

Conservation of Maritime Cultural Heritage: View from the Angle of Quang Ngai Province (Vietnam)

Ngo The Bach, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Thang Long - Hanoi Heritage Conservation Centre
09, Hoang Dieu St., Hanoi, Vietnam
Email: bach.ngothe@gmail.com

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Thang Long - Hanoi Heritage Conservation Centre
09, Hoang Dieu St., Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

Quang Ngai is a province located in the South Central Coast region of Vietnam, on the coast of the East Sea. It borders Quang Nam Province which is home to the famous Cu Lao Cham shipwreck in the north and the Binh Dinh Province in the south. It has a long coastline of 129km and wide territorial waters of 11.000km². Quang Ngai has 6 seaports which are favorable for maritime transport and trade. The Ly Son Island of Quang Ngai province is located on the north-south waterway transport of our country, which is also the East-West international trade route in ancient times. The continuous discovery of shipwreck relics in the seas of Vung Tau, Binh Chau commune, Binh Son district, and Ly Son Island in recent years has demonstrated that the potential of maritime cultural heritage in the sea of Quang Ngai is enormous and rich. However, such precious heritage now is in danger of being undermined by the illegal exploitation of some local fisherman. In the context of our current status of underwater archaeology, the necessity of carrying out the studies, protection, conservation and promotion of the value of this important heritage resource is a major issue being faced by professionals and heritage managers. This article refers to the issues of preserving and promoting the value of maritime cultural heritage in Quang Ngai province, in order to serve for the exhibition in place and development of tourism as a new approach.

Key words: conservation, underwater cultural heritage, shipwreck, promotion of the value, tourism.

Introduction

Vietnam is located on a peninsula, one side adjacent to the East Sea, having a long coastline of 3,260 kilometers with many islands and islets spreading along the country, making this S-shaped piece of land become the great crossroads of civilizations from ancient times. Here, on this land, we realized the formation and development of the cultures, the integration and acculturation, interference, convergence and the spread of Vietnam to the world and the world to Vietnam by the sea route, although many people supposed it simply as a cultural convergence. From East Asia to Southeast Asia, from the Middle East to India, even *Early modern* Europe, the age-old history of the Vietnam sea and island culture has demonstrated that interference. Therefore, the study on the value of maritime cultural heritage of Vietnam is extremely necessary for peeling the depths of cultural values, reaching the awareness and deeper assessment. Such jobs are supposed to consume so much effort and time.

In 2000, after the Vietnam Salvage Company (VISAL) finished the first phase excavation of the ancient shipwreck at Cham island, while many protection measures have been applied to this ancient shipwreck relic, many people have still carried out illegal tapping.¹ In 2003, the Government of Vietnam allocated to the Doan Anh Duong Salvage Company participating in the surveys and excavations of ancient shipwrecks in many sea areas of Vietnam. In 2012, a 700-year-old ancient shipwreck was discovered in the sea area of Vung Tau, Binh Chau commune, Binh Son district, Quang Ngai province. The excavation of this ancient shipwreck, in association with the continuous discoveries of other shipwrecks in this sea area led to the need to study methods of

preservation, conservation and the promotion of underwater cultural heritage here.

Vietnam Sea and Islands Cultural Heritage

Regarding the sea and island culture of Vietnam, it is impossible not to mention the material and the intangible culture of Vietnam's coastal areas. Right from the Neolithic, the *scallop culture* in the coastal areas of Vietnam appeared, bearing many special characteristics as well as general features to East Asia and Southeast Asia. Bau Du culture, Da But culture, Thach Lam - Thach Lac cultures ... have provided valuable material on the mode of living, economic life, culture and spirituality of prehistoric man through the landscaping tools and their habitats.² By the Bronze Age, a variety of cultures and places belonging to the great cultures such as Dong Son, Sa Huynh, Oc Eo was found and studied through out from the North to the South, including Dau Ram (Quang Ninh province), Hoa Loc (Thanh Hoa province), Bai Coi (Ha Tinh province), Binh Chau, Long Thanh (Quang Ngai province), Can Gio (Ho Chi Minh City).

Despite these examples being modest in comparison with the material provided from archaeology, these findings also help to realize the tremendous value and clarify the genealogy of Dong Son culture in the Delta and the northern plains and Sa Huynh..³ All cultures and locations mentioned above have characteristics from the culture of sea area, containing many elements of sea and islands culture, but also bearing many elements of the delta, even in the narrow region at the center of Vietnam. Coastal heritage also includes the system of ports and sub-ports, existing at least from the ages of Dong Son - Sa Huynh - Oc Eo (from the 7th BC to 1st-2nd AD) until the 18-19th centuries with relics such as Lach Truong, Bai Coi, Hoa Diem, Go Que and etc to Van Don, Hoi Thong, Thanh Ha, Hoi An, and Nuoc Man...⁴

Studying the seaport system in the historical process of Vietnam for identifying the proper role and position on the international maritime route is a confirmation on the location of S-curved coast of Vietnam on the map. Those ports and sub-ports were extremely important in commercial activities. They are not only the place to import goods, but also a haven for international sailing through the East Sea to take on fresh water and food, and avoiding storms, and pirates.⁵ Heritage on the coastal, island and archipelago areas of Vietnam include temples, pagodas and shrines where the Ly - Tran dynasties are from. Buddhism, which was considered as the state religion at that time to carry out a part of the People's Defense strategy, along with the army defending the borderland, including islands. Right from the feudal era, it is reported by the ancient people that O Cap (Vung Tau province today) earned their living from finding sites underwater. Over twenty years, Vietnam has unearthed six ancient shipwrecks. They are the merchant ships which passed through the Vietnamese's seashore from overseas, but had sunk because of currents, storms, or fires. However, these are very small numbers compared with the information we learned from the field through material culture and from the retrospective information of the fisherman⁶.

After Hon Cau, X coordinates, the Ba Ria - Vung Tau sea has also detected another two shipwrecks. Chau Thuan Bien village (Binh Son, Quang Ngai province) has a lot of shipwrecks with varied dating which were realized via analyzing the pottery artifacts. It is very clear that the Vietnamese Sea lies on the important route of international trade; therefore any and all findings in these seas have demonstrated for the role, position and value of the East Sea of Vietnam on the East - West silk and ceramic route.

The Vietnam Maritime Cultural Heritage preserved the remnants of many great naval battles in history during the dynasties of Ngo Quyen, Tran Quoc Tuan' with the battle on Bach Dang river cited as a typical example. In addition to the battles, there were military regimes to protect the sea. The important findings about the seal called "Phụng mệnh bình hải tướng quân chi ấn" of Le Thanh Tong (1490) found at sea Van Don (Quang Ninh province), can confirm on the existence of an army for protection of the Vietnamese seas from that period. All cases such as the Tran Khanh Du's army carried out the business of coal wholesale; Tran Nhan Tong King moved to Yen Tu mountain for practicing Buddhism; Tran Hung Dao set up the manor at Van Kiep - Luc Dau river door and the seal called Binh Hai, the oracles of the East Sea of Nguyen Binh Khiem and etc,⁷ are the maritime strategies for sea protection from the fathers, suggesting to us a direction for more investment on the studies of military heritage and patriotic wars in the East Sea.

Conservation of Maritime Cultural Heritage in Quang Ngai province

Status of Maritime Cultural Heritage in Quang Ngai Province

Quang Ngai province is located in the south central coast region of Vietnam. It borders Quang Nam province in the North and Binh Dinh province in the South and Truong Son High Mountain and majestic Tay Nguyen in the West and the East Sea in the East. Apart from the business of domestic trade, foreign trade activities here through the Hoi An port were also quite developed. In the late 16th century, early 17th century, Minh Huong (village of the Ming people) merchant ships also docked in Co Luy - Thu Xa for trading and exchanging goods and etc. The early 20th century, the Japanese, Chinese and French merchants had their ships docked in

Co Luy - Thu Xa to sell clothing, kerosene, household items, and then buy sugar, cinnamon, salt, dried areca, and honey.⁸

Quang Ngai has a long coastline of 129km and wide territorial waters of 11.000km². Quang Ngai has 6 seaports which are favorable for maritime transport and trade. The Ly Son Island of Quang Ngai province is located on the north-south waterway transport of our country, which is also the East-West international trade route in ancient times. Thanks to such an important position, Quang Ngai province was evaluated to be the place having great potentialities for maritime cultural heritage. The discovery and excavation of ancient shipwreck dated the 15th century in 1999 in the place of Song Tau, Vung Tau Sea, Binh Chau commune, Binh Son district, can be said as the starting point for the process of research and discovery of maritime cultural heritages in Quang Ngai province. In addition, that was popular time of hunting antiques underwater carried out by the parts of the habitants living in this area (Fig. 1).⁹



*Fig. 1: Local fishermen are diving to find antiques.
(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian
Prehistory)*

In recent years, Quang Ngai emerged as a hot spot for marine cultural heritage. The first discovery is the Binh Chau 2 ancient shipwreck in 2012. From 4th June to 23th June 2013, Binh Chau ancient shipwreck was excavated, this Binh Chau ancient shipwreck was located about 200

meters far from Binh Chau coast and at the depth of 3.5-4m compared with sea level. We detected the remaining traces of the ship with the length of 20.5 m, the width of 5.6m and the hull of ship divided into 13 compartments with 12 partitions (Fig. 2). Artifacts collected here from include 274 ceramics barrels which are goods on board with ceramic lines such as brown glaze, celadon, blue and white porcelain, blue and white porcelain glaze, dating from the 13th century (Figs. 3-5). In addition, some metals like bronze mirror, bronze weights, boat tacks and bronze money were also discovered on this shipwreck. Archaeological excavation of Binh Chau ancient shipwreck is the 6th ancient ship excavated in the Vietnamese seas. In order to protect this national heritage, excavation experts have wrapped these shipwrecks by steel sheet piles (Larsen), pumping out the water to expose the hull and artifacts aboard, the excavations then were carried out conveniently (Fig. 6).¹⁰

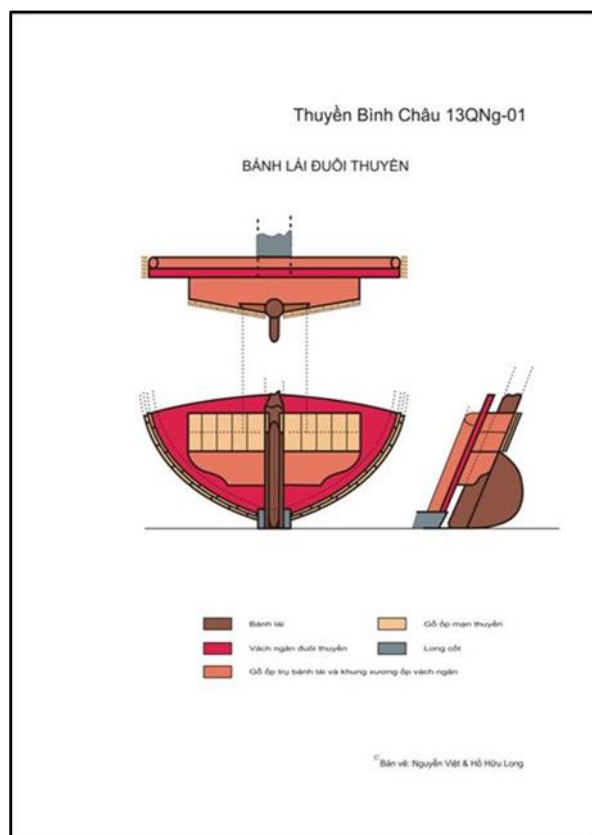


Fig. 2(left): Detailed drawings of the part of Binh Chau ship's rudder.

(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian Prehistory)



Fig. 3(left): Hundreds of artifacts burnt and sticking overlap.
(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian Prehistory) and Fig. 4 (right): Artifacts found in ancient shipwreck in Binh Chau - Binh Son.(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian Prehistory)



*Fig. 5: Celadon-glazed dishes and eel-skin-glazed dishes and apple skin glazed dishies, dating Nguyen Dynasty, the 13th century.
(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian Prehistory)*



*Fig. 6: The first time of excavation of ancient shipwreck as on land.
(Quang Ngai Province Museum, The Center for Southeast Asian
Prehistory)*

Considering a whole, the maritime cultural heritages of Quang Ngai province are much more than other regions. Until now, they have discovered 10 shipwrecks, in which 08 shipwrecks discovered in the sea areas of Vung Tau - Binh Chau and 02 shipwrecks found in Ly Son Island.¹¹ Most of the shipwrecks lie about 400m far from the coast, in water depths of between 2m to 5m. It can be seen that the distribution scope of shipwreck traces is quite concentrated, near shore and at quite shallow depth. The discovery of shipwrecks in the seas of Vung Tau province with many different dating, stretching from the 8th-9th centuries to the 18th century, shown that during 10 centuries, this place was an important destination on the route of international trade in ancient times.

In Vietnam, currently, we have not yet found any other area where the relics of shipwrecks distributed densely as the area of Vung Tau, Binh Chau province and also no other province where having rich maritime

cultural heritage as Quang Ngai province. It can be said that the sea area of Vung Tau is an "ancient graveyard" with dozens of shipwrecks have been identified. But these valuable heritage resources are faced with the risk of being destroyed because of the illegal exploitation of a part of local fishermen and the expansion of the project of Dung Quat 2 port. This is really a big challenge for managers and professionals.

Generally, when shipwreck relics discovered, the excavation experts often pay attention to the value of goods transported by ships, but not really fully understood the value of that underwater heritages. Therefore, since the 90s of the last century to now, there have been 6 shipwreck relics excavated officially, and dozens of illegal salvage were conducted only for economic purposes. Hundreds of thousands of artefacts were taken up and carried away for auction at domestic and abroad. By carrying out such exploitation forms, the State may earn some certain amounts for immediate benefits, but they gave up long-term benefits with more value. If we know how to combine with the shipwreck relics with the archaeological sites for creating an over of maritime cultural heritage, we will create favorable conditions for development of tourism here.

Direction of Conservation of Maritime Cultural Heritages in Quang Ngai Province

History has left for Quang Ngai province an extremely valuable heritage resource is maritime cultural heritage. These are assets, enormous resources for studying the values of culture, economy, politic and contemporary society and promoting the value serving for the tourism. To protect the marine heritage of Quang Ngai, we should have a new behavior more positive and proactive with this type of heritage. The question raised here is how to preserve the shipwreck relics and other

forms of marine heritage in order to promote the value for serving the public and contribute to improvement of the people's life in the region through the forms of community tourism and ecotourism.¹²

Based on analyzing the characteristics of the cultural heritage of Quang Ngai province and comparison with marine cultural heritage in other places, the experts came up with a new approach for the maritime cultural heritage resources of Quang Ngai province. That is the on-site conservation of shipwreck relics serving for exhibition to promote the values of heritage, as well as catering for diving tourism to sightseeing heritage - a favourite tourism type currently being interested by both domestic and foreign tourists. Moreover, the purpose of heritage conservation is to promote the values, particularly here is to build the museum for on-site exhibition and develop forms of diving tourism to sightseeing the heritages. The conservation and promotion of heritage values on the site will obtain the long term and sustainable benefits, creating more jobs and stability for local people. These values will inevitably create positive effects, which make the life of people in the region be improved; people will be more involved in the conservation of heritage. Accordingly, the serious problems such as illegal mining acts and destruction of heritage will be minimized and replaced by an attitude of respect and the actions of conservation and promotion of positive values of the heritages.¹³

As we know, the cultural heritage is fundamental for economic development, especially for the tourism industry. Marine cultural heritages in the sea areas of Quang Ngai and Vung Tau provinces differ with the others in term of quantity, density distribution, geographical distribution, the depth, etc. With these characteristics, currently, these sea areas are filing the application dossier to the competent authority for obtaining the

approval and recognition as National Maritime Heritage and World Heritage.

Issues of Replicating the Models for Conservation of Maritime Cultural Heritage in Vietnam

Conservation of marine cultural heritage is a relatively new field of study in Vietnam at present and is the top concerns of the archaeologists, the museology and researchers. Since the early 90s of the 20th century to the present, the Vietnamese archaeologists have conducted many excavations of shipwrecks from Quang Nam to Kien Giang provinces. Especially, similar to the sea areas of Vung Tau - Binh Chau and Ly Son (Quang Ngai province), Kien Giang province has also become an interesting place with a lot of shipwreck relics. Kien Giang province in general and Phu Quoc Island in particular has become the hot spots for the conservation of marine cultural heritage. Although, the distribution of heritages is not dense as the one in the sea region of Vung Tau - Binh Chau in Quang Ngai province, the sea region of Kien Giang province is potential for various types of heritage. Since 2005, in this sea area, we have discovered 3 shipwreck relics and simultaneously collected the information and artefacts from two other shipwrecks kept by local fishermen.¹⁴

Similar to the sea areas of Vung Tau - Binh Chau (Quang Ngai province), the issues of conservation and promotion of values sustainably with respect to the relics of shipwreck in Phu Quoc (Kien Giang province) is very being interested. At the same time, they also carry out the protection of the relics discovered, implementing the investigations and overall surveys of the sea areas of Phu Quoc, Kien Giang province, aim at further discovering the relics hidden, mapping the marine cultural heritage for conservation planning. The next action is to deploy the on-site conservation of marine heritages in Quang Ngai province, drawing

learned lessons and replicating this model for Phu Quoc province. The conservation and promotion of the marine cultural heritage value in Phu Quoc sea, Kien Giang province will contribute not only for serving the political aims of the State in relation to the issues of maritime sovereignty, but also for the purposes of scientist research and especially supporting for Phu Quoc in accomplishment of the national strategic by 2020 is to become the centres for tourism and marine eco-tourism developed at high level; the center for exchange of commercial, high-quality services of the country, the region and the world.

Regarding the Duties for Protection and Promotion of Underwater Cultural Heritage Value in Vietnam

The Government of Vietnam promulgated a Decree on the management and protection of underwater cultural heritage.¹⁵ This Decree provides for the management and protection of underwater cultural heritage, including cultural heritage in the inland water areas, internal waters, territorial waters, exclusive economic zones and continental shelf of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I would like to contribute a few thoughts after 10 years this Decree was issued:

The protection and promotion of the values of Vietnam's underwater cultural heritage must firstly carry out the comprehensive studies and evaluation of the values of heritage. However, the tasks for research, evaluation of underwater heritage is still very limited. The comprehensive, systematic and connective studies are not interested. Accordingly, there still remain a lot of topics and stages which has not been focused and many studying fields have been left vacant. Each organization, each group, each individual researcher, owns privately a block of studying materials and publishes them disjointedly, making our perception incomplete. That is the limit for the work of protection and promotion.

However, the results of research on underwater cultural heritage in Vietnam, based on the foregoing, are only as dotted markings on the panorama. In fact, the studying material on these issues were much richer. If the systematization of studying material can be implemented, it will create many valuable research works. However, those works should go deeply into each topic, each historical period, each region, each field... and then, summarize to help managers get the suitable policies and strategies in terms of not only the protection and promotion of heritage value, but also the political, economic, cultural, and social aspects.

Regarding documents, artefacts, collections and exhibits of underwater cultural heritage in Vietnam, though many stages and studying fields thereof are still vacant, but based on the obtained results from the studies and the collections from the researchers and museums, it should be better to have a museum of the underwater cultural heritage. Quang Ngai province has a museum project in Ly Son on Truong Sa - Hoang Sa and a museum project on vessels and maritime cultural heritage in Phu Quoc Island. The above activities have just only exploited in the extreme small extent of this field in comparison with the large scope of underwater cultural heritage in Vietnam. Therefore, it is necessary to build a more comprehensive and broader museum with the investment from the State to promote underwater cultural heritage in Vietnam. Accordingly, we will have the orientation and a more in-depth vision in the work of study and exhibition on this field.

Regarding festival of coastal areas and islands of Vietnam, since there are many similarities in term of the content, rituals and feature between them, we suggest expanding the influence of some festivals with the significance as the festival of ethnic communities, but not just the festival

at the level of village community, regional or local communities. For last several years, Ly Son has elevated to the festivals but still not satisfying as expected. To achieve this, the work for research, evaluation, rehabilitation and supplementation should be made. Accordingly, we would promote the influence in terms of politic, society, economy and culture of the festivals with the local and international communities.

The protection, restoration and embellishment of the cultural heritages in general and the underwater cultural heritage in particular have been reached many remarkable achievements during recent ten years. However, with a huge volume of such heritages, it is impossible for the state budget to cover all expenses for implementing such jobs. Although, the socialization of this job in many provinces is very significant for many years, however it should be applied and replicated in this case. However, the protection of cultural heritages is still much neglected and loose. These relics in Cai Beo (Cat Ba - Hai Phong city), how much area is left while the urbanization rate is going strongly today? The archaeological sites in Truong Sa discovered by the colleagues from Vietnam Archaeology Institute in the 90s of last century, but recently, were concreted. Apart from Truong Sa, in Phu Quoc, with the rate of rapid growth at present, many construction works were springing up, but archeology has not reached out to them. Heritage sector should actively propose in advance the major construction projects in Phu Quoc, Co To... serving for the investigation, research and excavation.

Conclusion

Since this article presents about cultural properties in the coastal and sea and island areas of Vietnam only from the perspective of Quang Ngai province, there are many other findings, important researches and many valuable scientific insights have not been mentioned here; therefore, the

author expected that this article will get the reader's sympathy. Apart from Quang Ngai province, there are currently many other hot spots of marine cultural heritage in Vietnam. Therefore, there must be a consistent and long-term strategic and plan for the issues of conservation and protection of this important heritage for the country and the future generations.

To conclude, there are two main issues we want to affirm:

1. The sea and islands cultural heritage of Vietnam is extremely rich with the various types, characteristics, and different historical periods. However, the studies in this regard have not been carried out regularly, continuously and systematically. The reason for this situation is that there is no State authorities to be assigned for taking in charge this issue to manage with the long-term orientation and for each specific stage.
2. With the abundance of sea and island heritages, the conservation and promotion of their values should have a strategy, with the longer and wider vision. However, for each particular case, it should have the situational reaction to timely protect and preserve the precious heritages for serving the long-term strategy.

With that spirit, it is necessary for Vietnam to have a research agency specializing in the underwater cultural heritage, existing besides a separate museum or sectoral museum under this research agency to perform research centralised, professional projects. This research agency also needs a center of underwater archaeology, instead of an underwater archaeology division under the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology as present, which was invested by the limited and slow human resource and facilities. This is the model that the Koreans applied and they also have cooperated with Vietnam during last years for implementing many

research programs effectively. In order to make the premise for this model, all materials, documents, artefacts... should be centrally gathered with an authority having the same objectives and functions for research on maritime heritages, announcing the depth issues in each study areas, each historical period, then to review and evaluate for providing the next studying direction.

Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam or Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, under the National University of... are the appropriate authorities to perform this task. As the preparatory step, the specific research programs on maritime cultural heritage should also be planned, with the detailed assignment for each competent authority with the objectives and functions for research in each field, implementing each program or project. One of three ministries and ministerial-level agencies should gather the above experts, formulating programs, plans, schemes and projects prior to the assignment. This is a great and long-term program which needs the investment/funds from the government budget.

Endnotes

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