

Introduction: Creating a Favourable Environment for South China Sea Issue Resolution Through International Research Cooperation

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The series of articles on the South China Sea issue published in the present journal represents the interim results of the major Chinese National Social Science project entitled “*Collation and Research of Documents on the South China Sea in Southeast Asia*”, which I lead. Every year, the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences conducts open bidding across the country for key research topics that are foundational, strategic, and forward-looking in nature. This project, which I was awarded and initiated in 2021 (Project No.: 21&ZD244), is one such endeavour.

The project aims to systematically sort and analyse documents related to the South China Sea issue held in Southeast Asia. It seeks to uncover the historical facts and legal foundations embedded in these materials, thereby providing a robust academic basis for an objective and comprehensive understanding of the historical background and current realities of the South China Sea dispute.

Throughout the project’s implementation, the research team has adhered to the principles of openness, cooperation, and transnational research, in accordance with the management guidelines of the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences. The Office actively encourages international academic collaboration and permits foreign scholars to act as sub-project leaders. The goal is to foster broader perspectives, access to more diverse sources, and the production of more rigorous and objective research findings. This model is of particular value in the social sciences, especially

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in the context of the South China Sea issue, which is both complex and contentious.

As a scholar who has long been engaged in research on the South China Sea, I am keenly aware that academic inquiry into this Theme Issue carries not only the task of theoretical exploration but also the social responsibility of contributing positively to public understanding and policy formulation. However, within the current international academic climate, there remains a tendency to selectively ignore key historical documents due to political agendas or ideological bias. Scholars from some of the claimant countries, as well as certain Western researchers, often avoid or downplay the study of pivotal documents — either in pursuit of their own interests or under the guise of “political correctness”.

Take Vietnam as an example. A number of studies within its academic community deliberately avoid reference to the official 1958 letter from Pham Van Dong, then Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, addressed to the Chinese government, which clearly recognised China’s sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands. According to international law, this formal statement has a fundamental bearing on Vietnam’s current legal position on the South China Sea. In light of this and basic principles of international law, no amount of subsequent evidence advanced by Vietnam to support prior sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands can alter this legal reality (Wang and Wang, 2022). If relevant scholars approached such documents with greater responsibility, acknowledged historical facts, and presented a more complete and accurate account of the dispute through academic channels, it might be possible to foster a more rational and constructive public discourse. Sadly, some academics continue to ignore basic facts and use so-called research to inflame tensions, further complicating the situation in the South China Sea.

In this light, I believe that promoting rational understanding and peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute requires broad participation and concerted effort from the international academic community. The successful release of this Theme Issue shows the academic responsibility of scholars from China, and we are thankful for the *International Journal of China Studies*, published in Malaysia, to provide such a platform that contributes to academic mutual understanding. At the outset of the project, I invited Professor Ngeow Chow Bing, Director of the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya, to be an academic

partner. Director Ngeow emphasised that participation in such research must strictly follow academic logic and scholarly norms — namely, “reasoning and deduction based on facts”. In this spirit, he agreed to provide the IJCS as a neutral platform for us to articulate our views and perspectives, just as he offers the journal to all scholars around the world to voice their perceptions and interpretations. This principle aligns closely with my own academic values and laid a strong foundation for this Theme Issue.

Following the project’s launch, I conducted fieldwork in both Malaysia and the Philippines, meeting with numerous local experts on the South China Sea to better understand their research outputs and perspectives. In the course of these exchanges, I observed several instances where limited understanding of the facts and incomplete access to materials had led to skewed interpretations and conclusions. This further underscores the urgency and necessity of promoting international cooperation and enabling foreign scholars to gain a deeper appreciation of Chinese academic work on the South China Sea.

Building on this shared understanding, Director Ngeow and me agreed that the *International Journal of China Studies*, published by his institute, would edit and publish this Theme Issue on the South China Sea. This edition showcases significant research contributions made by Chinese scholars in recent years. Although the articles address a wide range of topics and adopt different research angles, all authors follow the same academic standard — respect for facts and strict adherence to logic.

In the current climate, where the South China Sea issue remains highly sensitive and under close international scrutiny, I hope these articles will serve not only as valuable references for the academic community, but also as a firm foundation for informed policymaking and constructive dialogue.

Reference List

- Wang, Zichang and Kan Wang (2022), “Legality of Pham Van Dong’s Note——A Critical Study on Li Woteng’s Inferences”, *Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making*, No. 5, pp. 75-90.