

1 Forbidden Outpost

Coming and Going

The most comprehensive local gazetteer about the early history of Fujian, *Sanshan zhi* (1174–89), records that there are many islands in the north-east sea of Lianjiang County, among which are “the Upper and Lower Gantang in the sea.”¹ Upper Gantang and Lower Gantang are the old names of Nangan and Beigan, the major islands of Matsu. A later record explains the origin of the name: “Gantang ... was named for its abundance of cogon grass (*maogan*).”² A stele standing in Dawang Temple, Tieban Village, Nangan, further reveals the ancients’ footprints on the island. The inscription reads: “Lin Youcai happily donated twenty *guan* of Zhongtong paper notes.” Zhongtong paper notes were issued during the reign of Kablai Khan (1260–87). By the early years of the thirteenth century, therefore, fishermen were already docking their boats in Nangan and building a temple there.

When Japanese pirates became rampant along the coast in the early Ming period, the government adopted a scorched-earth policy as its coastal defense strategy. In 1387 (Hongwu 20), all the islanders were moved back to the mainland, leaving the Matsu Islands deserted.³ The storytellers’ memories help us to track this large-scale movement of population. According to Chen Jinmei, a storyteller in Shanlong, Nangan, it was said that there once lived a family with the surname Sun and the village was thus once called “Sunlong.” Later, when Japanese pirates went on the rampage, the Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, ordered all the people evacuated and had the whole village burnt down, turning it into a barren wasteland (J. Liu 1996b).

Despite an official edict that “not a single ship should sail the seas,” coastal residents began to revisit Matsu for fishing or resettlement by the mid-Ming. At that time, there were already thirteen settlements in Nangan and Beigan. An important gazetteer, *Bamin tongzhi* (1490), records:

The Upper Gantang Mountain in the sea has winding and twisting peaks and ridges, on which are six ports including Zhuhu and Huwei. The Lower Gantang Mountain protruding from the sea stands opposite the Upper Gantang Mountain; it has a steep, tall shape and has thereon seven ports including Baisha and Jingcheng. ... In Hongwu 20, to defend against Japanese pirates, all the people were moved [inland] near the city.⁴

Yet in the early Qing years, the residents of Matsu were once again ordered to move: To wipe out the anti-Qing forces led by Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong), the Qing government issued the Great Clearance Order. In 1661, the coastal residents in Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong were forced to move 30 *li* inland:⁵

South Gantang and North Gantang are in the northeast seas of the county, with a distance of eighty *li* from each other; both are on strategic locations and have military posts. South Gantang belongs to Min County, and North Gantang to Lianjiang. Beacon towers and watchtowers have been established on North Gantang, where there are ... seven ports. ... In the early Ming the people were moved inland. The ban on dwelling in coastal areas was later lifted, and agricultural and fishing activities flourished. But when our country was newly established, the rebellious forces in the sea were yet to be pacified, so the people were moved inland again.⁶

After that year, Matsu was abandoned once again (S. Li 2006: 75). In 1683 (Kangxi 22), following the pacification of Taiwan, the Qing government gradually lifted the sea ban, allowing the coastal residents to return to their homeland. Nonetheless, it was still forbidden to move to the coastal islands, or to fish or build shelters there. Nangan and Beigan remained “deserted islands in the sea.”⁷ It wasn’t until the reign of Qianlong (1735–96) that coastal residents gradually started to colonize the islands. Fishermen went there to “build shelters and to hang fishing nets” (*daliao guawang*), and the number of settlers steadily multiplied (131). This, however, disturbed the officials: “It is inevitable that some tricky fishermen would build shelters or erect poles to hang fishing nets. ... But it is reported that there are even people who live there

permanently, who gather crowds to cultivate the land and the mountains, and who disobey expulsion orders.”⁸

Faced with this trend, some officials in Zhejiang and Fujian (such as the Zhejiang Commissioner, Gu Xuechao, 1721–?) worried that the people on the outlying islands would become outlaws and thus suggested burning down the illegal thatch settlements that had been stealthily built over time. Others (such as the Viceroy of Zhejiang-Fujian, Gioroi Ulana, 1739–1795) feared that if all the people of the numerous islands along the coasts of Zhejiang and Fujian were expelled, they would be out of work and might even be forced to turn to banditry. Gioroi Ulana suggested that those people who were already incorporated in the *baojia* (household registration system) should not be expelled, while other scattered households and those living on forbidden lands should be returned to their domicile of origin and their shelters burned. As for fishermen sailing to the islands and building temporary shelters, the local officials should go and inspect them and issue licenses as appropriate.⁹

As habitation of the southeastern outlying islands had been debated for a long time, Emperor Qianlong finally decided to legalize it. The imperial decree in 1790 (Qianlong 55) proclaimed that the coastal residents had lived and worked in peace and contentment on the islands for a long time; if they were suddenly ordered to move, hundreds of thousands of people along the coasts might be put out of work, and so they were deserving of sympathy. Besides, if the local officials handled this matter improperly, they would disrupt people’s lives and might even cause them to become vagrants or pirates, a most unsatisfactory outcome. The emperor thus ordered that people on the outlying islands should be allowed to live there without fear of expulsion, with the exception of areas classified as forbidden lands. As for the scattered households, most of them were impoverished, and it was wrong to dash the hopes of such people. In the end, the emperor decreed the following:

The fishermen sail the seas to fish; it is improper to comprehensively forbid them from setting up temporary shelters on the islands. In addition, since there are only a few households, it is not difficult to perform an inspection. ... Thus people shall be allowed to live on these islands, and their houses need not be burnt.¹⁰

From then on, it was no longer illegal to stay on the islands, and the number of people there gradually increased.

From the mid-Qing to the late Qing, a steady stream of coastal inhabitants of Lianjiang, Changle and other counties moved to Matsu. Yet the residents still traveled back and forth between mainland China and the islands. Previous studies on Taiwan have shown a close relationship between temple construction and settlement formation (See 1973; C. Hsu 1973). The temples in Nangan were mostly built during the Daoguang years (1820–50) in the late Qing (H. Wang 2000); the Matsu residents probably settled there in this period. By the early twentieth century, there were already more than 300 households in Tieban, Nangan.¹¹

As isolated and peripheral islands, the historical literature about Matsu is very limited, and descriptions are even rarer. However, the few extant entries disclose again and again the fact that Matsu had historically been a forbidden outpost. Located in the southeast seas of China, Matsu was inevitably under the sway of the constantly changing frontier policies of the government. The fishermen fluctuated between using the islands as temporary shelters, settling there permanently and deserting the islands when forced to do so.

Signposts in the Sea

As indicated above, historical records of Matsu are scarce. Other documents, such as nautical maps, mark the islands as signposts in the sea and describe how they may serve as places to ride out the tide or to take shelter from the wind before entering Fuzhou, the provincial capital.

Sitting at the mouth of Min River, Nangan, Beigan and Baiquan appear in many ancient nautical charts; Dongyin, Nangan and Beigan are marked in “Zheng He’s Nautical Chart.”¹² S. Li (2006: 46–7) further indicates how Matsu was one of the stations along the sailing routes frequented by both investiture ships (*fengzhou*) and tribute ships (*gongchuan*) during the Ming and Qing periods. Investiture ships were sent from Fuzhou to Ryukyu to confer kingship on its kings, while tribute ships carried tributes back to the court. An early Qing record (1684) states:

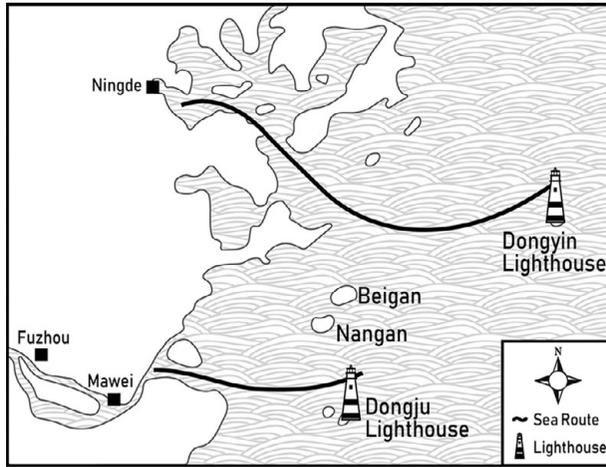
The two mountains of Gantang are very close to each other. ...Whenever a scout is sent to Tamsui, Keelung, Ryukyu or Japan, he always departs from there and returns to the port. Each time the Japanese pirates arrive at Gantang, they also put down anchor there to gather water.¹³

Historically, the Matsu Islands harbored ships destined for Fuzhou while they waited for the tide or took shelter from the wind. The role of Matsu as a safe harbor became more prominent when Western forces reached China in the late Qing. After its defeat in the Opium War of 1842, China ratified the Treaty of Nanking with Britain, stipulating the opening of five ports along the southeastern coast of China. To safely navigate the reef-ridden waters, the British Navy sent vessels in 1843 to map the islands and reefs along the coast of eastern China, and to determine their latitude and longitude. The results were published in *The China Sea Directory* (Reed and King 1867), offering an overview of the ports on different islands.

The British Navy provided more information about navigation in the sea of Fujian, including entries about Baiquan (now called Juguang), Nangan, and Beigan (S. Li 2006: 98). An Englishman named Collinson (1846: 231) indicated that if ships encountered the northeast monsoon before entering Min River, they could dock in the south of Baiquan Island to take shelter from the wind. The British warship HMS Cornwallis was recorded to have anchored there for five days due to a strong monsoon wind. Ships could obtain small amounts of fresh-water in Baiquan and hire pilots capable of navigating ships to the Min River during ebb tide. Two ports in Nangan could harbor ships during the northeast and southwest monsoon seasons, respectively, and fresh-water was also available in both ports. The south of Beigan also allowed for anchorage, and junks and small fishing boats traveled back and forth between Beigan and the Min River.

Later, in order to help ships identify routes through the reefs, Robert Hart, who served as the Inspector-General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, built two lighthouses on the south and north ends of the Matsu Islands in 1872 and 1904. The Dongju Lighthouse in the south directed boats to safely enter and exit Fuzhou and Mawei, while the Dongyin Lighthouse in the north directed them to sail in and out of Sandu'ao (see Map 1.1).

The two lighthouses stood as signposts to guide boats in the sea of Min. In this period, the Matsu Islands were influenced by the treaty port of Fuzhou: the islanders started to have access to Western ideas and goods. Today, houses including elements of Western styles (*F. huang ngiang nah*)



Map 1.1 The lighthouses in Matsu and the sea routes around them
(Map based on Wang, Wang, and He 2016: 61)

are still very popular in Matsu. These houses in a mixed style were probably developed by artisans inspired by the foreign houses in Fujian.

Pirates and Bandits

As the Matsu Islands were located at the very border of the state, and there was no formal governance over it, numerous pirates and bandits rose to power one after another. For a long period, the islands along the coast of southeastern China were infested with pirates. On Dongju Island a stele commemorating the defeat of Japanese pirates by a general in the late Ming period (1617) still stands. The notorious pirate Cai Qian (1761–1809), who plundered Zhejiang, Fujian, and Taiwan during the mid-Qing, was active on the Matsu Islands. Historical descriptions show that Cai Qian often hid himself in the seas of North and South Gantang (Beigan and Nangan today). According to a memorandum from Li Diantu ([1738]–1812), the viceroy of Fujian, while the coastal navy was gathering in Gantang to blockade the pirates, all of a sudden, “thirty-something pirate ships sailed out from South Gantang; the navy bombarded and fired at them, chasing them in full force ...all the way to the outer sea of Baiquan.”¹⁴

Cai Qian exacted taxes from the island fishermen and forced the people to supply freshwater. In addition, Cai built shacks in Beigan, and procured rice, food, and material for ropes to use on ships.¹⁵ Even in the present day, many elders can still point out the traces Cai Qian left on Matsu. For example, the Matsu people call Cai Qian “the Sea Emperor” (F. *hai huongna*) (J. Liu 1996c); “Datielu” (lit. the blacksmithing furnace) in Tieban Village was said to be the site where Cai forged his weapons; and the crude cannon originally placed in the Goddess Mazu Temple in Tieban was said to be forged by him as well (Wang, Wang, and He 2016: 104). It is said that the four Goddess Mazu temples in Matsu were all built by him (J. Liu 1996c); indeed, the name of the islands originated from one of those temples (Y. Yang 2014: 143–4).

The relationship between the islanders and the pirates was in fact even more complicated. Previous studies on the pirates in southeastern China have shown that the pirates relied on the coastal residents in China or the islanders to supply the necessities of life (Antony 2003: 17; Murray 1987: 89). The story of the Wheat-Field-Plowing King (F. *Lemah Toyuong*) told by Chen Ruichen, an elder in Dongyin, reveals more about the ambivalent relationship between the islanders and the pirates:

When the pirate ships were docked in Bei’ao Bay, Cai Qian was suddenly agitated and could not sit or lie down. He stood up and strode to the ship’s wheel. The sky above was completely cloudless, and the strong, powerful south winds blew directly at him; suddenly he spied on Bei’ao Hill a farmer and a large yellow ox plowing a field of immature green wheat shoots. Cai was greatly surprised by this scene and muttered to himself, “a farmer shouldn’t be doing that to unripe wheat—how strange!” So he instantly sent out some men to investigate the matter, ordering them to report back to him as soon as possible.

The men sailed ashore on sampans, but when they climbed the hill, they saw neither the farmer nor any green wheat but spotted instead dozens of giant sails on the remote horizon in the direction of Matsu. It was not the fishing season, so there should not have been so many ships in the sea. The men glanced at one another, knowing from experience that something was wrong. They hurried back to the ship and reported what they saw to Cai Qian. Cai thought it very likely that the navy was coming ...so he ordered all his ships to embark at once and flee downwind, escaping a possible disaster.

Because Cai Qian called himself “the Sea Emperor,” Cai ordained the mysterious farmer as “the Wheat-Field-Plowing King” in gratitude for saving his life, and had his statue placed on the left side of Goddess Mazu in Dongyin Temple. (J. Liu 2003)

In fact, the fate of Matsu was intertwined with pirates and bandits not only in the Qing Dynasty but also well into the early twentieth century, when the newly formed Nationalist government set up in Beigan the first Gan-Xi Joint Security Office (administering Gantang and Xiyang Islands) in 1934. However, in this time of political instability, the Nationalist government was unable to control the numerous islands in the southeast seas. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, the Japanese forces quickly came to these islands (although they did not occupy them). The Japanese warships patrolled the ocean, mainly with an eye to preparing an attack on southeastern mainland China. Meanwhile, the Nationalist government deployed troops on both banks of the mouth of Min River to defend the provincial capital of Fuzhou. During the turmoil of war, islands in the southeast seas, such as Matsu, became an ungoverned no-man's-land where many local despots rose to power one after another, transforming themselves into pirates. Japan bought off the local forces to fight the Chinese, calling them the "Fujian National Salvation Army" (*Fujian jiuguojun*). Though the pirates and bandits abided by the orders of the East Asia Development Board in Xiamen under the Japanese, they also cooperated covertly with the National Bureau of Investigation and Statistics, profiting from both sides of the conflict.¹⁶ As for the pirates themselves, they constantly clashed with each other, seeking every opportunity to drive their opponents away. Up to the present day, legends continue to circulate about the pirates and about the many buildings they left on the islands, such as the pirate house in Beigan (see Fig. 1.1).

This house was built by a particularly menacing bandit in Beigan named Chen Zhongping during his heyday in the 1940s. Hiring masons from mainland China to construct it, Chen also had a secret tunnel dug under the floor to allow him escape when needed. Right before completion, however, with only the floor of the second level unfinished, Chen's "boss" Lin Yihe was killed by the Japanese and he was forced to become a fugitive. Chen did not have a chance to use the house even for a single day. He was later killed in Nangan (J. Liu 2004a).

When I first visited Beigan, I was amused to find my guest house hostess reciting in fluent Fuzhou dialect the following limerick composed by Chen:



Fig. 1.1 Pirate house
(Photo by the author)

My ancestors moved from Heshang to Beigan,
And lodged above Qinbi called himself
Banshan.

In youth I worked in Yuansheng, buying fish,

I lost all my money because of gambling.
Having no way out, to Nangan did I flee,
Where the Yihe army granted a position to me,
raised to a director, to Beigan I transferred
Whoever hears my title Quanquan gets scared,

for if I beat you up, a single punch will strike
your heart.

(tsuluong ouhluong, tshienky poyh kang)
(khyngmiah suong'o, toh puangnang)

(tsoey' iu tshouhsing, nguongsing)
kautshiang)

(ingui tuijeng, suokho kangkang)
(mouhhuah khotaih, tahlouh nangngang)
(ngiehwo uilui, hungngo tsokuang)
(kuangtso tsuoeng, teusuong poyhakang)
(miangho kheingngeing, hungnoeyng)
tukiang)

(kungnau khatheih, suohthui kau ny)
singngang)

I still clearly remember the rather realistic punch she threw in my direction to illustrate the last line!

This limerick was obviously intended to intimidate the local people, but it also briefly accounts for the origin of Chen Zhongping and his rise to power. His ancestors came from Changle, Fujian and settled in a place

above the Qinbi Village in Beigan. As a young man, he worked in a store in Qiaozi, trading shrimp and other common low-cost fish. Having lost everything by gambling, he fled to Nangan to seek protection from Lin Yihe, a pirate chief. Later, Chen was assigned to Beigan as a boss, collecting protection money from passing fishing boats and merchant ships. All the people in Beigan were afraid of him, for if they dared to disobey him, they would suffer his wrath and even violence.

Other pirates also often compelled the locals to collect fees for them. For example, Chen Ruichen, the Dongyin elder, recalled his own experience:

In the early 1940s, I was forced by the Peace Salvation Army to become the security head (*baozhang*) of the Dongyong Security Group. ...There were tithing heads (*jiazhang*) under security heads, and at that time the usual practice went as follows: lots written with words like beds, tables, chairs and quilts were put into a bamboo jar or an iron can; each tithing head drew a lot and “collected” the item specified on the lot from each household. (Liu and Qiu 2002 [2001]: 475–6)

During the Second World War, many pirates and bandits of this kind dominated the sea along the coast of Fujian. For example, Lin Yihe, who granted Chen Zhongping a position, was an important figure on the Matsu Islands.

The rise of Lin Yihe vividly illustrates how these islands remained “a place outside civilization” (*huawai zhi di*) during the early twentieth century, where local despots, the Japanese, and various Chinese forces collaborated, competed, and clashed with one another. As noted above, it wasn’t until 1934 that a state institute called the Gan-Xi Joint Security Office was established in Matsu for the very first time, with Wang Xuanyou appointed as its director. Yet in less than two years, Wang was shot dead by Wu Yike, a bandit from Changle, China, who seized the office’s guns. After that, Wu often extorted money and goods in Nangan and Beigan; he even robbed the house of Lin Yihe, by then an important local figure. One day the following year, when Wu sailed out to go plundering, Lin captured him and delivered him to the government of Lianjiang County in China. For his actions, Lin was awarded the position of “police captain” (*tanjing*) by the county government and made responsible for anti-smuggling operations at sea. Before long, however,

Lin himself was listed as wanted by the county government and forced to flee because gangsters in his employ had stolen legally confiscated opium. One day, when a village in Nangan was staging performances for deities, Lin Yihe broke into the Township Office and stole its guns, thereby formally becoming a pirate living on pillage and booty. Lin collected protection fees from fishermen and exacted taxes from passing ships (P. Zhang 2001 and J. Liu 2004b). He also opened an opium shop in Matsuo, where opium was sold publicly (J. Lin 2006).

As previously mentioned, the Japanese bought off the local forces and named them the “Fujian Peace National Salvation Army” (*Fujian jinguojun*); Lin Yihe was among their ranks. He was incorporated in 1939 and appointed “the commander of the first road army under the second army group” (*Di'er jituan diyi lujun siling*), while simultaneously cooperating with the National Bureau of Investigation and Statistics, thus playing both sides. At his peak, he built a munitions factory in Siwei Village, Nangan, and mustered his own private armed force. Later, an unfair division of spoils triggered a conflict between Lin Yihe and Lin Zhen, who was in charge of the army group in Dongju. In 1942, Lin Zhen introduced the forces of Zhang Yizhou from Nanri Island and, conspiring with the Japanese, lured Lin Yihe into the sea to drown him (P. Zhang 2001: 983). After defeating Lin Yihe, Zhang Yizhou renovated the Mazu Temple in Nangan in 1943 and erected a stele in front of the temple as a mark of his victory.

Taking over Lin Yihe’s forces, Zhang Yizhou built his short-lived “Kingdom of the Min Sea (*minhai wangchao*)” which was headquartered in Nangan and stretched from Xiamen in the south to Zhejiang in the north (C. Zhang 1984: 94). Skillful in dealing with the Japanese, Zhang took good advantage of them:

Whenever the Japanese special agents were sent ...to South Gantang, Zhang treated them to feasts and even provided opium and morphine to them. ...As for the Japanese on the warships in the sea around Dongju Island, when they reached Baiquan or South Gantang, Zhang also paid due respect to them, so the Japanese didn’t have any worry in the Fujian seas. If the Japanese warships mooring offshore at the mouth of Min River requested freshwater, vegetables or other provisions, Zhang was always responsive, and he also often offered intelligence collected from the mainland to the Japanese. Meanwhile, he used ...steamships to smuggle goods banned for export during wartime, such

as food, tung oil and timber, to Xiamen and Shanghai ... in exchange for cotton yarn, cloth and other materials. After transporting the materials back to the islands, he resold them to the mainland, earning a good return. (J. Lin 2007)

Zhang also realized that Matsu was on the route from Hong Kong to Shanghai and was frequented by many merchant ships. With roads often blocked during wartime, the sea routes became highly lucrative. Accordingly,

[Zhang] established a taxation bureau in South Gantang and set up branches on other important islands to collect cargo tax, fishing tax, license tax etc. ... Every ship that passed through the sea near Gantang had to apply for a sailing license from the appropriate taxation bureau, and the fishing boats in the sea had to pay fishing taxes. (J. Lin 2007)

As the Japanese gradually retreated in 1945, Zhang quickly pivoted and opportunistically pledged support to the Nationalist government, transforming himself into part of its “Fujian Vanguard Army” (*Fujian xianqian jun*), though he was dismissed soon after his incorporation.

To conclude, we could say that in the early twentieth century Matsu was a stateless society located within a no-man’s-land: ruthless bandits and pirates scrambled for power and profit using physical force and tactical ingenuity and surviving in the crevices between warring Japan and China. On these outlying islands they rose, fell, and vanished in the blink of an eye, fleeting as shadows. As the local saying goes: “He whose fist is strongest takes everything” (F. *Tie nǚng kungnaumo tuai, tie noeyng to sieh*). Indeed, the Matsu islanders seemed to take this for granted.

Islands Indivisible from the Mainland

The people who migrated from the coasts of China to Matsu mainly made their living by fishing. They usually chose an area near the sea as a base, and later extended the village inland toward the mountains (see Fig. 1.2).

Fishing was a man’s job and the only source of family income. When men sailed out, they spent all day or sometimes many days at sea, and so the management of the household fell solely on women who were responsible for chores such as cultivating sweet potatoes, cutting firewood for fuel, feeding livestock, and taking care of children. Life on the sea was



Fig. 1.2 Ox Horn surrounds the inlet and spreads uphill
(Photo by Yang Suisheng, approximately 1986)

unpredictable and dangerous and the threat of disaster loomed large; shipwrecks were relatively common. When a fisherman did not return, the entire responsibility for the family fell on the shoulders of his widow. There is a saying in Matsu to the effect that “a wife (or a mother) is a bucket hoop (F. *Lauma/ nuongne sei thoeyngkhu*).” The analogy drawn between a bucket hoop that encircles the bucket to prevent the staves from falling apart and the role of a mother who holds the family together, protecting the children from destitution, is an apt one.¹⁷ If only one family member is to survive most “would rather that the mother lives” (F. *gangnguong si nuongma, me a si nuongne*). Nonetheless, the hardships endured by widowed mothers and fatherless children were almost unbearable in these barren islands, and thus the Matsu people also practiced a special kind of marriage arrangement in which a man came into the family of a widow (F. *suongmuong*). His responsibility was to support the family and to take care of the children left by the deceased husband. This allowed the children to receive good care, instead of becoming “a burden as children-in-law” (*tuoyou ping*). The rewards flowed both ways: the man entering a widow’s family earned respect

for looking after her children, and the family's continuation was guaranteed.

As for the inter-household relationships, people who had lineage relations or came from the same place usually formed their own communities inside the village. Those who came to Matsu alone would ally with people with similar circumstances into multi-surname dwelling units. In Ox Horn, for example, there are five major neighborhood units, including Da'ao (F. *toey o*, Big Inlet), Niujaopi (F. *ngu oyh biah*, Ox Horn Slope), Xibianshan (F. *se bieng nang*, Western Hill), Nanguan (F. *nang nguang*, Southerner's Place), and Liujianpai (F. *loeyh kang be*, Line of Six Houses). Not only do the residents of each of these units have diverse hometown origins, but they also worship their own separate deities. Before the communal temple was built in 2008 (discussed in Chapter 8), they organized separate ceremonies on festival days. Take, for example, the Lantern Festival (F. *pe mang*), which is the most important local celebration. Each unit observed it on a different day; thus the same festival was celebrated as many as eleven times in a village! Even though both banks of the inlet in Ox Horn had jointly built a temple for a deity named "Big Brother Chen" (F. *ting noey o*), each area still chose a different time (during the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, respectively) to hold the ceremony. In other words, although the villagers of Ox Horn lived together around the inlet, they were not integrated into a community in this period.

Inter-village interactions were limited too. The islanders usually sold fish directly to the mainland in exchange for daily necessities, but there were few inter-village exchanges inside the islands. The islanders seldom visited other villages except to see relatives, and the roads between villages were merely narrow trails overgrown with grass. The Matsu people called the act of going to another village "traversing a mountain" (F. *kuo lang*), a phrase which clearly illustrates the inconvenience of movement. A good number of Matsu people mentioned that "it was faster to row a boat" to a neighboring village.

During this period, the residents of the Matsu Islands formed an indivisible whole with their hometowns on the mainland. Indeed, the islanders usually replicated their hometown lineage relations on the islands. For example, of the Cao lineage members in Ox Horn, only

the fourth and seventh branches lived in the village; the descendants of the eighth branch were isolated on the other side of the mountain, near the islet of Huangguanyu, lying to the east of Nangan. Not until their shabby thatched huts were burned in an accidental fire were they allowed by the other lineage members to move into Ox Horn. This spatial allocation in Ox Horn reflected the relationships of the Cao lineage in their homeland, Caozhu Village in Fujian. It is said that the founding ancestor of the Cao only had seven sons. The eighth branch comprised the descendants of a long-term farm laborer who was considered to be “of impure ancestry” by the other lineage members. When members of the fourth, seventh, and eighth branches moved to Ox Horn, the Cao people still isolated the descendants of the last branch away from the village as before. This spatial distribution reveals how the early society in Matsu duplicated social relations in the mainland.

Between the islands themselves, there were also linkages based on the relations radiating from the hometown. After moving to Matsu, lineage members still kept in close contact with one another even when they were on different islands. For example, the Caos in Ox Horn were the descendants of the seventh branch Cao lineage in Caozhu, Changle. Some of the members of the seventh branch had also moved to Fuzheng Village in Dongju. In earlier days, these Cao lineage members scattered across different islands even bought boats together. Some Ox Horn people said their parents would, on their deathbeds, urge them in particular to keep up close contact with their relatives on other islands.

Similarly, if lineage members moved to different villages on the same island, their relationships would be even closer. For example, there are two lineages with the surname Chen in Shanlong, the largest village in Nangan. Though both Chens came from Changle, China, one belonged to the Chen lineage of Wenshi (hereafter Wenshi Chen), and the other to the Chen lineage of Lingnan (hereafter Lingnan Chen). The ancestors of the Wenshi Chen originally came from Jiangtian, Changle; some of them later moved to Nangan, and they developed into an important group in Shanlong. There are fewer Lingnan Chen than Wenshi Chen in Shanlong itself, but this is not the case when we take the whole of Nangan Island into consideration: in addition to Shanlong, the Lingnan Chen moved to the villages of Tieban and Meishi. Indeed, if

the Lingnan Chen united their members in all three villages, they would outnumber the Wenshi Chen and become the biggest group. Liu Jiaguo, a local historian of Matsu, has recorded a dispute in 1930 between the Wenshi Chen and Lingnan Chen which expanded to the other villages in Nangan, and eventually their hometown—Changle, Fujian:

In Shanlong Village, Chen Guanbao of the Wenshi Chen had an argument with Chen Zhengzheng of Lingnan Chen. The family of Chen Guanbao ran a cargo business that made a lot of money. Chen Guanbao, well-fed and corpulent, gave Chen Zhengzheng a good beating. Later, one time when Chen Guanbao was passing by Meishi, he had the misfortune of falling into the hands of the Lingnan Chen. He was kidnapped to the mainland and was being transported to Lingnan to suffer some extralegal penalty. The group who escorted Chen Guanbao, however, was discovered by the Chens of Jiangtian (Jiangtian being the ancestral residence of the Wenshi Chen) at an inlet in Changle, and Chen Guanbao was released through mediation. After this incident, in order to empower the lineage members on the outlying islands, the Chens of Jiangtian even “opened the ancestral hall (F. *khui sydoung*)” and carried a palanquin to Lingnan. They demanded that the Lingnan Chen stop bullying the Wenshi Chen on the outlying islands; otherwise, they would “fight the whole village” (F. *piang tshoung*) of Lingnan regardless of cost. (J. Liu 1996b)¹⁸

This story shows how the Matsu Islands and the relevant mainland hometowns were an indivisible whole during this period. Though geographically separated by the ocean, they shared a strong social and cultural affinity. Indeed, the Matsu people say that in the past, traveling to Matsu was described as “going to the outer mountain (F. *kho ngie lang*),” while departing for the mainland was called “returning home (F. *tuong tshuo li*).” At that time, people on Matsu would try to return home to celebrate important festivals. Since the location of Ox Horn is very close to the mainland, the villagers always held festivals one day early so that the residents could return to their hometowns in time for the celebrations there. This special custom continues to the present day, but the residents of Ox Horn are now teased by their neighbors as “real foodies (F. *tshui ia ie*),” who just cannot resist feasting twice for the festival. Last but not least, when islanders reached the end of their lives, some hoped to be brought back to their hometown for a proper burial. As a result, there was a practice of the “waiting coffin (F. *ting nuo*).” The bereaved set up a shelter outside the village and temporarily placed the coffin on a wooden rack or on a stone to wait for the ship to take the coffin back to the mainland for burial.



Fig. 1.3 Ancestral tablets and photos in a house
(Photo by the author)

Conclusion: Stateless, Transient, and Fragmented Islands

When I first visited Matsu in 2007, I was surprised to find that unlike in Taiwan or southern China, there are no lineage halls on the islands. It wasn't until I visited an old house and heard an eighty-year-old woman's explanation that I understood the reason for this. The ancestral altar in this lady's old house looks very rough and rudimentary (Fig 1.3): when her family built the house, they simply dug a hole in the corner of a wall to place ancestral tablets or pictures. The tablets are often surrounded by a messy collection of objects and appear to lack the aura of sanctity that we commonly see in Taiwan.¹⁹ I asked her why this was so. She replied that the Matsu people did not intend to stay on the island permanently; they lived simply and remained flexible in life, ready to return to the mainland at any time.

Indeed, people who relocated to Matsu in earlier times often moved back and forth between their hometowns and the islands according to the fishing season. As they did not necessarily plan for a long-term settlement, the relationships between the lineage members in Matsu were not as stable as those in their hometown. The lack of a lineage hall or relevant ceremonies further reduced the cohesion among the members on the

islands. Cao Changbi, the editor of the genealogy of the Cao family in Ox Horn, spent more than two decades going back and forth across the Strait for his laborious investigations.²⁰ Cao told me that the greatest difficulty he encountered while compiling his book was a frequent lack of links between the lineage members: many people only vaguely know that they are descended from a common ancestor but are unable to trace genealogical relationships in detail. His difficulty gives further clues as to why there are no lineage halls on the islands. Since the islands for them were but “outer mountains,” the Matsu people thought it unnecessary to build a lineage hall in a temporary residence. Neither did they hold any big celebrations on the islands or pilgrimages to China in the early days, since they could return to the mainland at any time.

In sum, Matsu in early times was not even an immigrant society but merely a stopover or temporary place to live, with people coming and going in a constant state of flux. Lying beyond the reaches of state power, the islands were almost deserted, a lawless place where “the strongest fist took everything.” The island society during this period was characterized by transience and brokenness. All of that changed with the arrival of the army in 1949.