

ISLAND INFRASTRUCTURE AS CIRCULATION AND NARRATION

Railway Development on Hainan Island

[Received November 1st 2023; accepted July 14th 2025 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.267]

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how railways, as infrastructure, fabricate and articulate an island's identity (its 'islandness'), from the perspective of a case study of Hainan Island in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The development of the railway on Hainan is predominantly contextualised in terms of two distinct historical construction phases: the first stage is a brief colonial period under Japanese rule (1939–1945) in which railway development was undertaken for resource exploitation supporting colonial expansion and war supply; the second stage is the present-day development of a circular high-speed train network as part of the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port (2023–2025). In the latter case, Hainan's transportation infrastructure is more than a symbol of the modernisation of the island, it also affirms the image of the island as a type of tropical paradise for outsiders and mainland Chinese, aligning with the national vision of the island as an embodiment of extra-statecraft. This dominant narrative of Hainan, rooted in infrastructure, reinforces a tourist-centric identity and facilitates capital circulation. I argue that the complexity of Hainan's islandness, grounded in railways as transportation infrastructure, reveals a counter-utopian perspective and resistance to colonial legacies, particularly from the perspective of intra-island circulation and its multifaceted cultural dimensions. This research not only spotlights underexplored realities of Hainan's railway development but also sheds light on an emerging conceptual framework – the railway as means of circulation and narration – for understanding Hainan's speculative infrastructure development and infrastructural promises for the future.

KEYWORDS: Hainan Island, high-speed railway, extra-statecraft, circulation, cultural narration, free trade port, transportation infrastructure

Introduction

During the ten-day national holiday celebrating the 2024 Spring Festival, Hainan's tourism transportation capacity was challenged by high outbound flight ticket prices, in some cases ten times higher than arrival tickets for travellers who hadn't pre-booked their return journeys. Although departing by boat across the Qiongzhou Strait to the mainland was typically an alternative, unstable weather conditions – including heavy fog – prevented this. Moreover, the train had to be disassembled to cross the strait by ferry, a process that took three hours. This situation, while an outlier, vividly conveys the continued isolation of Hainan in terms of infrastructural connectivity: there is not yet a bridge or tunnel between

mainland China and Hainan.¹ This lasting infrastructural reality raises dual speculations: the suspension of the transportation infrastructure project (perhaps as part of the railway system) that would connect Hainan to the mainland, and lingering concerns about the future development of Hainan as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for international tourism and the local economy.

The connectedness of Hainan to the outside world through transportation infrastructure not only illustrates the unfulfilled nature of the island's infrastructural connection with mainland China but also the role of Hainan in the vast South China Sea (Figure 1). Hainan (which literally means 'the island at the south of the sea'), is slightly smaller than Taiwan Island at 33,900 km² as opposed to the latter's 35,800 km². In disputes over sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction in the South China Sea, Hainan is a dynamic frontier for mainland China in international affairs and in the "militarization of ocean spaces in geopolitical conflict zones" (Huang & Lien, 2022, p. 882). The geopolitical discourse surrounding Hainan Island and the South China Sea is a manifestation of "new waves of resource nationalism and disputes over contested jurisdictions" that represent "fertile, if unstable, grounds for exploring more-than-territorial expressions of sovereignty" (Havice, 2018, p. 1294). On one side, there's the controversial re-territorialisation of the South China Sea in conflicts between China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines. On the other side, Hainan Island is excluded from the so-called 'first island chain' – a legacy of the Cold War US strategising that encircles the East China and South China seas and which is identified by the U.S. as being of strategic importance for its foreign policy and maritime strategies against China.² These ongoing and evolving geopolitical tensions underscore Hainan Island's unique strategic position that is made evident in its controversial development – particularly the rapid expansion of its free trade port and the construction of artificial islands across the South China Sea.

Currently, the Hainan Free Trade Port initiative designates Hainan Island as an SEZ with the aim of cultivating a sophisticated industrial and commercial ecosystem (Xiu & Li, 2022, 11). The implementation plan outlines that by 2025 Hainan will operate under an autonomous customs system featuring three distinct concentric zones of trade: Hainan to the outside world, Hainan to mainland China, and within Hainan – each governed by specialised economic and trade regulations.³

¹ Considering the high financial costs, concerns for coastal and marine ecosystems, and the high prevalence of earthquake disruption and seasonal typhoons, in addition to technological challenges, the proposal for the Qiongzhou Strait Tunnel – a 19.3-mile high-speed submarine tunnel connecting Guangzhou and Hainan with a 20-minute drive – remains uncertain.

² See Yoshihara for an analysis of the island chain's role in contemporary geopolitics.

³ This was discussed during the annual Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan in March 2023 and was scheduled for completion by 2025. The plan is characterised by adherence to the leadership of the CCP and alignment with socialist principles and the goal for 2025 was to establish a basic level of the Hainan Free Trade Port focused on free trade and zero-tariff investments. By 2035, the aim is to upgrade it with well-developed operations and liberalisation, facilitating the movement of capital, people, data information, and goods through infrastructure projects like the high-speed railway and artificial islands. Ultimately, by the mid-21st century, Hainan Island is expected to become a comprehensive and highly impactful free trade port. The master plan, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, was reported on by the Xinhua News Agency on June 1, 2020.



Figure 1 - Map of Hainan Island in relation to southern China and Vietnam (Google Maps, 2025)

With state approval, the Hainan Free Trade Port has established rules governing, regulating, and organising the circulation of people, goods, and investments through the island. In this context, Hainan, as a free trade port and an experimental field for opening-up trade, embodies Keller Easterling’s (2014) concept of “extra-statecraft”. Easterling defines infrastructure space as a potent operational medium working alongside statecraft and undisclosed economic-political activities. Extra-statecraft approaches infrastructure space through protocols, standards, and practices that serve as repeatable formulas and spatial products for SEZs in both state planning and global systems. On Hainan, the tangible infrastructural landscape comprises hotels, resorts, tourism-focused shopping malls, artificial islands for real estate complexes and container ports with import/export tax exemptions. Operating as a free trade port – as extra-statecraft outside the state – Hainan Island reveals a powerful and speculative dimension of island-scale infrastructure space, particularly in terms of circulation and narration in the spatial and cultural dimensions. This is analysed from the perspectives of decolonisation and island studies, and through the lens of infrastructure. In this context, two perspectives can be adopted for understanding the railway as transportation infrastructure on Hainan: the material aspect, that is, circulation; and the representative aspect, that is, the railway as a means of territorial narration. The railway, as a form of transportation infrastructure whose direction and control derives from the mainland, develops and configures the island through technology and capitalism. On a larger scale, the high-speed railway as transportation infrastructure is a part of the infrastructural zone of the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port as an example of extra-statecraft.

In the following analysis, the article first focuses on how Hainan’s identity is being narrated, constructed, and involved in a global discourse of modernising development and amid geopolitical tensions. The second section, centring on the concept of infrastructure for circulation (geopolitical, cultural, and capital), analyses the history of perceptions and

desires relating to Hainan's railway system as initiated by the Japanese colonial regime during World War II, before delving into the contemporary development of a circular high-speed train network as part of the Hainan Free Trade Port's infrastructure. Finally, the article returns to the significance of the narration of the railway on Hainan Island in its specific cultural and spatial context for politics and imaginaries of infrastructure on the island.

The tropical paradise narrative and Hainan's modern identity

Thinking concerning islands often involves the interplay between utopian and dystopian ideas. This is showcased in the imaginative and literary discourse of the desert island, which allows for reflection on aspects of Western civilisation capitalism, and colonialism (Defoe, 2008 [1719]; Golding, 1954; Stevenson, 1883; Wells, 1896; Xiao & Chen, 2022). Philosophically, in the context of modernity, thinking on islands is dialectical. While Gilles Deleuze's (2004 [1953]) essay 'Desert Islands' emphasises islands' inherent recreation of the world, Jacques Derrida's (2011) analysis examines the sovereignty and legibility of desert islands in the discourses of deconstruction and decolonisation. They both argue that an island's identity is both "real and imaginary, mythological and scientific", and this can also be seen as sovereign (Williams, 2012). In this light, thinking on islands involves practices and imaginaries that deal with the discourses of modernity in terms of colonisation, nation-states, and the knowledge hierarchy.

The theoretical lineage of the decolonisation of islands has been extensively explored in Oceania post-WWII, viewing islands in a progressive and reflexive manner (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016). In terms of knowledge production and cultural practices relating to islands, decolonisation theories and methodologies aim to "avoid remarginalizing already marginalized actors" (Nimführ & Mweloni, 2021, p.10). Meanwhile, the decolonising approach/decoloniality is viewed in terms of praxis, analysis, and a process by which to approach the internal relations between modernity and coloniality (Quijano, 2007). The study of islands echoes Derrida's statement that "there is no world, there are only islands" (2011, p.9) – and can engender a relational, non-modern, non-linear and more-than-human mode of thinking (Pugh & Chandler, 2021, p. 34). Accordingly, this understanding of islands is a paradigm that is opposed to the hegemonic, the modern, the mainland, and 'one world' thinking. In other words, the continuous reflection on less developed islands has tended to characterise these as imagined sites of socio-political experiments" and as embodying "utopia's narrative of its violent foundation" (Pugh & Chandler, 2021, p. 217, p. 219). In modern times, the utopian narrative of Hainan began with its positioning as a 'third paradise' – after Bali and Hawai'i – awaiting discovery and development, as recounted by the Chinese-Malaysian physician and epidemiologist Wu Lien-teh (1879–1960) in his 1937 article 'Hainan, the Paradise of China' in *The China Quarterly*. To achieve this promise of a third paradise, according to Wu, it was necessary to develop tourism infrastructure along Hainan's coastal cities to attract international tourists, athletes, naturalists and individuals interested in researching the cultures of the island's ethnic groups' (the Li and Miao peoples) in its inland, mountainous regions.

These utopian visions of Hainan Island embody the desire to replicate the island paradise model and the growing international recognition of Hainan's development in a globalised modern world. Specifically, the island as a tourist paradise is a romanticised narrative that obscures the extraction of tropical natural resources, the reinforcement of cultural exoticism and the militarisation and capitalisation of ports. In this context, Hainan is perceived as a

repository, enclave and territory shaped by imperial perspectives, colonial aspirations, and nationalist reinterpretations. Similarly, from 1963 to 1985, Jeju was planned and developed as a tourist utopia in conscious replication of the development of Hawai'i and so as to intertwine it with the history of mainland South Korea (Tran, 2022). In this vein, Jeju and Hawai'i share similar qualities with Hainan Island insofar as they were each developed as tourist paradises while also serving as naval bases and, in light of their being continuously haunted by a colonial sensibility, as counter-utopian places for island identity in relation to mainland politics and ideologies.

In light of this, within the historical and geographical context of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, it is possible to rethink islands through an archipelagic approach. In doing so, we can remap the intricate and contested relationships between and among continents (peninsulas), islands, ocean flows, and people. Methodologically Perez asserts that “archipelagic thinking” is grounded:

in assemblages of island, continent, and sea, requir[ing] a conceptualization of the global that is forced to do more, geographically, geohistorically, and geopolitically, to differentiate islands from each other while theorizing their connectivities and commonalities. It requires micro as well as macro analyses, a focus on materiality as much as metaphor, a turn to the glocal, to find the different valences of the global and the local that are operating simultaneously. (2020, p. 7)

Geographically, geohistorically and geopolitically, the islands of Hainan, Taiwan, Jeju, and Hawai'i have all experienced colonial violence, especially in their modern histories, as part of globalising processes and macro-level transformations. They continue to exist under the shadow of geopolitical tensions and the influence of global tourist fantasies. Conversely, on the micro level, the fluidity, inner vitality, and dynamics of these islands are essential to understanding their unique identities.

In particular, for Hainan Island, the cultural narrative of the island's indigenous people complicates the narrative of Hainan's infrastructure-based modernisation. The Li people, considered the earliest inhabitants of Hainan Island, were depicted and introduced to outsiders through the ethnographic observations and visual archives of early Western intellectuals and explorers. Between 1931 and 1932, the German ethnologist Hans Stübel conducted two field trips to Hainan and documented his observations in the 1937 book *Die Li-Stämme der Insel Hainan*. Stübel highlighted that Hainan Island was in a state of dynamic change due to the “civilizing” forces of modernity (Guo et al., 2013, pp. 170–171). On June 26, 1937, Leonard Clark and Nicol Smith travelled from Hong Kong to Hainan Island and resided there for two months. They captured the vibrant life and rich culture of the Li people through a 37-minute documentary film entitled *Beyond the Mountains of the Red Mist* and hundreds of photographs, illustrating the diverse cultural landscape of Hainan Island. In Clark's 1938 article published in *National Geographic Magazine*, he enthusiastically describes the expedition, beginning, “So, there is nothing left in the world to explore?” After experiencing village life, the rituals of the Li people, and the natural environment of Hainan Island, Clark returned to what he perceived as the civilised world of Han Chinese culture and had luckily left two days before Japan bombarded Hoihow on Hainan Island. Stübel and Clark not only represent Western outsiders' efforts to discover and archive the remote and ‘exotic’ island through the lives and cultures of indigenous peoples but also embody the methodology of the ethnographic expeditions in search of native people in the interests of contributing to modern knowledge production. Such approaches were founded on explicit binaries: gaze and

being gazed at, native group and civilised world, coloniality and modernity. In this regard, the narrative of Hainan Island as a paradise reinforced its identity as a geographically isolated and undeveloped place in which indigenous inhabitants were culturally 'subjected'.

Subsequently, during the Japanese occupation between 1939 to 1945, the utopian narrative of Hainan Island converged with unfinished colonial infrastructure projects for the exploitation of natural resources, such as railroads and dams. The primary activity of the Japanese colonial regime on Hainan was conducting surveys that contributed to colonial knowledge production. The exploitation of natural resources at the Shilu Iron Ore Mine in Changjiang Li Autonomous County by the Japanese colonial government serves as an example of colonial knowledge production, governance, and assimilation on a tropical island. The investigation of Hainan began in 1939 with the report 'Tentative Outline of Hainan Island Government Affairs,' followed by the initiation of exploitation in 1940 (Xu, 1999, p.33). (Xu, 1999, p.33). The primary objectives were military and security-related, driven by the need to investigate and export critical resources to compensate for Japan's resource shortages arising from wartime consumption. Interest in Hainan was categorised as part of the ethnographic field of "southern studies", along with research on Taiwan – that is, as a colonial island for the practicing of tropical and oceanic studies (Xu, 1999, p.125, 129, 132–133).⁴

The Japanese imperial hierarchy of knowledge and colonising strategy toward the island further reinforced the imagery of Hainan as tropical, primitive and uncivilised wherein it was considered invisible, occupied, peripheral and colonisable (Dados & Connell, 2012). In the case of Taiwan, despite the production of modern knowledge structured for colonial exploitation of natural resources, the brutal violence embodied in colonial infrastructure construction "overturned the colonial ideology of romanticising tropical islands as paradise" (Ku, 2015, p. 160), as illustrated in journalistic reports such as Tamura Taijirō's short story about the construction of a hydroelectric power station at Sun Moon Lake (Kuo, 2015). Hainan Island shares a similar colonial experience of infrastructural violence, not only in the use of forced labour in railway construction, but also in the conscription of Taiwanese soldiers into the Japanese army on Hainan, which complicates the re-colonial history between Taiwan and Hainan Island.

More recently, Hainan Island's imposed image as a tropical island utopia has been reconfigured by national capital and global investments for infrastructure-led development. This new discourse on Hainan mainly emphasises its position as an experimental zone for participation in global trade, while also attempting to establish its international reputation as a 'paradise' for tourists and investors. In the process of reform and opening up, Hainan, as an SEZ, has served as a metaphorical "window" (窗口), "test field" (实验区), and "vanguard" (先锋) for international exposure and tariff trade. While Hainan was not the first Free Trade Zone in China since the initiation of marketisation and re-entry into global trade in 1980s, it is the largest one, with its developmental process featuring large-scale infrastructure development and island-scale planning. While the designation of the whole of Hainan as a free trade port evokes the long-term desire to develop the island, there have been struggles and failures in its economic growth and infrastructural construction. In 1984, during Deng Xiaoping's (1904–1997) southern tour, he predicted that "It would be a great success if Hainan's economy could reach Taiwan's level within 20 years" (*Beijing News*, 2008). Thereafter, Hainan

⁴ Although academic interest in investigating Hainan was ignited by a proposal in 1937 by scholars from the University of Tokyo focusing on the fields of anthropology and agriculture, the field of 'Southern Studies' was developed in Taihoku Imperial University, located in Taipei, during the colonial period (1937–1945).

underwent a series of reforms, including its separation from Guangdong as a new independent province of the PRC and enshrinement as an SEZ in 1988. Since then, Hainan has been claimed as an ideal “less developed frontier” for the mainland thanks to its unique island qualities:

The Chinese desire both a remote laboratory-type environment in which to experiment with capitalist-style management practices and a modernised economy which can bring in much-needed foreign exchange and foreign technology. An island distant from Beijing but close to Hong Kong and Macau, such as Hainan, seems an ideal place to conduct such economic and political experiments. (Edmonds, 1989, p. 169)

The utopian narrative of islands as tropical paradises has been reworked into a modern paradigm of colonisation, tourism, and economic-political experiments. Hainan has been articulated and archived as a utopian island largely due to its undeveloped conditions and tropical natural resources, as well as the ethnographic depictions of the culture and life of the Li people. The Japanese colonial regime on Hainan left a counter-utopian legacy in the form of unfinished infrastructure projects. Hainan remains less developed largely due to a lack of infrastructure construction until its socialist paradise narrative is refabricated in the establishment of the Hainan Free Trade Port. In the following section, the article delves into the role of the railway on Hainan to examine the relationship between the island’s spatial identity and infrastructure development.

Railways in circulation: Thinking on Hainan Island’s transportation infrastructure

The high-speed railway encircling Hainan Island (Figure 2), which began operation on December 30, 2015, is claimed to be the world’s first round-island railway line in a tropical region. This three-hour journey around the island is seen as a modern approach to tourism and a technological achievement of the infrastructure-oriented national imagery. Haikou and Sanya, as the island’s two major port cities, link the west and east railway lines. The railway features numerous coastal sites that were significant during the Japanese occupation and which had a profound and lasting impact on the island’s development, building upon the initial urban growth that took place from the Qing dynasty to the Republic of China (Zhang, 2008, pp. 79–83). Although the Japanese colonial regime attempted to replicate the colonial experience in Taiwan (including resource investigation, tropical medicine development, “police administration”, special propaganda, and economy building) to effectively make Hainan the ‘second Taiwan’, the application of this developmental model to Hainan was limited to a handful of infrastructure projects that were variously linked to the resource extraction (Zhong, 2023).



Figure 2 - Illustration of the course of Hainan’s High-Speed Loop Railway at the Hainan Railway Museum (author’s photo, 2023)

The inevitable comparison between Hainan and Taiwan stems from their shared history of colonial development. More importantly, the railway, as one of the few Japanese colonial infrastructure projects on Hainan Island, reflects dual aspects of this colonial history – both exploitative desires and limited development. During the Japanese colonial period the development and establishment of port locations along Hainan’s coastal areas, connected by railway routes to the Shilu Iron Ore Mine, became prominent examples of militarised infrastructure development. For instance, Basuo Port in Dongfang city was built for the export of raw materials from the Shilu mine. However, due to the port’s shallowness, a light rail route was later constructed from Shilu to Sanya’s Yulin harbour, connecting the two mines for iron ore. This mineral exportation was closely tied to the military infrastructure and war support system. World War II and the Japanese occupation of Hainan came to an end in 1945, and following the interregnum of the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), the People’s Republic of China took over Hainan in 1949–1950. The Shilu mine resumed operations in 1957 and was continuously exploited until it was exhausted in 2017. While the Shilu mine was recognised as the largest high-grade iron ore deposit in China and was also hailed as “Asia’s largest iron ore reserve” (Li, 2018), its history raises questions about the historical legacy and significance of Hainan’s railway, which evolved from a Japanese colonial infrastructure project to an achievement of post-socialist development.

In the post-socialist development process, while it is nominally part of the Hainan Free Trade Port construction project, the intra-island high-speed railway also plays a significant role in the tourism industry. CGTN (China Global Television Network) promotes the railway as the “best option to explore the island”, listing several major cities along it such as Haikou, Wenchang, Qionghai, Wanning, and Sanya.⁵ Within this tourism infrastructure network, the

⁵ See, for instance: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d7855544e33457a6333566d54/index.html>

island features a distinct physical and conceptual circuit that demonstrates how transportation systems connect Hainan's coastal urban centres, thereby establishing patterns of temporal experience and economic flow. These cities are connected by the circular high-speed railway, promoting the concept of the 'three-hour economic circle'. This conceptual circle contains three rings of encirclement: the largest traversing the easily accessible coastal cities populated by Han Chinese and international tourists; the second largest encompassing the major residential areas of the indigenous Li and Miao peoples; and the smallest encircling Wuzhi Mountain (Five Finger Mountain) and upland regions inhabited by the less assimilated groups of the Li population.⁶

Essentially, this three-hour economic circle as the dominant narrative of transportation infrastructure on Hainan Island embodies a continental mindset, projecting the totality of an island's future. However, as Baldacchino argues, "transport infrastructure does not guarantee economic and social progress" (2008, p. 29), nor does it hold "the promise of serving as development panaceas". An equivalent continental logic of totality and facilitation gave rise to the developmentalist fantasies of the Mao era, embodied in the physical possibilities of the nation's massive infrastructure projects. In Zheng Wenguang's 1958 novel *Communist Rhapsody*, he writes:

*Above their heads floated an island, covered with coconut trees—it was Hainan Island, with a long levee connecting it to the mainland. Just then an electric train thundered across the levee. It was just like a real train, except of course somewhat smaller. This meant that the Qiongzhou Strait levee had been completed, and now electric trains departing from Beijing could reach the Yingge Sea in only 48 hours.*⁷

Similar to the slogan of the three-hour economic circle, Zheng's novel imagines future transportation from Beijing to the farthest western coastal towns of the Yingge Sea on Hainan within two days. This timeframe, facilitated by communist transportation infrastructure, highlights the remote location as a travel destination and as a testament to the mainland's modernisation efforts. The occupation and conquest of islands are means of constructing the nation-state. In the historical context of Mao's China, ideological tensions with capitalist nations ultimately led China towards capitalism (Duara, 2021, p. 149). For the Hainan Free Trade Port, the idea of 'Enriching the Island and strengthening the Army' (Zihua, 2017) still serves as the dominant guidance and propaganda narrative, focusing on economic development and militarised sovereignty. While the development strategy on Hainan Island during the SEZ era continues to evolve through infrastructure projects like the loop railway, the interpretation of Hainan's railway history remains less coherent. It straddles nationalism, colonial, and socialist narratives, as seen in Hainan's Railway Museum, which will be discussed in the next section.

Viewing Hainan as a spatial enclave, it is constructed and imagined by mainlanders and outsiders. Its historical roots are embedded in transportation systems: connecting the island with the mainland across the seas and connecting the intra-island areas across the

⁶ The central circle in the mountains had once served military-strategic role as a "communist rear area base". Yet, historically, the Li people were driven into the central and western mountainous areas by the Han Chinese who immigrated to Hainan and occupied the northern and eastern plains areas (Feng & Goodman, 1997, p. 56). Also see *Zhonggongzhongyangshujichu dui qiongyagongzuo de zhishi*, 1940, 11, 17.

⁷ Unpaginated online copy - translated by Adrian Thieret, MCLC Resource Center, <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/communist-rhapsody/>.

mountains. The Ming scholar-official Hai Rui (1514–1587) proposed building a road crossing the Li people’s residential area in the uplands around Wuzhi Mountain in order to resolve the endemic disputes among Li tribes. Later, the Qing imperial general Feng Zicai (1818–1930) inscribed a cliff with the words “open up deserted mountains by hand”, thereby officially establishing the road from the mountainous Li villages to the southern ports. The control over and governance of the Li people was not only reinforced through this transportation infrastructure, it also served desires to shape the island in exclusive circles. Hainan’s island spatiality, with its connectivity challenges and less-developed economic conditions, reveals the desire for mega-infrastructure projects implemented through a scalar approach. However, the high-speed railway of Hainan focuses on inter-island circulation for tourism rather than the cross-strait connection needed to resolve the mainland–island connectivity problem. As Baldacchino (2008, p. 31) insists, “a railway as transport infrastructure is essentially antithetical to island life”; as such, the high-speed railway on Hainan Island forms a ‘speculative circulation’ due to its tourism industry and future development as an SEZ. It also speculatively considers the future construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port along with issues of the island environment, tourist population, international investments, and ideological politics.

Cultural narratives and spatial experiences of railways on Hainan

Museums expose the symbolic or representational dimension of spatial production (Lefebvre, 1991) by fabricating historical memory, cultural narration, and architectural legacies. In this spatial context, the Hainan Railway Museum not only intertwines the unsettled history of Japanese colonial architecture and transportation infrastructure with the nationalist and socialist construction phase of the railway but also investigates how public space and visitors interact with and experience the historical narration and spatial experience of Hainan’s transportation infrastructure. To provide a lively and interactive depiction of the railway’s history in a spatial context, I examine a specific visiting experience at the Hainan Railway Museum in Dongfang city. This museum, located near Basuo station, is the only railway museum on Hainan Island. The main building, constructed in 1941, formerly served as the military headquarters of the Japanese empire in Hainan (Figure 3a). Today, the first floor of the main building showcases the early railway history of Hainan, spanning from the late Qing dynasty to the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. The second exhibition hall documents the development and construction of Hainan’s railway from 1950 to 2009. The third exhibition hall showcases the circular island high-speed railway, covering the period from 2010 to the present. In addition to displaying a collection of locomotives from the periods of the Japanese occupation and the Republic of China, including the Japanese K3 train built in 1939 for mineral transportation and the special train made in Japan in 1941 for Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Mei-ling (Figure 3b), the museum serves as an official archival center and educational facility. It also portrays the intricate and interconnected railway lineage and narratives of nationalist awareness and ideological propaganda in a non-linear historical sense.



Figure 3a – The No. 1 Exhibition Hall at the Hainan Railway Museum (on the building that was the former Japanese military headquarters on Hainan). 3b - the official Japanese train, made in Japan in 1941, exhibited in the outdoor space at the Hainan Railway Museum (author's photos, 2023).

In fact, both the visiting experience of the museum and its institutional operation reveal conflicting and convoluted impressions and narrations of Hainan Island's railway history as an educational and cultural resource for tourists to experience. These tensions largely manifest in the lack of funding, ambiguous responsibilities in leadership and management, and an inadequate reflection on the colonial history of Hainan Island. The museum underwent renovations and reopened on May 18, 2021. During my visit in May 2023, it was supposedly open to the public, but exclusively for group visits arranged by schools or official departments for educational purposes. After a substantial period of communication and waiting, the museum's head official eventually arrived after the lunchtime break and granted me access upon presentation of my department's introduction letter for research purposes. According to one online post from 2022, visitors were similarly unable to access the exhibition hall; they were only permitted to stroll through the museum's courtyard and observe the trains and buildings on display from the exterior. Additionally, disputes and discussions frequently arise between visitors and the gatekeeper. This confusing museum situation can also be observed from the online message board for the authority on the website of *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party). One comment, posted on February 24, 2023, complained to the municipal party secretary of Dongfang city about the lack of hot water in the museum and the closure of exhibition halls during opening hours. In response, the official feedback on March 3, 2023, was as follows: "1. The Hainan Railway Museum is an enterprise that has not been officially registered. 2. Located in the Hainan Free Trade Port, the museum offers free admission but faces difficulties in terms of service, funding, and operations. 3. The museum's purpose is to preserve Hainan's railway history and serve as an educational base for new railway staff, as well as to provide patriotism education for primary and secondary school students nationwide. 4. Lastly, the museum currently does not accept individual visitors".

These controversial regulations and operations of the only railway museum on Hainan not only highlight the public role of the museum space but also demonstrate the conflict between the official recognition and promotion of the representation of the island's railway legacy and lineage in Hainan's SEZ. Firstly, Hainan's railway history serves as both a historical and spatial representation of the Japanese colonial legacy and war violence. Secondly, the developmental lineage of Hainan, as mediated through its transportation infrastructure, has not been fully incorporated into the socialist narrative of the Hainan SEZ. This ambivalent

and ambiguous attitude reflects the disjuncture arising from top-down administration, as well as the colonial and political tensions that exist within Hainan between mainlanders and islanders, as noted by Feng and Goodman:

At the same time there are fairly obvious limits to using any colonial perspective in the interpretation of Hainan's development, even the presumably more appropriate concept of "internal colonialism" developed after Lenin by a series of commentators. The most important of these limits is that none of Hainan's communities – all of whom claim to speak for the province – is advocating revolution and independence. The arguments are about control and relative autonomy within the Chinese state, not about separation and the creation of entirely new political entities. Here a comparison with Taiwan – with similar mainlander-islander social and political conflict since 1949 – may well be instructive, for Hainan had developed from cultural integration, assimilation and compromise over several centuries even before 1949. (1997, p. 80)

The limitations and obscurity of using a colonial perspective to comprehend Hainan Island's position in Japanese colonial construction and its relationship with Taiwan highlight the complexities and dilemmas of examining railway infrastructure history and cultural politics. The development and advancement of railways as transportation and technological infrastructure play a crucial role in this process. From the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, railways served as the essential physical medium for the nation. Hainan Island, as the most remote destination of a national railway system, holds a unique place in this discourse. In the context of Japanese occupation, the absence of railways was seen not only as a limitation to resource exportation but also as a critical form of transportation infrastructure to support Japanese colonialism in exploiting natural resources, producing knowledge about tropical islands, and positioning Hainan as part of Southeast Asia and the Global South. While the completion of the circular island high-speed railway in 2015 is regarded as a contribution to Hainan's modern identity for the free trade port's construction, the ambivalent cultural identity of the island is still a contested one, as the Hainan Railway Museum demonstrates.

Conclusion

The railway network on Hainan Island – a speculative infrastructure project initiated by outsiders and mainland investors – remains unstable due to fluctuating global and national capital flows, while also affecting the island's coastal ecosystem and technological advancement. In fact, the modernisation process of Hainan Island in its infrastructure development does not have a long history in the context of globalisation. In the early 1990s, Hainan Island still faced difficulties in transportation infrastructure and hotel facilities, with insufficient electrical and water supply. Around 1992, only 4% of Japanese respondents in a survey said they had ever heard of Hainan (Cheung, 1993). It was only in the past two decades that massive infrastructural development took place, marked by major tourism-centered projects, such as the Sanya Phoenix International Airport and the Haikou Meilan International Airport, established in 1994 and 1999 respectively. However, along with this development came new challenges and issues, such as the collapse of the real estate market, environmental protection concerns and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In the broader context of today's discourse on the Global South, Hainan Island also represents a

rethinking of geopolitical power and the repossession of technology. The modern narrative of Hainan Island as a tropical paradise has been shaped by the imagery of its tourist industry, yet the core of Hainan's economic growth is the free trade port. As such, the speculative future of the high-speed railway on Hainan Island, including its operation and maintenance costs and the continued arrival of a tourist population, depends on the development of the Hainan Free Trade Port. The physical and metaphorical circulation represented by Hainan's high-speed railway in terms of geography, socio-economics and culture raises questions about the island's identity. This is particularly relevant as we consider future transportation infrastructure development across the central mountainous area (and its potential impact on the Li people's ethno-cultural dynamics) and around Hainan Island in the South China Sea.

The island is positioned as a frontier – not as an experimental ground for global capital, but rather as an embodiment of contemporary fragility threatened by breakdowns of labour supply, natural forces like climate change and rising sea levels that will deconstruct, reshape, and challenge the existing totality. In the imagery of Hainan Island being developed for international tourism, Hawai'i serves as a historical reflection and as a representation of developmental crisis. The residents and local communities of Hawai'i struggle with problems stemming from colonialism, military occupation, tourism, food insecurity, high costs of living, and the effects of a changing climate (Aikau & Gonzalez, 2019, p. 1). From this perspective, islands are integral entities that exist beyond the continental totality imposed upon them. They are neither capital utopias nor peripheral spaces, but rather components of oceanic circulation and flows (Duara, 2021) within planetisation.

For Hainan, circulation as part of narration, or narratives of circulation as a conceptual framework for perceiving the island's railway development and legacy, articulate the tensions in terms of historical construction, cultural and power dynamics in thinking about the island's temporality and spatiality. Theoretically, through the infrastructural lens, rather than the hegemonic imagery of tropical paradise or the emerging concept of “extra-statecraft”, Hainan Island's identity (its islandness) is arguably one of counter-utopian resilience through the speculative future and promises of its intra-island transportation infrastructure. Pragmatically, the railway's history and construction complicate and foreground Hainan Island's identity, not only addressing domestic and international attention and visitors but also calling forth new issues, concerns and discussions on the island's geological, social and cultural dynamics. A more dramatic latent issue lies in the suspended, underdeveloped plan of a mainland-to-island railway connection. Whether due to technical difficulties or financial considerations, this incomplete cross-strait transportation system will persist as an infrastructure gap challenging Hainan's development. Thus, I further argue that the ongoing and latent ultra-developed intra-island railway and the unlikely island-to-mainland cross-strait transportation connection add potential tensions when reflecting on Hainan's islandness in terms of infrastructure power.

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