BOOK REVIEW

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An outstanding historian not only pays attention to major events, but, even more importantly, how human beings actually live. In Michael Szonyi’s (Associate Professor in Harvard’s Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations) recent book, we can find a truly vivid world once smothered by the haze of the Cold War. Former scholarship has examined the conflict in the Taiwan Strait as a matter of high politics and international diplomacy. Professors often cite the 1958 Quemoy (or “Jinmen 金門”, as it is called in Mandarin) bombings as a classic example of brinkmanship, a case study for high-pressure diplomacy in the face of escalating global tensions. This book does not contribute to the discussions about these traditional topics, but looks at Jinmen from a very different perspective, asking how its inhabitants experienced these dramatic events, and how they remember them today. It also focuses on the relation of the state to everyday life. In fact, for the 40,000 people living there at the height of the Taiwan Strait crisis, Jinmen was simply “home”.

This book is comprised of four parts and an introduction. Each part has several chapters, fourteen in all. In the introduction, entitled “Ordinary Life in an Extraordinary Place”, Szonyi illustrates Jinmen as an island located just one mile off the southeast coast of China, on the edge of the Taiwan Strait. The island—which covers barely 70 square miles—became a symbol of resistance to Communism after 1949, when Mao Zedong 毛澤東 established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and drove Chiang Kai-shek’s 蒋介石 Nationalist forces out of the mainland into Taiwan, Jinmen, and a few other neighboring islands. Afterwards, the lifestyle of Jinmen’s residents became transformed immediately.

The first part, “Geopoliticization Ascendant”, points out that in August 1958, the PRC began to carpet-bomb Jinmen for reasons that are still disputed. More than 500,000 shells were dropped over a period of 44 days. Island residents spent their days in and out of bomb shelters, and Chiang Kai-shek deployed nearly 120,000 Taiwanese troops to protect the shorelines and return fire. The US government, which already had Army advisers on the island, sent naval vessels and air support to bolster Jinmen’s defenses. As tensions increased, the chairman of the United States Army Joint Chiefs of Staff began to lay out plans for a nuclear attack. On Oct. 6, a ceasefire was finally called—but for the residents there, life had been permanently altered. The island essentially became a military base, and the lives of residents were completely militarized.

The second part, “Militarization and Geopoliticization Change Course”, tells us that Jinmen’s military importance became less significant due to the US’s neutralization of the Taiwan Strait. The huge troop presence on the island resulted from Chiang’s efforts to force the US to commit the island’s defense. Even though Taiwan underwent dramatic economic growth during 1960s to 1970s, Jinmen had no industrialization to speak of. To the residents, there was the incessant noise of
PROPAGANDA, A CONSTANT BACKGROUND TO THE RHYTHMS OF DAILY LIFE. ENORMOUS SPEAKERS WOULD BLARE OUT NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY TOWARD THE MAINLAND, AND BOTH SIDES CONTINUED TO DROP SHELLS CONTAINING PROPAGANDA LEAFLETS ON ALTERNATE DAYS OF THE WEEK DESPITE THE CEASE-FIRE. THE PAPER BOMBARDMENT CONTINUED FOR 21 YEARS, UNTIL 1979. THESE SHELLS, AS WELL AS THOSE FROM THE INITIAL CONFLICT, STILL DOT THE LANDSCAPE OF JINMEN-AND THEIR CASINGS ARE NOW USED TO MAKE COOKING KNIVES.

PART THREE, “LIFE IN COLD WAR-TIME”, CONSISTS OF THREE CHAPTERS THAT EXPLORE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF SOCIAL LIFE FROM 1960S TO 1980S, FOCUING ON HOW THE PEOPLE OF THE ISLAND EXPERIENCED AND NEGOTIATED WITH THE WAR ZONE ADMINISTRATIONS(ZHANDI ZHENGWU 戰地政務) REGIME. THESE THREE CHAPTERS DEAL SEPARATELY WITH TOPICS ON ECONOMY, RELIGION AND GENDER. THEY SHOW HOW THE PROJECT AND EXPERIENCE OF MILITARIZATION WERE INFLECTED BY THE SPECIFIC EXPRESSION OF GEOPOLITICS ON JINMEN. SZONYI EXAMINES A RANGE OF THEMES TO PAINT A PICTURE OF LIFE ON JINMEN DURING THAT PERIOD, INCLUDING HOW RESIDENTS NEGOTIATED CURFEWS, TURNED TO MARKET GARDENING TO PRODUCE FOOD TO SELL TO THE SOLDIERS, ETC. THEY EVEN SUFFERED FROM SEVERE SOCIAL PROBLEMS-IN PARTICULAR, THE THREAT OF RAPE AND THE CREATION OF A SYSTEM OF ARMY-RUN BROTHELS. THE DISTORTED SEX RATIOS AND ASSUMPTION THAT SOLDIERS NEEDED SEXUAL OUTLETS TO BE KEPT IN FIGHTING SHAPE MEANT THAT EVEN WOMEN’S BODIES BECAME MILITARIZED, DEPENDENT UPON MILITARY CONCERNS AND CRITERIA. TEMPLES TO THE SOLDIERS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES ON THE ISLAND ARE FOUND EVERYWHERE. NOT MERELY EVIDENCE OF THE PERSISTENCE OF TRADITION IN THE FACE OF MODERNIZATION, THEY ALSO REFLECT STATE EFFORTS TO USE THE POWER OF MEMORY AND RELIGION TO SHAPE SOCIETY.


PROF. SZONYI HOLDS THE OPINION THAT JINMEN HAS FREQUENTLY BEEN REPRESENTED THROUGH METAPHOR FOR HALF A CENTURY, WHICH HE USES AS A CASE STUDY TO EXPLORE FOUR INTERRELATED PHENOMENA: MILITARIZATION, GEOPOLITICIZATION, MODERNIZATION, AND MEMORY. THESE FOUR FORM THE KEYWORDS OF THE BOOK. THE MILITARIZATION OF JINMEN FROM 1949 TO 1992 CAUSED IT TO BE UNDER A CONDITION OF NATIONAL EMERGENCY AND MARTIAL LAW. BY GEOPOLITICIZATION, SZONYI MEANS NOT ONLY THE WAYS IN WHICH LIFE ON JINMEN BECAME CONNECTED TO GLOBAL POLITICS, BUT ALSO THE FORMAL AND EXPLICIT CONSTRUCTION OF IT AS A SYMBOL IN A LARGER INTERNATIONAL STRUGGLE. FOR SUCH A LONG TIME, JINMEN WAS AFFECTED BY OUTSIDE EVENTS TIED TO INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, BY DECISIONS MADE IN BEIJING 北京, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, AND ELSEWHERE. IT REPRESENTED A BEACON OF FREEDOM FOR THE ENSLAVED MASSES OF ASIA, OR THE SPRINGBOARD FOR THE COMING WAR TO FREE THEM. IT WAS ALSO USED AS A METAPHOR FOR THE DETERMINATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA(ROC) TO RESIST THE PRC, THE COMMITMENT OF THE US-LED COLD WAR ALLIANCE TO RESIST COMMUNISM, AND EVEN THE COURSE OF HUMAN PROGRESS. MEANWHILE, THE AUTHOR
uses the term “modernization” to describe not a specific set of conditions and values derived from Western experience, but also a complex of desired changes. The meaning of modernization is always negotiated and even contested, shaped both by global discourses and their local inflections. The link between militarization and modernity, itself a form of mass utopia, produced distinctive modes of governmentality.

Referring to the memory of the local people, Szonyi finds that the Cold War is remembered today less as an ideological confrontation than in terms of the minutiae of struggles of daily life. International conflict became immanent in fields such as domestic life, religious practice, and economic exchange, while personal experiences under martial law also regard themselves as heroic defenders of freedom. Under a militarized economy, rat tails, women’s bodies, basketballs appeared as symbolic items in collective memory. As an extreme example, a cult to the spirit of a drowned woman named 汪玉蘭 constructed her as a symbol of anti-communism.

In regard to methodology, the book is based primarily on oral history and archival documents. Indeed, the different ways in which local people interpret the past is itself an important theme of the book. Between 2002 and 2007, Szonyi visited the island repeatedly and conducted interviews with more than 70 residents who lived through the Cold War years. According to him, the exciting thing about being a historian is to give people the chance to tell the story in their own words. He also obtained a great deal of information from the archives of the ROC’s Ministry of Defense in Taipei and gained access to documents from the Jinmen villages.

Szonyi’s book contributes greatly to the scholarship of cross-Strait relations and Cold War research. First of all, a new tendency in Cold War research is how culture and society were shaped by in recent years. The legacy of the Cold War continues to be important in many parts of the world. In some places, the challenge is to deal with the material consequences of the Cold War-environmental degradation, economic disruption, and social dislocation. Personal lives were mercilessly sacrificed in favor of public events. We should acquire valuable lessons from their sufferings to avoid similar disasters from happening again. Jinmen offers a localized example of a much broader phenomenon, the geopoliticization of everyday life during the great ideological conflict of the latter twentieth century. Secondly, the militarization of Jinmen meant that policies there often exaggerated those implemented on Taiwan. Until the lifting of martial law in 1987, the entire ROC was under a state and Jinmen became an exception within an exception. Many Jinmen people speak about a division of labor between Jinmen and Taiwan, wherein Jinmen was responsible for military defense, enabling Taiwan to concentrate on and later enjoy the fruits of economic development. The study of Jinmen qualifies the well-known story of the rapid economic growth and eventual political pluralization of ROC on Taiwan since 1949. As we know, the Cold War was intertwined with the Chinese civil war. Jinmen offers a useful case study with which to reflect on the similarities and differences between post-1949 China under Mao Zedong and Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek. Finally, Jinmen also invites comparison with other highly militarized societies around the world. The processes of mirror-imaging can
also be detected elsewhere, but particularly evident in the other divided states of the Cold War—Korea, Vietnam, and Germany. In the Third World, where the Cold War was often wrapped up in anti-colonial struggles, it was vis-à-vis one expression of broader debates about the meaning of modernity. The perception that modernization was essential to national security in the face of pressing danger, and the consequences of this perception for the articulation of modernization was widespread in Asia and beyond. Szonyi expresses his consuming humane care for Jinmen, these research methods also applicable to other Cold War areas. As a researcher, who specialized in the Taiwan issue and modern Chinese history, it was a rewarding experience to read such splendid analysis and synthesis.

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