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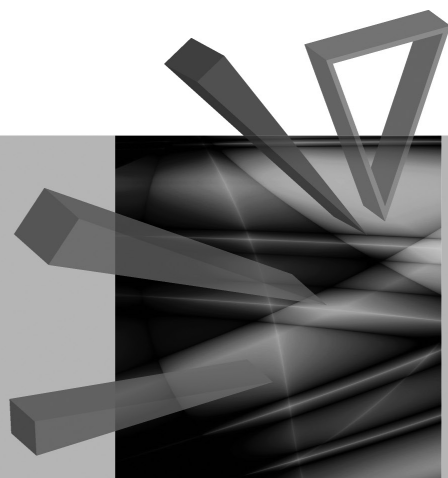
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VIETNAMESE FISHING COMMUNITIES: WHICH SOLUTION BETWEEN GEOGRAPHIC ADVANTAGE AND CONFLICTS OVER TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY?

Abstract: Located on one of the world's main lines of communication and influenced by three cultures, Vietnamese fishermen are also caught in the territorial disputes between their country and China. Beyond fishing resources, it is a political problem and a strategic challenge. Fishing communities' culture is used by the government as an evidence of Vietnamese territorial possession in South China Sea. Geostrategic and financial issues are attached to their position. Caught in the middle of disputes between external belligerent parties which want to monopolize maritime resources, the priority of these fishermen still is protecting themselves and their culture. By outlining the difficulties faced by fishing communities, the author hopes to demonstrate the role of government policies and the urgency of protecting those who draw their life from the sea.

Keywords: Vietnam, fishing communities, South China Sea, geostrategy, industry.

1. Introduction

With its East side bathed in the South China Sea, Vietnam enjoys a particular geographic advantage: 3260 km of coastline with fishery, oil and gas resources, located on one of the world's main lines of communication.¹ Can we imagine better place?² Vietnam shares with its neighbour China sea and land borders and territorial disputes have existed for centuries between them. Fishing communities are gravely concern, especially about the escalation of the conflict in the region.³ This article is a part of research conducted in Phu Quy island, facing Spratlys archipelago from July until November 2012. A mixed method was used to isolate primary data. This paper derived much of it information based on intensive interviews with key

¹ Vu T.L., *Atlas du Vietnam*, La Documentation Française, Paris 1994.

² See the workshop "Le Vietnam et la mer", AAFV, Paris 2000.

³ See K.V. Chen, *China's War with Viet Nam*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, Stanford 1987. See also A. Forbes, Why Vietnam loves and hates China, *Asia Times*, 26 April 2007.

informants. The use of statistics was combined with surveys done on and with fishermen in order to have a “snapshot” of their daily life. The main difficulty rests in the fact that the fishing communities are not open. It is common knowledge that the fishermen are not talkative and all the findings represented several months of painstaking investigation and joint operations by Vietnamese researchers and myself.

2. Economic situation

Vietnamese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is over 1 million km². Fisheries represent an important sector of Vietnamese national economy: 6% of national export values. The figures speak for themselves: In 2012, total fisheries production of Vietnam was about 5.7 million ton, 6.1 billion dollars in income and 40% of total annual national food production.⁴ Last year, there were 28,424 Vietnamese fishing vessels in the South China Sea⁵ for 5264.3 thousand CV total capacity of fishing. This economy is attributable to the fishing communities. In the past decade Vietnam has emerged as the largest aquaculture producer in Southeast Asia.⁶ In this country fisheries play an important role and support approximately 4 million people. Their life has been dependent on fishing activities. With the volume of trade, the coastal shores became economic engines that were fundamental to the success of the Vietnamese economy, its culture but also for its future. The visit to Japan by Vietnamese Deputy Minister Tran Quoc Khanh in May 2013 has given new impulse to the national fisheries industry.⁷ Vietnam had vast potentials in fisheries and made all efforts to further expand its market. To ensure its sustainability into the future, this industry and its people need to be protected. The last decade has seen growth in the overexploitation of marine fisheries resources and the deterioration of the coastal environment. To fight these barriers, fishing communities have paid more attention to their traditions and beliefs, to protect their culture and their living environment. The fishermen represent the keystone of this sector.⁸ However, little is known regarding their “culture.” As the situation in South China Sea is becoming critical both economically and strategically for the Vietnamese fishing communities, things need to be done and with their cooperation. But who are those people living along the South China Sea’s shores? We first need to know who these fishermen are and what are their problems or needs.

⁴ Source: General Department of Vietnam Customs.

⁵ Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam.

⁶ Source: Intervention of the Vietnamese Delegation at the meeting of the Fisheries Committee of the European Parliament.

⁷ See report with the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (M.O.I.T).

⁸ V.K. Nguyễn, *Người Việt với biển*, NXB Thế Giới, Hanoi 2011. This is especially evident in the 暹羅國路程集錄, a 19th century manuscript describing the maritime route between South Vietnam and Thailand. By visiting the islands one can guess all the richness of the South China Sea. Another manuscript, 上京城, recently found in Phu Quy island also describes the route from Phu Quy to Hue (South to Central Vietnam) and the role played by the Vietnamese fishermen. This report, divided into 4 books, clearly shows life as it was in this area.

3. Cultural identity

This area was crossed by 3 main cultures: Chinese, Indian and Archipelago.⁹ All the migratory movements combined with the influences brought by the Chinese domination era¹⁰ and French colonization, from 1859 to 1954, shaped the culture of the Central coastal inhabitants.¹¹ Consequently, Central Vietnamese fishermen derive their richness from the cultural diversity of these three influences. Through the ages, a sort of cultural syncretism took place and made them quite different from the rest of the country. The fishermen have long been seen as belonging to a low social class.¹² Maritime occupations often place them in a highly unpredictable, constantly changing environment and because they depend on natural hazard when they are at sea, they developed some beliefs that could not be understood by inlanders.¹³ It is not surprising that they hold many beliefs about fortune and misfortune. In their beliefs and value system, rites and folklore play a very important role and define their daily life, provide an outline, a general framework for their culture and build their identity.¹⁴

In a country with 54 ethnic groups, they do not represent an ethnic group but must be considered as a community, apart from the inlanders. As they live along the coasts, they have always been exposed to foreign cultures. Those foreign cultures were responsible for shaping their culture and shaping their identity, strongly rooted in a coastal culture, a kind of multicultural mixture.¹⁵

4. Cultural issues

As has been pointed out, the Central part of Vietnam is a mosaic of cultures. Champa kingdom and its Indianized civilization have had a huge impact on the fishermen culture. But with the downfall of the Champa kingdom, in 17th century, the Vietnamese imposed their sinicized culture to this area.¹⁶ Still, the fishermen kept the cultural heritage they received from the Cham and they still do. Some also came from Chinese

⁹ J. Népote, *La Péninsule du sud-est asiatique et les communications inter-asiatiques*, *Péninsule* 1996, no. 32, pp. 141–154.

¹⁰ K. Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1976.

¹¹ According to Charles Wheeler, the Central major harbor, Hoi An, was an important city of the area: “The city in its heyday throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries served as a major export and transshipment site serving Asia’s sea trade”, in: N.T. Tran, A. Reid (Eds.), *VietNam: Borderless Histories*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2006, pp. 163–193.

¹² See the report of Phan Thi Dung, IIFET 2008 Vietnam Proceedings.

¹³ Trần N.T., *Recherche sur l’identité de la culture vietnamienne*, Editions The Gioi, Hanoi 2006.

¹⁴ L. Cadière, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Vietnamiens*, Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient, Saigon 1955.

¹⁵ V.K. Nguyen, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ T.K. Trần, *Việt-Nam Sử-Lược*, Institut de l’Asie du Sud-Est, Paris 1987.

culture. These deities, combined with their own, are now celebrated by some inlanders but it was not always thus. Today, inlanders even come to pay tribute to maritime gods with the fishermen. Qualities of maritime cults are now known and accepted by the Vietnamese as added value and the fishing communities embody the cultural richness of this area.

In comparison to the rest of the country, fishing communities are very specific. Like many fishermen of all nationalities, they interacted with the people they met at Sea. The result is that their culture is now totally different to the inlanders' culture. Another detail bears mentioning: Production among small-scale fishermen in Vietnam is characterized by cohesive social relation as their productivity is commonly influenced by patron-client relationship embedded within the communities' social and economic relationship. This also determines their character. A closer look reveals there is some compelling evidence that the Central coastal inhabitants use place identification in order to distinguish themselves from the inlanders. In this sense, place operates in a similar way to a social category and self-identity. According to J. Diamond the blueprint for global inequality lies within the land itself so if the land is generous the residents prosper.¹⁷ By extending this theory to Vietnamese fishing communities, one expected to find very rich inhabitants along the coastline but in reality the opposite is quite true. For decades, the fishermen were on the margins of Vietnamese society. According to Bui Dinh Chung, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that the school enrolment rate in fishing communities is low and largely inferior to the national average.¹⁸ Furthermore, capitalism plays its role in compartmentalizing the social strata among fishermen, in which petty producer is placed into lower social class. In the 1990s the fishermen were considered as "spoilsports," living on a land that should be used for touristic purposes. However, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of maritime culture promoted by Vietnamese government.¹⁹ A sense of enlarged patriotism and common citizenship has been stimulated. The officials try to restore a "bond" with the fishing communities, the bond they lost after 1975, when the fishermen started to flee the country, to escape from communism. This reconciliation is more necessary than ever. In the best interest of all, the central government tries in every way possible to link maritime heritage to the national history.

¹⁷ J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel – The Fates of Human Societies*, W.W. Norton, New York 1997.

¹⁸ According to the statistics given by World Bank, Vietnam has accomplished great progress in the field of education but the number of children out of school is still high. The national rate for adults is 98 for 2008–2011 but it seems that this official figure is incorrect: Many of fishermen have very low literacy skills.

¹⁹ D.T. Ngo, *Understanding Vietnamese Traditional Farming Implements: History and Typology*, Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, Hanoi 2000.

5. Geopolitical and geostrategic issues

Placed under the spotlight because of the territorial disputes between China and Vietnam, the Vietnamese fishermen find themselves in an unwanted predicament: in the middle of the conflict which prevents them from making their living effectively. It must be acknowledged that their position is very delicate. Their living environment is claimed by different countries and especially by China. 80% of Chinese maritime trade is carried by sea through the South China Sea and this figure is increasing because of Chinese energy-hungry. Beijing had declared that this maritime space represented its vital interests.²⁰ For all those reasons, China attempts to appropriate this maritime corridor. Diplomatic relations between these two countries became tense since a few months and the situation is not getting any better.²¹ Vietnamese Le Luong Minh has been appointed ASEAN Secretary-General in January 2013 and one of his missions is to establish partnership between the members for better economic exchange with China.²² Meeting financial needs can also contribute to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict. Vietnam's PM Nguyen Tan Dung gave, on May 31st, a keynote in Shangri-La Dialogue Singapore 2013, the Asia Security Summit.²³ He repeated once again the importance to provide security, safety for navigation. It is more necessary than ever to negotiate treaties between Asian nations. The spark that ignited the conflagration can happen at any time. There have already been many calls for the respect of the exclusive economic zone in conformity with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Maritime treaties and USA's ratification of UNCLOS are long overdue. The 10-year-old Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in South China Sea (DOC) can help to resolve this conflict. China Sea's financial stakes are high. Taking these things into consideration, Vietnamese government tried to prevent the situation in South China Sea worsening. In the highly topical debate concerning sovereignty, Vietnamese government puts forward its fishing communities.

6. The role of the primary parties involved

In the territorial disputes for the sovereignty of some China Sea's islands, the Vietnamese fishermen are powerless. To face the Chinese hyper-power, Vietnam seems very tiny. Its geographic luck became an apple of discord in which issues at stake are the South China Sea's oil fields and a main maritime road. The first reflex

²⁰ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011*, USA, Department of Defense, Office of Secretary of Defense, Washington, DC.

²¹ M. Chemillier-Gendreau, *Le Vietnam et la mer*, Les Indes Savantes, Paris 2000.

²² According to the Jakarta Post of 2013 January 9: "Minh faces the Herculean task of leading the association's 10 member nations."

²³ <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130530/DEFREG03/305300012/Asia-Pacific-Defense-Leaders-Meet-Singapore-Hagel-Attend>.

was to focus on the fishermen's culture, on their beliefs and on the traditional fishing community organization. A high regulation of inter-relationships among fisheries stakeholders and the authority of the village elders created cement that holds all coastal communities together. Although locally varied, everywhere the respect of traditions is clearly seen. The goal is to find cohesion between coastal communities and beliefs can serve as cohesion. It is the cornerstone of Vietnamese fishing communities. In general, the moral basis of Vietnamese society is anchored in its traditions and beliefs and this is particularly true for the fishermen. Their beliefs are deeply rooted in their culture. After 1975 the government forbade all forms of worship and religious activities until 1991 but despite prohibition, the cults continued. With the revival policy, *Doi Moi*, the maritime cults enjoyed a certain degree of support from politicians with the aim to unify the country. In recent years, the government has made attempts to preserve fishermen's culture but this reality hides another one: the necessity to link maritime culture to the possession of the territory. This cultural manipulation is a fool's game but it is of mutual benefit.

7. The scheduled end of the fishermen's living as we know it?

The task of all governments and parties concerned is to coordinate diplomatic relations to ease tensions, which is not easy. After months of provocation from different sides, the situation has remained tense. No matter what the outcome of this crisis may be, one can say that the fishermen finally obtained a decisive card to reverse the power relationship. As they are actually in the spotlight, they use this new "power" to safeguard their culture and even promote it. Ceremonies of maritime cults organized by the Vietnamese islanders attract considerable media attention. In Nha Trang, thousands of pilgrims come to the whale's temple every year after fishing season to pay tribute to maritime deities. The fishermen have successfully preserved their culture even if it is not wrong to say they take advantage of geopolitics conflicts to put a spotlight on an ancestral culture, one of the finest and richest of Southeast Asia. Their beliefs are so strong that they entail the inlanders: for the whale festival, even the farmers who had never seen any marine mammals go on pilgrimages. The financial impact of maritime cults is becoming more and more important considering the devotion of the faithful. Fishermen's cults finally assemble the whole Vietnamese society who is steadfastly behind them and support them. But this "victory" is precarious. An armed conflict could spoil things: it is a pitfall to avoid. Everyone stands to lose. The financial consequences would be disastrous for this area. South China Sea has a strong touristic potential, not to mention the fishing or oil and gas incomes for Vietnam. At the moment, however, emphasis is placed in the upper North, between China and Japan. However, the situation is critical for fishing community: at Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore 2013, Leon Panetta, American Secretary of Defense has clearly indicated that the United States will concentrate its

naval forces in the Asia-Pacific in the very near future.²⁴ This announcement has sparked a vigorous debate in China. Division between major powers could be disastrous for this area. A solution must be found quickly by the international organizations. Economy and politics are closely tied up. The instability in this area is not benefiting anyone. Furthermore, Chinese maritime trade still increases and its new arms race is frightening.²⁵ To stay in the race, the Vietnamese government injected 3.3 billion dollars into the defence budget for 2012 and the arms race has weakened the Vietnamese economy. But Vietnam is not the only country involved. The exploitation of fishing resources or oil resources needs mutual understanding between South China Sea's nations. What would happen to the fishing communities if the spark finally grows into a steady flame?

8. Conclusion

The talks have been lately resumed between countries in the South China Sea. Even if no agreement had been obtained, considerable efforts were made in this area. Far beyond territories disputes, the fishing communities are the guardians of a unique multicultural heritage. However, they are often forgotten in discussions between great powers. Everything must be done with the purpose of preserving their culture as these men do not have alternative livelihood or long-term sustainable income sources.

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²⁴ Panetta's speech in Shangri-La Hotel, June 02, 2012: "President Obama has stated the United States will play a larger role in this region over the decades to come. This effort will draw on the strengths of the entire United States government. We take on this role not as a distant power, but as part of the Pacific family of nations. Our goal is to work closely with all of the nations of this region to confront common challenges and to promote peace, prosperity, and security for all nations in the Asia-Pacific region. [...] The United States will keep six aircraft carriers in the Asia-Pacific region and will shift 60% of its warships to the region, over the coming years until 2020."

²⁵ *New Arms Race: China's Military Modernization Aimed at Achieving Parity with US*, Global-Research.ca, 28 February 2007.

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WIETNAMSKIE SPOŁECZNOŚCI RYBACKIE: PRZEWAGI GEOGRAFICZNE I KONFLIKTY CZY SUWERENNOŚĆ TERYTORIALNA?

Streszczenie: Artykuł prezentuje trudną sytuację w branży rybołówstwa w Wietnamie. Wietnamscy rybacy zostali włączeni w spór terytorialny, który toczy się między Wietnamem a Chinami. Stali się narzędziem w rękach rządu wietnamskiego, który poprzez ich działalność chce zaznaczyć swoją obecność na Morzu Południowochińskim. Artykuł przedstawia także geostrategiczne i finansowe aspekty toczącego się sporu.

Słowa kluczowe: Wietnam, społeczności rybackie, Morze Południowochińskie, geostrategia, przemysł.