

Forum: Extra-Taiwan and the Future of Sinophone Studies

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Response 2

From Extra to Oceanic

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What does it mean to imagine Taiwan as ‘extra’? Howard’s paper asks exactly this, pushing us to move past the bounded geography of the island and treat Taiwan as an epistemological condition rather than a fixed location. By putting forward ‘extra-Taiwan’, he opens the door to larger debates in Sinophone studies, diaspora, indigeneity, and nationalism. The move is ambitious and welcome. It asks us not only to rethink where Taiwan belongs but also how we study it.

Appealing as this invitation is, I want to ask what it might leave less visible. As Howard so eloquently shows, ‘extra-Taiwan’ privileges discursive, linguistic, and political categories of space. What is perhaps left on the margins is Taiwan’s deeply material history of entanglement with its environs. I would argue that reading that history through the optic of the sea makes it most vividly present. Yes, Taiwan is ‘extra’. But it is also oceanic. The flow of people, products, and ideas across the surrounding waters was not just the context for but

the conditions through which the island negotiated its position in regional and global histories.

In other words, if we take the sea seriously, the picture shifts. Howard wants to move us away from an insular Taiwan, and I agree with that, but the categories he uses still seem tied mostly to diaspora and comparative politics. That makes sense, but it also keeps us somehow land-bound. Taiwan's history has always been moved by water: Austronesian routes, Dutch and Spanish projects, Qing traders and pirates, Japanese imperial ambitions, the Cold War fleets. They operated not as setting but as the conduits by which Taiwan was inserted into larger configurations.

Thinking oceanically helps us to remember that Sinophone studies, while important for displacing the China-centred frame, does not capture the whole picture, which is only sensible, since no single framework can encompass the full complexity of Taiwan's past and present. Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and Austronesian voices were on the scene from the very beginning; Portuguese or Arab navigators incorporated Taiwan into larger circuits of trade and exchange. Approaching Taiwan only through the lens of 'Sinophone displacement' has the effect of narrowing the picture, with some dynamics overlooked in the process. And the binaries we are otherwise too often trapped by, including state/non-state, legitimate/illegitimate, also become quite unstable at sea. People in coastal areas moved seamlessly between trader, pirate, fisherman, settler, sometimes within the course of a single lifetime. Empires found that difficult to regulate. During the Cold War, too, Taiwan was more than a contested state; it was also a naval hub, and a fisheries power, in the Pacific. Which is to say, Taiwan's 'extra' is not only discursive. It is also material, lived, and carried across water.

This is why I find Howard's proposal so stimulating, since it opens up new ways of thinking about Taiwan at the conceptual level. And yet, as I try to articulate what excites me, I also find myself wondering if the category of 'extra-Taiwan' might not be made even more productive by paying more attention to the material practices that have long defined the island's place in the world. In this spirit, one direction to explore might be to situate 'extra-Taiwan' more squarely in histories of circulation and connection. If Howard encourages us to think of Taiwan as concept, let us also think of it as current, as route, as passage.

Consider three brief moments. Over the course of the seventeenth century, two of the first great experiments in early modern maritime empire, the Dutch East India Company and Spanish Manila project, transformed Taiwan into a global hub. Dutch forts at Zeelandia and Provintia functioned as warehouse-fortresses, binding Taiwanese sugar and deer hides to Japan and Java. Spanish settlement from Manila worked to integrate Taiwan into the Manila galleon system. In their efforts to undermine and replace one another, these companies simultaneously ensnared the island in multi-imperial entanglements more than any other place in East Asia.

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the seaborne networks linking Nagasaki and Southeast Asia became the basis for mobilisation by the Zheng regime in Taiwan. Zheng Chenggong and his successors used Taiwan as a naval base to tax trade, wage war, and make deals with multiple powers. Even the Qing state, before also trying to directly incorporate the island, used maritime bans and incremental administration to reconfigure Asian Seas relations. These developments suggest a more central position for Taiwan as an arena for the changing balance of power.

The island's oceanic position again proved decisive in the twentieth century. Japanese colonial rule turned Taiwan into both a naval launching point for its own Southeast Asian expansion and a laboratory of marine science and fisheries, sending its marine catches to markets as far away as Micronesia, Tokyo, and beyond. The experience of Taiwan after the Cold War ended in 1949 was also maritime: US warships patrolled the waters around the island, and Taiwanese fishing fleets sailed far out into the Pacific, drawing the island into the geopolitics of ocean resources.

Seen in context, these are not local curiosities but reminders that Taiwan's significance has always been worked out at sea. The island's histories of empire, migration, and strategy are inseparable from the maritime systems that connected and contested it. In this sense, the 'oceanic' and the 'extra' should not be seen as rivals. They work best together. If there is no 'extra', Taiwan becomes reabsorbed into the constrictive dichotomy of nation and territory. If there is no 'oceanic', 'extra-Taiwan' might appear detached from the histories that animate it.

Howard has given us a bold provocation. My hope is that by adding the sea to the frame, we can give that provocation ballast. Taiwan studies, after all, has long been attentive to maritime history as scholars since the 1970s have explored its role in colonial trade, indigenous navigation, and Cold War geopolitics. The task now is not to rediscover the maritime but to integrate it more fully into the conceptual debate. If 'extra-Taiwan' points us beyond bounded geographies, an oceanic Taiwan grounds that move in histories of movement, exchange, and to some extent also disconnection. Together, they offer a richer way forward for the field.

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