

## **The Dichotomy of Dachen Island's Red Culture: Portrayal vs. Reality in the Context of Tourism Development**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Following the evacuation of the Dachen Islands by the Republic of China in 1955, the People's Republic of China undertook a reconstruction and redevelopment effort through the volunteer work of a youth committee known as the Reclamation Team. Today, Dachen Island is renowned for symbolizing Red Culture and the Reclamation Spirit, receiving significant government support, especially for developing its sustainable tourism industry. This field study investigates the disparity between the island's portrayal as a symbol of Red Culture and the Reclamation Spirit and its actual experience as seen through tourists, landscapes, and residents. Tourists are primarily drawn to Dachen Island for its natural scenery and relaxation rather than its Red Culture. The island's social media image highlights its natural beauty, contrasting sharply with the patriotic culture emphasized by government and official news outlets. Although Dachen Island features several cultural and historical sites, many remain closed or underutilized. As modernization progresses, the island faces a declining youth population, while migrant workers are attracted by the expanding tourism industry. Red Culture and the Reclamation Spirit function more as branding tools that help the island secure government funding and recognition rather than reflecting the lived reality of its residents.*

**Keywords:** Dachen Island, Portrayal vs. Reality, Reclamation Spirit, Red Culture, Tourism Development

### **1. Introduction**

At the climax of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1955, the Republic of China (ROC) Armed Forces, with assistance from the United States Navy, evacuated approximately 30,000 civilians and military personnel from the Dachen Archipelago located in the South China Sea near Zhejiang Province, China. This mass evacuation occurred following the capture of the nearby Yijiangshan Island by the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Elleman, 2019). After increased

tensions on Dachen Island and imminent defeat, the ROC Forces decided to consolidate and maintain a defensible position on other strategic islands, Kinmen and Matsu, which remain under ROC control today ("The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958", n.d.). During the withdrawal from Dachen Island, the ROC forces implemented a scorched-earth policy, planting explosives in critical military installations and infrastructures around Dachen Island to prevent the PRC from using the island's resources after their evacuation. Months following the withdrawal, a group of young volunteers called the Reclamation Team, from the PRC, worked to mobilize and reclaim the Dachen Islands (Wang, 2023). The group first worked to locate and dispose of the explosives and restore the agricultural land, buildings, and ports (Wang, 2023). After seventy years, Dachen Island has been re-established as a fishing village with a rapidly developing sustainable tourism industry (Ali & Li, 2024). "Red Culture" and "Reclamation Spirit" have become an integral part of Dachen Island's branding, and Dachen Island is now known as "The Pearl of the East China Sea" ("“东海明珠”垦荒精神之岛——大陈岛", 2021).

For my Dachen Island field study, I focused on the portrayal versus reality within the Red Culture, Reclamation Spirit, and tourism development. My interest sparked as I pondered upon a twelve-foot-tall monument of Hu Yaoban, the Chinese politician responsible for gathering the youth volunteers. I hadn't previously seen images or heard about the monument prior. The walkways around the monument were overgrown with trees and plants, and the well-built plaza was empty.

My research aims to observe the discrepancy between Dachen Island's cultural identity and the reality experienced by residents and visitors. How does the island's Red Culture and Reclamation Spirit shape its public image and impact tourism development? How do Red Culture and tourism development intersect on Dachen Island? What are the discrepancies between the portrayal and reality on Dachen Island?

As a Chinese-American born and raised in Texas, my perspective is informed by both my heritage and my academic interests. On the island, I was guided around Dachen by a group of undergraduates, graduates, and professors from Renmin University. I directly communicated with locals and tourists through my adequate Mandarin speaking level. My research aims to contribute to the limited international research on Dachen Island.

## **2. Context and Background**

### **2.1 Overview**

Dachen Island, also known as Tachen Islands, is a group of 29 islands in the East China Sea off the coast of the Jiaojiang District of Taizhou in Zhejiang, China. The Dachen Archipelago comprises two main islands and 27 islets and rocks, covering 14.6 square kilometers

("“东海明珠”垦荒精神之岛——大陈岛", 2021). Dachen Island is a national central fishing port and the third-largest fishing ground in Zhejiang Province ("Local Flavor Adds Spice to Tourism", 2023). It is known for its natural landscapes and historical relics. The Taizhou Fisheries Administration sets the fishing season from October to February ("China's Dachen Islands Achieve Zero-carbon Status", 2023). In recent years, the island has experienced growth in the tourism industry (Ali & Li, 2024). The Dachen islands are known as the Donghaiminzu, or "Pearl of the East China Sea."

This study was taken from Lower Dachen Island, which has an area of 4.89 square kilometers and an estimated population of 3000. The hilly Island includes Dachen town, Haimen Port, and Fengwei Mountain. The main tourist attraction on the Island is the Jiawu Rocks, two 15-meter-tall and 11-meter-wide rocks situated by the ocean (Ali & Li, 2024).

## **2.2 History**

At the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was created, Dachen Island remained administered by the Republic of China (Elleman, 2019). By 1955, a brief armed conflict arose between mainland China and the Republic of China islands during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. In response, the United States Navy and Republic of China Armed Forces evacuated Dachen Island and transported approximately 30,000 people to Taiwan in 8 and a half days through Operation King Kong ("February 7, 1955 -- Evacuation of Chinese from Tachen Islands", n.d.). As the ROC evacuated, they implemented explosives in military installations and infrastructures as a part of the scorch-earth policy in hopes of preventing and hindering the PRC from utilizing the island (Wang, 2023).

In January 1956, Chinese politician Hu Yaoban led a group of 227 youths under 20 from Wenzhou to help rebuild the abandoned islands. Concurrently, a group of people in cities along the coast of Zhejiang was mobilized to settle on the island. The youth volunteers later summed up to 467 and became known as the "Reclamation Team" ("“东海明珠”垦荒精神之岛——大陈岛", 2021). The volunteers would make an oath of commitment, responsibility towards their country, and everlasting perseverance and were awarded by the Central Committee of the Chinese New Democratic Youth League.

In 2006, the then Zhejiang Party Secretary Xi Jinping visited Dachen Island and recognized its Reclamation Spirit. He states:

“We must not forget the ardent hope of our revolutionaries and the contributions made by the Reclamation Team members. We must carry forward the Reclamation Spirit and base ourselves

on scientific development, innovation, strength, and selfless dedication. Establishing a well-off, modernized, and developed Dachen Island is promising.”

("习近平回信勉励大陈岛老垦荒队员的后代", 2016)

In 2010, Xi Jinping wrote a written letter to the old reclamation team pointing out the modernization possibilities of the Island. In 2016, Xi Jinping, now General Secretary of the Chinese Communists, wrote a letter to the 12 elementary students who were descendants of old reclamation team members to encourage them to honor and learn from their grandparents and, like them, rejuvenate the Chinese nation. Xi Jinping’s message included:

“I hope you learn from your grandparents, love the Party, love the motherland, love the people, and strive to grow into a new generation of builders with knowledge, character, and performance, ready to contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” ("习近平回信勉励大陈岛老垦荒队员的后代", 2016)

### **2.3 Development**

Dachen Islands has experienced significant infrastructure and economic development compared to 1955. The fishery and industry output value reached 42.4 million yuan in 1991 (Ali & Li, 2024). A telecommunications system, one hospital, one middle school, and two primary schools were created ("Local Flavor Adds Spice to Tourism", 2023). Dachen Island has been established as one of the national windsurfing bases, with the windsurfing team of Dachen Middle School often winning national and provincial competitions. There is a forest coverage rate of 47%, with 9,376 acres of greenery on the hills and slopes of Dachen Island’s topography.

Increased government attention and funding have spurred the growth of the tourism industry through expanding service sectors and providing employment opportunities for locals. Additionally, Dachen Island has achieved a zero-emission transition emphasizing sustainable tourism through 34 wind turbines, increased transmission efficiency, and a pilot hydrogen project, which cost 4.3 million USD ("China’s Dachen Islands Achieve Zero-carbon Status", 2023). The purpose is to drive the development of fishing and tourism. Dachen Island has seen exponential growth in tourism since 2021, and the number of tourists on the island was approximately 160,000 in 2023.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

I conducted my field study through the Renmin University School of Sociology Field Study Program in Dachen Island during the Summer of 2024. During this period, we spent ten days on the island observing the village and conducting interviews and spent four days in Jiaojiang,

Zhejiang, the mainland district closest to Dachen Island, after a typhoon warning made us leave the island early.

The ongoing project on Dachen Island started in 2021, and the Renmin University professors return each year to conduct their studies. We were well-accepted and accommodated by the community, and the Dachen Management Committee Leaders often communicated with us. I was in a group of eight people consisting of Renmin University PhD candidates, undergraduates, and a high schooler. Two of them had previously come to Dachen Island before and were well-connected. We conducted semi-structured interviews with tourists, shop owners, Taoist priests, migrant workers, and elderly residents. We were able to utilize their previous research and explore the islands' landscape.

We also created a questionnaire for tourists to understand their demographics, travel style, and experience on Dachen Island. It was an online 28-question form that consisted exclusively of multiple-choice questions. There were Likert scale questions, single-select, ordering, and multi-select questions. The tourists did it through their mobile devices after scanning a QR code. We asked tourists around the village to fill out the form, and we mainly targeted participants at the dock waiting for the ship to depart. We received 140 filled-out questionnaires.

#### **4. Research Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Tourists Preferences Regarding Red Culture and Reclamation Spirit**

The questionnaires reveal that most tourists on Dachen Island are working-class, young adults who do not have children, and 75% of tourists hear about Dachen through social media. Through analyzing the online presence of Dachen Island, we found the focus is on the scientific view and landscape rather than on historical or cultural aspects. Many tourists are social media influencers who come here mainly to capture images for their WeChat Friend Circle, Weibo, and Red accounts. The only consistent recognition of the Reclamation Spirit on social media is in the form of the Reclamation Spirit Memorial Monument on Huangfuqiao Mountain famous for providing a good view of the city and the ocean. Contrary to the Red Culture image the government and official news articles highlight, Dachen Islands' natural beauty dominates its online image.

Dachen Island experiences its peak visitor numbers during the summer and holiday breaks. For 82% of the tourists, it is their first time coming to Dachen Island. Most people come for scenic coastal views and a desire for a relaxed vacation since. When asked about their preferred travel style, over 80% of respondents preferred slow, relaxed travels that focus on scenery rather than history, culture, or entertainment. Only 21% of tourists listed the island's Red Culture and Reclamation history and culture as the top three attractions, while 74% listed the island's natural

scenery. Additionally, another demographic of people who visit Dachen Island, usually regularly, is the Zhejiang locals who come here to fish. For Zhejiang locals, Dachen Island is best known for its fresh seafood, particularly the Yellow Croaker.

The main attraction of Dachen Island is the natural views, and the place acts as a getaway from people's everyday working lifestyle, as indicated by the preference for relaxed and unplanned vacations. It can be observed the Red Culture and Reclamation spirit is not the emphasis of people's travels to Dachen Island.

#### **4.2 Culture and Historic Infrastructures on Dachen Island**

Out of 24 possible areas of improvement, attractions related to the Reclamation Spirit were rated as the least in need of enhancement. The areas most commonly cited for improvement were the cost of electric scooters, the hot temperatures, and the duration of the boat trip to the island. Nearly 49% of visitors visit some type of Reclamation Spirit attraction, yet we observed still a lack of tourist activity at these sites during our visits. At least one or more cultural and historical attractions will be a part of the Group Travel agenda. With the exception of the Reclamation Memorial Monument which most tourists will go to because of its grandeur and position which offers a panoramic view of the village and the ocean.

During our exploration, we found that several cultural and historical sites, including the Cultural Auditorium, Party History Education Base, Youth Palace, and Qingken Cultural Memorial Hall, are annually closed except for visits by high-profile influential government leaders. I also heard from locals that one of the Cultural Auditoriums would be used as a center for Mahjong playing. Once, I heard music play in the Youth Palace, and there was a worker inside doing construction. I also discovered a hidden plaza and statue of Hu Yaoban amongst the residential buildings. Later, I discovered I could not find any online image of the statue. These well-funded cultural and historical infrastructures appear underutilized and may not attract sufficient tourist interest even if they were open.

**Fig. 1: Statue of Chinese Politian Hu Yaoban**



**Fig. 2: Reclamation Spirit Sign**



#### **4.3 Future Development and Government Funding on Dachen Island**

Dachen Island is experiencing a significant decline in its population of children under 16. With only one elementary school, serving approximately 15 kids. Most families relocate to the mainland or send their kids to the mainland for their education. Yet, in contrast, Dachen Island is having an influx of migrant workers due to its fishing and growing tourism industry. The community sense on the island is only seen in the Mahjong centers, but otherwise, it is not commonly observed. Dachen Island will continue to forgo substantial population composition changes in the next decade.

The government has actively supported and funded the development of the tourism industry on Dachen Island. Before, the island was designated as a pilot site for a hydrogen energy system, making Dachen into a zero-emission island. The government also provides financial incentives, such as tax exemptions, to encourage further development. Government workers are offered stipends for traveling to Dachen, further promoting the island as a key destination. This substantial investment contrasts with the island's slowly declining population and the erosion of its once-vibrant community spirit.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Despite the emphasis on Red Culture and the Reclamation Spirit in government and official media, which paint an idealized image of Dachen Island, the reality differs based on the island's social media presence. Tourists are primarily drawn to the island for its natural scenery, food, and relaxation, while residents lead quiet, calm lives. Red Culture is not an integral part of daily life, but, rather, functions more as a label and marketing tool for the island. The government's

support will likely continue as long as Dachen remains tied to Red Culture. However, the declining population and weakening sense of community may raise concerns about the island's future. Future research should continue to reveal the true conditions of Dachen Island, offering a more accurate representation of its current state. Additionally, exploring the policy implications of the island's modernization will be crucial for addressing the challenges it faces.

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