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Hayton, Bill

2014

Hayton, B. (2014). The paracels: historical evidence must be examined. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 126). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/82095>

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No. 126/2014 dated 3 July 2014

The Paracels: Historical Evidence Must be Examined

By Bill Hayton

Synopsis

Advocates of the Chinese territorial claim to the islands of the South China Sea frequently cite vague historical references in support of their arguments. In order to be properly assessed, the exact references should be made explicit and honestly assessed.

Commentary

PROFESSOR LI Dexia's commentary on the Paracel Islands is a useful compendium of the arguments made in support of the Chinese 'historical claim' to the islands. The author knows these arguments well; her 2003 paper, *The Dotted Line on the Chinese Map of the South China Sea* was among the first to discuss the Chinese point of view in English.

However, her RSIS Commentary entitled *Xisha (Paracel) Islands: Why China's Sovereignty is 'Indisputable'* dated 20 June 2014 lacks verifiable evidence. It would be of great benefit to the community of South China Sea researchers if the author, or others, could rectify this situation.

No convincing evidence

The author tells us that, "Based on numerous Chinese historical records, since at least the North Song Dynasty (960-1127AD), China had exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Xisha (Paracel) and Nansha (Spratly) Islands effectively".

Advocates of the Chinese historical claim in the South China Sea sometimes make reference to ancient documents that mention 'the Sea' or 'islands'. To my knowledge, none of these references can be identified with any specific islands. There is simply no way of telling whether the islands they mention are in the Paracels or Spratlys or just among the hundreds of islands lying within a few nautical miles of the Chinese coast.

Is the author able to provide specific references to the exact texts in these historical records? Do any of these records identify the 'Xisha' and 'Nansha' islands by name? Based on my own research I do not believe that there are any official Chinese documents issued before 1909 that use those terms.

In fact, I have seen no convincing evidence that would demonstrate any official Chinese interest in the Paracels before 1909. As the French researcher Francois-Xavier Bonnet has shown, a map of Guangdong Province

published in 1897 went no further south than Hainan Island. The situation changed in 1909 because of rising nationalism in China provoked, in particular, by the discovery that a Japanese entrepreneur was extracting guano from Pratas Island – located between Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Vital episode in Paracels' history skipped

Following that discovery, an expedition to the Paracels was organised by the Governor of Guangdong, Zhang Yen Jun. According to the French owner of a regional shipping company, P.A. Lapicque (recorded in a book published 20 years later), the governor's expedition was guided by two Germans from the trading firm Carlowitz and Company.

There were, apparently, no local pilots up to the task. The group spent two weeks at anchor off Hainan waiting for good weather and then sped to the Paracels on 6 June before returning to Canton the following day. This visit is now the basis for China's claim to sovereignty over the islands.

Lapicque noted with incredulity how this brief expedition managed to produce 15 detailed maps of the Paracel Islands. It seems more likely that the Guangdong authorities simply copied the existing European maps of the islands and gave the features Chinese names. This would seem to be where the name 'Xisha' originates: probably a translation of the English-language name for one of the Paracel Islands, West Sand.

Moving closer to the present day, Professor Li is incorrect to assert that, "After Japan's surrender in 1945, however, the Islands were returned to China according to the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations". There is no mention of the Spratly or the Paracel Islands in either the Cairo or Potsdam Declarations. This was because France was lobbying for them to be recognised as French territory so the allies made no commitments about their future sovereignty.

Li also skips over a vital episode in the history of the Paracels. As the Norwegian expert Stein Tonnesson, has conclusively demonstrated, forces from both Nationalist China and France occupied different islands in the Paracels after the Second World War. The Chinese arrived first, on Woody Island in the Amphitrite Group in early January 1947. The French arrived a few weeks later and, finding Woody Island occupied, deposited their troops on Pattle Island in the Crescent Group.

Open vague historical claims for independent examination

French, and then Vietnamese, forces remained in control of Pattle Island from that point until they were evicted by Chinese invasion in January 1974. Nationalist Chinese forces abandoned Woody Islands on 4 May 1950 and were not replaced by Communist Chinese forces until 1955 or 1956.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the Chinese operation to seize Pattle Island and the Crescent Group in 1974 was planned months in advance and was not the accidental result of a battle between fishermen.

These are tense times in the South China Sea and if the issues are to be resolved, all sides must be prepared to engage in an open and rigorous discussion. Vague references to ancient historical documents are not sufficient. All sides must make their evidence available to independent examination.

At the moment China, Vietnam and the Philippines claim ownership of large groups of islands as if they are single units. If each claimant could put forward specific evidence for their title over each individual feature - rather than for large groups of islands within it - it would be possible to assess each one individually. Then it might be possible to begin to unwind the disputes.

Bill Hayton is the author of The South China Sea: the struggle for power in Asia to be published by Yale University Press in September 2014. He contributed this specially to RSIS Commentaries.