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Imagining Maritime Conflict Landscapes: Reactive Exhibitions, Sovereignty and Representation in Vietnam

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Abstract

This chapter explores how maritime conflict landscapes – often detached from the public imagination – are imagined and made real. The conflict landscape in question is the South China Sea where, during May 2014, skirmishes between Chinese and Vietnamese shipping vessels broke out when the Chinese tried to set up a drilling rig in waters close to the Paracel Islands, an archipelago claimed by both states. I describe how two ‘reactive’ exhibitions in the Museum of Da Nang in central Vietnam – set up concurrently in rapid response to the maritime crisis under directions from the state – deployed a range of maps, photographs, documents, and performances to assert sovereignty over the islands and depict to diverse museum audiences Chinese aggression and threats. I reveal the power dynamics at play in the exhibitions, including processes of silencing, foregrounding, inscription and remittance, that shape the visibility of maritime landscapes to museum audiences, domestic and international. I demonstrate how museums are active sites for the management and production of conflict landscapes, orchestrated to perform as a unifying force – nationally and internationally – to shore up maritime borders and garner international support.

Keywords: museums, maritime conflict, landscapes, history, Vietnam

During the summer of 2014, a wave of reactive exhibitions were launched across Vietnam that responded to the political crisis in Bien Dong or the South China Sea.¹ These exhibitions were quickly orchestrated by museums under direction from the Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communications to show public support for Vietnamese claims to sovereignty over the Paracel Islands (Hoàng Sa) to the north and Spratly Islands (Trường Sa) to the south. The crisis escalated when China placed a drilling rig close to the waters of the Paracel Islands which led to a series of skirmishes between Chinese and Vietnamese shipping vessels and calls for restraint by Beijing and Hanoi in a bid to diffuse military tensions in the region.²

In this chapter, I am interested in how this offshore episode of military confrontation provided the catalyst for a series of reactive exhibitions to take place.³ These reactive exhibitions were designed to communicate to Vietnamese and international tourists sovereignty rights over the islands by making them visible and expose the Chinese as aggressors in the region. An analysis of these reactive exhibitions will reveal the power relations at play in their construction and display; and provide a means to be able to understand how conflict landscapes are imagined and brought into view in a highly volatile and contested geographic zone which lies off the east coast of Vietnam. What is important in terms of understanding maritime conflict landscapes is that these are imagined zones, areas that remain at the margins of borders and territory and which few Vietnamese have ever visited or could identify. Exploring how these landscapes are made visible through curatorial techniques of silencing and foregrounding combined with calls for public participation in collecting and ceremonies, demonstrates the complex and political processes taking place in museums to make conflict landscapes real and so galvanise national and international support. By asking what processes of formation are at stake in museum methods (Thomas 2010), this chapter contributes original research to discussions about how museums are deployed as resources to symbolically shore up territorial borders by making visible the nation's geo-body (Winichakul 1994).

¹ Bien Dong means East Sea in Vietnamese.

² For more details of sovereignty issues and conflict resolution in the South China Sea, see Buszynski (2003), Valencia (2007) and Yahuda (2013).

³ Reactive exhibitions are displays which are put on rapidly, with minimal time for planning, research and preparation, and which solely serve a particular issue, such as a political crisis or social agenda. In general, I distinguish them from other types of exhibitions which have lead-in time and which fit into a particular institutional programme and agenda, rather than guided externally by state policies and political ideology.

Conflict, national narratives and museums in Vietnam

Vietnam is firmly fixed in the popular imagination as one that has been afflicted with conflict and destruction, propelled by Hollywood films and US political narratives about American military intervention in the region. The memory of the war never dies, as the Vietnamese scholar Nguyen (2016: 39) argues, though he also reminds us how the fragments of which offer a precious resource from which the country's reconstruction and future could be built. Indeed, this process of reconstruction has already commenced as Vietnam has become a major international destination for conflict heritage with tourists offered the opportunity to experience battlefields and trails, tunnel complexes, and military prisons used by the North Vietnamese army in conflicts against the French and Americans (Henderson 2000). Coupled with this growth in dark tourism, many of these sites have also become pilgrimage places for ex-American servicemen, who make return trips to Vietnam to visit places that they were stationed at or battlefields where they fought (Bleakney 2006, Schwenkel 2009).

The decades of conflict against the French and Americans form a dominant political discourse, continually evoked by both Vietnamese media and state organisations in television programmes and anniversary commemorations. As Pelley (2002) describes, the rhetoric of victory and resilience over foreign invaders (the Chinese, the French and the United States) has unified the country so much so that military heroes who sacrificed themselves for the state have been transformed into martyrs and worshipped at commemorations organised by the state (Malarney 2001). Tai (2001) calls Vietnam the 'country of memory' given the upsurge in commemorative activities since unification in 1975, though these narratives have been exclusively controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party, with its powerbase in Hanoi.

The centralist control of history is most evident in state-funded history museums.⁴ There, museums generally organise national history through a Marxist-Leninist chronology of linear

⁴ Museums – as an institutional phenomenon – have a long history in Vietnam. Under the French Indochina colonial period, the first museums were established in the early twentieth century. The Museum of Imperial Antiquities in the ancient capital of Hue, the Louis Finot Museum in Hanoi (now the Vietnam National Museum of History) and the Musée Henri Parmentier in Da Nang, (now known as the Museum of Cham Sculpture) were the early forerunners, before a new wave of building took place in the late twentieth century, squarely focused on nation building and promoting the achievements of the ruling Vietnamese Communist Party. See Tai (1998) for an overview of the colonial formation of museums in Vietnam and their development.

time following epochal events in the development of the state before and after the August Revolution in 1945. Their objective is to relay the achievements (*thành tựu*) of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the progress of the state under its stewardship.⁵ In its exhibition form, this stands accused of blatant propaganda though it functions as a tool for patriot training of schoolchildren, political cadres, police and military cadets. In effect, this dogmatic approach to history can also be viewed as a distortion as it tells an idealised or mythical version of events according to those in control (Anderson 1983, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Tai 1998, Trouillot 2015, Watson 1994). Typically, historical displays tell the Vietnamese state version of history, centred on breaking down stereotypes in Western media of Vietnam and at the same time homogenising Vietnam as though the country had one experience of the past. Nguyen (2017), for example, observes how the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City – a challenging museum that depicts in graphic detail the atrocities of the US-Vietnam war and the effects of Agent Orange on infants – promotes Vietnamese history and anti-colonial resistance through a more humanitarian representation of Vietnamese people. This way, she argues that this is an attempt by the museum to counter foreign stereotypes that portray Vietnamese negatively and thus enable the Vietnamese to tell their own story and truth about the conflict and the impact of this on Vietnamese people. This process reinforces the state strategy of placing the Vietnamese as victims of foreign aggression (Pelley 2002), eliding any discussion of divisions within Vietnamese society of diverging versions of history (Tai 1998).

Yet more recent scholarly attention has focused on how museums are agents for transforming historical consciousness. These approaches place Vietnamese museums in a superior role for understanding the shifting politics and policies within the Vietnamese Communist Party. Through the interpretation of historical events by analysing exhibition content, tone and narrative, state attitudes towards historical events can be revealed publicly. For instance, Sutherland (2005) observes how exhibitions at Hoa Lo Prison Museum – a heritage site that depicts the incarcerated lives of Vietnamese revolutionaries over the French colonial period as well as the detention of American airmen during the US-Vietnam conflict – have taken on a

⁵ Under one party rule, national and provincial museums fall under state control with the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism responsible for managing museums and heritage sites nationally. Others, such as the Vietnam Women's Museum or the Vietnam Museum of Military History come under the governance of the Women's Union and the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defence respectively, though these are both state organisations. Recent heritage legislation permitting the establishment of private museums has been the catalyst for growth though these institutions generally expand rather challenge nationalist ideology and there still exists some form of control and checking by the state to attain the legal rights to open a museum.

strong anti-French tone while sentiments towards the Americans has been toned down. Similarly, Schwenkel (2009) also notes how exhibitions focused on the atrocities committed by American forces during the US-Vietnam conflict have been reworded, making them more palatable to American tourists who now visit the country. Schwenkel adds that this process ties into wider objectives of the Vietnamese state in its diplomatic relations with the United States. Thus, with the onset of the Doi Moi reforms of 1986 in Vietnam, which allowed the state to enter into normalised diplomatic relations with other countries, museums reflect this policy of openness in the way other countries are portrayed in exhibitions.

The idea that museums are agents of change in Vietnam is most succinctly captured in the outcomes of an exhibition at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in 2006. The exhibition in question was ‘Life in Hanoi the Subsidy Period 1975-1986’ – which received much critical acclaim because it was the catalyst for promoting discussion for the first time in Vietnamese society of a period of economic hardship called *bao cấp* (the subsidy era) that the government wanted to forget. Maclean (2008) argues how the exhibition – through its public display and discourse – was a watershed moment in establishing the subsidy period officially (since no official name existed beforehand) and shaping how this period was known and understood by Vietnamese society.

Yet what is absent from the scholarly literature on museums in Vietnam (as well as Asia in general), is the question of how territorial sovereignty is represented and imagined through state-funded museums.⁶ This is surprising given the current dispute in the South China Sea which – as a maritime conflict landscape – is at the centre of competing legal claims to sovereignty not only by China and Vietnam, but also by the neighbouring states of Malaysia, Philippines, and Taiwan. As China has gradually increased its military presence in the region, most notably by the building of military airstrips and fortifications on individual islands in the Paracel Islands, there have been increased tensions in the region which almost spilled over to a military confrontation between Vietnam and China in 2014. At present, most of what we know about sovereignty and nationalism in Vietnam has come from historians (e.g. Tai 1998, 2001, Pelley 2002), political scientists (e.g. Amer and Nguyen 2005), or anthropologists working with minority communities (e.g. Taylor 2014, Scott 2009). While most of the literature on museums and sovereignty either focuses on colonialism and empire (Macdonald 2003,

⁶ See Humphrey (2007) for an insightful overview of anthropological approaches to sovereignty.

Andermann 2007, Knell 2011, Preziosi 2011) or the sovereign rights of First Nations and indigenous peoples (Kelly and Gordon 2002, Lonetree 2012, Tsosie 2009), little if any research has addressed the question of sovereignty and museums in Vietnam, particularly how such claims are expressed through reactive exhibitions. What makes any discussion of conflict landscape so interesting in the Vietnamese context is how maritime borders become liminal spaces that can only be seen in the imagination or in museum exhibitions. Thus, during periods when sovereign borders are under threat, how do states mobilise museums and in what form are these landscapes represented? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over several repeat visits to the museum since 2013 and during 2014 at the height of the tensions, I use the Museum of Da Nang in central Vietnam as my case study to explore how conflict landscapes are imagined and understood in Vietnamese society.

Reactive exhibitions, the Museum of Da Nang, and sovereignty claims

Opened in April 2011, the Museum of Da Nang stands on a site which is a microcosm of some of the key historical milestones that have taken place in Vietnam over the last century and a half. The museum is built by the historically significant Dien Hai Rampart – the national historical monument marking the first conflict where General Nguyen Tri Phuong fought the French when they were on the way to invade Vietnam in 1858. In one corner of the museum’s site stands a US Bell ‘Huey’ helicopter – an icon of the US-Vietnam war – and just outside the perimeter of the museum grounds stands a large glass skyscraper, the impressive Da Nang City Hall – a thirty-four storey development run by the People’s Committee of Da Nang – an emblem of the country’s rapid economic growth and embracing of the modern market economy. Almost unnoticed, positioned at the foot of the steps leading into the museum is a water feature labelled with small islands representing the names of individual islands of the Paracel Islands. Da Nang is a centrally controlled municipality with administrative control over the Paracel Islands.

The Museum of Da Nang is a purpose-built space with a display area of 3000 square metres, divided into three floors. The main hall of the museum has a curved shape, which symbolizes the terrain of the city like a great arm holding the sea. On the wall of the entrance foyer, there are five sail-shaped plaques representing the marine city rising to the ocean. The content of the bas-reliefs on the plaques represents the historical development of Da Nang which includes images of conflict, modernity, minority communities and mythology. The galleries introduce

more than 2,500 objects, photographs and documents about natural history, history, culture of Da Nang City (including its rich maritime and fishing heritage) and the surroundings. These include eclectic displays of archaeological implements, musical instruments, ethnic minority cultures and military history, including graphic photographs and dioramas of battlefields from the US-Vietnam War.

During the summer of 2014, at the height of tensions between Vietnam and China over the South China Sea, the Museum of Da Nang put together two exhibitions asserting Vietnam's maritime sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. These two exhibitions: one displaying maps and documents; and the other, colour photographs, are the focus for my discussion on conflict landscapes, which I introduce now.

Maps, territorial claims, and continuous sovereignty of the Paracel and Spratly Islands

The first exhibition was called: 'Paracel - Spratly Archipelagos: The inseparable territory of Viet Nam' and displayed a diverse assortment of historical documents, photographs, atlases and maps collected from China, Europe and Vietnam. The exhibition was neatly arranged in semi-circle formation on a set of wooden easels in the entrance hall of the museum so that museum visitors, including Chinese tour groups, could file past to witness what the museum (and the Vietnamese state) to consider as the incontrovertible truth. Many of the maps dated back to the 16th century and had captions explaining their significance in Vietnamese, English and Chinese, clearly marking the islands as separate from Chinese occupation. The maps and historical documents presented an image of continuous territorial occupation through the use of chronology, multiple perspectives (the use of Chinese, Vietnamese and European maps) and photographic testimony (using both French colonial and Vietnamese ones), often using yellow highlighter to draw attention to significant information or facts.

Maps legitimate political authority over territory and empire; they help create myths which assist in the maintenance of borders and are an 'aggressive complement' to speeches, texts and patriotic songs (Harley 1988: 282). In the Museum of Da Nang, the map is intimately linked to maritime sovereignty claims which invokes important questions about national identity and world views (Whitehead 2011: 110). Winichakul (1994) demonstrates how the map was a modern tool introduced to communicate and enforce territoriality control over a region in the face of foreign expansion into Southeast Asia; it serves to make bounded spaces a reality.

Similarly, in Vietnam, the map is deployed as a political tool for asserting Vietnam's claims of territorial sovereignty over the archipelagos. The map is a dominant form of visual culture in heritage sites and museums across the country. For example, in the UNESCO World Heritage Hue Citadel, an antique map displays the dynastic lineages of Vietnamese rulers on the Paracel Islands, affirming continuity of Vietnamese presence on the islands over China. Here the imperial past is usurped to make claims to sovereignty. Similarly, in the Museum of Nature located in Hanoi, visitors are directed around a large gallery space tracing out human evolution. The final section has a large interactive map featuring Southeast Asia: visitors are informed by the museum attendant how the Paracel and Spratly Islands have always been part of Vietnam. Here, claims of sovereignty are expressed through autochthony, the inalienable relation of the land to its original inhabitants.

Commenting on the silences of maps, Harley (1988: 209) remarks how hidden political messages may be communicated in maps through what is omitted as much as what is depicted and emphasised. This control of the visual imagery is akin to what Hall (1999) terms 'selective canonisation' – and exposes the way Vietnamese state institutions invest in developing their own truth and writing history. In the Museum of Da Nang, the curatorial intent imposed a particular significance on the maps in the exhibition as it presented the map as indisputable evidence of Vietnam's claims over the disputed islands: it represents the geo-body of the nation in concrete form, identifying the limits of territory and othering what lays beyond (Winichakul 1994). The strength of this evidence rested on historical documents which were produced in the pre-revolutionary past and then used to assert visual evidence of continuous territorial sovereignty of the islands. For instance, the maps on display in the exhibition conceal the very fact that during the conflict between North Vietnam and the United States, it was the South Vietnamese navy who challenged the Chinese navy and tried to force them into withdrawal from the Paracel Islands. The omission of this historical fact neatly evades the issue of continuous territorial sovereignty and avoids heaping praise on the enemy, the South Vietnamese army – who are marginalised in dominant political narratives as puppets (*nguy*) of the American regime. Moreover, the maps – presented as evidence of territorial sovereignty – relate to the pre-revolutionary period. This is a period that does not fit easily into official histories of national unity and is often neutralised in Vietnam. Similarly, another map presented at the exhibition is titled 'A map of China published by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in 1979.' Thus, the exhibition reactivates the past to serve the political demands of the state. Activating this past also mobilises competing narratives and memories.

At first glance, the Museum of Da Nang's exhibition appears to be the result of a political directive from the City of Da Nang's Ministry of Information and Communication to produce a cogent political message supporting state claims of sovereignty over the disputed islands. From the outside, this may appear to be true as the museum curators endorse an official state narrative of continuous occupation of the islands through the chronological arrangement of maps, photographs and documents in order to defend the state's territorial integrity. However, a closer exploration of the process of exhibition will reveal much more about the complexities of how this reactive exhibition shapes historical consciousness.

In acknowledging how museums operate through global networks and relations, Basu (2011) describes a collaborative museum project that encouraged expatriate Sierra Leoneans to repatriate knowledge by engaging with a digital heritage project focused on documenting Sierra Leone collections in British ethnographic collections. The return of object knowledge, claims Basu (2011), can be understood as a form of cultural remittance – supporting the return of dissipated objects and associated knowledge in digital form – and then deployed in nation building after a period of devastating civil war. In Vietnam, museums are also linked into these global networks and relations from which they are able to garner support and resources. In the case of the sovereignty exhibition, ordinary citizens were invited to contribute in support of sovereignty crisis by donating maps and documents that maintain Vietnamese maritime sovereignty over the Paracel Islands. This form of cultural remittance – unlike Basu's (2011) apparent return of cultural knowledge – is politically complex. This is because the call to actively acquire maps and documents relating to the disputed islands reveals other interesting insights about the complexities of history in Vietnam, as those complicit in its production hold competing narratives about the past. I make this claim because these materials (maps, atlases, photographs, and documents) were collected from various donors, nationally and internationally. Some were collected from individual map collectors and scholars in Vietnam; others were acquired by expatriate Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều* who were not necessarily supporters of the Vietnamese state) who donated them to the research institutes and museums, most likely as a public show of support and patriotism – a form of cultural remittance – which may one day be recognised in the event of reconciliation between the Vietnamese state and expatriates who left after 1975. Others were collected by government bodies, such as the City of Da Nang, who acquired them from antique auctions. There were also many ancient maps relating to Vietnamese cartography stored in national libraries or archives in Belgium, Holland, UK, USA,

Spain and Portugal. The government and researchers had contacted these collecting institutions to copy maps or atlases which were then displayed in the exhibition. Thus, the process of collecting the maps and documents on the South China Sea reveals conflicting ideologies and complex motivations. While expatriate Vietnamese may not support the single party system and the Vietnamese Communist Party, they respond to the nationalist call for support because Vietnamese sovereignty over its own borders is of much greater significance.

Photographic exhibition documenting the sinking of fishing boat DNA 90152

Running concurrently to the sovereignty exhibition was a second exhibition of photographs housed in the large glass atrium that stands at the front face of the Museum of Da Nang. Titled: 'Pictures about the fishing boat DNA 90152 sunk by Chinese vessel on May 26th 2014', the exhibition featured around twenty large colour photographs documenting Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and the sinking by a Chinese vessel of Vietnamese fishing boat DNA 90152 near the oil rig which Chinese authorities had placed in the disputed region. The photographs – stills from actual video footage of the incidents which had been aired on state media outlets – told a story of how the fishing boat was rammed and then sank, which led to the rescuing of the Vietnamese fishermen in the South China Sea.⁷ This story of violence is portrayed as a kind of sacrifice and points to what Girard (1972) proposes, that the constitution of modern nation-states depend on the sacrifice of one of one's own community or group.

The photographic exhibition clearly emphasizes the dynamic and reactive nature of many Vietnamese museum exhibition programmes that respond to rising tensions in the South China Sea. In the aftermath of the incident, these photographs were reproduced in various media formats for the public to witness. Through their strategic deployment in public display (in the exhibition, newspapers, World TV news and so forth), the photographs became active agents in the Vietnamese struggle for continued sovereignty of the island archipelagos. As Caswell (2014) has pointed out in relation to photographs displayed in the Tuol Sleng archives in Cambodia of prisoners detained and tortured under the Pol Pot regime, the images perform the act of bearing witness as they capture the very moment of aggression and violence.

⁷ In May 2019, the fishing boat was put on display at a newly built exhibition centre on the coast of Da Nang that focused on asserting sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The boat was donated to the Da Nang city government by its owner and then displayed with its prow facing out towards the sea.

The exhibition opening at the Museum of Da Nang was orchestrated to coincide with an international workshop by the University of Da Nang and Pham Van Dong University called: 'Paracel-Spratly Archipelagos: Historical Truth' (19-21 June 2014). Over one hundred scholars attended from countries such as the United States, Australia, and France to discuss China's placement of a drilling rig in Vietnamese waters. Scholars attending the opening ceremony were also invited to sign their names on a large map of Vietnam placed in the courtyard in front of the museum. The signing ceremony took place in front of a crowd of prominent officials, academics, museum staff and local school children next to the statue of General Nguyen Tri Phuong, who repelled the French colonial soldiers in 1858, affirming the Vietnamese spirit of resistance.

This form of spectacle plays an active role in the nationalist agenda which involves transforming visitors into witnesses of Chinese aggression and territorial incursions. As Caswell (2014) has commented in relation to the documentation photographs of prisoners in Tsol Sleng prison in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, visitors to the exhibition are secondary witnesses who share in the process of remembering. Caswell states how the photographic mug shots of prisoners are incorporated into new archival records that document the act of witnessing, revealing both how photographs specifically are an active part of the performance of human rights in Cambodia, and how records in general are dynamic performative entities whose meaning and context change as they travel through space and time with reuse (Caswell 2014: 99). While, in the Vietnamese case, domestic visitors like school children and local people were shepherded past the displays, placed in the most prominent area of the museum, resources in the form of state media, military personnel, international experts, and local dignitaries, transformed the exhibition into a spectacle.

The signing ceremony could be seen as an inscriptive protest towards territorial incursions, a call for intervention and international justice. The participants witnessing the signing of the map of Vietnam (and the disputed archipelagos) stand in for larger constituencies; the foreign academics are a symbol of the international community; the Vietnamese school children (unintended victims of Chinese aggression) are a symbol of the next generation of Vietnamese. In the case of the photographs, maps and documents, the next generation of Vietnamese are witnessing the international community witness the sinking of the fishing boat and the territorial incursions committed by the Chinese. Here, witnessing the photographs, maps, documents, and the signed map is an antidote to forgetting. These images – mass-produced as

a form of what Nguyen (2016) calls ‘weaponized memory’ – reflect the creation of new records in the form of media that documents the act of looking at the map and photographs. They provide an opportunity for viewers of these images, school children, museum visitors, foreign academics, and so forth, to enable another layer of looking. In this way, the photographs and maps are performing sovereignty claims by making maritime conflict landscapes visible. The exhibitions become a vehicle through which the conflict becomes real, and people can document bearing witness to the aggression of the Chinese state and garner international attention for the assertion that such incursions should not be repeated.

As these images gain another life through media attention of the opening events – covered widely in Vietnamese newspapers and online media – in the photographs of people looking at maps and documentary evidence (digital and paper, video and still), the maps and photographs are transformed from records of political aggression to records of justice; the narrative transformed from one of the helplessness of victims (the fishermen rammed and injured by Chinese vessels) in the face of territorial incursion from a regional superpower to one of the agency of survivors in the act of witnessing. This political spectacle mobilises emotional responses: outbreaks of violence such as the burning of factories suspected of being run by Chinese owners; acts of philanthropy in the donation of maps and documents; or through the gifting of fishing boat DNA 90152 rammed by the Chinese vessels to a new exhibition hall planned close to the beach in Da Nang dedicated to the Paracel Islands.

Conclusion

Harley (1988: 301) states that maps are ‘preeminently a language of power, not of protest.’ However, in the case of the South China Sea maps perform as both: as a selective process of foregrounding and silencing, together as agents of international rights, calling out for justice and intervention from the international community for territorial incursions. As a collection of maps and documents, they reveal hidden meanings and sentiments as they embody diverging ideas of history and conflicting political ideologies, nationally and internationally. On the one hand, the issue of territorial sovereignty unifies, drawing together people on a global scale in opposition to foreign (Chinese) aggression; and on the other, it glosses over differences of historical interpretation by creating an emotional response to territorial incursions and the threat to Vietnamese sovereignty.

The maps and photographs became the focal point of the Museum of Da Nang, whose displays were used to assert claims over the archipelagos. The maps and photographs were then deployed to attract international attention to the incursion of the Chinese drilling rig in the face of Western indifference. These maps not only provide historical evidence to the sovereignty claims of the Vietnamese state, the photographs also bring ashore the reality of conflict between the Chinese navy and Vietnamese fishing boats by documenting hostilities and the sinking of the fishing boat for domestic and international visitors to the exhibition to witness.

Seen in this light, museums play a pivotal role in making conflict landscapes real and knowable. By putting on reactive exhibitions and mobilising audiences (school children, workers, officials, cadres, and state media), museums create witnesses to maritime incursions and implore their audiences to communicate messages of territorial sovereignty to increasing circles of listeners. Therefore, rather than simply reflect state policy on the South China Sea, the museum becomes a site for political action to shore up its geo-political body by mobilising larger constituencies in transmitting the nationalist message. By asserting sovereignty over the islands and that incursions will be remembered, these public records of witnessing perform territorial rights in the face of a local and international political climate that favours forgetting. In this way, the reactive exhibitions are a museological strategy on the part of the museum to manage and produce conflict landscapes, foregrounding maps, documents, and photographs as the truth to what lies offshore and unseen, while also playing down and silencing certain aspects of the reality of current occupation of the islands..

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Illustrations

Figure 1: Museum of Da Nang. Photograph: Graeme Were.

Figure 2: Map exhibition at the Museum of Da Nang, 2014. Photograph: Graeme Were.

Figure 3: Photographic exhibition at the Museum of Da Nang, 2014. Photograph: Graeme Were.