
Sovereignty or Identity?

The Significance of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute for Taiwan

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Abstract

Narratives of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute expose the spectrum of Taiwan's national identity. While Taiwan has long been struggling to legitimise its claim of representing China or to become an independent state, some of the Taiwanese people still welcome their former colonial master, Japan. This paper draws on academic and journalistic work on how Taiwan has responded to the islands dispute. The author also turns to the internet to examine popular sentiments in the region by examining netizens' discourse on the islands from Taiwan's largest bulletin board system (BBS), Station-PTT. This survey finds that the sovereignty dispute surfaces issues of national identity.

Key Words

Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, China, Taiwan, Japan, National Identity.

Introduction

Where does Taiwan fit in the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute? Officially, Taiwan's government could also make claims on the islands. But historically, Taiwan has had and continues to have intimate relations with both China and Japan. Former Ming Dynasty officials and scholars escaped to Taiwan in the 17th century to seek refuge from the newly installed, Manchur-run Qing Dynasty. After the Second World War, the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek fostered an anti-Communist ideology and Chinese identity, reinforced by US dominance militarily, politically, economically and culturally. At the same time, Taiwan also shares an intimate history with Japan. Colonised by the latter between 1895-1945, Taiwan's elderly still wax nostalgically about Japan while the younger generation swarms to Japanese *manga* and *anime*. Indeed, Taiwan turned out to be Japan's top donor after the 2011 earthquake. Taiwan also enjoys a variety of bilateral relationships with Japan.¹ Nonetheless, Taiwanese do not

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disregard Japan's invasion and colonial rule of China from the 1930s-1940s. Some Taiwanese have called for a "brotherhood" between China and Taiwan against what they see as an imperialistic Japan;² others suggest that Taiwan join the US-Japanese alliance against China to prevent the latter from invading Taiwan after taking over the disputed islands.³

This paper explores the ambiguity of sovereignty in contemporary world politics. Even though international relations (IR) proceeds from sovereignty as a premise in inter-state relations, it remains elusive due precisely to Westphalian power politics, exercised most blatantly during the colonial/imperialist era of the 19th and 20th centuries, followed by US hegemony since the Second World War. Taiwan, as noted above, serves as a prime example of a state that has experienced all of the above.

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turn to the internet to examine popular sentiments in the region by examining netizens' discourse on the islands from Taiwan's largest bulletin board system (BBS), Station-PTT. This survey finds that the sovereignty dispute surfaces issues of national identity.

Let's see how.

National Identity and the Islands Dispute

Debates over the islands' sovereignty highlight the role of history on national identity. This historical legacy, moreover, frames Westphalian inter-state politics. For some Taiwanese, for instance, only Taiwan, as the Republic of China (ROC), has the legitimacy to claim sovereignty over the islands, not China. The latter suffers from the yoke of an outlaw government, the People's Republic of China (PRC), even though international society recognises it as the legitimate government of the Chinese people. In contrast, some declare that the islands belong to Japan: in the Treaty of Peace (1951), signed with China to return Taiwan, Japan did not relinquish its rights over the islands. Furthermore, many argue, the islands have nothing to do with China or Taiwan.

State actions reflect these ambiguities of history and culture. In response to Japan's claim over the Islands, Taiwan's government proposed "The East China

Sea Peace Initiative”.⁴ It proclaims Taiwan’s sovereignty over the islands based on three points: i) the islands were discovered, named and used by Ming China (1368-1644) and later became a territory of Qing China (1644-1912); ii) although the islands were annexed by Meiji Japan during the Sino-Japanese War, coupled with the cession of Taiwan to Japan in 1895, the post-Second World War arrangement “restored the islands to their pre-1895 legal status”; and iii) the transferring of administration rights of the islands by the US in 1971 does not “constitute a transfer of sovereignty”.

Some groups in Taiwan, however, are perplexed. The government’s references to the Ming and Qing Dynasties seem to echo a “one China policy”, suggesting no differentiation between the ROC and the PRC and thereby subordinating Taiwan to China.⁵ Those who propose Taiwan’s independence and rectification from “Republic of China” to “Taiwan” argue that the Treaty of Peace never claimed sovereignty over the islands; therefore, it is untenable for Taiwan to claim the islands as auxiliary territory. This argument reflects the position of some that Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) party on Taiwan was an alien and oppressive regime. Some scholars argue outrightly that the islands belong to Japan, stating that it was the first application of international law in East Asia based on the doctrine of *terra nullius* under international law.⁶

The complexity of Taiwan’s national identity reflects contentions regarding “legitimacy”. Some Taiwanese regard Japan as their genuine place of origin; Japan represents a civilised and modern society. One observer notes, “[s]ome Taiwanese intellectuals believed Taiwan should denounce China for its backwardness and betrayal and welcome Japanese rule as an opportunity for the island to be modernised by administrators from Asia’s most advanced country”.⁷ In contrast, others insist on Taiwan’s Chinese origins, citing the historical and cultural ties across the Strait. They identify themselves as Chinese even though some of them deny the legitimacy of a Communist China.⁸

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National identity issues surface most prominently where national security strategies are concerned. Those who call for a sense of “brotherhood” between Taiwan and Mainland China against an imperial Japan usually reflect a strong “Chinese” identity.⁹ Those who suggest Taiwan join the US-Japanese alliance against Taiwan’s enemy, China, are more

inclined to support a Taiwanese, if not Japanese, identity.¹⁰ In short, those who identify themselves as Taiwanese tend to have a positive perception of Japan relative to China, while those who identify themselves as Chinese are more prone to have a negative attitude towards Japan.¹¹ We hear two different voices, accordingly, within the same national entity. In contrast, the people of Japan and China seem united in their stance regarding the islands dispute. The background to these two different voices reflects deep-seated identity issues in Taiwan.

Chinese Identity and Anti-Japanese Sentiment

“Long divided, the world will unite; long united, it will fall apart”: Taiwan’s president Ma Ying-jeou quoted this famous opening line from the 14th century epic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to call on the people of Taiwan and China to create a new history through peaceful resolution to Cross-Strait relations.¹² This quote aimed deliberately to remind both Taiwan and China of their common origins in a Chinese cultural identity.

The KMT has long emphasised this Chinese identity, but in contrast to Communism in China. The KMT’s own half-century rule on Taiwan, however, defined politics as one-party rule only.

Democratisation did not begin until the late 1980s-early 1990s. Before then, the Taiwanese independence movement was strictly banned. “Taiwanese” was never an option as a national identity; any sign of insurrection or rebellion was directly and brutally suppressed.¹³ Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese as a national identity has emerged, and interaction among Taiwan’s different ethnic groups has become more prominent.

Indeed, ethnic, political, and cultural meanings infuse “Taiwanese” or “Chinese” as an ethnic label in Taiwan. Public opinion polls usually fail to elucidate these connections.¹⁴ Ethnically speaking, the term “Taiwanese” refers to the descendants of immigrants from China’s Fujian Province in the 18th and 19th centuries. They regard themselves as natives to the island and distinct from the “mainlanders” who escaped from the Chinese Communists in 1949. Politically speaking, however, those who identify themselves as “Chinese” are not necessarily those who came to Taiwan with the KMT forces or who, now, are their descendants. Rather, they are those who contend that the Taiwanese government represents the “true” China, not the Communist regime in Beijing. The ROC still retains “China” in its title, they reason. Although the ROC’s actual control only extends over Taiwan and the smaller islands of Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu, along with some even smaller

islands, Taiwan's constitution still claims sovereignty over the entire territory of China.

Those who identify themselves strongly as Chinese emphasise their Chinese roots in history, culture and blood. The history of Japanese imperialism in the last century, they believe, should not be forgotten, even though they themselves have never engaged in any kind of anti-Japanese resistance or experienced Japanese colonial rule directly. Here, we see a continuing legacy of the Chiang Kai-shek regime. It propagated anti-Japanese education and forbade the use of Japanese language in broadcast media as well as imports of Japanese audiovisual entertainment products.¹⁵

Nonetheless, many in Taiwan embrace Japan. They often remember nostalgically their times under Japanese occupation. With the restriction on Japanese products lifted in 1992, Japan-mania in Taiwan fully flourished and spread nationwide, leading to a minority of Taiwan's younger generation to identify themselves as Japanese.

Japanese-ness and Anti-Greater China Sentiment

Japan remains popular in Taiwan. In 2011, the Japanese Exchange Association commissioned Gallup to poll popular impressions of Japan in Taiwan.¹⁶ The poll found that 75% of Taiwanese

people have amicable feelings towards Japan, higher than the 62% that had the same feelings in 2009. And the younger people were even more pronounced in their positive impressions of Japan.

According to Li and Chen, Japanese-ness has become a practice of daily life in Taiwan, not a political injunction.¹⁷ Leo Ching points out that while early anti-Japanese sentiments embraced China as the ancestral homeland (*zu guo*), this was based on desperation and fantasy, not on political or cultural identification.¹⁸ Under colonial rule, Taiwan's elite class formed a relationship of reciprocal dependency with the ruling government. Of particular note were the "Chinese native landowner class" and the "emerging literati". People in Taiwan began to perceive Japanese culture as their own by the end of the 1920s.¹⁹ The KMT government sought to alter this situation after relocating to Taiwan in 1949. But it served only to temporarily suppress Japanese culture in Taiwan, not extinguish it altogether.

Taiwan's younger generation underscores this affinity for Japan. Taiwan's elderly may have been indoctrinated by Japanese education under colonial rule but Taiwan's young people flock to Japanese culture due to commercialism and consumerism. Sony, Wacoal, Shiseido, Family Mart, Toyota, Yamaha, SOGO department, and so on, pervade Taiwanese daily life. Young and old in Taiwan also regard

the Japanese lifestyle, as depicted in Japanese TV dramas, as ideal. Japanese TV programmes started in Taiwan in 1992 and became an instant hit with Taiwan's youth. Audience ratings for Japanese programmes have exceeded those from Hong Kong. In 1996, Tokyo Broadcasting System Television sold the rights for over 1,000 hours of Japanese TV programmes to Taiwan.²⁰ Many streets and popular shopping districts in Taiwan exhibit a pseudo-Japanese sense of style. Shop signboards are full of Japanese names like "Yamanote Line Black Bubble Tea",²¹ or "Harajuku Plaza",²² and numerous shops display Japanese "kawaii" (cute) style goods. Taiwanese tourism reflects this Japanese mania as well: Japan remains the site for Taiwanese tourists to visit. In 2012, 1.56 million Taiwanese visited Japan, second only to Koreans.²³ Today, many in Taiwan and Japan regard the two countries as a "Community of Common Destiny".²⁴ The relationship between Japan and Taiwan, Lam notes, is "underpinned by a shared history, common values, economic ties, strategic alignment, and social networks between their political and business elite. It is also buttressed by mutual warmth, admiration, at the societal level".²⁵

Still, heated debates about Taiwanese identity continue. Public polls, however, fall short of demonstrating the complexity of this issue. Data from the internet provides an alternative way

of understanding national identity in Taiwan.

Cyber Discourse on the Islands

As Castells points out, online discourse takes place in a medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in a chosen time, on a global scale.²⁶ Cyber discourse serves as a major example. BBSes originally started as bulletin boards to be used not only as an information source but also as interactive forums for public discussions and debates on a broad range of topics. BBSes enable participants to keep pace with current events and news in real time. Giese points out, "Offline events and major discussions (on BBSes) are picked up at roughly the same time".²⁷ Accordingly, BBS discussions and debates are highly interactive. Owing to the absence of temporal and spatial limitations, writers on BBSes from all over the world are able to post their ideas onto this open space. Users on social media like Facebook and Twitter have been increasing in the past decade in both China and Taiwan, but BBSes play a significant role in the daily discourse for netizens.

According to Lu, 3 billion users are registered on BBSes in China.²⁸ (One netizen is allowed to register at multiple BBS sites.) Similarly, Lu notes that PTT

is the most popular BBS in Taiwan, with more than 1.5 million registered users. The PTT BBS is a terminal-based system in Taiwan. It was founded by students from the Department of Information Engineering at National Taiwan University and is currently administered by the Electronic BBS Research Society. PTT now claims to be the largest BBS in the world. Some users on PTT are from China.²⁹ PTT has over 20,000 boards with a multitude of topics, and more than 40,000 posts are created daily.³⁰

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I collected articles on the islands dispute posted from December 2009 to September 2012 on the Cross-Strait Board. I found that netizens posted most of their articles during two specific periods: the first, in September 2010, with 32 posts when a Japanese Coast Guard vessel collided with a Chinese fishing boat and the Chinese captain was arrested on 7 September. The second period of greatest activity occurred in 2012, with 104 posts when the Japanese government declared its nationalisation of the islands. For this paper, I selected texts by netizens who posted more than 10 times during these two periods.

Sovereignty, Legitimacy and Taiwan's National Identity

On 29 September 2012, Chronodl sent a post titled, "Diaoyutai Belongs to Japan".³¹ Chronodl forwarded an article referring to historical records dating back to 1896 that confirmed Japan's occupation/ownership of the Islands. Chronodl added:

Those who assert Chinese or Taiwanese sovereignty over the Diaoyutai Islands are provoking nationalism, thus obscuring the point of focus, and ignoring the history of the Japanese contribution to the Diaoyu Islands... The Diaoyu Islands are Japan's territory, named Senkaku.

Highlander quickly responded with a new title: "Diaoyutai Belongs to Taiwan":³²

Diaoyutai never belonged to Japan. A defeated country should not talk such nonsense.

Chronodl retorted immediately:

It is not important who won or lost. Is this the only thing China can boast of?

The debate continued. But it ended eventually with Highlander referring to Japan's constant violation of international law by invading neighbouring countries. Japan, to Highlander, is a deceitful country. "Before 1971", Highlander wrote,

[T]he Japanese government recognised the legitimacy of the ROC, but denied it afterwards. The property of the ROC, which was legally registered in Japan,

was adamantly retained by Japan after diplomatic ties were cut off. Apparently, they dare to flout anything deemed to be legal. I cannot see any justifications for what they are now cheekily bringing up.³³

TERRIST and ilyj2012 argued about Taiwan's national identity: that is, if Taiwan unify with China or stay independent. In a post titled "Senkaku and Okinawa", TERRIST cited a statement by China's government in 1953 that Diaoyutai belongs to Japan. TERRIST denounces the Chinese government's insistent absurdities:³⁴

There is no so-called "indivisible territory of China".³⁵ Everything except the PRC and Communist control is changeable. Why do Chinese nationalists and people supporting unification with China in Taiwan still expect the Chinese government to take back the Senkaku Islands? Isn't it ridiculous?!

A mainland Chinese, ilyj2012, responded as follows:³⁶

Taiwan should strengthen its power, especially military power, if it desires China to forfeit unification.... The author [referring to TERRIST] is supposed to be pro-independence. Try harder! Still long, long way to go for you!

TERRIST chided ilyj2012 for being such a mainlander:³⁷

Taiwan has been independent. China has not ruled Taiwan for one day... The only way for China to give up unification of Taiwan is to accept the fact... Otherwise, please fight for unification like a man! Try harder! Still long, long way to go for you!

ilyj2012 taunted back:³⁸

Really? Taiwan has been independent? Could you show me your Republic of *Taiwan ID please?*

ilyj2012 continued:³⁹

Your [Taiwan's] constitution even rejects the acknowledgement of Taiwan as an independent country. What should *we* [China] do?

Ultimately, ilyj2012 disapproved of Taiwan's affinity for Japan:⁴⁰

I feel some attitudes from the Taiwanese extremely odd. When the Japanese occupied Taiwan's Diaoyutai Islands, most Taiwanese stated Diaoyutai was Japan's originally. But when it came to the anti-Japanese demonstrations in China, the Taiwanese expressed strong hatred toward those protesters and called for their comeuppance through grinding teeth. The protest seemed radical, but at least they took a position against Japan. You Taiwanese provide commentary on nothing yet antagonise those who stand for something. Honestly, I don't even know if you are Japanese or Taiwanese. It's really confusing.

The state needs an external enemy, along with "internal shamings", so citizens will be willing to sacrifice for the state.

In contrast, one netizen from Taiwan, OceanTaiwan, suggested a Taiwanese-Japanese-US coalition against China:⁴¹

I have little Chinese-ness in my mind. I am a Taiwanese but Japanese to core. I am also very fond of using good quality

products made in Japan and wish for a good allegiance between Taiwan and Japan. The thing is, Taiwan lacks might. The best strategy is to formulate a federal far-east alliance under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan.

Those in Taiwan who identified with Japan scoffed at the Chinese government's "cowardly" attitude towards Japan. Note this post from Dachiu:⁴²

Japan's Coast Guard has successfully kept Taiwanese and Chinese fishing vessels at a distance to 12 nautical miles, while the police hold the Diaoyutai Islands. Taiwan and China, however; react in a cowardly manner without chasing the Japanese fishing vessels away. It is obvious, no matter how Taiwan and China may rally against Japan, Diaoyutai is now undeniably under the holy reign of the grand Japanese empire. China was so beaten flat by Japan that that the Chinese bristle not but fizzle. They just let people sabotage their own properties. All barks but no bites and with gangs swanking propaganda around- now that is what we call a Grand Country, China.

Usage of language like "under the holy reign of the grand Japanese empire" strongly indicates the author's Japanese identity.

Conclusion

Narratives on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute expose the spectrum of Taiwan's national identity. While Taiwan has long been struggling to legitimise its claim of representing China or to become an independent state, the Taiwanese people still welcome their former colonial master, Japan. These Taiwanese would rather discard their Chinese identity than suffer from what they perceive as an illegitimate, tyrannical regime in Beijing.

Shih points out that national identity is invented.⁴³ A state needs to constantly search for an object upon which it can exercise sovereignty to construct or reinforce its national identity. The state needs an external enemy, along with "internal shamings", so citizens will be willing to sacrifice for the state. Taiwan's inability to agree on its own name reveals this problem of national identity. Accordingly, the people of Taiwan cannot reach a consensus on whether China or Japan is the external enemy in the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute, and what Taiwan means to each.

Endnotes

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- 10 After Taiwan’s former president Lee Teng-hui said “The Senkaku Islands were Japanese territory in the past and are still so at present”, he came under fire and some commentators pointed out his Japanese identity relates to his view on the islands dispute. (cf, Tong-rong Tsai, “Ruguo Diaoyutai Kaizhan Taiwan de Sange Xuanze (Taiwan Has Three Options Once the War Launches on Diaoyutai)”.
- 11 Chuang Jing-Yi and Mei-Chih Li, “Ethnic Identification and Attitudes towards the Japanese in Taiwan”, *Journal of Indigenous Psychological Research*, Vol. 20 (December 2003), pp. 105-135.

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- 14 When various public opinion polls in Taiwan raise the question of “national identity”, these usually present three choices only: “Taiwanese”, “Chinese”, or “Both” (does not include “Do not know” or “Refuse to answer”). In 1992, 25.5% of the respondents identified themselves as Chinese, but by 2011, this number dropped to 4.1%. In comparison, the percentage of respondents identifying as Taiwanese increased steadily from 17.6% to as high as 54.2% during the same period. The percentage of respondents answering “Both” was around 40% over the long term. See, Election Study Center, National Cheng-Chi University, Taiwan, “Taiwanese / Chinese Identity Distribution Trend”, 2013, at <http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/modules/tiny2/content/TaiwanChineseID.htm> [last visited 1 June 2013].
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- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
- 20 Lee, “Imagine Here/Practice There”.

- 21 Yamanote Line is a railway loop line in Tokyo city.
- 22 Harajuku, an area between Shinjuku and Shibuya in Tokyo, is renowned for its high street fashion.
- 23 Statistical Information, Japan National Tourism Organisation, at <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/ttp/sta/> [last visited 1 June 2013]. Taiwan's nostalgia for Japan contrasts sharply with how Koreans feel about their colonial experience under the Japanese (1910-1945). See, for example, Usumiki Hideo, *Hannichi to Shinichi no Hazama: Kankoku-Taiwan kara Mita Nihon (Between Anti-Japan and Pro-Japan: Japan Perceived from Korea and Taiwan)*, Tokyo, Tokyo Keisei Shinhosha, 1997.
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