

COMMENTARY

The tensions between Japan and China over control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands: Reading East Asian History Differently

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The tensions between Japan and China over control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands go back more than a century. But there was a time when the islands were a part of the Ryukyu kingdom which was independent of both countries and had trade links with both.

Islands have always been anomalous places. Unique to the earth's geo- logical history, they are storehouses of rare life-presences. Then there are islands, once located along history's fluid changing lines, that are now crucial in a present-day geopolitical and economic context. As events of the recent past have shown, these islands, like the eight uninhabited islands strewn in the East China Sea and overlooked by Japan, China and Taiwan, can set off diplomatic tensions between nations.

A sign of uneasiness the islands evoke is clear from the different names they have: the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands are referred to as Diaoyu or Tiaoyutai by China and Taiwan, respectively. Observances relating to the anniversary of the "Liutiaohu incident", an event that led to Japan's China invasion of 1931 were aggravated this year by news that the Japanese government was seeking to "formally" buy the privately owned islands. Japan's claim to the islands dating from the 1890s have always been questioned by China and Taiwan, who cite textual evidence from a period much farther back, but present- day concerns now matter more. The islands lie along vital fishing lanes and oil reserves were indicated there in the late 1960s.

Precedents do exist in international law on settling conflicting claims made by nations over uninhabited islands. Claims over the Clipperton Island in the east Pacific, now controlled by France and eastern Greenland that is part of Denmark's claims to the region, were resolved in the 1930s on the basis of parameters such as evidence of occupation, peaceful intents and history. But in the case of Senkaku/Diaoyu, history in many ways is the *very* source of conflict. Sometimes the past's difficult coexistence with the present can make resolution elusive, though Deng Xiaoping's prescient advice at the time of the Sino-Japanese friendship treaty (1978) still rings true. After an incident when the Chinese "diplo- matically" retreated and declared the presence of its ships near the islands as "accidental", Deng had agreed to the islands not figuring in the treaty. The conflict now shelved would be resolved by wiser future generations, he said.

The past will always matter though. On the other hand, perhaps a different reading of history, one that highlights again the unique linkages that once tied the region, that is, land masses and seas together, could help in a better understanding.

Seven hundred years ago, the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands, like others around, con- stituted vital

outposts of the seafaring kingdom of the Ryukyu. The presence of the islands has been recorded by chroniclers, cartographers, and calligraphers of the period. The inclusion of these islands in the Ryukyu kingdom appeared in an early 18th century text written by a Japanese warrior scholar called Hayashi Shihei, a book later part of the collection of the Dutch trade official Isaac Titsingh who visited Edo (Tokyo) in the 18th century.

Ryukyu Kingdom

The Ryukyu kingdom centred around islands of the Okinawa group, and others such as the Amami and the Sakishima. These have been inhabited since millennia as archaeological excavations have established. In the 14th century the kingdom was at the centre of a thriving trade, with its ships traversing a vast oceanic region from Korea down to south-east Asia and even some islands in the Pacific. The Rekidai Hoan, a collection of Ryukyu documents across three centuries, listed these links with a wider world. Most of these documents however were lost in the 1945 battle of Okinawa though some copies, it is believed, survive in Taiwan and Tokyo universities.

The Ryukyu kingdom was influenced by both kingdoms of China and Japan, and yet had its own autonomy, something that would remain in place even after its defeat by the Satsuma clan of Japan in the early 17th century. It was also a period when pirate groups called the *wokou* (or *waku*) played a defining role. They were rebels of a kind and included several *ronin*, warriors from feudal Japan, but soon disparate Chinese groups too would join the ranks of the *wokou*, and they were indiscriminate both in their allegiances and their choice of victims. The *wokou* regularly raided coastal cities of China, Korea and even Japan. There are records of *wokou* ships sailing up the river Yangtze, pillaging and raiding cities along the coast.

This existence of a 16th-century maritime world of traders, merchants and pirates with dividing lines never really rigid between them, partly played a role in how China and Japan would soon “isolate themselves”. The interior world was largely an agricultural one; while coastal and riverside cities, where trade and exchange occurred, were also largely insecure, faced as they were by the threat of repeated pirate attacks. This was in some ways a defensive gesture on the part of China and Japan, to keep the *wokou* away, but it soon encompassed several practices, “isolationist” in nature. Policies that banned overseas trade, called “*haijin*” in China, and those that forbade contact with foreigners called “*sakoku*” in Tokugawa Japan, meant that only a few trading outposts, or islands, some part of the Ryukyu kingdom, allowed contact, exchange and foreign residence.

As these kingdoms closed themselves, the Ryukyu maritime kingdom thrived in a system both intricate and fluid where concepts of ruler-ship, lines of control, and aspects of sovereignty were based on trust and tribute, derived from links to the two land masses that were its immediate neighbours. For two centuries, the Ryukyu had acknowledged the dual sovereignty of both China and Japan, and yet retained its independence, in a system of governance that has no place in accepted models today.

Japan's relations with China in this period continued via the Ryukyu kingdom. The island of Tanegashima, then part of the Ryukyu kingdom, and located close to the Japanese island of Kyushu, was where the ship of the Portuguese explorer Fernao Pinto landed in 1543 after heavy storms blew it off course from eastern China. Tanegashima was a trade outpost and it was from here that goods moved farther on to Japan, and Pinto's arrival at Tanegashima was the first recorded presence of European traders in an area close to Japan. There was Dejima, off Nagasaki farther north, where the Dutch would soon have their outpost, a world described eloquently by David Mitchell in his novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*.

Meiji Japan's western-driven modernisation formally made the Ryukyu kingdom part of the country

in the 1860s. The Senkaku islands, part of this kingdom, were declared *terra nullius* by Japan though it formally controlled them only after the war of 1894-95, when Japan scored a decisive victory over China. Until the treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the Sino-Japanese War, Japan had been wary of contesting China's claims to the islands. War was to intervene again in the 1930s, and then the 1970s saw a new era of contesting claims over these islands, aggravated because of bitter memories that remain of conflicts and a terrible war less than a century old. On the other hand, a different perhaps collaborative reading of history when these islands were part of a richer maritime world could bring about a richer understanding between nations. The past always offers us two readings and sometimes the more forgotten lessons can hold up pointers for the future.

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P.S.

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