

Overview of *van chai* in Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam: Tradition, present and future challenges

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ABSTRACT

During process of seeking methods of advanced fishery management experience to apply into small-scale fishery in Thua Thien Hue – Viet Nam, the author is surprised that some advanced countries also apply similar methods that the traditional fishing village associations (Van Chai) has been managed fishery activities in lagoons in Thua Thien Hue since feudal times. The changes by returning back to original points in order to connect and glue the traditional quintessences of fisheries management, to advanced management in foreign countries is a core in an argued approach as well as in reality of managing small - scale fishery in Thua Thien Hue-Viet Nam presently.

Based on that, this report has introduced previous fishery management in Tam Giang lagoon based on traditional fishery villages, to research ways to reform the management of small scale fisheries based upon local fisher's associations; outlined a scenarios for fishery management patters for future based on local community in Thua Thien Hue. The system expect to solve disputes in term of fishermen, fishing grounds and fishery resources.

The report is a synthesized collection from researches of the author and relevant documents available. The findings show that fishery villages in Thua Thien Hue used to be successfully managed fishery resources through its own mechanism (regulations) and actively support of feudal authorities (a form of primary co-management) and practical experience derived from efforts to manage modern fishery. In Thua Thien Hue at present, the selectively inheritance of traditional values of fishery villages is one of potential ways in managing fishery in Tam Giang lagoon specifically.

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1. Introduction: Traditional *van chai* on Tam Giang lagoon

1.1. Structure of a *van chai* and its membership

The settlement process of fishers in Thua Thien Hue had lead to the establishment of communities living over the surface of the water.

Archival materials from the Nguyen Era confirm that from 16th to the 18th century fishing communities were organized as "*phuong*", "*thon*", "*nau*", etc. and then merged into "*thuoc*". This proves that feudal governments paid attention to the fishers, and tried to group them into administrative units. However, such structures were fluid, and beyond the control of the government. For various reasons groups of fishers varied in size, so independent administrative structure like, like the *tong*ⁱ Vong Nhi on the Perfume River (Song Huong) have never existed in communities on Tam Liang Lagoon.

In such a special context, lagoon communities established necessary social relationships for survival. They gathered into small, kinship-based groups, to create small residences in the lagoon area. Many such residential groups occupied the same water body, fishing in severe physical conditions and under social discrimination. Eventually then they became a *van* or *van chai*, is a social organization widespread throughout all of Vietnam, from upstream to lower basins of rivers and lagoons.

A *van chai* in Thua Thien Hue has its own characteristics, which are different from coastal fishing and terrestrial farming communities. A farming village huddles inside a thick bamboo coverage, and villagers' lives are regulated by close family relationships, village conventions and state regulations. In contrast, *van chai* is comprised of simple sampans in waters in aquatic areas that lack the fixed boundaries characteristic of terrestrial settlements, with flexible administrative regulations. Conventions of course exist in *van chai*, but they are less strict than in farming villages.

Although apparently a paradox, we contend that although the structure of the *van chai* is fluid, its membership maintains cohesive and good relations. The instability of the *van chai* might be attributed mostly to living environments and occupation demands. Lagoon people must leave their communities to make living based on following the fish stocks. Unlike rice farmers, who work fixed plots of land, fishing forces lagoon-resident fishers travel hither and thither in their sampans. As a result, fishing families keep going out to fish, and return only sometimes with handful of food enough for a meal, for a day or sometimes a bit longer.

Despite its instability, *van chai* existence is strengthened by family relationship and those within the neighborhood. Family sizes are decreasing because of small size of the sampan, each of which is home to a nuclear family. An extended family of several generations cannot easily live together on a small sampan, and the separation of families of parents, brothers, relatives attracts fishers to return to their communities. In turn, a *van chai* is highly suitable structure to link family members. Lagoon residents usually remind each other of the phrase "leaving home but not leaving the ancestors," and their *van chai* is truly "home" to their ancestors. Despite the loosened structure of a *van chai*, it seems to possess enough strength to maintain the relationship among its members.

Their itinerant livelihoods require cooperation and mutual assistance among members of fishing communities. Under harsh conditions for survival, the community strength provides the spiritual confidence that help them maintain and develop their occupation. A *van chai* is a safe place to shelter from heavy rains, storms or floods, and it provides spiritual and material support to members. It also represents to outside world, including, in the past, the resistance against feudal rulers.

In general, a *van chai* consists of 40-70 families. Lagoon residents in Thua Thien Hue have preserved many of the traditions and fishing experiences, by handing them down from generation-to-generation. A child born in the village would be nursed in the arms of his/her family members and neighbors until maturity. The village is a 'life school' for members, and serves as the place for spiritual heritage and cultural activities. The careful study of structure and activities of *van chai* give a profound understanding of these cultural values.

1.2. Management structure of traditional *van chai*

Each *van chai* was headed by a male leader of occupational experience and prestige. He was the voice of the community, especially in communicating with outsiders. In addition, he was responsible for solving internal disputes in a reasonable and affectionate manner, by balancing justice, mutual assistance, familial and neighborly relationships, and national standards of ethics. About such vital issues such as migration, site selection for fishing and for shelter during storms and floods, the leader consulted with the community elders, but then alone was responsible for making the final decision that all members had to follow.

During the election process of a leader, candidates were evaluated based on their prestige, sense of ethics and other talents regarded as essential. Since feudal governments could not control *van chai*, such an election was a democratic process. This was apparently unlike the situation in terrestrial villages/communes, where those aspiring to become headmen usually resorted to committed. The leader was not paid; with either a State salary or incentive from the community. Like everybody else, he had to make living to support his family, while assuming the responsibility entrusted in him by the community members. The leader did not work for a fixed term basis, but often permanently. However, he would be dismissed for a serious breach of ethical standards.

Since the mid-20th century, smaller *van chai* have tended to merge into larger and more densely populated units. This led to the creation of the post of assistant to the leader, who assists in management and public duties, and functions a secretary and accountant.

1.3: Relationships among *van chai*

Relationships among *van chai* are generally very good thanks to empathy among people who share the same living conditions, and who are often linked by kinship. Because a *van chai* is a social structure and not an administrative unit, the occupationally mobile fishers can move from one *van chai* to another without fulfilling any administrative procedures. In Thua Thien Hue, migrants may be given rights and obligations similar to others, and they are not discriminated against by the original residents. Both migrants and native-born members of a *van chai* share the same attitude of equality and peaceful co-existence. There are several main reasons for this.

The first is that the *van chai* structure is fluid, because and its members keep leaving to make a living. So migration is very common. Second is that lagoon residents greatly respect neighborhood relationships, because they live in a natural environment that combines both abundant resources and numerous challenges. So the need for mutual assistance is high. The struggle for survival has increased the need for mutual assistance among lagoon fishing community members, such that discrimination between in-migrants and earlier inhabitants has therefore never existed, either practice or subconsciously. This is a major difference between lagoon fishing communities and rice farming villages.

Further, because lagoon residents were marginalized by feudal society and looked down on by the royal courts, they have tended to aggregate and share egalitarian attitudes in order to combat discrimination. In addition, unlike reclaimed land the resource-rich lagoon waters cannot be demarcated for personal ownership. Newcomers have no negative impacts on the 'accommodation' and occupation of earlier residents, so no economic dispute arises after. "*Diễn*

tu – ngư chung” (paddy field is of personal asset, fish are of public property) is the popular way of thinking.

Although it might be inaccurate to claim that lagoon residents are always polite one another, since in a diverse and complex society, disputes and conflicts, sometimes severe, are unavoidable in relations between individuals/groups. But such conflicts are not linked with social classes. Broken solidarity, schisms or discontinuities within the community hardly occur in *van chai*.

The *van chai* in Thua Thien Hue may be differentiated in terms of residence area, the timing switching between aquatic and terrestrial life, occupations, and names. For example, some names are based location of residence, such as Chanh Truoi, Thien Loai; some after occupation (fishing gears) such as *Van Cau* (Hook & Line); some after the wishes for good luck such as *An Thanh* (Peace & Success). Sensing a shared fate, lagoon residents are keen to overcome the fragile boundaries of *van chai* to support or be supported by any other member of the lagoon community. This out-going character is typical of the *van chai* and difficult to discern in terrestrial farming villages.

1.4: The relationship between a *van chai* and its host terrestrial village.

Fishing villages are the largest social community unit on the Thua Thien Hue lagoons. Regardless of that for administrative purposes *van chai* are under terrestrial villages (*dưới van trên làng*, or “*van chai* is subordinate to terrestrial village”). Traditionally this has been a difficult relationship that has bound lagoon residents for centuries.

A *làng* (village) of lagoon residents does not have exactly the same meaning as a terrestrial village with a set of *xóm*, *phe*, *giáp*, or *thôn*. A *van chai* has its host village, a terrestrial agricultural village that has the administrative right to control it. Normally, a *van chai* is managed by the terrestrial village that has administrative borders around its residence.

The binding of a *van chai* to a land-based was probably first institutionalized during the Nguyen Era, in an effort to control them indirectly through agricultural villages. Because of this, members of fishing community had to pay taxes and render military service. Although lagoon residents felt a “royal pressure” from the host village, they had no major connection to the host village, other than the paperwork handled by their leader. The leader of *van chai* was responsible for every problem and activity of the villagers.

There existed an unequal relationship between a *van chai* and its host village. Land-based residents often looked down on lagoon people, called them *dân ngụ cư* (migrants) and treated them unfairly. For instance, during festivals lagoon residents were forced to provide unremunerated logistical services, or, if lagoon residents came late for religious or customary ceremonies, they would be reprimanded and punished heavily. There was almost no inter-marriage between residents of land-based villages and lagoon dwellers.

For these reasons lagoon residents were not happy with their ‘hosts’, and they would not voluntarily return to their village, doing so only when they must to pay tax, render public service, or perform obligatory service in festivals. This long history of discrimination has resulted in serious psychological and social consequences which are difficult to repair quickly.

2: Tradition, present and future challenges

2.1 Tradition

Fishing rights in Tam Giang lagoon historically took the following two formsⁱⁱ:

- 1) Central government authorized the local (district, commune) governments near Tam Giang lagoon to auction fisheries and tax collection; and
- 2) A Royal Bonus given to villages of outstanding merits, or, in some cases to a military unit in war time, or to a specific geographical area (water surface). The villages would then have to pay tax, but they were allowed to fish by themselves or other villages/individuals with their permits. They could transfer such rights to other villages, but the sales to private individuals were prohibited.

The host villages (or tender winners licensed by the State to collect tax) would accordingly convene meetings for all *van chai* (by occupation or site) in the region, to evaluate them and determine their tax quotas. Each *van chai* then held follow-up meeting(s) to evaluate specific occupations and locations to impose tax levels (e.g. *tro nhat trung*, *tro nhat thue*, *tro xet*, etc.) on fishing households or individuals. Besides the sharing of fishing rights and tax responsibilities, the *van chai* may have had other regulations and rules about coordination and management of fishing grounds and common resources, designed to avoid disputes and conflicts.

With this approach, the management of fisheries resources in the Tam Giang lagoon has always been attached to a fishing community, although modifications might occur at different times in history. *Van chai* has become the nucleus for management. The central government (Royal Court), local authorities (commune, village), and communities are different links in the chain of natural resource use. The clarification of management roles with rights and obligations of all stakeholders groups, from the State to community and individuals, ensured the smooth implementation of this process (Figure 1).

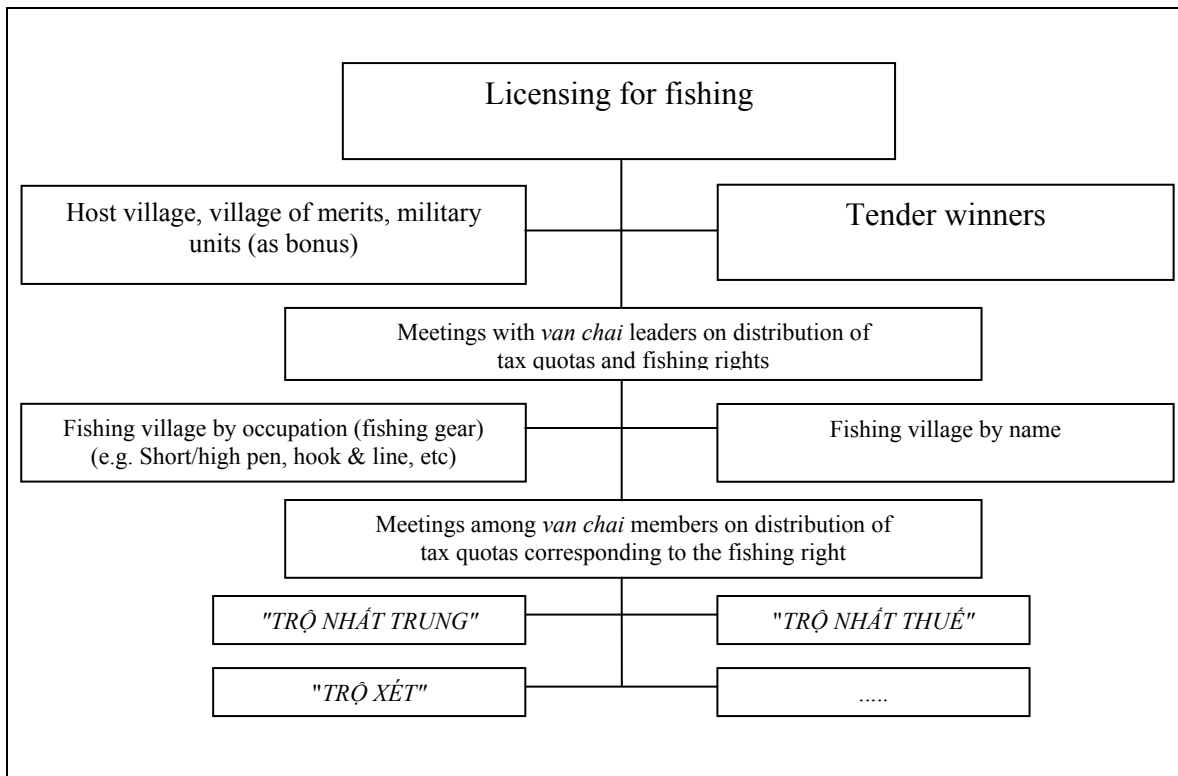


Figure 1: Tam Giang fisheries management in the past

If we consider fishing rights, fishers' organizations and their initiatives of self-regulation as the components of the so-called "community-based fisheries", it appears that such system have been developed in Tam Giang. Fishers' organizations (*van chai*) control their members' activities in the use of fishing grounds/resources within the limits of their fishing rights in the lagoons, under their own and State's regulations.

2.2 The present time

In the 30 years since the reunification of Viet Nam, lagoon fisheries have been growing in an unplanned manner, while the pressures of unemployment and low income have led to a massive growth in the number of fishermen. As a result, the number of fishing gears has soared while catches have declined, signaling a depletion of aquatic resources. (In general this has resulted from the use of such destructive methods such as electric shocking and trawl nets.) Despite great efforts by the fisheries management agencies and governments at all levels, the management process has not been approved. Limitations of personnel and finance are the main reason why the State has lost control over broad areas of water surface.

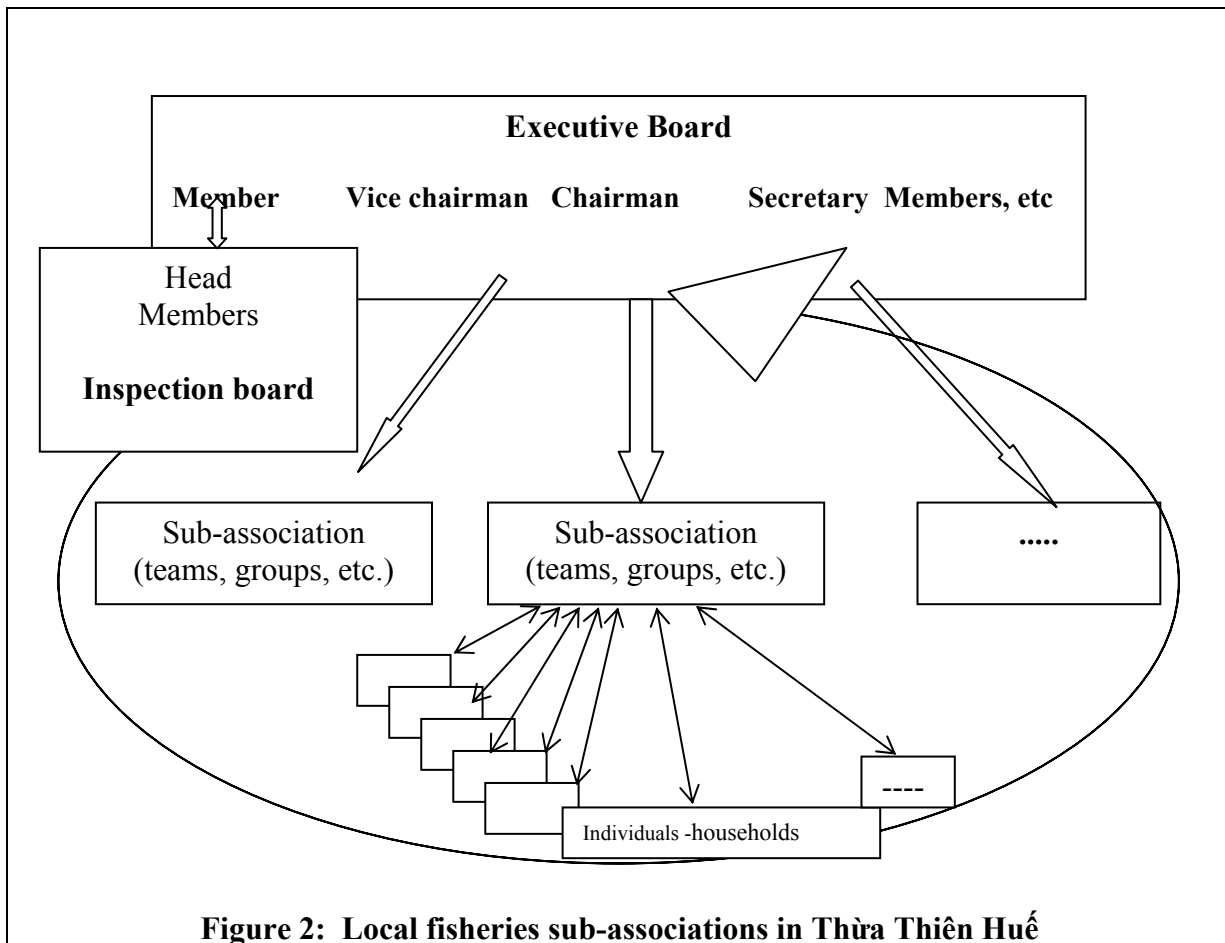
There is an urgent need to develop new management approaches which are more effective, feasible and cost-effective, and suited to varied local conditions. Ruddle's suggestion that "merging the *van chai* into the fisheries management structure may be the practical way for solving important issues in the coastal fisheries management in Vietnam"ⁱⁱⁱ, seems to be a good idea for reforms in lagoon fisheries management. A study on the establishment of community-based management system for small scale fisheries in Thua Thien Hue has been put into the agenda, with the aim to harmonize traditional and modern values.

Since 2003, the "Overall Masterplan on the Lagoon Fisheries Management" identified the re-structure of the fishing communities and local fisheries organizations. The development of production organization, cost-effective collaboration, and protection of fishing grounds, aquatic resources and habitat, were considered as key functions of local fisheries sub-associations. To date, 33 fisheries sub-associations (of 2,000 members) with legal entity status have been officially established, to share responsibilities in resource and environment management with the State. Fishers are becoming more responsible for formulation and implementation of fisheries management schemes for their fishing grounds and aquaculture sites, instead of depending on the State. This is the obvious way, because the fisheries resources and environment capacity is served the local livelihood.

In addition, the mechanism of people-focused fisheries management has been formulated in the "Set of Regulations on Fisheries Management in Thua Thien Hue Lagoons"^{iv}. This legal document is regarded as revolutionary in the provincial fisheries management. The regulations specify that the fishers' organizations are authorized to establish capture and aquaculture in certain waters, in line with State regulations and policies. They are encouraged to work together with the State in management of fishing grounds, aquatic resources, habitats, and in collecting fisheries taxes. The fishers' communities will have certain rights and conditions to self-regulate the internal issues which are often out of State's control because of financial and manpower shortage. This framework is believed to be effective in resolving major issues and facilitate people's active management of aquatic resources by clarifying their roles and responsibilities.

This management regulation is assessed by Siriwardena^v as follows:

- Openness for a clearer, more responsible and self-regulated management process;
- Cost-effectiveness in the implementation of law and administration;
- Facilitated resolution of local issues through locally made proposals, management strategies and regulations that are more appropriate to local context and ecological conditions;
- Better use of indigenous knowledge and awareness of resource through information provided by fishers and farmers to supplement the scientific available information for management;
- Builds capacity in fisheries resources management;
- Enhanced ownership over resources, which makes fishers well-motivated to consider resources as long-term assets rather than overexploitation.
- Formulated management rules and regulations that brings in consensus and adaptation, and
- Enhanced dialogue and understandings among members to reduce conflicts.



The results of the fisheries management reform in Tam Giang lagoon have not yet attained the expected objective, but in the past five years, more fishers have shown an interest in joining local fisheries sub-associations, which would give them long-term rights to use aquatic resources in certain waters. The commitment of the State, local authorities, PPC of Thua Thien Hue by means of legal documents encourages fishing communities' participation in the fisheries management system through fishers association. Scientists, donors, NGOs, GOs all strongly support this process with many projects.

2.3: Future challenges:

Community-based fisheries management system has great potential to enhance the effectiveness of fisheries management. However, many challenges lie ahead, because this type of management is new to the State. Further, it needs pragmatic methodologies and initiatives for institutionalization, as well as conserving traditional values during renovation. This is quite different from simply adopting fisheries management approaches from developed countries.

Though there are some institutions working on Thua Thien Hue lagoons, the decentralization process to local governments is slow, partly because of limited capacity and awareness of local staff. Most fisheries staff is dependent on State's support and underestimates the people's capability. As a consequence of that it is necessary to:

- Raise awareness on the "people-centered" approach to all fisheries sector staff in the application of specific management methods.

- Apply the results of “people-centered” approach gained from the freshwater and near-shore marine fisheries (within 6 n.m.), which has been decentralized to the local provincial authorities, in order to “develop the community-based management model over the inshore fisheries resources”^{vi}.

- Develop policies on decentralization of fishing rights to local fisheries sub-associations to better manage fishing grounds and water bodies, though this is a real challenge as “fishing right” and “land use right in fisheries” are new to Thua Thien Hue and other provinces. This would be a key technical factor to develop the community-based management approach and enlarge the contribution of the mentioned values to fisheries management.

ⁱ A special non-territorial administrative unit of boat families on the Huong (Perfume) River, and similar to present-day *huyen* (district). *Tong Vong Nhi* first emerged during the reign of King Minh Mang.

ⁱⁱ Hai Phong Sub-Institute of Oceanography (1994), *Lagoons of Thua Thien Hue*, proceedings of the Workshop on Research Project Coded 03-11 under State Program KT-03. Hải Phòng.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth Ruddle (1998), Traditional community-based coastal marine fisheries management in Viet Nam, *Ocean & Coastal Management*, Vol. 40, pp. 1-22, 1998. Elsevier Science Limited, USA.

^{iv} Thừa Thiên Huế Provincial People’s Committee. Set of regulations on lagoon fishing in Thừa Thiên Huế. Attached to Decision 4260/2005/QĐ-UB, dated 19/12/2005.

^v Sunil N. Siriwardena (2006), Report on The Organisation of Fisheries Associations, Project: Integrated Management of Lagoon Activities (IMOLA) in Thua Thien Hue Province of Vietnam, FAO, Rome

^{vi} Para. 2, clause 4, Article 12, Decree 123/2006/NĐ-CP, dated 27/10/2006 of the Government "Management of fishing operations of individuals and organisations in Vietnam marine areas".