

VIỆT SỬ CƯƠNG GIÁM KHẢO LƯỢC 越史綱鑑考畧 BY NGUYỄN THÔNG - AN IMPORTANT DOCUMENT TO AFFIRM VIETNAM'S ISLAND AND MARITIME SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract

Nguyễn Thông 阮通 (1827-1884) was a poet and historian in the Nguyễn Dynasty. He served in positions such as the principal of the imperial academy, the administrative commissioner of Quảng Ngãi Province and the administrative commissioner of Bình Thuận Province. He was the author of 越史通鑑綱目考畧 (*Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược/A Brief Revision of the Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of Việt History*), usually shortened as 越史考畧 (*Việt sử khảo lược/A Brief Revision of Việt History*), after being assigned to revise the series 欽定越史通鑑綱目 (*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục/The Imperially Commissioned Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History*), which had been collectively composed under imperial order. In *Việt sử khảo lược*, Nguyễn Thông dedicated a section to Vạn Lý Trường Sa 萬里長沙, consisting of both the Hoàng Sa and the Trường Sa archipelagos (internationally known as the Paracel and the Spratly archipelagos, respectively). Studies of Vietnam's islands and maritime sovereignty have barely mentioned this important document. This article introduces *Việt sử khảo lược* and its significance in confirming Vietnam's sovereignty over the two archipelagos.

Keywords: Hoàng Sa; Paracel; Trường Sa; Spratly; Vạn Lý Trường Sa 萬里長沙; Vietnam; Maritime and island sovereignty; Nguyễn Thông; Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược 越史通鑑綱目考畧

1. Introduction

Vietnam has many historical documents concerning its sovereignty about the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagos, including atlas, historical books, and other kinds of writings. The ancient documents widely known to researchers are the map 天南四至路圖 (*Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ/ The Collection of the South's Road Map*) completed in 1686 by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo; the

book 撫邊雜錄 (*Phủ biên tạp lục/Miscellany on the Pacification at the Frontier*) completed in 1776 by Lê Quý Đôn; and the historical and geographical series 大南寔錄 (*Đại Nam thực lục/The Chronicles of Đại Nam*) and 大南一統志 (*Đại Nam nhất thống chí/The Record of Unified Đại Nam*) written in the Nguyễn Dynasty.

An important but rarely mentioned source is 越史通鑑綱目考畧 (*Việt sử thông giám*

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cương mục khảo lược/A Brief Revision of the Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History) by the scholar, imperial bureaucrat and poet Nguyễn Thông 阮通 (1827-1884). It contains a complete article about 萬里長沙 Vạn Lý Trường Sa discussing the Hoàng Sa Archipelago (internationally known as Paracel Archipelago or the Paracel Islands). Appearing later than the other documents mentioned above, this document written in literary Chinese provides an exhaustive conspectus of earlier documents in Chinese about the Hoàng Sa issue as the final legacy of Vietnamese Confucian scholars to later generations, which discussed this issue in French and *quốc ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese).

This book was first translated into Vietnamese using *quốc ngữ* decades ago. The collection *Thơ văn Nguyễn Thông (Verse and prose by Nguyễn Thông)* [5] (p. 222) produced by Lê Thước and Phạm Khắc Khoan and published in Hanoi in 1962, contains several *quốc ngữ*-translated excerpts from *Việt sử thông giám cương mục*. In 2009, the Institute of History in the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences organized the translation of the entire series of *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược* and published it in the same year [8]. In 2019, the complete translation was reissued with the translator's name, Đỗ Mộng Khương, printed on the cover [9]. As for the article "Vạn Lý Trường Sa", the Institute of History reused the translated excerpt by Lê Thước and Phạm Khắc Khoan and added another passage translated by Đỗ Mộng Khương. This passage was cited by Nguyễn Thông from 海國聞見錄 (*Haiguo wenjian lu/Records of Things Seen and Heard about the Coastal Regions*) by Chen Lunjiong 陳倫炯 of the Qing Dynasty. Lê Thước and Phạm Khắc Khoan produced a good translation, but they still mistook a few proper nouns for common nouns. Đỗ Mộng Khương provided a valuable addition, but his translation still contains a few unclear expressions, inexact

sentence punctuation, and confusion between proper and common nouns. Neither of the two translations has any annotation for ancient place names, which is of utmost importance but also a real challenge in researching maritime sovereignty.

This paper provides another complete translation and detailed annotation of the article "Vạn Lý Trường Sa" in *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược* by Nguyễn Thông and analyzes its significance in affirming Vietnam's sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagos.

2. Nguyễn Thông and *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược*

Nguyễn Thông 阮通 (1827-1884), who used the courtesy name Hy Phần 希汾 and several pen-names (Kỳ Xuyên 淇川, Độn Am 遯庵 and Đạm Trai 澹齋), came from Bình Thạnh Village, Thạnh Hội Hạ Ward, Tân Thạnh District, Tân An City, Gia Định Province (currently re-organized as Phú Ngãi Trị Ward, Vàm Cỏ District, Long An Province). He served as a royal bureaucrat during the reign of King Tự Đức of the Nguyễn Dynasty, and was also known as a scholar and a poet. Nguyễn Thông won the rank of senior bachelor (舉人 cử nhân) in the Confucian court examination of the Gia Định Province in 1849, which opened the door for him to serve in various positions of the royal bureaucracy such as education commissioner (訓道 huấn đạo) of Phong Phú District (An Giang Province) (1851), the provincial education commissioner (督學 đốc học) of Vĩnh Long Province (1862-1867), the surveillance commissioner (按察 án sát) of Khánh Hòa Province (1867-1868), the administrative commissioner (布政 bố chánh) of Quảng Ngãi Province (1869-1873), the vice principal (司業 tư nghiệp) of the Imperial Academy (Quốc tử giám, 1876) during which service he was assigned to co-revise the series 欽定越史通鑑綱目 (*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục/The Imperially Commissioned*

Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History) composed by historians in Quốc sử quán (National History Bureau) under imperial order. He later was re-appointed to work as the administrative commissioner of Bình Thuận Province (1877) and then worked concurrently as the vice-commissioner for agriculture and the provincial education commissioner of Bình Thuận Province (1881). He wrote 人事金鑑 (*Nhân sự kim giám/Golden Mirror to Reflect People's Incidents*) (co-written), 越史通鑑綱目考畧 (*Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược/A Brief Revision of the Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History*), 淇川公牘 Kỳ Xuyên công độc/*Official Documents Composed of Kỳ Xuyên*), 遯庵詩文集 (Độn Am thi văn tập/*Verse and Prose Collection of Độn Am*), 淇川詩文抄 (Kỳ Xuyên thi văn sao/*Selected Verse and Prose by Kỳ Xuyên*), 臥遊巢詩文集 (Ngọa Du Sào thi văn tập/*Verse and Prose Collection of Ngọa Du Sào*) [1] (pp.64-75).

Nguyễn Thông was assigned to collaborate in the revision of the series 欽定越史通鑑綱目 (*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục/The Imperially Commissioned Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History*) composed by a team of imperial historians working in the National History Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty. He and his co-revisers checked for mistakes and provided comments. The job was carried out in about three months, from May to August of the Bính Tý year, the 29th year of King Tự Đức (1876). When the assignment had been completed, Nguyễn Thông collected all the comments and added a little further discussion to compose a work of his own, *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược*, which means *A Brief Revision of Comprehensively Reflected Chronicles of the Việt History*, completed around the Thanh Minh Festival (held in early April of solar calendar) of the Đinh Sửu year, the 30th year of King Tự Đức (1877), as stated in the preface.

This work contains 7 volumes: volume 1:

prolegomena; volume 2: Main section; volume 3: An Nam; volume 4: Lâm Ấp; volume 5: Research on Chân Lạp; volume 6: Research on Xiêm La; volume 7: Research on Nam Chiếu (accompanied with Ai Lao). The article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” is in volume 4 discussing the state of Lâm Ấp (Chiêm Thành), because the archipelago belonged to Lâm Ấp before it was incorporated into Đại Việt. The volumes were proofread by Nguyễn Thông's daughter, A San, whose name was on the back cover of each volume.

The complete title of the series is *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược*, but it was usually shortened in different ways. 大南正編列傳 (*Đại Nam chính biên liệt truyện/The Main Section for Great Figures of Đại Nam*), in the biography of “Nguyễn Thông”, referred to the series as *Việt sử thông giám khảo lược*. 國朝鄉科錄 (*Quốc triều hương khoa lục/Records of Passed Candidates in Provincial Examinations of the Dynasty*) called it *Việt sử khảo yếu*. Nguyễn Thông himself referred to the series as *Việt sử cương giám khảo lược* (in his essay *Ngọc Sơn thọ doanh chí*) or *Việt sử khảo lược* (in the preface to his *Ngọa Du Sào thi văn tập*).

The Library of Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm/The Institute of Sino-Nôm Studies (Hanoi) possesses two texts of *Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược* written in Chinese characters, shelfmarks A998 and VHv1319, usually referred to as the Nguyễn Thông version. I read the VHv1319 text [7] to translate and annotate the article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa”. I also compare the original text that Nguyễn Thông cited from Chen Lunjong's 海國聞見錄 *Haiguo wenjian lu* to the text in *Haiguo wenjian lu* (sheets 15-16) currently stored in the Library of Waseda University (Japan), usually referred to as the Waseda University version [2], and to the excerpt in another version (sheets 36-37) stored in University of Malaya Library (Singapore), usually referred to as the University of Malaya version [3].

3. Annotated translation of the article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” by Nguyễn Thông

萬里長沙

萬里長沙在廣義省里山島(俗呼外嶼，唐人曰外羅)。望東開舟，三晝夜可至。我大越南國初常揀安海、安永二戶丁壯置黃沙隊，採取海物。每歲二月往，八月歸。

沙洲自東而南，一起一伏，不知几千百里，中有深澳，舟可灣泊，洲上出甜水，海鳥多不知名。有古廟瓦葺，扁額刻「萬里波平」四字，不知何代所建。軍人往辰，常携南方菓核，散播廟內外，冀成樹以為識認。自黃沙隊罷，近來無復向若者。昔人傳記，多稱海外十洲三島之勝，由今觀之，不可謂無其地，但以爲神仙窟宅則妄耳。

《海國聞見錄》，南澳氣，居南澳之東南。嶼小而平，四面掛腳，皆巉岨石。底生水草，長丈餘。灣有沙洲，吸四面之流，船不可到；入溜，則吸攔不能返。隔南澳水程七更，古為落滌。北浮沉皆沙垠，約長二百里，計水程三更餘。盡北處有兩山：名曰東獅、象；與台灣沙馬崎對峙。隔洋闊四更，洋名沙馬崎頭門。氣懸海中，南續沙垠，至粵海，為萬里長沙頭。南隔斷一洋，名曰長沙門。又從南首復生沙垠至瓊海萬州，曰萬里長沙。沙之南又生巉岨石至七州洋，名曰千里石塘。長沙一門，西北與南澳、西南與平海之大星鼎足三峙。長沙門，南北約闊五更。廣之番舶、洋艘往東南洋呂宋、文萊、蘇祿等國者，皆從長沙門而出；北風以南澳為準、南風以大星為準。惟江、浙、閩省往東南洋者，從台灣沙馬崎頭門過而至呂宋諸國。西洋呷板，從崑崙七州洋東、萬里長沙外，過沙馬崎頭門而至閩、浙、日本，以取弓弦直洋。中國往南洋者，以萬里長沙之外渺茫無所取準，皆從沙內粵洋而至七州洋。此亦山川地脈聯續之氣，而於汪洋之中以限海國也。沙有海鳥，大小不同。少見人，遇舟飛宿；人捉不識懼，搏其背吐魚蝦以為羹。

《符元安針路》記，外羅（廣義省里山島），開舟對萬里長沙甲庚卯酉八更，對萬里石塘艮坤寅申八九更。

VẠN LÝ TRƯỜNG SA

Vạn Lý Trường Sa 萬里長沙 (literally ‘thousands-of-li¹ sandy area’) is located three days and nights sailing eastwards from the island of Lý Sơn 里山² (vernacularly known to Vietnamese people as Ngoài Lao 外嶼 and written by Chinese people as 外羅 Wailuo, pronounced in Vietnamese as Ngoài La) of Quảng Ngãi Province. During the early days of our Đại Việt Nam country³, the authorities often recruited young men from the two villages of 安海 An Hải and 安永 An Vĩnh⁴ to establish the Hoàng Sa Crew sailing there to collect sea products, habitually departing in February and returning in August.

The sandy area stretches from the east to the south, with emerged and submerged areas occupying thousands of *li* of the ocean surface. There are deep water areas for docking ships and vessels. The islands have freshwater and sea birds of unknown names. There is an old tile-roofed temple of unknown construction date, its entrance plaque announcing “萬里波平” (*Vạn lý ba bình/Thousands of lis of serene waves*). Every time an imperial crew visited the islands, they brought seeds from the southern mainland to plant around the temple, so that people could locate the islands from afar with the fully grown trees. Since the Hoàng Sa Crew discontinued their visits, no one has travelled to those islands. Previous generations left us many writings that contain stories telling about ten amazingly beautiful sandbars and three islands offshore. Re-reading those writings, we cannot entirely deny the existence of those places, but believing them to be divinely glorious havens is a complete illusion!

In 海國聞見錄 *Haiguo wenjian lu*⁵ it is written:

“南澳氣 Nan’ao Qi⁶: refers to the island located southeast of 南澳 Nan’ao Bay⁷. The island is small with even surface, its four sides firmly settled on ancient volcanic rocks⁸, its base surrounded by waterweeds of more than a *zhang*⁹ long. The bay contains a sandy area that absorbs water from its four sides, making it impossible for ships to accessing it. Any ship drawn into the water currents near the sandy area would be pulled by the tides¹⁰, unable to return. About seven *gengs*¹¹ sailing from Nan’ao is a place believed by ancient people to be the bottom of the ocean (落漈 Louji¹²). The northern part of Louji contains many emerged and submerged sandy islands, totally 200 *lis* long, equal to 3 *gengs* sailing. Beyond the northernmost point of Louji are the two mountains 東獅山 Dongshi Shan and 象山 Xiangshan¹³. Four *gengs* across the ocean from Louji is 沙馬崎 Shamaqi¹⁴ of Taiwan. The in-between sea is called 沙馬崎頭門 Shamaqi Tou Men. Nan’ao Qi floats alone in the ocean, its sandy southern area meeting 粵海 Yuehai (the Yue Sea)¹⁵, opening to 萬里長沙 Wangli Zhangsha/Vạn Lý Trường Sa. The water body between Nan’ao Qi and Vạn Lý Trường Sa is called 長沙門 Zhangsha Men/Trường Sa Môn. A series of sandy islands emerge over the sea surface from the south of Trường Sa Môn to 萬州 Wanzhou in 瓊海 Qionghai (the Qiong Sea)¹⁶, called Vạn Lý Trường Sa. Beyond the south of those sandy islands appear a reef of ancient volcanic rocks leading to 七洲洋 Qizhouyang, called 千里石塘 Qianli Shitang/Thiên Lý Thạch Đường¹⁷. Trường Sa Môn, along with Nan’ao Island in the northwest and 大星 Daixing Island¹⁸ in the southwest, which belongs to the 平海 Pinghai Peninsula, form a tripod pose. Trường Sa Môn has a north-to-south distance of approximate 5 *gengs* sea sailing¹⁹. Chinese and Western ships and merchant vessels from Guangdong Province²⁰ going to southeastern countries such as 呂宋 Luzon, 文萊 Wenlai, and 蘇祿 Sulu²¹ have to travel through Trường Sa Môn. Under northerly winds, mariners usually made Nan’ao Island their point of reference, and under southerly winds Daixing Island. Vessels from the provinces of 江 Jiang (Jiangsu), 浙 Zhie (Zhejiang) and 閩 Min (Fujian) leading towards the southeastern sea have to travel through Shamaqi Tou Men of Taiwan to reach Luzon and nearby countries. Western ships often take the route along the eastern side of 崑崙 Côn Lôn (Pulo Condore) Island and the Qizhouyang Sea beyond Vạn Lý Trường Sa, passing through Shamaqi Tou Men to reach Min²² (Fujian), Zhie (Zhejiang), or Japan, taking an indirect route to get across the ocean. Sailors of Chinese ships leading to 南洋 Nanyang²³ beyond the south of Vạn Lý Trường Sa found the eastern-side ocean so vast and endless with nothing to mark their way, so they usually travel through Yueyang/the Yue Sea (Guangdong Province) on the other side of Vạn Lý Trường Sa to reach Qizhouyang. The underwater continuous ridges created the geographical layout of these islands, enabling mariners to determine different maritime countries in such a vast ocean. Vạn Lý Trường Sa has many sea birds of different sizes that have hardly encountered humans and often boldly rest on the ships of humans. They are even unafraid of being caught. When hit on the back, they usually drop shrimps and fish for people to cook soup.”

In 符元安針路記 *Fuyuanan zhenlu ji* it is written:

“From Wailou/Ngoại La Island (Lý Sơn Island of Quảng Ngãi Province)²⁴ it takes 8 *gengs* following the compass needle pointing jia-geng mao-you²⁵ to reach Vạn Lý Trường Sa, and 8 or 9 *gengs* following the needle pointing gen-kun yin-shen²⁶ to reach Vạn Lý Thạch Đường.”

4. The value of the article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” by Nguyễn Thông

4.1. “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” precisely and comprehensively covers all literary Chinese documents about the Hoàng Sa Archipelago until 1877

4.1.1. Name

Vạn Lý Trường Sa does not refer to the modern Trường Sa (Spratly) Islands but to the Hoàng Sa (Paracel) Islands. This conclusion is based on the following points:

- Location: It can be inferred from Nguyễn Thông’s text that Vạn Lý Trường Sa is close to and on a similar latitude to Lý Sơn Island, while Trường Sa (Spratly) is on a similar latitude to Khánh Hòa Province.

- The close distance between Vạn Lý Trường Sa and Lý Sơn led the Nguyen Lords to recruit men from the two villages of An Hải and An Vĩnh in Lý Sơn to go fishing on Vạn Lý Trường Sa. The Bắc Hải Crew formed under King Gia Long consisted of men mostly from Bình Thuận Province who went fishing on the sea from the Trường Sa Islands to Phú Quốc Island (Hà Tiên Province).

- The fishing team that went to Vạn Lý Trường Sa was named the Hoàng Sa Crew, not Trường Sa Crew.

- What is the relation between the two names “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” and “Hoàng Sa”? I consider that “Hoàng Sa” or “Bãi Cát Vàng 垓葛 (吉) 鑽” (literally means Golden Sandy Area) was solely referred to by Vietnamese people and recorded in Vietnamese documentation since the 17th century, such as *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ* by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo. Meanwhile, “Vạn Lý Trường Sa/Wanli Zhangsha” was the international name, first appearing in the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644) in *The Selden Map of China*²⁷, followed by other Chinese documents such as 海外紀事 *Haiwai jishi* by 釋大汕 Shi Taishan, *Haiguo wenjian lu* by Chen Lunjiong and Vietnamese documents such as *Phủ biên tạp lục* by Lê Quý Đôn, *Đại Nam thực lục* and *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* by the National

History Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Chinese writings and maps had mentioned Hoàng Sa with many names such as 千里長沙 Qianli Zhangsha/ Thiên Lý Trường Sa, 萬里石塘 Wanli Shitang/ Vạn Lý Thạch Đường, 千里石塘 Qianli Shitang/ Thiên Lý Thạch Đường, 七洲洋 Qizhouyang/ Thất Châu Dương, etc., causing much confusion and misunderstanding to researchers, but Nguyễn Thông never used them.

The name Vạn Lý Trường Sa was probably used to refer to the entire archipelago of rocky, sandy, and coral islands scattered over thousands of kilometers from the north to the south of Vietnam’s East Sea. In 1838, 大南一統全圖 *Đại Nam nhất thống toàn đồ* described those islands as the two separate archipelagos of Hoàng Sa and Vạn Lý Trường Sa. The latter is currently known as the Trường Sa Archipelago of Vietnam.

4.1.2. Nature and landscape of Vạn Lý Trường Sa

Nguyễn Thông wrote: “The sandy area stretches from the east to the south, with emerged and submerged areas occupying thousands of *lis* of the ocean surface”. A similar geographical feature had been recorded by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo in 1686: “[The archipelago is] 400 *lis* long, 20 *lis* wide, standing alone in the ocean, stretching from the Đại Chiêm 大占 Estuary to the Sa Vinh 沙榮 Estuary²⁸” [6] (p.40). *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* wrote: “The archipelago contains golden sandy islands occupying thousands of *lis*” [10] (p.492).

Nguyễn Thông wrote: “There are deep water areas for docking ships and vessels. The islands have freshwater and sea birds of unknown names.” These features match the description provided by Lê Quý Đôn: “The mountains have freshwater streams. The archipelago contains a long Golden Sandy Island (黃沙渚 Hoàng Sa Chử) of approximately more than 30 *lis* long, with wide, even surface and freshwater streams transparent to the bottoms. The island has countless swallow’s nests and other kinds

of birds that are bold and unafraid of people” [4] (p.199). *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* provides similar information: “The water is transparent. The island has freshwater sources and countless seabirds gathering around”. [10] (p.492).

Nguyễn Thông wrote: “There is an old tile-roofed temple of unknown construction date, its entrance plaque announcing “萬里波平” (*Vạn lý ba bình/Thousands of lis of serene waves*)”. Similar information was recorded in the section of the Ất Mùi Year, the 16th year of Minh Mệnh [1835]: “Hoàng Sa is in the maritime zone of Quảng Ngãi Province. It contains a white sandy island that has lush vegetation and freshwater wells. Located southwest of the island is an ancient temple with a plaque saying ‘萬里波平’ (*Vạn lý ba bình/Thousands of lis of serene waves*)” [12] (p.673). *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* provides similar information: “Located southwest of the island is an ancient temple of unknown construction date with a plaque saying ‘萬里波平’ (*Vạn lý ba bình/Thousands of lis of serene waves*)”. [12] (p.492).

The temple was probably first built by fishermen and then intensely renovated by the Hoàng Sa Crew under the order of King Minh Mệnh, as recorded in the section of “Ất Mùi Year, the 16th year of Minh Mệnh [1835], Summer, the 6th month” in *Đại Nam thực lục*: “Last year, the King intended to construct a temple and erect a stele on that location, but the plan was postponed owing to enormous storms. This year, Navy Captain (水軍該隊 Thủy quân Cai đội²⁹) Phạm Văn Nguyên, under imperial order, led a construction troop called Giám thành³⁰ and seamen from Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định Provinces to carry materials to construct a new temple located 7 *zhangs* from the old temple. The temple is decorated with a stone stele on the left and a curtain wall on the front. The crew left after ten days doing the construction” [14] (p. 673).

4.1.3. Location and sea routes to Vạn Lý Trường Sa

Nguyễn Thông cited the article of “Nan’ao Qi” (the currently Dongsha/Pratas Island) in

Haiguo wenjian lu by Chen Lunjiong to provide the location and sea routes to Hoàng Sa (Vạn Lý Trường Sa). Readers can peruse our annotated translation above for details.

4.2. The article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” by Nguyễn Thông is an invaluable historical document affirming Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa/Paracel Archipelago.

Nguyễn Thông affirmed that the Hoàng Sa/Vạn Lý Trường Sa Archipelago belonged to Đại Nam, more specifically under the jurisdiction of Quảng Ngãi Province: “Vạn Lý Trường Sa 萬里長沙 (literally means thousands-of-li sandy area) is located three days and nights sailing eastwards from 里山 Lý Sơn Island (vernacularly known to Vietnamese people as Ngoài Lao 外嶼 and written by Chinese people as 外羅 Wailuo, pronounced in Vietnamese as Ngoài La) of Quảng Ngãi Province.”

Nguyễn Thông affirmed that the predecessor of the current state of Vietnam already declared its sovereignty over the archipelago by organizing the Hoàng Sa Crew to exploit this archipelago over a long period of time: “During the early days of our Đại Việt Nam country, the authorities often recruited young men from the two villages of 安海 An Hải and 安永 An Vĩnh to establish the Hoàng Sa Crew sailing there to collect sea products, habitually departing in February and returning in August.”

Nguyễn Thông affirmed that Đại Nam had sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa Archipelago, and the imperial state exploited the archipelago in peaceful and useful ways, benefiting not only Vietnamese people but also people of other countries. The authorities preserved and renovated the archipelago, building a temple for luck and safety to fishermen and mariners, planting trees signaling the location of the islands so that the fishermen and mariners could visit for freshwater or shelter. “Every time the imperial crew visited the islands, they brought seeds from the southern mainland to plant around the temple, so that people could locate

the islands from afar with the fully grown trees.” This activity was also recorded in the section of “Quý Tỵ Year, the 14th year of Minh Mệnh [1833], Autumn, the 8th month” in *Đại Nam thực lục*: “The King said to the Minister of Works: The maritime zone of Quảng Ngãi Province has an island range called Hoàng Sa, where the water and sky merge in one color looking from afar, and deep and shallow water areas look undistinguishable. In recent time, merchant ships have frequently got harmed [stranded] by the sea! We should prepare sailing ships and organize for a crew to go there next year building a temple, erecting a stele, and planting trees. In the years to come, the fully grown trees will be easily recognized from afar, preventing passing-by ships from getting stranded in shallow water. This will bring everlasting benefits” [13] (p.743).

The Hoàng Sa Islands first appeared in Vietnamese documentation in *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư* by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo, compiled in the 7th year of Chính Hòa (1686). More information was given by Lê Quý Đôn in the book *Phủ biên tạp lục* completed in 1776. The most detailed description of events that had taken place over a long period was provided in *Đại Nam thực lục* composed by historians in the National History Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty, started in 1811, with different volumes completed during the 1820s, 1830s and later. The article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” in *Việt sử thông giám cương mục* by Nguyễn Thông appeared in 1877, much later than those sources, but it was a fully comprehensive collection of previously provided information, based on careful perusal of not only Vietnamese but also Chinese documentation such as 東西洋考 (*Dongxi yangkao/Research on Eastern and Western Oceans*), 瀛寰志略 (*Yinghuan zhilue/Concise Records of the World*), *Haiguo wenjian lu*, 海國圖志 (*Haiguo tuzhi/Atlas and Description of the Countries beyond the Seas*), etc. The article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” by Nguyễn Thông further indicates that Vietnamese people have paid serious and continuous attention to maritime sovereignty for a very long time.

5. Conclusion

Nguyễn Thông was an imperial bureaucrat who spent his life in service filling various positions such as the administrative commissioner of Quảng Ngãi Province, the administrative commissioner and concurrent vice-commissioner for agriculture of Bình Thuận Province. During his service in Bình Thuận, he established the Đồng Châu Association providing work for refugees who left the southern region to Phan Thiết. He also made a working trip to start reclaiming the Tánh Linh jungle. During his service in Quảng Ngãi, he organized the construction of the Vĩnh Lợi Channel and promoted land reclamation, irrigation, and vegetation growing. It could be his service in Quảng Ngãi that stirred his concern for the Hoàng Sa Archipelago and motivated him to collect documentation for the article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” in *Việt sử thông giám cương mục* [1] (pp.17-20). This work clearly shows that Nguyễn Thông was a careful and responsible scholar with an objective viewpoint and immense knowledge. He conducted extensive research into Vietnamese sources and expanded his reading to Chinese and Western sources. He cited many new documents that were unfamiliar to his contemporaries, such as *Haiguo wenjian lu* by Chen Lunjiong, 天下郡國利病書 (*Tianxia junguo libing shu/On Benefit and Faults of the Empire's Local Administration*) by 顧炎武 Gu Yanwu, *Yinghuan zhilue* by 徐繼畲 Xu Jishe, etc. He knew about latitude and longitude and applied them to determining the location of places [7], [8]. Therefore, his article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” does not tell a fictional story but provides a scientific description of national territory. With precise information and a firm opinion of Vietnam's sovereignty and the exercise of that sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa Archipelago, the article “Vạn Lý Trường Sa” holds a valuable position among the sources affirming Vietnam's sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa Archipelagos.

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Notes

- ¹ Li 里: a traditional Chinese unit of distance, approximately equal to 500 meters.
- ² Ngoài Lao 外嶼 (Nom characters): literally means “the small outer island (of Ré)”, which is the vernacular name of Lý Sơn Island. The Chinese name 外羅 Wailuo, pronounced in Vietnamese as Ngoại La, recorded in Chinese maritime maps such as *Chinese Ancient Maritime Map* [11] (pp.83-84). It is possible that the Chinese name imitated the pronunciation of the island’s locals.
- ³ “The early days of our Đại Việt Nam country” 我大越南國初 refers to the period during which the Nguyễn Lords expanded the country southwards and established Đàng Trong (the South Region, known internationally as Cochinchina). The earliest known document to record this incident was a report in *Thiên Nam tứ chí lộ đồ thư* by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo coming from Nghệ An Province, composed in the seventh year of Chính Hòa (1686). The country name Đại Việt Nam or Đại Nam was validated by King Minh Mệnh in 1838: “On Giáp Tuất Day, the 3rd Month, Spring, Mậu Tuất Year, the 19th year of Minh Mệnh, the country name was officially changed to Đại Nam (...). From then on, the country had to be referred to as Đại Nam in all documents and conversation. The combined reference of ‘Đại Việt Nam’ was flexibly accepted.” [15] (pp.276-277).
- ⁴ 安海 An Hải and 安永 An Vĩnh: two fishing villages on Lý Sơn Island. Lý Sơn Island previously belonged to Bình Sơn District, Quảng Ngãi Province, later being upgraded to Lý Sơn District of Quảng Ngãi Province.
- ⁵ 海國聞見錄 *Haiguo wenjian lu/Records of Things Seen and Heard about the Coastal Regions*: a composition completed in 1730 by 陳倫炯 Chen Lunjong (1687-1751), a provincial commander of the naval forces of the Qing Dynasty. It provides information of countries and coastal routes over the five continents. The composition inherited information from previous Chinese texts and was strongly influenced by Western books and maps.
- ⁶ 南澳氣 Nan’ao Qi: an ancient name of Dongsha 東沙 Island (internationally known as Pratas Island), located northeast of Vietnam’s Biển Đông (the East Sea, known internationally as the South China Sea), near Guangdong, 340 kilometers from Hongkong, 444 kilometers from Kaohsiung (Taiwan), currently under the sovereignty of Taiwan. Dongsha is a ring of coral reef formed on an undersea volcano, called 暗礁 *anjiao* in the Chinese language. When completely exposed on low tide, the island stretches 46 kilometers long and 2 kilometers wide, with a lagoon inside that is measured to be 16 meters at its deepest.
- ⁷ 南澳 Nan’ao: the name of a bay in Guangdong Province. The bay contains a small island of the same name, under the jurisdiction of Shantou City (Guangdong Province), located about from 3 to 8 kilometers from the Guangdong’s shore.
- ⁸ The Nguyễn Thông version and the Waseda University version share the same line (四面掛腳) 皆礮古石 *jie lou gu dan*, while the Malaya University version has a little difference 皆嶼 岫石 *jie lou hu dan*. The uncommon word 礮 *lou* in the former citation is related to volcanic lava. The word 嶼 *lou* in the latter hardly stands alone; it just appears in the name 岫嶼 Goulou, a peak in the Heng Mountains (衡山 Hengshan). The word 岫 *hu* in the latter citation means a mountain covered in vegetation; the compound word 嶼岫 *louhu* is not present in any dictionary. Therefore, the expression in the Nguyễn Thông version and the Waseda University version is more understandable than that in the Malaya University version. Dongsha Island is a coral reef ring formed on an underwater volcano, so the entire sentence 四面掛腳皆嶼古石 can be understood as “[the island’s] four sides are firmly settled on ancient volcanic rocks”.
- ⁹ Zhang 丈: a Chinese unit of length equal to 3.2 meters.
- ¹⁰ The Nguyễn Thông version states “入溜, 則吸閣不能返/Ru liu, ze xi ge bu neng fan”. This version uses the word 閣, which means a tower; so does the Waseda Uni version. The Malaya Uni version uses the word 攔 instead, which means to delay, making more sense in the sentence than the other word.
- ¹¹ Geng 更: a traditional Chinese temporal unit, equal to one tenth of a day. It was traditionally used to measure ocean distance. Vessels averagely

accomplished around 6 *lis* 里 (576 meters) every *geng*.

¹² 落漈 Louji (sea bottom): The account of Liuqiu in *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* states: “The seabed at the western, southern, and northern sides [of 落漈Louji] gets lower toward the 澎湖 Penghu Islands [located south of the Taiwan Strait], and reaches the deepest at Louji, near 琉球Liuqiu. The word 漈*ji* means a place where the water falls in without getting out.” Liuqiu here is not the Liuqiu/Nansei Islands located north of Taiwan and south of Japan, but 小琉球 Little Liuqiu/Lambay/Lamey Island located 12 kilometers southwest from Taiwan.

¹³ 東獅山 Dongshi Shan: a seashore mountain in Fujian Province; 象山 Xiangshan: a seashore mountain in Zhejiang Province (China).

¹⁴ 沙馬崎 Shamaqi or 沙馬崎頭 Shamaqi Tou (the word 崎*qi* usually appears as 磯 or 岐 in documents composed during the Qing Dynasty): an ancient name of currently known 鵝鑾鼻 Eluanbi Cape, the southernmost point of Taiwan.

¹⁵ 粵海 Yuehai: the sea around Guangdong Province.

¹⁶ 瓊/琼海 Qionghai: the sea around Hainan Island.

¹⁷ 七洲洋 Qizhouyang and 千里石塘 Qianli Shitang/ Thiên Lý Thạch Đường were identified differently in various ancient maps. Qizhouyang can be the southeast sea of Hainan Island. Thiên Lý Thạch Đường was identified as the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) Islands in some maps and as the Spratly (Trường Sa) Islands in others.

¹⁸ 大星 Daixing: a mountainous island located southeast of the Pinghai 平海 Peninsula, Huidong District, Guangdong Province.

¹⁹ Five *gengs* sea sailing: is about more than 300 kilometers, with a *geng* sea sailing achieving about 5 *lis*, each *li* equal 576 meters. See footnote 11 above.

²⁰ The Nguyễn Thông version wrote: “廣之番舶船、洋艘/Guang zhi fan bo chuan, yang sou”. The Waseda University and the Malaya University versions read: “廣之番舶、洋艘/Guang zhi fan bo, yang sou”. The latter citation is more succinct. The word 船 *chuan* in the Nguyễn Thông version is superfluous. 洋艘 *yang sou* refers to Western ships, including warships; 番舶 *fan bo* is a word commonly used before the Opium

War (1839-1842) that refers to Western-owned or even vessels built with Western technology. The entire expression “廣之番舶、洋艘往東南洋” means “Western ships, including warships, and Western-owned vessels from Guangdong Province going to southeastern countries”.

²¹ 呂宋 Luzon: the biggest island of the Philippines, commonly used to refer to the country itself; 文萊 Wenlai: Brunei; 蘇祿 Sulu: an Islamic country located south of the Philippines and north of Boneo Island of Malaysia.

²² The Nguyễn Thông version wrote the wrong word 閩 *lu*. Both the Waseda Uni and Malaya Uni versions wrote the word 閩 *Min*, another name of Fujian Province.

²³ 南洋 Nanyang (literally the Southern Ocean): mainly indicated the area which is now Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

²⁴ This annotation is provided by the author of the original text.

²⁵ 甲庚卯酉 *jia-geng mao-you* is a direction on ancient Chinese compass, similar to the 80° or the three o'clock direction on Western compass.

²⁶ 艮坤寅申 *gen-kun yin-shen*: a direction on ancient Chinese compass, similar to the 50° or the two o'clock direction on Western compass. Inferring from this text, Vạn Lý Thạch Đường cannot be the Spratly Islands but a part of the Paracel Islands.

²⁷ *The Selden Map of China*, assumed to be drawn during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), was the earliest map to mention the names Vạn Lý Trường Sa and Vạn Lý Thạch Đường with detailed description of their geographical location. This color-drawn papered map of 100cm x 150cm size at first belonged to the British lawyer John Selden (1584-1654) and was then donated to the Library of Oxford University in 1959, where it has been preserved since. More related details can be found in [10] (pp.106-121).

²⁸ The Đại Chiêm 大占 Estuary, currently known as Cửa Đại, is where the Thu Bồn River meets the ocean, near Hội An City, Quảng Nam Province. The Sa Vinh 沙榮 Estuary, recorded in *Thiên nam tú chí lộ đồ* by Đỗ Bá Công Đạo, is the modern-day Sa Huỳnh Estuary in Đức Phổ District, Quảng Ngãi Province.

²⁹ 該隊 Cai đội: In the Nguyễn Dynasty's army, a cai đội leads a company of 50 soldiers. A cai đội in the capital navy force was ranked the higher fifth in the nine-rank system. A cai đội in other provinces was ranked the lower fifth. [16] pp.110-111.

³⁰ 監城 Giám thành, also called 監衛 Giám vệ, was a construction organization formed in the Nguyễn Dynasty, containing four teams of around 50 builders per team, carrying the duties of designing the layout of the citadel, training workers for the citadel's construction and maintenance, planting trees along the Ngự River in the capital, constructing imperial mansions, and planning the layout of the capital. In the fourteenth year of King Minh Mệnh (1833), Giám thành was officially an organization in *Hộ thành binh mã ty* (The Department of Troops and Horses for Capital Defense). In the first year of King Thiệu Trị, Giám thành builders were acknowledged the official-ranking part-time soldiers. [16] p.226.

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The literary Chinese text of “Vạn Lý Trường Sa”
in Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược, coded VHv1319,
Library of the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, Hanoi

1

萬里長沙
萬里長沙在廣美省里山島係外嶼廣人曰外羅望東開舟

2

三晝夜可至我 大越南國初常揀安海安永二戶丁壯置黃沙隊採取海物每歲二月往八月歸沙洲自東而南一起一伏不知幾千百里中有深澳舟可灣泊洲上出甜水海鳥多不知名有古廟瓦蓋扁額刻萬里平四字不知何代所建軍人往辰常攜南方菓核散播廟內外葉成樹以為識認自黃沙隊嚴近未無復向若者昔人傳記多稱海外十洲三島之勝由今復之不可謂無其地但以為神仙窟宅則妄耳

3

海國間見錄南澳氣居南澳之東南嶼小而平四面挂脚皆礮古石底生水草長丈餘灣有沙洲吸四面之流船不可到入洧則吸圈不能返隔南澳水程七更古為落濼北浮泥皆沙垠約長二百里許水程三更蘇岩北處有兩山名曰東獅象其臺灣沙馬崎峙隔洋闊四更洋名沙馬崎頭門氣懸海中南續沙垠至粵海為萬里長沙頭南隔斷一洋名曰長沙門又從南首復生沙垠至瓊海萬州曰萬里長沙沙之南

4

又生礮古石至七洲洋名曰千里石塘長沙一門西北共南澳西南與平海之大星鼎足三峙長沙門南北約闊五更廣之番船舶洋艘往東南洋呂宋文萊蘇祿等國者皆從長沙門而出北風以南澳為準南風以大星為準惟江浙閩省往東南洋者從臺灣沙馬崎頭門過而至呂宋諸國西洋呷板從崑崙七州洋東萬里長沙外過沙馬崎頭門而至閩湖日本以取弓弦直洋中國往南洋者以萬里長沙之外泄沙無所取準皆從沙內粵洋而至

5

七州洋此亦山川地脉聯續之氣而於汪洋之中以限海國也沙有海島大小不同少見人遇舟飛宿人捉不識懼搏其背吐魚蝦以為羹
符元安針路記外羅廣美省里山島開舟討萬里長沙甲辰卯酉八更討萬里石塘貝坤寅申八九更