

BOOK REVIEW

BEACHHEADS: WAR, PEACE, AND TOURISM IN POSTWAR OKINAWA

BY GERALD FIGAL

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Among the most reliable signs of summer's approach in Japan is the sudden proliferation of travel posters for Okinawa. These advertisements typically feature young, bikini-clad women frolicking on a tropical beach or otherwise enjoying a recognizably exotic landscape. Actual Okinawans play a mere cameo role in these advertisements, as do Japanese men and just about anyone who appears to be over thirty years old. The ads primarily target young women from mainland Japan (they are, after all, among the nation's most avid consumers of vacation packages), and the implicit viewer is expected to identify with (or lust after) the young models.

Okinawa's image as a tropical destination for Japanese tourists—as an exotic, internal, other—has become so naturalized and firmly implanted within the national imaginary that it is easy to overlook how *unnatural*, self-conscious, and gradual was the process that fostered this image. As Gerald Figal documents in his new book, *Beachheads*, the transformation of Okinawa into a stereotypically exotic landscape dates back to the early postwar decades when Okinawa was still under U.S. occupation. Figal is especially interested in exploring how closely intertwined are the realms of Okinawa tourism and the legacies of war and occupation.

Beachheads is the first book-length study of tourism in Okinawa to be published in English, and it is also a rare treatment of the topic by an historian. Modern scholarship on tourism as a cultural phenomenon has been dominated by anthropologists and sociologists (cynics might view anthropology as the quintessential academic *practice* of tourism), and sociologist Tada Osamu has written extensively about tourism with respect to Okinawa. Tada elucidates how the constructed nature of the islands as a “tropical paradise” not only draws heavily from classic colonial images of the exotic, but continues to both shape, and be shaped by, desires of visitors from the Japanese mainland. Figal's main contribution is to situate tourism to Okinawa within a broader historical frame. He begins with the Meiji Era but devotes particular attention to the early postwar decades, drawing on both archival research and fieldwork to underscore how critical the 1950s and 1960s are for understanding Okinawa as a tourist destination today. As he states in the book's Prologue, he aims to present “historical analyses and contemporary critiques of how issues of war and peace have shaped Okinawa's identity as a tourist destination and how tourism development has dealt with war history and peace promotion as it puts forth a marketable product” (17).

The book is divided into three sections, each consisting of two chapters. Part I, “Grave and Caves,” provides an historical overview of tourism to Okinawa. In this section, Figal focuses on the slow transformation of the war-torn landscape into a tourist site, albeit one visited at first mainly by veterans and bereaved families to commemorate those killed in the Battle of Okinawa. Figal notes that tourist promotion in the early postwar years was directed primarily at Okinawans themselves in an effort to persuade them that their devastated islands, still littered

with bones of the dead, actually harbored the potential to attract tourists. Figal argues that the bone collection campaigns of the late 1940s and 1950s laid the foundation for what would later emerge as iconic tourist sites for commemorating war victims and advocating peace: “In the process of this bone-collection campaign, the caves of the ill-fated Imperial Blood and Iron Youth Corps in Mabuni and the Himeyuri Student Nurses Corps in Komesu were discovered and subsequently became Okinawa’s second and third major war memorial sites: the Himeyuri-no-tô (established February 1946) and the Kenji-no-tô (established March 1946).” As Figal notes, visiting battlefield sites to mourn and commemorate the dead has been central to Okinawan tourism since the early postwar years, and those promoting tourism at that time emphasized the industry’s potential to transform the local landscape by parlaying the devastation of war into a site of peace. The war and its victims were thus central to the rationalization and establishment of tourist development in Okinawa, and as sacred ground was converted into a public memorial space, it was inevitably commercialized in the process.

Part II, “Creations and Recreations,” details the makeover and commercial branding of Okinawa as a tropical paradise modeled largely on Hawaii (Ch. 3) and then explores issues related to the restoration of Ryukyu Castle (Ch. 4). As Figal acknowledges, the former topic has already been discussed in detail by Tada Osamu, but Figal argues: “Contrary to the common view that the image of Okinawa’s land- and (*sic*) seascape was born from the 1975 International Marine Exposition—the event that certainly solidified Okinawa’s place in the mainland Japanese tourist imagination and jump-started growth in Okinawa tourism in general—its roots go back to the 1950s and spread in the 1960s when the first concerted efforts to tropicalize Okinawa took place.” (92) Central to the “tropicalization” was the four All-Ryukyu Greenification Promotion Campaigns conducted between 1959 and 1970 to reforest those areas devastated by wartime bombardment. In the early campaigns, trees and flowers deemed to foster economic development or natural protection from the elements were primarily selected for planting, but as interest in generating tourism grew during the 1960s and early 1970s, nonindigenous trees and flora began to be planted more in greater quantities, and, paradoxically, afforestation efforts emerged as well, with the aim of transforming the Okinawan landscape so as to conform more closely to a stereotypical tropical environment, or into a domestic version of Hawaii. Needless to say, this often entailed great expense, both in terms of economic outlay and the toll it took on the natural environment.

Not surprisingly, mainland Japanese seemed more comfortable with this exotic makeover of Okinawa than did local residents, although Figal is especially careful to highlight the added complexity entailed as local residents gradually internalized what originated as a set of images projected by the tourist’s gaze:

The floral tropicalization of Okinawa Island in the midst of general afforestation programs and through outside interventions raises thorny issues concerning Okinawan identity. In short, we can conceptualize tourism-induced tropicalesque afforestation as an effect of the tourist gaze, the act of tourists visualizing a destination before, during, and after a trip to it, which shapes what they see and how they see it. The power of the tourist gaze is also actively implicated in a dialectic between native and visitor in the production, packaging, and promotion of the product, the “sightseeing spot.” (103)

Figal is not interested in valorizing one landscape over another in accordance with its purported “authenticity,” nor is he particularly concerned with rigid, monolithic conceptions of identity.

Rather, he follows Erve Chambers in asserting that any meaningful identity is enacted in the realm of everyday life, regardless of the origins of its referents. Thus Figal argues that as tropical tropes of hibiscus and palm trees gradually come to be viewed by Okinawans as “native” to the local environment, thereby becoming naturalized or domesticated, such a view should be deemed “legitimate” in the sense that it constitutes a social reality. To dismiss this perspective as not grounded in the historical facts, he insists, is to deny the agency of local residents to forge their own identity. Some readers may find that such a treatment of the problem gives short shrift to complex issues (and to the notion of agency itself, which must also be viewed within a broad historical frame), but being drawn into debates about authenticity is not Figal’s aim in this book, and his desire to deflect the issue here does little to detract from the force of his main argument.

Further complicating the problem of the “tropicalization” of the local landscape is that, in addition to the importation of nonindigenous elements, were those already present but requiring a transformation in their ascribed symbolic meaning. Rather than the physical transplantation of a foreign botanical species, native (or long-domesticated) species had to be redefined. The hibiscus, for example, had already existed for nearly three centuries in Okinawa, where it was traditionally viewed as a Buddhist symbol of the ephemeral nature of life. To the extent that the hibiscus symbolized the brevity of life (a reality brutally reinforced by the war), the transformation of the flower’s ascribed meaning, as Figal incisively notes, “...parallels the path of postwar Okinawa tourism from its early focus on war memorials and battle sites—places of death—to its present focus on conjuring a carefree and revitalizing tropical beach resort for stressed-out Japanese from the north.” (104)

The restoration of Shuri Castle is another instance in which various historical eras intersect—the supposedly glorious days of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the Japanese military control over the islands during the war when the Castle served as a command center, and its bombardment by American naval ships over the course of several days, the decades of neglect during the postwar occupation. The castle’s restoration itself, for all of its attention to historical accuracy, is, after all, a replica, and one in which fidelity to an originary source is balanced with certain interpretive liberties taken on the part of those responsible for its (re-)creation. Here, too, Figal is less concerned with issues of historical or architectural fidelity than he is with interrogating the deployment of the restored castle as a heritage site, a new, yet ancient, symbol of Okinawan otherness within Japan. As he succinctly notes: “‘Ryukyu’ is Okinawa in heritage mode” (130), adding that “What UNESCO did not recognize and what goes unnoticed by most tourists is the extent to which Shuri Castle owes its present existence and its symbolic and political function to the Battle of Okinawa as much as it owes its heritage site status to its Ryukyu Kingdom origins” (136).

In Part III, “Bases and Beaches,” Figal turns his attention more directly to the U.S. military presence, arguing that it is not only implicated in the development of Okinawa’s postwar tourist industry, but also reminding us that the military presence itself has long served as one of the attractions and distinguishing characteristics of Okinawa as a tourist destination, although the nature of that attraction has changed over time. During the occupation, for example, he notes that the bases provided a source of foreign products at cheap prices, drawing tourists from the mainland in search of watches, jewelry, whiskey, golf clubs, and other luxury items. While today’s tourists need not travel to Okinawa for such products, military paraphernalia sold in army-navy surplus stores remains a popular tourist item and itself is

emblematic of Okinawa's otherness. Furthermore, American products and cultural elements are essential to the entire concept of the *chanpuru* (bricolage) culture, which is routinely touted as distinguishing Okinawa from Japan's other tourist destinations. Thus the relationship between the war, the ongoing American military presence, and Okinawa as a distinctive and alluring tourist destination is more complex than at first appears.

Figal reminds us that while the high-end resort enclaves and U.S. military bases that dot the main island of Okinawa might seem to exist in separate realms from each other as well as isolated from the everyday lives of local residents, one can readily identify structural parallels and economic symbiosis between the bases and beaches. Most obviously, both continue to occupy prime real estate on the coast or near cities while severely restricting access by Okinawans. And for many mainland tourists, the beaches and bases together embody the multifaceted nature of Okinawa's supposed exoticism—while, at the same time, their superficial differences serve to mask the crucial fact that they account for a substantial portion of the prefectural economy yet impose serious constraints on economic growth.

In reading through *Beachheads*, it gradually dawned upon this reviewer that Figal appears to have had a *double entendre* in mind when he employed the plural form for the book's title. On the one hand, he uses "beachhead" in the conventional sense to refer to America's military foothold on Okinawa's shore during the Pacific War, underscoring the significance of the war, occupation, and American bases. Yet it seems that he also coins the term (as a sly play on slang such as "pothead") to evoke the image of contemporary Japanese tourists who spend much of their time in Okinawa on the beach, indulging in stereotypical fantasies of the islands as an exotic tropical paradise. That such fantasies are constructed, marketed, and consumed has been amply documented by other scholars. Figal's important contribution is to add historical depth and to emphasize the long and entrenched relationship between the realms of war and occupation on the one hand, and the gradual emergence of Okinawa as an exotic, tropical destination for mainland tourists on the other. Yet as the book's subtitle, "War, Peace, and Tourism in Postwar Okinawa" implies, no matter how dedicated the efforts of tour promoters to highlight the exotic otherness of the islands, tourism in Okinawa remains inextricably linked to the ongoing legacies of war—and to the unfulfilled quest for peace.