

very ancient one." According to this spokesman some of the skirmishes which took place at the end of 1986 and the beginning of 1987 caused little concern because the Chinese were simply using them to mark the eighth anniversary of the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea.²⁹

This interpretation, while not totally convincing, is nonetheless interesting, since it reflects the enduring tradition of symbolic exchanges between the two countries and above all their capacity to interpret these correctly. China's attempts to exert pressure on Vietnam date from about 208 BC, when the first Vietnamese kingdom was established. China maintained a sort of feudal hold over the neighbouring states from which it exacted tribute and Vietnam was part of this system until 939 AD when it gained its independence as a result of defeating the Chinese in battle. In 981 the Vietnamese inflicted another defeat on China, this time on the Song dynasty. It was only during a twenty-year interlude, from 1407 to 1427, that the Ming dynasty succeeded in reimposing control over Vietnam and reintroducing Chinese customs. Even during these twenty years, however, the Chinese had to cope with Vietnamese resistance which was shown in a variety of ways, such as refusing to wear the pigtail and lacquering their teeth in accordance with Vietnamese tradition. This resistance lasted up to the time of the guerrilla war which resulted in Vietnam regaining its independence in 1427. In 1788 China suffered yet another setback when the Qing dynasty was humiliated in its attempt to regain Vietnam as a Chinese protectorate.³⁰

Before this, in 1471, the kingdom of Champa, more or less the equivalent of modern-day South Vietnam, was taken over by Vietnam, but relations between the North and the South remained difficult and were marked by bitter rivalries between the Trinh in the North and the Nguyen in the South. At the same time Vietnam was trying to gain control over the Laotian principalities in order to use them as a shield against Thailand. Finally, in 1658 Vietnam sent an expeditionary force to intervene in the interminable struggle for the Khmer throne, and in

²⁹ The author's interview with a representative of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Hanoi, July 1987.

³⁰ See for instance Takashi Tajima, "China and Southeast Asia: Strategic Interests and Policy Prospects," *Adelphi Papers*, no. 172, London: IISS, 1981, pages 9-10.