



ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

Decolonizing the ‘One China’ Narrative: The Case of Taiwan

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I

This essay argues that contemporary Taiwan, as a democratic, functionally independent polity, constitutes the crucial exception to disavowals by the Republic of China (ROC) and People’s Republic of China (PRC) of imperialist claims and ambitions. As such, it explores how the ideal of a single China spanning the Taiwan Strait (‘one China’) depends on the erasure of a (proto-) national Taiwanese identity, and possibly the suppression of the people who claim it.¹ ‘One China’ narratives seek to naturalize Taiwan’s absorption into the ROC in the 1940s and its potential future annexation by the PRC, hiding the pressures placed on Taiwanese people today to give up their hard-fought democracy, as well as the bloodshed that would be involved in any military conquest.

In its separation, Taiwan has been powerfully constitutive of how many Han Chinese nationals of the PRC and ethnic Chinese abroad understand what China is and ought to be.² From the perspective of the PRC party-state, as articulated in speeches by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Xi Jinping and Chinese ambassadors stationed around the world, Taiwan is a wound whose only proper healing is a political union with the PRC.³ The PRC claims sovereignty over Taiwan on the implicit grounds that it is the inheritor of the fullest extent of Qing territory and the explicit contention that it has superseded the ROC as the true ‘one China’. There is, to date, no organized protest within China or even in the PRC diaspora against a possible

¹ This essay draws on research for a book co-authored with Mark Harrison, titled *Revolutionary Taiwan: a new nation comes of age*, that is under advance contract with Cambria Press.

² Lowell Dittmer, ‘Taiwan as a factor in China’s quest for national identity’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 15 (2006), pp. 671–86.

³ See, for example, Xi Jinping, ‘Working together to realize rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and advance China’s peaceful reunification’ (speech, Beijing, 2 Jan. 2019), Taiwan Work Office of the CPC Central Committee, Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council.

invasion of Taiwan, a war that would also cost a significant number of Chinese lives, convulse regional and global economies, and expose ethnic Chinese in the West to the kind of discrimination and opprobrium that Russian emigrants have experienced since the reignition of the Russo-Ukrainian War in February 2022. The lack of mass and sustained Chinese opposition to an invasion reflects the danger to Chinese nationals of violating (what is quite literally) the party line on Taiwan. It is also, arguably, an indicator of how popular and convincing the 'one China' narrative is among those who identify as Chinese and look to the PRC as a motherland, such that even military action against an unwilling populace is seen not as colonial, but decolonial or even anti-colonial.⁴ The 'one China' narrative also sets Taiwanese apart from the 'overseas Chinese' and Chinese diasporic communities that Taomo Zhou discusses in her essay in this roundtable, on whom there is no comparable pressure to become part of the PRC and take on the identity of PRC citizens, even in Singapore, where ethnic Chinese also form a supermajority of the population.

In response to the question posed by the literary scholar Jennifer Wenzel, 'Who decolonizes?', it is Taiwanese people who are at the forefront of challenging teleologies that premise the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on subjugating Taiwan.⁵ Various constituencies of Taiwanese people are engaged in mitigating the daily and high-level impacts of the 'one China' narrative. They do so on the basis of several contentions: that Taiwan's potential annexation by the PRC will constitute imperial expansion, not 'peaceful reunification'; that Taiwan's occupation by the ROC in 1945 was a form of colonization, not 'peaceful reunification'; and that Taiwan is not intrinsically Chinese land, but a settler colony multiple times over.

Their efforts, however, are constricted by geopolitical hierarchies and anxieties about US–PRC conflict that make the 'one China' narrative stubbornly resistant to historical enquiry. 'Why, after all, is the island of Formosa formally called in its own documentation...the Republic of China?' asks Lyle J. Goldstein, formerly of the Naval War College, in an illustrative publication from April 2020.⁶ 'That simple, seemingly inconvenient semantic fact implies not Americans, but rather Chinese people should decide the future of Taiwan. In other words, this is a civil war – plain and simple.' Goldstein asks a question for which he supplies no historical answer, only ideological pronouncements and policy recommendations. Such is the allure of the 'one China' narrative

⁴ Instructive although of course inexact comparisons may be drawn with movements opposing Israeli policies towards Palestinians, anchored in many cases by Jewish participants and scholars. See David Landy, *Jewish identity and Palestinian rights: diaspora Jewish opposition to Israel* (London, 2011).

⁵ Jennifer Wenzel, 'Decolonization', in Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully, eds., *A companion to critical and cultural theory* (New York, NY, 2017), p. 450.

⁶ Lyle J. Goldstein, 'How progressives and restrainers can unite on Taiwan and reduce the potential for conflict with China', *Responsible Statecraft*, 17 Apr. 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/04/17/how-progressives-and-restrainers-can-unite-on-taiwan-and-reduce-the-potential-for-conflict-with-china/>, accessed 9 June 2023. *Responsible Statecraft* is the public-facing publication of the Quincy Institute, a think tank advocating restraint and non-interventionism, co-founded in 2019 by a group of policy-makers and academic historians.

that a question which should point to the ROC's brutal mid-century colonization of Taiwan ends up being used as justification for the island's takeover today by another, more powerful Chinese state.

II

If typical periodizations of Chinese history hide China's expansion by invasion and conquest, as James Millward outlines in his roundtable essay, common periodizations of Taiwanese history enact a similar sleight of hand by identifying the short-lived Dutch and Spanish settlements of the early modern period, as well as the twentieth-century Japanese regime as colonial in nature, while labelling the Qing (1683–1895) and ROC eras (1945 to the present) as non-colonial.⁷ When Japan surrendered Taiwan in 1945, the island's six million inhabitants, consisting of indigenous Austronesian peoples and descendants of Han settlers who had arrived during the Ming and Qing dynasties, were not given a say in their post-war future. The ruling party of the ROC, the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), occupied Taiwan on behalf of the victorious Allied Powers, deeming 25 October 1945 'Retrosession Day' (*taiwan guangfu jie* 台灣光復節). The term 'retrosession' portrayed fifty years of Japanese colonization as an aberration from lawful Chinese rule and suggested that Taiwan had always belonged to the government that currently held power in China, even one that had never ruled the island before. 'Retrosession' was also meant to evoke a close, familial relationship between those settlers whose families had migrated from China generations prior (called *benshengren* 本省人 in KMT parlance, 'those from the province') and newcomers (called *waishengren* 外省人, 'those from outside the province').⁸

In short order, however, governing power in the new province was concentrated in the hands of the latter, with *waishengren* exercising a 'near-monopoly over important positions in the provincial administration, including state enterprises and monopoly bureaus' and *benshengren* making up 'only a small portion of [even] midlevel officials in the various departments', according to Steven E. Phillips's study of early Nationalist rule.⁹ Less than eighteen months after retrosession, in what became known as the 28 February 1947 Incident, island-wide protests broke out against Nationalist corruption and mismanagement. Reinforcements sent from China by Chiang Kai-shek, then-chairman of the Nationalist Government, killed an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 Taiwanese,

⁷ In both everyday life and bureaucratic documentation, the year in Taiwan is counted according to the founding of the ROC in 1911–12. The year 2023 CE is thus *minguo* ('year of the nation') 112, eliding the fact that Taiwan was a Japanese colony in 1911–12 and not part of the ROC, according to its own provisional constitution of 1912 and constitution of 1923.

⁸ Dominic Meng-hsuan Yang and Mau-Kuei Chang, 'Understanding the nuances of *waishengren*: history and agency', *China Perspectives*, 83 (2010), pp. 108–22.

⁹ Steven E. Phillips, *Between assimilation and independence: the Taiwanese encounter Nationalist China, 1945–1950* (Stanford, CA, 2003), p. 70. See also Hong-zen Wang, 'Class structures and social mobility in Taiwan in the initial post-war period', *The China Journal*, 48 (2002), pp. 56–8.

primarily *benshengren* and indigenous.¹⁰ Cross-Strait unification, unilaterally imposed, is thus not a hypothetical thought experiment for Taiwanese today. It is a process that has already been tried once within living memory, at high cost to Taiwan's existing inhabitants.

Metropole and settler colony unexpectedly merged in 1949 when the KMT lost the Chinese Civil War to the CCP and fled to Taiwan with an estimated 1.2 million followers. Taiwan became the new site of a central government that, like its provincial counterpart, also concentrated power in the hands of elite *waishengren*, while doling out land and housing – albeit often marginal in quality – to the military dependents who made up the base of the exiled party. Nearly all seats in the ROC's main legislative body, the Legislative Yuan, and the (now-defunct) National Assembly were reserved for representatives of mainland provinces chosen in elections held on the mainland in 1947–8.¹¹ Likewise, only 5 per cent of civil service positions were reserved for *benshengren* who passed the requisite exams, although they comprised approximately 85 per cent of the population.¹² In 1949, the KMT also imposed martial law on Taiwan, beginning a thirty-eight-year period referred to as the White Terror, in which accused communists, leftists, dissidents, and advocates for liberal democracy, proportional representation, and Taiwanese independence alike risked interrogation, torture, imprisonment, exile, and execution. It was this unelected, arriviste government that protested the option of competing in the Olympic Games under the name 'Formosa' at Rome in 1960¹³ and insisted on occupying the seat for 'China' at the United Nations until 1971, when the UN Assembly adopted Resolution 2758 expelling Chiang Kai-shek's representatives and leaving the people living in Taiwan without effective representation in a key multinational organization.¹⁴

In Taiwan, the tenacious fight for democracy throughout the White Terror was inseparable from the attempt to decolonize the island from one-party, ethnic minority, and military rule under the ROC. Early twentieth-century movements for self-rule within the Japanese empire had drawn on ties to a Chinese homeland and wider Chinese diaspora.¹⁵ The subsequent experience of rule by a Chinese state that was not homegrown but arrived from outside the island

¹⁰ Recent work on the 28 February 1947 Incident deserving of more attention includes Yen-kuang Kuo, 'The history and politics of Taiwan's February 28 Incident, 1947–2008' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Victoria, 2020).

¹¹ Simon Long, *Taiwan: China's last frontier* (London, 1991), p. 63.

¹² T. W. Ngo and Hong-zen Wang, eds., *Politics of difference in Taiwan* (New York, NY, 2011), p. 3.

¹³ John Horne and Garry Whannel, *Understanding the Olympics* (New York, NY, 2016), pp. 189–91.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the passage of Resolution 2758 and the missed opportunity for dual recognition, see Yi-shen Chen, 'From a province to a sovereign state: Taiwan's political changes as reflected in the three critical years 1951, 1971, and 1991', in Peter C. Y. Chow, ed., *A century of development in Taiwan: from colony to modern state* (Cheltenham, 2022), pp. 40–59.

¹⁵ 2021 marked the centennial of two Japanese-era movements for self-rule, the Taiwan Cultural Association and the League for the Establishment of a Taiwanese Parliament, commemorated with a flurry of publications in Taiwan exploring how activists articulated both a local Taiwanese identity and connection with a broader Chinese race, including Tsui-lien Chen, *The dream of self-governance: Taiwanese democracy movements from Japanese colonialism to February 28th* 自治之夢：日治時期到二二八的台灣民主運動 (Taipei, 2020).

and allocated positions and resources unevenly between the minority of new Chinese settlers and the majority, descendants of pre-twentieth-century migrants, fed into a movement for democratic governance that looked not to 'the mainland' or a shared sense of belongingness in a Chinese diaspora, but primarily to a sense of Taiwanese-ness defined in distinction to ROC notions of Chineseness. Since the democracy reforms of the late 1980s to mid-1990s, consisting of the legalization of opposition parties, the repeal of provisions of the criminal code forbidding 'anti-state' activities, the demilitarization of public life, and the first direct elections of the legislature, vice presidency, and presidency, the relationship between metropole and colony has begun to invert. Utterly dependent on Taiwan and its human and environmental resources for survival since 1949, the ROC has itself undergone a process of localization or Taiwanization (*bentuhua* 本土化), to the degree that in two successive elections in 2016 and 2020, the legislature and presidency were won by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which began as a banned political party in 1986 and which traces its roots to once-verboden expressions of Taiwanese heritage, identity, languages, and culture. Today, Taiwanese identity has been popularized and pluralized. It is expressed by people of varying family and cultural backgrounds and political commitments and has largely assimilated the third generation of *waishengren*.¹⁶

Yet, Taiwan does not fit the prototypical pathway from colony to nation-state. No internationally recognized Taiwanese nation-state has yet been established in place of the ROC. What accounts for this stall? KMT and CCP party leaders, conventionally figured as rivals, are united in their hostility to a Taiwanese state. The KMT platform holds that both sides of the Strait belong to a single Chinese nation whose name and government are yet to be determined, a position it calls the '1992 Consensus' (although rank-and-file KMT voters may not subscribe to this view).¹⁷ Still, it was under single-party KMT rule in 1991–2 that the Additional Articles of the ROC constitution were promulgated, granting only residents of the 'free area of the ROC', meaning Taiwan and its outlying islands, rights of full political participation.¹⁸ The Articles implicitly acknowledged that there was no longer a constituency for 'retaking the mainland' (*fangong dalu* 反攻大陸), the far-fetched goal of the dual Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo regimes. For its part, the DPP

¹⁶ A definitive work on modern Taiwanese identity is Mark Harrison, *Legitimacy, meaning, and knowledge in the making of Taiwanese identity* (New York, NY, 2006). In 1992, the year the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University began conducting surveys on Taiwanese identity, the percentage of respondents identifying as 'Taiwanese only' was 17.6. Thirty years later, that percentage was 62.3, while the corresponding percentage of people identifying as 'Chinese (*zhongguoren*) only' fell from 25.5 to 2.8. Election Study Center at National Chengchi University, *Taiwan/Chinese identity (1992/06–2022/06)*, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>, accessed 10 Aug. 2022.

¹⁷ Austin Horng-en Wang, Yao-yuan Yeh, Charles K. S. Wu, and Fang-yu Chen, 'The non-consensus 1992 consensus', *Asia Politics and Policy*, 13 (2021), pp. 212–13.

¹⁸ 'Additional Articles of the Constitution of the Republic of China', amended 10 June 2005, Laws and Regulations Database of the ROC (Taiwan), Ministry of Justice. As of August 2022, there are twelve Additional Articles.

mainstream holds that in its current state, Taiwan, as governed by the ROC, is already independent and not part of the PRC. It states that any further constitutional changes to the ROC should be pursued by plebiscite.¹⁹ While it is no longer illegal within Taiwan to urge the drafting of a new ROC constitution, or to endorse the abolition of the ROC altogether, they are dangerous avenues for any political leader to pursue since Beijing has signalled that it would regard these moves as a declaration of ‘independence’ and a provocation to war.

III

Even if Taiwan had followed a classical decolonizing model, overthrowing the ROC and winning a seat in the UN as the Republic of Taiwan, that alone would not negate its history as a settler colony. Although the ‘one China’ narrative portrays Taiwan as eternally Chinese land, basing that claim in part on the demographic makeup of the island today, large-scale Han Chinese settlement in Taiwan is not ancient, but rather dates to the early seventeenth century – to the same period, that is, when Europeans began settling overseas in what is now the United States and Canada. Chinese settlers first came to Taiwan in significant numbers (an estimated 30,000–50,000) as recruits of the Dutch East India Company (1624–62). They acted as ‘co-colonizers’, to borrow a term from Tonio Andrade, towards the Siraya indigenous peoples (later classified as ‘plains indigenous’) who inhabited the south-western coastal plains around present-day Tainan.²⁰ The population of Chinese migrants multiplied after the Qing takeover of the western part of the island in 1683, to approximately 2.9 million.²¹ Like their European counterparts in the New World, they encroached on hunting grounds of different indigenous peoples and villages, competed with indigenous tribes for trade and natural resources, disrupted indigenous foodways, economies, and cultural practices, and employed indigenous people in various forms of semi-free or forced labour, pushing east across the island, although it was not until Japanese colonization that the indigenous tribes of the central mountains and east coast were brought under centralized state rule.²² As in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, it was colonial ethnography and governmentality that created indigeneity as a legal and ethnic

¹⁹ Democratic Progressive Party, ‘Part 3: Resolutions’, ratified at the 2nd Session of the 8th DPP National Congress on 8–9 May 1999. The relevant propositions read: ‘1) Taiwan is an independent and sovereign state. Changes in the status quo of independence should be decided by all residents in Taiwan via a referendum. 2) Taiwan does not belong to the People’s Republic of China. China’s unilateral advocacy of the “one China Principle” and “One Country, Two Systems” fundamentally does not apply to Taiwan.’ www.dpp.org.tw/en/upload/download/Resolutions.pdf, accessed 15 Nov. 2022.

²⁰ Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han colonization in the seventeenth century* (New York, NY, 2010).

²¹ Population estimates of Han Chinese in Taiwan at the end of the Qing period are taken from John Shepherd, *Statecraft and political economy on the Taiwan frontier* (Stanford, CA, 1993), p. 161.

²² See Katsuya Hirano, Lorenzo Veracini, and Toulouse-Antonin Roy, ‘Vanishing natives and Taiwan’s settler colonial unconsciousness’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 50 (2018), pp. 196–7.

marker of difference. Taiwan continued to experience new waves of settler colonialism in the twentieth century, under the Japanese and ROC regimes, the latter of which was not just a refugee or exile state, but one that also took control without the consent of the governed and settled more than a million non-native people from the metropole in short succession.

The push for an internationally recognized Taiwanese nation overlaps imprecisely with indigenous efforts at decolonization. As the anthropologist Tomonori Sugimoto notes, a prominent strand of Taiwanese nationalism lays 'claim to nativeness' by arguing that intermarriage between Ming and Qing-era settlers and indigenous such as the Siraya and Ketagalan (the latter of whom lived in what is now the Taipei Basin) reinforces *benshengren* belongingness in Taiwan, and thus also Taiwan's separateness from China. 'Indigeneity is not erased...[but] rather inscribed into settler-centric narratives and inherited by settlers', he writes.²³ By contrast, according to the political scientist Ek-hong Ljavakaw Sia, the priorities of indigenous activists often centre on 'self-rule, rather than outright national independence'.²⁴ After all, a new nation-state called 'Taiwan' but still dominated demographically, culturally, and politically by people of Han Chinese descent might well reproduce the same history of seizure and displacement. Even in a post-authoritarian period that frequently celebrates indigeneity in rhetoric and ideology, many of the demands of indigenous activists and organizers remain unmet, such as the right to have privately held land be classified as traditional tribal territory and its development subject to local indigenous oversight.

How to decolonize an island that is today ruled by a unitary government but that has been home for several thousand years to dozens of small-scale, linguistically and culturally distinct indigenous communities and was unevenly colonized over the course of three centuries is a subject of fierce debate. An instructive case-study is the campaign for state recognition of the Siraya peoples in the south-west and Ketagalan peoples in the north, whose ancestors were the first to encounter European and Chinese colonizers, and thus the first to experience Sinicization and Han intermarriage. Recognition of the Siraya is opposed by some representatives from Amis, Puyuma, and Paiwan communities, which were among the last indigenous groups to be brought under centralized state control and minoritized on their ancestral lands.²⁵ Perhaps a million people may end up qualifying as Siraya, thus outnumbering by about 400,000 the current population of recognized indigenous people across sixteen different tribes.

²³ Tomonori Sugimoto, 'Settler colonial incorporation and inheritance: historical sciences, indigeneity, and settler narratives in post-WWII Taiwan', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8 (2018), p. 284.

²⁴ Ek-hong Ljavakaw Sia, 'Crafting Aboriginal nations in Taiwan: the Presbyterian church and the imagination of the Aboriginal national subject', *Asian Studies Review*, 42 (2018), p. 358.

²⁵ For more on the campaign for state recognition of the Siraya, see the work of Jolan Hsieh, 'The changing identities of Taiwan's plains indigenous peoples', in J. Bruce Jacobs and Peter Kang, eds., *Changing Taiwanese identities* (New York, NY, 2017), pp. 12–26. For more on the opposition this campaign has encountered from members of recognized indigenous tribes, see Liu Tzu-husan, 'Taitung councilors oppose recognition of the Siraya', *Taipei Times*, 29 June 2022, p. 3.

As the Taiwanese historian Wu Rwei-ren argues in his 2016 book *Prometheus unbound: when Formosa reclaims the world*, Taiwan's history of settler colonialism, serial conquest, eventual democratization, and incomplete nation-building, combined with the looming ambitions of the PRC, renders it a simultaneously colonial and post-colonial space.²⁶ The contrast between this framing – which makes room for contingency, paradox, and the still-unknown future of Taiwan – and the 'one China' narrative could not be clearer.

²⁶ Rwei-ren Wu, *Prometheus unbound: when Formosa reclaims the world* 受困的思想：臺灣重返世界 (New Taipei City, 2016).

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