

The Paracel Islands In The French's Perception In The First Half Of The Nineteenth Century

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Abstract:

Along with the strong development of international maritime trade, information about Vietnam as well as the Paracel and Spratly Islands, contemporarily called Pracel or Paracel, was soon presented in documents published in various European languages including French. In the first half of the nineteenth century, before Vietnam was invaded by the French, the kings of the Nguyen Dynasty took many actions towards the archipelago called the Hoang Sa or Cat Vang (i.e., Paracels) by Vietnamese people. This article focuses on analyzing the accounts referring to the Paracel Islands and its relationship to Vietnam in the French historical documents published in the first half of the nineteenth century to show the French's perception of this archipelago.

Keywords: Paracel Islands, Annam, Gia Long, Cochinchina, French, maritime trade.

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After the important geographical discoveries by sea that took place in the second half of the fifteen and early sixteen centuries, international shipping routes were established connecting Europe with other continents. From the ports of Europe, merchant ships busily spread all over the world. In addition, a series of scientific inventions were also introduced and rapidly applied to maritime activities, boosting the world's maritime trade to the golden stage of development. Together with trading activities, Europeans were increasingly interested in the specific facts of the countries and regions where they came. With a long coastline covering almost the eastern part of Mainland Southeast Asia, as well as many bays and ports, Vietnam quickly became a significant link in the international maritime trade route through the East Sea (the Vietnamese term for South China Sea). Stretching far off the coast of Vietnam, the Paracel and Spratly Islands, including a collection of small islands, sandbars, and shoals, were always an obsession for navigators passing through. The Europeans called them Shoals of Pracel or Paracel Islands. Therefore, description about Vietnam as well as the Paracel and Spratly Islands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries also appeared in high frequency in European publications including those in French. Based on the details in the written documents published in French, the article focuses on the Paracel Islands and their relationship to Vietnam in the first half of the nineteenth century as well as the French's perception towards this land and sea.

The South China Sea and Paracel Islands are traditional fishing grounds of Vietnamese fishermen

Dai Viet country from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century consisted of "Đàng Trong" and "Đàng Ngoài", which were called Cochinchina or Cochinchine, and Tonquin or Tonkin by Europeans. After overthrowing the Tay Son Dynasty and establishing the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802, King Gia Long (1802-1820) established the capital in Hue, named the country Vietnam, and divided Vietnam, including Cochinchina and Tonkin, into local units called "trấn" or "phủ". Vietnam was officially unified in terms of territory after a long period of nearly two centuries of division by feudal dynasties. After King Gia Long passed away, King Minh Mang (1820-1840) ascended the throne and divided the country into 30 provinces and one "phủ". From the center of the Hue imperial city, Dai Nam was divided into different areas including Ta Truc, Huu Truc, Ta Ky, Huu Ky, Nam Ky and Bac Ky. In 1838, King Minh Mang once again renamed the country into Dai Nam. Meanwhile, when referring to Vietnam in the nineteenth century, Europeans still used the terms

Cochinchine or Cochinchina (i.e. “*Đàng Trong*”); and Tonquin or Tonkin (i.e. “*Đàng Ngoài*”) like in the previous centuries. In some cases, Cochinchine was even used to call Annam. This is clearly seen when Edme Mentelle explained that “it was the Portuguese who gave Annam the name Cochinchine, without permission of any other authorities” (1804, p. 229). Thus, Edme Mentelle equated Cochinchine with the whole country of Vietnam, which was an unfortunate mistake compared to the reality in Vietnam at that time.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French also noticed that Vietnamese fishermen annually sailed to the islands which formed a small archipelago full of reefs, indicated on the map with the name Paracels archipelago (Mentelle, 1804; *Géographie*, 1804). Meanwhile, the Paracel Islands, known as a labyrinth of islets, rocks and shoals that were notoriously dangerous for shipwrecks in previous centuries, was well identified by stretching in front of the seashore of Nam Ky from 10°45' to 16°30' North latitude and about 107° East longitude of Paris. However, some navigators crossed these waters without danger. Therefore, the French suspected that the Paracel Islands was likely to be over-exaggerated as being shown on maritime maps (*Géographie*, 1804). According to the records in some works at that time, the Paracels archipelago, located at a distance between the coast of Nam Ky and Hainan island, belonged to the Annam empire, and “was a place frequented by fishermen” (Malte Brun et al., 1831, p. 221; Balbi, 1833, p. 745). Although the documents did not mention the activities of the Hoang Sa (Paracel) flotilla (“*đội Hoàng Sa*”), the regular fishing activities of fishermen in the Paracel Islands showed that the South China Sea, including the Paracel Islands, was the traditional fishing ground of Vietnamese people at that time. According to Vietnamese historical sources under the Nguyen Dynasty, even in the first years of his accession to the throne, to assist the soldiers of the Hoang Sa navy to conveniently work, King Gia Long upgraded their homeland in Cu Lao Re (also known as Cu Lao Ly, Ly Son district of Quang Ngai province today), which depended on An Vinh commune in the mainland, to become an independent administrative unit of Son Tinh district at that time. The soldiers of the Hoang Sa navy performed regular patrols in the South China Sea and the Paracel Islands (Hieu, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the details that the French described the presence of Annam fishermen in the Paracel Islands certainly included them. It is worth noting that in 1807, a work about John Barrow's trip to Cochinchine, translated into French by Malte Brun, also mentioned the sea trade and fishing activities of the Annam people in the South China Sea as well as in the Paracel Islands with various types of boats like those of the Chinese and the Malays. According to Barrow, the Annam people not only fished but also collected swiftlet nests in the Paracels archipelago (Malte Brun, 1807). However, it is hard to believe that swiftlet nests could be found in the Paracel Islands because swiftlets, in fact, mainly nest in the coastal islands of Central Vietnam. Perhaps this was a mistake in the process John Barrow gathering information about the fishing and product collection activities of Cochinchina fishermen, especially in the Turon area (i.e., Da Nang), where the British delegation stopped from 14 May to 16 June 1793 on their voyage to China. From 1926 to 1930, *Gouvernement general de l'Indochine* made a survey of natural conditions and biological resources as well as fishing in the South China Sea including the Paracels and Spratly Islands, and they found that there were no swiftlet nests and swiftlets in the Paracel and Spratly Islands (Delacour & Jabouille, 1930).

In the process of learning about Vietnam, the geographical position of the Paracel Islands running parallel to the coast of Cochinchine was increasingly elucidated through a series of expeditions in the South China Sea. As reflected by Malte Brun (1813), the Paracels archipelago, also known as Pracel, was a maze-like strip of islets, rocks and shoals. According to the latest maps, the Paracel Islands extended in front of the coast of Nam Ky, at about 10° 45' to 16° 30' North latitude and about 107° East longitude. However, in 1835, the updated information about the location of the Paracel Islands was corrected by Malte Brun and J.J.N. Huot, at 17° 8' North latitude and 110° 24' East longitude of Paris. From the records of the French, this archipelago was made up of several groups of islands, including the main islands groups such as Amphitrite (i.e., An Vinh group), Discovery (i.e., “*bãi rạn Đá Lôi*”) and Voadore (i.e., “*Đá Chim Én*”). Some of these islands were occupied with trees and were the place where Cochinchines fished annually (Malte Brun & Huot, 1835; Balbi, 1840; Domeny de Rienzi, 1841). With a long coastline that covered almost the eastern part of Mainland Southeast Asia, Cochinchine fishermen continued their fishing activities on a large scope from Cambodian waters, even from the Gulf of Siam (i.e., the Gulf of Thailand) in the South to the waters of Tonquin (i.e., Bac Ky) and to the Paracel Islands of the Annam Empire to catch seafood (*Dictionnaire*, 1839). According to Hyacinthe Langlois and William Guthrie (1839), the Paracels archipelago had about 300 islands with many pitfalls located off the east coast of Nam Ky. In fact, the Paracel archipelago consisted of two main island groups, the Crescent Chain in the west and the Amphitrite in the east, with a total number of islands much fewer than the figures provided by Langlois. It can be inferred that the name Paracel was still used by the French to refer to the two archipelagos of Paracel and Spratly in the South China Sea. By 1841, the position of the Paracel Islands was determined to be from 15°46' to 17°8' North latitude and from 108°50' to 100°24' East longitude, (Domeny de Rienzi, 1841). Most of the information about the geographical coordinates of the Paracel Islands reflected by French scholars at this stage was based on the longitude of Paris, so there was a little deviation from the international coordinates we use today. It also can be understood that the perception of the West in general

and the French in particular about the Paracel and Spratly Islands next to the European-Asian arterial maritime route through the South China Seas was increasingly clear and precise. Along with indicating the geographical coordinates of the Paracel Islands, the French were also interested in the climatic characteristics of the sea of Nam Ky. Accordingly, the rainy season of the coast of Nam Ky was from September to November, and from December of last year to February of the following year, there was also rain due to the monsoon from the North. During the northern monsoon, the wind usually blew from the east, separating this coast from the Paracel Islands, accounting from Cape Varella (i.e., Dai Lanh Cape, Phu Yen province in present-day). In this place, there were often thunderstorms mixed with calm winds; however, in the Paracel Islands, there were usually fresh monsoons (Dictionnaire, 1841).

The French's perception about Vietnam was more and more complete as a series of historical, geographical works and encyclopedias continued to update information on a regular basis. The accounts showed that, in the mid-19th century, in the eyes of the French, the Paracel archipelago, famous for its dangerous reefs off the coast of Nam Ky, appeared more obvious and less dangerous. Through expeditions and measurements, the French got more awareness of the Paracel Islands due to the more accurate geographical coordinates. In addition, the French also realized that the Vietnamese fishermen acted on a wide sea space from the Gulf of Siam (Thailand in present-day) to the North and to the waters bordering Bac Ky, including the Paracel Islands. Annually, Vietnamese fishermen often come to this archipelago to catch seafood. However, it can be seen that in the mid-nineteenth century, in the perception of the French in particular and Westerners in general, the Paracel Islands were not distinguished into two archipelagos, namely the Paracel and Spratly Islands as they are today, although they were already represented as two archipelagos in some geographical maps at that time.

Relationship of the Paracel Islands and Annam

The interest of the French in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was quite early through different ways such as missionary activities and maritime trade. Right at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the contact of the French with Vietnamese society took place, typically with the activity of the missionary Alexandre Rhodes. By the early 19th century, information about Vietnam became more and more popular in French society. While the French pointed out that the Paracel Islands were always a group of small islands and rocks near the east coast of Nam Ky (Aynès, 1816; Bulletin, 1825; Delavigne, 1829), the South China Sea with Paracel archipelago was, for a long time, the place where fishermen from the Cochinchine coast engaged in fishing activities and belonged to the Annam empire (Manuel, 1824; Cortambert, 1826; Géographie, 1839; Abrégé, 1842).

While the latest information was always updated, the French were not only concerned about the history or geographical features but also the political, economic and cultural situation of the country namely Annam. Thanks to the process of investigating for the fact, by the 1830s, the French had quite specific data on the population of the Annam empire with about 12,000,000 people, and Hue as the capital, located on the east coast opposite to the Paracel Islands, etc., the islands of the Annam empire including the islands from the Gulf of Tonkin (*vịnh Bắc Bộ*) to Condor (*Côn Đảo*) and the Paracel archipelago to the east of Cochinchine (Delavigne, 1834, 1835; Dictionnaire, 1837; Lefranc, 1844).

In 1847, the encyclopedia "Encyclopédie Catholique" directed by Jean-Baptiste Glaire (1847) also reflected clearly that the Paracel archipelago consisted of a set of islands and reefs in the South China Sea, at a distance of 50 miles southeast of Hainan (China's Hainan Island), and about the same distance from the east coast of Nam Ky. The archipelago was made up of several island groups, the most notable of which were the Discovery, Amphitrite and Voadore groups considered the dependencies of the Annam Empire. Meanwhile, Malte Brun (1856) also asserted that until 1856, the Paracel Islands still belonged to the Annam Empire, 200 km southeast of Hainan Island and off the coast of Nam Ky. It was made up of some island groups, with the main groups of Amphitrite, Triton, Moncy (i.e., Money island in present-day), etc. Some of these islands were covered with trees. People from Nam Ky went there every year to fish.

In summary, throughout the French works, the Paracel archipelago was increasingly reflected with its island groups. The information about this archipelago was always associated with Annam or Cochinchina ("*Dàng Trong*" in previous centuries and Nam Ky under the Nguyen Dynasty). Many works also showed that the Paracel Islands belonged to the country of Annam and described them in relation to the coastal islands or to the cities of Vietnam at that time. This showed the perception of the contemporary French as well as Europeans about the real situation of Vietnam when the Nguyen kings continuously took actions to establish and protect the state sovereignty with these two islands.

The Paracel Islands and the Nguyen kings of the Annam Empire

Europeans in general and the French in particular had access to Vietnam very early through merchant ships. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Portuguese merchants and missionaries were present in Vietnam or Dai Viet at that time. After that, merchants and missionaries from other Western countries came to

Vietnam in turns to establish trade and missionary relations (Phan et al., 2012). However, activities of the French in Vietnam and Indochina became increasingly dominant, especially in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, when the French helped Nguyen Anh with overthrowing the Tay Son Dynasty and establishing the Nguyen Dynasty. Therefore, more and more information about Vietnam was updated in French documents.

Jean Baptiste Chaigneau (1769 - 1825), one of the French navy officers who helped King Gia Long in the uprising to overthrow the Tay Son Dynasty and worked in Vietnam, reflected in his memoirs written in 1820 that the Emperor Gia Long ruled the country including Tonkin (Bac Ky), Cochinchina (Nam Ky), etc., inhabited coastal islands, and uninhabited Paracel archipelago consisting of small islands, reefs and cliffs. Chaigneau also clearly stated that "by 1816 the current emperor took possession of the archipelago" (Salles, 1923, p. 257). Noticeably, Chaigneau was in Vietnam for quite a long time under the reigns of King Gia Long (1802-1820) and King Minh Mang (1820-1840) and married a Vietnamese Catholic, so his reports on Annam's situation and on the Paracel Islands can be considered reliable. In the historical records of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty, 1816 was a turning point in the Vietnamese feudal State's activities of affirming and defending national sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. The Paracel navy, a specialized force performing the tasks of exploiting and protecting national sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos in the South China Sea, was merged into the National Navy by King Gia Long (Hieu, 2020). Right after that, in March of the same year, King Gia Long continued to "send the National Navy and Paracel navy to ride a boat to the Paracels to explore the sea" (Quoc, 2007, p. 922) in order to carry out the task of affirming national sovereignty over these two archipelagos. The event in 1816 provided by Jean Baptiste Chaigneau was a reflection of the series of rushed actions by King Gia Long in merging the Paracel navy into the National Navy, and sending them to Paracel and Spratly Islands for measuring the navigation routes and islands of these two archipelagos.

The newer and more specific understandings of different countries and regions of the French and Westerners gave rise to a proliferation of geographical and historical publications. The widespread dissemination of information about countries and regions, including Vietnam, made the perception of Westerners more and more complete and accurate. The work "Abrégé de Géographie Universelle" (1838) described the Annam Empire as a powerful empire founded in the early nineteenth century by Nguyen Gia Long, the last descendant of the Nguyen Lords in Cochinchine (i.e., *Đàng Trong*). Annam lied to the south and east of the South China Sea and bordered with the Chinese empire to the north, and the kingdom of Siam to the west. Annam's territory included Bac Ky in North Annam, Nam Ky in South Annam, Cambodia and some other surrounding regions which depended on and paid tribute to Annam such as Tsiampa in Binh Thuan, Laos, also known as Bao kingdom, and some other small territories. The Paracels belonged to the Annam Empire, and its small islands were home to a large number of fishermen. The coastal cities and important ports of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty, including the imperial city of Hue, were described in detail in this work.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the situation of Vietnam continued to be updated and reflected in works published in French. However, one of the urgent perception demands of the French at the moment was to figure out Annam's political geography. In the eyes of the French, the Paracel Islands, which the Annam called the Golden Sands, were continuously occupied by the Annam. However, they did not know if the Annam state had established any facilities in the Paracel Islands, for example, for the purpose of protecting fishing. What the French knew for certain was that Emperor Gia Long established national sovereignty over the archipelago by claiming it belonged to Annam in 1816 (see Yanosky, & David, 1848; Dubois De Jancigny, 1850; Nouvelles, 1859). This perception of the French completely coincided with the historical records of Vietnam from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries when they called the Paracels archipelago with the names like Cat Vang, Bai Cat Vang or Hoang Sa, where every year, at the behest of the The State, the Hoang Sa navy approached to collect the remains of the shipwrecks. By 1867, based on the information provided by M. Michel Duc Chaigneau, son of Jean Baptiste Chaigneau, Malte Brun (1867) stated that the country of Annam, also known as Vietnam, covered almost the entire coastline of the Indochine (i.e., *Đông Dương*). The territory of Annam at that time included the areas such as Cochinchine (*Nam Kỳ*), Tonquin (*Bắc Kỳ*), a part of Cambodia, islands nearby the coast and the Paracel archipelago with uninhabited small islands and reefs.

Thus, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Paracel and Spratly Islands were mentioned in the French documents with dense frequency and increasingly clear and accurate content. In the perception and reflection of the French, the Paracel and Spratly Islands were an indispensable part when referring to the characteristics of the territory or the situation of Vietnam at that time. Furthermore, some documents also mentioned the historic event in 1816 when King Gia Long made decisions and actions to affirm national sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The event illustrated that these archipelagos were under the management of the feudal state of Vietnam right in the first half of the nineteenth century before the French invaded Vietnam.

Some comments

It can be seen that after a long process of approaching and investigating, the information the French gathered about Vietnam was widely disseminated in French society through a series of publications in the first half of the nineteenth century. Since then, the French's understandings about Vietnam under the rule of the Nguyen Dynasty, including the geographical location, development history with its great potentials, became more and more specific and precise. In particular, the Paracel Islands in the middle of the South China Sea, famous for its small islands, reefs, and sandbanks like a maze always lurking to sink Western ships, was recognized as a part of Vietnam or belonged to the country of Vietnam with the name Annam at that time. Although in the eyes of the French, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Paracel Islands was still considered a dangerous place but displayed with a specific geographical location, which was not so large as the previous maps showed, and ships could safely navigate through these waters. In this islands area, the French witnessed the fishing activities of fishermen in the coastal areas of Vietnam, who they called the Nam Ky people.

While pointing out that the Paracel Islands was of the Annam Empire's possession and was a fishing ground of the Cochinchina people, the documents repeatedly stated that the Annam emperor, Gia Long, claimed sovereignty over this archipelago. Some documents also mentioned the event in 1816 when King Gia Long crossed the sea to this archipelago to perform a solemn ceremony of planting the flag of the Annam Empire and declare his sovereignty here. Perhaps, this was just an emphasis of the French on the fact that the archipelago belonged to Vietnam when the Paracel Navy and the National Navy under the order of the Emperor of Annam sailed to the Paracel Islands to collect remains from shipwrecks, measure the waterways and map the archipelago. The descriptions of the actual situation in Vietnam in the first half of the nineteenth century not only reflected the perception of the French at that time but also give us a more complete and comprehensive view of the history of Vietnam in the period before the French invasion.

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