

Hainan, Zhuya, Qiongya, or Qiongzhou Island? Historical changes of names of the largest China's island

Dr. Vladimír Liščák, Res. Prof.

Oriental Institute, Czech Academy of Sciences / Terminological commission of the Czech Office for Surveying, Mapping and Cadastre, Praha (Prague), Czechia

Hainan short overview

Hainan Island (Chinese¹: 海南島 *Hǎinán Dǎo*) forms the extreme southern limit of the People's Republic of China, save for the Paracel Islands. Sometimes referred to as the Tail of the Dragon (Chinese: 龍尾 *lóngwěi*), is an enigmatic full stop to the Han empire (202 BC – 220 AD). Hainan lies between longitudes 108°30' and 111° E and latitudes 18° and 20°31' N. It is separated from the mainland by the 25 km Qiongzhou Strait (Chinese: 瓊州海峽 *Qióngzhōu Hǎixiá*), also called the Hainan Strait, and since 1988 it forms the Hainan Province (Chinese: 海南省 *Hǎinán Shěng*), the smallest province of PRC, which was separated from the Guangdong province. The province has land of 33,920 square kilometres (13,100 sq mi), of which the Hainan Island is 32,900 square kilometres (12,700 sq mi) and the rest is over 200 islands. Located in the South China Sea, Hainan is about 300 km east of Vietnam across the Gulf of Tonkin, some 500 km southwest of Hong Kong.

Indigenous peoples like the Hlai a Kra–Dai-speaking ethnic group, are longest-native to the island and comprise 15% of the population. Their native languages include the Hlai languages. They are recognized by the Chinese government as one of the country's 56 ethnic groups (Li 黎 nationality). There are some 750,000 Hlai speakers. The Han population, who compose a majority of the population at 82%, speak a wide variety of languages including

¹ For Chinese names I use Standard Chinese (普通話 *pǔtōnghuà*).

Standard Chinese, Hainam Min (or Hainanese), Yue Chinese, Cantonese, Be language, Hakka Chinese, etc.

Hainan has always been regarded as a backwater by successive Chinese dynasties and a mystery to foreigners. Indeed, had it not been for a handful of inquisitive academics and devoted missionaries who “found Hainan” (starting in the 16th century), our knowledge of the island would have amounted to little more than folklore.

Although some ancient sources refer Hainan, it was the act of annexation of the island in 111 BC during the reign of Wu Ti, the Han Emperor, that marks of the start of Hainan's recorded history (Schafer, 1969). Hainan when invaded by the Han armies was in the possession of unorganized aborigines called Li (*Hlai*), who today number 700,000 and rank to the largest minority group in the island's 5.6 million people. The Chinese invaders had no conception of the size of the island, and for more than seven hundred years of occupation, Hainan was depicted on maps as little more than a wavering coastal strip with occasional southward bulges.

The lack of thorough exploration was due first to a pre-occupation with exploitation of the island's northern pearl beds, rumours of which initially lured the Chinese to this “treasure island” (Schafer, 1969), and second to the strength of the Li people in the hinterland which confined the Han invaders to the coastline. Two administrative areas were established by the Han government to subjugate the “savage Li” and thereby hopefully sap the untouched treasures from the island's interior: drugs, incenses, precious metals, pearls, tortoise shell, ivory and coloured, scented cabinet timbers (Mayers, 1872), all luxury goods prized by the Chinese Court.

Although the island remained nominally under Chinese sovereignty, effective government was not reintroduced until the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Even then, the island remained firmly in the hands of the indigenous peoples, and the coastal settlements established by the Chinese became a dreaded place of banishment for those who had lost favour at court on the mainland. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), the island was placed under the administration of what was then Guangxi Province (廣西省 *Guǎngxī Shěng*, now an autonomous region). In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Chinese began settling in the northern uplands and plains, displacing the indigenous Li there.

Although the name Hainan (literally “South of the Sea”) was used as a rather imprecise collective name for all southern lands which lay beyond the familiar borders of the early

dynasties, it was not until the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century that the name was applied specifically to the island. Under the sovereignty of Kublay Khan (Qubilai, r. 1260–1294), the island was incorporated with the western portion of Guangdong Province under the designation *Haibei Hainan Dao* (海北海南道 *Hǎiběi Hǎinán Dào*), i.e., the “Circuit or Intendantship of North of the Sea (straits) and South of the Sea” (Mayers, 1872). Since *Haibei* was already used to describe coastal Guangdong, the practice arose of referring to the island south of the sea as Hainan (Schafer, 1969), although it was not until 1921 that it became the official name of the island (Liu, 1938). But in Western sources and maps it still remained mostly as Hainan.

New administrative footing established by the Mongols paved the way for the constitution of the island in 1370 as the Prefecture of Qiongzhou (瓊州府 *Qióngzhōu Fǔ*), named after the major city of the island (near present-day Haikou 海口 *Hǎikǒu*) which was first settled in 631 A.D. (*Qiongzhou Fu zhi* 瓊州府志, 1920 edition). The new prefecture was placed under the jurisdiction of Guangdong Province, an arrangement which has continued to 1988. This new status marked the promotion of the island from remote dependency to an integral part of the imperial realm.

Changes of Names

During history the name of the island changed several times. One of the earliest known names is Zhuya (珠崖 *Zhūyá*, i.e. Pearl Cliffs), which was used already in the Han dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, Hainan Island has become the Yazhou Prefecture (崖州 *Yázhōu*, i.e. Jade Prefecture) 《舊唐書·地理志四》. This name still remains as the name of modern Yazhou District in Sanya in the south of Hainan Island. In 631 it was changed to the Qiongzhou Prefecture (瓊州 *Qióngzhōu*), in modern northeastern Hainan. It existed from 631 to 1329, but between 742 and 758 it was known as Qiongsan Commandery (also translated as Qiongsan Prefecture, Chinese: (瓊山郡 *Qióngshān Jùn*).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, explorers referred to the island as “Aynam” (<https://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl/en/Map-island-Aynam.7512>; Dampier, 1729), which remains the pronunciation of its name in the local Hainanese dialect.

In 1906 the Chinese Republican leader Sun Yat-sen proposed that Hainan become a separate province. Hainan was historically part of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, and for a short time (1912–1921), it was nominally independent under the name Qiongya Island, administrated as Qiongya Circuit (瓊崖道 *Qióngyá Dào*, i.e. Jade Cliffs Circuit) under the 1912 establishment of the Republic of China. In 1921, it was planned to become a special administrative region Qiongya (瓊崖特別行政區 *Qióngyá Tèbié Xíngzhèngqū*); in 1944, it became Hainan Special Administrative Region with 16 counties, including the South China Sea Islands. Hainan was one of the last areas to eventually come under the administration of the People's Republic of China, having been under the control of ROC forces until March 1950. The name of *Qiongya* was also used by the Soviet government of Hainan (Chinese: 瓊崖蘇維埃政府 *Qióngyá sūwéi'āi zhèngfǔ*, 1928–1941)

The Qiongya Soviet government was established in August 1928. In November 1941, the Anti-Japanese Democratic Government of Qiongya Northeast District was established, and in September 1945, it was changed to Qiongya Democracy. The government (called the Qiongya Provisional Democratic Government in 1947), in July 1949, was renamed the Qiongya Provisional People's Government until the liberation of Hainan on May 1, 1950.

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