

ARCHEOLOGY AND PATRIOTISM: LONG TERM CHINESE STRATEGIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA¹

By François-Xavier Bonnet “*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,*” Sun Tzu.

“*Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting,*” Sun Tzu.

Abstract :

Several authors writing about the Chinese claim to the Paracel Islands have dated the first official Chinese expedition to these islands to 1902. However, none of these writers have been able to show any records of this expedition taking place. In fact, Chinese records show that the expedition never happened. Instead, a secret expedition took place decades later to plant false archaeological evidence on the islands in order to bolster China’s territorial claim. The same strategy has been applied in the Spratly islands: the sovereignty markers of 1946 had been placed, in fact, ten years later, in 1956.

Introduction :

Professor Marwyn Samuels, in his well-known book “Contest for the South China Sea” admonished western scholars who dated the first Chinese expedition to the Paracels to 1909. Instead, he asserted that the first expedition took place in 1902. According to Samuels, this first inspection tour was directed by Admiral Li Chun and was the first attempt to implement the 1887 convention between France and China, asserting the rights of China over these islands.² Since the publication of Samuels’ seminal work, it has

become conventional to refer to this “indisputable” fact in books and articles concerning the dispute in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, none of the subsequent writers have been able to substantiate this assertion.

Archeological campaigns of the 1970’s and the grand narrative:

Between 1974 and 1979, several archeological expeditions were carried by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and archeologists in the Paracel Islands. Among the artifacts these expeditions found were porcelains from different periods, the remains of temples and several sovereignty markers. These markers were dated 1902, 1912 and 1921. In 1973, the magazine from Hong Kong, *The Seventies*, showed a picture of a 1902 tablet found on an islet of the Paracels.³ The *Hong Kong Standard* newspaper reported the findings on March 6 1979 in an article titled “Tablet proves ancient rights.” These two articles, both showing a picture of a 1902 tablet, became the only sources of informations on the “indisputable” expedition of 1902 for scholars like Hungdau Chiu and Choon-ho Park and Marwyn Samuels in 1982. Before 1979, neither western nor Chinese scholars had ever mentioned the existence of a 1902 expedition. The only official voyage recorded in the Qing annals was the inspection tour led by Admiral Li Chun in 1909.

The ghostly expedition in the Paracel Islands :

There is a simple reason why no scholar has been able to unearth any historical records of the 1902 expedition: it never happened. Instead evidence of a 1902 voyage was concocted at a much later date: 1937.

In June 1937, the chief of Chinese military region no. 9, Huang Qiang, was sent to the Paracels with two missions: Firstly to check reports that the Japanese were invading the islands and secondly to reassert Chinese sovereignty over them. According to records of his mission dated July 31 1937, he left Guangdong on June 19 and arrived in the Paracels on June 23. The same day, he visited four islands of the Paracels in the Amphitrite Group (Woody, Rocky, Ling Zhou and Bei island). The following day, June 24, he left for Hainan.

This short and confidential mission has been recounted by the Chinese historians Han Zenhua, Lin Jin Zhi and Hu Feng Bin in their seminal work “Compilation of Historical Documents on our Islands of the South Sea” published in 1988.⁴ However, if they published the report of July 31 1937, they forgot, consciously or not, to publish the annex of this report. Fortunately, the confidential annex of this report had been published in 1987 by the Committee of Place Names of Guangdong Province in a book titled “Compilations of References on the Names of All our Islands of Nan Hai.” This annex gives the details of the actions of Huang Qiang in the Paracels⁵.

In this annex, Qiang explained that, as planned, his boat was loaded with 30 sovereignty markers. Among them, four dated from the Qing dynasty, the others from 1912 (the first anniversary of the Republic of China) and 1921. He carried no markers dated 1937, however, because the mission was confidential. His team found the four markers dating from the Qing dynasty, dated 1902, in the city of Guangdong. According to the annex of his report, his team buried the markers, noting their geographical coordinates, on the four islands. On Bei Dao (North Island), they buried two markers from 1902 and four from 1912. On the island of Ling Zhou, the team buried one marker from 1902, one from 1912 and one from 1921. On Lin Dao (Woody Island), two markers from 1921 were buried. Finally, on Shi Dao (Rocky Island), they deposited a single

marker, dated 1912.

In short, the 1937 expedition placed a total of 12 markers on the islands, including three bearing the date 1902. They were forgotten from 1937 to 1979 but then “discovered” between 1974 and 1979 by archeologists and PLA troops. This is almost certainly the explanation for a mysterious sentence in Samuels’ book when he wrote that these tablets of 1902 were thought to have been lost during World War II⁶.

The mystery of the sovereignty markers in the Spratly islands :

Most of the books, articles, and official declarations mention that China had retaken the Spratlys in 1946 from the Japanese and planted sovereignty markers on several islands. This story has been told for the first time by the Taiwanese Zhang Zhen Guo in his book “Trip to Nansha”[Nansha xing] written in 1957 but published in 1975.⁷

Zhang, who was a leader of the Taiwanese expedition of 1956 in the Spratlys (against Thomas Cloma), wrote that during the 1946 expedition led by the commander Mai Yun Yu, the party took control of three islands, namely Taiping dao (Itu Aba island), Nam Wei dao (Spratly island) and Xi Yue dao (West York island). On these three islands, the team of Mai Yun Yu planted the sovereignty markers, dated 1946.⁸

However, when the book of Zhang was published in 1975, the commander Mai Yun Yu was still alive and read it. This was a shock to him! In fact, he recognized that while his team went to Itu Aba island on December 1946, destroyed Japanese markers and planted two sovereignty markers (North and South of the island), they never went to Spratly island and West York island.

In fact, according to the official records, when the Filipino Thomas

Cloma declared in 1956 his ownership on the Spratly islands (Freedomland), Taipei sent patrols three times to these islands (2 boats from June 2 to 14, 3 boats from June 29 to July 22 and 2 boats from September 24 to October 5). During these patrols, the soldiers had the ceremony of the flag and erected sovereignty markers on the three islands of Itu Aba, Spratly and West York. However, as a trick, these markers were dated 1946 but were brought 10 years later, in 1956, to the Nansha.⁹

Archeology and patriotism : The politics of sovereignty markers

Were the archeologists sincere when they found the markers in the Paracels ? Or had they been coached by the PLA who knew the story? We can't know. Nevertheless, if we add the episode of the Spratlys, we can see a more elaborate and systematic strategy of manipulating the records. These two episodes do show the limits of relying on archeological artifacts to try to resolve the territorial dispute. Any artifact could be genuine (coming from the museum for example), but buried in a much later time. In the psychological war over the South China Sea islands, this trick can become a fact. This seems to be what had happened in these cases. The myths had appeared in many works written in English and reached an international audience. In the meantime, it seems plausible that these myths would be well known by few researchers with knowledge of Mandarin and a group of Chinese experts. In all, it suggests that 'patriotic archaeology' is deeply flawed and that experts should be wary before relying on it to pass judgment on the territorial disputes.

¹ This paper has been presented at the Southeast Asia Sea conference, Ateneo Law Center, Makati, March 27 2015.

² Samuels, Marwyn S, *Contest for the South China Sea*, New York: Methuen, 1982, p.53

³ *The Seventies* no3 March 1973 quoted in Hungdah Chiu and Choon-Ho Park, *Legal Status of the Paracel and Spratly islands*, Ocean Development and International Law, 1975, p. 25

⁴ HAN Zhen Hua, Lin Jin Zhi and Hu Feng Bin (edit), [Wo guo nan hai shi liao hui bian] (*Compilation of Historical Documents of our Nan Hai islands*), Dong fang/Chu ban she, 1988, p.210

⁵ Committee of Place Names of the Guangdong Province [Guangdong sheng di ming wei yuan hui], *Compilation of references of the names of all the South Sea islands* [Nan Hai zhu dao di ming zi liao hui bian], Guangdong Map Publishing Company [Guangdong sheng di tu chu ban she], 1987, p.289

⁶ Samuels, p.53

⁷ Committee, 1987, p.290

⁸ Committee, 1987, p.290

⁹ Committee, 1987, p.291

Bibliography:

Committee of Place Names of the Guangdong Province [Guangdong sheng di ming wei yuan hui], *Compilation of references of the names of all the South Sea islands* [Nan Hai zhu dao di ming zi liao hui bian], Guangdong Map Publishing Company [Guangdong sheng di tu chu ban she], 1987.

HAN Zhen Hua, Lin Jin Zhi and Hu Feng Bin (edit), [Wo guo nan hai shi liao hui bian] (*Compilation of Historical Documents of our Nan Hai islands*), Dong fang/Chu ban she, 1988.

Samuels, Marwyn S, *Contest for the South China Sea*, New York: Methuen, 1982

About the author :

François-Xavier Bonnet is a geographer and a Research Associate of the French Institute for Research on Contemporary Southeast Asia (Irasec). He has published, among others, “ Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal,” Irasec’s discussion paper 14, November 2012, <http://www.irasec.com/ouvrage34> email: mpdbonnet@yahoo.com

PICTURE OF THE 1902 SOVEREIGNTY
MARKERS

Steles from the Guangxu reign (1882-1902) on one of the Xisha Island
Source : Thomas H. Hahn Docu-Images.
<http://hahn.zenfolio.com/xisha/h1D468115#h1d468115>.



SECRET MISSION OF JUNE 1937

Source : Committee of Place Names of the Guangdong Province

[Guangdong sheng di ming wei yuan hui], Compilation of references of the names of all the South Sea islands [Nan Hai zhu dao di ming zi liao hui bian], Guangdong Map Publishing Company [Guangdong sheng di tu chu ban she], 1987, p.289.

——见《文物》1976年第9期第9—22页。

4. 立碑记录

要件 民字第9号

第九区专员呈报派员会查西沙群岛所得情形请核由 *hai kou*

职经六月十九日会同广东绥靖主任公署高级参谋云振中……陆军152师副旅长叶庆常……第九区保安司令部副司令王毅乘海周舰于本月二十日晨四时由海口起航……二十三日上午十一时到西沙群岛中之林岛、石岛，停泊于两岛之东北，即登陆调查。……两岛并无日本人居住，复查之林岛渔民王家钦，据云日本渔船每月常来西沙群岛三、四次，放渔炮捕鱼，并抢夺渔民所得而去。并云法国战舰常至其地云。……职等乃在林岛立石三方，石岛立石一方（石碑记录另详），六月二十三日上午五时四十五分由林岛起航……八时到玳洲岛，即登岸调查一切，并无日本人踪迹，乃立碑三方于该岛之北端。……下午三时到北岛，即登陆调查，……并无日本人踪迹，乃立碑六方于岛上。……六月二十四日下午七时半返海口。虽然西沙各岛均属浅滩，舢板不能靠岸，既无港湾以泊船只，复无高山以蔽风浪等缺点，但尚假人工之建设，以弥补其缺点，则可成为国防军事上要塞也。等情。附缴西沙群岛图及航线图各一份，各岛树立石碑纪录表一份，鸟粪六包。……呈请察核转报，实为公便。

第九区行政区督察专员 黄强

民国二十六年十月卅一日

附件：西沙群岛立碑记录表

(1) 石岛藏石碑一方，于石岛(对正林岛)老树侧，即石岛之南部距离岸边50英尺，入土深一尺，该石碑刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”等字。1912

(2) 林岛北便岸边(对正石岛)由藏石地点以罗盘测石岛之左边为N28°E，测石岛之右边则为N52°E。

(3) 在林岛中央大路边水井之西北，距

离井边5尺处，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国十年立”等字。1921

(4) 在林岛之西南、弧魂庙仔(庙宽9英尺，高6英尺)之后背，相距庙墙6英尺，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国十年立”。1921

(5) 在玳洲岛北端石上距岸边大石边七十五尺，距离大石东边六十二尺，藏石一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国十年立”等字。1921

(6) 在玳洲岛北端中心树下，藏石一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”盖泥八寸。1912

(7) 在玳洲岛之东北端草棚后便大石上，距离草棚三十七英尺藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大清光绪二十八年立”等字。1921

(8) 在北岛之东南端小路口藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大清光绪二十八年立”等字。1921

(9) 在北岛之东南端南便岸边石角屋左角，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”等字。1912

(10) 在北岛之南便岸边草屋前空地，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”等字。1912

(11) 在北岛之南便岸边草屋后，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”等字。1912

(12) 在北岛之东南角对正中岛处，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大中华民国元年立”等字。1912

(13) 在北岛之北岸边，藏石碑一方，刻“视察纪念大清光绪二十八年立”等字。

5. 西沙群岛的古庙遗址

在西沙群岛的各岛屿上，几乎都有古庙遗存。据广东省博物馆和海南行政区文化局考古人员的调查，仅在赵述岛、北岛、南岛、永兴岛、和五岛、琛航岛、广金岛、珊瑚岛和甘泉岛即有古庙十四座，在中岛、晋卿岛、金银岛等地也有遗存。古庙大都位于岛屿的边缘地方，庙门向海。渔民的船只就

