

Lives of Sea Nomads in the Period of Social Change in Modern China

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This paper aims to give a true picture of sea nomads living in the mouth of the Jiulong River in Southern Fujian Province to show how their lives have changed since the end of the Republic of China period. Their surroundings changed drastically as indicated by their participation in a release operation during the Chinese Civil War, the collectivization of sea nomads in the 1950s and the acquisition of cluster housing from the 1960s. Their relationships with local farmers and residents have also changed significantly, resulting in a wider range of intermarriage, for example. Blood and regional relationships that bound them together appear to have been lost in their economic life. Yet, such relationships are still deeply rooted in their social life and play a central role in marriage and the operation of coastal boats.

Their wish was fulfilled when they acquired land to settle. From the perspective of the government, however, giving them the land was a means to push the collectivization of sea nomads forward by limiting their life, work and consumption activities in one specific area. In the 1960s or after, their labor activities came to have three pillars: large-scale fishing in the ocean, small-scale fishing in the mouth of the Jiulong River and factory work on land. Some flexibly changed their work locations from water to land and vice versa, and sometimes family members worked in different settings. Moreover, when the production responsibility system was adopted between 1983 and 1985, each individual became able to choose a way of making a living. Interestingly, many sea nomads easily move between water and land. Even though they have settled on land to be engaged in life, work and consumption activities, the water remains a place to live and work for them. The boundary between water and land seems to be something they can cross easily in every respect of life, work and consumption.