

South China Sea disputes: Chinese historical evidence found wanting

Written by vuquangtiep

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“Historical evidences” of some Chinese scholars are vague, erroneous or blatantly false, relying as they do on uncorroborated evidence, faulty logic, misquotes, misinterpretations and outright inventions.



In response to Bill Hayton’s commentary [The Paracels: Historical Evidence Must Be Examined](#) on Eurasia Review, Professor Li Dexia and Researcher Tan Keng Tat published their commentary [South China Sea Disputes: China Has Evidence Of Historical Claims](#).

These two authors asserted that to properly address Hayton’s issue would require a monograph and pointed to the Philippines’ 4000-page legal brief as an example. One would expect therefore that in that short commentary they would have selected only the strongest evidences from centuries of historical records to support their arguments. Let us look at some of these evidences (some of which were recycled in their Eurasia Review article Xisha (Paracel) Islands : [The Inconvenient Truth](#)).

2. Li and Tan quoted from the 13th century book ‘Chu Fan Chi’ which mentions the names ‘Chien-li chang-sha’ and ‘Wan-li shih-chuang’, and claimed that according to the book’s translators’ “[these two names] referred to the Paracels.” However, according to F. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill’s [translation](#) of ‘Chu Fan Chi’ (published by the Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1911) ‘Wan-li shih-tang’ is Maclesfield Banks and ‘Wan-li shih-chuang’ “is certainly the same” [i.e. Maclesfields Banks] (Hirth & Rockhill, p.185). Hirth & Rockhill did not identify ‘Chien[Tsien]-li chang-sha’ but simply referred to it as “«Thousand-li-banks», east of Hainan” (p. 283). Nowhere in the book ‘Chien[Tsien]-li chang-sha’ is referred to as the Paracels. Li & Tan are thus misquoting Hirsh and Rockhill in a manner that is academically objectionable.

The whole paragraph containing the quote reads: “Ki-yang lies at the extreme (southern) end of the coast (of Hai-nan), and there is no land beyond it, but outside there are two islets, Wu-li (五里) and Su-ki-lang (蘇基郎). Chan-ch’ong [today’s Central Vietnam] faces it to the south, and to the west it looks towards Chon-la [today’s South Vietnam]. To the east (of Hai-nan) are the «Thousand li banks» (千百里) and the «Myriad li rocks» (萬里石) and (beyond them) is the boundless ocean, where the sea and the sky blend their colours, and the passing ships sail only by means of the south-pointing needle [compass] —if it be closely watched by day and night—for life or death depends on the slightest fraction of error.” From this paragraph and indeed from the whole book there seems to be no way to identify either Chien-li chang-sha’ or ‘Wan-li shih-chuang’ with the Paracels. No distance from land is indicated, and the direction is vague or outright wrong, as the Paracels is South-East of Hainan, not East. There is no evidence that Chu Fan Chi’s author Chau Ju-Kua, a customs inspector of foreign trade in Fujian province, actually knew the islands in question: he might have just heard about them from foreign traders.

The book title, ‘Chu Fan Chi’ (初蕃志), literally means ‘A Description of Barbarous Peoples’, or ‘Records of Foreign Nations.’ This book is therefore mainly about things and peoples outside China. The same can be said to Chen Lun-Chiung’s book ‘Notes on land across the sea’ (海國文獻-pinyin: Hai guo wen jian lu) that Li & Tan also referred to. Mentions of an island in these books therefore can hardly be taken to imply that it belonged to China.

3. Li & Tan quoted several cases of Chinese sailors going near or passed the islands that are purportedly the Paracels or Spratlys during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. We will simply point out the obvious fact that going past an island is not proof that one first discovered it or owns it.

4. Similarly, describing an island in a book is not proof of first discovery or ownership either. After all, most literate countries will have books describing countries and territories halfway around the world, without claiming that half the world belongs to them. (Hopefully we will not see this happen in the future as China gets more and more assertive!)

5. Li & Tan asked how Vietnamese fishermen could have travelled 250 nautical miles to the Paracels in 1405. We suggest they find out more about the maritime history of South East Asia. Like other coastal South East Asian nations (and unlike the continental-oriented China), the Vietnamese have a long maritime tradition. Living in a country which consists mostly of a thin coastal strip, they rely on the sea for their survival. Indonesian and other South East Asian sailors crossed the Indian Ocean and reached Madagascar as early as the 9th century,

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travelling 800 nautical miles. Polynesian sailors, of course, made even more impressive voyages in primitive vessels millennia before.

6. Responding to Hayton's statement that he has seen "no convincing evidence that would demonstrate any official Chinese interest in the Paracels before 1909," Li and Tan claimed that the 1887 Convention concerning the [Delimitation of the Border between Tonkin and China](#) assigned to the latter all islands east of a certain (north-south) delimitation line, including the Paracels. This is a complete misunderstanding of the treaty, and such an interpretation would lead to the absurd result that most of the coastal islands of central Vietnam belong to China, even if they are separated from the Vietnamese mainland by only a few meters (since the delimitation line in question, if extended indefinitely to the south, would cross well into the Vietnamese mainland).

Firstly, the treaty, as its name indicates, was concerned only with the border between Tonkin and China. Tonkin was a separately administered unit of Vietnam at that time, and extended southwards only as far as the 20th parallel (roughly the same as the northern coast of Hainan island). The Paracels lie mostly south of the 17th parallel, nearly 300 km to the south. By no stretch of the imagination could it be construed that the Paracels lie within the scope of the treaty.

A more careful reading of the relevant paragraph of the treaty would give rise to an even more restrictive interpretation. In that paragraph, some contested areas near the coastal town of Monkai are assigned to China, and the islands that are specifically mentioned by name (Chagu and Go-tho) are both coastal island (situated within a few km of the mainland), making it clear that the signatories were only concerned with the frontier on land and nearby coastal islands. In fact, an accompanying map signed by both parties (http://danluan.org/files/u23/danluan_a051.jpg) shows the delimitation line in question extending only about 10 km offshore.

7. Li and Tan invoked Chiu & Park (Ocean Development and Law Journal, 1975) in support of their position. However, the arguments advanced by these authors are essentially the same as those of Li & Tan (indeed, it seems that the latter drew heavily from Chiu & Park's paper), which we have thoroughly refuted.

8. Regarding the quotes from Ung Van Khiem, Le Loc and Pham Van Dong, only the last can be said to be properly documented. Pham Van Dong's letter did not mention the Paracel and

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Spratly islands. Furthermore the Paracels were at that time under the administration of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), which vigorously defended its sovereignty over the islands.

9. Hayton rejected Li's assertion that "after Japan's surrender in 1945, the Islands were returned to China according to the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations", pointing out that the Paracels and Spratlys were never mentioned in these declarations. In response Li and Tan quoted the following sentence from the Cairo Declaration: "Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed". This is an illogical and meaningless response because neither the Paracels or the Spratlys are mentioned in that sentence, or anywhere in the Cairo or Potsdam Declarations for that matter. Instead of countering Hayton's statement, Li and Tan have actually corroborated it!

10. Li and Tan's assertion that "From 1946 to 1956 [...] France and the Republic of Vietnam did not challenge China's sovereignty over the islets" is both disingenuous and false. Firstly, between 1946 and 1954 France was busy fighting a full scale war against the Viet Minh, while in 1955-1956 the Republic of Vietnam was in a chaotic situation after taking over from the French, with government, communist, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai and Binh Xuyen forces engaged in a civil war. Nevertheless, the French still managed to reoccupy Paracels in 1947 and stayed in Pattle Island and some nearby islands until 1956, while the State of Vietnam (the Republic of Vietnam's predecessor) asserted sovereignty at San Francisco in 1951 as Li and Tan themselves pointed out, and the Republic of Vietnam reaffirmed Vietnam's sovereignty over Paracels and Spratlys in June 1956 following a Chinese statement on the same issue in May 1956.

11. As mentioned earlier, Li & Tan recycled most of the above arguments in their Eurasia Review article [Xisha \(Paracel\) Islands: The Inconvenient Truth](#) . That article includes one more canard that needs to be shot down: that Japan returned the Paracels and Spratlys to China under Article II, Treaty of Peace on 28 April 1952. The article mentioned actually reads: "It is recognised that under Article 2 of the Treaty of Peace which Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on 8 September 1951 (hereinafter referred to as the San Francisco Treaty), Japan has renounced all right, title, and claim to Taiwan (Formosa) and Penghu (the Pescadores) as well as the Spratley Islands and the Paracel Islands" This article, and Article 2 in the 1951 San Francisco treaty to which it refers, simply state that Japan renounces sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys. Nowhere do they say or imply that Japan "returns" these islands to China. International treaties are binding legal documents of great import and are therefore carefully drafted, no more should be read into them than what has been actually written.

In conclusion, Li & Tan's "historical evidences" are vague, erroneous or blatantly false, relying

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as they do on uncorroborated evidence, faulty logic, misquotes, misinterpretations and outright inventions. If that's the best evidence that these researchers can produce, they will not gain many converts to their cause.

By Pham Quang Tuan and Phan Van Song

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