

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Typical Islands, Borrowed Islands: Epistemological and Intellectual Decolonialization in Island Studies

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In the emerging scene of non-western island studies, research done on the sinophone world mainly (but not exclusively) by sinophone scholars has become a conspicuous strand in the literature. Despite the diverse locations in focus, most research tends to functionally apply rather than organically engage with west-inflected island theories. Starting from this premise, I embark on a series of critical reflections on the multilayered and intersecting subjectivities of the non-western island researcher and the related challenges in the context of epistemological decolonialization by analyzing two symptomatic narrative vignettes abstracted from my own research experiences in local island and archipelagic areas in China. Specifically, I argue that in the face of intersecting structures and conflicting forces, the non-western island researcher is both stranded and enabled by a series of in-between conditions in which epistemological innovation is difficult, but still possible if pursued through relentless interrogation of one's own vested interest and constant realignment of positionality. In the end, I propose three ethical-epistemological traps for non-western scholars practicing island research under the shadow of western intellectual hegemony.

Introduction

In the emerging scene of island scholarship undertaken by sinophone researchers, mainly through the outlet of *Island Studies Journal*, critical engagement with islandness is scarce, if not nonexistent. In this regard, I see my own modest contribution to the field as following a trajectory of going from using island theories to functionally analyze Chinese examples, to gradually shifting toward a critical assessment of islandness as a west-inflected theoretical construct.

There is no boastfulness in expressing my trajectory in this manner; adopting a critical approach is not a merit in itself. Nonetheless, almost six years into my experience in island studies, I do feel my research trajectory not altogether common among sinophone colleagues publishing in *Island Studies Journal* and other island-focused academic journals. This critical-reflexive paper was conceived and written on the premise that it is worth reflecting on how my island research has developed, why it has developed the way it has, and what implications it might have for my future research. I believe that such an endeavor can facilitate deeper knowledge concerning the challenges of representing and empowering cultural diversity in island studies and myself as a non-western researcher.

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I start by framing the paper within a recent tradition of reflexive autoethnography in the humanities and social sciences in general before examining in detail the critical-reflexive approaches found in both western scholarship involving islands and island studies *per se*. In the autoethnographic sections, I give a contextual account of my brief island research trajectory in order to pave the way for reflections on two issues that arose during the process. I emphasize examining myself as a knowing, living and laboring researcher/subject as I am intersected, stranded, and enabled by dislocated spaces, different structures, conflicting forces, etc. In the end, I propose three traps that are present in practicing non-western island studies within the frame of epistemological decolonialization, and I offer some critical reflections on the ethics of practicing island studies, especially for non-western, mainland-born researchers.

Reflexive scholarship and autoethnography

This paper is partially inspired by the increasingly salient tendency of reflexive scholarship in the humanities and social sciences in general. ‘Reflexive’ is used throughout the paper in the double sense of being capable of reflection and “turned back on itself” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Whereas the former sense projects the researcher as an active thinking subject, the latter shifts the focus to moments when the researcher realizes that they are often subject to impersonal and conflicting structural and circumstantial forces. This mixture of agency and contingency constitutes a salient theme of the tendency: the in-betweenness of both research experience and researcher identity. A reflexive approach often leads to contradictions and ambiguities in terms of the researcher’s subjectivity. This is succinctly summarized by Nadarajah (2007) as “the outsider within.”

However, contradictions and ambiguities are not necessarily intellectually debilitating. Exploited wisely, they could facilitate deeper insight into both the research process and the researcher themselves. For example, exploring an ongoing research engagement with a squatter settlement community in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia in the context of local community sustainability and contemporary globalization, Nadarajah (2007) taps into the “in-betweenness of research” as a potentially fruitful condition in which theoretical innovation and analytical understanding become possible, though potentially creating practical difficulties during fieldwork. For Nadarajah, the contemporary anthropologist can only negotiate her place in terms of shifting identities and power relations as the traditional authentic insider has become increasingly illusory. Reflections can be made on either the researcher’s own research experiences or those of other practitioners.

In another case study, reflecting on a Chinese professor’s experiences of bilingual instruction of the course Fluid Mechanics at a university in central China, Ai (2016) criticizes the techno-functional approach to education studies by shifting his attention to the issue of cultural identity in the process of bilingual instruction. Hybrid identities constructed between Chinese culture and English culture, and between a traditional Confucian educational

subjectivity and one that stresses student-centered communication, are examined with recourse to Bhabha's (2004) concept of 'the third space'. Although the paper is relatively thin in empirical description, it demonstrates the centrality of in-between subjectivity in reflexive scholarship.

Another characteristic of reflexive scholarship is its embrace of the research and reflective processes rather than only the outcome. Seen in this light, failures can be a treasure trove. Even in fields where the dominant paradigm is dualist and objectivist, according to which a detached researcher's duty is to observe, predict and control what is out there, reflexive approaches are gradually making inroads. For example, Duarte and Hodge (2007) trace the various stages of Duarte's frustrating yet creative fieldwork related to a study on a tripartite partnership program on urban sustainability in Brazil. What began as a positivistic project aimed at producing a model for "participatory urban environmental sustainability programs to deal with problems resulting from high demographic growth" turned into a self-transformative "meta-autoethnography" in which the researcher is implicated in a complex and ambiguous web of multiple subjectivities. In the process, formal interviews and focus groups designed to extract neat managerialist patterns of behavior were replaced by informal conversations with informants, seeking to understand the nuanced discourses of organizational narrative. Emerging from a crisis in the fieldwork, the researcher looked back on it as "a rather successful form of failure" in organization studies (Duarte & Hodge, 2007, p. 201). This research also demonstrates that, far from being solipsistic, autoethnography's focus on the individual does not conflict with the mission of social engagement.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that paradoxes and contradictions are not the only concern in reflexive papers. Despite the abundance of detours and digressions in their narrative sections, some reflexive papers are quite optimistic in their celebration of the ultimate synthesis of knowledge and experience. In this regard, Radesjö's (2018) paper is a typical example. Drawing on the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), she recounts, interprets and reflects on her academic and emotional trajectory as an aspiring educational researcher learning from/with a community of real researchers through a Master's Program at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Her conclusion is exceptionally optimistic:

As an aspiring educational researcher myself, following a research group composed of real researchers led to experiences that I will add to my history of learning. An aspiring educational researcher is who I am, and an educational researcher is who I am becoming—and that feels good. (Rådesjö, 2018, p. 79)

A similar example can be found in Xu's (2018) autoethnography of her experiences as an international PhD student in Australia. Challenging a longstanding adjustment paradigm characterized by dysfunction and deficit in crosscultural adaptation discourse, Xu reconstructs her overseas sojourn as an empowering process of self-formation undertaken by an exploratory and

reflective agent. The study is largely predicated on an integrative and positive model of identity narrative instead of a deconstructive one foregrounding contradictions and ambiguities. A synthetic approach to tension can also be found in Kaplan-Berkley, Strickland, and Dimartino's (2019) autoethnography on the post-dissertation experiences of three doctorates living in different locations across the globe. Adopting a collaborative approach, the authors/researchers examine how a closed-cohort learning model helped them survive and thrive in academia despite the negative emotions inevitably involved in the process.

Like failures, emotions, especially those that are deemed negative and useless, have gained a prominent place among the concerns of reflexive scholars. Linking the nodes between research process and the researcher's emotional *epiphanies*, reflexive self-examination can shed light on the complex working of the researcher's identities. Based on five autoethnographies about life-changing moments from childhood to adulthood, Richards (2015) reveals the conflicting, flexible nature of researchers' identity by drawing parallels between difficult personal events and academic research trajectory. The fallacious split between public and private realms in the framework of conventional academic writing is thus healed through a melding of "autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward)" and "ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward)" (Tedlock, 2005, p. 467). In other words, the fallacious divide between the personal and the social has thus collapsed.

An autoethnographic paper can be reflexive without being adequately critical in examining the multilayered configuration and entrenched interests of the researcher's subjectivities. For example, based on their respective experiences of doctoral research in geography at European universities, Asante and Abubakari (2021) reflect on the motivations, challenges, and especially benefits connected with the pathway of PhD by publication for entry-level African researchers. The authors address the issue of what collaborative autoethnography undertaken by researchers from the Global South can do to complement the dominant discourse of "northern theories" (Asante & Abubakari, 2021). However, with a mindset of "catching-up with the rest of the world" in terms of engaging in global knowledge economy through academic publishing, their paper can be said to be reflexive without being critical (Asante & Abubakari, 2021, pp. 102–103).

That said, critical approaches have indeed become a salient alternative (if not overtly mainstream) strand in reflexive literature in general. For example, in their introduction to a special issue consisting of papers that "perform," "ruminate," and "narrate" versions of decolonial or postcolonial autoethnography, Chawla and Atay (2018, p. 3) explicitly refer to the necessity to "decolonize autoethnography". Different methods notwithstanding, the authors contributing to this special issue share the position that decolonialization not only involves the critique of western hegemony by the

colonized, but also the colonizer's self-reflection on their vested interest in colonization. In the latter regard, what the authors share is attentiveness to the interstitial subjectivities of the researcher.

In the words of Bhabha (1996), the colonized subject inhabits a "third space" where identities are always multiple, shifting, and hence, rich with possibilities for the formation and performance of new subjectivities. While bearing this lofty goal in mind, I am aware that power works in intersecting, implicit and nuanced ways in decolonial scholarly practice. For example, centering on an ethical dilemma between maintaining ethical-decolonial commitments and caring for the different professional needs of different scholars, Alburo-Cañete et al. (2022) reflect on configurations of power in academia. They do so through the lenses of the affective intensities that shaped their decisions over whether to contribute to a key development studies journal that had caused much controversy due to its publishing of a problematic article that argued in favor of colonialism. The decolonial researcher simultaneously has ethical-political commitments and a need to operate in a hostile and dehumanizing academic environment. In this regard, an essentializing approach to western hegemony is ineffective since power cuts both globally and locally.

Apart from colonial and postcolonial aftereffects, another target frequently under attack in reflexive scholarship is the neoliberalized academia that acknowledges only spectacular and outward-facing activities that have the potential to induce quantifiable change. Using feminism-inflected self-care as a reflexive process, Jones and Whittle (2021, p. 386) reevaluate the identity of researchers as "networked actors" capable of reclaiming the importance of the "small, slow, and contingent" and shattering the myth that "impact is generated through isolated individuals," as is often dictated by the neoliberal ideology. Similarly, Lynch and Kuntz (2019), drawing on Foucault's ideas on discipline and normalization, engage in critical self-investigation into the former's physical education research journey. Of particular interest is her critique of the neoliberal university's disciplining force in seeking to govern thought and how it is possible to resist by taking risks in moving away from traditional academic meaning-making.

Critical-reflexive approaches in island studies

Island scholarship in the wide sense has included some attempts at being partially autoethnographic and critical. For instance, two well-known reflexive essays from Pacific studies are extremely helpful for refreshing the knowledge about the relationship between island epistemology and indigeneity, though the authors would probably not identify themselves as island studies scholars as such. Building on his own experiences of being a Pacific islands expat/scholar, Gegeo (2001, p. 504) revisits Indigenous epistemology of place and space in the context of the Solomon Islands, spelling out its implications for the formulation of "Native Pacific Cultural Studies" that is "truly Native and Indigenous in epistemology and focus." As a widely used reference in island studies, Hau'ofa's (1994) 'Our sea of islands' can be said to be equally reflexive

in the sense that it questions the neocolonialist hegemonic mentality surrounding aspects of research into islands and islandness, such as smallness, isolation, and the related notions of economic dependency and cultural belittlement. What is epistemologically significant is Hau'ofa's attempt to replace the discrete and confining notion of 'Pacific Islands' with a relational and reciprocal worldview of Oceania.

Within island studies *per se*, the tendency to be reflexive, critical and decolonial has become more visible in the past few years. This can be seen in some recent papers published in *Island Studies Journal* and *Shima*. A noteworthy example is Schneider's (2020) performative paper, which qualifies as a full-fledged self-reflexive postcolonial practice. Building on Jonathan Pugh's (2018) idea of relational island geographies, Schneider explores the various stories told concerning the 1803 'Igbo Landing' on St. Simon Island, Georgia. Her essay succeeds in delving into the depth of ambiguities between a series of dichotomies, including self and ancestors, island and mainland, and history and present. She also excavates the forgotten layers of Black histories in colonial violence. In an extremely experimental style, Schneider's own multilayered postcolonial identity is performed rather than dryly analyzed in the interstices between tourist, descendent of settler-colonial enslavers, and latter-day scholarly observer. Without settling on any summative argument, the essay aims at a type of "rival thinking" beyond the delimitation of fixed states, which is compared to "shoals" that are "relentlessly littoral and thus impede our too easy arrival at any mooring, any stasis, any resolution, any conclusion" (Schneider, 2020, p. 209). What is ethically admirable is Schneider's sense of guilt as a descendent of white settlers, which deserves quoting at length:

What happened? The details are *not* undecidable. Some of my ancestors in Georgia and elsewhere had participated in the enslavement of Africans and the removal of Indigenous peoples, but even if those particulars were not true of me [...] the sand of slavery sticks to the pores of all of us awash in the capitalist circum-Atlantic and grinds the particulates of history against our skin [...] What is undecidable are not the facts of what happened, but our response-ability to and with the sand that shifts our Relations in time. What will we do [...] to alter the course [...] of white liberal humanism in the ravages of the Plantationocene it continues to plot? (Schneider, 2020, p. 212)

The written performance of non-fixity and undecidability could fit broadly within the tradition of 'archipelagic thought' represented by Glissant (1997) and subsequent postcolonial scholars influenced by his philosophy modelled on the Caribbean geographies. For Schneider (2020, p. 216), the liberation of Black history from one particular static narrative has the potential to fight against collective oblivion and moral apathy, and to foster "the formation of a new kind of body."

Less experimental in style but sufficiently critical-reflexive in nature, Garrison (2019) embarks on an inquiry into white settler colonial discourse and an ethical discussion of settler responsibility by applying the Hawaiian concept of *kuleana*. Garrison uses three cases of Indigenous movements in the Pacific and the Caribbean in order to link islands in the regions in collective demilitarization and decolonial reconfigurations. At the end of the paper, Garrison (2019, p. 70) invites the descendants of white settlers like herself to engage their own whiteness and “unearned settler privileges.” Her critique is thorough and calls for US citizens to take accountability for their continued financing of the country’s archipelagic military. What connects Garrison’s decolonial practice with that of Schneider is the unfolding of the multi-strata formation of postcolonial subjectivities instantiated through the researcher and, more importantly, a shared sense of guilt over her own settler identity. As Garrison (2019, p. 63) puts it, “We are not simply ‘descendants’ of settlers; we are settlers.”

While colonialism narrowly defined refers to historical phenomena commonly associated with white European expansion and settlement, coloniality is better treated as an ever-present mindset, a discursive strategy, and an epistemological condition that is contingent upon circumstances and subject to contextual variations. In a multivocal paper co-authored by a diverse group of scholars, Grydehøj et al. (2021) criticize Western and metropolitan powers’ deployment of the China threat discourse in their attempt to justify “neocolonial entrenchment” in both militarized and economic forms in four island states and territories scattered across Oceania, the Arctic, East Asia, and the Caribbean. Drawing partially on some of the authors’ own experiences as both marginalized Indigenous islanders and university researchers in critical island studies, the paper serves as a nuanced reflection on the diversity of islander experiences within coloniality and how a combined set of perspectives could pave the way for practicing decolonial political geography in specific island contexts. The sensitivity to regional circumstances and specific contexts is a prerequisite for practicing decolonial scholarship targeted at structural hegemony of all sorts rather than merely an essentialized west. This context-sensitive approach to decolonial island scholarship is also argued for in Grydehøj’s (2018) critical analysis of research positionality within the “colonial matrix of power” related to island and Indigenous issues. In this editorial, Grydehøj (2018) reflects on the problematic process of voice exclusion and invites readers to consider whose voices they should listen to and how they can determine whose voices are excluded. Island studies scholars should realize both the “impossibility of making absolute determinations regarding which voices are worth hearing” and the need to “hear our own voices with a critical ear” (Grydehøj, 2018, p. 10). The latter need is particularly relevant to the critical-reflexive approach of this paper.

Despite the diverse critical-reflexive strategies employed in the aforementioned literature from island studies and island scholarship in general, all the examples involve island and archipelagic regions where western

colonialism is either/both organic history or/and lived heritage. Against this backdrop, decolonizing Chinese island studies could fill some gaps in which colonality is relevant mainly epistemologically and intellectually, given that historical colonialism on a national scale in the western sense is largely absent in China. It is for this reason that this paper adopts an epistemologically decolonial approach to examining the researcher as a non-western subject intersected, stranded and enabled by diverse forces and structures.

Throughout the paper, decolonialization is used in ways to incorporate not only the critique of western hegemony by the colonized, but also the non-western researcher's self-dissection of their entrenched interest in west-dominated knowledge production and academic publishing. Therefore, while the decolonial researcher is on the one hand recognized as an intellectual subject with ethical-political commitments to challenging western hegemony, they are also treated as a multilayered laboring subject struggling with real-world concerns in an increasingly hostile academic environment both at home and globally. Instead of adopting a misleadingly essentializing approach to western hegemony, I endeavor to examine the multi-strata condition and dynamic processes of my own non-western research positionality vis-à-vis west-inflected island studies.

In the following sections, I will narrate my own island research trajectory before critically analyzing the structural and circumstantial processes involved by probing into two vignettes of symptomatic significance. Apart from examining my own entanglement in the array of relations, spaces, vested interests and power structures, I also set out to question and rethink the objects and methods in the field. In this light, the paper is as much about critical self-reflection as about theoretical intervention in island studies. The paper thus concludes by discussing the traps, challenges, and possibilities of practicing island studies in non-western contexts.

Island research trajectory

I bumped into the field of island studies as a double outsider. On the one hand, I grew up in inland China and the island had not been a topography worthy of my attention. On the other, literary and largely speculative by training, I lacked basic skills of conducting geographical research. Nevertheless, while being an outsider created obstacles, it somehow freed me from the burden of being obliged to defend specific island tropes and assert disciplinary identity. Against these debilitating and liberating backgrounds, I undertook three island research projects and published the results in three peer-reviewed papers between 2017 and 2020 (Hong, 2017, 2020a, 2020c). Project 1 covers the entire archipelagic territory of Zhuhai municipality on the west bank of the Pearl River estuary, China (Hong, 2017). Project 2 focuses on a specific near-shore island in Zhuhai (Qi'ao Island) (Hong, 2020a), and Project 3 examines inhabited river islands on the rural-urban fringes of the Yangtze Delta basin across several provinces (Hong, 2020c). Project 1 and Project 2 were self-financed whereas Project 3 was partially supported by a grant provided by the National Social Science Fund of China.

A few words about motivations. At a personal level, I was drawn to island studies primarily because of its perceived potential to remap space from the margins and its prioritizing of local spaces over the dominant official and commercialized discourses on them. Moreover, being able to publish in higher-ranking international journals listed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) is seen blindingly as a symbolic prestige that could be used as crucial asset in job hunting, annual performance evaluation, and workplace promotion at most, if not all, academic institutions in the Chinese mainland. Another structural factor that needs to be considered is that, especially but not exclusively for early career researchers in the Chinese mainland, it is extremely difficult to publish in domestic journals listed in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), inaccurately regarded as the Chinese equivalent to SSCI, which remains almost the only index that is meaningful in recruitment and promotion considerations at elite Chinese universities and research institutions. Constrained and framed by these metrics, publishing in SSCI-indexed international journals is both symbolic capital in itself and a pragmatic alternative for survival in the domestic academia against the backdrop of extremely limited opportunities for many entry-level researchers who are not *well connected* to those who have a say in influencing editors' decisions. In other words, for early career Chinese researchers like me, international publishing is a crosscultural tactic of *reaching out in order to reap rewards at home*.

In this regard, engaging with island studies theories is in part a pragmatic tactic to get published as most influential English-language academic journals require earnest engagement with the literature. Unfortunately, the aforementioned cross-disciplinary and crosscultural strategies did not serve me well career-wise. Until January 2020, I had had the vested interest in question as I was employed by a key university in Guangdong, China. However, a significant career crisis in early 2020 forced me to abandon seeking research-intensive employment and also provided me with a chance to rethink my involvement in island studies and the ethical complexities involved.

Put otherwise, I am no longer making a living by publishing academic papers. This may be a sad reality considering my previous professional aspirations, but somehow it allows me to put my own island studies practice in perspective, objectify my emotions, and write down my reflections as detachedly and unreservedly as I can. As I am no longer constrained by the ruthless double demand of hyper-productivity and acute political sensitivities, I have gained the luxury of being loyal only to my own research purposes. From this point on, it seemed almost inevitable that I would begin critically engaging with west-inflected island theories that I had previously only applied in a functional manner.

My critical engagement with islandness has something to do with a personal inclination to not follow trends without questioning them. As far as I remember, this has been the case since I was a teenager; anywhere I went, I had difficulties completely *fitting in*. A more structural factor is that, having been trained in literary studies, I had gradually moved away from the discipline

for a complex array of reasons, including lack of publishing opportunities, shift of disciplinary focus at my former institution, and more importantly, an increased awareness that real-world spatial issues engage me more emotionally than purely symbolic ones. Before I realized it, this cross-disciplinary turn of mine was already taking place and may have partially resulted in my eventual “career suicide” in an academic power structure in which compartmentalized disciplinary identity is paramount for institutionalized academic recognition (Dawson & Pugh, 2021). But then again, my disciplineless-ness gave me a license to be *infidel* academically. Arguably, while being disadvantaged by one structure, being disentangled from it exposed me to new possibilities and more structures.

In general, my island research trajectory can be summarized in the following stages: 1, learning to apply islandness defined by island studies scholarship in examining local geographies; 2, coping, mostly unconsciously, with the challenge of applying islandness in local cases; and 3, coming to terms with the contradictory condition of simultaneously actively engaging with islandness and drawing some critical distance from it. One of the patterns of my brief island studies experience is a focus on familiar spaces at home. Chinese researchers who wish to publish internationally tend to only research Chinese cases; this had felt like almost the only way for me to go until I began reflecting on it. Why did I take it for granted that I could only research Chinese cases if I wanted to be published internationally? Maybe it has to do with all those papers written by Chinese scholars that I saw in international journals. Maybe there is something deeper, in the unconscious sense of cultural inferiority while confronting an academic market whose rules and vibes are largely defined by the west and further reinforced by the complicit non-western emulators.

The second salient pattern of my island research is, as mentioned earlier, I focused on *atypical* islands, that is, urban archipelagos, near-shore islands and river islands that are not sufficiently remote and insular as many of those islands studied more often by scholars from other regions. This second pattern is conditioned by a number of practical circumstances. For one thing, these islands form a significant part of Chinese landscapes from the perspective of a Chinese mainlander. For another, I live close to these topographies and have not been lucky enough to be funded for extended fieldwork in remote oceanic islands. Moreover, at a deeper level, it can be hard for many Chinese mainlanders to relate to the experience of totally inhabiting pieces of land insulated from the continent by water for the simple reason that Chinese geography and culture have an extremely powerful centripetal pull toward the continent. This posed significant challenges as I was struggling to understand these islands using west-inflected island theories, which are largely derived from the model of oceanic islands that often have (or are said to have) relatively distinct social structures, unique cultural characteristics, and varying degrees of political autonomy.

Therefore, in Project 1, islandness was more or less something I needed to engage with in order to get into and pass peer review. In Project 2, I got more skillful at integrating island studies theory and my case study, but a critical awareness of the west-inflected islandness discourse was at best touched upon, half-consciously and in passing. In Project 3, my specific study area, with its hyper-integration in urban environments, preempted convenient appropriation of west-inflected theories of islandness and thus forced me to rethink their premises. The result is a paper comprising case studies and a significant portion of critical theorization on the place-specific variations on islandness (Hong, 2020c). This ambiguous position of both trying to fit into the islandness discourse and reflecting on it has hitherto remained a conscious strategy in my later research exploring Chinese islands and islandness at the intersection of western theories and local geographies (Hong, 2020b, 2022). In the processes listed above, I underwent an emotional mixture of intellectual euphoria, constant confusion and often gnawing guilt; these emotions form the very life force that gave birth to the conception of this reflexive paper. In the following section, I critically reflect on the epistemological-ethical struggles and power relations involved in my own island research experiences by analyzing two vignettes of symptomatic significance.

Two vignettes

This paper aims to examine a non-western island researcher (instantiated by me) as a knowing, living and laboring subject intersected, stranded, and enabled by dislocated spaces, different structures, and conflicting forces. In order to foreground the conflicting yet dynamic subjectivities of the researcher and to integrate autoethnographic narratives and critical reflections, this section alternates between first person and third person voices.

Vignette 1: near shore, far from the type

In January 2020, I experienced a major professional crisis (well, a job promotion interview that could have decided my future career in Chinese academia). A panelist on the promotion panel, a fellow Chinese expert who was from outside island studies, dismissed the value of one of my representative research outputs, giving the reason that the kind of near-shore islands I studied in the paper, published in a western academic journal of human geography, were not *typical* enough. He went as far as to jest with another panelist from tourism studies seated beside him that those islands hardly qualify as islands and are at best peninsulas since they are connected to the mainland by bridge.

The subtext, as I understood it then, was that, if you want to do island studies, go study more typical islands that are cut off from the continent, alone and unique in the ocean. The incident occurred more than two years ago, and I am by no means taking this frustration personally. But I continue to be haunted by that doubt over the value of my research from a standpoint premised on the 'typicality' of islands. To some extent, it shows how powerful the typical western imaginary of islands can be, even for a Chinese person for whom islands very likely are not part of their familiar geographies. This

still fresh and frustrating memory brought me back to the research project I undertook in 2017, which finally crystalized in the publication of the paper in question (Hong, 2020a).

In retrospect, the research process involved in that project was painstaking, full of confusion and self-doubt. I gathered a lot of information about the island of Qi'ao, part of the city of Zhuhai. But as a novice researcher in the field, all these were no more than data in need of framing. A relational approach was suggested to me by a western colleague. In theory, the relationality discourse in island studies champions displacement, dynamism and free space. But all I could think of was the island-mainland interaction. Binarism is a sign of intellectual sterility, I thought to myself. But it was very difficult to break free from the pull of that dichotomy. What exacerbated things was, barring technical problems, almost all the material I could find about this near-shore island was premised on a mainland outsider-looking-in perspective. I was compelled to compensate for this gap by creating empirical data with three field trips.

In the scorching heat of July 2017, accompanied by my cousin, I roamed Qi'ao Island trying to find local residents to talk to. In the village museum, transformed from an ancestral hall in worship of the biggest tribe on the island, we bumped into an elderly local waiting for his daughter at 9:30 in the morning, and our conversations were not relevant to my project. Those islanders I did manage to interview eventually were either former village cadres or migrant workers. Others I came across were mostly old people too weak to move, who, lying motionless in bed, could be seen without having to protrude your head from the windows lined along the alleys radiating from the village square. One participant expressed the view that the air on the island felt better than that in the district center on the mainland and that the islanders place more importance to community than do people living on the mainland. But a distinct island identity, as depicted in western island scholarship, was nowhere to be found. Most of the islanders' ancestors were claimed to have hailed from the central plains of China hundreds of years ago. The biggest ancestral hall was built in worship of their ancestors from Henan, a major province in central-north China. Ethnic diversity was not an issue; like me, all the people with whom I spoke were of the Han ethnicity. These histories were verified by local chronicles. Information I gleaned from the field mainly concerned land disputes. But these problems could be seen anywhere else in the country, especially at its rural-urban fringes. They are serious problems indeed, but they are not island problems. I could not exaggerate the distinctiveness of the island in order to produce a paper that was familiar to island studies.

On a wall near the ancestral hall, I spotted a few posters in protest of unequal distribution of land in local redevelopment. They were probably intentionally displayed there, for this place is a major tourist attraction at the heart of the village. I took some photos, made inquiries, and performed further research in online sources to learn more details about the protest. However, after much

consideration, I decided to gloss over the dispute in a passing remark in the resultant article, for addressing this kind of issue with political implications might invite trouble at home.

A minor concern is the peculiarly tight word limit of the target journal, *Area*. But a deeper issue was that portraying the islanders simplistically as victims of a system gone wrong may incur the risk of succumbing to the stock fantasy of a suffering non-western people in need of democratic salvation. I was thus stranded between two forces. On the one hand, I could not sit comfortably in the bubble of mainland-based romanticization of the island. On the other, after having been exposed to the ambiguous realities of the island, an authentic and pure island perspective seemed equally wishful. Indeed, this island was different from where I live on the mainland. But it definitely was not as distinct as many of the remote oceanic islands at the center of island studies, places that are culturally dynamic, politically autonomous, loaded with heritage, etc.

Looking back, that paper was a failure to some extent in the sense that the local experiences and sense of place were mitigated by my over-eagerness to bridge west-inflected theories and local realities (Hong, 2020a). Should I ever return to Qi'ao, it would be as a tourist, a sojourner at best. Would my link to the island amount to anything more than an intellectual and professional engagement? Would this paper, if published, mean anything to people other than myself and the academic institution to which I was affiliated? I strained to orient the research toward islandness, but my confidence was low.

Reflection on Vignette 1

At a surficial level, the vignette shows that the author's real-world circumstances have limited his research scope. He chose a near-shore island for his research project because it was familiar to him and accessible at relatively low cost in terms of traveling expenses and time. Considering that this project was self-funded, the choice was a pragmatic one.

Nonetheless, the vignette also reveals a crosscultural gap in island studies. That is, dominant methodological approaches in island studies—including relational geography, archipelagos, and the Anthropocene—are largely derived from the oceanic model and may be a hard fit for other types of islands lacking a distinct identity and sufficient autonomy. The struggles and confusion the author underwent were partially a result of his lack of social resources and rigorous disciplinary training. However, at a fundamental level, these problems were caused by the discrepancy between west-inflected island epistemology and the local geographies of a continental landmass surrounded by islands. The former is premised on remote, interconnected islands and archipelagos with relatively distinct identities, whereas the latter is premised on discrete islands of fuzzier identity at an accessible distance from the mainland. Integrated with the mainland to varying degrees, these islands are not easily susceptible to liberal archipelagic interpretations.

Nevertheless, these islands are still islands. In this regard, the discrepancy can be, and needs to be, negotiated. On the one hand, island studies need to be more inclusive of these ambiguous island types. On the other hand, researchers studying these island types need to reconfigure their familiar geographies through the refreshing lens of island studies while guarding against facile application. The middle area of ambiguities is usually where critical innovation takes place. In this way, island studies can empower cultural diversity while maintaining a distinct focus and a vital sense of disciplinary identity.

In hindsight, the project described in Vignette 1 should have taken as its starting point that Qi'ao is an island and therefore, no matter how atypical it may look compared with other islands usually studied in the field, its islandness should be acknowledged. In this regard, bringing forth the islandness of the location itself is already epistemologically innovative, considering China's mainland tendency in dominant geographical and even spatial thinking. This is also the primary benefit of island studies for a remapping of Chinese geography. However, the specific aspects of islandness need to be constantly measured against and modified by the actual geographies of and around the island as they unfold during the research process. The matches and, more importantly, mismatches that the process reveals will provide the concept and the field with an organic vitality across spaces and cultures.

Vignette 2: borrowed 'island', borrowed space

May 2016. A western colleague shared with me two articles about an Indian coastal city, the main argument of which ran as follows: the city's coastal and marine geographies have enabled its liberal economies and free entrepreneurship. I liked the articles and set about comparing the Indian city with a Chinese counterpart, Zhuhai, that is the focus of this particular research project.

My main point can be boiled down to this: Although both Asian cities have similar coastal environments mixing land and sea, the Chinese city fails in transforming them into full-fledged free economy whereas the Indian city has internalized the free entrepreneurial value associated with the sea. A few weeks later, I scoured the local history section of the university library, searching for historical evidence to flesh out the paper's land-sea interaction argument (Hong, 2017). Among other examples, the Maritime Ban practiced in Ming and Qing dynasties and the border controls enforced during China's Cultural Revolution period stood out. Before I knew it, I had slipped into a mode of evaluating Zhuhai's historical geographies by simplistically setting sea against land, state against civic world, and border closure as underdevelopment against territorial openness as advanced development. The truth value of these historical evidence aside, my interpretation was thus heavily ideologized.

December 2016. As I was editing the end-text references of my paper, I retained the original Chinese language of the sources (Hong, 2017). I was half consciously attempting to draw prospective readers' attention to the culture-specific dimension of the sources. In an academic environment in which English is the *lingua franca*, Chinese characters would stand out. This is what

I had in mind. However, as I look back on the references, my claim for cultural sovereignty is more formal than substantial. In the references, English-language sources are mostly theorizations on islandness whereas Chinese sources provide empirical data. Moreover, inside the text, all the methodologies and theoretical frames are provided by English-language sources, mostly from western scholars. Here is an embarrassing fact: there is virtually no Chinese island studies theory or even literature that I can reference. Indeed, there is no shortage of domestic literature involving islands or giving prominent attention to islands, but literature addressing islandness does not exist in China. I felt intellectual isolation and emotional loneliness.

This was fine; I have long regarded myself as a somewhat lone researcher and sometimes even seen intellectual isolation as positive conditioning for academic originality and integrity. However, there was also a sense of guilt over the realization that I was largely following in the steps of a west-initiated discipline. After all, islands might not be that important to either me or my culture. The discomforting need and impulse to justify my island studies engagement epistemologically and ethically has remained relevant up to the present day.

Reflection on Vignette 2

The author had been living in a riverine area in central-south China before moving with his family to the southern coastal city of Zhuhai in 1995. Despite the existence of islands in both areas, the topography had not been intellectually important to him until he was accidentally introduced to island studies through a call for papers in autumn 2015, for a conference being held in Hong Kong the following year. At the initial stage of his engagement with island studies, he was imposing an acquired epistemology on familiar types of islands in his lived environment. Perhaps in reaction to the often inert, confined living conditions in inland China, he unconsciously associated islands with movement, fluidity and connectivity, and the mainland with stasis, solidity and insularity. Looking back, these values are more ideologized notions than real-world attributes. That is to say, in a way, the author reinforced an ideologized trope of the island that he was supposed to challenge. The result is an interpretation of islands based on a deficit model in which island, movement and economic freedom intertwine with each other to signify a more advanced level of social development whereas the mainland, stagnation and planned economy are relegated to a lower stage of social development. At the heart of this interpretation is a romanticized reconfiguration of islands and marine geographies.

The narrative about reference editing reflects yet another typical risk faced by non-western scholars who aspire to get published in quality international academic journals. To assert the uniqueness of Chinese island geographies, you need to engage with western island studies literature. However, by mindlessly engaging with western island scholarship, you run the risk of twisting Chinese islands into a figure that can better fit within western frames. The occasional self-doubt and shame the author experienced could be the interiorized manifestations of this paradox. Most, if not all, Chinese-language domestic

research tends to approach islands through cases studies on individual islands rather than theorization on islandness. Against this scholarly backdrop, western literature remains nearly the only source of intellectual inspiration for and an important theoretical toolkit at the disposal of Chinese island researchers aspiring to international publication.

The imperative of engaging with literature is not a fault in itself; dialogue is the life force of academia. However, in practice, can we still guarantee the authenticity of our ideas if they need to go through layers of disciplinary coating before being articulated, if at all? As far as the author is concerned, how indigenous can his island research remain if all the frames and methods are readymade tools provided by western sources? This is a fact that may hurt the self-esteem of many Chinese scholars; their (our) struggle against western intellectual hegemony is undertaken at best by contributing empirical experiences contrary to western interpretation and representation. The entrenched intellectual hegemony embodied by the demand for theoretical engagement and formal adherence is less often questioned. True, initiating more non-western researchers into the field helps challenge this hegemony and foster cultural diversity. Showing formal respect for their cultures and languages in editing is also helpful.

The vital difficult challenge nevertheless remains: how to facilitate, enable and empower epistemological innovation by including non-western island philosophies, figurations and imaginaries in the field. While it is true that the chance of discovering readymade island theories from contemporary Chinese scholarship remains slim, China has an almost incomparably long and rich history of geographical documentation, representation and imagination, the sheer heterogeneity of which is alien to even most present-day Chinese people. Deeper investigation into these sources has so much to offer in terms of alternative island “onto-epistemologies” (Chandler & Pugh, 2021).

Traps and future possibilities

I now propose three traps that are present in practicing non-western island studies in the context of epistemological-intellectual decolonialization. The traps are presented as follows in order of descending risk.

Trap 1: Uncritically using west-inflected island theories to free islands from the confines of local geographies. The first trap is largely based on illusions, and the primary risk involved is epistemological. In extreme cases, a theory is invoked merely in order to prove its validity.

Trap 2: Exploiting certain aspects of west-inflected island theories with the purpose of appealing to both critical decolonial readership in the west and dominant nationalist ideology at home, the common target of which happens to be the imaginary hegemonic west. The second trap could amount to dishonesty if the author were conscious of what they were doing.

Trap 3: Rejecting west-inflected island theories and retreating to an imaginary point of “onto-epistemological” origin (Chandler & Pugh, 2021). The third trap risks resulting in bigotry of a sort that is commonly seen in diverse contexts across histories and cultures. While its risks are essentially epistemological, they can have social and political implications.

These traps are presented in order to caution against potential tendencies rather than to criticize specific authors. I will refrain from proposing wholesale solutions, not just because solutions are beyond my capacity but also due to my firm belief that attempts at one-size-fits-all solutions are themselves a temptation of the colonialist mindset. It would be much wiser to stick to empirical studies, continue engaging with western theories and discourses, and save some room for critical reflexivity in each single project.

So far, my papers have not attracted substantial attention, several publications in the field notwithstanding. Among those few who do quote from them, most are drawn to the specific research area rather than to my theoretical position on islandness. This less-than-satisfactory reception of my research by both the imaginary international community of island studies and my fellow Chinese academics raises several questions concerning not only my own future research direction but also the limits and challenges of cultural diversity for the field.

Is it not exactly of a colonialist mindset to categorize certain islands as *typical* and others as *atypical*? Is it not self-defeatist to streamline *atypical* islands into a model of islandness built largely on *typical* islands? Worse still, is when a researcher makes token efforts to engage ritualistically with island studies literature simply in order to get published internationally and then be able to reap rewards at home. There is also, however, a danger to exaggerating the uniqueness of non-western island experiences in order to appear sufficiently decolonial in the west. Indeed, such a practice may allow a researcher to reap double rewards, not only fitting into the critical decolonial scholarship (a relatively slender segment of Western academia) but also aligning with the dominant ideology at home, so long as the target is kept relentlessly and safely on the *west*.

At the time of writing these lines of criticism, I am reflecting more on my own research practice than those of my compatriots. But this is not just about the solipsism of a fringe intellectual. I honestly believe that ethical decolonial research in the present era needs to start from a ruthless interrogation of the researcher’s own vested interest, as it is shaped and crisscrossed by overlapping power structures and through intersectional forces. In the context of island studies undertaken by non-western researchers, these structures and forces include primarily a cultural obsession with more ‘typical’, research-worthy islands and island figures, journals’ demands for engagement with literature from the field, the symbolic and material benefits that come with publishing in high-ranking international journals, the writing and editing strategies consciously or unconsciously adopted in accordance with these interests, the

presumptuous dismissal of the relevance of island studies in one's own culture, and (equally problematically) the pretense that islands are significant in that culture.

Concluding remarks

From the window of my bedroom, at this moment, I have a half-blocked view of a sea dotted with islets, lighthouses and ships. Despite the irrefutable existence of these marine geographies, the following questions keep nagging at me: Are islands really that important in my culture? If they are, why the paucity of scholarly attention? And if they are not, what is the point of writing about them? How can I justify my relatively lone engagement in a field that sounds somewhat esoteric to scholarly ears even in my own culture?

It was and perhaps still is true that islands are not central to China's overwhelmingly centripetal continental culture. If one is really committed to doing island studies about and in China, one must start by acknowledging (though not necessarily accepting) this premise. The marginal status of islands in Chinese culture does not mean they are unworthy of study. Quite the opposite. It is precisely islands' marginal status that gives them the potential to rechart Chinese social, cultural, and even political geographies, as long as one guards against the danger of overemphasizing islands' significance to the culture. This sounds like a rather ambiguous positioning for Chinese researchers dealing in island studies. But surely, reimagining the center from the perspective of the margins is part of the deal? This 'neither here nor there' in-betweenness is a necessary condition for and natural corollary of the epistemologically and intellectually decolonized scholar.

All the confusion and criticisms voiced in this paper stem from a critical-reflexive digging into myself as a non-western, mainland-born scholar barging into island studies. Should any colleagues find any parts of this part unfair or uncomfortable, I alone am to blame. At the end of the day, island studies has been a decisive turn in my intellectual trajectory and career, and for this reason, I am grateful to all those that ushered me in and showed me the way.

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