Tourism as a Territorial Strategy in the South China Sea

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INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is deploying tourism as a tool in its territorialization program for the South China Sea, reconfiguring geopolitical imaginaries and popular political discourse, and developing new leisure spaces, economies, and infrastructure. This approach is consistent with China's deployment of outbound tourism to achieve political objectives in other regions, both within and far beyond its periphery. Outbound tourism from China has been used as an economic lever for extracting political concessions not only in nearby Taiwan, but as far away as Canada. At the same time that tourism is being used to consolidate Chinese state authority in Tibet (Shepherd 2006), it has also triggered widespread popular protest in semi-autonomous Hong Kong. State-directed Chinese tourism is now increasingly precipitating international protest over the territorially contested South China Sea.

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The unsettled sovereignty of the South China Sea has provided a theater for several "creative territorialization" strategies, including tourism, administrative rezoning, and land reclamation. This chapter will focus on the former two and argue that the PRC is using tourism as a tactic in the South China Sea not only to assert military and administrative control over the region, but also to promote patriotic sentiment among its own citizens. Both tourism and administrative rezoning function tangibly as territorial technologies in the region by remaking the facts on the ground (or on the sea, as it were): Ships and planes bearing people and materials inscribe visible changes on the landscape, physically labeled as a particular zone. Tourism and zoning also function intangibly in intra- and international space by making discursive claims about regional heritage and history. The claims of official state agencies, both about sovereign territory and its administrative division, are reproduced and circulated by travel industry actors, tourists, and bloggers, promoting further tourism development and materialization of the PRC's claims.

This chapter will first situate and provide a brief political history of China's general outbound tourism policies and practices before turning to the South China Sea itself. Particular attention is paid to the territorial claims implicit in new Chinese passport designs and the establishment of the Sansha City administrative region, which covers much of the South China Sea. This will be followed by a qualitative analysis of official state announcements and destination-marketing materials from both private and state-owned Chinese travel agencies, and online how-to guides and blogs. This analysis explores the territorial implications of representations of South China Sea destinations as not only new sites for leisure, but also for the performance and training of a patriotic Chinese citizenry.

Among all the competing state claimants to the South China Sea, the PRC's use of tourism as a tool of foreign policy (Richter 1983) and territorial strategy (Rowen 2014) is most well established, and this history is briefly recounted below. Moreover, China's military and island-building projects are more extensive than those of its neighbors. Therefore, China will receive proportionally greater attention in this chapter. Nevertheless, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines—among China's most assertive counter-claimants—have also become increasingly proactive about organizing politically motivated tours in recent years and will also receive brief discussion.

Tourism as a Territorial Strategy and Tool of Chinese Foreign Policy

This chapter builds on work (Rowen 2014, 2016) that uses the case of tourism from the PRC to Taiwan to argue that tourism should be seen as a *technology of state territorialization*. Tourism in this sense is conceived as an ensemble of practices that produce tourists as national subjects and, reciprocally, the territory of the nation-state itself, as effects of power. The production of national tourists and national territory takes place both domestically and internationally, and may include devices such as travel permits, practices such as border crossing and site visitation, and everything else enabled by the physical and human infrastructure of tourism, including performances of the nation-state and its territory.

Mere maps, not just bodies and battleships, can produce heated disputes in the South China Sea. For example, the passport—one of the main devices employed by tourists, the State, and quasi-State apparatuses that regulate mobility—has been deployed in the South China Sea dispute. A map with the Nine-Dash Line was included in China's microchip-equipped passports starting in 2012, drawing immediate criticism from officials in the Philippines and Vietnam. "The Philippines strongly protests the inclusion of the Nine-Dash Line in the e-passport as such image covers an area that is clearly part of the Philippines' territory and maritime domain," Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario reportedly said. Luong Thanh Nghi, a spokesman for Vietnam's foreign ministry, offered a similar interpretation: "This action by China has violated Vietnam's sovereignty to the Paracel and Spratly islands as well as our sovereign rights and jurisdiction to related maritime areas in the South China Sea, or the East Sea" (Mogato 2012).

The South China Sea was not the only mapped site at stake with the 2012 passports—officials in India and Taiwan also registered loud displeasure with the inclusion of depictions of their effective territories in the PRC travel documents, constituting a coincidental united front on the battlefield of this peculiar "passport war." Those foreign ministries directed their immigration officers not to stamp the new passports for fear of legitimizing the PRC's territorial claims. Their solution was the creation of another device: entry stamps on specially issued, separate forms (Tharoor 2012).

The PRC's invention and deployment of "Approved Destination Status" (ADS) is another example of China's politically instrumental use of tourism. Outbound tourism has, since 1995, been regulated by a

system by which the China National Tourism Administration confers ADS on countries that have signed bilateral agreements with China. ADS allows outbound group tourists to apply for visas through travel agencies, saving them a trip to the consulate. It also encourages greater marketing of group tours. ADS is, therefore, a highly desirable designation for countries that are eager to boost inbound tourism revenue.

The initial purpose of the ADS system was to limit Chinese nationals from bringing hard currency abroad (Arlt 2006). ADS later became a tool to exert other forms of political pressure. A primary criterion is that "the country should have a favorable political relationship with China" (Kim et al. 2005, p. 212). For example, it took Ottawa over 18 ministerial visits to China and the adoption of more pro-China rhetoric and policy positions before Canada was granted ADS in 2009. This so-called gift is expected to bring over US$100 million in additional annual tourist revenues (Lo 2011).

Complementing such political and economic tactics, the cultural authority exerted via the construction and management of tourism sites is an additional dimension for the analysis of the PRC state practice. Anthropologist Pal Nyíri (2006, p. 75) has argued that the PRC "sponsors a discursive regime in which scenic spots and their state-endorsed hierarchy are tools of patriotic education and modernization, and in which the state has the ultimate authority to determine the meaning of the landscape." Organizational conditions that allow this to happen include the deep institutional and personal overlaps between state regulatory agencies, tour operators, and site developers and management. These scenic spots are symbols of state authority, components of a late socialist nation-building project, and a part of the PRC's presentation of itself as a territorially bounded nation. The PRC's deployment of tourism in the South China Sea, in which official state actors, travel agencies, and media actors together produce the effect of Chinese territory, is consistent with these broader territorial techniques and strategies.

Tourism, "Creative Territorialization," and Tension in the South China Sea

Tourism in the South China Sea has been facilitated by new administrative designations and territorial divisions, characteristic of the PRC's "creative territorialization" strategies (Cartier 2013). The July 2012 establishment of the Sansha prefectural-level "city," encompassing only

13 square kilometers of land but including 2 million total square kilometers of the surrounding waters of the Spratlys and Paracels, is an example of the relationship between "administrative-territorial change…and the role of the State in projecting future social, political, and economic goals through territorial adjustment" (Cartier 2013, pp. 72–3). A major goal of the establishment of Sansha City is the consolidation of the PRC's claim to sovereignty over the extent of the territory. The performative declaration of Sansha's creation by the (administratively super-ordinate) Hainan provincial governor and provincial party secretary "narrates the territorializing discourse" of this new administrative arrangement (Cartier 2013, p. 72).

Tourism is a critical component of this territorializing process. The United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee—the state body tasked with facilitating Communist Party collaboration overseas and advancing the PRC's territorial expansion and integration projects (including Taiwan and Hong Kong)—on 21 May 2015, issued a series of suggestions on how to improve Sansha tourism safety measures as a part of its online "selection of exciting recommendations" (*jingcai jianyan xuandeng*):

> With the establishment of Sansha City in recent years, Sansha tourism has become official business. Sansha tourism has extremely important significance. To pledge and protect our nation's sovereignty over the South China Sea, promoting the development of Hainan and South China Sea tourism will have an important function. The year 2013 was our nation's year of ocean tourism. The opening of Sansha tourism was the official maiden voyage of deep-sea tourism. Our nation is a tourism great power, and extending our destinations into the ocean will symbolize our move towards being a tourism superpower. As Sansha tourism is ocean tourism, there are a number of key tourism safety issues. Tourism safety is the fundamental guarantor of tourism development. Primarily because the Xisha [Paracel] Islands occupy a special position in the South China Sea issue, even though our nation has sovereignty over the Xisha Islands, their geographical position and special environmental factors raise issues for tourism management. (China National Democratic Construction Association 2015, author's translation).

While the remainder of the United Front report focuses primarily on navigation safety, weather, medical facilities, and tourist safety education, it suggests that "incursions" by Vietnam and the Philippines into the PRC's claimed territorial waters may also influence Paracel tourist safety.

The United Front Work Department's own communications make plain that tourism is a conscious part of the PRC's geopolitical strategy for the South China Sea. This is an agenda shared across agencies—in 2016, the mayor of Sansha, Xiao Jie, announced his plans to make Sansha "a major tourist attraction comparable to the Maldives and [which] will be a key post on the Maritime Silk Road" (Li and Liu 2016).

Tourism adds rich narrative modes and acts to state territorial discourses, articulated not only in government agencies, but with the collaboration of a mix of state and non-state actors. It enrolls not just politicians and bureaucrats but also ordinary bodies, businesses, and even blogs in the production of borders and territory. The abstract administration of sovereignty in the imaginary space of a potential tourist destination became increasingly concrete with the opening of the Paracels to tourism on 6 April 2013—one year after the creation of Sansha. Although the maiden voyage of the *Coconut Princess* raised objections from Vietnam, Chinese officials and tourists appeared unfazed. For example, in a BBC news video report on tourists as "foot soldiers" in the China-Vietnam sovereignty dispute, a middle-aged Chinese male tourist claimed, "This is our national territory. I can come and go here whenever I please." The journalist concluded, "on the islands, tourism has become more about politics than mere pleasure" (Ethirajan 2014). Travel agencies are clear about the political implications of their operations, and use them as selling points. "Setting foot onto China's most beautiful gardens is a declaration of our national sovereignty," says the website of the Hainan Airways International Travel Agency (Torode and Mogato 2015).

Tourist industry representations of the disputed island groups further perpetuate the territorializing instrumentality of the newly formed Sansha City administrative zone. For example, Ctrip, China's largest travel booking engine, lists island destinations such as Yongxing Island (the seat of Sansha's government; also known as Woody Island), Qilian Island, and others under the Sansha category. This follows Ctrip's general site hierarchy of province-city-destination, normalizing the administrative-territorial claims implicit in the creation of Sansha City.

Under its general information about Sansha City, Ctrip includes the following description:

> Sansha City is one of the three prefectural-level cities in Hainan. Located in the South China Sea, it is the southernmost city in China, and the second city in the country to be composed of an archipelago. The land area of

Sansha City is 13 square kilometers, and the sea area is over 2 million square kilometers. In its jurisdiction are the Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha island groups as well as their waters. It is China's smallest city by land area, largest city by total area, and least populated city. Sansha City's government seat is on Yongxing Island in Xisha. Yongxing Island is also the largest island in the South China Sea. (C-Trip Destination Guides 2017, author's translation)

The exact same description is found on the websites of state-owned operators such as Beijing China Travel Service, while others with subtle variations but substantially similar content can be found on social travel sites like Mafengwo. Such descriptions of urban spaces would be banal in less exceptional "cities," but their appearance here furthers the aims and strategies of the initial establishment of Sansha City, which serves, in Cartier's terms, to "safeguard China's sovereignty and serve marine resource development, [which] are future-oriented and backed by state power. This is… the administration of sovereignty and the economy of marine resources in the abstract space of a city" (Cartier 2013, p. 72). It is also the geopolitically instrumental administration and economy of leisure, and specifically tourism, in this abstract space.

Contested Sovereignty and Territory as Selling Points

The itineraries and marketing copy of the PRC's Paracel cruise ships use the destination's remoteness and geopolitical salience as selling points. On the Hainan International Travel Airways website, the four-day round-trip voyage from Sanya, Hainan, to the Paracels on the *Coconut Princess*, which took approximately 200 passengers on two trips per month, is described as 2015's trendiest voyage:

Sail on the legendary *Coconut Princess*, circle the beautiful Xisha islands.
    This is the southernmost and most difficult journey, but it will change your life. There are no starred amenity services or facilities, just the extreme purity of the sky, sea, islands, and beaches. Open China's map—in the deep blue of the South China Sea, behind the red coral and blue waters hides the Paracels. Here is a heaven, half of water, half of fish. In 2005, the Paracels were named "1st Place, Most Beautiful Islands" by *China National Geographic Magazine*. If you think Sanya is stunning, then a look at the Paracels sea will make you swoon. Even if it's just a glance, even just a passing look, you'll be certain that this is the ultimate paradise. Everyone's heart

has a sea like this. What a pity that most people will never arrive in their lifetime. (The Coconut Princess 2015, author's translation)

Despite the above claims, the terms and conditions at the bottom of the page add: "The Paracels are military zone, not a tourism area. The Paracels are one of China's undeveloped areas. It is necessary to observe the nation's laws and regulations as well as the rules of the islands, and to take care of the natural environment. Violators will be held responsible."

Another advertisement for the *Coconut Princess* is even bolder in its appeals to patriotic sentiment. Next to a PRC flag is this call to action:

> The southern islands have been part of China's territory since ancient times. They are a sacred territory that cannot be divided. Please join us, step on the sacred (*shensheng*), miraculous (*shenqi*), mysterious (*shenmi*) national territory (*guotu*) with your two feet, and witness and participate in history! (Mysterious Paracel 2017, author's translation)

A promotion for a different ship, the *Sansha No. 1*, departing from Wenchang City, Hainan, states:

> China's most mysterious sea region, its southernmost archipelago, an important military zone, the Paracels' highest island is Shidao, its biggest island is Yongxing Island … The Paracels are a place you should visit once in your life. Some tourists think that Sanya's Tianya Haijiao is the southernmost point in our homeland, but actually that's false. Others say that Zengmu'ansha [James Shoal], in Sansha, is the southernmost. Looking at the map, Jinmujiao is far south too. But these hair-splitting distinctions all pale in view of the already-developed Paracels. (The Sansha No. 1 2017, author's translation)

The marketing copy of both of these sales pitches and regional descriptions focuses not just on the natural beauty of these destinations, but also on their geographical uniqueness as the southernmost claimed extent of the homeland. Striking here is that the PRC's claims to the Spratly Islands, which are significantly farther south of the Paracels, are subsumed in the destination-marketing hyperbole of the website. If anything, this should be read as an indication of the creatively ambiguous nature of the PRC's claims to the region, as well as the fact that the Spratlys have not yet been opened up to PRC tourism. Once tourists are able to head farther south than the Paracels, China's so-called southernmost archipelago designation

will no doubt move farther southward online as well. Indeed, this development is already on the horizon, with Fiery Cross Reef receiving its first civil aircraft and tourists in January 2016. While they were only a small group of soldiers' spouses and children, if the Paracels are any precedent, there will be many more to come (Liu 2016).

A Political Reading of Popular Tourist Guides

The novelty and infrequency of South China Sea visits limits the availability of blogs and other first-person accounts of South China Sea leisure tourism. Nonetheless, the online search giant Baidu's Travel and Experience sections feature several South China Sea posts with thousands of unique visitors. The author of Baidu's most popular "how-to guide" for Woody Island (Shi 2012), who also wrote a guide to tourism in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, exemplifies the political tenor of South China Sea tourism. Between substantial verbiage devoted to the island's profusion of palm trees, expansive beaches, broad blue ocean vistas, and historical relics, the island's value to nation-building narratives is still given prominence of place. Striking here is an assertion of affinity between the PRC and the Republic of China, which first officially issued the Nine-Dash Line as a territorial claim in a 1947 map before it retreated to Taiwan in 1949 (Fravel 2011):

> Here you can watch the raging seas lapping against the shores and see the majestic sights of waves piled upon waves. At sunset, you can also enter the "General's Forest [将军林]," filled with love and romance, and feel the affection and nostalgia the Republic [of China] leaders had for the Paracels. (How-to Guide 2016, author's translation)

The second most popular posting, a photo blog by Baidu user Black Night Prince "黑夜王子" details his four-day trip in February 2015, and shows photos of the PRC flag on every island, as well as photos of him in front of posted signs announcing not only national sovereignty, but the exact administrative designations of the islands under Sansha City, for example, "China, Hainan Province, Sansha City, Yagong Island." In the responses to both of these posts and others, commenters allude to the Paracels as "China's Maldives," assert that the Paracels contain China's finest beaches and boundless marine resources, and consistently use terms like "Our Nation" and "homeland" to emphasize Chinese sovereignty

over the region. Not surprisingly, tourism bloggers are facilitating the creative territorialization strategies of the Chinese state.

MALAYSIA, VIETNAM, AND THE PHILIPPINES ENTER THE FRAY

While China's claims are the most extensive, it is certainly not the only player in the South China Sea tourism game. The oldest continuous tourism operation in disputed territory is the Avillion Layang Layang Resort in Swallow Reef, which was occupied by Malaysia in 1983 and is well within its Exclusive Economic Zone. Malaysia first built a naval base on reclaimed land before beginning construction on a dive resort in 1991 to mild criticism from the PRC (Chen 1994) and Vietnam, whose foreign ministry then stated that, "pending settlement of disputes the concerned parties should avoid making the situation to be more complicated" (Thao 2001). Apart from maintaining this resort, Malaysia has not expanded its tourism operations in recent years. Its neighbors, however, have decided to join the fray in the meantime.

In June 2015, Vietnam replied belatedly to the *Coconut Princess*, China's cruise ship in the Paracels, by announcing a six-day cruise to two islands and two reefs in the Spratlys. The cruise ship promotion was released on the Ho Chi Minh City website, using language that had a similar patriotic register to its Chinese competitor: "Travelling to Truong Sa [Spratlys] … means the big trip of your life, reviving national pride and citizens' awareness of the sacred maritime sovereignty of the country … Tourists will no longer feel Truong Sa as far away, the blue Truong Sa ocean will be deep in people's hearts" (Reuters 2015). The cruise ship was the first salvo in a still tentative, step-by-step rollout of Spratly tourism, including passenger flights and package tours revealed later in 2015.

The Philippines has also expressed an interest in building a cruise line to serve their military-controlled islands in the Spratlys, including Patag, Lawak and Pagasa, as well as the Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal). General Gregorio Pio Catapang, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, claimed that "the cruise service could be a win-win situation for China and the Philippines because Beijing already has cruise services in other areas of the South China Sea" (quoted in Keck 2014). However, according to the same article, a naval official from the Chinese People's Liberation Army saw such a potential cruise line as a violation of

China's territorial claims. All of this indicates the likelihood of a new kind of tourist adventure in the not-too-distant future: the cruise ship confrontation.

Conclusion

Tourism is a high-stakes and potentially dangerous game in South China Sea territorial disputes. The PRC is the largest and most active player, but Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia also appear intent on promoting their claims. Tourism's key role in PRC strategy is underscored by the direct involvement of the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China, which is tasked with promoting the party's programs overseas and consolidating the PRC's territorial claims beyond mainland China. Claims to the South China Sea are made discursively by images on passports and with spoken and written official pronouncements. The synergistic effect of PRC rezoning and state-directed, politically instrumental leisure tourism bolsters the PRC's territorial claims and its administrative-hierarchical division of the South China Sea. These claims are reproduced by travel agencies and tour operators, and propagated by journalists and bloggers.

Chinese cruise ships continue to depart several times a month from Hainan to the Paracels, carrying several hundred passengers whose self-reporting bolsters the message of marketing materials that sell the islands as aesthetically inspiring and geopolitically vital destinations. Vietnam has announced a similar cruise tourism campaign for the Spratlys, and the Philippines has also expressed interest. Not just a paper "passport war," but a real-life "tourism war" of navy-backed cruise ships may be on the South China Sea horizon.

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