

# War, Rebellion, and Intervention under Hierarchy: Vietnam–China Relations, 1365 to 1841

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## Abstract

What does international hierarchy look like? The emerging literatures on hierarchy and international orders remain overwhelmingly focused on the contemporary era and on the great powers that comprise the top of the hierarchy. This article addresses that gap by examining diplomacy, war, and domestic politics in the premodern Vietnam–China relationship under the hierarchic tributary system. Specifically, we construct a unique data set of over 1,200 entries, which measures wars and other violence in the region from 1365 to 1789. The data revealed the stable and legitimate nature of tributary relations between formally unequal political units. The Vietnamese court explicitly recognized its unequal status in its relations with China through a number of institutions and norms. Vietnamese rulers also displayed very little military attention to their relations with China. Rather, Vietnamese leaders were clearly more concerned with quelling chronic domestic instability and managing relations with kingdoms to their south and west.

## Keywords

measuring war, tributary system, hierarchy, historical IR, China, Vietnam

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What does international hierarchy look like? Did hierarchy exist outside of the modern nation-state system? The past decade has seen a flourishing of two important and related theoretical debates in the field of international relations (IR). The first concerns hierarchies and seeks to understand how and when different types of political units—not just states—can be organized into vertical relations (Mattern and Zarakol 2016). The second concerns international order, asking whether the Westphalian, Western system that has largely dominated the globe since the nineteenth century was inevitable, whether it might be changing, and what that might mean for the future (Reus-Smit 2017). Both these literatures provide sound theoretical reason to believe that if two political units mutually agree on their relative statuses and relative positions in a hierarchy, then the relationship will be stable even if there are substantial differences of material capabilities.

Yet these literatures on hierarchy and international orders remain overwhelmingly focused on the contemporary era, on the Western, Westphalian system, and on the great powers that comprise the top of the hierarchy. They rarely grapple with the issue of nonstate systems, and they also rarely emphasize the perspectives or actions of the weaker powers. In short, while IR scholars have begun to move beyond simple notions of “states-in-anarchy,” the discipline as a whole is not yet taking a truly global view of international order and subjecting it to careful scrutiny. The best way to study the contemporary international system is to compare it to something truly different. By looking at hierarchy from the perspective of a subordinate power, examining international systems composed of diverse units, and studying non-Western systems, we can gain a broader perspective into the fundamental workings of hierarchy.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining diplomacy, war, and domestic politics in the premodern Vietnam–China relationship under the hierarchical tributary system of IR in historical East Asia. Vietnam was a central participant in the tributary system (Kelley 2005; Lee 2016a). The tributary system was an international system based on sovereign inequality: formally unequal units were granted substantial freedom of action as long as hierarchy was observed. China, at the top of the hierarchy and viewed as a source of civilization, crafted a variety of different relations with different types of units. Vietnam, viewed as high in the hierarchy but not possibly an equal of China, was an important member of the system. This article argues that different international systems with different organizing principles have existed and may exist again; and the tributary system is thus a key comparative case that demonstrates that hierarchy, not anarchy, defined large swaths of historical East Asian IR.

Specifically, the research presented in this article focuses on the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate unit—in this case, China–Vietnam relations—and reveals that patterns of war, self-restraint by the hegemon, rebellion and intervention, and institutional emulation were all different under the hierarchy of the tributary system than would be expected in a balance-of-power international system. The initial findings discussed in this article are consistent with earlier findings about

the pacifying nature of tributary relations between formally unequal political units (e.g., Kang 2010; Kang, Shaw, and Fu 2016).

The authentic imperial record that we examine here suggests that the monarchs of the Dai Viet period were usually much more concerned with internal stability than with aggrandizement or invasion from China.<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese court explicitly recognized its unequal status in its relations with China through a number of explicit and formal institutional mechanisms and norms. Vietnamese rulers also displayed very little military attention to their relations with China, which were conducted extensively through the institutions and principles of the tributary system. Rather, Vietnamese leaders were clearly more concerned with quelling chronic domestic instability and managing relations with the Champa and other kingdoms to their south and west. Vietnam experienced interstate war in only 27 of the 400 years included in the data, or 7 percent of the time. Moreover, the bulk of security preparations mentioned in the source material bore no relation to the northern border but predominantly involved troop movements to preempt intraelite conflict. As would be predicted by a relationship organized by hierarchy, the Vietnamese court even occasionally sought the Chinese court's cooperation in putting down rebellions.

This article thus challenges the anachronistic view of Vietnamese history that tends to be taken at face value by Western scholars and indeed most Vietnamese themselves: that historically, Vietnam feared China and saw China as its main external threat. So deeply has this modern Vietnamese meme of chronic war with China taken root that it is often repeated without reflection by observers and scholars of East Asian security. For example, London (2016) posits that “For Vietnam, periods of Chinese expansionism have always posed existential threats,” and Vietnamese scholar Le Hong Hiep (2016, 30) writes that “In the past, it [Vietnam] had to unflinchingly struggle for its own survival and national identity in the face of a more powerful and inherently expansionist China. As such, China was perceived as a permanent security threat that the country had to keep an eye on.”

We make these claims by introducing and building upon a unique data set, the “Early Modern East Asian Wars Dataset,” which measures wars and other violence in the region from 1365 to 1789, a 424-year period. This data set is specifically designed to be as social scientific as possible and to be as compatible with existing data sets as possible, such as the Correlates of War (COW). To the original data set, which documented conflict incidents in early modern China and Korea, we have now added data from Vietnam's historical annals. For this, we rely on a key nineteenth-century Vietnamese language primary source, 欽定越史通鑒綱目 [“The imperially ordered annotated text completely reflecting the history of Viet”], originally commissioned in 1859 and last published in 1884, referred to hereafter as the “IHV” (Phan 1969). The IHV was written during the Nguyen dynasty prior to French colonialism in Vietnam and thus provide a fascinating perspective on how the Vietnamese people of the period viewed themselves and their foreign relations.<sup>2</sup> The specificity and granular detail in this data set is unprecedented in the IR literature and substantially increases our knowledge of premodern East Asian IR. The Vietnamese source introduced

in this article not only forms the basis of a unique and highly detailed new data set covering violence in early modern East Asia, it also enables broader analysis of East Asian conflicts beyond the typical focus on China, Korea, and Japan, and even comparison with the COW, or the European historical experience.

Addressing scholarly debates about early modern East Asian IR is important for a number of reasons that speak to fundamental theoretical issues in IR scholarship. Perhaps most importantly, this emerging literature about the tributary system lends clear empirical support to the existence and importance of hierarchy as an organizing principle in international systems. Overwhelmingly, the debate about hierarchy and anarchy has focused on the contemporary international system. Our research directly expands study of the variety of international systems beyond the European or contemporary system by looking at an enduring, influential system, thus making our IR discipline more “international.” By focusing closely on a key relationship in premodern East Asia, we provide an “out of sample” test of hierarchy. This not only confirms the utility of hierarchy as a theoretical concept but also adds to the conceptual clarity of hierarchy by providing clear observable implications.

This article also makes a major contribution to the scholarly measurement of war and other forms of violence in IR. To date, most of the attempts to systematically measure and account for war have focused on the contemporary era, perhaps most notably the COW project. This research program is vibrant but tends to be limited to studying the wars from 1816 to present. There is almost no scholarship that attempts to use modern social scientific coding rules and evidentiary standards to systematically measure war and other violence in the premodern era. This data set, which was constructed using as self-consciously rigorous standards as possible, provides scholars with a wealth of new data about war that can truly provide cross-temporal as well as cross-sectional data.

The article proceeds as follows. Theory: Hierarchic international systems section reviews the theoretical literature on hierarchy as a phenomenon, deriving a series of observable implications about self-restraint, diplomacy, war, and domestic politics such as rebellion, and foreign intervention in hierarchic relationships. The “Early Modern East Asian War” data set section introduces the “Early Modern East Asian Wars Data Set,” discusses the source material, addresses questions of historiography, and explains measurement and coding decisions. Summary of the Data section summarizes the empirical patterns revealed in the IHV and situates the data and the issue of history within the wider historical literature on Vietnam. The Tributary System as a Hierarchic International Order Now section describes the tributary system of IR in China–Vietnam relations in detail, exploring diplomacy, war, and domestic politics. The concluding section draws larger implications and further directions for scholarship.

## **Theory: Hierarchic International Systems**

A growing number of scholars have argued that international systems are often characterized by inequalities and differentiation, not sameness (Adler-Nissen

2015; Phillips and Sharman 2015). In this new literature, states are differentiated according to functions, specializations, and degrees of authority among them. These differentiations and inequalities lead to relations of superordination and subordination among states—that is, hierarchies. While hierarchy can be imposed purely by coercion, it is also common for hierarchy to involve elements of legitimate authority. Hegemony, for example, is increasingly being interpreted as a type of hierarchy. More than simple military predominance, Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990, 283) argue that “the exercise of power—and hence the mechanism through which compliance is achieved—involves the projection by the hegemon of a set of norms and their embrace by leaders in other nations.” Lake (2007) has highlighted the “relational” aspect of authority that rests upon a bargain that precedes the creation of formal institutions. For Lake, authority rests on “a bargain between the ruler and the ruled premised on the former’s provision of a social order of value sufficient to offset the latter’s loss of freedom” (p. 54).

This section will explore what hierarchy looks like and derive observational expectations about a number of facets of hierarchy. This is not intended to be a comparison of anarchy and hierarchy but rather an exploration of hierarchy. However, at times, the contrasting expectations that would arise from hierarchy are so stark that the comparison is inevitable. To that end, the contrast of anarchy and hierarchy can illuminate features of hierarchy that otherwise might not be so clearly observable.

### *Self-restraint and Hierarchy*

The central question about hierarchy is how a more powerful unit and less powerful unit can craft a stable relationship. The most consequential type of relationship comes in a system in which there is one dominant power. Unipolarity describes a specific type of distribution of material capabilities, whereas hierarchy or hegemony refers to a political and social relationship in which the most powerful unit and the weaker units agree on their relative positions in an asymmetrical power structure. Realism, with its focus on the distribution of material capabilities among states, predicts that hierarchy is impossible. But realism also has two contradictory hypotheses for how smaller units should behave toward a unipolar power. Either the predominant power will cause other units to balance against it or the unipole will expand and conquer other units until it is an empire. For example, Mearsheimer (2014, 337) predicts unfettered expansion: “Unbalanced bipolarity is not a useful category...that system is likely to disappear quickly, because the stronger state is likely to conquer its weaker rival.”

In contrast, Waltz Kenneth (2000, 55-56) predicts balancing will occur quickly: “both friends and foes will react as countries always have to threatened or real predominance of one among them: they will work to right the balance.” In either case, realism sees unipolarity as a temporary phenomenon. Similarly, most mainstream applications of the bargaining theory of war, for example, conclude that it is

extremely difficult for a predominant power to craft a credible commitment not to renege on any agreement it makes with a weaker power.

Yet there is just as much theoretical reason to believe that under certain conditions, an unequal system with one predominant power could prove to be quite stable. More than the material asymmetry between units, what is important are the intentions and values of the predominant power. A superpower that behaves with self-restraint is less likely to cause fear or balancing in secondary units than one that does not. As Finnemore (2009, 59) notes, in a unipolar system, “material constraints are small. Much is determined by social factors, notably the identity of the unipole and the social fabric of the system it inhabits.”

Why would a unipole engage in self-restraint? Mattern and Zarakol (2016, 636) observe that the bulk of research about hierarchy “has focused on superordinate states, and in particular, the incentives they face to exercise self-restraint in spite of their right to govern through power as they see fit.” For example, Ikenberry (2011, 61-62) argues that stable hierarchy emerges when the predominant actor engages in “enlightened self-interest, engaging in self-restraint and binding themselves to agreed-upon rules and institutions.” Walt (2005, 141) also emphasizes self-restraint in explaining why counterbalancing did not form: “There are clear signs that U.S. power is making other states uncomfortable and encouraging them to search for various ways to limit U.S. dominance.... Whether such efforts will grow in number and in significance, however, will depend largely on what the United States chooses to do.... In particular, will most states see U.S. intentions as comparatively benign, or will they believe that U.S. intentions are aggressive?”

Much of this theory may be unobservable *ex ante*. Our goal in this article is not to theorize about when and why a predominant or aspiring power would engage in self-restraint. Rather, this research is interested in exploring what an enduring hierarchy looks like and how it operates. This leads to a definition of hierarchy:

Hierarchy: a political contract that includes provisions that resolve distributional issues between the two parties (which could include questions about the distribution of power in the bargaining model), construct some set of governing arrangements to handle future disputes, and have some delegation of political authority from the subordinate to the superior.

The delegation of political authority helps to separate hierarchy from an international organization, and the endurance of these contracts—stability—is linked instead to their ability to resolve the commitment problem. Given a situation in which a dominant and subordinate unit craft a mutual agreement about their relative positions in the hierarchy, we can derive a number of observable implications for what that hierarchy should look like. Bracketing how such a credible commitment to self-restraint and how a legitimate authority relationship could obtain, it is possible to explore what a hierarchic relationship should look like if two sides are able to craft one. Most centrally, it should be possible to identify the presence of mutual

recognition of their relative positions in the hierarchy. If authority includes legitimacy, then the delegation component of this definition also provides a way to link to questions of explicit recognition of the hierarchy. Signaling acceptance of the bargain, and recognition of the hierarchy itself, could be informal and implicit but will usually be explicit and institutionalized on both sides:

**Hypothesis 1:** In a stable hierarchy, explicit recognition of relative rank and the hierarchy itself will exist on both sides.

We can also hypothesize about observable implications and the comparative statics relative to other arrangements that should obtain if there is credible self-restraint and a clear hierarchy. There are a large number of possible dependent variables implied in hierarchy. The most prominent one, but one we do not address here, is whether hierarchy implies peace. This is simply for empirical reasons: in the 400 years studied here, China was in a hierarchic relationship with Vietnam. The only empirical way to test hierarchy peace is to find a time when China was not in a hierarchic relationship with Vietnam, which is outside the scope of our data.

However, we can explore a number of other dependent variables implied in hierarchy. Most importantly, if there is hierarchy, active attempts at conquest by the larger power should be rare, as should be active attempts at balancing by the smaller power. To be sure, realism never has provided testable propositions for how much conflict is enough. This is realism's fault, not ours, and it is unfalsifiable. The frustrating inability to pin down falsifiable realist hypotheses has been well-documented over the years (Wohlforth et al. 2009). Nevertheless, that should not stop us from making a careful argument about whether two units are concerned about war or not. Unipoles last longer, and are stable, when they are legitimate. That is, how much conflict does anarchy predict and how much conflict does hierarchy predict? Interstate war is always a rare event, but the realist scholars quoted do provide a number of clear observable hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 2:** Hierarchy should be longer lived than unipolarity without hierarchy.

**Hypothesis 3** (the Mearsheimer Hypothesis): If there is no hierarchy, then the more powerful unit should try to conquer the weaker unit.

**Hypothesis 4** (the Waltz Hypothesis): If there is no hierarchy, then smaller units should balance against the most powerful unit through defensive preparations against the more powerful unit and be actively engaged in assessing each other's relative capabilities and intentions.

**Hypothesis 5** (the Walt Corollary): Absent hierarchy, smaller units should cooperate and ally in order to balance against the most powerful unit in the system.

The converse of these hypotheses would lead one to conclude that a hierarchy obtains. That is, if two units clearly identify each other in a hierarchy, if their relationship is long-lived, if they show few attempts at conquest or balancing, and if there is a relative paucity of military preparations, planning, and assessment, we would conclude that the two units have crafted a stable and clear hierarchic relationship.

### *Rebellion and Intervention under Hierarchy*

Hierarchy consists of more than simply self-restraint by the hegemon, explicit recognition of the hierarchy, and less war. The theoretical literature has identified other aspects to hegemony, in particular ways in which hierarchy can systematically affect rebellion and external intervention. Cunningham (2016) argues that hierarchy affects the outbreak and intensity of civil war—potential rebels anticipate that the subordinate state will receive intervention from the dominant state, making the costs of civil war too high to contemplate. Cunningham writes that “if leaders of subordinate states give up sovereignty to dominant states to assure protection...then subordinate states also (or even primarily) enter into hierarchical relationships to attain protection against the loss of power due to internal violence” (p. 318). This largely accords with McDonald (2015, 566), who points to the pacifying effect of hierarchy, writing that “hierarchical membership can reduce the likelihood that a subordinate state participates in a military conflict against another state that is either inside or outside of the larger political consortium.”

**Hypothesis 6:** If there is a stable hierarchy, then intervention by the dominant power will be welcomed by the subordinate unit and aimed at stabilizing the leadership of the subordinate unit against internal challenges.

### *Institutional Form and Emulation under Hierarchy*

Part of hierarchy would lead to the expectation that there would be explicit recognition of hierarchy on both sides. In fact, McDonald (2015, 578) argues that great powers use their hierarchical relationships to “shape the domestic institutional structure *and* foreign policy choices of subordinate states.” McDonald argues that “hierarchy can produce institutional similarity and peace” (p. 56). This focus on the importance of hierarchy for domestic politics is echoed in recent scholarship by Lee. Lee (2016b, 329) argues that the “dominant logic in the literature is that hegemony is a product of the agency of the preponderant state and is built by the activities of this one actor.... Varying responses to hegemonic authority are [actually] determined by a combination of domestic political needs and the degree to which hegemonic ideas resonate with local notions of legitimacy.” Both these scholars find that in hierarchy, the dominant power serves as a model for domestic institutional emulation by the subordinate units.



**Hypothesis7:** Institutional similarity through emulation or imposition is one consequence of accepting hierarchy.

These hypotheses lend themselves to a mix of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation. Some, such as the hypothesis about explicit recognition by the units, rely on careful examination of documents and case studies. Others, such as the frequency and scale of conflict, are more easily measured and counted.

In the subsequent section, we introduce a new data set that provides a granular measure of conflict in Vietnam over an almost five-century period. We examine the findings of this data set and then supplement that data set with a careful evaluation of the existing historical literature on premodern Vietnam's foreign relations as well as examining primary sources from both the Chinese and the Vietnamese courts. The evidence overwhelmingly leads to the conclusion that Vietnam and China were engaged in an explicit, mutually recognized hierarchical relationship. The two countries conducted their relations through the institutions and norms of the tributary system of IR that was extant at the time. Vietnam held little fear of Chinese conquest, and Vietnam did not balance against China. Vietnam also did not ally with other small powers such as the Cham to balance against China.

## The “Early Modern East Asian War” Dataset

In this article, we rely on a Vietnamese language source to build a regional data set of wars and other violence in early modern East Asia. While Kang and his colleagues have previously created data sets using classical Chinese and Korean sources, the data set we constructed and introduced in this piece based on the IHV complements their work and allows for an extraordinary range of comparison and allowing for differentiation between external and internal conflicts (Kang 2010, chap. 5; Kang, Shaw, and Fu 2016). The Vietnamese data set we constructed covers events from 1365 to 1789, a period of 424 years. We chose this seemingly arbitrary time range for three main reasons. First, this period covers the Ming and the Qing dynasties in China and thus corresponds neatly with the existing data set by Kang and his coauthors. Secondly, this time period covers a remarkably long stretch of Vietnamese history, encompassing many of the most important events in Sino-Vietnamese tributary relations. As such, we are confident that this database captures much of what is most important in the study of war and rebellion in precolonial Vietnam. Finally, while it would have been ideal to perhaps create a database covering an even greater span of Vietnamese history, which was simply not realistic within the time frame available.

The Vietnamese court kept imperial records just like their Chinese and Korean counterparts did, and these records remain as an invaluable source for those interested in studying patterns of war and diplomacy in early modern East Asia. The IHV is particularly useful as it provides a year-by-year account of both internal and external conflicts in Vietnam.

The IHV is an account of ancient and premodern Vietnamese history written in classical Chinese characters in the annalistic style, drafted in 1859 and formally published in 1884.<sup>3</sup> The compilation of the IHV took twenty-eight years in total. The first draft of the IHV was edited and compiled by a group of scholars affiliated with the Nguyễn triều Quốc sử quán (阮朝國史館; Academic Historica of the Nguyen Dynasty) led by Phan Thanh Giản (潘清簡)<sup>4</sup> under the order and supervision of Emperor Tự Đức (嗣德), who was genuinely interested in academic works and a keen researcher of Confucianism. Based on the solid foundation laid by Phan Thanh Giản and colleagues, Nguyễn Thông (阮通) and other prominent scholars thoroughly reviewed and proofread the first draft of the IHV, verified the historical sources on which the IHV relied, and enriched the historical description of the IHV. The draft was finalized in 1881 and subsequently sent to twelve calligraphers for scribing. Upon approval from the then Vietnamese emperor (Kiến Phúc; 建福), the IHV was released in 1884. Unfortunately, Emperor Tự Đức did not live long enough to read the final version of the IHV, despite having commissioned it. Historian Keith Taylor (2013, 628) cites the IHV as one of his key primary sources, calling it “an erudite collection of all available information from Chinese and Vietnamese texts.”

In the Online Appendix, we discuss compilation and potential issues regarding the IHV. There are limitations to any historical source, however, and the IHV is the best source available to study premodern Vietnamese history for its comprehensiveness and inclusion of miscellaneous sources (Ge, Zhen, and Zhao 1995; Wu 1998; Zhang 1974). All other possible sources were almost equally biased and could not possibly match the IHV in terms of historical comprehensiveness.

### *Coding and Description of the IHV Data*

We have attempted to bring our data set into conformity with the COW project and other standard data sets used by scholars of contemporary war. Specifically, we coded the parties involved in each incident documented by the IHV and, when possible, we coded which party initiated the war. Often what matters more to researchers is not whether a country is involved in a war, but why the war started and what the initiator’s intentions were. However, we found it difficult in many cases to establish a clear instigator–target dichotomy, since the contemporary accounts likely contained significant bias and, unlike COW, our data set deals with such dissimilar political units as nomadic groups, pirates, and local bandits. Our database also provides a brief summary of each incident in Vietnamese and English as well as the page in the IHV used to construct each incident, with the aim of making our coding more transparent and replicable.

We coded the IHV in two key categories: participants and interaction type. One key innovation in this data set is that the new coding scheme allows us to identify conflict dyads and, in some cases, triads. In this way, scholars can use the data set to isolate China–Vietnam interactions, Lao–Vietnam interactions, and so on, rather than simply keying their searches on a single country.

For participants, we coded six types of political units:

1. *Nomads*, which includes all the societies in the vast Central Asian steppe—including Tibetan polities as well as the range of Mongol, Khitan, and other peoples on the steppe
2. *Wakō* (倭寇, 왜구) or pirates (Korean: *waegu*, Chinese: *wokou*, English: pirates, but literally “bandits from Japan”)
3. *Nascent national states of Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China*
4. *Internal revolt* (peasants, rebellions)
5. *Other dynasty/dynastic change*
6. *Intraelite faction*

Besides the type of political unit of the participant, we also coded the country to which the participant belonged. The country codes for China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Champa, and Laos are as follows:

1. China
2. Korea
3. Vietnam
4. Japan
5. Champa
6. Laos

We developed a coding scheme that combines the political unit code and the country code. The participant code is composed of two digits. The first digit is determined by the political unit code and the second digit by the country code. For example, a rebellion in Yen Lang is coded as 43, in which 4 implied that it is an internal rebellion group and 3 is the country code for Vietnam. We coded nation-state actors of Vietnam (e.g., the Later Le Dynasty) as 33 in that they are nascent national-state actors (political unit code—3) of Vietnam (country code—3). The Ming dynasty is coded as 31, with 3 indicating that it is a nascent nation-state actor and 1 indicating it belongs within the country code of China.

We also coded six types of interactions:

1. *Border skirmishes* (not intended as conquest)
2. *Interstate wars* (wars of conquest or major mobilizations)
3. *Pirate raids*
4. *Non-Vietnamese conflicts* (incidents that did not involve Vietnamese dynasties or Vietnamese diplomacy)
5. *Internal conflict* (farmers’ riots, rebellions, and mutinous provincial officials)
6. *Regime consolidation* (incidents in which one dynasty was establishing control)

Conflicts were coded as border skirmishes when they were the result of local conditions not aimed at major territorial expansion or did not involve major mobilizations. Given that the IHV did not contain an actual casualty count for each incident, we could not use the widely accepted minimum 1,000 battle deaths threshold as the criterion to distinguish border skirmishes and wars. The distinction was instead made through our qualitative reading of the evidence at hand. It should also be noted that the dividing line between simple low-level skirmishing and full-scale war is not always self-evident or an easy coding decision.

Examples of entries coded as “internal or domestic” include:

- Monks rebel against the Trần Dynasty in 1389,
- Tribes in Tuyên Quang rebel in 1440, and
- Fighting between the Mạc forces and the Later Lê forces in 1525.

Examples of entries coded as “border skirmishes” include:

- A Champa incursion into Hóa Châu in 1444,
- An attack by Hắc La Kingdom (a tribe located in modern Yunnan) against the Later Lê government in 1508, and
- An attempt by the Later Lê government to fortify the border against a Qing nobleman’s incursion in 1701.

Examples of entries coded as “war” include:

- The Ming troops’ capture of Đông Đô from the Hồ dynasty government in 1406,
- The fall of the Champa capital to Later Lê forces in 1446, and
- The battles between Qing troops and Tây Sơn rebels in 1788 to 1789.

## **Summary of the Data**

The findings from the IHV are quite revealing. Of the 279 total incidents of violence reported from 1365 to 1789, 31.2 percent were external, while 68.8 percent dealt with internal violence of some kind (Table 1). In other words, by far the Vietnamese court was more concerned with internal than external threats to its survival. Of the internal violence, there was roughly the same number of internal revolts (35.8 percent) as regime contestations (31.9 percent).

In terms of who is listed in the IHV, China features in 8.4 percent of entries, Champa in 5.4 percent, and Laos in 1.1 percent (Table 2). Again, the overwhelming number of entries focuses on internal contestation such as rebellious groups in Vietnam (10.9 percent), challenges to the existing ruler (14.5 percent), or intraelite factions within Vietnam (10.5 percent).

**Table 1.** Summary of IHV Data Set: Type of Vietnamese Conflict, 1365 to 1789.

Interaction	Counts of Incidents	Percentage of External Subtotal	Percentage of Total Entries
Border skirmish	18	20.7	6.5
Interstate war	69	79.3	24.7
External subtotal	87	100	31.2
Conflict does not involve Vietnamese dynasties	3		1.1
Internal revolt or conflict	100		35.8
Regime contestation	89		31.9
Total incidents	279		100

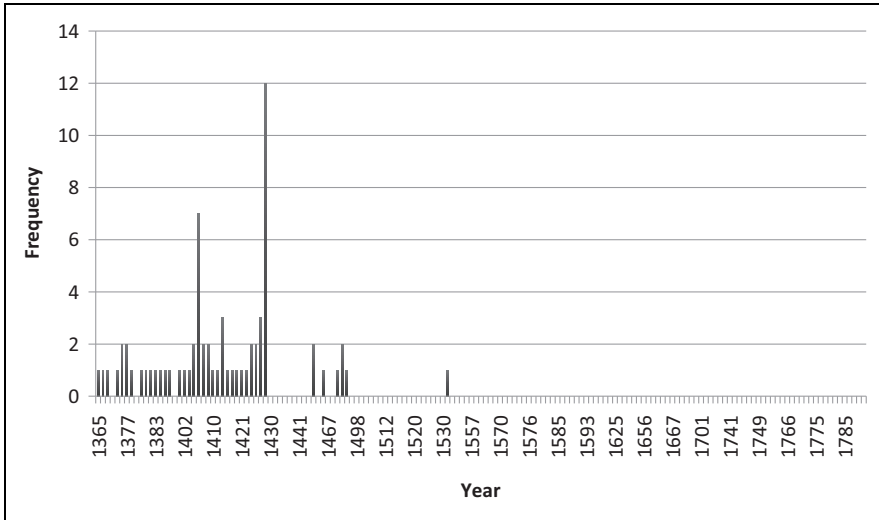
**Table 2.** Summary of IHV Data Set: Participants in Vietnamese Conflict, 1365 to 1789.

Participant	Counts of Participation	Percentage of Total Participation
State actor of Vietnam	257	45.9
State actor of China	47	8.4
State actor of Champa	30	5.4
State actor of Lao	6	1.1
Tribal people in Vietnam	12	2.1
Tribal people in China	7	1.3
Rebellion group in Vietnam	61	10.9
Dynastic actor challenging the existing ruler	81	14.5
Intraelite faction in Vietnam	59	10.5
Total count of participation	560	100

**Table 3.** Years in Which Conflicts Occurred, Vietnam, 1365 to 1789.

Measure	Border Skirmish	Interstate War	Internal Revolt	Regime Contestation	Conflict Does Not Involve Vietnamese Dynasties
Count of years	15	39	56	64	3
Percentage of total years	3.5	9.2	13.2	15.1	0.8

Because the IHV counts incidents, and not simply years, one event may have multiple entries within a single year. When evaluating the frequency of events, counting the years in which various events occurred provides a perhaps better measure (Table 3). Border skirmishes occurred in a total of fifteen years or 3.5 percent of the four-century period. Interstate war occurred in thirty-nine years or 9.2 percent of total years. The Vietnamese court was far more often involved in dealing with internal revolts (fifty-six years) or regime contestation (sixty-four years).



**Figure 1.** Interstate War, Vietnam, 1365 to 1789.

Figure 1 shows that the Vietnamese court dealt with interstate wars far more often early in its history. The majority of entries deal with the two decade Ming Chinese occupation of Vietnam from 1407 to 1428, which is clearly indicated in Figure 2. Indeed, the IHV powerfully corroborates the more qualitative assessments discussed earlier that portrayed Vietnam's relations with China during this four-century period as being primarily cultural and diplomatic rather than military and security-centric.

In contrast, regime contestation attempts or internal revolts were chronic issues that occupied the Vietnamese court, demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

In sum, the key takeaway is that China did not appear to figure prominently in Vietnamese security concerns over this four-hundred-year period.

## The Tributary System as a Hierarchic International Order Now

The new data in this article provide unprecedented granular clarity on internal and external conflict involving Vietnam and have implications for hierarchy more generally. Most importantly, we note that Hypotheses 1 and 2—hierarchy can stabilize a relationship between two units of unequal power, hierarchy will usually be explicitly accepted, and hierarchy can be long-lasting—are clearly present in China–Vietnam relations during the time period in question.

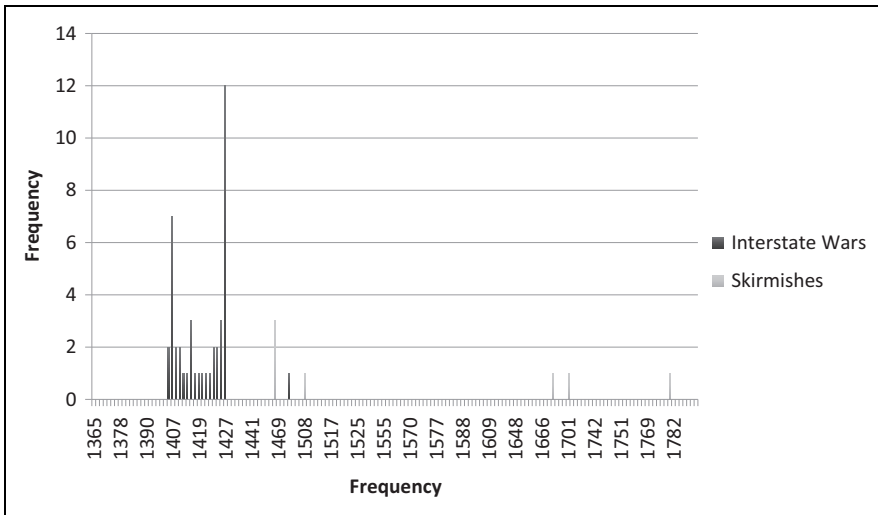


Figure 2. Chinese interactions in Vietnam, 1365 to 1789.

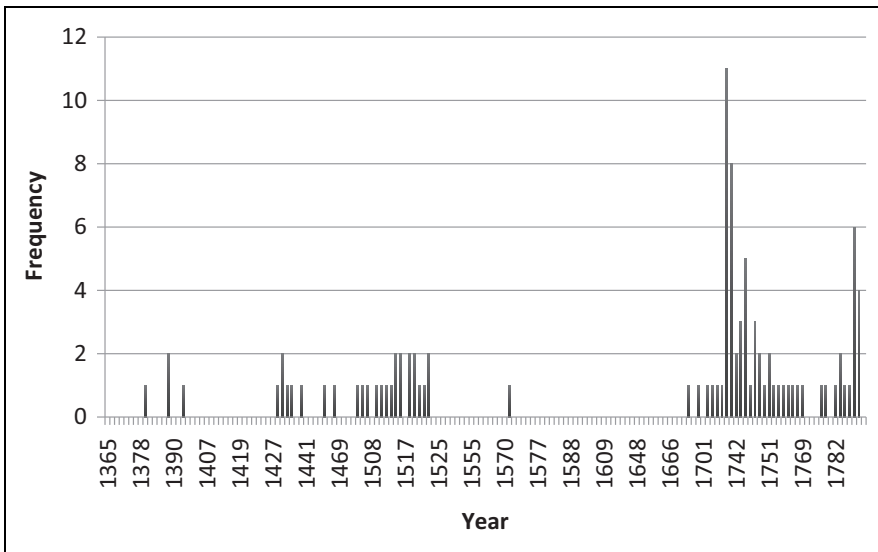
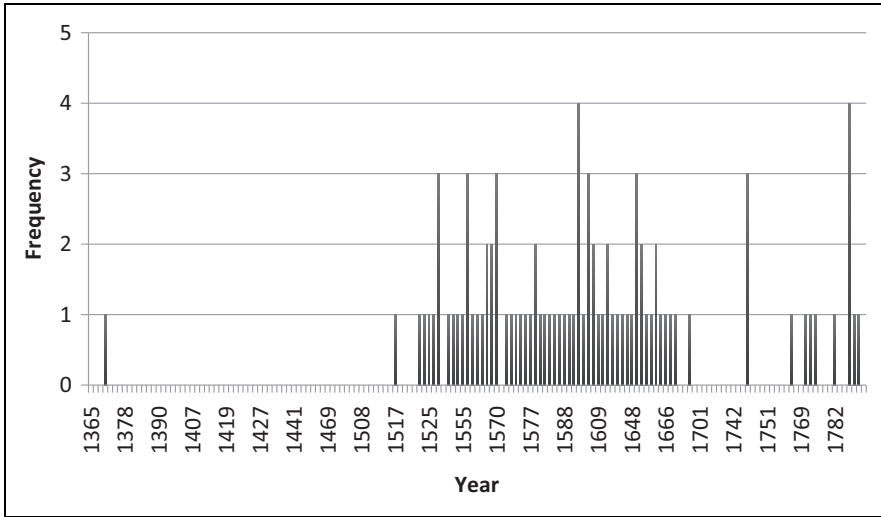


Figure 3. Internal conflict, Vietnam, 1365 to 1789.

### Diplomacy

Hypothesis 1—explicit recognition of the hierarchy—actually began long before the time researched in this study and continued essentially unquestioned until the arrival of the French in the nineteenth century. Vietnam became independent from China in



**Figure 4.** Regime contestation, Vietnam, 1365 to 1789. Border skirmishes were all between tribal people in China and the Later Le government.

tenth century as the Tang Chinese dynasty was collapsing. A local warlord in the Red River plain, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh (丁部領), sent emissaries to the Song court in 973 and 975 AD, quickly receiving investiture. Investiture was an enduring diplomatic protocol where one party would explicitly accept subordinate tributary status and which recognized the legitimate sovereignty of another political unit, and explicitly identified the king in that subordinate tributary state as the legitimate ruler (Li 2003). Successive rulers received investiture at varying levels of status and envoys “regularly carried tribute to the Song court” (Taylor 2013, 49). For example, Lê Hoàn (黎桓) sent tribute to the Song emperor in 983, in return being granted an appanage of over 4,000 families (Kiernan 2017, 146). Anderson (2013, 274) observes:

By 1086 a clear border had been mapped out between the two states, the first such court-negotiated border in China’s history...the existence of a formal border between the two polities was successfully challenged only once in the next eight hundred years.

The Dai Viet (Vietnam) formally became a tributary state of China in 1174, when Emperor Lý Anh Tông (李英宗) of Dai Viet received investiture from Emperor Xiaozong (宋孝宗) of Song dynasty in China. Particularly important was the negotiated status within the tributary system that established Vietnamese regional independence while maintaining a check on Chinese expansionism. Indeed, while the first Ming Emperor Hongwu (洪武) cited the Mongols in the north as the primary existential threat that needs to be contained, he also explicitly listed Vietnam (along



with Korea, Japan, and twelve other states) in his guidelines for future generations as “not to be invaded” (Chen and Liu 1986, vol. 6, 487).

Hypothesis 2 suggests that hierarchy is more long lasting than unipolarity. Put differently, all realists agree that unipolarity should be short-lived. By any standard, a relationship that lasts eight centuries is an exceedingly long time, one that almost all realists would agree should not survive between two actors of vastly differing material power. The Vietnam–China relationship clearly did not “quickly come to an end.” This is not definitive evidence of a hierarchy, but it is nonetheless powerful probative evidence.

The explanation for this remarkable stability rests largely on the pacifying nature of the hierarchic tributary system in early modern East Asia. The East Asian tribute system was an international system, comprising an enduring, stable, and hierarchic system with China clearly the hegemon, in which cultural achievement was as important as economic or military prowess. Built on a mix of legitimate authority and material power, the China-derived tribute system provided a normative social order that also contained credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority.

This order was explicit and formally unequal but informally equal: secondary states did not believe nor did they call themselves equal to China, yet they had substantial latitude in their actual behavior. China stood at the top of the hierarchy, and there was no intellectual challenge to the rules of the game until the nineteenth century and the arrival of the Western powers. Korean, Vietnamese, and even Japanese elites consciously copied Chinese institutional and discursive practices in part to craft stable relations with China, not to challenge it.

The core of the tribute system was a set of institutions and norms that regulated diplomatic and political contact, cultural and economic relations, and in particular, explicitly stated a relationship between two political units. In contrast to the modern Westphalian ideal of equality among nation-states, the tribute system emphasized the “asymmetry and interdependence of the superior/inferior relationship,” and inequality was the basis for all relations between two units (Hevia 1995, 124). The tribute system was formalized in two key institutions: diplomatic recognition by the superior state, known as “investiture,” and the sending of embassy envoys to the superior state. Tribute embassies served a number of purposes—they stabilized the political and diplomatic relationship between the two sides, provided information about important events and news, formalized rules for trade, and allowed intellectual and cultural exchange among scholars. Missions themselves, composed of scholar-officials, interpreters, physicians, alternates, messengers, and assistants, could comprise hundreds of people.

Anderson (2007, 66) notes, “Tribute missions were important opportunities to negotiate the balance of status and authority existing between the Chinese and Vietnamese rulers.” Countries explicitly ranked each other on a hierarchy, and there were explicit expectations, rituals, and rights associated with different places on the hierarchy. The sending and receiving of tribute missions was carefully institutionalized, and countries of higher rank were allowed more frequent missions and also

**Table 4.** Vietnamese Tributary Missions to China Conducted during the Ming Dynasty.

Reign Name	Reign Years	Number of Tributary Missions
Hongwu 洪武	1368–1398	13
Jianwen 建文	1398–1402	0
Yongle 永樂	1403–1424	1
Hongxi 洪熙	1425	0
Xuande 宣德	1426–1435	3
Zhengtong 正統	1436–1449	9
Jingtai 景泰	1450–1456	4
Tianshun 天順	1457–1464	5
Chenghua 成化	1465–1487	10
Hongzhi 弘治	1488–1505	7
Zhengde 正德	1506–1521	5
Jiajing 嘉靖	1522–1566	4
Longqing 隆慶	1567–1572	0
Wanli 萬曆	1573–1620	8
Tianqi 泰昌	1621–1627	2
Chongzhen 崇禎	1628–1644	3
Total	1368–1644	74

Source: Li (2003, 42); Zhang (1974).

given greater privileges for those missions. Most explicit were the number and frequency of tribute missions that China allowed other countries to send. Vietnam, the most highly ranked country in Southeast Asia, was allowed frequent tribute missions, and they were of higher quality than other countries were allowed, with greater rights and greater trading privileges, as well. This links directly to Hypothesis 1: Mutual recognition, particularly from the subordinate state, is legitimizing. And so if Vietnam continues to engage in tributary missions, then it continually legitimizes Chinese authority and hierarchy is present.

As Table 4 indicates, from 1368 to 1644, seventy-four tributary missions were conducted, averaging one in every 3.7 years. Table 5 shows the frequency of Vietnamese tributary missions to China from 1644 to 1839. Throughout this time frame, forty-two tributary missions were conducted, for an average of one in each 4.6 years. Tribute missions were massive affairs, involving hundreds of scholar-officials and supporting staff. The distance to Beijing was vast; and these missions would spend months in transit. They would then typically spend six months in Beijing exchanging information, holding meetings, and conducting business. As a scholar-official, to be selected to serve on a tribute mission was the capstone honor to a career.

Investiture was the other central element to the tributary system. The more powerful unit would symbolically approve or “invest” a foreign ruler as the legitimate ruler of his kingdom. Although nominally symbolic, investiture involved requesting the approval of the more powerful unit. Vietnamese rulers accepted investiture from China throughout the entire time period under study. In fact, investiture, or official

**Table 5.** Vietnamese Tributary Missions to China Conducted during the Qing Dynasty.

Reign Name	Reign Years	Number of Tributary Missions
Shunzhi 順治	1644–1661	1
Kangxi 康熙	1662–1722	13
Yongzheng 雍正	1723–1735	3
Qianlong 乾隆	1736–1795	15
Jianqing 嘉慶	1796–1820	5
Daoguang 道光	1821–1839	5
Total	1644–1839	42

Source: Fairbank and Teng (1941, table 5); Li (2003, 74).

recognition of the legitimacy of a ruler in the eyes of the Chinese emperor, was a key element in diplomacy and a key element for domestic legitimacy. The following sections will show that the only three Chinese interventions into Vietnam were prompted when a properly invested Vietnamese king requested Chinese help to deal with internal rebellions. In sum, Vietnam and China existed for eight centuries in explicit, formally recognized unequal diplomatic relationship.

### *War and Hierarchy*

The relative absence of war, as well as patterns of military preparation in Vietnam and China, led to the conclusion that hierarchy characterized relations between the two sides. The Mearsheimer hypothesis—Hypothesis 3—that the stronger power should try to conquer the weaker power, finds little support in our data set. If China was as expansionist and exploitative as often asserted, then there should be ample evidence of war, invasion, and conflict in China–Vietnam relations. This expectation is clearly not supported by the empirical record.

There was only one Chinese attempt to conquer Vietnam during the time under study (1407–1427). Furthermore, that Chinese intervention came at the request of the properly invested Vietnamese leader who was facing an internal rebellion. The two-decade Chinese occupation of Vietnam was thus an anomaly in China–Vietnam relations (Whitmore 1977; Chan 1988). Although China had invested the Tran dynasty (1225–1400) as rulers of Vietnam, that dynasty began to lose control in the 1390s. In 1400, Hồ Quý Ly deposed a Tran king and declared himself founder of a new dynasty. A member of the Tran royal family appealed to China for help in overthrowing the usurper, and China initially sent troops and an envoy merely to restore a Tran as king. The Chinese party was ambushed and wiped out just over the border. The Yung-lo emperor was enraged by the ambush. He noted vehemently: “叢爾小丑，罪惡滔天，猶敢潛伏奸謀，肆毒如此。朕推誠容納，乃為所欺，此如不誅，兵則何用？ (The guilt of those shameful little wretches reaches up to the sky. They [The Annamese Court] have dared to ambush and be traitorous and vicious to this extent. I have seen sincere with them and they have deceived me. If

we do not destroy and punish them what are our armies for?)” (Lo 1979, 173). To avenge this humiliation, the Chinese sent a punitive force of 215,000 into Vietnam in 1407.

Taylor (2013, 175) notes that:

Vietnamese historians have unanimously viewed the experiment in Ming rule as a tale of woe with no redeeming features.... However, this was not a story with a pre-ordained narrative. It was initiated and abandoned as a result of decisions made in the Ming court.... Ming rule had a transforming effect on the development of Vietnamese culture and politics.

Lê Lợi (黎利)—one of Vietnam’s greatest heroes—fought a ten-year campaign against the Ming, in 1422 being “utterly defeated” and suing for peace. A few years later, successive Ming emperors decided that holding Vietnam was an unnecessary distraction (Taylor 2013, 183), preferring to return the relationship to a tributary one under a Vietnamese ruler. Unfortunately, unraveling two decades of Ming bureaucratic administration was not so easily done, and the withdrawal took years, hastened along by the return of Lê Lợi. In 1427, Lê Lợi defeated 100,000 Ming forces at the Chi Lang pass (Nguyen 2004, 63). Lê Lợi immediately became a tributary of China to ensure peace, telling the Ming “I will be content with my rank of vassal and pay tribute, as has been the custom” (Kiernan 2017, 197). In a face-saving move, Ming Emperor Xuande (宣德) wrote that “I am specially sending envoys with a seal and am ordering the Lê Lợi temporarily take charge of the affairs of the country (*guo*) of Annam and govern the people of the country” (Stuart-Fox 2003, 90). Taylor (2013, 191) writes that “an important matter was to regularize the tributary relationship with Ming. In 1431, the Ming court recognized Lê Lợi as king. Thereafter, relations with Ming were amicable and uneventful.”

As Brantly Womack (2006, 129) comments, “Although China remained suzerain of Vietnam and occasionally interfered in its politics, it no longer aspired to its territory.” The typical rejoinder to the almost complete absence of Chinese invasions could be that Vietnam simply balanced Chinese power and deterred it from attacking. Yet the Waltz balancing hypothesis (Hypothesis 4) predicts extensive balancing, military preparations, and military assessments between the two sides are also clearly absent in the Vietnamese case. There is in fact almost no record that Vietnam sent costly signals to China again and again about its resolve and preparations to fight. Vietnam did not invest heavily in fortifications and preparations for conflict with China. Indeed, there exists almost no evidence that the China–Vietnam relationship was one of military means. Womack (2006, 132-33) notes that “China provided an agenda of ‘best practices.’...it should be emphasized that if China were still an active threat, then Vietnam’s political task would have been military cohesion, and its intellectual task would have been one of differentiation from China [not emulation].” Put differently, historical Vietnam did not assiduously engage in the consolidation of military cohesion or differentiate itself from China precisely

because China was *not* perceived as an active and significant threat. Over four centuries of stability was maintained through diplomatic, not military means. The centuries of stability between China and Vietnam reflect the legitimacy of the system more than the military balance between the two states.

Even if there was not chronic war or endemic conflict between China and Vietnam, if Vietnam were constantly concerned about Chinese military invasion, then there should be ample and extensive discussion in the IHV about how to deal with China's military threat and possible military strategies and actions (The Waltz hypothesis, Hypothesis 4). Similarly, had China wanted to conquer Vietnam but simply lacked the power to do so, we should find Chinese court debates in the following centuries about whether to invade Vietnam and arguments about the futility of so doing. Yet, during both the Ming and Qing dynasties, the sporadic discussion in the Chinese court about Vietnam concerned "normal" events about an accepted political unit, not whether China could conquer Vietnam.

Records of the Vietnamese court's discussion about its relations with China are revealing for its emphasis on emulation, not distance. Evaluating how the subordinate unit—the Vietnamese—viewed their position in the world, and their identity requires exploring how they expressed themselves at that time. As the IHV reveals, China was viewed as a source of inspiration or as a country to emulate. Far more than military domination, Vietnam records show an admiration of China. Kelley (2005, 2) observes that "Vietnamese envoys passionately believed that they participated in what we would now call the Sinitic or East Asian cultural world, and that they accepted their kingdom's vassal status in that world."

The Walt hypothesis (Hypothesis 5)—that smaller countries will ally together to balance against a more powerful challenger—does not find support in the historical record. The logic of alliances and balancing should have seen Vietnam balance against China by allying with other smaller units such as the Chams or Siam. But rather than working together, each country had its own relationship with China, tributary or not. Indeed, at the start of the time under study, the Chams appealed to China for help against Vietnam, and China intervened briefly in attempting to sort out the fighting between the two. Rather than the Cham and Annamese allying together to balance Chinese power, they both appealed to China as the ultimate arbiter in their own relations. As the Vietnamese expanded slowly southward at the expense of the Champa, the Chams even came to pay tribute to the Dai Viet. Well into the eighteenth century, the Chams were paying tribute to the Vietnamese court (Taylor 2013, 321).

### *Domestic Politics: Rebellion and Intervention*

The history of Vietnam was as much about civil war and rebellion as it was about dealing with external powers. Perhaps most notable in terms of hierarchy was the pattern of rebellion and intervention in Vietnam. For centuries, the central political task in Vietnam was crafting political unity and dealing with civil war or rebellion;

in contrast, Vietnam–China relations were generally unremarkable. The few times that China did intervene in Vietnam follows a pattern: China only intervened Vietnam when the Chinese court felt the need to restore a fallen dynasty/state (*shing mie ji jiue*; 興滅繼絕). In this sense, every Chinese intervention into Vietnam was deemed legitimate because the invested rulers were overthrown by traitors and villains (Chen 2016). And the IHV clearly shows almost every Chinese intervention into Vietnam was requested by Vietnam first.

Hypothesis 6—that intervention will support the regime against rebellion—finds clear support in the data. There were only two major military interventions during the time in question. More significantly, in both of those interventions, the Chinese were initially invited in by their tributary in order to provide support for the regime against internal rebellion and insurgent. In 1788, the Chinese left immediately; in 1407, the Chinese ultimately decided to attempt to retain control of Vietnam. But the relevant point is that the initial impetus came from Vietnam, not China.

The 1788 Qing intervention was on behalf of Lê dynasty, which the Qing court had properly invested as legitimate rulers of Vietnam (Kiernan 2017, 261). In the late eighteenth century, rebel leader Nguyễn Huệ (阮惠) began to threaten the Lê dynasty court, and the king’s mother appealed to Beijing for support. Taylor (2013, 378) writes that “the Qianlong emperor was not interested in territorial expansion in the south, but, taking his duty as an overlord seriously, he approved a limited expedition to support Le dynasty forces in taking back their capital.” The Vietnamese ruler, Lê Duy Khiêm (黎維), was restored to his palace, where he:

...fruitlessly urged the Qing to advance against Nguyen Hue. Qing authorities were in the process of preparing to withdraw when.... Nguyen Hue rushed his armies north and pushed the Qing troops into and across the Red River.... Scholars assisting Nguyen Hue quickly negotiated peace with the Qing court, sending apologies, tribute, and appropriate words of submission. (Taylor 2013, 378)

There were also two minor Chinese interventions into the domestic politics of Vietnam during the time under study: 1540 and 1593. In 1540, the Mạc and the Lê had become rival dynasties with the Lê being the properly invested rulers according to the Ming court in Beijing. Both the Mạc and the Lê dynasty appealed to the Ming court for investiture as the legitimate ruler of Vietnam. Taylor (2013, 243) writes “the question of whether the Lê dynasty or the Mạc were the legitimate rulers of the vassal state of An Nam was ignored until 1537.” The Ming court ultimately decided that the Mạc should recognize the Lê dynasty as suzerain, which Mạc Đăng Dung, leader of the Mac regime, rejected. The Ming assembled a 100,000-man army on the border and prepared an expeditionary force against the Mạc in 1540. In response, Mac Dang Dung and forty of his officials crawled across the border bareheaded and requested to be allowed to submit to the Ming, yielding a small symbolic amount of territory to the Ming. The Ming army withdrew and recognized the Mạc as administrators of their territory, “albeit at a lower status in the scheme of tributary

relationships than had previously existed for the Lê dynasty.... it was a small price to pay for Ming recognition and for peace on the northern border” (Taylor 2013, 244).

In 1593, Mạc Mậu Hợp (莫茂洽), the fifth reigning emperor of the Mạc dynasty was killed by the force led by Lê Duy Đàm (黎維潭). Descendants of the Mạc turned to the Chinese court for help in the form of military intervention. After some internal debates, the Ming dynasty decided to neither “reject” the Lê dynasty nor “abandon” the Mạc. Descendants of the Mạc were placed in Cao Bằng, and Lê Duy Đàm was recognized as the administrator (Zheng 1996, 221).

Hypothesis 7 predicts that subordinate units will emulate the dominant unit. Certainly, China’s civilizational allure was widely copied throughout preindustrial East Asia and particularly in Vietnam. Neighboring states emulated Chinese practices for a number of reasons, two of which were as a means of domestic political and social control, as well as to manage foreign relations with China. Emulation actually had the opposite effect of ramifying the Chinese-dominated order. The “emulation” of Chinese practices occurred both out of genuine respect for Chinese innovations, but just as importantly, as a means of creating political cohesion in the home country. The Chinese influence on Vietnam is well known and needs little repeating here. Woodside (2006, 25) reminds us that “by no later than the fifteenth century Vietnamese rulers had joined Chinese and Korean ones in organizing their central administrations around six specialized ministries.” Taylor (2013, 165) notes that:

The fortunes of the Ly and Tran dynasties waxed and waned with the Song and Yuan dynasties...both sides carefully observed the tributary relationship. Books, medicine, theater, music, weapons, and government policies in the north were easily perceived, understood, and adopted in the south. Disorders and political troubles in the south were monitored and any potential for requiring or enabling intervention was evaluated in the north.

In short, there is considerable evidence, and indeed what might approach conventional wisdom among historians, that early modern Vietnam’s chief security concerns did not include China.

## Conclusion

The Western international system grew and spread out of something that preceded it that was quite different. Because of the triumph of the nation-state system, it is forgotten that other international orders have existed and might exist again. The current international system is actually a recent phenomenon in the scope of world history, but to date, it has generally been studied from within, that is, scholars studied European history to explain how this European model for IR developed over time. In this way, researching historical East Asia provides an opportunity to seek out genuine comparisons of international system systems and their foundational

components. Kelley (2005, 28) suggests that “It should be clear to the reader that the manner in which we view the world today—that is, as divided between equal nations, each of which takes pride in its own cultural uniqueness—is perhaps inappropriate for viewing the world of the East Asian past.”

Within this tributary international order, hierarchy and negotiated relative positions in that hierarchy served to stabilize relations. Vietnam, never larger than the size of one Chinese province, crafted centuries of stable relations with China. The data presented here powerfully confirm the relative peacefulness of the Vietnam–China relationship. Furthermore, that relationship was consciously maintained through a series of norms and institutions—such as investiture, tribute missions, and the active dispatch of diplomats and scholars—that allowed the two sides to learn about each other. Vietnam actively emulated China. Far from seeking to balance Chinese power or fearing Chinese invasion, Vietnamese elites actively sought to learn from and emulate what they considered to be civilization—that is, Chinese practices and ideas. Each side spoke from a common diplomatic, Confucian, vocabulary that served to make communication, negotiation, and compromise possible. The case of historical Vietnam–China relationship corroborates the claim that stability is possible if political entities are able to craft mutually legitimate understandings of status and work within that worldview.

This case study was a detailed exploration of a non-Western, historical example of a remarkably stable yet unequal relationship between two unlike political actors in an international order. As a vivid case study, the Vietnam–China relationship illuminates the ways in which hierarchy and international order can exist in international politics. The data presented in this research also provide an unprecedented granular view of war and other violence in premodern East Asia—data that can be used to explore any number of scholarly issues about domestic and international violence over a remarkably longtime, 400-year period. The database that is the basis of this research provides unprecedented detail into war, rebellion, and Vietnam’s relations with its neighbors. Combined with previous research on premodern Korea and China, this scholarship provides an important addition to our knowledge about war and violence in non-Western and premodern societies and international systems.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. We use the term “Vietnam” for ease of use and continuity, even though it is anachronistic. As Woodside (2006, 1) observes, “The Vietnamese generally did not call themselves ‘Vietnamese’ before the twentieth century, any more than the ‘ancient Greeks’ called themselves Greeks; but anachronisms cannot be avoided here.”
2. For the Chinese-language source, Kang 2010, chap. 5, introduces an 800-entry data set based on Fu (2003). Building on Kang (2010), Kang, Shaw, and Fu (2016) bring in a key Korean-language source based on Institute of Military History, ROK (1996).
3. Specifically, the IHV covers the historical records from the Hồng Bàng dynasty (around twenty-ninth century BC) of ancient history to the end of the Later Lê dynasty in 1789.
4. Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1876) was born into a noble Chinese–Vietnamese family. He was a noted historian and diplomat.

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