

Island of Memories

Postcolonial Historiography and Public Discourse in Contemporary Taiwan

Lung-chih Chang

HCM 2 (3): 229–244
DOI: 10.18352/hcm.471

Abstract

The re-discovery of Taiwanese history along with both official and local initiatives of cultural heritage and public commemorations constitutes an important postcolonial cultural phenomenon. This paper discusses the “memory boom” in post-martial law Taiwan and examines its implications in our understanding of history, culture, and modernity in East Asian context. The major arguments of this paper can be summarised in three parts. The first section introduces the emergence of new academic and public discourses in Taiwan in the post-martial law era. The second and main section offers four major examples of postcolonial historiography and public discourse including national commemoration, ethnic revival, the heritage movement and Taiwanese wartime experience. The final section further illustrates the features of Taiwan’s postcolonial historiography in terms of history and memory with topical discussions on the rethinking of the modernity question and the reinterpretation of Japanese colonial heritage.

Keywords: Taiwanese historiography, public history, memory, heritage, identity

Introduction

For a first-time visitor to Taiwan, an alternative to the must-see Taipei 101 tower or the trendy National Palace Museum is the nostalgic 228 Peace Memorial Park. The park is located in downtown Taipei right beside the ROC presidential palace, formerly the Japanese Taiwan Government-General Building. Founded as Taipei New Park in 1908 by the Japanese, the park was renamed as 228 Peace Memorial Park in 1996 by the then city

mayor, a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) member, to commemorate the February 28 incident of 1947. In 2008, another memorial for the victims of the White Terror was erected at the nearby Ketagalan Boulevard. With the juxtaposition of a Qing stone stele, a Japanese colonial museum, and Chinese pavilions, the park has become a microcosm of Taiwan's complex historical landscape and multiple collective memories.



Figure 1 The Taipei 228 Memorial Museum that is located in 228 Peace Memorial Park (photograph by Feng-nan Su)

This paper aims to introduce important developments in contemporary Taiwanese historiography and historical discourse during the past quarter-century after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987. This post-martial law era is characterised by the flourishing of Taiwanese historical research since the late 1980s and the emergence of a memory boom in the mid-1990s. As the result of Taiwan's democratisation, the trend towards

indigenisation gave rise to academic history and further led to a new public discourse on the island's past.¹ The new historical narrative not only emphasises civic nationalism and multiculturalism, but also attends to differences in ethnicity, gender and class. The postcolonial historiography of Taiwan is both reflective and constitutive of the ongoing identity debate and memory politics. Beyond doubt, the new Taiwanese identity has transformed from a single, depressed, and unified one to a multiple, more varied, and even contested identity.²

Grounded on representative scholarship and examples of public history, the major arguments of this paper can be summarised in three parts. The first section introduces the rise of Taiwan study in the post-martial law era and the importance of national identity in the formation of new academic and public discourses. The second and main section offers four major examples of postcolonial historiography and public discourse including national commemoration, ethnic revival, the heritage movement and Taiwanese wartime experience. The final section further illustrates the features of Taiwan's postcolonial historiography in terms of history and memory with topical discussions on rethinking of the modernity question and the reinterpretation of Japanese colonial heritage. The conclusion reflects on the significance of postcolonial historiography and memory politics in shaping Taiwan's collective identity and historical consciousness.

From Academic History to Public Memory: Identity Politics and Postcolonial Historiography in Contemporary Taiwan

The emergence of a "Taiwan-centred" history is one of the major features of the trend toward indigenisation in post-martial law Taiwan. Once considered a subordinate subject of orthodox Chinese history, the research of Taiwanese history has become a legitimate and flourishing academic field since the late 1980s. With her discontinuous legacies of Chinese local history, Japanese colonial history and Western area studies, the trajectory of Taiwanese historiography is reflective of the island's tumultuous political history.³

With the input of new talents and resources, the study of Taiwanese history has developed into a vibrant discipline. Taiwanese historical study flourished in regard to source collection, research topics, institutions and internationalisation. Leading institutions such as the Institute of Taiwan History (ITH), the Academia Sinica and major archival centres at both National Taiwan University and National Taiwan Library constitute the

infrastructure of the new discipline. Moreover, the rapid increase in Taiwan-related graduate programmes testifies to the thriving development of Taiwan studies as a new field of academic research.

Following the trend towards indigenisation and democratisation, Taiwan has been experiencing a “memory boom” since the 1990s with increasing numbers of museums and heritage sites. Collective remembering and the production of heritage is closely related to the new pursuit of Taiwanese identity and has become a major feature of identity politics. The once suppressed social memories of local Taiwanese have now transformed into the driving force behind the indigenisation movement and constitute a new narrative for official, academic and popular histories on Taiwan.

From a historical perspective, Taiwan’s decolonisation was disrupted by the Chinese Civil War and then by the Cold War after the end of the Second World War in 1945. As a multi-ethnic society consisting of indigenous peoples and Han immigrants, a new ethnic division between Taiwanese and Chinese mainlanders characterises the martial law period between 1949 and 1987.⁴ The controversy over national identity has increased in the 1990s as the domestic debate over political reforms was complicated by changing cross-strait relations in the course of the island’s growing economic ties with mainland China. The various responses and reactions towards the national identity debate testify to the mingling of nativism, nationalism and globalisation in Taiwan’s identity debates and public discourses. The following section will discuss major examples of history revision and public commemoration in contemporary Taiwan.

From Political Taboo to National Holiday: Remembrance of the 228 Incident

In 1989, Taiwanese award-winning director Hou Hsiao-hsien released his film entitled *A City of Sadness*. Invoking the metaphor of sadness, Hou retold a family story during the tumultuous era of Japanese defeat, Chinese takeover, Taiwanese uprising, and the white terror of Chinese civil war. Issued only two years after the lifting of Martial Law in 1987, Hou’s film became the first Taiwanese film to win the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. *A City of Sadness* became the first artistic work that explored the political taboos of Taiwan’s post-war history.⁵

The 228 Incident of 1947, caused by the corruptive practices of the ROC take-over of Taiwan after the Second World War, is an island-wide anti-government uprising that was bloodily suppressed by the Kuomintang

(KMT) troops from mainland China. The estimated number of deaths varied from 10,000 to 30,000 and thousands more vanished, died, or were imprisoned during the White Terror period in the 1950s. As a political taboo, the 228 Incident symbolises Taiwan's ethnic tension and became the cause of the overseas Taiwan independence movement. It was not until the late 1980s that Taiwanese Presbyterian Church members and oppositional politicians began to break the silence and called for peace and justice.

Following the lifting of Martial Law, the 228 Incident gradually transformed into a symbol of tragic history and collective suffering. In 1995, the families of victims received apologies from the first Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui. A special commission was set up in the same year to deal with compensation and rehabilitation. The first 228 memorial was erected in Chia-yi and a memorial museum was established in Taipei. In 1997, February 28 became a national holiday for remembrance and peace. In view of the significance of 228 anniversaries, both DPP President Chen Shui-bian and KMT President Ma Ying-jeou attended annual memorial ceremonies with victim families following their inaugurations.

The 228 Incident also became the focus of academic research and public commemoration. In 1991, the first scholarly study on the 228 Incident was published in English.⁶ Under government sponsorship, the first official report of the Incident was issued in 1992; and the first Ph.D. dissertation of the subject was completed and published in 1995. Major research institutions including the Academia Sinica and Academia Historica collected and compiled important archival sources of the event. Oral historians collaborated with victims' families to collect testimonies around the island. With the advocacy of human rights and transitional justice in recent years, scholarly discussion of the Incident has been enhanced.⁷

In addition to academic research, the tragic memories of the 228 Incident inspired numerous oral histories, literary works and public exhibitions island-wide. As a burgeoning subject in contemporary historiography, the 228 Incident also became a contested site of collective memory and historical representation. Academic and public historians not only endeavoured to reconstruct the historical facts but also debated its causes and significance. The plethora of interpretations reflects widely different ideological positions on national identity. Despite their differences, researchers now recognise the complex dimensions of the 228 history and continue to explore its multiple meanings in archival and oral histories, political novels and art exhibitions.⁸



Figure 2 Some academic and literary works about the 228 incident in Taiwan (photograph by Feng-nan Su)

From Historical Oblivion to Ethnic Revival: Rediscovery of Indigenous Pingpu People

The struggle for indigenous rights and cultural revival is one of the most important social movements in the 1980s. As a response to the call for the recognition of indigenous rights, the ROC government set up a Council of Aboriginal Affairs in 1996, which was renamed as the Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP) in 2002. Along with the Hakka Affairs Council, the CIP represents the official recognition of Taiwan's major ethnic groups. As of November 2014, sixteen tribes have been recognised as indigenous peoples in Taiwan. These formally recognised tribes enjoy certain legal benefits and rights with their distinct group identity.⁹

The rediscovery of the plains indigenous people (Pingpu) is a peculiar case in rewriting the history of native Taiwanese. Though active in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as major inhabitants and land-owners of the island, the Pingpu people were considered to be assimilated to, if not devoured by the sea of Han Chinese immigrants. Under different colonial policies of various regimes, many Pingpu groups suffered the extinction of their indigenous languages and cultural identity. It was not until the rise of Taiwanese history in the 1980s that the study of Pingpu history and culture became a new subject of academic and local historians.¹⁰

In 1988, the first research bibliography of the plains aborigines was published by the Academia Sinica. In 1992, researchers from various disciplines organised a workshop to promote Pingpu studies. Historical docu-

ments ranging from Qing land deeds to Japanese photographic records have been unearthed and compiled. With new scholarly attention, the history and culture of the once forgotten Pingpu people became part of the new multicultural narrative of Taiwan and symbolised the collective search for a new Taiwanese identity on the island.¹¹

In the summer of 2013, an exhibition entitled “Seeing Pingpu: The History and Culture of the Indigenous Plains Peoples in Taiwan” opened to the public in southern Taiwan. The exhibition was organised by the National Museum of Taiwan History in collaboration with domestic and overseas institutions, local churches and various indigenous tribes. Through displaying the Pingpu archaeological remains, legends, ballads and stories, the exhibition aimed to introduce the Pingpu experience and to promote public awareness so as to eliminate stereotyping and misunderstanding.¹²

In addition to academic studies and museum exhibitions, the ethnic revival of the Pingpu people has also been encouraged by the flourishing ethno-tourism in Taiwan. For example, the Taizu Night Sacrifice of the Siraya Pingpu tribe in October attracted many visitors to the Toushe Village in Tainan. Since its revival in the late 1980s, there has been a joint effort with the official authorities to promote local tourism and the event has evolved into a cultural festival. In 2005, the Night Festival became a cultural attraction of the newly founded Siraya National Scenic Area; and the Siraya activists persist in promoting their cultural identity and call for official recognition.¹³

From Colonial Site to Local Heritage: Transformation of Japanese Spatial Legacies

The “memory boom” experienced since the 1990s and represented by the increasing numbers of museums and heritage sites is closely related to a new pursuit of locality in the post-martial law era. In 1994, the central government under President Lee Teng-hui launched the Integrated Community-Making Programme for creating a nation of communities. The programme was continued by the DPP government after the regime change in 2000. Amid the grand community-building scheme, most of the former Japanese colonial sites were designated as cultural heritage sites. Such a transformation of Japanese legacies into heritage sites became a constituent part of the new identity and cultural narrative of Taiwan.¹⁴

The academic and public awareness of heritage protection in Taiwan is represented by the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Preservation

Act in 1982. During the martial-law era, Japanese colonial sites were regarded as “poisonous leftovers of Japanese imperialism”. In order to sever the connections of Taiwan with the fifty-year Japanese colonial rule, the KMT government strengthened the superior status of “orthodox” Chinese culture; numerous Japanese sites, such as Shinto shrines, were demolished, reconstructed or deserted. Even Taiwanese vernacular architecture struggled to qualify as cultural heritage. It was not until 1991 that former Japanese sites were designated as national historic monuments.

Starting from 1998, more and more Japanese sites were designated as “historic monuments” or “historic buildings”. Japanese sites gradually became legitimate sites of memory and were renovated with government subsidies under the community-building scheme. These heritage sites represent new political, cultural and economic trends of localism in postcolonial Taiwan. The bond between memory and place inspired grassroots initiatives of conservation and triggered a sense of community and civil awareness toward a vision of a well-inhabited homeland. The reinterpretation of former Japanese colonial sites as new symbols of locality and Taiwanese subjectivity constitutes a unique case of postcolonial memory politics.

Japanese colonial sites, which have long been sites of memory for different groups of Taiwanese people, are used as a locality reproduction strategy for postcolonial society in Taiwan. Conserving and reusing the sites not only shows the emerging multicultural narrative of a new Taiwanese identity, but also the efforts to utilise heritage spaces to evoke civil awareness and a sense of community. However, the Japanese sites did not become sites of memory simply after official recognition. The changing public perception of colonial sites is interwoven with the popular image of Japan produced by remaining colonial structures, KMT neo-colonialism, the Japan-Taiwan relationship under the cold-war framework, and the Japanese mass-media commoditisation in Asia.¹⁵

The cases of the Jinguashi Gold Museum and the Buddhist Qingxiu Yuan Temple offer a nuanced operational model for tackling conceptual and practical difficulties in representing Japanese colonial sites as Taiwanese heritages. The museum used to be an old Japanese mining site in the mountain area of northern Taiwan while the temple was located in a former Japanese immigrant village in eastern Hualien. Initiated by grassroots activist groups, these colonial sites went through an open dialogue of multiple memories before achieving a new awareness of locality and commemoration. Under an active process of reinterpretation and negotiation, the former Japanese sites are no longer legacies of a predatory coloniser, but have been transformed into new symbols of localism and grassroots activism aiming for a better future.¹⁶

From Marginal Voices to Colonial Subalterns: Rewriting Micro-Histories of Taiwanese Wartime Experience

In contrast to the open official commemoration of the 228 Incident, the Taiwanese wartime experience has remained much in oblivion and received little attention from the politicians and the media. Owing to the anti-Japanese rhetoric of the KMT government and the official memory of Taiwan's "Restoration" (Chinese: *guangfu*), those Taiwanese who participated in Japanese wartime activities were considered collaborators, if not traitors, during the martial law decades. It was not until the 1990s that the Japanese colonial era (1895-1945) became a legitimate field of study in Taiwanese history and became entangled with the national identity debate and history textbook controversy.¹⁷

It is hard to discuss the impact of the Second World War and its aftermath in Taiwan. A total of 200,000 Taiwanese participated in the war from 1937 to 1945 and the death toll was estimated to be around 30,000 people (roughly 15%). In official records, Taiwanese men went to the battlefield as army and navy "volunteers", military civilians and labourers, as well as college student soldiers. With the new scholarly attention on Japanese colonial Taiwan, people began to look at the ruptured history and collective memories of marginal groups such as Taiwanese aboriginal volunteers (*Takasago giyutai*), comfort women (*Ianpu*) and youth workers (*Shonenko*).¹⁸

Taiwanese aboriginal volunteers were engaged in operations in the Philippines, New Guinea and Southeast Asia from February 1942. There were about 3,500 soldiers in eight recruitments and 20,000 military labourers. Tinged with huge suffering and high casualties, their stories were not known to the public until the return of Lee Guanghui (Japanese name: Nakamura Akio) from the remote jungle of Indonesia in 1974. It was only in 1997 that the first exhibition on their behalf was held in Taipei. In 2001, documentary director Pan Xiaoxia issued a film entitled "Fought for whom?" on the controversy of Yasukuni shrine worship. New political controversy arose in 2006 when some former volunteers erected a Japanese-style memorial in Taipei County to commemorate their deceased peers.

In contrast to the indigenous soldiers, the case of Taiwanese comfort women attracted more media attention due to the international controversy since the 1980s. Their number was estimated to be 500. These women were sent as sex slaves to China and Southeast Asia during the war. The survivors remained in silence and did not receive organisational support until 1992. Under the assistance of Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation (TWRP), they began to tell their own stories and to file international law-

suits against the Japanese government. Amid renewed public attention, the first report and documentary on Taiwan comfort women were released in 1995 and 1998, respectively; and the first scholarly research along with various oral interviews and albums was completed in 2005.¹⁹

The story of Taiwanese youth workers took on a different trajectory. It was estimated that about 8,400 youth workers were recruited in eight groups from October, 1942. Their mission was to study and build warplanes in Japan. Based at the naval factory in Kanagawa, they were later transferred to Nagoya, Yokohama, Yokosaka and Gunma areas. Some died in the U.S. air raids in 1944. Others returned to Taiwan as the war ended. Although a memorial was erected by their Japanese counterparts in 1963 at Yamato city, Nagoya, it was not until 1987 that they could meet together as an organisation (Taiwan Takazakai). In 1993, the former youth workers gathered in Japan for a Japan-Taiwan joint meeting. Their memoirs were published in 1999; and in 2006, documentary director Guo Liang-yin released a film entitled “Emerald Horizon Shonenko’s Stories”, that brought their story to the general public.²⁰

The divergent and often fragmented memories of aboriginal soldiers, comfort women and youth workers reflected the complex question of “becoming Japanese” in colonial Taiwan and offered glimpses of the micro-histories of Taiwanese during the Second World War.²¹ As colonial subaltern groups, their stories shed light on the transnational features of the Japanese empire and her complex legacies on postcolonial identity politics in Taiwan and East Asia. No longer relying solely on official archives and academic history, the three cases also exemplify the active role of NGO workers and public historians as well as the empowering effect of oral history and documentary in unearthing marginal histories and subaltern memories.

Rewriting the History and Memory of Taiwan: from the Debate on Colonial Modernity to Cultural Heritage Making

After a quarter-century of the democratisation and indigenisation movement, Taiwan has become an island nation with multiple, if not divided, memories. Since the 1980s, simultaneous trends toward globalisation and localisation have contributed to popular construction of a past promoting local solidarity. As the island’s history has become a contested, multiple and negotiated field, the politics and the quest for a new identity emerged

as the key features in contemporary Taiwanese historiography. Both commonalities and differences in the memory of different groups reflect an important historical context and the social relations in postcolonial Taiwanese society. New academic trends, combined with changing political and economic situations, have led to the transformation of historical discourse.

The “memory boom” in post-martial law Taiwan has influenced people’s social, political, economic, and everyday life. The presence of the past is evident at all levels of society including popular culture, government initiatives, the heritage and tourist industry, family and genealogical history, reparation claims, and repentance declarations. Historians today not only deal with sources and facts but explore vehicles of memory and the role of different media that represent the past such as commemorations, textbooks, holidays, literature, museums, architecture and the Internet. They have to sift meaning from memory by interrogations of the use of evidence, of narrative, and of sources.²² In order to illustrate the dual features of history and memory in Taiwan’s postcolonial historiography, I will present two examples used by academic and public historians. One is the rethinking of Taiwan’s modernity question and the other is the reinterpretation of colonial heritage. In the spring of 1984, historians of Taiwan debated the question of modernisation and the roles played by Qing Taiwan governor Liu Mingchuan (1836-1896) and Japanese civil administrator Goto Shimpei (1857-1929). The unresolved controversy continued in academic discourse in the 1990s with new theoretical insights on key analytic concepts such as modern, modernisation and modernity. Scholars not only addressed important methodological issues such as the periodisation of Taiwan’s modern history but also reflected further on the paradigm of modernisation theory.

The scholarly rethinking of colonialism and modernity was conducted from two related dimensions. On the one hand, historians commented on the Eurocentrism and linear narrative of orthodox convention that regarded the term “modernisation” as a synonym for “Westernisation”. In research on East Asia, modernisation theory is closely intertwined with interpretative paradigms such as “tradition vs. modernity” and “challenge and response”. Scholars criticised the superiority of the Western centre and the neglect of Chinese internal, long-term historical factors.²³

On the other hand, new emphasis was put on the notion of “modernity” as a sociological concept for understanding the contemporary social formation and its development, especially the global expansion of capitalism and the nation-state. In light of poststructuralist and postcolonial thoughts, scholars began to cast doubts on the universality of Western

modernity and pointed out the destructive and violent aspects of the modernisation process. Historians no longer took modernisation as an uncontested, *a priori* research hypothesis.²⁴

This rethinking of modernisation theory also influenced the analysis of Taiwan's colonial modernity and research on modern Taiwanese history. In contrast to the modernisation debate of the 1980s, the research of the 1990s takes the multi-faceted connotation and temporal compression of Taiwan's modernisation as well as the historical trajectory of colonialism and its social effects into account.

Influenced by colonial studies and postcolonial historiography, a new generation of scholars has begun to view the colony as a complex and pluralistic field of knowledge and politics, discussing various imaginations and practices of modernity.

The new scholarship on colonial modernity can be differentiated into the following five analytical directions: (1) case studies of regional modernisation; (2) critique of incomplete and contradictory modernity; (3) analysis of colonial governance; (4) discussion of hybrid modernity; and (5) search for alternative modernities. In dealing with the complex question of modernity and colonialism, historians of modern Taiwan now adopt different positions and analytical approaches. From a comparative perspective, scholars emphasise Taiwan's multi-ethnic society and frequent regime changes, and consider the island's path towards modernity as a multiple and compressed historical process with unresolved issues of decolonisation and national identity.²⁵

The second example concerns the local heritage movement and the reinterpretation of Taiwan's colonial legacy. In contrast to the academic rethinking of the modernity question, how to deal with Japanese colonial legacy became a contentious issue of public debates in post-martial law Taiwan. How to reinterpret the ambiguous colonial sites has become a crucial task for policy-makers, professionals and local activists in the local heritage movement who endeavoured to create a new sense of place for civil, political and economic initiatives.²⁶

Mindful of the former colonial hierarchy and the neo-colonial structure, Taiwan's progressive intellectuals and grassroots activists have been playing an active role in digging out historical layers and humanistic values in the conservation activities. Facing the unavoidable ambiguities in the process of representation in transforming the colonial into the local, public intellectuals and local historians adopted a memory approach that works at a deeper and more nuanced level than that of the state and the government. Through active reinterpretation and negotiation, former colonial

sites have been transformed into cultural heritage for the local communities. This effort helps explore and engage the once silenced, and provide a platform for negotiation and the reformulation of meaning.²⁷

It is through this memory approach in local heritage building that decolonisation no longer means “removing all traces of colonial era”. The new strategy of preserving colonial sites involves the following tasks: (1) recognition of their contested nature; (2) engagement of controversial voices; (3) discovery of attached historical memory; and (4) transformation of structural inequality with persistent locality building. The reinterpretation of the Japanese colonial legacy thus offers an alternative vision of the decolonising process. Compared with other East Asian countries, Taiwan is unique in her postcolonial cultural heritage-making. Without forceful removal and eradication, these new sites of memory become localities of new collective identity and sense of community that promote civil awareness, social welfare, environmental concern, and economic improvement.²⁸

Conclusion

This article discussed the issue of history, memory and identity in contemporary Taiwan. The transforming identity was the result of a complex entanglement of political, social, and economic factors. From the rise of research on Taiwan history since the late 1980s to the “memory boom” in the mid-1990s, Taiwan’s postcolonial historiography and public discourse is exemplary of the multiple approaches and reactions to indigenisation movement. After two decades of democratisation, twenty-first-century Taiwan has become an island of multiple memories. The combination of national identity debates, new academic trends and the heritage movement has led to the transformation of Taiwan’s historical landscape. As evident in the discussion above, neither the anti-Japanese Chinese nationalist orthodoxy nor the Han-centric Taiwanese nationalist narrative do justice to the emerging collective identity and public memory of postcolonial Taiwan. The different genres of public history-making and cultural politics constitute a sharp contrast to the official ideology and master narrative that glorify Taiwan’s economic success and political democratisation. From the national commemoration of the 228 Incident to the ethnic revival of the Siraya people, from the transformation of Japanese colonial sites to the collective remembering of Taiwanese wartime experience,

these vivid accounts exemplify the important issues of ethnicity, gender and class intersecting with nation building in postcolonial Taiwan.²⁹

Consisting of academic history and public memory, the new historiography of Taiwan is also a joint quest for nationalist imagination, postcolonial differences, and transitional justice. The ongoing public debate is representative of the vitality of Taiwan's civil society. As democracy means more than electoral politics, the Taiwanese now need to deal with the co-existence and competition of different identities and collective memories. In order to promote compassion and communication over confrontation and conflict, a new synthesis is required between civic nationalism and empowering postcolonialism. How to reconcile different memories through competition, negotiation and mutual enrichment remains one of the major intellectual and moral challenges for Taiwanese historians.³⁰

Notes

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About the Author

Lung-chih Chang is Director of the Interdisciplinary Programme of Humanities and Social Sciences at National Tsing Hua University, and Associate Research Fellow of the Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. He received his B.A. and M.A. from National Taiwan University and Ph. D. in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University. Dr. Chang has been a visiting scholar at Tokyo University, Cambridge University and Heidelberg University. His research interests include social and cultural history, comparative colonialism and contemporary historiography in Taiwan and East Asia. He is working on the public history and collective memory of post-martial law Taiwan and on a monograph on Japanese colonial discourse and cultural politics in the early twentieth century. E-mail: lchang@gate.sinica.edu.tw