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Vietnam Field Study

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The Tokinese Alps: Geopolitics of Northern Vietnam

The Tokinese Alps lie to the north of Vietnam, bordering the Yunnan Province of China. The region includes notable sites like the villages Lao Cai and Sa Pa within the Lao Cai Province. It is home to many minorities of Vietnam, their villages lining the mountainous landscape that breeds rice fields.[[1]](#footnote-1) One would think looking at these villages and this rural lifestyle that this region has always been peaceful. Many forget that this tranquil area has seen centuries of fighting between China and Vietnam. The Tokinese Alps, while beautiful in their tranquil appearance, have seen their fair share of battles and attempts of conquests from the Chinese over the centuries, most notable being the Sino Vietnamese War in 1979. Sharing this border and the Tokinese Alps has negatively and positively shaped the relationship between China and Vietnam.

Conflict between China and Vietnam has existed for centuries. In 40 C.E. there was a conflict made famous by the dedication shown from the Trung Sisters. The conflict centered on property rights, the Chinese seeking to take rights away from the women and instill their laws over Vietnam. The Trung Sisters were able to abolish Chinese law for two years before dying in 43 C.E. Lady Treiu was another famous Vietnamese general that led an attack against the Chinese around 240 C.E, stating “I want to ride the waves, slay the big whale of the Eastern Sea [China], clean up our frontiers and save the people from drowning.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Tensions with China has continued for the most part of the millennia, but this demonstrates how the China and Vietnam relationship has been an ancient sore spot with each other since the beginning of the Common Era.

However with this being said, sharing a boarder with China has also allowed for the relationship to be mutually beneficial between the two nations. China has continuously helped Vietnam push out foreign influence. China wished to maintain its sole influence and power over the Southeast Asia region, throughout changes in its regime. This can be seen in the 1870’s and 1880’s when China aided Vietnam in pushing out the French, but failed to do so.[[3]](#footnote-3) This led to the French colonizing Vietnam and being able to build the Haiphong-Kunming railroad through the Tokinese Alps in order to encourage trade with China.[[4]](#footnote-4) While this was an attempt to foster good relations with China, China certainly did not appreciate it as they supported the Vietnamese fight against the French in the French Indochina war.[[5]](#footnote-5) China continued to support Vietnam throughout the Vietnam War, and strove to maintain a positive relationship that benefitted them. This provided a lot of tension in the relationship since Northern Vietnam was growing closer with the U.S.S.R.[[6]](#footnote-6) That tension between China and Vietnam is partially responsible for the Sino Vietnamese War that began in 1978-9 and took place in the Tokinese Alps.

The most recent conflict between China and Vietnam was the Sino Vietnamese War, a short war that detracted from the positive relationship that built during the majority of the 20th century. On February 17th, 1979, the Battle of Lang Son and Lao Cai took place.[[7]](#footnote-7) Both of these towns are located near the border of China. This was done to a.) “teach Vietnam a lesson” as quoted by Deng Xiaoping and b.) to establish a more favorable border for China, meaning that China wanted the rice terraces that the Tokinese Alps offered.[[8]](#footnote-8) The war lasted 17 days and 20,000 lives were lost as a result, with thousands of refugees fleeing to the south of Vietnam.[[9]](#footnote-9) After this war, the borders closed in 1979 and remained closed until 1993 when relations began to move in a more positive direction.[[10]](#footnote-10) This was due in part to the growing necessity to re-establish trade relations with China, evident by the mass migration of Vietnamese in 1989 in order to shop at Dongxing, a town in southern China. Individuals were travelling miles, over rivers and mountains just to shop at the commercial stores in Dongxing, which indicates just how important this really was to the Vietnamese people, and how it was a growing necessity for these relations to take a positive turn.[[11]](#footnote-11)

After 13 years, the region and towns of the Tokinese Alps seem to be recovered. The only habitants are minority tribes like the H’mong and Red Dao, who have their own culture and language, secluded away from the rest of the Vietnamese civiliazation. Farming and tourism are major sources of income, the main harvest being rice that many people travel all over the world to come see, the area being described as a “rare and rustic beauty.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Despite the relationship being unstable between these two states, the border has remained continuous and definite for the course of history, officially solidified on December 30th, 1999.[[13]](#footnote-13) Though this agreement is relatively recent, the Tokinese Alps have proven to be the physical divide between these two states as they constantly strive to achieve a balanced, cross-border relationship.

Overall, by sharing the border between Vietnam and China, defined by the Tokinese Alps, a complicated and interesting relationship has formed between these two entities marked by a millennia of conflict and cooperation. With this being said, it is important to note that throughout all of these conflicts, China has always been the aggressor, never Vietnam. China attempts to continuously influence, if not completely dominate Vietnam due to the shared border of the Tokinese Alps. Recently a memorandum was published that due to conflicting claims on the South China Sea, both Vietnam and China risk coming to a military conflict all over again.[[14]](#footnote-14) With this being said, it is evident that Northern Vietnam, especially the Tokinese Alps has seen its fair share of both peace and conflict between these two states.

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