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Vietnam: Current Situation and Future  
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[Paper]

## Marine Cultural Heritage in Lý Sơn Island, Vietnam: Current Situation and Future Challenges

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### Abstract

Although the discussion of marine cultural heritage has received much attention, limited research considers the culture and heritage of small islands, especially in a developing country like Vietnam. In recent years, socio-economic development programs on the small islands, on the one hand, have made significant contribution to the local economies; on the other hand, the development process has caused negative impacts on natural as well as cultural aspects of small islands, particularly the marine cultural heritage. This paper examines the current situation and future challenges of marine cultural heritage under pressure of socio-economic evolution on Lý Sơn Island of Vietnam. A qualitative approach was used in this study to analyze and synthesize the data. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key persons who study and live on Lý Sơn Island. Preliminary findings revealed that the marine cultural heritage in the study site is being preserved quite well in terms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. However, future challenges related to the impacts of economic restructuring (e.g., changing from traditional fishery to other sectors) and tourism development (e.g., changing the local lifestyle) will be happening that may cause the loss of marine cultural heritage on this small island. This research suggests that the local government policy makers should take these challenges into consideration together with economic development goals. Future research is also needed to widen the perspectives of other stakeholders regarding the relationship between economic development and the conservation of marine cultural heritage of small islands.

### Keywords

Marine cultural heritage (MCH), social-economic development, Lý Sơn Island, Vietnam

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, the concept of marine cultural heritage (MCH) has been widely discussed globally, but MCH is perhaps difficult to define and categorise (Flatman 2009; Lehman 2018; Henderson 2019). According to Lehman (2018), MCH reflects the relationship between human society and the ocean and recognises the value of the physical traces of this link. In a recent central work on maritime archaeology, for example, Cat-sambis, Ford and Hamilton (2013) stated: “The sea is perhaps the greatest boundary that humankind has looked upon through most of history. The timeless relationship between humanity and the ‘wine-dark sea’ is, therefore, inseparably linked with what it is to be human” (xiii). Bass (2013) stated that marine cultures played an important role in the history of humankind with regard to the global influence of watercraft, maritime labourers, ports, and coastal settlements.

Scholars argue that maritime archaeology has broadened its study boundaries from underwater cultural resources, such as the shipwrecks, to the consideration of entire maritime cultural landscapes (Henderson 2019; McGrail 1997). Westerdahl (1992), who first noted the “human utilization of maritime space by boat: settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping and its attendant subculture” (12), introduced the concept of the maritime cultural landscape in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of maritime archaeology. Accordingly, coastal monuments and traditions are incorporated and considered as maritime cultural landscape. Recently, scholars have been engaging in utilizing maritime cultural landscape approaches to explore the relationship between the land and sea to embrace the totality of the potential space affected by human maritime action (Hunter 1994; O’Sullivan 2003; Henderson 2019).

Based on the marine cultural landscape concept, MCH can be understood as all past human action on the coasts and directly on the sea. However, the division between land and sea regarding human involvement is a relative boundary because human actions did not begin and end at the shoreline. Therefore, MCH includes tangible remains, such as shipwrecks, submerged settlements, coastal settlements, ports, and harbours; maritime ecologies; and geology as well as equally vital intangible components such as cultural practices, artistic and linguistic expressions, local skills, and traditional and historical knowledge. The reach of MCH is similarly broad and includes its relationship to economic development, environmental management, social justice, education, and identity (Henderson 2019). Ultimately, MCH is concerned with human relationships (physical, cultural, and conceptual) with the sea, and as such, it is an essential part of understanding the human past (Bednarik 2014; Henderson 2019).

In Vietnam, literature on marine culture research has been increasingly significant as many Vietnamese scholars have paid great attention to marine cultures. As such, the concept and characteristics of marine culture have been discussed widely by prominent Vietnamese scholars. For instance, Ngo (2014) stated that marine culture can be understood as a system of human knowledge about the marine environment, with values drawn from

living activities in that environment, along with the feelings, behaviours, beliefs, rituals, customs, and habits of people compatible with the marine environment. He considers marine culture to be a form of “ecological culture,” the study of the arts and humanities surrounding the marine environment. Similarly, Tran (2013; 2015) agreed that marine culture is a cultural element classified according to ecological conditions, formed under the impact of the marine environment on life and human labour activity, on spiritual values, and on social and material productive power. According to the author, marine culture is a system of values created and accumulated by humans in the process of existence, taking the sea as the main source of life. Marine culture must first be culture and must satisfy that the characteristic elements are systematic, valuable, human, and historical. This concept was further extended by Vu (2015), who argued that marine culture is a broad concept, fully understood, including the culture of coastal areas; thus, sometimes the term is added from the coast to clarify this concept. From this perspective, the author defined marine culture as the creative product of people in interaction with the sea and island environment. Sea and island culture can also be divided into two components: tangible culture and intangible culture. Furthermore, some works of Phan (2016) and Cao (2011) related to marine culture and anthropology were also discussed the concept of marine culture, its role in the socio-economic development of the residents of the Vietnam seacoast and islands. Remarkably, Tran (2016) provided an exploration of the potential for sustainable tourism development on three important Vietnam islands, Lý Sơn, Phú Quý, and Côn Đảo islands. The author mainly analyzed the aspects of tourism development in each selected island based on Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle but did not deeply discuss marine cultural heritage, its conservation status and challenges.

As seen in the above-mentioned discussions, whether from various perspectives such as cultural studies or cultural anthropology, scholars agree that marine culture is obviously a comprehensive concept as creative human activities under the influence of the marine and island ecological environment to form tangible and intangible cultural values (i.e., also known as material and spiritual values) related to the sea and islands.

Overall, to date, there have been much research by Vietnamese scholars referring to Vietnam’s marine culture from various perspectives and angles, including anthropology, marine culture, sea and island policy, and culture, folklore, livelihood, farming, fishing, marine geography, marine life, marine landscape, and traditional craft villages related to the sea. Such research demonstrated that marine culture in Vietnam is well established and paid significant attention by the Vietnamese researchers.

Despite much attention on marine culture have been put into consideration by many scholars nationally and globally, the assessment of the current situation and challenges of MCH concerning the impact of social-economic development in coastal and offshore areas has been less considered, especially on the small islands. Vietnam can be seen as a marine country, with a coastline of 3,260 km and about 3,000 large and small islands, of which Lý Sơn Island, Phú Quý Island, and Côn Đảo Island are the most special islands in the Central Vietnamese Sea. In terms of geo-culture, Lý Sơn is home to the cultural inter-



mingling of two ethnic groups, the Chăm and Việt, and a long-time traditional fishery; therefore, the MCH is so rich and diverse. Lý Sơn Island appears as a pioneer island of Vietnam, with historical imprints from the beginning of sea-oriented culture and economy.

In a broader context, the cultures of Lý Sơn Island and many coastal areas of central Vietnam have been formed uniquely and harmoniously from those cultural bases. The state has paid close attention to Lý Sơn Island regarding the economic development strategy of the Quảng Ngãi Province and the country because of its special location, which is close to the Hoàng Sa Archipelago. During the Nguyen Dynasty, Lý Sơn Island was continuously used as a forward military post, which played an important role in exercising sovereignty and in monitoring Vietnam's territorial waters (Nguyen 2013). At the same time, because of the great potential of marine natural and cultural resources, many key programs and projects have been implemented on this island both large and small in scale (Nguyen 2015). Especially since the 2010s, massive development programs, particularly tourism, have been implemented, which have created considerable positive impacts on the environment, social life, and culture to this area (Truong and Ha 2021). However, these development projects have also influenced negatively natural marine resources as well as MCH on this island. Therefore, this paper aims to present the current situation of Lý Sơn's MCH and the challenges of socio-economic development to MCH protection to find out appropriate policies for Lý Sơn Island and other small islands in Vietnam. This research on the MCH of Lý Sơn Island contributes significantly to the insightful understanding of the locals pertaining to how they protect and preserve their MCH. Thus, the present study helps to provide essential suggestions for the conservation and development of MCH in Lý Sơn Island.

This paper first provides a brief summary of research methods. An overview of Lý Sơn Island is presented next. Then, the current impacts and future challenges of MCH on Lý Sơn Island are examined and discussed. Finally, the paper concludes with key findings and policy suggestions for the conservation of MCH in the study's site.

## **Research Methods**

Our research is a qualitative investigation of current impacts and future challenges of the development projects on MCH in general and particularly on Lý Sơn Island in coastal central Vietnam. In addition to our previous ethnography, the research is primarily a desk-top study, with a limited number of interviews (table 1): the interviewees were four local experts who work and study about the MCH of this island and five village leaders, who have a good command of their locality based on traditional cultural knowledge. Interviewees were selected from those actively involved in development projects including tourism. All interviews were conducted in the period from July to September 2021. Critical evaluation of the data collected from the interviews is used, in combination with the information from secondary sources, to investigate the range of policies adopted by the state to explore the impacts and challenges to marine cultural heritage on Lý Sơn Island.

TABLE 1. List of interviewees

Interviewee code	Position	Age/ gender	Description
Vill001	Village fisher	56/M	A descendant of Mr. Vo Van Khiet, who was the first person to live on this island, he has been a fisher for many years. Currently, he is operating homestay services.
Vill002	Village leader	62/M	A former head of Tay Vinh An village, he understands well the history and culture of the island.
Vill003	Village leader	42/M	He was born and grow up on Lý Sơn Island. He works as a freelance tour guide on the island and has great knowledge about the cultural heritage of this island.
Vill004	Village homestay owner	40/F	A local resident on Lý Sơn Island, she operates a homestay for visitors on the island. She has been observing many changes on this island.
Vill005	Village leader	65/M	Born and raised on Lý Sơn Island, he worked as chief priest at Vinh Loc village, Lan hamlet, Tay village. He used to be a seafarer, a prestigious person in the village. Later, he was the village leader handling the traditional rituals and handle related cases in the village.
Exp001	Researcher	61/M	He has studied the marine culture of Quảng Ngãi province for a long time. His doctoral thesis was “Folklore of the Coastal Residents of Quảng Ngãi,” defended in 2003. He was the Director of the Department of Culture, Sports & Tourism, Quảng Ngãi Province Tourism and President of Pham Van Dong University. He is now retired and continues to research and publish many works on cultural heritage of Quảng Ngãi, including Lý Sơn Island.
Exp 002	Researcher	58/M	He was a heritage manager on Lý Sơn Island but is now retired and pursues his research about the cultural heritage of the island.
Exp 003	Researcher	44/M	Pursuing a career in academic research, in August 2019, he submitted his doctoral thesis “Culture and Beliefs of Residents on Lý Sơn Island, Quảng Ngãi.”
Exp 004	Researcher	34/M	Born on Lý Sơn Island, after graduating from University of Culture, Ho Chi Minh City, he returned to his hometown of Lý Sơn to work as a tour guide and was passionate about research. He has a great understanding of the local culture.

## An Overview of Lý Sơn Island

Lý Sơn Island is in northeastern Quảng Ngãi province, about 15 nautical miles from the mainland seaport Sa Kỳ (fig. 1). Lý Sơn Island was formed through volcanic activity millions of years ago, as were Lớn Island, Bé Island (An Bình) and Mù Cu Islet. Lớn Island has a total area of 10.32 km<sup>2</sup>. Bé Island has an area of 0.67 km<sup>2</sup> and is about 2.5 nautical miles from Lớn to the northwest, and Mù Cu Islet has an area of about 30 hectares, almost 300 m from Lớn Island (Tran and Ta 2000).

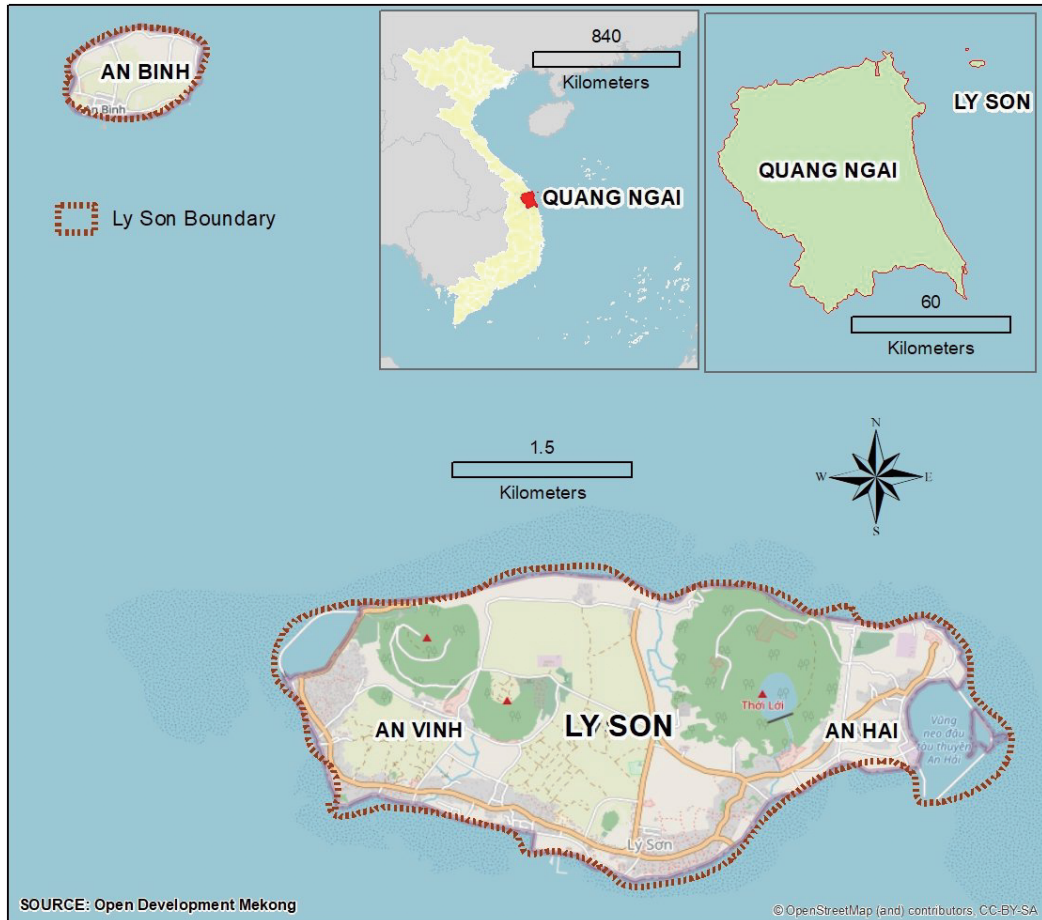


FIGURE 1. Location of Lý Sơn Island (Open Development Mekong 2021)

Lý Sơn Island is the remains of a volcano with five mouths, formed 25–30 million years ago. The five mountains are Thới Lới mountain, about 169 m high above sea level, Giếng Tiền mountain, 110 m high, Hòn Sỏi mountain, 105 m high, Tai mountain, 85 m high, and Vung mountain, 51 m high. These five mountains are the main source of groundwater, providing fresh water for all the inhabitants of Lớn Island. Bé Island, in particular, does not have fresh water, and residents on the island are supplied with water from Lớn island.

Historically, archaeological sites on Lý Sơn Island show that the Sa Huỳnh culture was present here from 3,000 to 2,500 years ago today. Archaeological study in Vietnam identifies the Sa Huỳnh Culture as significant in Vietnamese prehistory, primarily as a precursor to the Champa Civilization (Pham 2005). This phenomenon explains why Lý Sơn has hundreds of cultural relics of the Sa Huỳnh and Chăm next to Viet cultural relics. The Ốc Hamlet and Đông Hamlet in An Vĩnh Village still reflect the important imprints

of the Champa cultural today (Vo 2018).

Administratively, Lý Sơn is an island district in Quảng Ngãi Province, consisting of three communes: An Vĩnh (the center of the district, belonging to Lớn island), An Hải (Lớn Island) and An Bình (Bé Island). Mù Cu Islet is uninhabited. Currently, Lý Sơn Island has a population of about 22,000 people, who mainly work in fishing and agriculture (i.e., growing onions and garlic), a few in traditional occupations, trading, and tourism services.

The lava traces of the craters have created many beautiful natural scenes for Lý Sơn, such as Thới Lới mountain, Giếng Tiên, Cẩu Cave, Tò Vò Gate, Mù Cu islet, to name a few. Additionally, human remains of historical residents and cultures have contributed to Lý Sơn a wealth of cultural heritage, including tangible and intangible finds, such as archaeological sites related to the Sa Huỳnh, Chăm, and Kinh cultures.

Lý Sơn is an island with a very important strategic position in terms of security and defense of Vietnam and a convenient gateway to go to other regions and the world. The Kinh community, which following the Chăm people for generations, was known to take advantage of this position to adapt and exploit the sea, which created the rich marine culture heritage in Lý Sơn Island today.

## **Marine Cultural Heritage in Lý Sơn Island**

Lý Sơn's MCH exists in both tangible and intangible forms, expressed through works of beliefs, festivals, livelihoods, cuisine, lifestyle, thoughts, and actions of local residents. To give a clear overview of Lý Sơn's MCH, we classify it into two main groups of tangible and intangible marine cultural heritage.

### **Tangible Marine Cultural Heritage**

Lý Sơn Island has many tangible marine cultural artifacts, notably temples related to beliefs and spiritual life of the locals through many generations on the island. Among them, there are some distinct tangible marine cultural relics that have been recognized as National Heritage sites, such as Âm Linh Temple (Âm Linh tự), which is related to the tombs of Hoàng Sa militiamen (Hải đội Hoàng Sa), Hang Pagoda (Cave Pagoda), An Hải Communal House (Đình làng An Hải), and An Vĩnh Communal House (Đình làng An Vĩnh).

#### ***Âm Linh Temple and Tombs of Hoàng Sa Militiamen***

Âm Linh Temple is a place to worship the dead soldiers and spirits of the unknown dead, people whose identity was not known. The spirits worshipped in Âm Linh Temple are mainly the souls of those who died or were missed at sea, especially the Hoàng Sa militiamen who went out into the East Sea (Biển Đông—in Vietnamese) on duty. According to some local elders, Âm Linh Temple was built in the middle of the seventeenth

century, which is related to the establishment of the Hoàng Sa militiamen of the Nguyen lords. At that time, healthy and brave young men from the two villages of An Vĩnh and An Hải were recruited into the Hoàng Sa militiamen to serve the lords. They went to Hoàng Sa Archipelago to patrol and collect products for offerings to the Nguyen lords. There were many soldiers on the voyages who lost their lives in East Sea and never returned. The villagers were grateful to them and feel sorry for the homeless souls, so they built a place of worship called the shelter of the spirits. Âm Linh Temple was originally built with only simple, available materials on the island, such as cogongrass, bamboo, earthen walls, seashells, and sand. The temple was restored for the first time at the beginning of Gia Long Dynasty (1802–1820). It was repaired for the second and third times in 1833 and 1956, respectively. When it was almost totally rebuilt in 1996, Âm Linh Temple took on its present scale. The front yard of the temple has the special tower to worship Hoàng Sa militiamen with the words “Soldiers died in battle”.

Annually, on February 16 of the lunar calendar, locals hold a ceremony of sacrifice for the Hoàng Sa militiamen to pay their respects to their ancestors who died for protecting the Nguyen lords’ waters. Because of this speciality, Âm Linh Temple was recognized as a National Historic Site in 2007.

Attached to Âm Linh Temple are the Tombs of Hoàng Sa militiamen who obeyed the Nguyen lords, went to Hoàng Sa Archipelago, and died or went missing during their duties on the East Sea. According to legend, locals built memorial graves (Mộ gió in Vietnamese) to commemorate Hoàng Sa militiamen who died more than two centuries ago. The first memorial grave is the tomb of captain Pham Quang Anh and twenty-four sailors from the Hoàng Sa militiamen who went on a mission and disappeared forever on the East Sea. The islanders took clay from Giếng Tiền mountain to mould twenty-five human figures to represent the dead and placed them in the graves as a memorial for worshipping. For generations, the memorial graves of Hoàng Sa militiamen have been cared for by the islanders to show their gratitude.

### ***Hang Pagoda***

Hang Pagoda in An Hải Village is located in the heart of a cave at the foot of Thới Lới mountain. Due to the impact of volcanoes and the process of erosion of rocks by sea waves for millions of years, the largest cave on Lý Sơn Island has been formed. Before it became Hang Pagoda, there were traces of Chăm temples. After the Chăm people no longer lived on the island, this cave became a religious monastery for the ancestors of the Tran family of An Hải Village, such as Mr. Tran Cong Thanh, Mr. Tran Cong Tiem, and Mr. Tran Cong Quan (Vo 2018, 154). When Buddhism became popular on the island, locals installed Buddha statues to worship; then it became Hang Pagoda. Eventually, when the population on the island became crowded and wealthier, they contributed to the restoration and expansion of Hang Pagoda. In front of the pagoda, there is a painting of Thiện Tài Đồng Tử along with the statue of Bodhisattva Quan The Am facing the East Sea day and night to bless people who are living and earning a living on the East Sea. Hang



Pagoda is a scenic spot on Lý Sơn Island and was recognized as a National Scenic Relic in 1994.

### ***An Hải Communal House***

An Hải Communal House is located in the Đông commune, An Hải Village, and was built in the first year of Minh Mạng king's reign (1920). The house is a typical architectural and artistic relic, compared to the communal houses in Quảng Ngãi Province (fig. 2). According to documents still kept at the house, in 1926, Chief Nguyen Hung was assigned the task of restoring and embellishing the communal house. It was restored by the islanders in 1938 and 1943, but it still preserves the ancient architectural style of the Nguyen Dynasty of the 19th century.



FIGURE 2. An Hải Communal House (Vo 2018)

Every year, An Hải villagers organize many festivals at this communal house, for example, the Tứ Linh Boat Racing Festival, Praying for Peace, the Ancestor's Death Anniversary, the Đoan Ngọ Holidays, Kỳ Yên Ceremony, Thanh Minh Ceremony, and Paracel Soldier Sacrifice Ceremony, to commemorate the ancestors who established the village and protected the people who lived on Lý Sơn Island. For this speciality, An Hải

Communal House was recognized as the National architectural and artistic monument in 1997.

### ***An Vĩnh Communal House***

An Vĩnh Communal House is located in the Tây Commune, An Vĩnh Village. It is near Bến Đình, the place where the Hoàng Sa militiamen departed to the East Sea in the past (fig. 3). An Vĩnh Communal House was built at the end of the eighteenth century, in the period after 1773 until the beginning of Gia Long king's reign (the first king of the Nguyen Dynasty, who ruled Vietnam from 1802 to 1820). This communal house was first built using simple, available materials on the island such as grass, wooden columns, and earthen walls. Later, people on the island restored it many times, and then it was burned down by Chinese pirates. It was rebuilt in 1920, but it was later destroyed during the war with France. In 2009, An Vĩnh Communal House was funded by the state and restored to the way it looks today. It also has the same object of worship as the An Hải Communal House, especially the ceremony for the Sacrifice Festival for the Hoàng Sa militiamen, and is notable due to its special value in demonstrating Vietnam's sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa (Paracel Islands) and Trường Sa (Spratly Islands) by Vietnamese people since the seventeenth century. An Vĩnh Communal House was recognized by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism at the same time that the "Sacrifice Festival for Hoàng Sa Militiamen" was listed as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013.



FIGURE 3. An Vĩnh Communal House (Vo 2018)



## Intangible Marine Cultural Heritage

Intangible marine cultural heritage on Lý Sơn Island is demonstrated through the following typical festivals and beliefs:

### *The Ceremony to Pray for Hoàng Sa Militiamen (Lễ khao lề thế lính Hoàng Sa):*

This is a festival that has been maintained by the people of Lý Sơn Island for hundreds of years and has now become a National Intangible Cultural Heritage (fig. 4). At the beginning of the founding of the Hải đội Hoàng Sa, every year, the people of Lý Sơn Island were recruited into this squadron as soldiers to exploit and protect Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa. This was called the “soldier position.” The ceremony to honor the soldiers is a unique festival with the tradition of “when drinking water, remember its source,” to remember the gratitude of the ancients (An Vĩnh group of the Hoàng Sa fleet), who went out to search for products and set up landmarks on the sea border but did not return.



FIGURE 4. Ceremonial boat in the ceremony to offer sacrifices to Hoàng Sa militiamen at An Vĩnh Communal House (Vo 2018)

The festival is held at Âm Linh Temple on the 18th, 19th, and 20th of the third lunar month every year. This is a large festival, not only of the district but also for Quảng Ngãi



Province. It has a very elaborate organization, with many stages, but the most special one is the releasing paper boats into the sea, which implies forever maintaining the sea as before, and perhaps that's why the festival is called the "soldier position." On these days, in addition to organizing festivals, local people also repair and clean the graves of soldiers of the Hoàng Sa fleet.

This festival not only demonstrates the ethic of drinking water, remembering the source and the tradition of preserving and protecting the territory and territorial sea but also the unique culture of the coastal community of Vietnam.

### ***Beliefs and Festivals of Worshipping Cá Ông on Lý Sơn Island***

Fishers in coastal Vietnam believe that whales are their guardian angles, who bring luck to them, watch over them, protect them from the perils of the sea, and secure them when in trouble at sea. Thus, whale worship became a religious practice of Vietnamese fishers. The custom of worshipping Cá Ông (whale worship) is popular in coastal central Vietnam, associated with residents who work in fishing. The custom of worshipping the Cá Ông and then the Cá Ông Festival has similar characteristics. On Lý Sơn Island, according to custom here, if any fishers find a stranded whale (known as *Ông lụy* in Vietnamese), they have the duty to bury and mourn it as if they were mourning their own parents. Fish carcasses are bathed with wine and then wrapped in red cloth and buried by fishers in the sand dunes near the coast.

Every year, villagers see good and bad days and choose *Ông lụy* days to worship anniversaries of death according to the traditional Nghinh Ông ritual (welcoming Cá Ông ritual). The people of Lý Sơn and coastal central Vietnam have a saying: "Seeing Cá Ông enter the village is like gold in the closet" because according to this belief, if Cá Ông dies and drifts into any village, that village will be forever prosperous, and the fishers have smoothly trips in the sea. Three or four years after the burial, the villagers have to re-bury the remains, usually in the spring or summer, and then bring the bones for burial and communal sacrifice. For the large Cá Ông bones, the villagers will wait three years for the bones to disintegrate before bringing them to the box to bring back to the village to worship.

The worship of Cá Ông becomes a festival in the cultural life of Lý Sơn fishers. The Nghinh Ông Festival is an opportunity for fishers to relax, regain their spiritual balance after days of hard work and risks on the immense sea, and at the same time to show gratitude to "a sacred living being" in the sea, but in the minds of many fishers, it still contains the belief about the help of Cá Ông when the fishers have an accident. It can be said that the Nghinh Ông festival is a jubilant day for the people of the sea. The Cá Ông Festival shows visitors the integrity, performance, aesthetics, and community of the inhabitants of Lý Sơn Island. This is a unique tourism resource that can be used to exploit sustainable tourism on Lý Sơn Island.

### ***Tu Linh (Four Sacred Animals) Boat Racing Festival in Lý Sơn***

The Tu Linh Boat Racing Festival in early spring on Lý Sơn Island has existed and been maintained for more than 300 years. This is traditional folk culture, imbued with the identity of the islanders (fig. 5). The festival takes place every year, from the fourth to the eighth day of the Tet Holidays. Each guild usually has eight racing boats. Each racing boat belongs to a hamlet and is selected and decorated according to the image of “Four Sacred Animals”: the dragon, unicorn, tortoise, and phoenix (Tứ Linh: Long–Lân–Quy–Phụng).



FIGURE 5. Four boats race, the Dragon, Unicorn, Tortoise, and Phoenix in the Tu Linh Rowboat Racing Festival, January 2020 (Vo Minh Tuan)

The early spring boat racing festival is an exciting traditional sport and cultural activity, linking both the ceremony and the festival, attracting many local people and tourists from all over the world, creating an atmosphere of excitement and joyfulness for the island district in each coming New Year and spring.

The festival aims to commemorate the ancestors' roots, the ancestors who first gave birth to the island, and the heroic troops of Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa Island, since they had

the merit to protect the border of the Fatherland. In addition, locals pray for the peace of the nation and the people and that the good fisherers sail smoothly.

As mentioned above, Lý Sơn's MCH is quite rich and diverse in comparison with other Vietnamese islands such as Phú Quý or Côn Đảo. In terms of geo-culture, Lý Sơn is home to the cultural intermingling of the two ethnic groups Chăm and Kinh and a the long-time traditional fishery, while these other two islands have different geographical characteristics and cultural aspects. Despite having a unique and long-standing MCH, did socio-economic development programs have any impact on the island's culture? Next, we consider how the current strong development in Lý Sơn island has affected their MCH and what challenges will be faced in the future. To have a better look at the status of MCH and the future challenges on this small island, the next section presents and discusses the key findings of this paper.

## **Current Situation and Future Challenges**

### ***Current Situation of the Preservation of MCH***

Based on secondary data as well as the preliminary findings of the interviews with villagers and the experts who research MCH on Lý Sơn Island, we present several key findings below.

Regarding the current status of MCH on Lý Sơn Island, it can be said that this island still preserves the MCH very well. For example:

It still preserves quite intact the cultural values of the sea; what has been lost on the mainland still exists here (Exp001).

According to this expert, Lý Sơn preserves almost intact MCH, including both tangible and intangible, such as the system of communal houses, pagodas, temples, beliefs in worshipping the Cá Ông, and traditional festivals. Expert 001 considers Lý Sơn to be a living museum of MCH. This can be explained in several ways. First, Lý Sơn is an island with a long history that is the intersection of cultural layers in the historical process, leading to a richness of marine culture. Second, in terms of geography, because it is an isolated island, this helps Lý Sơn limit external influences and slow down the process of cultural change. Third, in relation to the community element, people are closely attached to the marine profession, still preserving the cultural institutions, customs, and regulations. Such cultural elements are still practiced in conservation work.

Some other experts also believe that thanks to socio-economic development, people's living standards have improved, which also contributes to the conservation and restoration of MCH (Exp002; Exp004). The improvement in living standards helps increase awareness and the willingness to contribute to the budget for the restoration and conservation works of the people on the island (Exp001; Exp003).

When asked whether the intangible cultural heritage (e.g, the Tu Linh Boat Racing Festival) has been commercialized and restored to perform for tourism services in Lý Sơn, all cultural experts that we interviewed believe that has not happened in this island.

As one of our interviewees stated:

The boat racing festival is the most prominent festival in Lý Sơn, related to the beliefs, culture, and people of Lý Sơn. The festival only takes place once a year on the fourth day of the Lunar New Year. Basically, the racing form has not changed: it is still manual rowing, and the boat racing technique at sea is still maintained. Spiritual strength and faith contribute to the success of the race. (Exp002)

Previously, there was a suggestion for the restoration and promotion of the ceremony to pray for Hoàng Sa militiamen to serve tourism and create economic benefits and promote the cultural heritage of the island (Vill001; Vill002; Vill004). However, the cultural experts did not agree with this strategy because if this suggestion were implemented, the ritual would lose its sacredness and change its nature (Exp001; Exp002). In addition, there would be no members of the community who would dare to perform this ritual to serve a tourism purpose (Vill003; Vill005). Even the theatricalization of the festival elsewhere would not be accepted and performed because the festival must be associated with relics and spirituality to have authentic value. As one of our interviewees explained: “Seafarers always pay great attention to taboos and respect marine cultural beliefs. Therefore, it is critically difficult for us to stage their rituals to serve tourists. Perhaps, in their religious beliefs, bad luck can come to us if we don’t respect the ancient beliefs that their ancestors maintained” (Vill003).

In general, the typical festivals in Lý Sơn have not been commercialized and are protected quite intact. Our research found that one of the crucial factors that contributes to the effective preservation of the MCH in Lý Sơn is the community factor. The role of the community is expressed through the issuance of regulations and village regulations. The custom has penetrated the souls of the people on the island. As local villagers shared: “When organizing a festival or ritual, all the key and elderly people in the community are gathered to discuss about the operation” (Vill001; Vill003; Vill004; Vill005). This statement demonstrates that the traditional management institution of the community is still protected; therefore, the annual ritual activities are always carried out carefully. This, more deeply, shows the role of the community, especially the older generations, in helping to preserve and maintain Lý Sơn’s marine cultural heritage effectively.

More importantly, one of the reasons why Lý Sơn’s MCH is still well-preserved is related to national policies. In terms of geopolitics, the distance between Lý Sơn and the Hoàng Sa Archipelago (Paracel Islands) is the shortest (historically, the Nguyen Dynasty sent the Hoàng Sa militiamen to the Hoàng Sa Archipelago for resource exploration), so Lý Sơn plays a very important role in Vietnam’s socio-economic and security defense strategies, especially in the context of extremely complex maritime international relations today. Therefore, the Vietnamese government has issued many policies to protect the cultural traditions and livelihoods of the people on this island. Protecting the traditional cultures and the people’s livelihoods on Lý Sơn Island has also had a positive impact on the protection of the Vietnamese islands and the sea. Given the important role of the geo-

politics of the island, the local people are more aware of their role and responsibility in protecting the heritage and resources related to the island and the sea. As a result, the MCH (e.g., the cults of the Hoàng Sa soldiers, Cá Ông, and other marine deities; boat racing, communal temple festivals, etc.) are strongly protected by the community.

### **Future Challenges for the Protection of MCH**

Although the MCH in Lý Sơn Island is being protected quite intact, the speed of socio-economic development, especially tourism, can pose challenges for the conservation of MCH resources on the island. In addition, as mentioned earlier, because the Vietnamese government pays a lot of attention to sea and island issues, Lý Sơn Island in particular has received a number of investment projects and substantial funding from the central government to enhance their infrastructure, which includes roads, power, water supply, hospitals, schools, supermarkets and fishing ports. The investment in infrastructure development not only boosts the socio-economic development generally but also is an important factor for tourism development on the island (Tran 2016).

In recent years, according to the People's Committee of the Lý Sơn District (Nguyen 2020), the growth rate of production value in the period 2015–2020 was estimated at 9.5%; economic structure shifts from agriculture to tourism and services, which currently accounts for more than 50% of GRDP. The number of tourists to the island increased rapidly. Before 2015, the number of visitors was not significant: in 2018 Lý Sơn welcomed nearly 250,000 visitors; in 2019, it welcomed nearly 265,000; per capita income is over 45 million VND/person/year (about 2,200 USD). Lý Sơn district is completing procedures to recognize the district as meeting national standards for becoming new countryside (Nông thôn mới in Vietnamese). These statistics reflect the positive contributions brought by socio-economic development. However, there are future challenges related to MCH conservation that may need to be considered.

#### ***Challenges from Economic Restructuring:***

The main economic sectors on Lý Sơn Island, agriculture and fishery, are also the two main occupations of the inhabitants. This creates the formation of two main communities on the island associated with occupational factors, namely the farming community and the fishing community. The MCH has a close relationship with the occupations of the local people. The marine profession was formed a long time ago and is still maintained today. It is the marine profession and the interaction between people and the sea that have contributed to the creation of MCH values, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage as described earlier. Agriculture, especially the cultivation of onions and garlic, has only been developed in the past few decades (from the 1970s to the present).

According to an analysis of government documents regarding tourism development on Lý Sơn Island, Tran Huu Thuy Giang (2016) found that the strategies as well as policies for socio-economic development on Ly Son Island 1975–2000 did not mention any



aspect of tourism. There were no plans for tourism development during that period. However, in recent years, tourism has developed faster than before as indicated above. The involvement of local people in the tourism sector has also increased significantly. Therefore, the change of occupations from agriculture and fishery to tourism will create the risk of losing the two traditional occupations, especially the marine profession. Once the fishery sector gradually disappears, the spiritual and festive elements associated with the sea are also at risk of disappearing. As Exp002 mentioned: “Today, the fishing activity on the island develops moderately and is shrinking. Because partly due to the narrowing of fishing grounds, partly due to the development of economic conditions, the younger generation has the opportunity to go to school, so fewer people go to the sea, the labor force attached to the marine profession also decreases.”

In addition, regarding the cultivation of onions and garlic, this expert also believes that there will be a risk of professions disappearing, first, due to the process of urbanisation, rapid population growth, and increased urban land demand will narrow the land area for crops. Second, the resources of sand and fresh water will not be sufficient to supply crops when the infrastructure construction process and the demands for fresh water are increasing, especially to serve the tourism industry. It can be seen that a change of economic structure could put the protection of MCH as risk.

### ***Challenges from Negative Impacts of Tourism***

As indicated earlier, tourism is developing quite quickly on Lý Sơn Island, reflected in the number of tourist arrivals, the number of accommodation facilities built, projects near the shore, embankment construction, airport projects, the tourist harbor welcomes. On the one hand, tourism causes certain negative impacts on the natural landscape, causing the overloading of infrastructure, the overloading of freshwater supplies (the number of tourists is too large for a small island with an area of only 10 km<sup>2</sup>). Furthermore, the amount of garbage has also begun to grow in many places on the island. Notably, tourism has shown signs of causing negative impacts on the lifestyle, culture, and behavior of the local people. According to Exp004, the Lý Sơn people are sincere and respectful, so the guests from other places were often invited to visit local people’s houses for a thoughtful reception and the best food. But today, under the impact of tourism development, the feelings and hospitality of the people have somewhat changed. For instance: “People have changed in perception, emotion, following the market, and personal interests, especially young people. This will gradually lose the good manners between people. [As] the guest-house owners competed for guests, conflicts of interest began to appear. The income disparity is starting to appear” (Exp002).

Although tourism activities are developing rapidly on Lý Sơn Island, there is a lack of a tourism master plan: tourism is growing spontaneously. Sightseeing and tourist activities are not associated with MCH, such as the tangible MCHs on the island. Most of the tourists as well as tourism service providers aim to explore and exploit the natural landscapes on the island. This finding is in line with Tran’s study (2016). He found that the

majority of domestic tourists neglected to visit a number of religious relics that reflect the traditional customs and island cultures of Lý Sơn islanders. This can lead to forgetting or indifference to MCH in conversion to tourism development. Specifically:

In my opinion, tourism development on Lý Sơn Island is not sustainable despite having extremely unique human and natural tourism resources. Tourists are not interested in exploring the MCHs. Only one relic site (exhibition house) has been exploited related to the relic associated with the issue of protecting the sovereignty of Hoàng Sa Island. Communal houses and festivals have not been exploited in tourism, and tourists do not know about these relics. (Exp001)

These challenges take place not only on Lý Sơn Island but also on other islands in Vietnam. The marine culture in Lý Sơn Island is just a case study introduced in this article; many other islands have gradually lost their identity with the current strong development, especially tourism. If there is no focus on marine culture in the near future, this culture may disappear under the process of urbanization and modernization. Furthermore, the changes in livelihoods and production methods may lead to the erosion of marine cultural heritage.

Generally, MCH on the Vietnamese islands can be products to boost island tourism. In this case, MCH can be used as a source of cultural tourism that can protect and enhance the islands' significant resources, local traditions, and values, but cultural tourism can also encourage quality economic development by planning for sustainable use of resources for tourism product development (Prohaska 1995). In the case of Lý Sơn Island, cultural tourism can also be used to further the national security mission in the context of the South China Sea disputes since this island can attract a large number of tourists who travel to the island to consume MCH that shows how Lý Sơn islanders have been asserting the sovereignty of the nation on the sea in the past and present.

## Conclusion

This article mainly introduces the MCH on Lý Sơn Island, Vietnam, as a case study on the current situation and challenges for MCH on small islands in the face of impacts from socio-economic development, specifically tourism development. This study has initially examined the conservation status of MCH on Lý Sơn Island, which is relatively intact thanks to the unique features of this island in terms of geography, culture, and history. However, in the face of socio-economic development trends, especially the tourism industry, these may be factors that challenge the conservation of cultural values of the sea and islands. From the preliminary results of this study, policy makers in socio-economic development planning, tourism planning, and cultural conservation, particularly in the case of Lý Sơn Island, need to pay more attention to MCH conservation. This article has certain limitations when accessing limited primary data sources. In particular, the voices of local communities have not been fully explored with regard to government policies, the

current exploitation and protection of MCH, and their expectations for future development. Therefore, future studies can expand the research sample size, develop more diverse research methods, and consider more insightful perspectives of local people to have clearer contributions to this research field as well as to the locality.

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