrative helps to consolidate the cohesion of the Vietnamese nation, it neglects an important fact: most of the time, premodern Vietnam enjoyed a positive synergy with the Chinese empire (Vu, 2016). The Vietnamese courts voluntarily absorbed Chinese values, institutions, and norms to strengthen their legitimacy at home. Also, the stable tributary relations with China enabled Vietnam to direct all of its energies toward handling domestic raids and expanding its territory southward. At times, dynastic Vietnam was so keen on and loyal to Confucianism that it claimed to lie at the center of Sinic civilization.

Among the various Confucian values and concepts that have been internalized by the Vietnamese, the Mandate of Heaven and the Confucian Orthodoxy exerted the most prominent influence on both the premodern Vietnamese courts and modern Vietnam. In this article, these two concepts are specifically conceptualized and addressed as Chineseness in Vietnam. While the Mandate of Heaven concept is used to evaluate whether the Chinese rulers live up to the expectation of Vietnamese people, the Confucian Orthodoxy tends to focus on the question of authentic and pure Confucianism as well as the center-periphery issue. Despite their respective characteristics, both concepts are closely related to the legitimacy or orthodox lineage issue.

In the past, after the Manchu people ascended to power in China, the Vietnamese courts used to question the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty. The Nguyen dynasty even claimed to be the legitimate heir to Chinese civilization. This in part affected the Nguyen dynasty's attitude and policy toward China and other smaller countries in the region. During the modern era, the Mandate of Heaven affects Vietnam in the sense that the Vietnamese leaders and scholars often evaluate whether a particular Chinese leader treats Vietnam in a kingly or hegemonic manner. Meanwhile, the Confucian Orthodoxy

concept makes contemporary Vietnam feel sufficiently confident to declare itself the representative of the “Asia East Culture.”

Further, by positioning itself as the center of the region, Vietnam has made numerous efforts to summon the countries in Southeast Asia to form a united front for dealing with other major powers. In particular, Hanoi has sought to maintain the centrality of ASEAN amid the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China, while avoiding being labeled a member of any anti-China or anti-US coalition. During a phone conversation with Nguyễn Phú Trọng in September 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for enhanced solidarity and cooperation between the two communist parties (China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), denoting the likelihood of a socialist united front against external forces. Despite China’s proactive move, Vietnam’s response has been relatively muted. In the foreseeable future, Hanoi will continue to take the initiative on regional platforms such as ASEAN, where it has sufficient space to maneuver while remaining prudent in its dealings with China. ■

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