

“Demilitarize” Ponso no Tao (Orchid Island): Toward Reclaiming Indigenous Territory and Place Names

Abstract

Ponso no Tao is situated 60 kilometers from the southeast coast of Taiwan. It is home to about 4000 Tao people who traditionally lived on fishing and farming, but over the past three decades, have increasingly relied on seeking jobs in Taiwan and island tourism to sustain their lives.

Since the KMT government took over political control of Orchid Island after WWII, the island has become militarized in very short period of time in the following two senses. First of all, the island was physically militarized with different sections of military units. Not only did the military put coastal protective units all over the coastal areas of the island, it also puts military prisoners as well as the government’s political prisoners in two separate locations. While since the 1980s, these military facilities have gradually been abandoned, most of these old facilities still lay waste, and the local people have difficulty reclaiming these lands.

The island was also militarized in a second sense. Many of the coastal rock formation sites have been named by outsiders—the Han Chinese people—with military names. Most famous of these military names include “Tank Rock”, “Battleship Rock”, “Steel Helmet Rock”. In addition, other rocks have been given animal names such as “dragon”, “lion”, and “elephant”, all foreign to the island. The main purpose of this paper is first to describe the historical transformation of Orchid Island into “militarized” zone and its effects. Secondly, this paper will discuss about ways to reclaim these militarized spaces and to rename militarized names according to Tao people’s traditional knowledge system.

Key words: Ponso no Tao, Orchid Island, demilitarize, land claim