

■ Article ■

The Problem with Islands: Is There a Long-term Solution to the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands Conflict?

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Abstract

The article traces the history of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and explores the underlying reasons why they have become the site of a political dispute between China and Japan. The paper suggests that islands have a specific ambiguity to them that makes them an easy space on to which to project political power and insecurity. Stress is placed on the changing concepts of geographical space that complicate what might otherwise have been a minor disagreement over islands and suggests how cultural factors have made uninhabited islands into a hot button issue that determines military budgets. The final section of the paper makes concrete suggestions as to how the conflict might be defused through cultural exchange and a broader conception of local issues. The author suggests that efforts to promote codependence and highlight local issues could make a difference because they will bring the focus of attention to the local communities.

■ **Keywords** : Senkaku Islands, Japanese foreign policy, Okinawa, Daiyu Islands, Pacific Pivot, Okinawa

Introduction

Much ink has been spilled in the media in the narration of the dispute between Japan and China about the sovereignty of an obscure group of islands known as the Senkaku Islands (or Diaoyu Islands in Chinese). Although there has been much discussion about how this dispute represents the “aggressiveness” of a “rising China,” or the “assertiveness” of a reinvigorated Japan, remarkably little attention has been given to the cultural and historical background of the islands, or the ideological and

institutional context within Japan and China, that have made this space so critical to a national and international story.

In other words, these islands came out of nowhere to become a battlefield where the pride of two nations is contested in public in a very short period of time. The question should not be what the claims on both sides are, but rather what in the cultural and ideological makeup of the two countries has made such a dispute possible, even preferable? The dispute over the territorial claims to this group of uninhabited Islands, of minor economic importance to both economies, have escalated to the point that they block out any discussion about the extensive cooperation between China and Japan in economic, educational, governmental, and NGOs spheres. Most all discussions on the complex relations between these two powers will come back inevitably to the tale of these tiny islands.

It is the repetition of this narrative itself that has done the most to worsen relations between the two nations. In part this development is simply a result of the tale of these islands giving a format, an evolving tale on to which the various distortions and contradictions produced by economic and technological integration can be projected. But the Chinese and Japanese are able to feel the deep pains of globalization which they sense vaguely in daily life vicariously through a narrative of disputed islands.

The question should be what exactly is it about these islands that makes them to play this role in a global narrative despite their relative economic insignificance? What might it be about these islands, and the chain of islands that makes up Okinawa, that makes them fundamentally different from other territory, and thus more powerful as a symbol of disputed national territory? Could it even be that it is precisely because the islands are uninhabited that they gain such symbolic power? The subtle cultural discourse on identity and borders, the role of borders in a larger national psychology, needs to be included in the discussion of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. One need only compare the dispute over Senkaku/Diaoyu with the dispute between Germany and France over

Alsace and Lorraine before the First World War. The provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were home to hundreds of thousands of people and a significant economic prize. In the case of Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands, the symbolic dispute looms largest, a virtual fight in a globalized information-rich world with profound implications for perceptions.

The unique qualities of islands as a location of ambiguity is treated at length in the study of islands in history and literature *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric and Politics* by Marc Shell of Harvard University. Shell considered at length the in-between status of islands in this thoughtful study, suggesting that islands, by their very nature, have a multivalent quality that frustrates concepts of ownership and draws surrounding powers into a contestation. Such ambiguity can lure the surrounding nations into disputes that go beyond the original intentions. Shell (2014) explains:

Whose island is it? The rules of ownership sometimes seem deceptively simple, and they hardly boil down to legal niceties about open and close seas. Islands are more like creatures on the high seas. As Melville says, "A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it. A Loose-Fish is fair game." His sly dictum suggests even that a harpooned whale might have an ownership claim on the ship it drags around. The question of ownership here thus pertains to a literary issue: who, speaking of islands, gets to name the ships at sea and the land, utopian or not, they come against? (p. 98)

Shell suggests here that the island has the potential to drag with it the continent to which it is attached, and that through the act of naming, or of claiming, the islands contribute to a project of self-definition and national destiny that goes far beyond the rocks and sand that make up the actual islands. Islands occupy a symbolic space wherein national borders become critical territory. The dispute over the island not only drags the nations behind it, it redefines them, through the dispute itself, as a contiguous whole in which societies that are increasingly fragmented within are suddenly made to appear as if they were unified, and the government is made to seem as if it is representative. The islands have

such power perhaps because each citizen feels increasingly like an island without his or her own nation. They create a powerful mythic discourse in a national shared narrative and that discourse gives credence to the concept of a nation state in an age of radical division and dislocation.

The Historical Origins of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute

There are Chinese texts that date back to 770 B.C. which refer to the region of the East Sea that includes the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The oldest term for these islands was Liegushe 列女古射 (See the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 ; Classic of Mountains and Seas). The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were referred to specifically as Gaohuayu 高華嶼 in the Tang Dynasty. Thereafter the islands appear in numerous maps of trade routes between China and Japan, but without any specific reference to nations.

In 1852, P. F. von Siebold referred specifically in his writings to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, noting that they were not included in the Ryukyu Kingdom. An American map titled "Map of the Chinese Empire" compiled in 1861 by S. W. Williams also excludes the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from the Ryukyu, using different colors. Most notably, Japan surveyed the Diaoyu Islands in 1885 with the intent of setting up markers to indicate Japanese possession, but met strong Chinese objection and delayed the project. It was only with Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese war, and the signing of the Treaty of Shimogaseki in 1895, that Japan resolved to incorporate the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, along with Taiwan and its surrounding islands.

The fate of Japan's remaining colonies was settled at the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951, but because the People's Republic of China was excluded from that event, no resolution of the Senkaku/Diaoyu problem was possible. Since then, the current Japanese position is based on a text entitled "The Basic View on the Sovereignty over the Senkaku [Diaoyu] Islands" which was released on March 8, 1972, after the final agreement for the return of Okinawa to Japan (Liang, 2011, pp. 114-116).

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were important primarily as navigational markers along the well-travelled trade route leading from the Chinese port of Fuzhou through the Ryukyu Kingdom, and beyond it to Japan.¹⁾ In those days, the islands were far more critical in that they made up part of a local trade route that has since disappeared as a result of the growth of massive ports and the use of container ships to transport goods en masse without any space for local players. Moreover, there was no clear border between China and Japan until the nineteenth century, because the archipelago now designated as the Okinawa Province of Japan was the independent Ryukyu Kingdom. The Ryukyu Kingdom had little military force and exercised rather loose control over its islands. Its military and administrative institutions were rather modest.

Thus the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands were located at the very end of the Ryukyu Kingdom archipelago, which in turn maintained a delicate dual client relationship with both the Qing Dynasty which ruled China (although its imperial family was Manchu) and Tokugawa Japan. The Ryukyu Kings, the Shō family, started to send tributary missions to both China and to Japan after the Ming Dynasty (patron of the Ryukyu Kingdom) fell and it was replaced by the Manchu Qing Dynasty. Because the Manchus lacked the legitimacy of the Ming Dynasty, that transition made it possible to pay tribute to both countries as part of a complex diplomatic positioning. The protocol involved, however, was clearly different.

That trade route plied by not only tribute ships but numerous small traders boats made Okinawa into a cultural and political bridge between China and Japan which was defined by direct human interaction, not mechanized container ships. Although there were pirates and there were military concerns, there was not any imperative to defend exclusive borders or to demand a specific cultural identity from the inhabitants of the region. There was no modern concept of citizenship or dominant cultural identity. Japanese language, habits, and culture extended down from the North into the Ryukyu Kingdom and blended together with Chinese and indigenous elements that varied from island to island. The

complete effect was to establish a cultural continuum that led from the Japanese islands of Kyushu to the North of Ryukyu to the Chinese mainland to the West of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. There was no clear cut off point separating the cultural and political realms, no “exclusive economic zone” as defined by Article 56 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. Such a concept would have been alien to the inhabitants of the islands, and in many respects it remains alien to them.

The pre-modern understanding between local communities that allowed for a slow cultural and political transition from Japan to China through an independent, but not assertive island nation came to an end when Japan occupied and annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879. That transformation was a result of the profound shift in the identity of Japan after the Meiji Restoration swept into power a group of samurai reformists determined to make Japan into a modern nation. But “modern nation” at the time was defined in terms of the great imperial powers like France, England, Germany, Holland, and Spain who drew their authority from their colonial holdings around the world.

That authority of the modern nation required above all that the Japanese oligarchy redefine its position in the world in geographic terms. Japan started to make extensive maps that defined its colonial possessions, extending eventually into Korea and China.

As Robert Aldrich (2014) has noted of Japan and other colonial powers:

Several generalizations about the shape of politics remolded by colonialism are crucial. One is the new cartography: colonizers drew lines on maps, the entities that they created eventually becoming the nation-states of the contemporary world. Colonialism fixed political borders that had earlier been far more vague and mutable. (p. 313)

From that moment on geographic borders became a matter of war and peace for nations, and the invisible lines projected onto the globe

by geographers far outweighed the concerns and needs of local inhabitants. Just a few years later Africa was divided into rectangles and squares by the imperial powers who attended the Berlin Conference of 1884 without any regard for the existing communities and nations of that continent. The random divisions allotted at that meeting survive to the present day, surviving multiple anti-colonial revolutions.

Although Japan promptly abolished the government of the Ryukyu Kingdom after its takeover and made it a minor province with little autonomy, Okinawa remains quite culturally and economically distinct from the rest of Japan and features six distinct languages that are not mutually intelligible with Japanese or with each other (Bairon, Brenzinger, & Heinrich, 2009). The political and cultural integration of Okinawa into Japan remains incomplete to this day and the archipelago retains an active independence movement. Moreover, the tensions between Okinawa and Tokyo have grown more pitched over the last five years as locals have turned decidedly against the United States bases in Okinawa and made the removal of troops a high priority. Thus the Japanese claim to the Senkaku islands has taken on greater significance as a result of the increasing need for Tokyo to assert its political and cultural control over Okinawa in light of more powerful contestations.

One could even go as far as to say that the chain of islands that made up the Ryukyu Kingdom, loosely linked together by wooden vessels that engaged in small-scale trade and fishing, became intolerable for Japan as it committed itself to a radical modernization of its economy and expansion of its navy and the adaptation of the conventions of international relations current among the imperial powers of the time. The strong central government established by the oligarchs was headed by the Meiji emperor and dedicated to pursuit of trade relations with other colonial powers and the extension of military power. Okinawa became the first colony and any suggestion that Okinawa is not a part of Japan is met with the most extreme sensitivity in Tokyo.

The expansion into Okinawa was not driven merely by hubris. It was also inspired by fear—and no doubt sensitivity about Senkaku in

Japan today is also powered by fears. In the 1870s Japan was still reeling from the shock of realizing the vast gap between its own naval power and that of the United States as was made painfully obvious when Commodore Matthew Perry led a squadron of two steamers and two sailing vessels into Tokyo Bay on July 8, 1853 and demanded that Japan open its ports for trade. China had been humiliated a decade before by the British during the Opium Wars and was made clear that military control of territory was the prerequisite for political survival. Thus the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have the unique position of being the absolute limit of the Okinawa extension of Japan from this period and are correspondingly sensitive.

Japan's annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom as Okinawa was the start of its colonial expansion into Asia, and for this reason any claims on islands in the waters just beyond Okinawa proper is naturally interpreted as an expansionist and aggressive act. At the time, Japan was looking for acceptance by an international community dominated by the great colonial powers and the highest priority of Japanese diplomats and strategic thinkers was creating a new Japan that would be considered as a peer by Europeans and Americans. For example, Baron Kaneko Kentarō, who was sent to Harvard University to study early in the Meiji period, served a major part in convincing Americans that Japan's war with Russia was meant to maintain the peace of Asia and to introduce Anglo-American civilization to the East (Anderson, 1914, p. 14). Kaneko would later strike up a close relationship with fellow Harvard graduate Theodore Roosevelt that would be critical to winning American tacit approval for Japanese colonial expansion.

But the most important means for Japan to assert its claims over Okinawa and Senkaku/Diaoyu was the full embrace of the complex field of modern map making and international law. Taking advantage of its speed in adopting Western institutions and nomenclature, Japan set out to create new maps and rules that would make these new territories Japanese in a manner that appeared entirely legitimate in the eyes of European authorities. International law seemed as good as natural law

in the drawing rooms and libraries of England and France and Japan worked assiduously to establish its sovereignty over Okinawa, Korea, and Manchuria in this manner.

The integration of the Ryukyu Kingdom into Japan, and the extension of Japan's concept of sovereignty far to the south, is related to the transformation of the entire culture of the nation under the pressure to adopt new concepts of land and property taken from Western Europe. The enclosure acts that swept England in the eighteenth century altered the definition of land and created the modern concept of real estate in which land and all its features and qualities can be owned in an almost absolute sense by someone or some organization. As a result of this shift in the definition of possession, the commons belonging to a manner or to a lord that had previously been shared by all farmers by habit and precedent vanished and became a private property which the owner was free to share, or not to share, entirely on his whim. Suddenly, the land to which poor farmers had had access to for generations was walled off and they were reduced to beggary.

This shift in the meaning of land, brilliantly described in Karl Polanyi's book (2001) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, had profound implications for more than farmland. The enclosure of land marked the beginning of a radical transformation of all objects into products and goods with a narrowly defined concept of possession which was based on monetary value and almost absolute. All aspects of human experience became objects for consumption and for possession and the trend towards commodification continues on today at an increasingly rapid pace.

That revolution in the thinking of a relatively small number of individuals in the eighteenth century spread quickly through the entirety of England, and then through Europe, acting as an ideological "ice nine" that transmogrified everything it touched into a fungible product that can be bought and sold. This new definition of land as real estate has merged with the nation state definition of territory to create an absolute division where none would otherwise be visible in Senkaku. Possession becomes

the defining issue, and this imperative is extended out as a result of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its “exclusive economic zone.” Interestingly, although both nations hotly contest the issues of possession of Senkaku, none question any of the underlying assumptions behind the “exclusive economic zone.”

Such a strategy of control by definition and by delineation was central to Japan’s strategy of seizing institutional authority in the region from the aged Qing Dynasty and Joseon Dynasty, serving to make their governments seem outdated, illegitimate, and untrustworthy. By using Western rules for map making and navigation, Japan wanted to effectively make up the rules themselves and gain the ultimate advantage. The technologies for the making of maps for Okinawa, and East Asia as a whole, and the nomenclature employed, were established by Japan, as were many of the terms for politics, economics, and diplomacy. The Meiji period maps produced by Japan, “*Gaihozu*” (maps of foreign areas), were essential for Japanese political dominance in the region (Kobayashi, 2006).

Such maps demonstrated that Japan’s adaptation of a sophisticated “Western” approach to describing the physical world gave it the authority associated with a new enlightened new global order and pushed aside time-honored habits and assumptions. Stefan Tanaka in his classic study *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* relates how Japan defined the goal posts for the intellectual discussion about East Asia at every level, from maps and science to constitutions and legal terms:

In [Meiji intellectuals’] quest to establish a new historical understanding of Japan, they sought a scientific methodology that prioritized the study of human activity as a regulated and historical object. Through their reading of the histories of Western Civilization, they came to believe that universal laws existed that govern all societies, including Japan, and they attempted to place Japan into that universalistic framework. In this sense the West, a geographical and idealized entity that represented progress and modernity, replaced China as Japan's ideal. (1993, p. 36)

At the core the project was aimed at ending a Sino-centric world view and thereby empowering Japan to make up its own rules. Islands were the front line in this project of rewriting Asia from a “Western” perspective as a way of expanding Japanese political authority.

When Japanese defend their claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands they emphasize abstractions taken from law and geography as a means of making it seem to those far away from the island in New York or Paris that the Japanese perspective is scientific, rational, and international. There is no mention in such arguments of the perspectives or the experiences of the communities which are impacted by decisions concerning the islands. There is not a word about who the people are who live there and what their lives are like, what they think about the issue. Japanese government defenses employ international law and maritime law because it appears to have a special, objective status. Those international agreements from the 19th century, perceived as being modern, are assumed to be rational and logical, regardless of the exploitation of the colonial past that lies behind them.

For example, in an article by former Japanese diplomat Tadashi Ikeda in *The Diplomat*, “Getting Senkaku History Right” the author frames the entire problem in terms of the imperative of international law and mentions nothing of the historical and cultural origins of the residents of the area or of their economic and political concerns. Ikeda argues that “Japan incorporated the islands into its sovereign territory using procedures in accordance with international law, prior to the conclusion of the treaty of Shimogaseki, which ended the Sino-Japanese War” (2013, p. 2). This statement of legal history is entirely accurate, but there is not a word about the gross illegality of that war itself and the demands made of China as a result that were clearly a blatant violation of international law. The entire imperial trajectory is skillfully hidden away in the abstractions of international law.

International law, after all, was developed as part of the larger imperialist system of the nineteenth crafted by the British, primarily, with the help of the French, Germans, and others. As James Gathii describes

the process:

The imposition of colonial rule went hand in hand with the imposition of English rules of property, tort and contract, which, in turn, facilitated the expansion of industrial and commercial capitalism....Thus, there was a close relationship between rules of public international law and those of English rules of property, tort, and contract in nineteenth-century protectorate jurisprudence. (2007, p. 1014)

That is to say that the extension of new concepts of property, defined in terms set by the conquering powers, was the twin sister of colonial rule and undergirded it at every turn. Thus the very argument invoked in the Japanese case cannot be separated from the violence of the nineteenth century.

In Antony Anghie's classic study of international law, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (2005), the author argues that imperialism and international law were inseparable, especially with regards to the central concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty, as the term evolved in the nineteenth century, came to refer to an "absolute set of powers which was bound by no higher authority and which was properly detached from all the imprecise claims of morality and justice" (Ibid., p. 101). That is to say that the power to control through sovereignty did not allow for any consideration of the concerns of local inhabitants. Although ancient texts could be presented as part of an argument for sovereignty, that process was by nature one that only a colonial power could do effectively.

Anghie suggests that colonialism defined international law and that the governing of non-Europeans through cultural subordination remains a major issue today. Only by "defining and excluding the uncivilized" (Ibid., p. 52) could the power of the new nation state and international law be made all powerful. He categorizes international law as an imperial discipline by its nature ultimately concerned with expansion and domination. He notes that "the colonial history of international law is concealed, even when it is reproduced" (Ibid., p. 268).

Referring to the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Ikeda writes, “Had the Senkaku, at that time, been recognized as ‘islands appertaining to Taiwan,’ the U.S. would not have placed the Senkaku under its administration as a part of Okinawa Prefecture” (2013, p. 1). Again, nothing of the tragic context of the Cold War and its devastating impact on local communities across Asia is mentioned. For that matter, Ikeda dismisses all traditional Chinese assumptions about surrounding territory, saying, “At that time imperial titles were given by Chinese dynasties to ‘barbarian’ tributary states. This thinking has been superseded by modern international law” *Ibid.*, p. 4). The disingenuous assumption is that international law is something invoked to insure objectivity and scientific accuracy. Yet there was nothing at all enlightened about Japanese imperial expansion and it could very well be labeled as “barbarian.”

The establishment of national boundaries in accordance with new international standards paralleled the growth of a Japanese bureaucracy that saw its interests in propagating the new structure of a modern “nation state” not only outwards, but also internally. Making a claim on islands on the fringe of Okinawa can be seen even as a preemptive strike to put China on the defense, lest China make a serious effort to demand Okinawa’s independence. The tragedy of Korea, or the Ryukyu Kingdom, in the 19th century was that a nation state only could be recognized by the international community if it complied with standards that countries that had not properly modernized could not meet or were ignorant of. All the islands, even small islets, were forced to snap to this new grid. That came to a peak in 1895, when, following its victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War, Japan declared the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to be Japanese territory in the modern sense of the word. The central government documented the formal names for each island in 1900 and thereby integrated them formally into an expanding Japanese empire. The determining factor for possession of territory had nothing to do with trading routes or personal relations, but rather was set by military control.

But the Japanese empire was at a distance from Japan proper at the time, and Chinese, Koreans, and others who lived in the Japanese

Empire never enjoyed the full privileges of those who lived in Japan as Japanese nationals. Although the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were part of the Japanese Empire, they were not part of Okinawa. The dispute is linked to the more profound question of where exactly Japan proper begins and how Japan is geographically defined. For China, Japanese actions are interpreted as an active effort to blur the boundaries and create the ambiguities so as to make expansion possible. The assessment may be mistaken, but history has many such precedents.

American perspectives on the islands that made up Okinawa shifted dramatically after World War II. General of the U.S. Army Douglas MacArthur wrote on March 21, 1948, about a new concept of America's "strategic boundaries" that went far beyond anything Americans had said before:

The strategic boundaries of the United States were no longer along the western shores of North and South America; they lay along the eastern shores of the Asiatic continent. ... All the islands of the Western Pacific were of vital importance to us. For these reasons, he [MacArthur] attached great importance to Okinawa, and felt it absolutely necessary that we [the United States] retain unilateral and complete control of the Ryukyu chain south of Latitude 29.53°. (Liang, 2011, p. 123)

The control of these islands by the United States, and later by a close ally of the United States, was considered a prime imperative for a global strategy. Thus the push outwards was no longer an expansion of the Japanese Empire, but a matter of America's immediate wellbeing. Chinese did not necessarily see it that way.

The fall of the Japanese empire did not resolve the ambiguous status of those who live and fish around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. And the People's Republic of China was excluded by the United States from all discussions of the islands after the 1949 revolution—and was not even recognized as a legitimate nation by the United States. There was no one at the table to articulate the Chinese position. Liang Zhijian notes

that “In 1951, China was excluded from participating in the San Francisco peace conference. Because China was not involved, it was of course impossible for the dialogue among WWII allies to include the Chinese perspective” (Ibid., p. 115). Much of the discussion about islands papers over this tremendous weakness in the discussion about the islands so far. Chinese views have been purposely excluded from the debate for decades.

In the post-war period, the United States occupied Okinawa and stationed much of its military there. Agreements were reached between the governments of Japan and the United States in 1965 and in 1969 to return Okinawa to Japan in the future. Although there was a lively debate about how and when to return Okinawa to Japan, there was no question about whether Okinawa was a part of Japan or not. It was assumed that Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa was a given and that all negotiations concerning reversion of Okinawa should be led by Japanese bureaucrats, with no participation from the people who actually live in Okinawa. When the famed Japanologist, and American ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer argued for the speedy reversion of Okinawa to Japan in the discussion leading up to the 1971 Memorandum of Conversation, there was no hint that Okinawa had any history of independence.

In the process leading up to the reversion of Okinawa in 1972, the United States continued to refer to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in terms of Japanese “administrative rights” (McCormack, 2011, p. 3).²⁾ The United States clearly avoided employing the term “sovereignty,” thus creating an ambiguity concerning the status of the islands at the moment that Okinawa was to revert to Japan in 1972. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were not considered a formal part of the Ryukyu Kingdom originally. The ideological environment of the Cold War and their proximity to the People’s Republic of China would seem to be sufficient reason to demand that they belonged to Japan. But although the region had a special status in the eyes of the United States security establishment, similar to that of Xiamen off the coast of Taiwan, these islands were not openly contested. There is some question as to whether or not the islands were

in fact part of a larger hedging project to create ambiguity and tension between China and Japan as a means of assuring a continued United States presence.

That phrase “administrative rights” with regards to the islands suggests that there is a clear difference between “administrative rights” and “sovereignty” or “ownership.” There is a larger question: to what exact sense does an island belong to a nation, to citizens, or to a property owner? The United States was happy to leave this question ambiguous, perhaps because it hoped to exploit such ambiguity at a future date. Kimie Hara (2001) suggests that the United States government imagined that the conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would serve as a “wedge of containment” to keep the United States engaged in East Asia. The controversy over the islands was imagined to be something that could serve to keep Japan from drifting too close to China. China was, after all, Japan’s primary market for its goods and services in the pre-war period and there was concern about China’s reemergence. Hara suggests that this ambiguity was part of the United States government’s long term plan for preserving its status in Japan by playing up territorial ambiguities in order to encourage Japanese engagement with the United States over the long term.

The significance of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands increased dramatically as China increased its exports in the 1970s and 1980s and embraced a developmental model that relied on revenue from products sold overseas. The resulting expansion of foreign trade had no precedent in Chinese history and moved away from a long-standing focus on domestic self-sufficiency. The emergence of a Chinese export-based economy largely dependent on the ocean for its economic survival also meant that the control of the sea became a critical topic for China. Any threat of military action by the United States, or Japan, that might disrupt trade had the potential to paralyze the Chinese economy to a degree that had never been true. Abandoning the policies of economic self-sufficiency of Mao meant that islands became important not only because of their nationalist symbolism, but also because they offered claims to ownership

of the ocean and could even be militarized if necessary in an emergency. The Senkaku Islands, and specifically the regions of the ocean that they defined, became critical to national security and therefore visible to policy makers.

When Okinawa reverted back to Japan in 1972 and the “administrative rights” over Senkaku/Diaoyu were therefore more clearly affirmed, there was little immediate response from the People’s Republic of China. At the time, China was in the final phase of the Cultural Revolution whose anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric had drawn China inwards and shrunk its global profile. If anything, the active pursuit of territorial claims might have sounded like the very imperialism that Mao was decrying in his speeches. But with the conclusion of that massive protest against capitalism and against possession, ownership issues returned to China. Slowly the value of trade became a larger part of the economic calculus, as did the fish harvest, and for that matter the oil and gas that lay beneath the sea. Subsequently, the submerged Chunxiao gas fields increased dramatically in significance. And Japan was perceived as a rival and threat not in an ideological manner, but rather an economic manner.

Japan and the United States were subject to constant attacks as the bastions of imperialism under Mao Zedong. The essential task for China’s leaders was to contest the ideological grounds by which economics and politics were defined and projected. Territory was not a primary issue. If anything, Mao’s position was if Japanese adopted his brand of revolutionary Communism, there would be no need for a conflict between Japan and China in the first place. But when Deng Xiaoping cast off revolutionary communism in the 1980s and the Chinese economy was integrated into the global economic system and into the Bretton Woods financial system, China accepted most of the rules of engagement of the international community. The final step was China’s acceptance into the World Trade Organization in 2001.

China abolished the private ownership of land and although it adhered to international law in accordance with the conventions of diplomacy, it did not view ownership of land as a driving issue in its politics.

But as the People's Republic of China was integrated into a global, capitalist economy, China increasingly embraced a similar concept of real estate, of profit, and of development to that used in the West. Land could be defined in monetary terms and the real estate value, asset value, and security value of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became quite evident. Chinese nationalism was related to the rise of the island controversy, but it was but one element.

Safe access to shipping became critical not only for the export of Chinese products, but also for the supply of raw materials for Chinese manufacturing (petroleum, iron ore, cow skins, and nickel) as well as for the supply of food to feed China's growing urban population. The consequences of this economic shift, starting with Deng Xiaoping's moves to make Chinese exports globally competitive by following an economic developmental model akin to that which President Park Chung Hee of the Republic of Korea had used in the 1960s and 1970s, meant that all discussion about the sea around China became extremely sensitive.

That was a new development in China. The Qing Dynasty had no qualms about shutting down external trade, and closing down the southern seacoast, for decades as a response to the resistance to its rule from Ming Loyalists stationed in Taiwan and the pirates with whom they mingled from the 1670s. Mao also vastly reduced Chinese exports and imports for thirty years when he refused to be drawn into the economic systems of Japan and the United States. But today China no longer has such a defense, and increasing dependence on imported energy and food suggest that closing down China is no longer an option. Thus oceans have become critically important to China. China is investing heavily in developing a blue-water navy in recognition of security threats posed by China's economic integration with the world via shipping and logistics systems. A military conflict over the islands surrounding China could result in a shutdown of trade and a collapse of the economy that would quickly lead to massive public unrest.

Robert S. Ross explains the changing concerns of China thusly:

In the past, support in China for a blue-water navy carrier was mostly confined to the navy. Naval officers have sought a carrier-centered navy for many reasons beyond simply nationalism, including normal inter-service rivalries, budget politics, and the intrinsic interest of navies to expand their capabilities. What is new is that support for a naval buildup has spread to the provinces and to all sectors of Chinese society, including to universities, government think tanks, industrial circles, the political elite, and the general public. Debates over maritime policy are now conducted in China's leading academic journals. (2009, p. 61)

Critiques of contemporary Japanese economics or exploitative business practices disappeared. Rather, critiques of past Japanese aggression which focused on how cruel and exploitative Japanese people were emerged that lacked the critiques of capitalism and imperialism that had informed previous writings. But this move away from an ideological critique of Japan made the issue of islands more visible and more focused. For China, Japan was flawed in its essential nature and there was no sense that this problem could be addressed by empowering Japanese workers or by advocating revolutionary change in Japan.

More recently, China's first bid to develop as a naval power since the Ming Dynasty is changing the nature of the debate on oceans. Islands are emerging a central topic in debates on security, especially in the case of the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. There is intense planning being undertaken by the navies of People's Republic of China, Japan, and the United States for possible conflicts in the so-called "first island defense line" (consisting of the Korean Peninsula, Jeju Island, Okinawa, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippines). Islands have become potential fortresses as a result.

The ramifications of any issue involving islands in East Asia has increased exponentially since the United States announced its so-called "Pacific Pivot" in 2011 and made plans to increase the deployment of ships and forces to East Asia. Any military activity near these islands

directly off China's coast threatens to quickly become an international incident, all the more in light of the highly aggressive Trump administration posture towards China. A major conflict is not necessary to bring the Chinese economy to a stop. Even minor incidents could freeze up trade routes and cause tremendous domestic instability. Therefore, the steps by Japan to militarize the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the adjacent islands of Yonaguni and Ishigaki, are read by China as an immediate threat. Military planning is part of the equation, but dependence on trade for raw materials and export markets is a large part as well.

But the sense of threat felt by the Chinese navy, and by the Chinese political establishment as a whole, because of recent military exercises by Japan in the region of Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands is not only a response to possible military scenarios. It is also a response to the rise of Japan as a military force in its own right, which appears to have far fewer restrictions on its actions from the United States. As the late Obama Administration and the incoming Trump Administration strive to out-source security duties to Japan for East Asia, that tension will only grow. Every step taken by Japan in this region is read as the start of a larger projection of force. The totality of that trend is not what the Japanese see as a return of Japan to its rightful status as a "normal country," but rather is an expansion of Japanese power that will inevitably lead to colonial expansion. That reading of events is shaped by the collective memory of trauma in China's recent history which is so effectively articulated in high school text books. Islands become, in the imagination of the Chinese, stepping stones for expansion and therefore Japanese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands seem far more threatening to China than they appear to outsiders. But the discourse goes both ways and the speed of China's economic rise has spooked many Japanese, making the issue of islands all the more sensitive.³⁾

Over the last one hundred years an elaborate discipline of maritime boundaries has emerged which has been codified as the body of rules and regulations known as international law. The laws defining the borders

of nation states, determining who has the rights to fish and to resources beneath the sea floor, are applied under international law uniformly throughout the world based on abstract principles that have little relation to the actual practice in the regions impacted. Today, by the force of practice, international law, and international institutions like the United Nations who accept it as natural law, international law is well established and even inviolable. For example, The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) assumes that the possession of resources and the application of all legal regulations concerning residents must start or stop at the border of the nation. That border is an ideal taken from Euclid's geometry whose width can be infinitely precise. Culture, geographical, and ecological features of the land are assumed to be irrelevant. Local concerns obviously are not taken into consideration. The ownership of resources found on the ocean floor surrounding claimed territory is not impacted by the shifting of the ground, the flow of currents, or the movement of human populations. The lines exist on official maps, but they mean nothing to tuna, or whales, or even to divers for abalone or fishermen plying the rocky coasts—unless, of course, they are ensnared in a controversy.

Rising Conflict in the Current Age of Profound Contradictions

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are a set of uninhabited islands in the Pacific Ocean that are equidistant from Taiwan and from the island of Yonaguni in Okinawa Province, Japan. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are also close to the coast of Fujian Province of the People's Republic of China. Although the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were insignificant clumps of rocks unknown to anyone but local fishermen for centuries, they have emerged at the center of heated debates in the media of both Japan and of the People's Republic of China over the last fifteen years. These islands form the space in the national imaginations of Japan and China wherein a complex conflict between two nations and two cultures is articulated and they have as a result become the impetus for an enormous drive

for militarization in the region that threatens to destabilize East Asia. The probability of a massive military conflict resulting from this confrontation is increasing, especially with the remarkably hostile words aimed at China of the Trump Administration.

Yet this sudden rise in tensions is paradoxical if we consider that China and Japan are increasingly being integrated as economies and that although the movement of people may be limited, raw materials and finished goods circulate between the two countries on a scale that is unprecedented in history. So also the internet-based exchanges between the two nations continue to increase in spite of all these tensions. Even tourism remains robust and is even increasing. It seems almost as if the greater the degree of economic and financial integration becomes, the greater the tension is that is projected onto these small islands.

The current tensions between the two countries over the Senkaku/Daiyu Islands started out as an almost imperceptible low-level simmer in the 1970s. The discovery of the underwater Chunxiao natural gas reserves also transformed the significance of the islands for People's Republic of China at a time that economic growth in the Western sense was becoming the dominant paradigm. The islands themselves were the same collection of uninhabited rocks, but new technologies for the detection of natural gas deposits, and for its extraction, rendered the previously unknown sea floor as lucrative real estate. These minor islands ceased to be minor. The flow of gas beneath the ocean, and the flow of oil and gas in the international markets, created a new volatility in this previously marginal space (Cho & Choi, 2016, p. 98).

The two countries signed an agreement in 2008 to jointly develop gas fields in the area (Yoshida & Terada, 2008), but little progress was made in the actual development of the proposed project. Japan would even accuse China of drilling unilaterally to extract gas from the Japanese side of the gas reserve. The value of fish in the international market, a product of the rising demand for fish in the Chinese market and the diminishing schools of fish in the region, also emerged as a new flashpoint. The status of the islands could also serve as grounds to make

a claim to the numerous fish that swim freely past these islands without any concern for national borders or the Law of the Sea. The islands combined a monetary value with potential ideological value related to nationalist sentiments. The road was paved for a high-profile showdown.

But tensions about the financial value of the islands did not break out into the public sphere until a certain incident was taken up in the media in China and Japan. A Chinese fishing trawler, the *Minjinyu*, entered the waters nearby Senkaku/Diaoyu on September 7, 2010, as part of its fishing activities. A Japanese coast guard vessel then drew near to the *Minjinyu* and ordered the trawler to leave the area immediately. During the resulting verbal dispute the *Minjinyu* rammed into the side of Japanese coast guard vessel. The Japanese coast guard vessel responded by boarding the Chinese vessel and arresting the captain, Zhan Qixiong (Fackler & Johnson, 2010). Japan held the captain in detention until September 24 and anger on the Chinese side rose from a ripple to a tsunami wave.

Although both sides blamed the other for the collision, most likely the event would have been forgotten if the Chinese captain had not been seized. Moreover, from the Chinese perspective, since the islands were claimed by China, the Japanese would have been seizing a Chinese in Chinese territory. Although this logic was lost on most outside observers, within China the act was interpreted as profoundly aggressive.

A critical line had been crossed and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became the palimpsest on which was inscribed all the frustrations and shames of the Chinese national imagination. The debate on their territorial status became increasingly caught up with patriotism. Actions by the Japanese government were immediately interpreted as an extension of Japanese imperialism after this legally doubtful decision to take a Chinese citizen into custody. The act revived the images of the colonial exploitation of China by the Japanese that had been burned so deeply in the imagination of the Chinese. As a result, large protests arose spontaneously in Chinese cities and quickly moved beyond anything the Chinese government anticipated. The protests were not limited to gatherings in the street.

Bloggers quickly filled the Internet with attacks on Japanese imperialism and defenses of Chinese territorial integrity. The mood of cooperation between China and Japan that had been built up painstakingly over a period of two decades quickly dissipated and was replaced with open hostility.

The emotional response to the incident was also found on the other side of the sea. Sporadic protests flared up in Japan concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and right wing groups in Japan quickly seized on the occasion to promote their agenda of remilitarization of Japan and called for direct confrontation with China. The Japanese media featured extensive coverage of the protests in China in a manner that suggested that Japan was directly threatened by China itself.

Not long after these protests, the Metropolitan Government of Tokyo, led then by conservative governor Ishihara Shintaro, decided to purchase three of the islands, Uotsurijima, Kitakojima, and Minamikojima from their private owners (McCurry, 2012) making them into land owned by the city of Tokyo. This highly unorthodox action brought an end to private ownership of the islands and their relatively non-controversial status as real estate, a status that can be separated from the issue of territoriality. Instead, the islands became, in the eyes of the Japanese government, national property which had to be defended. The state intervened in this local matter without the slightest concern for the interests of the local community as part of a larger drama of geopolitics, defense budgets, and the posturing of rising politicians.

Suddenly, the marginal physical space only visited occasionally by a few fishermen who speak a local dialect that is incomprehensible to Japanese bureaucrats suddenly became legally a part of the capital of Tokyo. In other words, from that moment a challenge to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands became a direct challenge to Tokyo itself, home to the Diet and the Emperor.

This provocative action predictably inspired a new round of even more virulent protests in China in 2012 which engendered a deep sense of distrust and foreboding in Asia. The previous trend towards increasing

economic and cultural exchange, one that inspired many to think about the future with great optimism, was profoundly undermined. This radical shift happened in 2012, a year that had been slated for a series of high-profile events to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the normalization of relations between Japan and the People's Public of China. Without exception those events were cancelled and the complex Japan-China cultural, political, and economic relationship was stripped down to its bones; the potential for future development profoundly limited. A conference on the innocent topic of comparative literature to which I had been invited was abruptly called off at that time.

Media coverage in China and Japan shifted significantly. In effect it became impossible for the mainstream media of either country to present a detached analysis of the problematic. Even the Japanese Communist Party avoided a deep analysis of the problem, let alone a consideration of the larger geopolitical factors behind this development. Even the Japanese Communist Party, which had a tradition of criticizing such actions by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, was muted in its response. The Japanese Communist Party's media organ *Aka Hata* (Red Flag) wrote:

Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro announced during a visit to the United States on April 17 that negotiations have begun to purchase the Senkaku Islands using the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's budget. The announcement related that negotiations with the owner for purchase have begun. In response, Ohyama Tomoko, director of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly's Japanese Communist Party, stated, "It is inappropriate for local government to interfere with this dispute by purchasing the Senkaku Islands." (*Aka Hata*, April 22, 2012, p. 1)

The implication of this article is that the procedure is inappropriate, but the dispute over territory is not questioned. The article does not contain a word about the risks, or appropriateness, of raising tensions with China over a small group of islets. The question of whether militarism

or imperialism might have anything to do with this problem has vanished from the Communist Party's debate—in dramatic contrast to the discussion of the 1960s.

There are also domestic issues within Japan which have encouraged the militarization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and the tendency to increase the dispatch of armed vessels to the region, rather than proposals for talks and initiatives to scale down the military presence. The Abe administration's confrontational policies have had the short-term effect of waking the Japanese from a long political slumber and motivating action. It is not so much that the Japanese are enamored of his approach, but rather that he stands out, like Donald Trump in the United States, as someone who tried to do new things in new ways. Although the direction is extremely risky, for many citizens Abe appears to be striving for something.

But ultimately what we will need is a set of authentic proposals for a solution that engages citizens at the local level and make suggestions for integration that are not based merely on trade by major corporations. There is a desperate need to bring other players into the process and articulate a more positive general narrative.

Possible Approaches to a Long-term Solution

The first step towards resolving the conflict over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is to understand the motivations and the perceptions of those involved in the current dispute. Both Chinese and Japanese have difficulty stepping back from the controversy and assessing the specific factors in modern society, in the media, and in a globalized economy that make islands so sensitive a topic. The emotions released are quite distinct and uniform but they are the product of complex factors that have been blended together into a seeming whole. We need to unravel the strands first.

It is possible, by enlisting a wide range of experts from around the world, and engaging citizens in open discussions and debates, to create a more accurate and more positive grand narrative of what exactly hap-

pened with these islands that will eventually start to displace more negative tales in circulation. We can bring in multiple narratives of cooperation and collaboration, especially at the local level, that show the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as part of an organic necklace for trade, fishing, and cultural exchange that brought China and Japan together. There is an objective and at the same time empathetic tale which highlights local interaction and promises hope, not conflict, for the future.

The territorial conflict over these uninhabited islands takes place at a moment of unprecedented economic and technological convergence between Japan and China. The territorial integrity of these uninhabited islands is being contested at a moment when it has become extremely easy to send money, or to talk by Skype, or to travel by airplane between Tokyo and Beijing. Distance has collapsed but cultural conflict has risen in its place. The barren islands play out a counter narrative on the media's stage, an anti-globalist drama that articulates the unspoken tensions that have arisen in the two capitals. The essential question is not what is the historical documentation showing ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, but rather whether islands have become a hot issue between China and Japan in spite of the high level of integration or rather because of the high level of integration. Might the islands be serving as a space onto which the ambiguities of a new integrated Northeast Asian narrative are being projected? If we start to understand that mechanism, we are halfway to a solution.

There have been times of closer relations, and of more distant relations, between the governments of China and Japan. But in spite of a recent decline in exchanges, the current level of economic, technological manufacturing, and cultural integration between the two nations remains unprecedented. The chains for finance, manufacturing, logistics, and distribution that tie the two nations together seamlessly (at the level of transporting goods) remain strong, and although there are occasional campaigns against Japanese goods, they are nothing like what has happened in previous ages. Again, we need a positive narrative that highlights these developments while addressing the dislocation resulting from

globalization.

We must also recognize the risks involved. These uninhabited, small islands, Uotsuri (Diaoyu in Chinese), Kitakojima (Beixiaodao) and Minami Kojima (Nanxiaodao), have taken on tremendous symbolic power in a short period of time and threaten to undo much of the progress in creating a community in East Asia that has been made in recent years. Some speak of the issue of valuable oil reserves in the vicinity of the islands and also the valuable fishing rights at stake. Such issues are no doubt a factor, but they cannot explain the scale of the emotional response. If a more fundamental understanding of the shared culture of the region, and of the two nations, these economic problems can be effectively addressed through negotiations.

If we want a real solution, we must consider the historical, economic and social factors that have led to the current crisis, and we should do so in a manner that does not postulate that the blame lies with one player or the other. The solution to the problem will come when we start to seek for the truth, no matter how inconvenient it may be. That truth will have more to do with the manner in which the societies, the economies, and the basic assumptions about the definition of the nations have evolved over the last hundred years, and especially over the last ten years. Only with a deeper understanding of the underlying issues that impact all of us, and which lies behind what we witness, can we make progress towards a long-term or permanent solution to the crisis. This approach has been sadly lacking in the media, but it is not too late to turn things around.

We must, above all, avoid generalizations and judgments about entire cultures and about whole peoples. We should not assume that either party is more advanced or more rational, but rather look for the motivations for how the players perceive the world. There is so much irrational activity in the world today that we should not be surprised or shocked by anything. We should not assume that the cultural phenomenon is easy to understand. We must give ourselves time, and delve into the details, while at the same time holding up a higher goal, a higher purpose.

It is entirely possible to launch an honest, broad discussion of the evolution of the concepts of sovereignty and geography that uncovers new potentials in these concepts rather than trying to restrict their interpretation. In previous ages, and even until twenty years ago, the islands themselves did not pose such a challenge and there may be any number of cultural and political steps that can be taken to restore such an original state or create a new one that alludes to previous relations but moves beyond in a new direction.

The problem with islands has taken a new twist because rapid technological developments have made media such a power and at the same time put a new pressure on central governments to assert their authority in response to increasing centrifugal forces. The origins of the need to assert national sovereignty are linked as much to the structure of governance as to any ideological need on the part of China or Japan to encourage nationalist sentiments among the population. We must create new cultural and social ties between the people of the region that give them a chance to reaffirm commonalities.

Similarly, the media has been filled with articles suggesting that the debate over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is but an effort of the Chinese government to shift domestic discontent away from domestic issues and towards Japan. Such political calculations always exist in all foreign policy decisions, whether in China or in Japan, but the emotions of citizens are not sufficient to explain the sudden rise in the frequency of the topic in the media. We need to consider the nature in which media is evolving in recent years, how the commercialization of media has led us towards a sensationalist approach to policy across the board. If anything, one of the first steps towards resolving this conflict is to create a healthier media that does not see the profits from sensationalist reporting to be a driving force for reporting. Again, healthy media can also be a space for active cooperation.

The islands resemble a play within a play, like the dumb-show that Hamlet employs to articulate his suspicions about his stepfather. Larger geopolitical tensions that overwhelm the players caught up in them are

projected on these barren islands and thereby the tale of frustration (going beyond common understanding) can be articulated in a manner that makes a limited sense within that smaller drama. The decision of the media to focus on the concrete actions taken regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands without a word concerning this more complex process suggests that the media has itself become part of the play.

We can take a hint from the efforts already underway in the islands near Senkaku/Diaoyu. The controversy unfolding in Tokyo is alien to the lives of people in the region and they are taking steps to create their own narrative which should be encouraged. The adjacent islands of Yonaguni and Ishigaki have suffered devastating drops in their populations in recent years and economic opportunity has all but evaporated. Because Yonaguni has no high school, many youth must leave the island early in life, never to return. For them, distancing themselves from China is the last thing that they want to do. Their primary interest is in creating new potential for exchange.

The local communities within the island populations around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are actively pursuing greater economic and cultural exchanges with China and Taiwan. For them, China is not a looming threat, but rather a significant economic opportunity. After all, even though the people of Yonaguni carry Japanese passports, they speak their own language, Dunan Munui, a language more distant from Japanese than English is from German. The traditional trade routes dating back for a thousand years would naturally tie these islands to Taiwan and the mainland. There have been efforts to increase those ties that have been undercut by Tokyo and its move towards militarization.

Yonaguni Island drew up “a plan for its own future, a ‘Vision’ statement for the region” (McCormack, 2011, p. 2) that was adopted early in 2005. The key themes were autonomy, self-governance, and symbiosis. In essence, it was “a plan to turn the island’s traditionally negative qualities of isolation and remoteness into positive qualities through adoption of a frame of regional inter-connectedness” (McCormack, 2012, p. 3). The residents hope to overcome their peripheral status in Japan by engag-

ing their neighbors and Yonaguni has become the first city in Japan to open a representative office in Taiwan to handle exchanges. However, Tokyo has discouraged the establishment of direct water links with Taiwan or the People's Republic of China. Reversing this negative approach could do much to ease tensions.

We must recognize that the shift in the perception of borders over the last 150 years is a result of the projection of the absolutes of geometry onto the world of human relations. But that trend has been exacerbated as central governments struggle to assert their claims over the political realm. The media also assumes that we can talk about the relations between states in an absolute manner, as if it were as clear as natural law that Japan that starts here and ends there, and that Tokyo is responsible for all activities over that space. But the fact of the matter is that the parts of the Japanese government that are actually involved in the debate on islands are almost as small as those islands themselves.

As for the borders, if we talk about goods and raw materials, they literally do not exist. If anything, the reality of technology and globalization is that such borders, such barriers, are increasingly less certain. There are large numbers of people who travel between these two nations and even more objects are in circulation between them in terms of goods and information. The borders are reminders for us of how much these modern systems have failed to deliver the world that they promised. For citizens, the conflict over borders suggests a clear identity which can relieve other social tensions. As Herbert Freehills (2012) describes the situation:

The economic relevance of the dispute results from the effects that sovereignty over the islands would have on maritime boundaries between Japan and China and the associated rights over natural resources in the East China Sea. These rights are linked to the delimitation of the maritime boundaries between the two countries, and in particular the continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Article 77 of UNCLOS gives a coastal state the sovereign right to explore and exploit the natural resources on its area of the continental shelf. In

addition, Article 56 UNCLOS allows a coastal state to claim an EEZ, and with it the sovereign rights over the exploration and exploitation of natural resources both in the waters above and on the seabed and its subsoil. (p. 1)

In fact, the greatest crisis for the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and all the islands surrounding them has nothing to do with fish, or natural gas, or even ancient maps. The greatest threat comes from the rising of the ocean waters that will eliminate many of the islands and entirely destroy the existing communities. Perhaps the best way to create a mood of cooperation is for all the residents to take the first concrete steps towards preparing for the rise of sea levels. That crisis increases solidarity on both the Chinese and the Japanese sides that no degree of negotiations by bureaucrats can possibly do.

We should ask why it was previously so easy for a Chinese fisherman to call an island by a Chinese name and a Japanese fisherman to call it by a Japanese name. For centuries the status of these islands, and most of the islands in the region, was not problematic at all. Names are just names, after all. And there are myriad agreements that can be reached for sharing the resources, provided that local residents are given priority. Why have we become so inflexible and who exactly benefits from such inflexibility and such confrontation? Such an honest debate may be painful, but it can also be infinitely rewarding in that it offers new possible conceptions of the problem outside of the tired national narrative.

This problem cannot be solved by armed vessels. Our response requires rather complex, long-term cooperation. The question of where China stops and Japan begins remains an open question that cannot be resolved by fiat. China and Japan are increasingly merging together in the technological and IT aspects, regardless of the conflicts reported in the media, regardless of efforts on both sides to reduced economic engagement. Money and information (increasingly the same thing), products circulated around the world, pull the two countries together. If we

are looking for a new definition of borders that is more appropriate to the realities of the 21st century, perhaps we can find some clues in the open exchanges of the pre-modern period.

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- 1) We find an example of the complex cultural identity of the islands in the map of the region made by Hayashi Shihei in 1785. He followed Chinese convention and gave the islands Chinese names. Presumably both Chinese and Japanese fishermen enjoyed use of these islands for their fishing. See Gavan McCormack's "Small Islands – Big Problem: Senkaku/Diaoyu and the Weight of History and Geography in China-Japan Relations" (McCormack, 2011, p.2).
 - 2) It certainly would have been possible for the United States make an explicit comment about the status of the islands at the time of the reversion. Yet the United States avoided such an action. McCormack (2011) notes "The US, which occupied the islands between 1945 and 1972, was carefully agnostic about their sovereignty when returning to Japan 'administrative rights' over them, and it has reiterated that stance on many subsequent occasions. As re-stated in the context of the 2010 clash, the US position is that sovereignty is something to be settled between the claimant parties. Furthermore, while Japan has exercised 'administrative rights' and thus effective control since 1972, it has blocked all activities on the islands, by its own or other nationals, thereby acting as if sovereignty was indeed contested. Thus, with two Chinese governments denying it, and the US refusing to endorse it, it is surely whistling in the wind for Japan to insist there is no dispute over ownership. Whoever initiated them, the clashes of that day raised a large question-mark over the islands" (p. 1.).
 - 3) The complexity of mutual anxiety of Japan and China towards each other is a product of both economic shifts and resulting emotional responses. Horiuchi (2014) states "The changing strategic environment in the region, which is characterized by the dramatic rise of China and the relative decline of Japan, has also contributed to the rise of nationalism in Japan. Through its impressive economic growth, China has overtaken Japan to become the second largest economy in the world. The government and people in Japan are also increasingly concerned about China's rapid military modernization. In Japan's view, one major problem is China's lack of transparency. China is eagerly trying to enhance its air and naval power capabilities, but it does not fully explain its real intention behind the development of new weapons systems such as aircraft carriers and stealth fighters. While on one hand, China argues that it will never seek hegemony, it is, on the other hand, rapidly strengthening its military capabilities" (p. 27).

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