

Historical and Cultural Layers of an Estuary: Case Study of Ky Anh Estuary, Ha Tinh Province

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Abstract: *This paper adopts anthropological approaches to space, place and cultural positioning for a case study of Ky Anh estuary in Ha Tinh province on the following assumption: Cultural area only provides a static (and probably prejudiced) viewpoint despite its significance for the cultural identification on a broader scale. Whereas, cultural space connotes a narrower yet qualitative one. Therefore, only cultural place provides a dynamic insight of the location where cultural practices take place and encompass all its dimensions and transformations over time..*

Keywords: Estuary, Cultural Area, Cultural Space, Ky Anh District, Ha Tinh Province

1. Space, place and cultural positioning: some theoretical issues

As an environment for existence, living, creating and practicing culture, space is extremely important for humans and hence the central focus of all sciences. In anthropology, from the analysis of the dimensions of physical space in relation to the construction of mental spatial dimensions, different theories have been established in the anthropology of space and place. In line with anthropological theories, there is in cultural studies a theory of “locating culture” where issues of regional culture, cultural space and place have been proposed, discussed and applied in research.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, an American anthropological research group

realized that anthropology was moving beyond the confines of regional studies and the rich reality challenged traditional approaches and requires in-depth specializations of anthropology. Therefore, they have initiated and inspired to organize a series of books on a new field of research: anthropology and place space. The series include four books¹ which were published

¹ The series is called *Blackwell Readers in Anthropology*, consisting of (1) *Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* (Edited by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo), (2) *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader* (Edited by Kelly Askew and Richard R. Wilk), (3) *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader* (Edited by Alexander Laban Hinton), and (4) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Edited by Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga).

by the University of Oxford's Blackwell Publishing.

This article thus reviews the research on anthropology of space and place and cultural positioning presented in *The Anthropology of Space and Place, Locating Culture*¹ edited by Setha M. Low² and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, one of the book of the series. In this book, the spatial dimensions covered include: (a) human geography, (b) human territory, (c) spatial behavior, (d) personal space, (e) opened space, and (f) public space. Theoretically, spatial domains include embodied spaces, gendered spaces, inscribed spaces, contested spaces, transnational spaces, and spatial tactics. In the various dimensions of space from an anthropological approach and cultural positioning, this paper hints at the implications of the theories on several spatial domains including geospatial and humanity space. They are some directions of appropriating space, including the perspective of human existence in space associated with daily cultural behavior (embodied spaces), the perspective of defining the meaning for space (inscribed spaces) and the competition among different communities over spaces to serve their interests (contested spaces). The article accordingly applies those theories for the analysis of the selected case study. At the same time, Henri Lefèbvre's theory of the productivity of space in *The Production of Space* that space has productivity in flexibility of social and research contexts is also adopted. The accretion of layers of meanings in a spatial area that we surveyed

is the illustration of the productivity of spatial meanings mentioned by Henri Lefèbvre.

2. Rivers flowing into the sea: deep bays and commercial space

Ha Tinh province is located in Central Vietnam, characterized with short rivers and large flows that form small basins. Jointly shaped by Tri and Quyen rivers, Cua Khau river (also known as the Vịnh river) is a fairly large river in Ha Tinh province and creates a basin of 510 km² that is directly linked with the sea. Cua Khau seaport therefore has an outstanding advantage compared to Ha Tinh's three other seaports (Xuan Hai in Nghi Xuan district, Cua Sot in Loc Ha district, and Cua Nhuong in Cam Xuyen district) due to the natural characteristics of a deep bay, without sedimentation, so large ships can enter and exit. According to the *Nghệ An record* and *Dại Nam nhất thống chí* [Đại Nam Unified Gazetteer]³, among the four seaports of Nghe Tinh, Cua Sot was the busiest port. However, in early decades of the 21st century, due to the changes of flows and sedimentation rate and other reasons, the two ports of Vung Ang and Son Duong in Ky Anh district have significant advantages. These ports are much deeper than the other ports in Ha Tinh province⁴ with low sedimentation rate, which is very convenient for large ships to dock or cross the coast.

³ Institute of History (1970), *Dai Nam Unified Gazetteer*, Social Sciences Publishing House, vol. 2, Hanoi.

⁴ If dredged, the depth of Vung Ang port would be from -11 m to -14 m; Son Duong port: -21 m to -24 m; Cua Sot port: -3m, Xuan Hai port: -3.2 m to -3.8 m; and Cua Nhuong port: -2 m to -4 m.

¹ Blackwell Publishing, 2003, Oxford, UK.

² Former President of the American Anthropological Society, 2007-2009.

Reviewing the activities of the seaports in the central Vietnam shows that this advantage has been utilized for centuries. According to Nguyen Van Kim (2014), the West-to-East flows of the rivers in this region before pouring into the sea have featured Vietnam's river-sea space by linking the fresh water system with the salt water system. This "not only creates a link of trade among economic centers but also compensates the shortcomings, and at the same time, multiplies the potential and strengths of many regions". (Nguyen Van Kim, 2014) This feature is particularly pronounced in the Central region, which we are talking about in Ky Anh waters, where the Tri and Quyen rivers converge to form the bay before flowing into the sea. The trade activities in Ky Anh sea was not mentioned directly in the chronicles but in a citation by Nguyen Van Kim (2014) regarding a transcontinental trade route going through Nghe Tinh port to southern Laos under the time of Đại Việt nation: "Based on the data collected from Phum Mien, K. R. Hall said that, at the end of the tenth century, from Nghe An, Đại Việt traders had passed Ha Trai beach in Khai Truong range (which *An Nam chí nguyên* [An Nam Original Gazetteer] called Khai Mon mountain - possibly the Cau Treo border gate now) along the Mekong river to Ban That before entering the capital Angkor of the Chenla kingdom. These trade activities have ensured the supply of goods for Chenla and the lower Mekong Delta". It is not clear which commercial port was employed to create this transcontinental trade route, but with its natural advantages Ky Anh sea is possibly one of the seaports on the route.

The role of seaports in Central Vietnam under the Chinese domination has not been clarified either in research. In this regard, Li Tana (2006) has shed some light as follows: "...contrary to the popular perception that the intersection of Jiaozhi and China was conducted by sea through the Tonkin Gulf. Until the Tang Dynasty, the exchange between China and Jiaozhi encountered many difficulties because of the barrier of the rocks along the coast. This explains why Ma Vien Phu Ba, a shogun of the Han dynasty, had to "dig mountains to connect to the sea" during the invasion to Giao Chi in the first century A.D. Traffic obstacles were only overcome in the 9th century, when Cao Biền removed these rocks. The difficulties in traffic of the Tonkin Gulf create conditions for Central Vietnam, the territory of Nghe Tinh today, to have an important position in the region's maritime trade route". By citing 19 times of tributes by Khmer kings to Đại Việt against five times of their tributes to the Song dynasty, Li Tana reaffirmed that "it is almost certain that, Central Vietnam is the gateway to the region's waterway transport activities, where most traders, pilgrims, and tributary delegations arrive before they cross the river to Giao Chi (Viet, Giao Chau)" (Li Tana, 2006). Nguyen Tien Dung also provided more information on this issue: in 183 years (1012-1195), Chenla sent its delegations to Đại Việt 24 times while only five times to China (Nguyen Tien Dung, 2010). Thus, with natural geographical features and historical evidence, it can be said that Ky Anh sea used to be an important commercial space, as in the words of Charles Wheeler: "Outside the bamboo grove, next to the market, near rice fields and fish ponds, there is a river flowing through.

Down the river, it is only a short distance for most Vietnamese people in the past, where the sea is placed. Here, Vietnamese face the world” (Charles Wheeler, 2006) (see also Tran Thi An, 2016).

3. At the foot of Deo Ngang where Dai Viet borders with Champa

Deo Ngang or Ngang pass of the Hoanh Son range was the southernmost point of Dai Viet since its independence in 938. This country’s “door latch” (in the words of Philippe Papin) was only unlocked in 1069 by the Southward conquest of Ly Thanh Tong, resulting in the capture and then the release of the king of Champa on the condition that three regions [châu] of Bo Chinh, Ma Linh, and Dia Ly (today’s Quang Binh province and a part of Quang Tri province) must be ceded to Dai Viet. Over time, the Vietnamese territory was gradually expanded to the South, away from Deo Ngang. However, this southern part of Dai Viet was always the target of attacks and robberies from the neighboring kingdoms of Champa and Chenla. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (the Official Historical Annals of Dai Viet) recorded nine attacks from the Chenla people in the Nghe-Tinh region (with tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of warships). According to Nguyen Tien Dung (2010), “besides the goal of looting the relatively abundant resources in the region, the Chenla rulers also desire to seize an important seaport as an critical gateway for their country to participate in the East Sea trade network at an early stage”. Commenting on the crucial position of Nghe-Tinh in the confrontation with neighboring countries in the south of Đại Việt, Nguyen Van Kim (2012) wrote: “In the confrontation and constant dialogue with the neighboring countries, *Nghe-Tinh* is the country’s representative and, at the

same time, a front-line and strategic area to ensure national security; to establish and expand relations with the outside world.

With that position, at historical times, Nghe-Tinh had to face directly with the Chinese forces when they wanted to cooperate with Champa and Chenla... to create political and military pressure from the South on Dai Viet. Within nearly four centuries, Nghe-Tinh had been a place of regional conflicts and a convergence of new development factors”.

Lying at the foot of Deo Ngang, the land and sea of Ky Anh had been undoubtedly for centuries the central battlefield of the fight over the occupation of the territorial waters and land - an at-the-time crucial area in terms of both politics and commerce, especially during the difficult time of trade activities in the Gulf of Tonkin. Besides, Ky Anh as the former southernmost part of Dai Viet remains being influenced by Chinese culture while on the other side of Deo Ngang was the land of Champa that is heavily influenced by Indian culture. The area, centuries later, is also home to migrants from the North (according to the directive by Ly Nhan Tong in 1075) and the Northern Central (Thanh Hoa and Nghe Tinh). The dynamics of the migration flows and the different characteristics of the Cham people in the Southern Deo Ngang have distinguished this Chinese-influenced land in the Northern Deo Ngang.

The special historical and geographical features of this area have contributed to locating the culture of Ky Anh estuary. The identification of the inscribed spaces, therefore, is important for the spatial appropriation from the perspective of human physical existence in associated with embodied spaces. However, the *dynamism* and *fluididity* of the overlapping cultural

layers of this place also create contested spaces among different communities in order to serve their own interests, which is reflected better through the description of the life of local people from the perspective of a cultural place.

4. The sacred temple at the estuary: a cultural imprint in Southern Đại Việt

The description of geographical factors and the introduction of the historical context have highlighted the coastal area of Ky Anh as a cultural imprint of Đại Việt, which is also reflected in the legend, bibliography and through the worship of a individual named Nguyen Thi Bich Chau.

Nguyen Thi Bich Chau is a created historical figure. Her name is not mentioned in any chronicles of the time or of the later versions. Her name only appears in mythology (i.e. the story that influences the creation of folk legends and/or folklore writers) and in later literary works (where folk legends are anchored and embellished).

Nevertheless, her name, her hometown and family background, and her contribution have been provided in folk legends. Legend says, Nguyen Thi Bich Chau is a concubine of King Tran Due Tong. She was the one who offered to the king “ten books of wisdom” [*Kê minh thập sách*] and accompanied him on battlefields, particularly for the last fight with Champa where she died on the horse’s back. She is then worshiped at a temple set up at Ky Anh estuary. *Hải Khẩu linh từ* [The sacred story of Haikou] in *Truyện kỳ tân phá* by Doan Thi Diem (1705-1749)¹ tells us more thrilling details of Nguyen Thi Bich Chau’s

last voyage with Tran Due Tong to the fight with Champa. According to this work, her death was not on horseback but on a sacrifice to the sea god in order to clear the way for the king’s ships while going through the rogue waves at Ky Hoa sea (today’s Ky Anh). The poem *Ha Hoa Hải Môn thứ lữ* [Rest at Ha Hoa seaport²] in *Minh lương cầm tú* (supposedly composed by King Le Thanh Tong during his trip to fight against Champa in 1470 although its origin is still a matter of controversy)³ further confirmed the existence of a temple with “vibrant flowers and plants” that worships Nguyen Thi Bich Chau (see also Tran Thi An, 2013). According to *Bich Chau du tiên mạn ký* [The story of Bich Chau’s travel to the heaven], which is drawn from the Nguyễn Huy family genealogy and is said to be written by Nguyen Huy Ho⁴, Bich Chau is a fairy who broke a jade cup and demoted to be on earth as a concubine of King Tran Anh Tong (1276-1320, reign: 1293-1320). She died in 1312 on the way of King Tran Anh Tong’s triumphal return after the battle against Champa in 1311-1312. (This is also when her punishment ends and she is called to return to the heaven.)

² According to *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* [Records on Administrative Systems of Successive Dynasties], Ha Hoa is a region [*phủ*] in Southern Nghe An, comprised of two districts of Thạch Hà and Kỳ Hoa (today’s Cam Xuyen and Kỳ Anh districts). The poem adopted the name Ha Hoa but Kỳ Hoa is mentioned in its notes. Doan Thi Diem in *Truyện kỳ tân phá* also used the name Kỳ Hoa (Phan Huy Chu, 1972).

³ Mai Xuan Hai (ed.) (1986), *Writings by King Le Thanh Tong*, Social Sciences Publishing House, pp.188-190.

⁴ Nguyen Hue Chi (ed.) (1999), *Oral fantasies of Vietnam*, Vietnam Education Publishing House, pp.343-353.

¹ Tran Nghia (ed., 1977), *General collection of Sino novels of Vietnam*, The Gioi Publishing House, Vol. 1, pp.342-358.

Local people believe in the legendary details (Bich Chau as Tran Due Tong's concubine, the writer of "ten books of wisdom", and the king's companion to fight the enemy) and the year 1377 (when her temple was established and Tran Due Tong died in the battle). The belief originated from the novel *Truyền kỳ tân phả* [The legend of the new genealogy] and is further strengthened with *Ha Hoa hải môn lễ thứ* by Le Thanh Tong¹. Every year, authorities and the people in Ky Anh district organize Bich Chau Temple Festival and make square sticky rice cakes [bánh chưng] of a quantity equal to the temple's age (since 1377). The sea space of the king's voyages thus has been transformed into a place for worshipping the god of seafarers (i.e. the king in the past and fishermen today). The identification of the spatial meaning is based on a combination of the people's belief and the direction of the government at different historical times.

It is noteworthy that in Ky Anh there are two temples (also known as *Bà Hải* temples) dedicated to Nguyen Thi Bich Chau: one is located on the bank of the Bay river (Cua Khau river - the confluence of Tri and Quyen rivers); another is built on the beach, at the foot of the Dòn range (next to Son Duong port where the current Formosa factory seated). Caretakers of the two temples both claim that their temples were the main temple, where Bich Chau's tomb was located. The confirmation of the temple's legitimacy under the influence of Confucianism is a way to attract the government's investment and worshippers.

¹ People do not believe in the story of Bich Chau in *Bích Châu du tiên mạn ký*, which might be attributed to the fairy origin of the character.

Thus, the worship of Bich Chau as a patron god for seafarers (in the past) and as a Holy Mother (at present) with the power to provide her blessing (for fish catch, health, fortune, prominence, conception, love, etc.) reflects the people's need to separate themselves from their embodied spaces and to become a master of their own spaces despite their evident submissiveness to and dependence on the forces of nature (i.e. their prayers to the forces of nature and *Bà Hải*). At the same time, the contest of the temple's legitimacy (Contested Spaces) shows the hints of cultural layers where the need of worshipping and the government's interventions involved.

One notable fact is that Bich Chau's temples are also found in Cua Nhung, Cua Sot and Cua Lo although the one in the region of Ky Anh Border Gate is considered the main temple with tens of thousands of visits every year. Why is that? It is because there involves both favorable geographical features and interventions from the government. As above mentioned, Ky Anh is naturally shaped as an enclosed bay, offering docking convenience and shelters to seafarers and their boats from the stormy weather. Besides, on August 3, 1991, the Ministry of Culture and Information recognized the temple worshipping Nguyen Thi Bich Chau as a National Historic and Scenic Monument. Thus, the creation of a cultural place from a cultural space is undoubtedly influenced by the combination of many factors: natural geography, human geography, history, and the people themselves, which requires to be separated and interpreted in order to obtain a proper understanding.

The formation of cultural places and theoretical concepts (embodied spaces, contested spaces) as discussed in the article

clearly shows the political aspect of the issue: the practice of culture has a significant role and a close relationship with asserting the power of an institution and national sovereignty, especially in critical areas. The construction of a “shrine” (in June 2014)¹ and a “symbolism tower of French resistance spirit”² despite being requested to be removed³, it is again proposed to the local authorities for the construction of new ones⁴ in Formosa Industrial Park (at Ky Anh port). That shows the great relevance to the theoretical and practical discussed issues.

Conclusion

A majority of Vietnam’s estuaries are river entries to the sea and characterized by regional geographical features. They have formed places where communities exercise their cultural practices. The layers of meaning of cultural places (in Kỳ Ninh commune, Ky Anh district) discussed in the article are

always changing and transforming due to changes in population and of the historical and socioeconomic context. Nevertheless, they retain some key identities of a already-shaped culture (the Central Vietnam), which is deeply influenced by the qualitative characteristics of the marine cultural space, including the combination of activities and beliefs that carry national historical values. It is the interactive cultural practices of local communities in the Ky Anh estuary that have created a cultural place, reflecting the Viet people’s domination of a sea space in socioeconomic, cultural, and sovereign aspects within a depth of history and time. For the studies of those places that are embedded with the vibrant daily life, it requires anthropological theories of space/place and cultural positioning to identify and obtain the insights □

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