

*Studying China from the Communist Comrade's Eyes: The Diverse Tracks of Vietnam's Sinological Development**

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Abstract

How the small states bordering China study their giant neighbor and how they develop the discipline that brought crucial impacts to their China policies have been ignored by scholars in social sciences and area studies. This article focuses on Vietnam, a nation that has developed its own special characteristics of Sinology because of the country's distinctive historical experience and close ties with China. This study introduces the different but equally remarkable training styles of Vietnamese sinologists through two analytical threads, namely, systematic training and cultural heritage. In addition to presenting the cases of Vietnamese Sinology, this study also compares the cases of Sinological developments in other East Asian countries. Through investigation and comparison, the current research is optimistic that it can show how and why Vietnamese Sinology has maintained its richness and diversity

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despite the domestic and international political upheavals that this field has encountered. This research further argues that the diverse resources accumulated in the evolution of north and south Sinology enable Vietnam to maintain flexibility when interacting with China.

How small states in China's periphery construct their understandings about it and how China's image has been translated and functioned in the small states' managing relationships with China are research topics rarely touched upon by scholars in contemporary China studies.¹ In the era of globalization, studying China is never merely about the personal interests of individual scholars but "involves interactions between two sets of identities—those of the observers and those of China."² The development of Sinology is rarely irrelevant to the struggles of individual Sinologists when facing power structure and political upheavals.³ In addition, the research orientations and outcomes of Sinologists generally provide a hint for the potential directions of the bilateral relationship between a specific country/state and China. Many Sinologists in the states adjacent to China's borders play the role of mediators and assist political leaders in physically and intellectually managing relationships and solving disputes with Beijing. Nevertheless, studying China occasionally causes the suspicion that these scholars are "pro-China" and sympathize with Beijing's behaviors.⁴

Vietnam is one of the most critical countries that shares a border and extensive political and cultural commonalities with China. The trajectory of the Vietnamese Sinological development has unique meanings for investigating the consistency of a small state's China policies. These Sinologists grew up and gained their educations in an environment sharing so much in common with China. This study presents how the personal backgrounds of Vietnamese Sinologists and the historical and political environments that they have experienced shaped their intellectual preferences and built their identities and perspectives on China. The intellectual histories and characteristics of Vietnamese Sinologists have provided considerable inspiration to researchers who are either interested in the relationships between China and a neighboring communist regime or looking for a new angle for better understanding inter-state relations in East Asia. In terms of methodology, the interview transcripts and personal biographies of Sinologists are used as the main sources to support the arguments of this study. These sources as supported by articles and conference papers were