

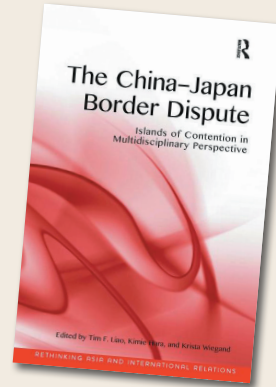
BOOK REVIEW

***The China-Japan Border Dispute:
Islands of Contention in
Multidisciplinary Perspective***

**Edited by Tim F. Liao, Kimie Hara,
and Krista Wiegand**

Ashgate, 2015.
xii + 202 pages.

Reviewed by Giulio PUGLIESE



This edited book provides an excellent multidisciplinary approach to the study of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute between Japan and China. There is no encompassing thread, but all essays tackle one or more questions highlighted in the introduction. First, how did the Japan-China border dispute arise? Second, which party has the more credible claim to sovereignty over the small archipelago? Third, what are the possible solutions to the dispute, both in the short and long term? In order to answer these questions, the book makes good use of the expertise of three historians, two legal experts, one sociologist, and two political scientists.

The variety of approaches, analyses, and conclusions reached is refreshing and hints at the complicated nature of the subject. The editors want to transcend disciplinary biases that end up favoring either Japan or China's claims. For instance, Gavan McCormack is particularly critical of Japan's rock-solid stance and sympathizes with China on historical grounds, not least because he understands international law as "an evolving expression of global power relations." McCormack presents valid evidence to debunk Japan's qualification of the Senkakus as "inherent territory," such as Japan's secret act of incorporation of the Senkakus in January 1895 during the final stage of the first Sino-Japanese war. Yet, notwithstanding Japan's resolute denial over the existence of a dispute, its restraint has been remarkable compared to China's heavy-handed methods in the China Seas. Moreover, in stark contrast to Russia and South Korea's behavior, the Japanese government has not developed the disputed islands under its control. In other words, Japan's rock-solid stance is relatively moderate compared to its neighbours. That said, this reviewer agrees with McCormack's conclusions: China has a stronger claim based on history, but a weaker one based on international law.

Underlining this book's panoply of voices, Ryan M. Scoville argues in favor of Japan's sovereignty claims from a legal perspective. According to his cogently argued essay, acquisitive prescription trumps prior occupation, not least because evidence of earlier Chinese acquiescence to Japanese claims is "damning." Interestingly, the careful reader will notice that the book's two legal experts disagree over a fundamental point concerning international law. Carlos Ramos-Mrosovsky posits that international law facilitates Sino-Japanese confrontation over the disputed islands, since both governments aim at bolstering

their sovereignty claims; on the contrary, Scoville states that attempts at reinforcing effective control over the islands are meaningless to reinforce either side's claims. This difference proves that disagreements abound within and without disciplines.

Sociologist Tim F. Liao provides an overview of Japan and China's reconstruction of the way the islands are remembered. He does so by analyzing government-sponsored messages at both the domestic and international level, and concludes that China is mostly concerned with the former, while Japan pays attention to both. Quite worryingly, both countries' "memory projects" run in parallel lines, meaning that it would be incredibly difficult to bridge the gap. Political scientist Paul Midford's essay is particularly helpful because it spells out the international political context that allowed the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute to flare up in 2010 and, especially, 2012. In other words, the ongoing Sino-Japanese standoff over a set of uninhabited islands is representative of the rapidly changing power balance between China, Japan, and the United States. Midford also suggests creative solutions based on underappreciated case studies. For instance, the 1920 treaty between Norway and Russia, which disentangles the sovereignty dispute from resource exploitation over the Svalbard archipelago, is illuminating.

This book is the result of an April 2013 research workshop at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Thus, this valuable collection of essays was thought through during the very early months of the Abe Shinzō and Xi Jinping governments. It is now evident that Abe and Xi are the most consequential leaders of post-Cold War Japan and China, especially in light of their remarkable political longevity and power centralization. Given Xi and Abe's taste for power politics and for an uncompromising stance on territorial integrity, future studies on the Japan-China border dispute will necessarily have to take into account the role of personality and of the interplay of domestic politics with the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis. For instance, "memory projects" underwent a renaissance under the Abe and Xi administrations: domestic and international publicity on the islands and denunciations of the counterpart's activities have skyrocketed in recent years.

That said, this book is particularly important for academics interested in a thorough multi-disciplinary approach to the study of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, advanced university students, journalists, and practitioners. Apart from the quality of each essay, the book's multiple perspectives showcase that the territorial dispute is no easy task to solve; nor should siding with either side be automatic given the garbled history, politics, and constructed (if not manipulated) "memories" attached to the islands.