RESEARCH NOTE

The Sampan\textsuperscript{1} Dwellers of the Perfume River and Lagoons at Hue, Vietnam\textsuperscript{2}

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Introduction

The sampan dwellers are such an integral part of Hue’s poetic landscape that it is impossible to visualize the Perfume River of languid tides, as it is immortalized in poetry or on silk paintings, without its slender boats, which are reminiscent of Venetian gondolas.

The sampan dwellers are semi-nomads who have lived, for several centuries, on the Perfume River as well as on the coastal lagoons. They are defined as ethnic Vietnamese but they speak the Hue dialect with an heavy accent and sentences that are either archaic or borrowed from non-Vietnamese languages of the province.

Each sampan dweller is attached to a floating village (a “\textit{van}”, which is a traditional unit) to which he must return during traditional feasts, such as new year, fishermen rites and ancestor worship. However, most leave rarely except for marriage and festivities, for they have developed locally a chain of resources which does not allow them to stay away too long.

Even though there is little space in each boat, the vast river belongs to them. They know every inch of it, from where the shelters are in case of a typhoon, to the fish holes, the shallows, the currents, and the trees and rocks where the good spirits (that one should never disturb) are said to live. It is difficult to know the exact number of families which travel like this, often motorless, to fish in the river, its estuaries, and the lagoons, for most of the year.

The living conditions of the sampan men are quite varied.

On the Phu Xuan lagoon, life is very difficult ... “there were two big storms, in 1983 and in 1985 which devastated many boats, killing numerous people and leading to conditions of extreme poverty. People were forced to shift from the river to pieces of land as small as 10 x 5 metres on which to construct a house and a tank. This helped to settle 30 families only, while 85 are still on the water and one quarter of the population remains absent for days on end, fishing day and night ...”\textsuperscript{3}

On upper waters the \textit{vans} are small: 20 to 30 families (\textit{ho}) live on what they get from the river and from the nearby forest.

The town of \textit{Hue} had a population of 6,278 living on the water in 1991. This is probably less than the estimated figure of 10,000 which includes illegal residents.\textsuperscript{4} Of these residents, 11 \textit{van}, or about 617 \textit{ho}, have more than 2,000 children, aged below 16
years, on 829 sampan (where the largest family is composed of 28 people). The poorest families, with an average size of ten, live on boats called ghe which are also used for fishing purposes. The rich families live on large sampan of about 12 metres long called do, which are also used at times for fishing. However, these families also have an uncovered ghe which serves exclusively for fishing purposes.

The origins

These visceral people, bonded to their sampan, define themselves according to the number of generations on water and professional occupations. Those who consider themselves as the true sampan dwellers identify themselves in Hue as dan chai or ke chai, the net fishermen. Most of them claim that their origin is the province of Quang Binh, to the north of Hue, where it is said a sampan dweller’s king, by the name of Quang Doc Tinh Phu (general of the water world), was born. The truth is that no one knows for certain the origin of these floating people. They do not in fact form an ethnic group. They are rather a marginalized social group whose origins can be explained by several theories, each of which may have a grain of truth.

Since land was not rare some centuries ago, why should people have chosen to live on water? After asking the boatmen themselves this question several times, our conclusion was that their families have lived on water for generations because that is the way the world was created. For them there have to be people on land to grow rice and others on water to fish. Others say that the formation of boat villages (van do) was the result of imperial needs to have a flotilla to transport merchandise from the maritime port of the imperial town and to make use of the river resources. One did remark, however, that there are also boat men in most coastal provinces of this country including those without an imperial court. Another theory suggests that they came from Southern China to settle on the coast of Vietnam. The same lexical, syntactic and phonetic variants can be found in certain coastal villages of fishermen. However if this theory, which remains unpublished, holds true for the fishermen of the sea, if only because of their physical resemblance to Chinese, we are not sure that it would apply equally well to the sampan dwellers on the river and the lagoons, who constitute a totally different social group.

Another question that comes to mind is why should there be such strikingly different boats in different regions and on different rivers? It should be noted that the nature of the boats of the sampan dwellers does not allow them to go out to sea. Furthermore, those among them who have a specific fishing boat on the sea form a sub-group and are often grouped in a specific van.

Certain land dwellers see the sampan men as individuals who quit life on land in the course of centuries after committing crimes there, so as to escape court procedures. They see it also as a way of avoiding social obligations (since for instance, the sampan dwellers often refuse to do military service). Yet another theory supposes that they were “untouchable” members of inferior classes of ancient society who acquired a new social status by living on water.

The Vietnamese-American war also forced a number of peasants from affected areas to settle on water. In some way they are refugees on the river (numbering up to