

# THE AFFECTIVE MEDIASCAPES OF CHINESE ISLAND ABANDONMENT

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Gang Hong

<honggangsysu@163.com>

**ABSTRACT:** Islands have long been alluring to sojourners from outside, especially when they are, or are assumed to have been, abandoned. The island lure becomes more powerful when the abandonment is represented in the media in ways that evoke compelling affective responses. Against this background, I intend to critically examine the affective mediascapes of abandoned islands by focusing on three Chinese examples. I argue that it is necessary and possible to de-affect the media lure of abandoned islands in a place-specific way and probe for alternative affective responses in relation to one or several dominant affects in a given context.

**KEYWORDS:** island abandonment, Island Studies, affective landscapes, mediascapes, China

## Introduction

Places and sites have been abandoned or brought to ruination across time and space. But fascination with abandoned places and ruins is arguably a modern cult sustained by both laymen and intellectuals. Presenting a universal history of ruins across civilisations from antiquity to the Enlightenment, Schnapp (2020) approaches these sites as objects of collective memory. Drawing on evidence from archaeology and literature, he focuses more on extraordinary, historic sites than on ordinary, everyday spaces. On the other hand, recent years have witnessed a growing academic interest in the contemporary geographies of abandoned places and ruins around the world (Dawney, 2020). This interest can be seen in studies involving various Chinese urban locations. An exemplar is a 2021 *China Perspectives* feature section on urban ruins and the production of space in contemporary China (introduced by Audin, 2021a). The collection involves non-island places in urban China, including Shanghai's outskirts and an urban village in Guangdong (Salgues, 2021); the uninhabited coal town of Kouquan near Datong, Shanxi (Audin, 2021b); obsolete architecture in the megacities of Beijing and Shanghai (Massey, 2021); and the ghost town of Ordos, Inner Mongolia (Woodworth, 2021).

There are two salient tendencies in the aforementioned literature. First, it is recognised that the production of images and videos plays an essential role in constructing a sense of place for these locations, notwithstanding abandonment and ruination as hard facts (Audin, 2021a). The engagement of visual culture with abandonment and ruination is a contested issue. Some scholars frame ruins as creative retreats for urban explorers, who tend to be external players. For example, in a case study on urban explorer Zhao Yang's photography project, Massey (2021: 21) frames the Chinese ruin as a "creative retreat from the pressures of the lived city" where urban explorers "infiltrate" obsolete buildings for

their own recreational purposes. The derelict spaces are reconfigured as a site of embodied and aesthetic pleasure. By contrast, many scholars criticise fieldwork photography's aestheticising tendency. Between these extremes are introspective approaches concerned with the nuanced ideological claim-making processes involved in fieldwork photos of urban ruins (Woodworth, 2021).

Second, with urban ruins and abandoned places rendered extraordinary in online media, solid empirical studies tend to reconfigure them as ordinary spaces beyond fascination or spectacularity. Therefore, urban locations of abandonment, ruination and dereliction are recast as "alternative geographies of the everyday" that are produced in social interactions by specific individuals and social groups (Audin, 2021a: 5). The focus is on the production of *ordinary* space by both local communities and external parties through their experience and appropriation of these seemingly *extraordinary* spaces. In this light, ruins and abandoned places in urban China cease to be depressingly soul-less landscapes, as are often depicted in media representations. For instance, Salgues (2021) reveals the rich, positive experiences of children of underprivileged classes as they explored and gamed in the ruins in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Other typical urban ruins in China are uninhabited industrial spaces deep in the hinterland, such as the coal town of Kouquan in Datong, Shanxi. Ethnography of the town undertaken in collaboration with diverse local groups produces new representations of the uninhabited place beyond the conventional scholarly lenses of the work unit, demolition, heritagisation, or decline (Audin, 2021b).

Beyond China, islands have historically been subject to abandonment: total or partial, abrupt or slow, forced or voluntary. This is evidenced in Dawson's (2014) pan-Mediterranean review of data on prehistoric island colonisation, abandonment and resettlement. Some abandoned islands have been subject to intense media representation. St Kilda, Scotland is an exemplar. With their former residents evacuated from the main island of Hirta more than 90 years ago, the abandoned archipelago has generated significant mediascapes constructed through both institutional and civilian sources (Bain, 2020; Campsie, 2020; Crae, 2019; *lovinglifeonthego.com*, 2017; Newsroom, 2018; *sundaypost.com*, 2022). Like St Kilda, Chinese abandoned islands have attracted considerable media attention due to the development of both island tourism and online media subcultures. However, there is scarce serious scholarly engagement with the topic. In order to both engage with and complement the aforementioned literature, this article examines the mediascapes of abandoned islands in China. Methodologically, I adopt a critical affective landscapes approach in order to first deglamourise the lure of these island geographies and then propose alternative affective responses to them. The next section is a brief introduction to the historical cycle of settlement and abandonment in global island contexts. Then, I summarise the main scholarly approaches to the topic. Following this, the affective landscapes of some prominent island representations in Chinese locales are critically examined. In the end, the necessity and possibility of cultivating alternative affects is proposed for the consideration of more diversified island development.

### Island abandonment as historical fact

The cycle of occupation, abandonment, and reoccupation is a constant in the history of islands. Historically, there has been a strong correlation between environmental instability on the one hand and, on the other, cycles of emergence and abandonment of

coastal villages in island locations. For example, on Santa Cruz Island, California, there were at least two distinct intervals of site abandonments around c. 2629-1698 BCE (Thakar, 2014).

This cycle is testified by other recent archaeological studies. Circular shell rings along the South Atlantic coast of North America are the remnants of some of the earliest villages that emerged during the Late Archaic period (5000-3000 BCE). Circular shell ring villages on Sapelo Island (Georgia) had emerged before being abandoned during the Terminal Late Archaic era (c. 3800-3000 BCE), supposedly due to radical environmental changes (Garland et al., 2022). On the small, isolated island of Nihoa, Hawai'i, the abandonment of permanent settlements can be glimpsed through the conspicuous ending to coral offerings in temple sites. It is supposed that these settlements were abandoned due to less frequent voyages to and from the island (McCoy et al., 2022). The almost 6000 years' cycle of human presence and abandonments can also be seen on the island of Stromboli, an active volcanic island at the northern edge of Italy's Aeolian archipelago. Human communities have always been at the mercy of anthropogenic and natural catastrophes, which can result in rapid migrations. The island of Stromboli may be popularly known for its benign attributes but sites from the Late Neolithic indicate that settlements on the island had to face the constant threat of the volcano, whose craters are located less than 2 kilometres from the coastline. After numerous eruptive crises, the inhabitants appear to have been intimidated. Subsequently, the island was rapidly and repeatedly abandoned due to both the physical impacts of the volcano and perceptions of environmental insecurity during the Middle Ages. Arguably, people's choice to stay on or leave the island may have been related more to the perceptions of volcanic risk rather than volcanic activity itself (Di Renzoni et al., 2021). In the words of Joseph Brodsky, "Geography provokes history" (Rosi et al., 2019: 8).

Among the diverse forms of environmental instability, climate induced changes are seen as a major cause of oceanic island abandonments. Around 1250-1350 CE rapid climate-driven sea-level fall created a food crisis for coastal dwellers in Fiji and throughout the tropical Pacific Islands. The related conflict forced people to abandon open coastal settlements in favour of more defensible locations (Nunn, 2012). The role played by climate in inducing societal changes represented by the abandonment of unprotected open coasts of large islands in the Pacific region in 1300 CE is well recorded. Another example involves the abandonment of villages in unprotected coastal parts of large islands (e.g. volcanic Babeldaob, in Palau) for more readily defensible offshore islands (e.g. limestone 'rock islands'). The cause of the abandonment is pinned down to decreased precipitation and sea level fall induced food shortage (Clark & Reepmeyer, 2012). Similarly, the establishment of stonework villages in the limestone islands of the Palau archipelago in equatorial Western Micronesia was followed by their eventual abandonment during 1200-1600 CE. While some volcanic island stonework villages have continued to be used, others were abandoned due to either depopulation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or subsequent German and Japanese colonial relocation programmes (Masse et al., 2006). Similarly, the Roman iron smelting sites on Elba Island (Tuscan Archipelago, Italy) are known to have been abandoned in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. A common explanation is that fuel scarcity after deforestation caused the abandonment. However, new studies suggest more multifaceted and nuanced socio-political reasons (Becker et al., 2020).

Indeed, historical evidence mainly from the Pacific islands indicates that coastal settlements on islands were usually abandoned if people perceived conflicts to be emerging. In these cases, they would often relocate to places where military defence was

easier. The safe places would usually be hilltops or caves on high islands whereas on lower islands, people would simply relocate to unoccupied, smaller islands elsewhere. The abandonment is localised in the former situation and total in the latter; both can be seen in Pacific island societies in the 14-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (Goff & Nunn, 2016). Nevertheless, it is noted that localised island abandonments are more commonly seen as far as my research goes. In the iconic case of Ho'oumi Beach site, Nuku Hiva Island (Marquesas), excavated by Robert Suggs in the late 1950s, new exploration suggests abandonment of the nearshore area for extended periods of time due to major marine intrusions and tsunami induced inundation. At the same time, the islanders resettled in more interior locations and/or on higher ground (Allen et al., 2021). The localised abandonment of islands is also found in the case of the Scottish Highlands and Islands during the Maunder Minimum (1645-1715). It is suggested that abandonment along the western seaboard in the region was temporary and possibly correlated to irregular weather patterns such as increased storminess (Dodgshon, 2005).

### Scholarly approaches to island abandonment

Broadly speaking, there are four principal scholarly perspectives on island abandonment. These focus on *climate change*; *landscape factors*; *discursive approaches* and *social aspects*.

#### *Climate change*

To some extent, island abandonments epitomise the historical impacts of climate change on human society. This is demonstrated by the abandonment of islands in the Netherlands and in Chesapeake Bay (USA) due to accelerated sea-level rise in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the causes of final abandonment may have been not only physical but also socio-economic. In other words, island abandonments may be caused by a combination of social issues and the direct impacts of physical environmental changes (e. g. sea-level rise) (Gibbons & Nicholls, 2006).

The climate change approach to island abandonment is mainly an anthropocentric and mainland-centred development discourse. From this perspective, island abandonment itself, especially when deemed inevitable, does not deserve much attention. What matters is how to transit successfully to mass migration. Using results of field surveys in small island communities in Tubigon, Philippines, a heavily flooded region following the Bohol Earthquake in 2013, Jamero et al. (2019) argue that in-situ adaptation can empower islanders for successful post-abandonment relocation; they perceive island abandonment as a strategy rather than a failure. Similar arguments are made by other scholars (e.g., Dawson, 2014). While Pacific Island countries and territories contribute little to climate change induced problems, they are among those most likely to be affected adversely. Within this frame, island abandonment and subsequent migration appear inevitable. However, the motivations of abandonment are mixed. On the one hand, climate change consequences are surely at work. On the other, economic, social, political, and demographic influences should not be overlooked. In the latter situation, island abandonments usually take place relatively spontaneously. However, forced abandonments/relocations also happen in the region due to the severe compromise of land, livelihood, and habitat security (Campbell, 2014). That said, from a mainland-centred development perspective, island abandonment itself is not as important as successful climate-change mobility.

*Landscape factors*

As previously seen, the anthropocentric perspective on island abandonments is prominent in climate change related discussions. But it is not the only perspective; post-human, eco-centric interpretations are dominant in the landscape approach to island abandonment. In this category, Flynn's critically acclaimed travelogue (2021) is an exemplar. Traversing diverse abandoned places from Chernobyl, through an uninhabited Scottish island, to post-industrial Detroit, the author celebrates the almost magical recovery power of nature after human intervention subsides. In the scholarly attention to the relationship between island abandonments and landscape changes, partial abandonments appear to be a focal point. In this regard, no evidence suggests that there is any qualitative difference between regional abandonment on the mainland and partial abandonments on islands, as islandness is not foregrounded in the literature. Islands are profiled in this article due to the focus of this journal – rather than anything distinctly unique about their histories. In the case of Mediterranean Islands, such as those in the Ionian region of Greece, land abandonment due to depopulation was not considered irreversible. The recultivation of abandoned land indicates that tourism and agriculture can be complementary as well as competitive (Kefalas et al., 2018). Similarly, island abandonments in southern Europe often involve localised rural landscapes on islands rather than total abandonments of islands; a case in point is the abandonment of olive plantations in east Lesvos, Greece (Zagaria et al., 2018). In another example, agricultural terraces were first abandoned and then re-cultivated in the Aegean island of Andros (Sakellariou et al., 2021). Furthermore, partial abandonments of land on islands often intertwine with other natural and social processes, such as colonisation in French Polynesia, forest dynamics on the island of Corsica, etc. (Stevenson et al., 2017; Sanz et al., 2013; Bevan et al., 2013; Kizos et al., 2010).

*Discursive approaches*

There is a dynamic dialectic between islands as such and islands as perceived, constructed and conceptualised in the Anthropocene (Chandler & Pugh, 2021). In this light, island abandonments can be considered to be as much about physically shrinking communities as about abandonment as media discourses. For example, the post-industrial abandonment of Lolland (Denmark) may be more a product of a precarity discourse rather than an indubitable physical fact. Dark imaginings of the abandoned island intertwine with local optimism expressed in digital forms. Lolland may indeed be a shrinking island community. But it can only be perceived as being truly abandoned because it is discursively constructed to be such, often through etic discourses produced by journalists, artists, and other cultural elites (Ledstrup, 2021). In extreme situations, island abandonments can even be strategically fabricated to pave the way for colonising purposes. This is what happened in the archipelagos of Patagonia-Aysen at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the process of the modernisation project undertaken in Chile. In this case, island abandonment functions as a strategic geographical imaginary that selectively visualises static settlement of the territory, like cattle-farming concessions, while nullifying the nomadism of the Chonos indigenous people (Nunez et al., 2016). Abandonment is discursively constructed to serve the purpose of justifying colonial occupation.

The most powerful imaginary of climate change induced island abandonments has to be the sinking islands narrative. This narrative, woven across media, policy, and development discourses, can be found in discussions about Pacific islands in general, but

particularly so in the case of the Solomon Islands. As envisioned by this narrative, the small, artificial islands along the coast of Malaita have been eroded and abandoned due to climate change induced sea-level rise. But it is probable that climate change may not be the only factor to blame, although islands are indeed being abandoned in this part of the globe. Focusing unilaterally on climate change alone helps to de-politicise environmental and development problems and distract attention away from the deeper socio-political causes of island vulnerability. Another consequence is that the discourse may even deprive local communities of the initiative and ability to act by casting them stereotypically as victims of an impersonal climate (van der Ploeg et al., 2020).

### *Social aspects*

The last approach is not in the mainstream of island abandonment scholarship as it involves neither the physical abandonment of islands nor the localised abandonment of sites on islands. But it is worth covering as it embodies the scope of the scholarship. In this body of literature, island abandonment is approached metaphorically. For example, the Italian island of Lampedusa's situation in the Arab Spring in 2011 has been examined as an example of "state abandonment", which is interpreted within a long tradition of perceived abandonment by the mainland state (Elbek, 2020). Similarly, islanders' perception of being abandoned can be understood within a postcolonial frame. Analysing text and images of a disease afflicting the then-French Indian Ocean Island of Réunion, Jansen (2012) finds local perceptions of abandonment by the French nation and therefore their historical geopolitical identification with France instead of postcolonial opposition. In another case, Iwawa Island (a rehabilitation centre for delinquent young men in Rwanda) is treated as a liminal space promising both nurture and abandonment. It functions as an island on which people are abandoned instead of one that has been abandoned itself (Lovgren & Turner, 2019). Abandonments could also be institutional and intra-island; urban planning in Canary Islands has been perceived to segregate and ghettoise the local working class (Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021).

### The media representation of Chinese abandoned islands

Fitting broadly within the discursive approach profiled above, this article relates to the academic discourse on the appeal of ruins and abandoned places. That said, it is particularly inspired by the affective turn in the humanities and 'soft' social sciences in recent decades. In what follows, I examine the representations of abandoned islands in mainly personal style media with a particular focus on the affective dimension of these landscapes straddling real places and virtual geographies. In the aspect of island typology, both saltwater islands that are relatively remote from the mainland and freshwater islands located in inland lakes or reservoirs are considered. The media formats of the data collected include mostly vlogs and photojournalism. The limited scope of the data resulted in part from a failure to obtain relevant media materials of less personal style and more extended length: documentaries on abandoned islands in the Chinese mainland are few and far between. Nevertheless, culturally speaking, islands are not the private property of intellectual elites; their meanings vary with different viewing subjects and are contingent upon ever changing contexts. The false boundaries between the serious and the entertaining, and the social and the personal collapse if one treats all seemingly *personal* data as materials for the dynamic and multifaceted cultural construction of abandoned islands. Therefore, examining the representations of

abandoned islands in these practices is valuable in critically understanding the interaction between islandness and abandonment in popular geographical imagination.

Not only are ruins rendered viscerally appealing in popular culture; their appeal has also been positively evaluated in scholarly discourses. One early example of such literature is Macaulay's *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953). In that work, Macaulay argues for a reading of ruins as things operating "on their own terms" rather than as "simply decayed fragments of something else" (Hayward, 2021: 3). Subsequently, more inclusive and alternative perspectives on ruins have been proposed. Challenging types of highly selective affirmatory heritage theorisation, Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2016) emphasise the importance of acknowledging the essential unruliness and stickiness of heritage. They argue that heritage should be seen as the raw, unfiltered legacy voluntarily and involuntarily passed on to future generations. In turn, they propose "ruin ecology", a notion liberated from linear temporality on which the traditional conception of heritage is premised. According to Olsen and Pétursdóttir, "ruin ecology" is about "how things in ruination affect our understanding of them, their material otherness, and the potential dimension of care embedded in this otherness" (2016: 41). In other words, as ruins are made up of things already divorced from human utility and ordinary valuation, their alternative inter-and-cross-species potentials (*and affective potential as well, I must add*) have been released. The old world built upon the rigid divides between nature and culture, and past and present is gone; what replaces it is a new perspective on ruins that appreciates their existence in-and-for-themselves. More recently, through an ethnographic case study of a small area of Sydney's inner harbour, Hayward (2021) also brings into relief the multiple readings of ruins. For him, Burns Bay's heritage effect is similar in type if not in scale with that of more monumental ruinations such as that of Chernobyl. The tannery buildings (demolished, allowed to decay, or to be swallowed by the bush) could be different things to different subjects, depending on whether you are contemporary non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people, those sensitive to Indigenous history, environmentalists, or simply urbanites living around the Bay. While the specific arguments made in the above literature are not necessarily pertinent to this article, the call for alternative interpretative potentials of ruins has inspired my writing.

On the other hand, as real-world violence, trauma, and radical changes increase, the affective turn in the humanities and soft social sciences stresses the aleatory, dynamic property of experience and its potential to disrupt, unsettle and haunt places (Berberich et al., 2013; Hoggett & Thompson, 2012). Affect is no longer merely perceived as romanticised, immaterial existence. On the contrary, it is theorised into something that is viscerally socio-political in the sense that affect could perform the double function of both laying bare forms of exploitation and compelling us to reconfigure our sense perceptions by juxtaposing forms of accepted visibility with alternative "mood-worlds" (Berberich et al., 2013; Ingold, 2011). Specifically, the affective approach aims to consider space and place beyond their material properties with the conviction that these immaterial landscapes have the potential to reshape material places and social spaces.

Critical affective landscapes scholarship is heavily invested in examining and exploring the dialectic geographies of overlooked and marginal sites and spaces, from the rural to the urban, from the man-made to the seemingly wild, and from the cultivated to the derelict (Berberich et al., 2013). Furthermore, it is especially attentive to the central role played by visual art practices in redistributing sense perceptions. Empirical research has focused on diverse spaces, including the bombsites of post-war Britain (Highmore, 2013); roadside memorials in the USA (Bednar, 2013); real and imagined council estates (Waites,

2013); affect in interpersonal interaction in physical spaces (Edensor, 2012); affective landscapes of everyday life in literature and art (Burch, 2015); the affective landscapes in rural gentrification in north-east Scotland (Sutherland, 2022); and the cinematic landscapes of Australia attempting to reconcile challenging indigeneity and a sense of national belonging (Stadler & Mitchell, 2010). Nevertheless, while affect has the potential to question, disrupt, and reconfigure normative landscapes of prescribed sense, its generative power in actual practice could also be contained and checked by the manipulation of feelings undertaken by dominant, oppressive ideologies. While affect has the potential to deterritorialise, it is also at the risk of being territorialised.

In what follows, I present and analyse the affective mediascapes of areas of three distinct abandoned islands: Shengshan, Xiji and Muyu (Figure 1).

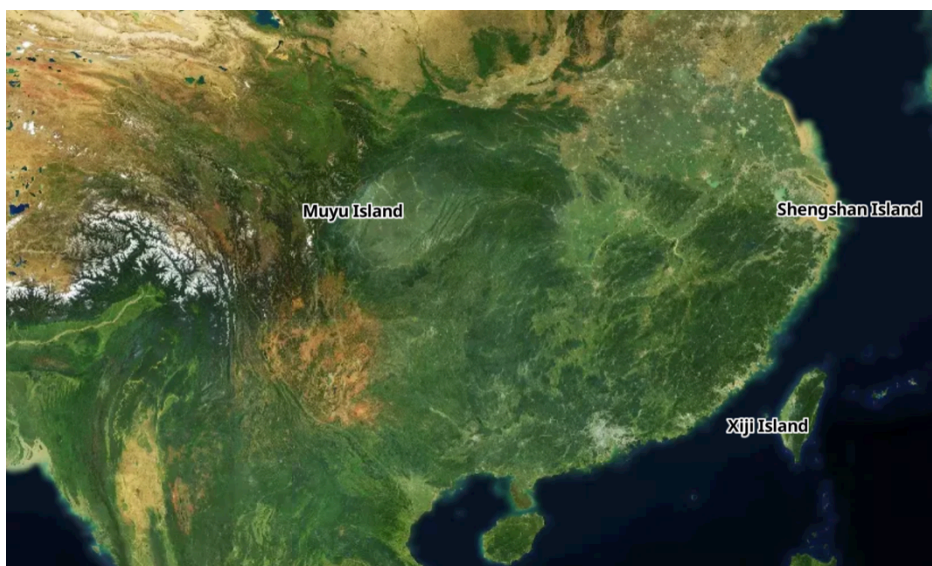


Figure 1 - Modified satellite image of an overview of Shengshan Island, Xiji Island, and Muyu Island in relation to the Chinese mainland (Imagery © 2022 © Mapbox © OpenStreetMap).

#### *Houtouwan, Shengshan Island, Shengsi Archipelago*

The former fishing village of Houtouwan is located on Shengshan Island (Figure 2) in Shengsi county, an archipelago consisting of several islands under the jurisdiction of Zhoushan, Zhejiang. About 40 miles southeast of Shanghai, it is within accessible reach from the metropolitan Nanpu Bridge Bus Station, first by bus and then by ferry. The town used to hold about 2000 inhabitants, predominantly fishers and their families, before the middle of the 1990s. It was economically prosperous for a while before being gradually depopulated due to the shrinking fishing industry, the growing attraction of bigger islands nearby and the more urbanised mainland cities such as Shanghai (Zachos, 2018). Officially depopulated in 2002, Houtouwan was merged into a nearby village (Wong, 2018).





Figure 2 - Satellite image of Shengshan Island on the right, connected by a bridge to Gouqi Island on the left (Imagery © 2022 © Mapbox © OpenStreetMap).

This almost abandoned island village has generated significant tourism and mediascapes both home and abroad (e.g. *abandonedrealty.com*, 2020; Panayotopoulos, 2018; planan, 2018; Wong, 2018; Zachos, 2018). In a *National Geographic* article, Houtouwan is recast as a posthuman landscape evoking a sense of tranquil beauty despite its decaying and decrepit conditions; that is, an unmistakable proof of nature’s miraculous and benign rewilding process. As the author writes, “(t)here, the former fishing village of Houtouwan is carpeted with lush, overgrown greenery, a foliage-rich shadow of what it used to be” (Zachos, 2018) (Figure 3). In another *CNN Travel* article, an album of thirteen photos of the island represents the “ocean-facing, cliff side village” as “China’s most beautiful, abandoned village” with the rural houses merging smoothly into blankets of lush greenery. It is underscored that the ghost village “looks even more enchanting in misty weather” (Wong, 2018). The village, despite its ghostliness, is seen as a quiet “primordial tableau” that could evoke “post-apocalypse” and “epic” sentiments (Panayotopoulos, 2018). In another example, Houtouwan, “the greenest village in the world”, is described as a “wondrous sight”, and a “photographer’s paradise” (planan, 2018). In general, these Western photojournalistic reports draw on the almost depopulated and lushly rewilded state of the island village to evoke a spiritualised aesthetic mixing tranquillity and amazement.

If Western photojournalism attempts to construct a post-human paradise out of Houtouwan, witnessing nature’s wondrous calming power, domestic vlogs posted on video platforms by individual users tend to process the islandscapes in a more anthropogenic way. Notwithstanding similar amazement over the village’s rewildedness

(Figure 3), most vlogs are heavily aestheticised and subjectivised; the forlorn beauty of the island intertwines with the introspective solitude of the individuals (Huaipeizi, 2019; Woshibai, 2021; ZhimingRaphael, 2021). The vloggers are often educated females, insofar as my research goes, but a gender interpretation is risky considering the limited scope of the data. Some of the vlogs come with slow-paced, poetic voiceovers. However, through the use of aesthetic filters, smooth editing, and background music (often exotic and laidback), they work almost unanimously to evoke – in effect if not on purpose – sentiments of introspective isolation, foreign modernity, psychological subtlety and a mixture of self-abandonment and self-indulgence.



Figure 3 - Screenshot from a vlog capturing the rewilded landscapes on Shengshan (Woshibai, 2021).

There is one exception. In a rare example, a young female vlogger tries to lay bare the abandoned island village's socio-economic plight at a certain point of the video. First, she states that the village was mostly abandoned by young people and some of the older islanders had no better choice but to stay (Woshibai, 2021). The gradual depopulation of the island is also mentioned in nonfictional travel literature covering the area (Sheng, 2017). Second, a senior islander interviewed in the vlog said that those that stayed do not really enjoy life on this "beautiful and tranquil island". On the contrary, she felt life on the island is inconvenient and frustrating; the remaining residents only stayed because they were not capable of leaving. Feelings of mild sadness are intentionally evoked here and testified to by several bullet-screen comments (Woshibai, 2021). However, the vlog is still very much shrouded in a bourgeois, aestheticised veil of desire through a chemistry of the sexualised postures of the vlogger and chic Japanese pop background music. Sadness over the socio-economic conditions of the island community is evoked briefly only to evaporate in a pervasive aesthetic of introspective coolness.

#### *Xiji Island, Penghu Archipelago*

Xiji is an island of the Penghu Archipelago perching in the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea. It was abandoned in 1978 as a result of Taiwan's economic shift towards industrialisation.

Xiji had always been an agrarian society with salient features of Chinese culture before it was gradually depopulated in the 1970s as young people relocated to more urbanised islands nearby in pursuit of better employment, a trajectory commonly seen in other small island communities around the world. Although the government targeted the smaller islands of the Penghu archipelago as possible sites of industrial development, Xiji was not considered worthy of investment due to dangerous basalt reefs along the southern coastline and hard-to-access northern cliffs. As a result, the remaining villagers of the community voted to relocate to Magong, the archipelago's main city. Today, no longer an inhabited island community, Xiji has been transformed into the South Penghu Marine National Park, a reserve normally off limits to outsiders without a permit (Morris, 2018) (Figure 4).

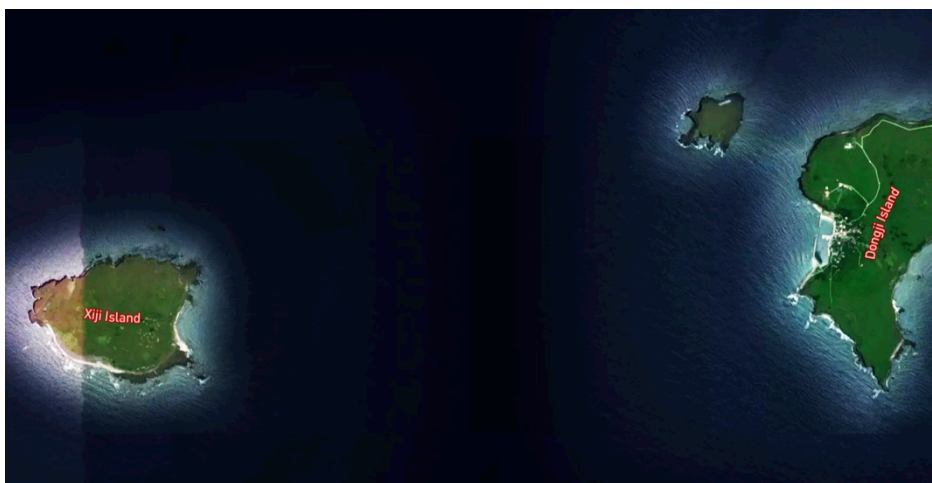


Figure 4 - Satellite image of Xiji Island on the left, across from Dongji Island, on the right (Imagery © 2022 © Mapbox © OpenStreetMap).

In a photo essay published online, James X. Morris presents the abandoned island by zooming in on the uninhabited and derelict village (e.g. Figure 5). With thirteen photos, the photographer highlights the traditional Chineseness of the village and its dissolution. As Morris says, this is an opportunity “to pause and reflect on what once was, and what still remains, of Taiwan’s pre-industrial communities” (2018). Specifically, his Image #1 portrays Xiji Village in ruins, emphasising its buildings facing the same direction, a typical traditional Chinese custom; #2 portrays the accelerated deterioration of Xiji Temple due to a lack of maintenance; #3 portrays the interior of Xiji Temple in ruins; #4 portrays the surviving traditional Chinese decorations on the interior wall of the temple; #5 portrays a forlorn protective pagoda and shrine erected in the 1950s along the coastline watching over the beach; #6 portrays a house relatively intact due to its rare, modern structure, with its roof gone (reproduced below as Figure 5); #7 takes us inside the abandoned house and presents a doorway alcove serving as an altar to worship the local deity of Tiangong; #8 portrays the remains of a decaying traditional kitchen, foregrounding the vulnerability of its local building materials; #9 portrays the remains of a bedroom, highlighting the cisterns for storing water procured from the wells on the island. #10 zooms in on the decayed altar in family houses for worshipping family ancestors and popular deities; #11 highlights the remains of goats, noting them as

frequently seen residents of the island seeking shelter in the abandoned buildings after humans were gone; #12 portrays an almost unrecognisable shrine in the form of a pile of rubble in a green open field; and #13 portrays in black and white a collapsed primary school belonging to the Kuomintang era. With these photos presented in a row, the Chineseness of the islandscapes is foregrounded. All the images are processed either in yellow-and-grey shade of nostalgia or bleak black-and-white hue, calling forth an aesthetic of haunting decadence, mixing senses of vulnerability, desolation, nostalgia, and beauty. In contrast to the aforementioned Houtouwan mediascapes, no wondrous rewilding nature is celebrated; instead, the moody images tend to channel viewers' emotion towards a lamentation over a disappeared island life that is pre-industrial, quintessentially Chinese, irrecoverably traumatised, and solidly grounded in the island geographies.



Figure 5 - Photo of an abandoned house on Xiji Island (James X. Morris, 2018).

#### *Abandoned freshwater islands in inland areas*

With the boom of short video and live-stream economy in the Chinese mainland since around 2014, first person perspective exploration of abandoned places has become a prominent media genre. While many vlogs or livestreaming channels in this category focus on derelict hospitals, schools, and former strategic industrial communities from a bygone era of planned economy, some media practitioners have attempted to jump on the bandwagon by harnessing the lure of abandoned islands in inland lakes, rivers, or reservoirs. In contrast to the highly subjectivised and introspective tendencies in the aforementioned vlogs involving marine islands, the video explorations of freshwater

islands in inland areas tend to be overtly masculine and devoid of any genteel aesthetic. The solitary male vloggers often take the viewers on virtual trips on daring explorations into the derelict buildings on these islands. Background music of the type often found in thrillers is deployed ostentatiously to create uncanniness. The affects evoked mix fear and excitement akin to the emotions that arise while watching horror movies.



Figure 6 - Modified satellite image of Muyu Island perching in the reservoir (Imagery © 2022 © Mapbox © OpenStreetMap).

In a series of three consecutive videos posted on a major video sharing platform, a thirtysomething male vlogger, along with his wife hidden behind the camera, takes viewers on first a boat trip to the abandoned Muyu (often called Snake Island by locals) in Baita Lake, Chongzhou (a county-level town of Chengdu, Sichuan Province); then an exploration of the derelict buildings formerly belonging to a local luxury club. The trip is conspicuously edited to evoke senses of forlornness, suspense, morbidity, and horror as the explorer covers various sites including a Chinese temple, a pagoda, and numerous derelict rooms. Snakes, rats, and bats are also mentioned by the talking explorer as he searches the rooms, although the animals are not seen. He repeatedly speaks of the “stenchy” and “corrupted” smell in the rooms. With close-up shots of tree roots

colonising the derelict walls, rewilding is endowed with a sense of uncanniness. Here, rewilding, rather than being a benign natural process, is recast as spooky and ghostly. Overall, the abandoned island is represented as an eerie posthuman site. Although the explorer allows viewers a glimpse into the prices of the commodities sold when the club was still operating about two decades ago by zooming in on a yellowish menu found in a room, the socio-economic circumstances of the rise and fall of the kind of luxury club in such a location are not touched upon (Shangnaqu, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). In another series of vlogs, the same male explorer ushers viewers onto a similar abandoned lake island in the same area that used to serve the same function in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Taking us through a video trip into the derelict cruiser-shaped building at one end of the island, the vlogger tries to construct a site of posthuman desolation and haunting memories through a combination of amateur adventure and spooky background music (Figure 7). Though nostalgia appears to be briefly evoked at a certain point, the affect exists without a specific temporal object, soon overshadowed by the eeriness of the scene (Shangnaqu, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).



Figure 7 - Screenshot from a vlog in which the explorer looks out from the inside of an abandoned building on Muyu Island (Shangnaqu, 2022).

Although personal vlogs are not obligated to do this, more profound socio-geographical understanding of the area needs to address why such a geographical locale developed into a high-end club in the first place and the reasons for its decline in the local contexts of urban economy. That said, exceptions can be found. Exploring an abandoned island perching in a reservoir in southwest China that used to function as a small-scale underground casino, the male vlogger briefly mentions local environmental policies as possibly causes of the abandonment. The supposedly unsatisfactory development of the island casino is also touched upon, if briefly. However, in keeping with most ruin explorations broadcast on the Internet, the overall ambience of the vlog is shrouded in mystery, morbidity, and horror, testifying again to the lure of *the uncanny island* in popular online culture.

### Towards critical affective mediascapes of abandoned islands

The island lure is certainly at work in the mediascapes of abandoned islands as depicted above. Notwithstanding their varying geographies, islands are usually perceived by outsiders peeping in to be marginal, special, and even idiosyncratic due to their assumed qualities of being bounded, small, isolated and littoral. The status of being abandoned adds fuel to the island lure, as spaces of abandonment and ruination themselves are powerful tropes with dark romanticist connotations. In the types of islandscapes of abandonment profiled above, a plethora of affects could be evoked, including sentiments of spirituality, tranquillity, amazement, introspection, loneliness, narcissism, self-absorption, exotic modernity, female subtlety, sentimental nostalgia, eerie desolation, exciting uncanniness, etc. Some of the affects are targeted at objects with a relatively clear contour (e.g. amazement over nature's rewilding power in Houtouwan, nostalgia over the lost traditional life of Xiji Island). Others reside in a vague spatial ambience without being anchored to any given objects. Still others are emotions projected unto islands by the media producers/island sojourners themselves (often coming from the mainland), turning the figure of island into highly subjectivised geographies. To critically examine these affective landscapes, one needs to ask at least two questions. 1. what gave rise to the affects in the first place? And 2. what alternative affects could be evoked to redraw the island geographies?

Nebulous and ethereal as they may appear, affects are firmly grounded products of a combination of material and immaterial factors. In our case, these factors include the reality of accelerated cycles of settlement and abandonment on islands in general, the perceived idiosyncrasy of islands from the mainland perspective, a growing niche interest in spatial abandonment, the appeal of dereliction and ruination in relation to conventional forms of topophilia, the boom of island tourism and urban exploration, the rise of online video and live-stream economy, and the inclination of individual media producers to attract maximal stream on the internet by exploiting the *extraordinary* lure of abandoned islands, etc.

Regarding the mediascapes of Houtouwan, the dominant affects include a spiritualised amazement over the rewilding power of nature and a psychological projection of the introspective individual. While both are legitimate within their own frameworks, their foregrounded status in the media has silenced other affects that would be equally important for us to engage with. A rewilded island village may look tranquil to day-trip sojourners but the lush greenery has also buried the real-world woes of islanders who felt stuck on a tiny space of scarce resources and life opportunities. Those that had the means to leave did so. Many of those that remained felt abandoned. While it is perfectly justifiable for non-islander video diarists to use the landscapes as a backdrop for the projection of personal sentiments, the hegemony of these affects needs to be complemented by more contextualised understandings in more socially sensitive media genres. Unfortunately, the latter category of videos is few, as far as my research has ascertained. Similarly, highlighting the introspective self of the outsider at the expense of the harsh realities of island life is problematic. Regarding the mediascapes of Xiji Island, the dominant affect is a Westerner's nostalgia over a disappeared traditional Chinese community along with its way of life. Commendable as it is in preserving local heritages, the affect needs to be complemented by possible emotional responses from those island emigrants themselves. Do they feel that they have abandoned a precious pre-industrial way of life? Or have they simply left the island for a better life elsewhere on the mainland or bigger islands? Regarding the mediascapes of abandoned freshwater islands in inland

China, the dominant affect is a mixture of eerie desolation and exciting uncanniness akin to the experience of watching horror movies. In this case, ethical considerations are probably not prominent as these islands were most likely uninhabited except for the entertainment business that used to be stationed there. While we could tolerate affective abandonment in personal vlogs, questions regarding the social geographies of the locations are worth asking. What gave rise to the development of the locations in the context of urbanisation in inland Chinese cities? What role did islandness play in the development? What led to the business's decline and how was the decline indicative of economic issues in the development of Chinese inland cities? To ask these questions requires either innovation of the existing media genre or the introduction of more socially engaged genres. Unfortunately, both are rare in this particular culture.

### Conclusion and reflection

In this article I have critically examined the affective dimension of media representations of abandoned Chinese islands after presenting some historical facts of island abandonment in global contexts and summarising the main scholarly approaches to the topic. I argue that it is necessary and possible to de-affect the media lure of abandoned islands in a place-specific way that could potentially deglamourise the conventional affects created, maintained and reinforced by the media representations of the locations. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to probe for alternative affective responses to the mediascapes. Culturally, islands have long been alluring to sojourners from outside, especially so when they are or are assumed to be abandoned. The island lure becomes more powerful when the abandonment is dramatised in ways that consciously or unconsciously evoke compelling affective responses. In this regard, a critical approach to examining the affective dimension of the media representations of island abandonment is useful in disenchanting the island figure and is productive in reimagining island spaces. Nevertheless, affects are not inherently regressive or debilitating. In fact, all narratives and representations about places are in varying degree affective. In the cases of Houtouwan and Xiji islands, nostalgia is not only a legitimate emotion but also an affective prerequisite for recovering a well justified sense of place and hopefully making real-world changes. People have spent a good portion of their lives in these places and therefore no radical changes in whatever form have the right to deny that affect. Furthermore, nostalgia, if managed and channelled properly, has the potential to be translated into real-world actions, be they heritagisations or political acts. The crux of the matter is, who needs nostalgia? Is it the old islanders? The young generations of islanders? Tourists from outside? Planners? Government officials? Reporters? Filmmakers? Or academic researchers? The answers must be mixed, but the powerful sway exerted by a few hegemonic affects in the media as described in this article often denies the islands alternative histories, visions and, therefore, identities. The tricky thing with affects is, vague and abstract as they may feel, they act primordially and more intensely than verbal-linguistic symbolic systems. Abandonment may be a significant island reality, but we can decide how to feel about it and project future visions of development accordingly.

My final reflections, inspired by the reviewers' comments on an earlier draft of this article, could have appeared in a footnote or endnote. However, considering the weight of their criticisms, it is worth addressing them here. The first criticism was straightforward, expressing that *by decrying the presence of hegemonic affects, I expected too much from personal video diaries*. Indeed, this is a justified criticism. But it is only so if you merely



consider the authorial intention of the videos and draw a rigid boundary between the personal and the social. In fact, I used these *personal* diaries more as cultural data than as individual creative works. In this light, even the seemingly *personal* is a reflection of the social and the media producers' intention is essentially irrelevant. On the other hand, notwithstanding my being merely a media enthusiast, existing representations of abandoned islands in my culture are largely restricted to these personalised media. The homogeneity in genre and affect is exactly the issue I have attempted to raise. The second criticism concerns the (lack of) justification for pursuing alternative affects in the first place. For me, affects are not immaterial feelings attached to the physical island space after the latter is already there or constructed. On the contrary, they are the implicit medium through which island spaces are experienced, imagined, planned, and developed. The false divide between the affective and the material needs to be shattered for affects have real-world impacts. One of the primary causes of island communities' vulnerability may be their *perceived* lack of developmental diversity. In this regard, alternative development is only possible if alternative affects already exist.

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