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Wei-ping Lin's Island Fantasia is a fascinating anthropological study of a lesser-known archipelago that was, up until recently, a key frontline location in the Sino-Taiwanese conflict. Taiwan's westernmost possession, the six islands of the Matsu archipelago, are a mere thirty kilometers from mainland China and the coastal city of Fuzhou. The main island of Taiwan, an eight-hour ferry ride away, is far more remote. In Island Fantasia, Lin examines how the rise and fall of Matsu's strategic importance as a location on the contested border between China and Taiwan and the economic marginalization the islands have experienced because of that conflict have caused the archipelago to struggle in efforts to define an internal social imaginary.

According to Lin, "social imaginary is the way the members of a community imagine their existence" (p. 3). While many scholars have written extensively about the importance of social imaginaries in the creation of common understandings that enable the daily collective practices of social life, few have seriously interrogated the origins of these imaginaries. While many scholars (Arjun Appadurai, Akhil Gupta, and James Ferguson, to name a few) seem to accept the premise that these imaginaries and the communal identities that they entail diffuse in a hierarchical pattern originating in the seats of power and spreading "downward" to the masses, Lin points out that there are a variety of imagining subjects within the social collective.[1] Every individual, in fact, has the ability to imagine, and with the advent of new media technologies, each individual imaginary has the opportunity to interact with the collective and become part of the shared social imaginary.

Matsu's wildly fluctuating significance in international affairs makes it a prime location for Lin's study of imagining subjects, as the archipelago has undergone many dramatic political changes since it was first inhabited in the seventeenth century. For most of its history, Matsu was a forbidden outpost. When Matsu was first settled, it was a remote fishing outpost that hosted mostly temporary settlements devoted to the processing of fish and shrimp for sale in Fuzhou markets. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pirates and smugglers also came to set up temporary outposts on Matsu. These pirates and smugglers became particularly important during the Japanese occupation of China in the twentieth century. One twentieth-century leader, Zhang Yizhou, managed to create an independent "Kingdom of the Min Sea" by cooperating with the Japanese, then promptly joined the Republican Army when the Japanese retreated in 1945 (p. 41).
When the Republic of China (ROC) established its government in exile in Taiwan in 1949, the People's Liberation Army stopped short of invading Matsu's Dongding, leaving Matsu as the ROC's westernmost outpost. The People's Republic of China (PRC) may have decided not to take Matsu even though its small size and close proximity made for an easy prize, because taking Matsu without following up with an invasion of Taiwan might amount to an admission of Taiwan's sovereignty to the international community. Rather than winning Matsu and losing Taiwan, the PRC opted to fight a never-ending battle of Matsu, marked by intermittent shelling of the islands by artillery on the mainland for more than twenty years. At the same time, Matsu became the most important frontline for the ROC, which instituted martial law on the island that lasted until 1992.

Geography and circumstance also enabled women to achieve an elevated status in Matsu throughout most of the periods of its history. In its early days as a forbidden outpost, when most men were engaged in fishing for long periods of time, women were the "hoop" that held the "bucket" of the community together (p. 83). Later during martial law, women were allowed closer access to military installations to buy and sell goods to soldiers in "G. I. Joe businesses," while the best opportunities for men were more often as visiting workers or students in Taiwan (p. 163). Lin's analysis of gender roles and their impact on Matsu's social imaginary is excellent and a worthy contrast to older studies of East Asian gender that owe much of their analysis to what Dorothy Ko calls "the May Fourth image of the miserable traditional woman" and an orientalist reverence for the model of new womanhood that emerged in the twentieth-century West.[2] Here Matsu's exceptionality enables Lin to provide an alternative gendered narrative that is new and refreshing.

It may be surprising to some readers that Lin does not attempt to compare Matsu to other frontier spaces in Asia or the world. While Lin mentions James Scott's work on peripheral communities in Southeast Asia, _The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia_ (2009), she does not fully explore the relationship of Matsu's forbidden outpost to Scott's Zomia. Peter C. Purdue's _China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia_ (2010) or Suk-Young Kim's _DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship along the Korean Border_ (2014) might have added interesting points of comparison to similar peoples living on China's other frontiers. Still, Lin's decision to limit her study to local history and ethnography greatly enhanced both the accuracy and exceptionality of her findings. Future scholars will surely use Lin's work to draw connections between this and other Asian frontier societies.

The shift from a temporary island community organized around fishing and illegal trade with the mainland to a frontline military establishment aligned with the distant island of Taiwan dramatically altered the social identity of Matsu. The United States' resumption of diplomatic talks with the PRC in 1979 and the end of the Cold War with the Soviet Union's balkanization in 1992 similarly dramatically changed the social imaginary of the archipelago. Unable to reestablish its former trade relations with the mainland, and no longer a prominent military frontline, Matsu has struggled for the past few decades to reinvent its imaginary in the post-Cold War world. Through organized pilgrimages, public forums, and online media campaigns like Matsu online, the people of Matsu have explored possible identities as a holy pilgrimage site in the worship of Mazu, a cross-strait economic zone connecting the people and businesses of Taiwan to the PRC and as an "Asian Mediterranean" gambling resort. Lin elegantly traces the history of each of these diverse imaginaries, identifies the groups that significantly contributed to each, and provides insights into why each in turn failed to emerge as the new social identity of Matsu.
It is in the failure of these recent social imaginaries that Lin hints at her most profound insight. While the cross-strait zone and the gambling resort were both quashed by political forces far removed from the archipelago, the imaginaries that they entailed were to a large degree locally conceived and promoted. This challenges the notion that imaginaries generally diffuse from the top-down, and implicitly asks, who should rightfully decide a place’s social imaginary? Geopolitical rivalries isolated Matsu from its traditional commerce and industry and left it economically marginalized. If Taiwan and China continue to disagree about Matsu’s position in the East Asian world, shouldn’t the people of Matsu be allowed to imagine and implement their own solutions to the socioeconomic problems that have been thrust upon them? It also leaves the reader to wonder whether Matsu’s search for its identity within the world from its precarious position between China and Taiwan is a microcosm of Taiwan’s own dilemma of self-determination between the last of the Cold War superpowers.

Lin’s most recent monograph is an invaluable study of an understudied region of Taiwan. It will make an excellent addition to any course about Taiwan, the Cold War, modern Chinese or Taiwanese political history, intra-Asian relations, Pacific Island geography and culture, gender in Asia, or social imaginaries and identity formation in general. I would also recommend this work as a poignant case study to people anywhere who are struggling to redefine themselves in a broader world of newly reactionary marginalization.

Notes

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