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UNDERSTANDING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: AN EXPLORATIVE CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea has attracted considerable attention among politicians, journalists and scholars since it has become a contested maritime space. Most works concentrate on conflicts and negotiations to resolve the ensuing issues. In this paper, a cultural theory will be applied to stress the importance of conceptions of space found in different cultures. The South China Sea is defined as "Mediterranean." By comparing it to other maritime spaces, like the Baltic and the Mediterranean Sea, lessons will be drawn from the "longue durée" of history, as analysed by French historian Fernand Braudel and from concepts of the cultural theory of Oswald Spengler. The paper will look at the South China Sea from two perspectives. The political perspective will discuss various events that have happened due to political tensions because of territorial demarcations, fishing rights and access to natural resources. Comparing three "Mediterranean seas," I shall argue that Mediterranean seas share certain properties that give rise to tensions and even armed conflict, but also solutions to its problems. The second perspective uses macro-sociology and cultural anthropology to classify and understand actions of the general population as well as political leaders when they ascertain property rights to Mediterranean seas.

Keywords: South China Sea, cultural analysis, cultural theory, Mediterranean seas, ASEAN

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INTRODUCTION

This paper[1] will look at the South China Sea from two perspectives. The political science perspective will discuss various events that have happened due to political tensions because of territorial demarcations, fishing rights and access to natural resources. This reflects the current discourse, found in most of the 16,200 books and papers touching on conflicts in the South China Sea (Google Scholar 1970 to 2012). Comparing three "Mediterranean seas," I shall argue that Mediterranean seas share certain properties that give rise to tensions and even armed conflict, but also solutions to its problems. The second perspective uses macro-sociology and cultural anthropology to classify and understand actions of the general population as well as political leaders when ascertaining property rights to Mediterranean seas.

"Since the end of the Second World War, the ocean has become a source of instability in the international system" (Yee 2011:166). Mediterranean seas, however, have been highly contested throughout history. The South China Sea has increasingly attracted the attention of politicians, journalists and scholars, following several clashes in recent years. While in 1999 noted British political scientist Michael Leifer could still publish a book chapter about a "stalemate in the South China Sea" (Leifer 1999: 1–9), the tension has accelerated shortly thereafter, leading to armed conflict. The basic outline of the South China Sea conflict has been well described in many publications. The situation can be described as follows.

The South China Sea is a "Mediterranean sea," surrounded by land belonging to different states: the ASEAN states (except Burma and Laos), Taiwan and China. Each (except Singapore) claim part of the South China Sea as their territory. Territorial claims are based on the law of the sea, which differs from land based property rights. Traditionally, the sea was open to all nations and their ships except for a three mile zone ("as far as a cannon ball could fly"), regarded as part of the national territory with all rights attached. This zone was extended to 12 miles and later on a 200 mile exclusive economic zone was added and accepted in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1977. This zone gave exclusive rights for fishing and the exploitation of underwater resources, especially oil and gas, to a nation state. This regulation provides no major problems to oceans and their bordering states, but proves to be very tricky to Mediterranean seas. There are overlapping claims, especially when islands are involved. Zones can be drawn around

islands, if they are inhabited and equidistance is used as a principle to delineate boundaries. Article 121, paragraph 3 the UNCLOS clearly states that "rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf" (Quang 2010). Erecting physical structures and placing military personnel on barren rocks has become a tool to turn rocks into inhabited islands with a claim to suzerainty.

UNCLOS also allows the use of historical evidence to stake a claim to areas where equidistant lines or islands are difficult to delineate. Whereas the Philippines argues along the lines of section X of UNCLOS to claim parts of the South China Sea as their exclusive economic zone, China has argued along historical lines, namely that all of the South China Sea and its reefs and islands have been used by Chinese seafarers and fishermen from time immemorial, at least since a map produced around 1300. As Malay seafarers have dominated trade and shipping in Southeast and East Asia in line with their Austronesian ancestry, similar claims could be posted by most ASEAN states as well. Since 1973 many disputes, arising out of UNCLOS have been settled by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea in Hamburg, Germany. The USA was, however, not a signatory.

The history of events and the failures of diplomacy have been well documented (Buszynski 2007; Kivimaki 2002; Quang 2010; Yee 2011) and can be followed up in about 42,400 publications dealing with South China Sea issues (Google Scholar as of 7 September 2012) that appeared since the 2009 clash between a US warship and Chinese vessels. There is no dearth of papers and resolutions, like ASEAN Secretariat 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (http://www.aseansec.org/13163.htm). Nevertheless, the disputes on the sovereignty over the South China Sea have yet to be resolved. Why not? Why has the dispute taken a turn for the worse since the 1970s? The growing importance of energy resources found in the South China Sea has been held responsible for the growing assertiveness of the Chinese government. The ASEAN states depend as much on energy resources as China does. Therefore this materialistic argument may not be sufficient to explain the growing impotence of diplomats and government agencies to hammer out a solution to the maritime problems of the South China Sea.

EVENTS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

While the Paracels are the object of bilateral disputes between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Vietnam, claims to the Spratlys are contested either entirely or in part by six parties, including Brunei, Chinese Taipei, Malaysia, the PRC, the Philippines and Vietnam. Except for Brunei, all the claimants have a physical presence in the South China Sea. Structures or flags have been put up on rocks and shoals to claim as national territories. This is in contradiction to the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS Article 121, paragraph 3).

On the other hand, China's argument for its sovereignty is based historically on the claim of prior discovery and on a decision of the San Francisco Conference of 1951 that required Japan to return several islands in the East China Sea to the PRC. Despite the pioneering work of Ptak and Schottenhammer (Ptak 2007; Schottenhammer 2009) a full study of China's historical claims, based on reliable historical sources, still needs to be done. According to Quang (2010: 428), Vietnam bases its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea on two pillars. "The claim on the Paracel Islands is based on historical documents issued by the Nguyen Dynasty in the nineteenth century, while its claims over the Spratlys have been seen as a continuation of a claim held by the French colonial regime after 1933. The Philippines' claim was strengthened by two facts: prior discovery by Tomas Cloma in the 1950s, and the declaration made by Carlos Garcia and Ferdinand Marcos in 1957 and 1971, respectively. Malaysia bases its claim on the basis of its continental shelf. Taiwan claimed the whole South China Sea and stated that this is its "historical maritime territory" (Quang 2010).

Figure 1: China's claimed territorial waters. Source: BBC World News http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21137144 (accessed 12 February 2013).

FROM EVENT HISTORY TO CULTURAL ANALYSIS

In this paper we shall abandon "event-history" (*l'histoire evénémentielle*) as criticised by Fernand (Braudel 1958) and instead attempt to understand the underlying causes of these long simmering conflicts. Rather than analysing individual events or clashes, we intend to step back and look at the underlying cultural and geographical patterns. In this we follow the methods of the "Verstehende Soziologie" (interpretative sociology) of Max Weber and the historical methods of the Annales School of French historian Fernand Braudel and his followers (Braudel 1958, 1966, 1972) by observing the "Longue Durée" of history, rather than short clashes and violent events.

Max Weber's "Verstehende Soziologie," often not quite correctly translated as "interpretative sociology" assumes that we need to understand the intentions, the underlying motives, the "subjektiv gemeinter Sinn" of actors but also the contexts in which actions take place to make sense of history, to understand, what happens. Braudel suggested that actors, including great historical figures, are often acted upon by the long flow of history, the physical

realm, by spatial opportunities and constraints. After his work on the Mediterranean, "Braudel became more and more attracted to the idea of quantification in economic history, the notion that history could become scientifically respectable through the use of graphs and tables and the collection of hard quantifiable data" (introduction by Oswyn Murray) (Braudel 1972). Long time series of data would reveal the long durée of history, if they are interpreted and used to explain historical trends.

Another look at the classics of world history and cultural analysis adds credence to this approach. Oswald Spengler, author of the monumental work on the "Untergang des Abendlandes" (Spengler 1923, 1998), English "The Decline of the West" (Spengler 1932) argues against a linear development from ancient Greek to Roman, and to European history, claiming instead that cultures are living organisms, going through a cycle of birth, life and decline. Spengler unfortunately misses out on Southeast Asia, but covers more or less the rest of the world, claiming that cultures share or are even determined by a particular conception of space, which forms the determining "Ursymbol" of Babylonian, Chinese, Classical Greek/Roman, Western, Arab and other civilisations. Conceptions of space are a constant in the flow, in the "Longue Durée" of history. We shall follow Oswald Spengler only in so far, as we shall use his idea of spatial concepts as powerful forces determining the options open to civilisations and analyse Malay and Chinese conceptions of space. This way we hope to "verstehen" (understand) the problems of finding solutions to the South China Sea debacle.

In this paper, we will look at the long term cultural conceptions of maritime space as well as the physical space itself. In short we follow the often cited "spatial turn" that reintroduced space into social science research (Mishkova 2010). The "social construction of space" (Steinberg 2001), in this case maritime space, is determined both by cultural values and by the need and desire to exploit maritime resources. The "spatiality of the capitalist economy" has reached the "free" oceans and has become even more relevant to the maritime space of the Mediterranean seas. The disputes over the South China Sea signify one major flashpoint of this process.

MEDITERRANEAN SEAS AND STRAITS

The South China Sea is one of many "Mediterranean seas." In contrast to oceans, Mediterranean seas (from Latin *media*-middle and *terra*-land) are surrounded by land, with narrow outlets to oceans or other seas. The Baltic, the Mediterranean Sea, the South China Sea may all be classified as "Mediterranean seas." Southeast Asia is particularly rich in Mediterranean seas. The Sulu Sea, the Celebes Sea, the Banda Sea, the Arafura Sea, the Java Sea, the Andaman Sea and last but not least the South China Sea are well defined Mediterranean seas, bordered by maritime ASEAN states. Though not called a "sea," the Straits of Malacca may also be classifies as a Mediterranean sea (Gerke 2008). By throwing a glance on other Mediterranean seas we may be able to put the issues surrounding the South China Sea into a better perspective.

Mediterranean seas often appear to exhibit a basic physical cum geo-political structure. The Mediterranean Sea and the South China Sea measure both about 3,400 km at their longest distance from shore to shore; the Baltic Sea about 1,000 km. All three seas are surrounded by maritime states ("thalassic states" from Greek thalassa-sea), island states ("archipelagic states")[2] and land-based states ("terranian states" from Latin terra). By looking at the "longue durée" of the well-researched history of the Mediterranean Sea we may discover some interesting parallels to the less well known South China Sea and the behaviour of the three types of states.

The ancient archipelactic Greeks battled the Persian terranian state. The Greeks could have conquered the whole Mediterranean, turning it into a Greek lake. Instead Alexander turned East. He defeated the Persian empire, cutting it off the Mediterranean Sea, but his empire crumbled soon after his death in 323. During the second centenium BC, the bitter conflict between Rome and Carthage raged for almost 200 years. Poet and Senator Cato (234–149 BC) closed his speeches in the Roman Senate, whatever their topic was, with the famous sentence "ceteris censeo Carthaginem esse delendam" (I further conclude that Cartage has to be destroyed). Hannibal of Carthage, a "maritime state," followed a "terranian" policy and tried to conquer Rome by taking the overland route through Gaull (Southern France) and across the Alps. The Carthagians failed, and Rome, also a "maritime state," counter-attacked across the sea using its navy, destroying Carthage and razing the capital city to the ground. Rome remained the dominant power in the Mediterranean Sea for centuries to come.

To jump closer to the present: eventually an outside power made an inroad, when on 11 April 1713 Gibraltar was ceded to Great Britain, which subsequently took over Malta in 1800 and thus controlled the sea lanes through

the Mediterranean, since 1869 after the opening of the Suez Canal all the way to Asia, but at the same time destabilising the whole Mediterranean region.

The door is open for speculation. Is Beijing and Tokyo the equivalent to Rome and Carthage? Is Singapore the Venice of the South China Sea? Will the US Empire, controlling the Pacific Ocean, also try to govern the Mediterranean South China Sea, or will China take over this role? Is Penang the Malta of the East? A much more detailed research would be necessary to answer these queries before a comparative picture would emerge.

All Mediterranean seas experienced periods of intensive trade relations, exchange of knowledge, economic prosperity and the flowering of science, religion and innovation. A common Mediterranean culture emerged around the Mediterranean Sea, centred at times on Athens, Alexandria, Rome and much later Venice. The same cultural integration took place around the Java Sea and later the Straits of Malacca, known at times as the "Sea of Melayu" (Andaya 2000).[3] This "Austronesian" and later "Nusantara culture" extended to the shores of the South China Sea. It never encompassed all the areas surrounding the South China Sea, which never developed into a cultural Mediterranean. Despite extensive trade, naval expeditions, like those of Srivijaya or much later the Bruneian *thalassocratie* (de Vivienne 2012) in the 16th century, or the Japanese Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, despite migration and religious missions, the South China Sea remained unified only in name, but never became a culturally unified region. The Thais and the Vietnamese and Chinese looked inward to their vast hinterland, and the highly fragmented Nusantara concentrated on their own Mediterranean seas, like the Sulu, Sulawesi and Java seas and the Straits of Malacca. With Western colonial expansion the South China Sea became an important shipping lane of European-Asian trade and some of the islands were envisaged as coaling stations for cargo ships, but the "South China Sea" remained a sea south of China and might as well have been called the North Brunei Sea, the Eastern Sea (Bien Đong in Vietnamese) or the Philippine Atlantic.

The South China Sea has been an important shipping lane for the past 2000 years, though there is little exact textual evidence before the 16th century (Ptak 1992). Its rich fish resources have provided livelihood for the surrounding countries for centuries. But since World War II the discovery of huge oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea "is producing a new geography of conflict in which resource flows rather than political divisions constitute the major fault lines" (Yee 2011). The positions of the governments of surrounding states have hardened, negotiations have largely failed and a solution is not in sight. A more detailed analysis of conflicts, debates, negotiations and diplomatic efforts may be in order, but we leave this field to political scientists and scholars of international relations. They may point to the weaknesses in ASEAN's

consensus based modus operandi in contrast to China's single-mindedness and increasing bargaining power of an emerging world economy. We follow instead the leads of scholars like Max Weber, Oswald Spengler and Fernand Braudel, as indicated in the introductory sections and put the fundamental question: Why has it not been possible to come to agreements as has been the case in the Baltic or Mediterranean Seas? We hypothesise that deep-seated cultural perceptions and values are at stake, in addition to the lure of vast "treasures" of maritime resources. This hypothesis is pursued further in the following section.

CONCEPTIONS OF SPACE

Maritime Space Versus Land-based Space – What are the Differences?

In popular view the sea is perceived as an open space without territorial, fixed lineal boundaries. Such boundaries are constructed only in relation to land: three mile zone and the two 12 miles international boundaries follow the coast line (UNCLOS 10 December 1982). A further 200 miles exclusive economic zone gives states the right of using marine resources. The sea is otherwise perceived as an open space, accessible by all kinds of vessels in any direction.

Of course there are, in reality, restrictions by currents, wind directions, tides, etc., but the perception of a free open space prevails. Sailors may have a more detailed perception of maritime space, but the general population draws a clear line between the "open sea" and the highly differentiated land area. Land-based space knows bounded territories, landscapes, fixed natural or political boundaries. Space is structured by places and place names, small patterned named areas like valleys and mountains, rivers, settlements, roads, geodetic points, etc.

Of course these generalised conceptions of maritime and land-based space are subject to variations. Cultural values and concepts are intertwined with these generalised concepts and yield a more varied epistemology of space. In fact one may surmise that the "generalised conceptions of maritime space" as underlying the current international law of the sea as promulgated by UNCLOS may be very much determined more by European culture than anything else.

Since the economic potential of oceans and the sea beyond fisheries and transport became evident, a movement towards "sea enclosure" has in fact started. Will the sea be exposed to "the tragedy of a transnational commons"?
The states, surrounding Mediterranean seas can be classified according to their maritime potential. States with a long coastline, deep rivers, natural harbours and long beaches have a natural potential to engage in maritime economic activities (Evers 2011). Michael Pearson has used the term "littoral societies" for the coastal population of these "maritime sates." He makes the case "that we

can go around the shores of an ocean or a sea, or indeed the whole world, and identify societies that have more in common with other littoral societies than they do with their inland neighbours" (Pearson 2006: 353). A maritime state will have littoral as well as inland societies. This may cause tensions and pull the state into either a maritime or terrestrial direction; not necessarily in day-to-day politics but rather in the "longue durée" of history.

Other states with a large landmass at their disposal may envisage the sea less attractive. A special case will be island states or states consisting primarily of islands of different shape and size. Mediterranean areas tend to show a similar physical structure. There are bordering states with a small coastline relative to their landmass, others will be prone to engage in maritime activities due to their high maritime potential, whereas there is, at least in the three Mediterranean seas under consideration, at least one state spanning the islands of an archipelago. For the purposes of UNCLOS::

> "(a) 'archipelagic State' means a State constituted wholly by one or more archipelagos and may include other islands;
>
> (b) 'archipelago' means a group of islands, including parts of islands, interconnecting waters and other natural features which are so closely interrelated that such islands, waters and other natural features form an intrinsic geographical, economic and political entity, or which historically have been regarded as such."

As Fernand Braudel has suggested the geographical physical conditions of a Mediterranean area will have an impact on the flow of history (Braudel 1972). Equally important appears to be the cultural dimension of the flow of history, of the "longue durée." Cultural anthropologist will agree that cultural values are generally more difficult to change than political boundaries or economic systems. I will therefore look at conceptions of space as a cultural trait of great permanence. Given the high degree of ethnic diversity in the South China Sea region, this appears to be an almost impossible task. I will nevertheless try to draw some general lines that may at least produce propositions to guide research on the predicaments of the South China Sea.

Conceptions of Space: Malay and Chinese

The countries surrounding the South China Sea can be divided into three cultural areas: China, Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam share many cultural characteristics, as do Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Thailand forms a distinctly different cultural area. The distinctions are not clear-cut, as all

these countries have a multi-ethnic population, but there tend to be politically dominant ethnic groups that have determined long-term political processes.

Concentrating on two big blocks, the Nusantara (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines) and the Sinic block (China, Taiwan, Singapore and perhaps Thailand), we will try to distinguish between their respective cultural conceptions of space. The cultural interpretation of maritime space will thus be defined as part of the Longue Durée of history (Braudel). Through this methodology we hope to enhance our understanding (in the sense of Max Weber's interpretative sociology) of current conflicts in the South China Sea.

Malay and Chinese conceptions of space appear to differ considerably as outlined in earlier empirical studies (Evers 1977a, 1977b, 2000, 2012). Chinese space shows clearly defined boundaries. Village houses in Southern China are arranged in a row; ancient cities are enclosed by a wall and tend to conform to an ideal pattern, as described in Paul Wheatley's "pivot of the four quarters" (Wheatley 1971). In contrast, Malay *kampongs* consist of scattered houses, built on land without clearly demarcated boundaries. Graves on Chinese graveyards are structures arranged in rows facing the same direction as demanded by geomancy, the "science" of location and direction. Graves in Malay graveyards, except perhaps for the nobility, are scattered and arranged without any clearly visible pattern. There is no conception of urban space. In Malay language, modern urban areas are designated as "port" (*bandar*), "fort" (*kota*) or "market place" (*pekan*). There is no original word to designate a "city." Power emanates from the Sultan's palace that may have been fortified by a stockade or wall, but the *rakyat* lives traditionally in *kampongs* scattered around the *istana*. The Javanese principalities of Yogyakarta and Solo may serve as an example. There was no clear-cut boundary, delineating the realm of each sultanate. Villages showing allegiance for either of the two sultans may be located next to each other, resulting in a chequered pattern of different authority, rather than bounded space. The *mandala* principle of governance points into the same direction. Power is ritually and actually concentrated in the person of the sultan and his *istana*, surrounded by the *mancanegara*, the directly ruled area where the royal retainers live, defined by their duties as warriors or servants for palace duties rather than as urban citizens. The realm of sultanates becomes diluted the further away from the ritual centre of the state (often described as the *paku alam*) an area might be, resulting in fussy border areas with overlapping suzerainty.

The emphasis on a centre as the seat of vitality and power appears to be a key Austronesian concept (Waterson 1993: 230), found in many Southeast

Asian societies. Power radiates from the centre and is diminished with distance. However, "a cultural history of Indonesian imaginings of the sea is yet to be written" (Cribb 2009).

All this was, of course, changed and regulated by the respective colonial administrations, following their Western concepts of clear boundaries, but the original conceptions of space still linger on as cultural traits and way of thinking (as we discovered, doing field research on patterns of landownership in Malaysia and Indonesia) (Evers 1975a, 1975b; Lee 1978).

Barbara Andaya's paper on Malay sounds and authority points to the same direction (Andaya 2011). The sound of the drum (*nobat*) emanating from a centre, the Sultan's *istana*, is heard at a distance and then slowly disappears further away from its origin. Authority and power is strong at the centre but peters out at the fringes. No clear boundary is marked by the sound of the Malay drum of authority.

Another related aspect of the Malay conception of space is its focus on water. Nusantara designates the maritime space between the islands. Chinese thinking appears to be land based. "The ancient Chinese always had a complex psychic relation to the vast ocean: longing, but disdaining" (Sun 2010). The traditional Chinese coastal defence concept of "alongshore defence" was changed by Deng Hsiao Ping in the 1970s/80s to the strategic concept of "offshore defence," which differed from China's traditional passive defence idea of defending land territory (Sun 2010: 334).

"But for Malays and many other sea and riverine peoples, the focus was on water, not land, and entities were formed by seas and rivers joined by short land passages" (Andaya 2000). The classic Malay states around the island of Borneo had their capital at the estuary of a major river, or as in the case of Brunei Darussalam or Pontianak on a *kampung air* right in a river (King 1994). Their wealth derived from trade with upriver forest products and the trading networks across the sea to other principalities, kingdoms, or sultanates (Hall 1985). Power was concentrated in the *istana* and vanished upriver or farther away across the sea.

The Nusantara concentric *mandala* conception of space differs from the Chinese conceptions of bounded space. Fuzzy boundaries versus clearly defined boundaries, the Malay *hulu* of distant, undefined areas far from the centre versus the "Great Wall" concept guide the perception of the South China Sea. The Nusantara concept is basically a maritime conception of free and undefined space, the Chinese appear to view the South China Sea as a bounded territory, of

their exclusive sovereign territory. The two concepts of space are not compatible. As cultural concepts they are difficult to change. A modern gold miners passion for natural resources is married to ancient cultural values; a situation that does not augur well for the South China Sea.

CONCLUSION: CONCEPTIONS OF MARITIME SPACE AND THE "NUSANTARA MODEL"

The Chinese government's position on the South China Sea may very well be driven by the Chinese conception of space. A shift from an inward-looking policy of a "middle kingdom" to an outward looking and assertive naval power did not mean that the conception of space, Oswald Spengler's "Ursymbol," has changed as well. Four thousand years of history cannot be pushed aside in a few decades; an economy can be changed and developed to new heights within a century, cultural processes take a much longer time-span and cultural values are extremely difficult to change. Max Weber's famous thesis on the importance of religiously based protestant ethics for the development of European capitalism shows how long-lasting stable cultural values are compatible with dynamic economic and political changes (Weber 2010, 1920).

A Chinese conception of bounded space is likewise a stable cultural value, underlying China's southward expansion into the Nan Yang, the Southern maritime arena. The whole South China Sea is claimed as Chinese territory and a clear boundary is drawn far into the South, ignoring the chequered patchwork of claims of the ASEAN states. From an ASEAN point of view the South China Sea looks very much like the territory of the Malay or Javanese Sultanates. Bruneian, Malaysian, Filipinos and Indonesian claims are stacked next to each other. This does not worry Malaysian or Indonesian politicians too much, as long as respective claims are recognised. Not so the Vietnamese and Chinese. For the latter the position is made unmistakably clear. The South China Sea is ours, like the "mare nostrum" of the ancient Roman republic. There is a clear boundary with no loops and deviations. Of course the hunger for energy resources, oil and gas, may be the driving force behind China's claim, but this could also be satisfied by a negotiated settlement, resulting in a patchwork of boundaries—probably a horrendous proposition to the Chinese mind and its conception of bounded space.

I am well aware that I am driving the cultural analysis perhaps too far. Not everything can be explained by cultural values, nor are cultural traits fixed in eternity. They are, however, persistent and difficult to change. It is much easier to expand the economy and drive the GDP than to change cultural values. This, at least, should be taken into account when proposing easy solutions to complex culturally determined problems.

The words of noted Malay scholar B. A. Hamzah can be quoted to show the clash of cultural conceptions in regard to the South China Sea: "There are parties which have claimed almost the entire South China Sea as their own on the basis of history. Such area claims cannot be serious nor treated with much respect. In my view such area claims are as frivolous and ludicrous as the Papal Bull of 4 May1493 dividing the world's oceans between Spain and Portugal" (Hamzah 1993: 97). This statement shows clearly the incompatibility of two different conceptions of maritime space. The "Nusantara model" of sharing of resources, a patchwork of claims that are differentiated according the type of resource (fisheries, oil and gas, and rights of passage) appears to be the best and fairest solution. Whether or not the Chinese terrestrian conception of bounded space can be changed into a maritime conception to allow a Nusantara type solution of the claims to the South China Sea may turn out to be an impossible dream, but the dream of a realm of peace, of an Asian "Maritime Darussalam" may eventually become a negotiable proposition.

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[2] According to article 46 of UNCLOS (a) "archipelagic State" means a State constituted wholly by one or more archipelagos and may include other islands; (b) "archipelago" means a group of islands, including parts of islands, interconnecting waters and other natural features which are so closely interrelated that such islands, waters and other natural features form an intrinsic geographical, economic and political entity, or which historically have been regarded as such.

[3] "The first reference to a 'Sea of Melayu' is from an Arabic document dated c. 1000, which noted that travellers 'reaching the Sea of Melayu, were approaching the area of China.' While the location of the Sea of Melayu is not specified, the practice of naming a sea after a dominant people surrounding its shores suggests that this particular body of water must have been the Straits of Melaka" (Andaya 2000).