

# **China Among Unequals: Asymmetrical Foreign Relationships in Asia**

A review by

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The author has been working on the question of asymmetry in inter-state relations for over ten years. His understanding of the historical relationship between China and Vietnam was the starting-point. Although this particular lack of symmetry between the two has been well known to all scholars of the two countries, no one before has attempted systematically to examine the possibility of that relationship contributing to theories of international relations. To that extent, Womack's original attempt to formulate a new framework to explain and perhaps to devise new and realistic principles to guide the relations between unequal states is an important contribution in itself.

This collection of essays goes beyond China and Vietnam and provides some challenging ideas about how we might look at the world. The ideal that all nations and states are equal is an admirable one and, at a certain level of contact between states, that should be the standard that all states should aspire to. But everyone knows that the reality is far from such a condition of equality. Political, economic and military power is distributed very unevenly. Size of countries and populations are obviously different, so is the distribution of resources available to various states. Most states can live with the fiction of equality because the current international system has affirmed that this fiction is the best way for inter-state business to be conducted. There are very good reasons why most countries would prefer to keep that fiction alive in the very delicate area of international relationships.

On the other hand, there are times when the pretence stands in the way of mutual understanding and respect between nations and states and becomes a source for serious miscalculations. The author is concerned about our failure to understand that, and argues that looking closely at practices of state-to-state relations that took asymmetry as normal practice is a matter worthy of careful attention. He sets out to demonstrate through specific analysis of asymmetrical relationships that, when handled well, have produced long-term peace between countries. The historical evidence is impressive, but whether the present globalized world that has been built out of the idea of the equality of states can return to variable inequalities is not so clear. The author does not claim that a theory of asymmetry is applicable in current international relations. What he offers is a range of subtle arguments why the reality of inequality need not be denied or feared. He suggests that the fiction of equality could also be better handled when people admit it is fiction and draw on other theoretical thinking to render real inequality acceptable in practice.

The 20 chapters here are based on essays written over a ten-year period and most have already been published. The author has grouped them into four sections. The five essays in section one that sets out the general approach are particularly interesting. They each raises questions about major assumptions in current IR theories that are essentially drawing on research done in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; each also seeks to introduce some alternative ways of looking at existing theories. The second and third sections, consisting of five and four essays respectively, deal with Chinese ideas of foreign relations and then some examples of China's experiences dealing with the United States. The materials cover some familiar ground and he tries to link the experiences to the different perspectives that the recognition of actual asymmetry would bring. Although not always convincing to this reader, the skills the author shows in extending his argument enable the reader to pursue explanations of events that are different from those widely accepted today. Taken as a whole, these two sections offer fresh and original insights and deepen our understanding of some key developments in Sino-US relations.

The final section of six essays concentrates on China's relations with neighbouring Asian states. The author has already given us an excellent full-fledged study of the particularly complex relationship between China and Vietnam (*China and Vietnam: the politics of asymmetry*, 2006). Here he makes other comparisons: China's relations with Korea; with Cambodia; and with Southeast Asia in general. He even examines the special kind of asymmetry that governs Taiwan's position in Chinese eyes, a particularly difficult exercise that he handles with sensitivity. His concluding chapter is especially useful. It takes on the case of two of China's oldest and nearest neighbours, Korea and Vietnam, that had successfully managed their relationships with imperial China over centuries. He demonstrates that, although they both accepted the Chinese tributary system, they had adjusted to the system in quite different ways. This leads to his conclusion that asymmetry could be handled flexibly and there are constructive ways to allow large and small countries to live in relative peace.

All in all, the essays do not add a great deal that is new to what he has written about the special relations between China and Vietnam in his earlier authoritative study but, by testing his main arguments against a range of other examples, he has added new dimensions to the very stimulating and intriguing idea of asymmetry in inter-state relations. The published essays here are not easily accessible in the journals and volumes they were first published in. And there are some that have not yet been published. Thus the collection provides us with a chance to follow the theme into new realms and this is something really worthwhile. I am therefore very happy to recommend publication.