



A Survey of Western Sources in Vietnam's South China Sea Narrative

By Alex Calvo / *Issue Briefings*, 11 / 2015

Like other South China Sea claimants, Vietnam deploys a range of arguments to support its narrative, including the invocation of historical documents, many of which are Western in origin. Hanoi has argued that such documents are particularly relevant because they come from non-claimant states, yet as with most historical sources, they are subject to interpretation.

Like their Chinese and other South China Sea counterparts, Vietnamese authors invoke history to defend their country's territorial claims. Some of their sources are domestic; others are Chinese but reinterpreted accordingly. A third category are Western sources, comprising records of missionaries and traders as well as official documents from the French colonial administration.

All three categories featured in a September 2015 exhibition in Da Lat, aimed at supporting sovereignty claims over the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) and Spratly (Trường Sa) archipelagos and



featuring “UNESCO-recognized woodblocks from the Nguyen Dynasty, bibliographies and atlas collections published by many countries at different times, most notably an atlas issued by China’s Qing dynasty in 1906 and subsequently used by the Republic of China”, as well as documents from different Vietnamese dynasties, the Republic of Vietnam, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and Western countries.¹

French Missionary Accounts

Before Indochina became part of the French Empire, the country’s priests became a common sight in the region. In addition to the paperwork generated by the Church administration, priests sent letters and some kept diaries. For example, in 1701, French missionaries travelling to China aboard the ship *Amphitrite* wrote in her log: “Paracel is an archipelago belonging to the Kingdom of Annam. It’s a terrible submerged reef, stretching hundreds of miles.” That same year, Priest Tartre sent a letter to his superior, which reads “Paracel was an archipelago of the An Nam Kingdom. It was an awful

1 “Lam Dong hosts an exhibition of Vietnam’s sovereignty over Truong Sa and Hoang Sa archipelagos”, *Voice of Vietnam*, 9 September 2015.
<http://www.vietmaz.com/2015/09/lam-dong-hosts-an-exhibition-of-vietnams-sovereignty-over-truong-sa-and-hoang-sa-archipelagos/>



submerged shoal ranging across hundreds of miles and witnessing several shipwrecks – It runs parallel to the coastline of Cochinchina (Dang Trong)”.²

References to the Paracels may also be found in a book titled “Description of Dang Trong”, by French priest and merchant Pierre Poivre, who visited them several times between 1719 and 1786, writing “I heard that the King (Lord Nguyen) regularly sent ships offshore to Hoang Sa in search for natural valuables to add to his collection”.

Other French Sources

Vietnam also relies on non-religious French authors, such as Jean-Baptiste Chaigneau, who wrote “Notice sur la Cochinchine” in 1820 after 25 years of service with King Gia Long, at the behest of French Foreign Minister Duke Richelieu. Published in the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hue* in 1923, the report describes Vietnam as comprising “Southern Vietnam, with a crowned Lord, [which] includes Dang Trong and Dong Kinh, formerly Dang Ngoai, ... and a few inhabited islands not far from the shore and the Paracels which comprises several

2 Duy Chien, “Western witnesses of Vietnam’s sovereignty over Hoang Sa”, *VietNamNet Bridge*, 26 June 2014. <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/special-reports/105809/western-witnesses-of-vietnam-s-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa.html>



small islands, waterfalls and deserted rocks. In 1816, the reigning King seized control of this archipelago”.³

These references are important for Hanoi as evidence against Chinese views that the Paracels were never under Vietnamese sovereignty. On the other hand, they are often not very precise when it comes to defining the geographical scope of the Paracels and the exact extent of the exercise of sovereign powers.

Other Western Geographical Writings

It was not only the French who wrote about Indochina. British travellers bound for China, for example, also crossed the South China Sea on their way to the Middle Kingdom. Thus, John Barrow, a member of the British Mission to China, wrote in his 1806 book *A Journey to Southern Viet Nam in 1792-1793* about “the types of boats used by the Southerners to travel to Hoang Sa for collecting bird nets”.

3 A. Salles (ed.), “Le Mémoire sur la Cochinchine de Jean-Baptiste Chaigneau”, *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*, No. 2, 1923, 253-283. The author would like to thank Dr Pham Thanh Van for providing him with a copy of this issue.



References to the 1816 Flag-raising Ceremony

Since one of the historical points of contention in the South China Sea is whether the Vietnamese had exercised sovereignty over the Paracels in the past, foreign references to the 1816 flag-raising ceremony by King Gia Long are valuable for Hanoi. One of these foreign sources is *Notes on the geography of Southern Vietnam* by Priest Jean-Louis Taberd, who was Vicar Apostolic of Cochin (Cochinchina) from 1824 to his death in 1840 and interpreter for King Gia Long. The notes, published in 1837, describe the “Paracel or Hoang Sa islands” as “an area crisscrossed by small islands, reefs and sand [that extends] to 11° North latitude and around 107° longitude”. They further explain that “[i]n 1816, the King held a solemn flag hoisting ceremony and formally took possession of the reefs, with a certain belief that no one would struggle [against] him”. Chaigneau also mentions the 1816 ceremony, writing “Paracel is composed of uninhabited small islands, reefs and rocks. Not until 1816, did the Emperor take the possession of the archipelago”.⁴

4 A. Salles ed., “Le Mémoire sur la Cochinchine de Jean-Baptiste Chaigneau”, *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*, No. 2, 1923, 257.



In his book *The world, history and description of the peoples of Japan, Indochina, Ceylon, etc.* (L'univers, Histoire et Description de tous les peuples Japon, Indo-Chine, Ceylan etc.),⁵ Dubois de Jancigny also makes note of the ceremony, writing “We observe that for 30 years now, the Paracel archipelago (referred to as Cát Vàng by the Annamese) ... has been occupied by the Annamese (Cochinchina)”. De Jancigny also notes, however, “We do not know if they have built any construction there (in order, perhaps, to protect fisheries)”.⁶

Dutch Sources

Dutch sailors and traders were also active in the region, and interacted with Vietnamese authorities. Some of the resulting written sources are among those used by Hanoi. An example was the *Grootebroek*'s shipwreck in the Paracels in 1634 during the reign of Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1614–1635),

5 “This book was published in 1850 by Firmin Didot frères, located in Paris, as a volume in the series, *L'univers: histoire et description de tous les peuples*. The series offers an interpretation on the history and life of countries and regions around the world, and this volume covers Japan, the countries in Indochina, and Ceylon. The author, Adolphe Philibert Dubois de Jancigny (1795-1860), was a French diplomat and researcher of Oriental Studies”, website of the Japan Foundation, 2015.

https://www.jpff.go.jp/e/about/jfic/lib/archive/information/2015/pdf/1507mini_e.pdf

6 M.A. Dubois de Jancigny, *L'univers, Histoire et Description de tous les peuples Japon, Indo-Chine, Ceylan etc.*, (Paris: éd. Firmin Didot Frères, 1850), 555.



which led to 23,580 réaux being confiscated. Two years later, they demanded the return of these funds from his successor, Lord Nguyen Phuoc Lan (1635–1648), who accepted their request, granting them also a license to open shops and freely trade with Southern Vietnam, souvenirs, and tax exemption on anchorage.⁷ Such administrative actions are also considered by Vietnamese authorities to be evidence in support of their South China Sea narrative.

References to Shipping through the Paracels

An aspect of Vietnam’s South China Sea narrative where the country’s authors extensively cite Western sources is the Nguyen Dynasty’s exercise of tax powers concerning the passage by foreign ships through and around the Paracels (Hoàng Sa). Gutzlaff, a member of the Royal Geographic Society of London, wrote in 1849 in the society’s journal that “Kativang lies 15–20 nautical miles from Annam coast and spreads on 15–17 degrees north latitude, 111–113 longitude”, explaining that “[f]rom time immemorial, junks coming largely

7 This episode was described in the 1936 Bulletin de l’Ecole Francaise d’ Extrême Orient, citing the Batavia journal of the Dutch - Indian Company. Duy Chien, “Western witnesses of Vietnam’s sovereignty over Hoang Sa”, *VietNamNet Bridge*, 26 June 2014. <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/special-reports/105809/western-witnesses-of-vietnam-s-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa.html>



from Hainan have annually visited all these shoals, and proceeded in their excursions as far as the coast of Borneo. Though more than 10 per cent of ships annually wreck, the quantity of fish taken is so great as to ensure all losses, and still leave a very good profit. The Annam government, perceiving the advantages which it might derive if a toll were raised, keeps revenue cutters and a small garrison on the spot to collect a duty from all visitors, and to ensure protection for its own fishermen”.⁸ Gutzlaff’s paper is an interesting source because can provide ammunition for the narratives of both Hanoi and Beijing. On the one hand, he acknowledges the long-standing presence of Chinese fishermen in the area, as is often raised by Beijing, while on the other he refers to the exercise of state power by the Vietnamese in the region, which Hanoi has sought to emphasize. This is a clear reminder that a given historical source can often be subject to interpretation and used to support multiple conflicting positions.

Insistence on the past exercise of state power was already important in the Republic of Vietnam’s narrative, as is made clear in a 1975 white paper, which reads, “[b]y the early 19th

8 Duy Chien, “Western witnesses of Vietnam’s sovereignty over Hoang Sa”, *VietNamNet Bridge*, 26 June 2014. <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/special-reports/105809/western-witnesses-of-vietnam-s-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa.html>



century, a systematic policy of effective occupation was implemented by Vietnamese emperors[.] The Truong Sa Islands, known to and exploited by Vietnamese fishermen and laborers for many centuries, were formally incorporated into Vietnamese territory by France on behalf of Vietnam. On both archipelagos, Vietnamese civil servants assured a peaceful and effective exercise of Vietnamese jurisdiction”.⁹ The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has followed the same line of reasoning. A summary of a “document about Vietnam’s official stance on Vietnam’s sovereignty over Hoang Sa Archipelago” released in 2014 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam reads,

Vietnam has publicly provided authentic historical materials proving that Vietnam established its sovereignty over the Hoang Sa Archipelago when the islands were terra nullius. Since at least the 17th century, the Nguyen dynasties of Vietnam organized activities to exploit resources on islands of the Hoang Sa Archipelago, undertook maritime measurements and recorded navigation routes to ensure the safety of navigation by foreign vessels through the waters of Hoang Sa Archipelago.¹⁰

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- 9 *White Paper on the Hoang Sa (Paracel) and Truong Sa (Spratly) Islands*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Vietnam, 1975. http://nghiencuubiendong.vn/download/doc_download/132-white-paper-on-the-hoang-sa-paracel-and-truong-sa-spratly-islands-part-1
- 10 “Vietnam Official Stance on Vietnam Sovereignty over Hoang Sa Archipelago”, *Vietnam Pictorial*, 9 July 2014. <http://vietnam.vnnet.vn/english/vietnam-official-stance-on-vietnam-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa-archipelago/59061.html>



French Colonial Actions: A Double-edged Sword?

An important aspect of Hanoi's narrative is the idea that the exercise of sovereign powers was not interrupted by colonization. However, colonial-era publications also show that the Vietnamese often protested against the perceived French colonial authorities' soft approach to China (and later Japan), and therefore Chinese authors may use this to contest Vietnamese claims of continued administration.

The above mentioned 2014 summary reads,

After France and Vietnam had signed the Protectorate Treaties of March 15, 1874 and June 6, 1884 respectively, France, on behalf of Vietnam, continuously exercised Vietnam's sovereignty over the Hoang Sa archipelago and protested against China's infringements. France conducted many activities to exercise sovereignty over the Hoang Sa Archipelago, including building and operating lighthouses and meteorological stations, establishing administrative delegations responsible for the archipelago attached to Thua Thien Province (Annam), and granting birth certificates to Vietnamese citizens born in the archipelago.

A Defence Ministry publication refers to the beginning of French control over Vietnam, stating that "right after imposing Vietnam under protectorate, the French Government demanded the French Resident Superior to Annam Le Fol carefully study Annam's sovereignty over Hoang Sa and Truong Sa. The



documents found clearly demonstrated Lords Nguyen and Nguyen Dynasty's exercise of their sovereignty over the two archipelagos, thus the Government decided to occupy them".¹¹

References in Vietnam's narrative to French actions also include bilateral dealings with China. For example, a request from Paris in the French Note Verbale dated February 18, 1937, addressed to China to solve the dispute by resorting to international arbitration was rejected by Nanking. The French also protested in 1947 after the Republic of China's occupation one year earlier of Woody (Phú Lâm) Island, in the Paracels.¹²

Nevertheless, some Vietnamese accounts of the colonial years explain how French colonial authorities were often seen as too passive in the light of Chinese, and later Japanese, attempts to encroach on islands considered to be Vietnamese. Newspaper reports point to a French desire to ingratiate themselves with the Chinese authorities in order to gain greater influence in the country as one of the reasons for their passivity.

11 "The Cairo Declaration (1943) and Vietnam's sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos", *National Defence Journal*, 27 March 2015.

<http://tapchiquptd.vn/en/research-and-discussion/the-cairo-declaration-1943-and-vietnams-sovereignty-over-the-spratly-and-paracel-archipelagos/7190.html>

12 Although a request for negotiations and third-party adjudication was refused, ROC forces later withdrew "Vietnam Official Stance on Vietnam Sovereignty over Hoang Sa Archipelago", *Vietnam Pictorial*, 9 July 2014.

<http://vietnam.vnnet.vn/english/vietnam-official-stance-on-vietnam-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa-archipelago/59061.html>



Thus, an article in *La Nature*, published on November 1, 1933, reads, “The French government established their domination in Annam. The islands of the Paracel Islands belong to An Nam so France has the ownership and responsibility to take care of this new territory. We must say that they (France) have completely ignored this responsibility until today.” From 1931 to 1933, journalist Cucherousset published seven articles in *L’Éveil Économique de L’Indochine* (issues 685, 688, 743, 744, 746, 777, and 790) criticizing Governor Pasquier for the, in his eyes, feeble defence of sovereignty over Hoang Sa. French authorities reacted by searching the newspaper’s offices at night and demanding the writer hand over his documents related to these articles. In issue 746, Cucherousset wrote, “Do we have to wait until the Japanese exploit the last tons of phosphate? Or is it true that the Japanese have paid a reasonable commission?” In issue 777, he listed the main arguments in favour of a stronger policy:

Firstly, the Guangdong provincial government has never been recognized by France as an autonomous government. Secondly, the Chinese government in Beijing in the past and in Nanjing at present have never claimed this archipelago and have not acknowledged the sovereignty of Guangdong. Thirdly, for more than 100 years, Annam has claimed sovereignty over the Paracels and this was noted in the archives of the Hue royal court. Moreover, the Guangzhou government cannot argue that Chinese fishermen often visiting the islands to catch turtles and dry their



nets that the Paracels belong to China because French fishermen often do so at the coast of Terre Neuve, but Terre Neuve still belongs to the UK.

These articles were not an isolated occurrence, given that many newspapers, both in metropolitan France and Indochina (the latter in both French and Vietnamese) regularly reported on the disputed islands, listing arguments to oppose China and Japan.¹³

Colonial Era International Treaties

International treaties are yet another colonial-era source used to support Vietnam's narrative.¹⁴ However, their meaning is often subject to different interpretations, and these conventions feature in both Vietnamese and Chinese arguments. One of the key treaties is the 1887 convention on the land border, which was signed by French authorities and the Qing dynasty. According to the convention, islands located east of a red line

13 “Vietnam’s sovereignty over Hoang Sa, as reported in early 20th century newspapers”, *The Vietnam Times*, 21 July 2014. <http://vietnamtimes.com.vn/vietnams-sovereignty-over-hoang-sa-as-reported-in-early-20th-century-newspapers/>

14 For a list of Sino-French treaties on the land border, see “China-Vietnam Boundary”, International Boundary Study No 38, Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US State Department, 15 December 1978, 7. <http://archive.law.fsu.edu/library/collection/limitsinseas/ibs038.pdf>



(described on a map attached to the treaty) belonged to China. Duy Chien argues,

This red line described on the map attached to the Convention was only 5 kilometers long, compatible with the width of the territorial waters of 3 nautical miles at that time, and functioned to demarcate the onshore islands within Tonkin Gulf. If following the [Chinese] authors' interpretation, this line could be extended boundlessly, crossing the Tonkin Gulf, and not only Paracels and Spratlys but also Hue, Da Nang and even all the islands along the Central Coast of Vietnam or Con Dao island, also belonged to China consequently.

Hong Thao Nguyen (Associate professor at Vietnam National University) also believes that the “treaty did not apply to islands outside the Gulf of Tonkin. Furthermore, that treaty was superseded when China and Vietnam concluded the Agreement on the Delimitation of Territorial Waters, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), and Continental Shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin on December 25, 2000”.¹⁵

Vietnamese and Chinese authors have also clashed when interpreting the 1943 Cairo Declaration. Hanoi says that it did

15 Hong Thao Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Position on the Sovereignty over the Paracels & the Spratlys: Its Maritime Claims”, *Journal of East Asia & International Law* 1 (2012), 187–188.
<https://southeastasiansea.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/vietnams-position-on-the-sovereignty-over-the-paracels-the-spratlys-its-maritime-claim.pdf>



not imply any transfer of disputed islands or other features in the South China Sea to China. As an article in the Vietnamese *National Defence Journal* in 2015 emphasized, “It was clearly stated in the Declaration that ‘Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the first World War in 1914, and that all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and The Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China’”, stressing that “no mention was made of Truong Sa (Spratly Islands) and Hoang Sa (Paracel Islands)”. Furthermore, the text explains that “It is worth noting that, at that time, China was a party to the Conference, but it did not have any reserve or any statement of its own on the restored territories”.¹⁶ Thus, the issue of whether or not the Cairo Declaration applies to the South China Sea joins the long list of outstanding issues concerning the document.

16 “The Cairo Declaration (1943) and Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos”, *National Defence Journal*, 27 March 2015.
<http://tapchiqptd.vn/en/research-and-discussion/the-cairo-declaration-1943-and-vietnams-sovereignty-over-the-spratly-and-paracel-archipelagos/7190.html>



Conclusions

In the South China Sea disputes, coastal states deploy a range of arguments to build support for their narratives. One key approach has been to invoke history by presenting and interpreting different kinds of historical documents, and Hanoi has been an active player in this regard. Vietnamese authorities and scholars often stress that many of these sources are foreign and thus potentially more powerful because they do not come from the claimant state. This argument was already clear in the 1975 Republic of Vietnam white paper, which stressed that “Vietnamese scholars are not the only people to record that Vietnam, formerly known as the ‘empire of Annam’, had early displayed state authority over the Hoang Sa Islands”¹⁷ and has remained in control ever since. Some of these sources, such as the 1887 French–Qing convention on the land border, feature in both the Chinese and the Vietnamese narratives about the disputes, with scholars and authorities on each side providing different interpretations of its text.

17 *White Paper on the Hoang Sa (Paracel) and Truong Sa (Spratly) Islands*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Vietnam, 1975.
http://nghiencuubiendong.vn/download/doc_download/132-white-paper-on-the-hoang-sa-paracel-and-truong-sa-spratly-islands-part-1



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