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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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THE TRANSLOCAL ISLAND OF OKINAWA.
ANTI-BASE ACTIVISM AND GRASSROOTS REGIONALISM

Edoardo Quagliato

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Shinnosuke Takahashi, *The Translocal Island of Okinawa. Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism.*, SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, xii+180pp. (ISBN 9781350411531). £26.09 (PDF)

In *The Translocal Island of Okinawa*, Shinnosuke Takahashi brilliantly tells the story of the anti-base movements' struggles against the militarization of the Okinawan territory. He organizes an historical and anthropological analysis under the lens of «trans-localism». Takahashi decides to strip away the layers of «Cold War geopolitical reductionism» (p. 6) that have extensively been used to frame the general «Okinawan problem» in favour of a people-based, transboundary, and «anti-colonial/anti-imperial» (p.7) approach. The author builds his argument on the previous works of scholars such as Arasaki Moriteru, whose contributions analyse Okinawa's political history from the inside and from below, and who also played a major role in activist groups; equal importance is given to the contributions by Ewa Domanska and Tessa Morris-Suzuki on the pervasive «material aspects of traces» (p.8). These «traces», or «wounds» (p.8) in the case of Okinawa, helped in building bridges not only in between the islanders, but also across the institutional borders, making it possible to conceptualize a «We» upon a shared struggle. (pp. 8-9)

The author then introduces his original concept of Okinawa as a «translocal island», in which multiple and *diverse* activists and their actions built the foundation of anti-base politics (p. 10). The focus on the «local» is also exemplified by referencing to other scholars such as Miyume Tanji's *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa* (2006), Masamichi Inoue's *Okinawa and the U.S. Military* (2017), but also Yonetani (2004), Dietz (2015), Onishi (2013), Kosuzu (2008), and finally Kozue (2019). The commonality between these scholars is their focus on the Okinawan struggle outside of reductionist narratives and the adoption of cultural or constructivist approaches to the matter.

Takahashi therefore builds his historical reconstruction around the concept of «locality». This idea is described as a «fluidal articulation» that is not represented by «institutional borders» but by a «more flexible and multidirectional» network of relationships «articulated on the ground level»

(p. 12). He also introduces the notion of «grassroot regionalism» as a sum of actions and perspectives that «regionalize» mindsets and forge links across the institutional and geographical borders of Okinawa (p. 15). By focusing on the stories of individuals and communities, rather than on broader geopolitical and reductionist narratives, the author wishes to emphasize the role of people in «making, unmaking and remaking local activism» (p.17). The concepts of grassroot regionalism, combined with the idea of translocal island form the theoretical and methodological framework of this book.

The book is structured in seven chapters. The first chapter has been summarized and discussed above: it focuses on the previous literature and the theoretical foundations of the study. From chapters two to six, the author introduces the readers to various organizations and people who promoted the grassroot activism that took place in Okinawa since the 1950s. The last chapter contains the personal experiences of the author during his visits to other South Pacific islands that host military bases, and a final reflection on his research.

Chapter two covers the 1950s and 1960s and recalls the history of occupied Okinawa for its first half, while concentrating on two of the most prominent movements in the latter part: the «whole-island struggle» (*shima-gurumi tōsō*), and the «Association for the Return of Okinawa to Japan» (*Nihon Fūkai Sokushin Kiseikai*). In particular, the «whole-island struggle» of 1956 represented an «unprecedented [...] island-wide protest, regardless of ideology, against the US occupation» (p. 34). The consequences of this protest, despite apparently beneficial to Okinawa, led to an unsatisfactory resolution that fuelled the subsequent mass protests in the 1960s demanding a revision of Okinawa's sovereignty. Here, the grassroot activism is visible in the participation of the most diverse local organizations in the political struggle against military occupation of Okinawa, but it also created the first divisions between pro-reversion and anti-reversion activists, highlighting the multiplicity and complexity of views that united under a common banner, and showing a fervent dynamism that «*shaped* Okinawa's anti-base struggle». (p. 43)

Chapter three documents how, after the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, and following developmental policies adopted by the Japanese government in the island, the «struggle» was reshaped and revitalized by rural citizens of Okinawa in response to the environmental degradation brought upon by new infrastructure projects. The focus of this renewed struggle was on the relationship between a community and its surrounding space and environment, with little relations with the «political binary» of Left and Right. It rapidly tied in the 1970s and 1980s with anti-base politics and pivoted around environmental issues, with multiple residents' organizations starting to organize around the regional concept of «Ryukyu Arc» (p. 58) and forging relationships with other local activist groups, thus expanding the network of activism outside of Okinawa (p. 59). The main individual behind this first

phase of regionalism is Arasaki Moriteru, and this expansion would be rooted in practical action based upon his concept of solidarity. It ultimately led to the foundation of a specialized research institution focusing its research on two scopes: the Ryukyu Arc, and the broader region of the Asia-Pacific.

This would have not been possible without the contribution of one specific individual whose contributions Takahashi extensively discusses in chapter four: Shimao Toshio. Through his work as an author, and its research on remote islands, Shimao managed to collect the «material aspects of traces» and experienced «the *presence* of the past» (p. 78). This «enacted» the theorization of the regional concept of «*Japanesia*», which celebrates the idea of a multipolar, multicultural archipelago against the idea of cultural homogenization perpetuated by the modern Japanese nation. This concept, explains Takahashi, enabled the discourse of the «Ryukyu Arc» as a critical concept, and allowed Shimao to travel to different islands in which a relationship between «islanders» and «mainlanders» shaped their histories, and witnessed both the traces of a colonial past, as well as the anti-colonial struggles. This, in turn, made the concepts of «Ryukyu Arc» and «*Japanesia*» a «home-grown version of decolonial cultural politics» (p. 87) that fundamentally shaped the Okinawan grassroots movements in their most recent phases.

Chapter five narrates the internationalization of one association that better upholds the legacy of previous grassroots movements, as well as embraces, in practical reality, Shimao's concepts through their activities. Takahashi recalls the diverse origins of the individuals who founded the Okinawa-Korea People's Solidarity: a mixture of mainland Japanese and Okinawans, as well as a Korean woman activist. The story of the group and their actions, including the struggles with internationalization and the heavy legacy of Japanese imperialism are reported thorough the chapter, including what the Okinawa-Korea's People Solidarity (*Okinawa Kankoku Minshū Rentai* - OKPS) experience means for younger generations and the future of trans-local activism in Okinawa.

Finally, chapter six focuses on the crucial individuals who permitted the development of such a «multifaceted regionalism» featured within the OKPS. Takahashi reconstructs the life of Arasaki Moriteru, whose life experience starting as a fervent nationalist and evolving into an anti-colonialist and promoter of cross-borders regionalism permeated the civic movements in Okinawa since their beginning after WW2; Takahashi Toshio, who abandoned its extreme leftist ideas to be accepted as a «local» by Okinawans and forged the first connections with Korean activists, keeping them alive throughout the years; Yu Yeongja, a native Korean who describes herself as a «bridge» (p. 131), and promoted civic activism both in Korea, Japan, and Okinawa since her younger years, despite her complex identity and the challenges brought upon by it. These life stories show the real meaning of translocal activism, or «a civic movement that fosters a social imagination

beyond local and national boundaries» (p. 137), and how these «translocal lives» formed the foundations of a social movement that operates outside of political binaries and institutional borders.

In conclusion, the final chapter contains the personal reflections of the author regarding the «invisible threads of regionalism», the future of younger generations of activists, and how the experience of groups such as the OKPS were possible in the beginning, and replicable to other movements. Again, the individual stories of people engaged in activism ultimately play a crucial role in expanding the conceptual and spatial scope of a movement. The author suggests that an underlying sentiment of «feeling at home in an unfamiliar place and environment» (p. 144) makes it simpler to enable a «grassroot regionalism with other communities» (p. 145); this connection can be «fragile [and] disrupted by various structural, technical, logistical and personal problems», but it remains «crucial to initiating and developing grassroots cooperation». (p. 146)

In his book, Takahashi told the story of how social movements born in Okinawa moved from being «local» to «trans-local» mainly through the contribution of individual activists whose private life majorly influenced the development and evolution of a grassroot regionalism still existing at present time. The historical narration flows effortlessly and constantly engages the reader with new and innovative insights on how the story of social movements can (and should) be told, outside of reductionist binaries dictated first by cold war lenses, and now by regional and global rivalries. The mixture of an anthropological, sociological, and historical approach makes the reader attached to the stories of activists who remained either invisible or incorporated in bigger «us» vs «them» group narratives. In this regard, Takahashi breaches these generic discourses and emphasizes the linkages between activists of different backgrounds who together made possible the realization of an inclusive, trans-local, and people-based movement such as the OKPS. «*The Translocal Island of Okinawa*» not only contributes to the academic debate by adopting an original approach and departing from streams of literature that tend to reduce social movements to mere reflections of bigger historical events, but it may also serve as a manual for newer groups in their quest for internationalization and reaching of broader audiences who share one or more affinities. This kind of study could also be replicated by scholars focusing on other island and people-based movements, such as the anti-base group «A Foras» from Sardinia, whose activities closely resemble the ones carried by Okinawan anti-base groups. This book could well be used as a starting point towards a comprehensive study of the just mentioned movement, as well as serving as fundamental literature for a hypothetical comparative study of the experiences of Okinawa and Sardinia against military occupation.

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