



Deterritorialization of indigeneity: Indigenous territory, development policy, and the Dan fishing community of Hainan (China)



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1. Introduction

Protections for Indigenous, ethnic minority, and minority nationality communities are enshrined in the legal systems of various countries around the world. Nevertheless, an abiding association between indigeneity and territory poses problems for Indigenous communities that live outside the spaces to which they have been assigned by the popular and state imagination. This problem is especially acute for Indigenous groups – for example, nomadic communities – that have never been associated with any particular piece of land. Such groups risk not fitting standard state frameworks for safeguarding Indigenous lifestyles, livelihoods, and wellbeing. The territorialization of indigeneity also, however, presents risks for more traditionally ‘grounded’ Indigenous communities by assisting state strategies of framing Indigenous peoples as objects of development, fostering a false choice between marginalization and assimilation.

This paper explores these issues through the case of the Dan (儋) community of Sanya City, Hainan, China. In Sanya City, the Dan, a fishing people who traditionally lived aboard their boats, have come under threat from a major urban renewal project that has simultaneously broken this Indigenous community apart and removed its access to traditional livelihoods. We argue that the plight of the Dan relative to other minority ethnic groups in the

region is linked to their lack of association with the land. This has simultaneously prevented the Dan from being classified as an official minority nationality (thereby preventing them from receiving state protection) and prevented them from assimilating into or adapting to mainstream Han Chinese-dominated society. The Dan thus find themselves trapped in social and economic marginalization.

We ultimately recommend a radical deterritorialization of concepts of indigeneity, both to empower Indigenous groups that cannot be easily territorialized and to help prevent Indigenous peoples in general from becoming objects of assimilationist development policy.

This paper is based upon ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and surveys undertaken among the Dan of Sanya City from 2012 to 2017. The study period has been a time of social and economic upheaval for the Dan community as its traditional residential neighbourhood has been largely demolished, and its traditional site of economic activity has been relocated. At the core of the fieldwork are open-ended interviews that Zuan Ou conducted with 41 members of the Dan community, leading to him maintaining close contact with five Dan families. The interviews investigated the history and present-day lives of the Dan as well as discussed issues arising from the redevelopment of the Shuijuxiang neighbourhood and the relocation of Sanya's fishing harbour. Interview contributors were primarily asked questions concerning two overarching topics: 1) Dan community structure and livelihoods and 2) the beneficial and/or detrimental impacts that Sanya's urban renewal project have had on the Dan. Statements from contributors have been used as evidence of the problematic nature of the urban renewal process but are perhaps primarily useful as evidence of the Dan community's self-perceptions and self-representations. It is important to note that, as with all communities, the Dan do not possess uniform opinions or a monolithic outlook, and individuals have their own distinctive hopes, criticisms, and understandings of their community.

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2. Minority nationalities and Indigenous peoples in China

The People's Republic of China (hereafter, China) does not regard the Dan as an Indigenous people or even as an officially recognized minority nationality (少数民族). We argue, however, that this lack of official recognition of ethnic difference is related to factors beyond ethnicity and self-identification and that it can be fruitful to conceive of the Dan as an Indigenous people for the sake of analysis. Indeed, given the historical propensity for dominant cultural groups to deny or downplay the Indigenous status of certain other population groups, it may sometimes be preferable to 'err on the side of indigeneity'.

The Chinese state operates a complex system of legal protections and preferential policies for minority nationality communities. Sautman (1998: 86) regards China as "the most important case" internationally of "government programmes of special benefits for minority nationalities with a history of political and economic subordination." This system dates to the 1950s, when "a massive ethnological survey was carried out, which attempted to codify and classify a bewildering diversity of languages and life-ways" from over 400 potential minority nationalities, ultimately resulting in recognition of 55 distinct minority nationalities alongside the Han Chinese majority population (Hathaway, 2010, p. 307). As of 2010, minority nationalities comprised 8.4% of China's population, nearly 112 million people (Population Census Office of the State Council, 2010).

Although China supports applying the English-language term 'Indigenous peoples' to groups in Taiwan, the state avoids using the term for groups in mainland China, and there is no generally accepted Chinese equivalent to this English-language term (Hathaway, 2010). The long and complex history of Chinese state formation and population development (Poston & Xiong, 2014, p. 116) makes it problematic to speak of the 'colonization' of ethnic groups such as the Dan in much of mainland China. The contrast with minority ethnic groups in Taiwan is important, for Taiwan's aborigines were affected by much later large-scale Han Chinese immigration and influence and subjected to strong assimilation efforts under both the late Japanese colonial regime and the Taiwan Government from 1945. Taiwan hosts significant Indigenous independence and self-determination movements, though these are internally divisive and relatively ineffectual in national politics (Simon, 2010, pp. 727–728). The actual policies aimed at Taiwan's Indigenous groups – affirmative action, preferential policies, protection of religious and cultural traditions, and enhanced political representation – bear similarities to mainland Chinese practice in that official recognition of Indigenous (Taiwan island) or minority nationality (mainland China) status is not regarded as implying a right to self-determination. According to both governments' laws, all ethnicities are equal, but minority nationalities and Indigenous peoples require special assistance to reach the developmental status of the majority population. In addition, the Chinese state conceptualizes Chinese nationalities in solely cultural terms, and racial distinctions are not generally seen as significant (Poston & Xiong, 2014). As a result, someone risks losing minority nationality status if he or she does not practice a minority national culture (however defined) or does not live in a place where the minority nationality is expected to be present.

3. Indigeneity, territory, and development policy

The Chinese system of minority nationality protections shares underlying rationales with international trends in Indigenous politics and policies. While recognizing the potential validity of other perspectives, our theoretical focus in this paper is on the connection between indigeneity and territory.

Territory is often regarded as a key aspect of indigeneity. It is central to a prominent working definition of 'indigenous communities, peoples and nations' used by the United Nations:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. (Cobo, 1986).

This emphasis on territory is unsurprising given that Indigenous politics entered the international political agenda with the post-World War II push for decolonization and self-determination of overseas territories (Daes, 2008) and Cold War era efforts by such territories to assert rights and identities (Mignolo, 2011: xxiii–xxiv).

Because of the state-centric nature of international political discourse, Indigenous politics is at its most straightforward (though not necessarily its most successful) when the Indigenous people in question claim territorially defined sovereignty and seek to supplant a colonial occupier. Indeed, fears of breakaway territories frequently prompt state resistance toward acknowledging explicitly 'Indigenous' rights. State and supranational actors often go to great lengths to counterbalance affirmations of Indigenous rights with assurances that these rights – for example in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007, §46.1) – cannot be "construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States." Nevertheless, as we shall see, the state benefits from tying Indigenous peoples to Indigenous territories.

Scholarly ethnographic and demographic research as well as "state-instigated construction of ethnic categories" (Donahoe, Habeck, Halemba, & Sántha, 2008, p. 995) can both cement understandings of one's own identity and obstruct attempts to escape ethnic labels once they have been applied. State classification systems do not, however, straightforwardly impel individuals to possess feelings of indigeneity or ethnic distinction. As Li (2000: 2–3) argues, self-identification as an Indigenous group and 'articulation' of Indigenous identity are neither "inevitable" nor "simply invented, adopted, or imposed" but instead represent "a *positioning* which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning." Indigeneity is a "social and political category" (Hathaway, 2010, p. 303) and thus subject to change and influence. At the same time as we should avoid projecting Indigenous status upon unwilling groups, we should recognize the processes that may cause individuals to resist being pigeonholed into a 'tribal slot' (Li, 2000).

Even among China's official minority nationalities, some individuals – especially those living in cities outside their traditional ethnic homelands – choose to abandon minority identities to "become part of mainstream society" and "be associated with progress and modernization" (Barabantseva, 2009, pp. 246–247). This is partially due to a strong Chinese association between minority nationality communities and minority nationality regions or territories. As Barabantseva (2009: 227–228) argues, the state discourse of modernization and development embeds "minority nationalities in an exotic aura and the policies implemented in their regard localize them in one geographic area, the West, thus demarcating them as localized elements of the Chinese nation-state."

The Sanya region of the island of Hainan, on which the present paper focuses, is in South China rather than Western China, but it was formerly located firmly on the periphery of Chinese state and cultural currents. It is thus that, besides the Dan, Hainan is home to significant communities of three officially recognized minority

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