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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

To Study Island China

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As greater attention has been paid to island research in China, interactions between Chinese and international island scholars have increased. However, research has tended to take an 'islands of China' approach, which perceives China as a continental country surrounded by a large number of islands. The present paper proposes an alternative 'island China' perspective, informed by selected Chinese traditions of thinking about islands and the sea, that captures the role islands have played and continue to play in Chinese culture. Drawing upon Fei Xiaotong's reflexive concept of 'cultural self-consciousness', we consider the cultural history of island China, including conceptual tensions between the binaries of continent/island and center/periphery, conceptions of land dwellers and water dwellers, the role of islands as hubs of cultural transmission, and the formation of maritime societies across East and Southeast Asia. We also argue that this cultural history ought to influence island governance in China today.

Introduction

There has been increasing attention to island research in China. This has over time led to increasing interactions between Chinese and international island researchers. In 2017, *Island Studies Journal* published a special section on 'Islands of China and the Sinophone world' (Grydehøj et al., 2017). The notion of 'islands of China' was intended to convey the fact that China—so often perceived as a thoroughly continental country—includes many islands.

In the present paper, we suggest that Chinese traditions of thinking about islands and the sea offer an alternative to 'islands of China', one that is more ambitious and less limited in its aims. We instead propose 'island China' as a concept that captures the role islands have played and continue to play in Chinese culture. Whereas 'islands of China' implies islands that belong to a Chinese mainland, 'island China' emphasizes the importance of islands and the sea to the very idea and expression of China. That is, just as events and

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processes occurring in the Chinese mainland inevitably influence conditions on islands, we argue that island China is and has been an integral—if not usually dominant—part of the Chinese world.

Large numbers of islands lie offshore from the semicircular coastline of the Chinese mainland, with some regions having a higher density of islands than others. We can speak of these coastal or oceanic islands within three distinct but at times overlapping cultural groups: (1) the Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea, (2) the East China Sea, and (3) the South China Sea. Going roughly from north to south, major islands and archipelagos in these three cultural groups include:

Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea: Changshan Archipelago (Liaoning Province), Changshan/Miaodao Archipelago (Shandong Province), etc.

East China Sea: Zhoushan Archipelago, Nantian Archipelago, Dachen Archipelago, Dongtou Archipelago, Matsu Archipelago, Pingtan Archipelago, Nanri Archipelago, Meizhou Island, Xiamen and outlying islands, Kinmen Archipelago, Dongshan Archipelago, Penghu Archipelago, Nan'ao Island, Taiwan and outlying Luzon Strait islands, Lanyu/Pongso no Tao, etc.

South China Sea: Hong Kong's outlying islands, Wanshan Archipelago, the river islands of Guangzhou, Macao, Chuanshan Archipelago, Hainan and outlying islands, etc.

These cultural groups present an obvious starting point for Chinese island studies, given that the study of islands within China has traditionally focused on the individual island as an isolated unit. Indeed, the first author of this paper has conducted research on various islands around the coast, including Tuoji Island in the Bohai Sea's Changshan/Miaodao Archipelago; Pingtan Island, Dachen Island, Meizhou Island, and Nan'ao Island in the East China Sea; and Hailing Island, and Hainan Island in the South China Sea. However, island China is larger than these three cultural groups alone, for Chinese people and Chinese culture have spread out through complex social and economic processes to a great many island and marine spaces across East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean, forming part of an interregional crosscultural sphere. Such a conception challenges the traditional understanding of Chinese culture as fundamentally continental.

In the sections below, we first introduce Fei Xiaotong's (Fei, 2013) reflexive concept of 'cultural self-consciousness', which we use as a means of thinking through Chinese thinking about islands and island research. We then provide an overview of the cultural history of island China, including conceptual tensions between the binaries of continent/island and center/periphery, conceptions of land dwellers and water dwellers, the role of islands as hubs of cultural transmission, and the formation of maritime societies across the region. This is followed by a discussion of developments in island governance in modern China and finally a conclusion.

Fei Xiaotong and cultural self-consciousness

The influential Chinese social scientist Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) studied under both sociologist Robert E. Park at Yenching University (1932) and later anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics (1936-1938). Unusually for the time, Fei (2013, p. 107) argued that Chinese researchers needed to approach their subjects in a culturally contextualized manner as a means of contributing to more nuanced understandings of different societies and better serving local people. Since the late 1930s, Fei had criticized oppressive modes of social control in Chinese society, but this was tempered by a belief in the value of cultural stability and a wariness of the impacts of external cultural influence. In the words of Arkush (1981, p. 52), Fei believed that "a happy society [...] was a stable, unchanging or slowly changing one. When change is slow, people all share the same experience, knowledge, activities, and standards; they all know their roles and can live unself-consciously in undisturbed contentment."

Although Fei was exceptionally familiar with Western culture and English-language scholarship (Arkush, 1981), one of his motivations was to consider whether modern Chinese people could maintain their cultural identity in the face of strong influence from Western culture (Fei, 2013, p. 197). When, after a pause of a few decades, academic research of his kind was revived at the start of China's Reform and Opening Up period in the late 1970s, Fei's thinking had shifted, as Chinese society had also shifted. One of his major concerns was that ongoing developmentalist rhetoric and policies would marginalize China's ethnic minorities, potentially excluding their specific needs and posing a threat to their survival and developmental prospects (Fei, 1988).

In his early years, Fei had not been particularly interested in employing classical Chinese philosophies, but he had believed that the teachings of Confucius reflected an absence of cultural centralism in traditional Chinese thought (Arkush, 1981, p. 16). Later in life, Fei was more apt to foreground Confucianism as a source of inspiration—producing inconsistencies between his thinking during different periods (M. Wang, 2014), which is perhaps inevitable for someone who practiced scholarship from the 1930s through to the 2000s. Fei argued that Confucianism emphasizes the importance of plurality and recognition of difference, with relevant Confucian sayings including "In teaching people, there is no discrimination" 有教无类; "The Way is not practiced. I shall go ride a raft on the ocean" 道不行，乘桴浮于海; and "The Master wanted to go and stay with the Nine Tribes of the East" 子欲居九夷 (Confucius, 1990). Confucianism was part of the basis on which Fei (2013, p. 43) proposed the concept of 'cultural self-consciousness' as a means of reflecting on and reevaluating human values and the foundations for a better future for humanity. He argued that in order to practice cultural self-consciousness, it is necessary to uphold positive aspects of Chinese culture and to approach all cultures, including Chinese culture, with an attitude of equality (Fei, 2013, p. 83). Fei (2013, p. 37) summarized

the aims of cultural self-consciousness as follows: "Every form of beauty has its uniqueness. It is precious to appreciate other forms of beauty with openness. If beauty represents itself with diversity and integrity, the world will be blessed with harmony and unity."

That is, Fei did not seek to describe a perfect, existing China; he tried to envision a China that lived up to its cultural ideals (as he conceived of them). Fei had thus embraced the long Chinese tradition of reinterpreting and drawing upon ancient thought in pursuit of present-day intellectual objectives (Grydehøj & Su, 2022).

Since its formulation, the concept of cultural self-consciousness has been interpreted and discussed by different scholars from various perspectives. It is important to note that although Fei aimed for the concept to facilitate crosscultural communication and knowledge creation, it is inevitably rooted in his own culture and cultural relations. Fei himself argued for the necessity of "using one's own mind to infer and understand other people's minds" (Zhao & Wang, 2019). When we use cultural self-consciousness in the present paper, it is with acknowledgment that this provides a framework for engaging with Chinese cultural history and looking toward a Chinese cultural future. It is not an argument for China being the best; it is an argument for China getting better.

The present paper also, however, highlights how, in the Chinese case, true cultural self-consciousness cannot be a process of turning inward by excluding that which is outside the country's territorial borders. We learn more about islands and ourselves when we acknowledge the cultural foundations of our own thinking about islands. Any understanding of islands will emerge from a particular cultural context, and recognizing this fact will open us up to new knowledge (Foley et al., 2023). "All knowledge is situated" (Simandan, 2019, p. 129). The cultural bases from which we produce knowledge influence the kinds of knowledge being produced and, to take a pluriversal perspective, are generative of different worlds (Nadarajah et al., 2022). It is through intercultural communication that these diverse worlds can influence and enrich one another, and recognition of these interactions must be part of a genuine endeavor to understand oneself.

The concept of 'island China' proposed in the present paper emphasizes the importance of studying Chinese culture from the perspective of islands. In the next section, we discuss traditional Chinese understandings of islands, which have informed the manner in which islands have been conceptualized and treated over the course of history.

The cultural history of island China

In *Shuoyuan* 说苑, the Western Han dynasty scholar Liu Xiang writes that "there are nine states within the four seas" 四海之内有九州 (X. Liu, 1987, p. 445). The 'nine states' refer to the land surrounded by sea and inhabited by people. One form of ancient Chinese cosmology saw land surrounded by water as the ideal habitation for both humans and immortals (Gao, 2013). This land-in-the-sea ideal exists in tension with the sea-in-the-land notion—a

sort of 'Asian Mediterranean' (B. Chen, 2016; Ling, 1979; Schottenhammer, 2008)—that flourished in the same period. In other words, already in ancient China, it was possible to choose and necessary to navigate between different culturally rooted conceptions of islands and the sea.

This tension is evident in the Song dynasty writer Su Shi's recollections of his arrival into exile on Hainan Island:

> When I first came to Hainan, I felt sad at seeing the boundless sea. I was lost in deep thought and wondered, "When will I depart this island and resume my office?" Yet I realized soon after, since Heaven and Earth are in the ocean, the provinces are in the great sea, and China is in the small sea, is there anyone who is not living on an island? 吾始至海南，环视天水无际，凄然伤之曰："何时得出此岛耶"已而思之，天地在积水中，九州岛在大瀛海中，中国在少海中，有生孰不在岛者？(Su Shi, qtd. in N. Liu, 2005, p. 271; translation our own)

When Su Shi thinks "When will I depart this island?", he is taking a terrestrial, land-in-the-sea perspective. In contrast, "Is there anyone who was not living on an island?" is an example of sea-in-the-land thought, in which the marine world is at the center rather than the periphery.

To speak of 'island China' from a position of cultural self-consciousness is to interrogate the fundamental meanings of islands for China—a country that has tended to center and continentalize itself but that has for millennia interacted with, influenced, and been influenced by other civilizations, often through the medium of islands.

Islands and continents: Between center and periphery

Land-in-the-sea thinking suggests that the continent is at the center, and islands surrounding the continent are at the periphery. In ancient and imperial China, islands were sometimes imagined as the dwelling places of immortals, as fundamentally 'other' than the realm of ordinary humans and the territory of the Chinese state (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017).

The anthropologist Wang Songxing (2001) proposes "looking at the center from the periphery" and elaborates upon the concepts of the 'centripetal circle' and 'centrifugal circle', in which the Han nation was formed by the fusion of numerous ethnic groups during its gradual geographical expansion from the central Yellow River basin to the continental peripheries in concentric circles. This aligns with Fei Xiaotong's theory of "the unified multi-ethnic Chinese nation." In his examination of Pan Guangdan's research on the migration routes of Yao, Miao, and She ethnic groups, Fei (1992) highlights the historical migration patterns of various ethnic groups in China, emphasizing the migration of coastal ethnic groups both by sea and north-south movements, introducing the concept of ethnic corridors. Liang Zhaotao (1981) and Jiang Yingliang (1985) note that the Baiyue/Yue People

along the southeast coast assimilated with the Huaxia in the Central Plains, contributing to the historical integration of coastal ethnic groups into the Chinese nation. The migrations and interactions of Chinese cultures took different routes over time and extended to numerous islands (B. Chen, 2012). Ma Guoqing (2006) advances the "spatial and temporal transformation of center and periphery" perspective for the anthropological study of South China's regional cultures and clan-centered Han Chinese social structures in Southeast Asia, with special reference to islanders and boat people.

The land-in-the-sea perspective often displays a continental bias: Looking at islands from the land also implies a particular relationship between the continental Han Chinese and surrounding island societies. This implication of islands as satellites to the continent has not always reflected reality though: Numerous distinct ethnic groups are distributed among the islands of East Asia and Southeast Asia but are also interconnected with one another and with continental peoples in complex ways, as evidenced by the shared linguistic and material cultural heritages of many Oceanian, Southeast Asian, and Indian Ocean islands (Adelaar & Himmelmann, 2004; Blust, 1984; Spriggs, 2011).

Since the Southern Song dynasty, coastal regions have assumed a pivotal role in Chinese historical narratives. The latter stages of the Southern Song dynasty witnessed the displacement of the final two emperors, along with their retinues of officials and military forces, to coastal areas encompassing Wenzhou, Fuzhou, Shantou, Yangjiang, and other locales within Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong. This has encouraged a Chinese research tradition that looks out from the mainland toward islands, with China's coastal islands simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) being seen as socially stable and culturally conservative spaces and as places to which continental peoples flee during times of war and upheaval, bringing with them elements of mainland culture. An old saying goes, "When ritual is lost, one seeks it in the wilderness" 礼失而求诸野 (Ban, 1962, p. 1746): That is, the periphery can preserve or create truths and values that have been lost in the center. In this research tradition, islands are fields in which multiple forces engage, intertwine, and become inseparable. From this Chinese anthropological perspective, islands are not the mainland's past but are places in which time and space have operated differently than on the mainland.

Cultural self-consciousness assists in recognizing not only how Chinese culture has spread outward from its continental heartlands but also how it has interacted with other realities and worldviews. As elsewhere in the world, Chinese islanders themselves make use of the resources, strategies, and discourses related to islands when interacting with the mainland, the surrounding sea, and other islands (Baldacchino, 2008). The center-periphery logic is thus not straightforward: In the transition between center and periphery, the researcher's own perspective must shift, recognizing islands and seas as spaces of population mobility, cultural exchange, innovation, and

social integration. Furthermore, the periphery is only remote and peripheral from the perspective of a presumed center; for many people, the island where they live will be the center of their cultural lives.

People of the land, people of the sea

In former times, Chinese mainlanders often thought of islanders as 'dwellers on the sea' (He & Faure, 2021). Yet migrations between islands and mainlands go both ways. During the reign of Kangxi (1661-1722), a policy was enacted to incentivize mainland residents to establish residence on Tuoji Island. The relocated population predominantly came from the northern coastal areas of the Shandong Peninsula. The fishing industry experienced a surge in the 1930s, leading to the recruitment of a substantial labor force from the Shandong mainland, but the conquest of the Miaodao archipelago by the Japanese puppet army in the 1940s led to the implementation of a maritime blockade. This led many islanders to evacuate Tuoji and relocate to northeastern continental China (Jingkou Village Chronicle Compilation Committee of Tuoji Town, Changdao County, 2012, pp. 28–31). Another instance is Dachen Island in the East China Sea. In 1955, during the war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, the Kuomintang ordered the evacuation of Dachen Island's entire population of 19,287, who were sent to the large island of Taiwan (Zhou, 2018, p. 63). From 1906 to 1945, the Penghu Islands experienced seasonal immigration (Zhuang & Xie, 2006), and Kaohsiung received a substantial influx of immigrants from Penghu, many of whom eventually settled in the region.

People living near the sea, islands, and coastal areas all depend to varying degrees on marine resources for their livelihoods and rely on maritime mobility (Z. Liu, 2020). This was particularly true for the boat-dwellers of the South China Sea, one of the "ethnic groups on the sea" (Pan, 2015), with mobile or migration-based fishing livelihoods. Anthropologist Barbara E. Ward (1985) bases her theory of social consciousness on the boat people of Hong Kong. Drawing upon Levi-Strauss' distinction between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' models, Ward proposes three classifications of boat people: immediate models (constructed by the boat people themselves), ideological models (constructed by the land-dwelling literati, who sought to define that which was appropriately Chinese), and internal observers' models (constructed by common people who interacted with the boat people but were not literati) (Ward, 1966). The people of the land believed that, because of real and perceived cultural differences, the people of the sea were not 'Chinese'; In contrast, the boat people saw themselves not as deviating from a Chinese standard but as living a life at sea of their own creation, rooted in their own knowledge and tradition, but requiring them to act in accordance with terrestrial norms when they spent time onshore (Ward, 1985). A lack of cultural self-consciousness encourages the kind of cultural defensiveness, exceptionalism, and ethnocentricism that fed into efforts to assess all of China's peoples on the basis of a particular of continental mindset.

Nevertheless, the intensive interactions between diverse populations flowing around the South China Sea region have over millennia shaped the social construction and cultural characteristics of South China as a whole. Competition for political and economic resources between people on the water and people on the land reinforced differences between islanders and maritime people on the one hand and mainlanders on the other (Siu & Liu, 2006). In the Ming and Qing dynasties, powerful clans used various social and legal means to exclude those who they labelled as 'boat dwelling' from terrestrial society, while in the 1950s, in the early years of the People's Republic of China, the new state used 'boat dwellers' as a social force to combat those who were perceived as representing feudalist clans (Xiao & Liu, 2004). These shifts in identity and movement between mainland, island, and water also highlight how the government historically provided opportunities for or set limits to the social mobility of the population on the water. In his study of Naozhou Island, He Xi (2014) suggests that because water dwellers rarely mastered writing, it was usually land dwellers who wrote their histories, ultimately affecting how water dwellers perceived themselves and interacted with other communities (see also T. Lin & Su, 2022).

In the imperial era, the mobility of island and marine societies occasioned administrative difficulties for the terrestrially oriented state. For defensive and administrative reasons, the Ming and Qing dynasties' island policies alternated between abandonment and use for military defense (S. Xie, 2015). Yet seen from an islander's perspective, island China would not have been an undifferentiated set of pieces of land surrounded by water; for those who live on islands, islands will be home, and specific islands will have specific meanings. This process is not essentially different from what occurs in continental localities, in which peoples create and nurture localized difference and sense of place. Indeed, Li Deyuan (2005) argues that Ming and Qing dynasty islands developed diverse fishery, maritime trade, and agricultural development models. From the Song and Yuan dynasties through to the Republican period, the Chinese state's maritime strategy gradually shifted from treating islands as a coastal defense frontier to treating islands as units of governance (H. Wang, 2016; B. Zhu, 2020). The state's ability to exploit the sea and ensure the security of the population in frontier zones depended upon its capacity for exercising effective island administration.

Weizhou Island, located in the Beibu Gulf, between the Leizhou Peninsula to the east, Hainan to the south, and Vietnam to the west, is farther offshore than most of China's coastal islands. Weizhou was not a state priority prior to the Ming government's institution of the 'sea ban' *haijin* 海禁, which turned Weizhou into a strategically important element of the state's coastal defense system. Even though the government abandoned the sea ban in the early Qing dynasty, transition to the new policy and maintenance of coastal defense proved difficult, and Weizhou was held at various times by pirates (Antony, 2014). The late Qing government relented to diplomatic pressure and allowed French missionaries to settle on Weizhou, which eventually

acquired a county-level government. Weizhou evolved from a deserted island, to a den of thieves, to a military town, and eventually into part of the national administrative system with a substantial foreign population (X. Chen, 2011).

Nantian Island, south of Ningbo and the Zhoushan Archipelago, was the final island county established by the Qing dynasty in 1910 on the southeastern maritime frontier. The island had been abandoned and closed due to the sea ban since the early Ming dynasty. The outbreak of the First Opium War and the onset of the maritime crisis made Nantian an important asset for territorial security, but later, the concept of 'recruiting people to cultivate their land first' 先招民耕作以实其地 (i.e., encouraging the development of civilian communities) gradually became an important element in the Chinese state's coastal defense policy (S. Xie, 2020). The cases of Nantian and Weizhou reflect the complex interaction between the development of China's islands and the Ming and Qing dynasties' wider historical development and coastal administration.

It is impossible to straightforwardly distinguish between mainlander, islander, and water dweller in Chinese history. Identities changed and were mutually constructed, and there were constant shifts between living in permanent settlements on land, living in squatter communities on land, living on boats, and living on islands (He & Faure, 2021; Siu & Liu, 2006). Since the 1970s, especially after the start of the 21st Century, nearly all boat people in Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi have settled onshore. There are still several sites in Hainan where boat dwellers live in floating homes, such as Lingshui Xincungang Port, Sanya Port, Changjiang Xingang Port, and Wenchang Puqian Port, though here too they face tensions and pressures involving terrestrial and marine industrial, urban, and social transformation (Ou & Ma, 2017).

All this illustrates how efforts to acquire a cultural self-consciousness that is inclusive of common—and not just elite—perspectives can be challenged by the relative exclusion of non-dominant perspectives from the historical record. Historical landed and elite interests have, for example, compromised our ability to fully value and understand traditional Chinese aquatic lives and livelihoods (Grydehøj & Ou, 2017). Care is thus needed to ensure that socially dominant positions do not continue to dominate future perceptions of cultural possibility simply because they were the strongest in the past.

Islands as hubs of cultural transmission

Cultures and societies are shaped by their geographies and natural spaces (Fei, 1992). In preindustrial times, agricultural, nomadic, and maritime cultures constituted China's three major ways of life, corresponding to the agrarian, nomadic, and maritime worlds respectively. Chinese scholars have previously devoted more attention to agricultural and nomadic cultures. Wu Yuqin (1983) argues that the nomadic and agrarian worlds—their juxtaposition and contradiction—constitute the world-historical process in Eurasia. The agrarian world is based on farmland, and the nomadic world is

based on grassland. China's agrarian and nomadic worldviews are essentially terrestrial. In contrast to the spatially bounded continental world, the marine world is boundless. Islands become focal points for perception and representation of the marine culture because they are visible and conceivable (Grydehøj, 2018). Islands (including island port cities) are also a link between the terrestrial and marine worlds and have played a key role in the formation of the world system (Abu-Lughod, 1987; Beaujard, 2007; B. Xie et al., 2020).

The coastal waters between land and sea in China are spaces of intermingling worlds. Islands in the area are crucial hubs for communication between land and sea, especially islands at key nodes in navigation routes, which become transit points, outposts, and springboards for the mobility of goods and people as well as of communication between Chinese and foreign cultures (Ma, 2020; Ou, 2018; Su & Grydehøj, 2022; H. Zhang & Grydehøj, 2021). Island China is often where land and sea merge: Incoming cultures are not simply transplanted whole from outside but coalesce with existing local cultures through interactive processes. Coastal islands come to host not only migration, culture, and trade that spread outward from the Chinese mainland but also migration, culture, and trade that enter from overseas islands and mainlands. Spaces of transcontinental interactions have been established through the agency of monsoons (Duara, 2021). More than just serving as transit points, island China provides a home for these diverse influences.

Within the pluriverse, many islands are mixtures of people and things arriving from all directions, interacting, merging, in constant change—and productive of new worlds. Island historical processes are characterized by both continuity and discontinuity, stasis and dynamism. Chinese island governance was long dominated by the mainland, but this process was not steady, and there were periods of and gaps in control, incorporation into the state, military administration, and semi-abandonment.

We may take the large island of Hainan as an example. During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (141 BCE – 87 BCE), two counties (Zhuya and Dan'er) were established in Hainan, but these were abolished and abandoned in the reign of Emperor Yuan of Han (75 BCE – 33 BCE). Following a long period of official neglect, the island came to the attention of the central government again in the late Southern Liang and Chen dynasties (502 CE – 589 CE). However, it was first in the Sui dynasty (581 CE – 618 CE) that the three counties of Zhuya, Dan'er, and Linzhen were formally established, becoming places of refuge and relegation for clan officials from China's Central Plains. The political, military, economic, and cultural expansion of Han culture moved from the northwest of the island down around the coasts, eventually reaching the island's interior but avoiding its southeast (Situ, 1986, 1987; H. Zhu et al., 2007). Seen from a continental perspective, Hainan gradually developed from a 'frontier culture' to an integral part of Han China (H. Zhu & Situ, 2001).

When Western religions spread into China, the first stop was usually an island. Shangchuan Island, in Guangdong's Chuanshan Archipelago, holds a unique position in the history of Christianity and trade between China and foreign countries, serving as Portugal's precursor colony to Macao (Z. Liu, 2006). Weizhou Island was not just important in terms of maritime defense but was also eventually a major point for trade and a springboard for the introduction of Catholicism into Guangxi, directly influencing the formation of the Catholic distribution pattern within the Beibu Gulf (Peng & Zhu, 2007). Cijin Island, just offshore the city of Kaohsiung on the island of Taiwan, was both an important trading port and an early English Presbyterian church stronghold for practicing medical and missionary work (S. Zhang & Xu, 1998).

Another example is offered by the Zhoushan Archipelago. Zhoushan is located in the East China Sea, south of the mouth of the Yangtze River and stretching across Hangzhou Bay, connecting Shanghai with Ningbo. Since at least the 7th and 8th Centuries CE, Zhoushan has been at the intersection of sea traffic between China, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula and canal traffic into the Chinese mainland. Zhoushan is today site of China's first and third busiest ports by tonnage and is an interstitial zone within the Yangtze River Delta megacity (H. Zhang & Grydehøj, 2021), yet Zhoushan has long served as an intermediate node of contact and exchange between Chinese mainland and foreign cultures (An, 2014). During the expansion of Western colonial power into East Asia in the 18th and 19th Centuries, the British created a settlement in Zhoushan, making the archipelago a prominent site for Sino-foreign exchange, especially following the 1840 Opium War (D'Arcy-Brown, 2012). In 1841, the French missionary Francois Xavier Timothey Danicourt came to Zhoushan to spread Catholicism. The statistics of Zhoushan's Dinghai County in the 20th Century show that, at one stage, the number of the followers of Christian churches exceeded the followers of Buddhism (Bao, 2010).

The movement of religious influence was not just one way. Most of China's contacts with the Japanese islands and the Korean Peninsula passed through Zhoushan, contributing to the spread of Confucian and Buddhist culture (Bingenheimer, 2016; S. Yu, 2022). More broadly, the Kuroshio Current—which connects the islands of Taiwan, the islands off the Chinese mainland, Jeju, and Ryukyu—has historically contributed to complex processes of cultural and material exchange in the East China Sea. These various islands and archipelagos can be analyzed as part of a shared cultural and spatial system that transcends national boundaries (Heo & Lee, 2018; Hyun, 2018; Lee & Hyun, 2018; Tian, 2017). There are, for example, numerous shared beliefs and religious traditions in the region, including the worship of deities such as Guanyin, Mazu, the East Sea Dragon King, Guanyu, Guangze Zunwang, Xuantian, Qingshui Zushi, Baosheng Dadi, Linshui Furen, Kaitai Shengwang, Kai Zhang Shengwang, San Shan Guo Wang, Xu Fu, and An Qisheng. Specifically, the Mazu faith, originating

from Meizhou Island, gained acceptance among coastal communities in the late-10th and early 11th centuries and subsequently disseminated globally. This phenomenon exemplifies the transmission process of island cultural identity (Ptak, 2019/2022).

Maritime societies

Confucius said, "The Way is not practiced. I shall go ride a raft on the ocean" 道不行，乘桴浮于海 (Confucius, 1990). This expression suggests that, already in ancient times, some Chinese people saw going overseas as a means of realizing one's ideals. Over the centuries, there has been substantial emigration of people from South China out to lands across the ocean (G. Wang & Ng, 2004). This is reflected in many literary works, such as the character of Li Jun and other good men who build ships and set sail from Taicang Harbor to become lords of Siam in the classic novel *Water margin* (Shi, 2010) and Yuan Chengzhi, who leads a group of heroes on an overseas expedition to Bo Ni in *Sword stained with royal blood* (Jin, 2013). Because one cannot float on the sea forever, many Chinese emigrants ended up settling on distant islands, ultimately creating networks of relation across land and sea.

Takeshi Hamashita's (2000) study of port trade and inter-port relations in East Asia highlights the role of islands as sites for trade and mobility. The South China Sea is bordered by a continent, vast archipelagos, and peninsulas, with monsoon winds facilitating trade across the region in ancient times, creating a diverse organization and layered network of exchange (B. Chen, 2016). Long-term socioeconomic exchanges have led to the formation of a distinctive economic sphere around the South China Sea, including island port cities such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Xiamen, Kaohsiung, Manila, Penang, Singapore, and Batam. The water frontier theory (J. Liu, 2016) emphasizes the importance and totality of 'Mediterranean' or sea-in-the-land commerce in Asia: People and goods flowed freely, and Chinese merchants served as critical links in facilitating exchange activities with the sailing trade network of South China.

It is also through this trade that continental China gained considerable power and wealth. Islands have been essential nodes in the South China Sea trade network as well as important stations in the flow of goods along the Maritime Silk Road (B. Xie et al., 2020), which extends out into the Indian Ocean world (X. Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023). The food trade was significant in the South China Sea economy. This included a longstanding Chinese-controlled sea cucumber trade in the Qing dynasty (Dai, 2003) and a sizeable bird's nest trade (X. Yu, 2021). The consumption of these commodities, the ways in which they were traded, and changes in attitudes over time are evident in the close relationship between the shifting mindsets of modern maritime China, the processes of migration, exchanges with neighboring and colonial powers, and the development of modern statehood in China and across Southeast Asia.

Claudine Salmon (1991) argues that, prior to the 18th century, Chinese people did not regard the islands of Southeast Asia as an unconnected foreign society and that China and Southeast Asia were closely linked by frequent ship traffic. In many cases, ethnic Chinese merchants had one family in China and another in Southeast Asia. The 'two-headed family' phenomenon is discussed by Chen Da (1939) in his study of overseas Chinese. Since the late 18th century, increasing numbers of people from South China chose to stay in Southeast Asia to make a living, married, and had children with local people, while also maintaining families in their hometowns in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hainan (J. Chen, 2008; Ou & Wen, 2022; Qian, 2011). Fishery production and marine trade continue to facilitate and promote cultural exchange, community interaction, and the sharing of marine resources on the islands of East and Southeast Asia (Ma, 2016, 2022).

In the cultural group of islands around the South China Sea, frequent interactions between islands and mainlands and between different islands within the maritime space have built a transregional social sphere. Peoples living on different islands surrounding the South China Sea have maintained ethnic distinctions while co-creating a shared maritime culture. Some of the islands in question are largely monoethnic, while others contain internal ethnic diversity, yet movements of fishers and merchants over the course of centuries have produced strong social networks that cross today's national boundaries. Although there are islands in the region (particularly those in China itself) that are today relatively isolated from continued crosscultural exchange, many of them have nevertheless been impacted by past interactions: Historical movements of peoples from Southeast Asia into South China have had a major influence on Chinese culture and society (G. Wang, 2000; Yang et al., 1997).

These cultural movements show that Chinese culture was never static or monolithic. Cultural self-consciousness requires looking inward to understand the need to look outward and appreciate diverse interconnections and interdependences.

Developments in island governance in modern China

Near-shore islands are subject to distinctive urbanization processes: Many islands in the Chinese cultural sphere have developed into port cities due to their spatial attributes of good potential for maritime transport, defensibility, and territorialization (Grydehøj, 2015). Urbanization has caused island settlements to shift from fishing villages to manufacturing, port services, and tourism industries. Island resource use and land use have changed significantly, with land originally used for farming being converted into industrial, residential, or commercial land, and with sea areas used for fishing becoming critical resources for island tourism (Wu et al., 2020). Relationships between people, land, and sea have changed as a result. The development of

an island's society cannot be separated from its geographical environment and ecological resources. Processes of globalization and economic change within China have caused shifts in the ways in which islanders use local resources.

In the international field of island studies, it has been noted that islands are often regarded as 'novelty sites' for social, economic, and political experimentation (Baldacchino, 2007) though not always with the intention of meeting the needs of local islanders or solving local problems (Baldacchino, 2020). Most of China's experiments with islands are top-down processes guided by—if not always directly managed by—the national government. These projects aim to address inequalities in development between rural and urban areas, yet low-quality, environmentally destructive, and unsustainable development is prevalent, and actions to counter this are hindered by poor infrastructure, limited community engagement, insufficient attention to environmental management, labor shortages, and weak carrying capacity (Q. Lin et al., 2018). Too often, centrally designed island development policies are not adapted to local differences (H. Zhang & Xiao, 2020), including differences between islands in an archipelago, different cultures and ethnic groups, and different preferences for developmental direction.

These challenges have long been recognized. Fei Xiaotong (1987a, 1987b) notes how remote island development policies have the potential to enrich island economies in an abstract sense while destroying the livelihoods of islanders, particularly ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. In the 1950s, the government promoted rubber farming as a crucial industry for Hainan, but the island's Li and Miao minorities did not participate in this industry. This led to differential development along ethnic lines and neglect of the cultural practices and priorities of local communities (Fei, 1987a, 1987b, 2009).

The case of the Dan people in the city of Sanya on Hainan further illustrates this point. After 1950, the Dan, who traditionally lived aboard boats, settled in Sanya Port and gradually formed a community of fishing villages. The government established new organizations to support these fishing communities, such as fishery mutual aid groups and cooperatives, deepening the Dan's transition from boat-dwelling to land-dwelling fisherfolk (Ou, 2021). Since the mid-1990s, Sanya Port area has undergone continuous redevelopment, transforming from a productive port to a consumer port. The fishing port has been relocated, and the Dan have been cut off from their traditional livelihoods (Ou & Ma, 2017).

Such processes are a result of development-oriented administration that fails to take into account and appreciate the traditions, cultures, and livelihoods of those who actually live in island and marine communities. As Rong Guanqiong (1991) argues, the desire to hasten island development and turn Hainan into a site for economic experimentation paid insufficient attention to the island's social, cultural, and ecological realities: Island development cannot be about the economy alone.

Discussion and conclusion

Ideas about Chinese islands and island societies have been evolving alongside altered island-mainland, island-island, and island-sea connections. Movements of people from mainlands to islands have produced island societies, while linkages and exchanges of peoples, goods, and knowledge have formed the basis for distinctive social and cultural systems, which transcend state-centric understandings, in the seas surrounding China (Ma, 2016). These social and cultural systems have moreover become significant for China's broader social and economic development. How should these understandings influence the ways we research island China?

In keeping with lessons from the international field of island studies, we recommend emphasis on island-centered research perspectives (Baldacchino, 2006; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016). Continental and terrestrial perspectives can be useful for studying islands, but island positionings are necessary too. Historically, Western anthropology often studied islands as locus, not focus (Ronström, 2013), and the scholarly gaze has sometimes produced islands as remote, isolated, exotic, dependent, and marginal. This has also often been present in Chinese island research. The tendency to see Chinese islands as populated by Chinese immigrant groups has to some extent mitigated marginalization within Chinese island research, but it has not made such research any better at escaping from continental positioning. The tendency to see Chinese islands as extensions of the continent has furthermore been evident in the application of top-down and undifferentiated governance and development models to Chinese islands and their surrounding marine areas over the course of many centuries.

The deep historical tradition on which Chinese island studies has been based cannot be disconnected from the manner in which the islands surrounding the Chinese mainland were transformed from frontiers of the continent to administrative units. The gradual shifts in the Chinese government's thinking about the role of islanders in national development have had an important impact on how islands are used and how islanders have engaged in globalization.

None of this, however, has been neutral or inevitable. None of it has been the only possibility presented by Chinese tradition. The continued existence of the transregional social sphere in the 'Asian Mediterranean' (to take a sea-in-the-land approach) offers Chinese researchers the potential to broaden their horizons. Island China is not limited to the territorial boundaries of the Chinese state but instead encompasses all the places where Chinese culture has spread and interacted with other cultures, ultimately returning to affect change on the Chinese mainland. Island China thus spatially overlaps with other island cultures and conceptions of islandness. Furthermore, there are island, mobile, and maritime perceptions and perspectives that have often been neglected or downplayed within the historical record. Traditional Chinese culture encompassed aquatic lives as well as agrarian and nomadic ones, and all were important in the formation of today's China. Studying

island China with a mindset of cultural self-consciousness involves a recognition that the Chinese mainland cannot be understood alone; its story includes the stories of other peoples and places.

To speak of 'island China' is, moreover, to ask 'Whose China?' The unity in plurality advocated by Fei Xiaotong is a dream—rooted in Chinese tradition—of a single China that is comfortable with being different things to different people. And as thinking by theorists such as Fei itself becomes part of Chinese tradition, so opportunities open up for reassessments, reinterpretations, and reapplications, for a flourishing and expansion of what *China* can be and do.

There remains scope for conceptualizing 'island China' as something other than just an offshoot from a hegemonic continental Chinese culture, other than just a set of spaces for interaction between the continent and the sea, other than just 'islands of China'.

What, then, does it mean to study island China? To study island China is to recognize islands as integral to the idea of China. It is to consider how land-water-people linkages have affected island and mainland societies together as well as how islanders wish and strive to develop their communities. It is, following Su Shi, to acknowledge that we are all, at last, living on an island.

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