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[Special Topics]

An Expanding World of Islands: The Emergence of Chinese Island Studies

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Keywords

Asia, China, Chinese island studies, islands, research field

Introduction

I joined island studies fourteen years ago, in 2007. I learned about the field after coming across Godfrey Baldacchino and David A. Milne’s (2000) edited volume *Lessons from the Political Economy of Small Islands* while doing an online literature search during my PhD research in the Shetland Islands. I read the book, liked it, wrote an e-mail to Godfrey, received an encouraging response, wrote a pair of articles for the journals *Shima* and *Island Studies Journal* (a publication of which I am now executive editor), attended an island studies conference in Åland, organised my own island studies conference in Shetland, founded the Island Dynamics research organisation—and before I knew it, I was at the centre of a small but widely dispersed research field.

At the time, it felt as though island studies was already ancient. Writing now, I realise that while there was a lot that I missed at the beginnings of the field, particularly in the formative years of the International Small Island Studies Association in the 1990s, I was part of some pretty formative years myself.

This is what academic research fields are like. If they are vibrant, they are always forming, are constantly formative.

Island Studies or the Study of Islands?

In his wonderful essay in the inaugural issue of *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies*, Godfrey Baldacchino (2020, 4) congratulates the journal for its efforts to “go global” and link up with wider island research rather than indulge in comfortable but constraining parochialism.

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This widening of outlook echoes developments within the field of island studies as a whole. Although island studies has from the start aspired to be a global project, it was long—and to some extent still is—practiced as a collection of discrete regional spheres of research. This is linked to the field's origins as a partial merger of various regional and disciplinary research traditions: Pacific development studies, Caribbean literature studies, Mediterranean small states studies, North Atlantic island studies in the humanities, and other research communities entered into more frequent and deeper interactions between the late 1980s and the early 2000s. The activities of the International Small Island Studies Association and the field-building work of Baldacchino (2006, 2004) were of critical importance to island studies' coming to be more than just the sum of its parts.

As a result, there are now more and more scholars who identify themselves with island studies, including a small number of scholars who regard globally comparative island studies as their primary field of research. Nevertheless, most people who engage with island studies per se still do so on the basis of a particular island, archipelago, or regional interest and knowledge. A considerable majority of contributors to the International Small Island Studies Association's biennial Islands of the World conferences and to the various island-focused journals (e.g., *Island Studies Journal*, *Shima*, *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, *Pacific Dynamics*, *Small States & Territories*, and now *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* itself) thus approach island studies as a way of framing their own research into, for example, Pacific island responses to climate change, business ecosystems in the Canary Islands, the importance of island identity to individuals on a small island off the coast of Maine, or literary traditions relating to a specific island trope.

There is nothing wrong with researching particular islands or particular regions within the framework of island studies. Globally, comparative island studies will never be the only possible way and often will not even be the best way of researching a particular topic on a particular island, in a particular archipelago, or in a particular region. Most research that *could be* positioned within island studies never is positioned in this manner, and most research that *is* positioned within island studies could conceivably be positioned in a different manner and does not, taken on its own, necessarily impart much knowledge about islands and archipelagos on a global scale.

It is nevertheless the case that island studies as a globally comparative field is informed by and can only exist because of such more-or-less limited case studies. Furthermore, nearly everyone who ends up being deeply engaged in globally comparative island studies has entered the field through focus on a particular island, archipelago, or region.

All this is to say that island studies as a field is deeply reliant on and conditioned by the breadth, quality, and type of research that individual scholars choose to position within it. When particular regions or disciplines are particularly prominent within the island studies literature, it has an effect on the assumptions made by the field as a whole. When particular regions or disciplines are relatively or completely absent from the island studies literature, it likewise influences the state of knowledge and foundations for

thought within the field as a whole.

Regional Gaps in Island Studies Knowledge

Some geographical regions remain largely untouched by island studies scholarship, including South Asia, Russia, near-shore islands of Africa as a whole, and most of South America and Central America. Until recently, the same was true for islands of China and Southeast Asia. This is not to say that no one is studying islands in these regions. Indeed, many scholars research islands in these regions; they simply are not positioning these studies within the field of *English-language* island studies.

This specification of language is important because there are a number of strong national island studies traditions. The most significant of these is the historic and expansive Japanese field of island studies, but there is also a thriving French-language field and a growing German-language community. These various national traditions produce wonderful research that is enjoyed by many people, but it must be recognised that this research often fails to cross the linguistic divide. It is all too easy for English-language island studies to regard itself as the international standard from which all the national traditions deviate. However, especially in relation to the longstanding Japanese, growing Chinese, and other burgeoning island research communities across Asia, such an Anglo-centric stance ignores the colonial and imperial aspects of linguistic silos within research and publishing.

This lack of communication between island studies traditions outside of the English language as well as more general research concerning islands in particular regions has produced significant knowledge gaps for the English-language field. If the “mainstream” English-language island studies, as represented by organisations such as the International Small Island Studies Association, is truly meant to work toward a global understanding of islands, then it is highly problematic if certain regions, cultures, and island types are excluded from the analysis. This can lead to the continual reiteration of what we already know (or already think we know): small islands are exceptional because they are small, and they are small (and capable of being regarded as independent units of analysis) because they are exceptional (Grydehøj 2020). Island studies has long sought to be “the study of islands on their own terms” (McCall 1994). This goal requires that we first know what “islands” are and how to identify them.

Just as it is impossible to extract the full realm of island experience from a case study of a particular island, it is equally impossible to speak confidently regarding attributes of islandness when only drawing information from precisely those islands that have been a focus of English-language island studies or that we choose to acknowledge as central to the field. How is it that Southeast Asia—the world’s most island-dense region and home to two of the world’s three large fully archipelagic states (the Philippines and Indonesia)—has only recently come to receive significant attention in English-language island studies (e.g., Putri and Salim 2020; Gonzalez 2020; Rivas 2019; Simangunsong and

Hutasoit 2018; Porter and Lück 2018; Lagbas and Habito 2016; Persoon and Simarmata 2014; Hayward and Mosse 2012), excluding prior attention to the important but narrow field of small island livelihoods and natural resource management (e.g., Hutubessy et al. 2014; Nurdin and Grydehøj 2014; Szuster and Hatim 2010; Persoon and van Weerd 2006)? How is it that research from and about Japan—the other of the world’s three large fully archipelagic states and cradle of a remarkable island studies community—has also only recently received significant attention within the English-language island studies “mainstream” (e.g., Akibayashi 2020; Qu 2020; Konishi and Papoutsaki 2020; Marutani et al. 2020; Takahashi 2019; Imamura 2018; Hayward and Kuwahara 2014; Johnson and Kuwahara 2013; Kuwahara 2012; Suwa 2007)? This is despite the longstanding availability of important Japanese island studies research in English (e.g., Kakazu 2012, 1994) and significant participation by Japanese researchers in the International Small Island Studies Association.

Chinese Island Studies

Southeast Asia and Japan have, at least, been recognised as island regions from English-language island studies’ early days as a distinct research field (e.g., Baldacchino 2006; Persoon and van Weerd 2006). The same has not been true for China, which has typically been seen as the mainland toward which islands relate rather than as an island region in itself.

Even though islands are a prominent part of China’s coastal and riverine geography, research from China and concerning Chinese islands was almost completely absent from English-language island studies until the mid-2010s, and only a very few articles in the field contained significant discussion of Chinese islands. Nearly all these articles appeared in the South Korea-based *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* (Shen 2016; Huang 2016; Tsai and Chiang 2014; Schottenhammer 2012; Qu 2012). The absence of China in the field is especially glaring in the case of *Island Studies Journal*, the Canada-based publication of which I became executive editor in 2017. Of the 206 articles published in *Island Studies Journal* between issue 1 (1) in 2006 and issue 12 (1) in 2017, only a single article concerned China (Sheng 2016).

In March 2016, Island Dynamics organised an “Island Cities and Urban Archipelagos” conference, which was hosted by University of Hong Kong. This conference in many respects launched island studies per se in China by serving as a platform upon which a new, multidisciplinary research community could be constructed. November 2017’s *Island Studies Journal* 12 (2) featured a special section based in part on this Hong Kong conference, “Islands of China and the Sinophone World.” From then until today’s issue 15 (2) in 2020, *Island Studies Journal* has published 26 articles by Chinese authors and/or significantly concerning China (Hong 2020c; Wu, Wang et al. 2020; Davis, Munger, and Legacy 2020; Li, Chen, and Grydehøj 2020; Kwong and Wong 2020; Zhong and Wu 2020; Xie, Zhu, and Grydehøj 2020; Ye et al. 2020; Yu and Li 2020; Zhang and

Xiao 2020; Yuen and Cheng 2020; Grydehøj et al. 2020; Chen and Dong 2019; Heo and Lee 2018; Hong 2017; Su 2017; Ou and Ma 2017; Qiu et al. 2017; Leung et al. 2017; Kwong and Wong 2017; Yue et al. 2017; Su, Wall, and Wang 2017; Luo and Grydehøj 2017; Rodd 2020; Sheng, Tang, and Grydehøj 2017; Grydehøj, Heim, and Zhang 2017).

Explicitly island studies-grounded research into Chinese islands by Chinese scholars has spread directly from the 2016 conference and 2017 journal special section to include publications in various other respected journals (e.g., Hong 2020a, 2020b; Zhang and Grydehøj 2020; Wu, Zhang et al. 2020). There has also been involvement by an increasing number of Chinese research institutions in the English-language research field (e.g., Zhejiang University's Island and Coastal Zone Institute; Zhejiang University's Ocean College; South China University of Technology's Research Center for Indian Ocean Island Countries; the Ministry of Natural Resources' Island Research Center; Fuzhou University's Law School; and Zhejiang University of Technology's School of Design & Architecture). A number of Chinese scholars have emerged as among the most theoretically innovative and boundary-pushing researchers in island studies today (e.g., Gang Hong, Ping Su, Huan Zhang). These developments have been buttressed by a further two Island Dynamics conferences ("Islands, Resources, and Society" in Zhoushan, 2018, and "Silk Road Archipelagos" in Fuzhou, 2019) and a further *Island Studies Journal* special section ("Silk Road Archipelagos: Islands in the Belt and Road Initiative" in 2020).

That is, within a period of five years (2016–2020), island studies research per se in China went from being non-existent to being one of the most prolific and high-quality sections of the field. This representation is furthermore diverse, covering a wide range of Chinese islands and archipelagos (e.g., Changshan, Chongming, Dongzhou, Guangzhou, Hainan, Hong Kong SAR, Macao SAR, Pingtan, Weizhou, Zhoushan, and Zhuhai) and disciplines (e.g., economics, environmental science, history, human geography, Indigenous studies, international relations, law, literature studies, planning, tourism studies, and urban studies).

Lessons for “Going Global”

In the case of Chinese island studies considered above, there were three main obstacles to coalescence of this tradition for island research into a national field and this field's engagement with international island studies before the mid-2010s. One obstacle was that it was in the mid-2010s that urban island studies first came to be an accepted subfield of island studies and thus that it became unexceptional for researchers to consider certain kinds of urbanised and near-shore island geographies, which are especially prominent among the islands of China. Another obstacle was that Chinese scholars who were researching islands were not reading the English-language island studies scholarship and to a large extent did not perceive any benefits to studying islands in a nationally or internationally comparative manner. A third and equally significant obstacle was that the English-language “mainstream” of globally comparative island studies had quite simply

shown little interest in the islands of China. If it had not, in fact, been for Huan Zhang of Zhejiang University contacting me personally in 2014 to discuss the possibility of research collaboration, it is unlikely that the “Island Cities and Urban Archipelagos” conference in Hong Kong a year and a half later would have been so well placed to foster the field’s growth at mainland Chinese universities. The same is true for the role of Otto Heim in organising the conference at University of Hong Kong and ensuring that some of his friends and acquaintances from Sun Yat-sen University in mainland China took part—people who would later become key to the Chinese island studies community.

What becomes clear is that it was a combination of a broadening of the field’s scope, interpersonal connections, conference activity, local institutional development, and targeted publication opportunities that inspired and then nurtured the growth of Chinese island research within the international island studies community. A similar multipronged approach could conceivably be used to help the field make headway in other overlooked island regions, such as Russia, Africa, and the Middle East, where there are existing island researchers who do not identify with and are largely unaware of the field of island studies.

Indeed, a similar process is evident elsewhere. Sun-Kee Hong of the Mokpo National University’s Institution for Marine and Island Cultures has participated in conferences, undertaken institutional work within South Korea, and founded the English-language but Asia-heavy *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*. These activities were important for making inroads for island research across the region and for Korean scholars in particular. Philip Hayward’s founding of the Australia-based *Shima* journal and the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative, which have drawn upon his immense skills at networking and encouraging researchers in emerging island studies communities, have likewise been critical for opening up English-language island studies and Asian traditions to one another, particularly within the humanities. These efforts in many respects echo Godfrey Baldacchino’s own earlier and continuing field-building activities at the University of Malta and University of Prince Edward Island and with *Island Studies Journal* and now *Small States & Territories*.

This also indicates the manner in which the various English-language journals of island studies support one another and make possible a broadening and deepening of island studies scholarly activity—even if, as the lack of overlap between the list of Chinese authors who have thus far published in *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* and *Island Studies Journal* shows, we cannot take such cross-fertilisation for granted.

Okinawan Journal of Island Studies joins a proud community of English-language, globally comparative island studies publishing. This new journal has the potential to build bridges between Okinawan and Japanese island research and the world, to both inform the increasingly global community of researchers and to help broaden Okinawa’s own horizons.

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