

Taiwan: A History of Agonies

Ong Iok-tek¹

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Reviewed by Aldric Hama

“Taiwan belongs to the Taiwanese; the Taiwanese alone are the true masters of Taiwan.”
Dr. Ong Iok-tek

Following their flight to Taiwan, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, claimed to be the legitimate government of China and made plans to eliminate the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and “recover the mainland.” At the same time, the CCP has claimed that Taiwan is an integral part of China—any “conflict” between the two is an “internal matter.” More recently, the Kuomintang, who always view themselves as mainlanders, have advocated reunification—with the condition that the CCP somehow vanishes from existence. Most Taiwanese, however, reject the idea of reunification, as they do not consider themselves mainland-Chinese and consider Taiwan a sovereign state.² Much to the consternation of the CCP, to this date, Taiwanese sovereignty is ingrained into the Taiwanese peoples’ psyche, and not merely a byproduct of Taiwan’s political liberalization in the 1980s or waning Kuomintang social influence. The current book, *Taiwan: A History of Agonies* elaborates Taiwan’s past as a state independent of China and its subjugation over time by its vastly powerful neighbor.

Professor Ong Iok-tek wrote *Taiwan: A History of Agonies* in 1964. The book was posthumously translated from the original Japanese into English and published in 2015. Born in Tainan, Taiwan in 1924, he graduated from prestigious Taihoku (modern-day Taipei) High School. Being fluent in Japanese, he continued his education at Tokyo Imperial University. Because of the deteriorating wartime situation in Japan, Ong returned to Taiwan. While in Taiwan, Ong wrote a number of plays that were critical of the Kuomintang. Kuomintang repression of the Taiwanese began in earnest with their arrival following Japan’s surrender and peaked with the “2.28 Incident,” in which thousands of Taiwanese were massacred over a period of several days beginning February 28, 1947-- Ong’s older brother was killed during this time. Ong emigrated with his family to Japan, where he re-entered Tokyo University and earned a doctorate in the “Taiwanese” language³. As a linguistics professor in Japan, he garnered the support of the Japanese people for Taiwanese independence and founded the pro-independence group Taiwan Youth, which

¹ In the current review, family names are presented first followed by given names.

² <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/10/29/2003658136>;
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/02/yes-taiwan-wants-one-china-but-which-china-does-it-want/?utm_term=.46e8547568fe

³ Ong’s biographer does not elaborate, but is probably referring to the Taiwanese variant of Hokkien.

later became the World United Formosans for Independence. He died in Tokyo, an exile from his native land, in 1985. While a linguist by training, Dr. Ong presents Taiwan's "agony" in the manner of a skilled historian, as an engaging historical narrative. Ong never fails to point out that despite foreign occupation, the Taiwanese considered themselves a unique, autonomous people throughout. It is Ong's aim, as noted in a chapter written by Ong's daughter, that the world fully comprehends that "Taiwan does not belong to China."

In the past, a "nation" or a "nation state" was defined as one that contained people that share, "or at least believe that they share, a substantially common history, culture and ancestry."⁴ The nation state is in effect the home of an extended family. One could further suggest that the goals and aspirations of the extended family are reflected in the polity, which is, in turn, bound to respect and promote the goals and aspirations of its family. A common cultural, historical and, perhaps, genetic heritage, among citizens encourages social harmony and where such commonality, unity is lacking and social cohesion is maintained through force.

Over time, as with most "politically incorrect" concepts, nations are no longer based on fundamental commonality but on convenience and vague notions of inclusion. One could wonder whether or not Taiwan is merely a "country," that is, a geographically defined area encompassing a group of people lacking a common genetic heritage, sharing little or nothing in terms of cultural and social conventions, a common language or history. Many of today's political states, such as those in Africa, were haphazardly created with the collection of peoples that happen to be in the area at the time. By contrast, nation states such as those in Europe, North America and East Asia have previously jealously guarded their historical, cultural and genetic heritage. Migration of culturally and ethnically diverse populations to these areas following World War II has greatly altered notions of nationhood. Given modern politics that are encouraging mass migration, perhaps there are few true states today.

If the peoples' feeling of distinctiveness and unity is at the same level of intensity as that of Ong's, one could indeed define Taiwan as a true state ("nation state"), a group of people distinct from the Middle Kingdom. Indeed, Ong suggests that the "struggle between Taiwanese and the Chinese" is an "ethnic" one. The "Chinese immigrants," the Hakka and Minnan, originated from southeast China, what is now Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, brought their particular "customs, traditions and language" and settled in Taiwan during the rule of the Ming Dynasty Wanli Emperor (1573-1620). The "immigrants" encountered the Austronesian, "Malayo-Polynesian" "indigenes" and competed against them for arable land, eventually forcing them from the plains to the central highlands. Inter-marriage between the immigrants and aboriginals was likely—Ong states that "some [aboriginals] were

⁴ Pearson, R. (2004) The misuse of the term "nation state". *Mankind Quarterly*, 44, 403-418.

assimilated [with the Han].”⁵ A wave of mainlanders arrived following Japan’s defeat, but contemporary Taiwanese consider themselves completely separate from mainlanders. Given their unique genetic and cultural inheritance, Taiwan could indeed fit the definition of a nation state.

The current book raises a number of fascinating insights which go against conventional wisdom concerning Taiwanese history. Given the author’s stance, his message will likely find hostile reception from those clamoring for absorption within the People’s Republic.

Lack of a long-standing claim by mainland China to Taiwan.

Ong shows that the Ming and Qing Dynasties were pretty much blasé concerning Taiwan, considered at the time a “no-man’s-land,” of no particular economic or strategic value—the Chinese authorities tightly regulated immigration and deported illegals. The Hakka and Minnan fled to Taiwan nonetheless to escape poverty and war. As Taiwan was already occupied by an alien race and given that the Chinese ruling class placed themselves at the center of the celestial order, the ruling class probably did not feel any great need to expand its rule over “barbarians.” A number of riots and rebellions arose within Taiwan due in part to the Qing’s hands-off, arms-distance policy. Only “unlucky officials” were sent to serve in Taiwan.

Without strenuous objection from the Middle Kingdom, barbarians such as the Dutch and Spanish established their presence in Taiwan in the 1600s. The Japanese at the time also sought to “permanently settle” Taiwan and went as far as seeking “tribute” from Taiwan—without success. Rather than merely dismiss Dutch colonization as sheer exploitation, Ong points out that the Dutch did increase Taiwan’s “sphere of the economy,” expanding its trade beyond China, thereby “weakening its economic ties with the mainland...” The Taiwanese economy expanded such that the Dutch increased importation of “war-torn, hunger stricken” mainland peasants. The Dutch even allowed “outstanding immigrants” to form autonomous assemblies. The immigrants eventually vastly outnumbered and out-competed the indigenes; the Chinese immigrants were “pioneers whose indomitable spirit overpowered the ‘spirit of the earth.’”

Furthermore, the Dutch attempted to raise the indigenes out of poverty, building schools and giving them for the first time a written language, resulting in a “remarkable” rise in the aboriginals’ “level of intelligence.”

⁵ Lin, M. et al. (2001) The origin of Minnan and Hakka, the so-called “Taiwanese”, inferred by HLA study. *Tissue Antigens*, 57, 121-199; Chen, C.-H. (2016) Population structure of Han Chinese in the modern Taiwanese population based on 10,000 participants in the Taiwan Biobank project. *Human Molecular Genetics*, 25, 5321-5331.

While their fortunes rose during Dutch rule, the Chinese immigrants nonetheless sought to oust the “red-haired barbarians” and take Taiwan for themselves. The Chinese immigrants instigated a number of rebellions by agitating the indigenes. The Dutch responded by employing indigenes, who butchered numerous Chinese. The violence led to a decline in immigration from the mainland and a concurrent decline of an economy that was immigrant-dependent—a warning to the present to those who believe that immigration is the solution of population decline and economic growth.⁶ The Dutch were eventually forced out of Taiwan by an anti-Qing warlord, Zheng Chenggong (“Koxinga”).⁷ The grandson of Koxinga, Zheng Keshuang, surrendered Taiwan to the Qing in 1683 and Taiwan was incorporated into Fujian Province. Nonetheless, the Qing disclaimed responsibility for criminal acts committed by the indigenes, including beheading foreign seamen who became stranded on Taiwanese shores.

Benevolent Japanese rule of Taiwan.

Taiwan and Penghu (the Pescadores) was conceded to Japan by the Qing with the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), settling the Sino-Japanese War. In defiance, loyalist Chinese established a “Republic of Formosa.” Former Qing officials held executive and legislative positions in the short-lived republic and pledged fealty to the Qing. As the Japanese military arrived to secure Taiwan, to avoid capture, the Republic’s leaders scrambled out of Taiwan. In Taipei, Chinese soldiers “set fire and plundered everywhere.” Such acts should not be surprising as these were Chinese military standard operating procedures.⁸

Ong makes very clear that he denounces Japanese colonial policy, going as far as noting Japan’s “war of aggression in China,” so as to show that he is not a Japanese shill. While Ong takes the standard anti-Japanese historical viewpoint, he nonetheless points out historical reality.

Upon arrival in Taipei, the Japanese found it to be a virtual open sewer, where “pigs and people cohabit.” As most of the Taiwanese were laborers or “laborer-turned

⁶ Outside pressure has been applied to Japan to increase foreign immigration to solve its economic “crisis” due to its changing demographics: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/26/japan-under-pressure-to-accept-more-immigrants-as-workforce-shrinks>. However, raising foreign immigration is not the economic panacea that its advocates believe it is: <http://www.npg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016NegativeEconomicImpactForumPaper.pdf>

⁷ A national hero on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, Koxinga conducted a brutal war against the Dutch, mutilating and beheading Dutch prisoners, including women and children. Some Dutch women were sold to Chinese commanders and their troops (Nieuhof, J. (1703) *Voyages & Travels into Brazil and the East-Indies*. Reprinted 2003, New Delhi, India: Asian Educational Services; Wells, S.W. (1849) *The Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*. London: Henry Washbourne).

⁸ E.g. Bradley, J. (2015) *China Mirage*. NY, NY: Little, Brown, and Co.; Seki, H. (2007) *A History of Massacres*. Tokyo: Bijinesusha.

businessmen,” the level of knowledge was “very poor” and education was “extremely retarded.” Efforts of the Dutch 200 years earlier were forgotten as about “99%” of the men were “illiterate.” Many Taiwanese “lived illiterate years without education until the period of Japanese rule...”

After 50 years of Japanese colonial rule, Taiwan emerged as a “nearly perfect capitalist colony.” During this period, Ong points out that the population and the amount of arable land doubled. Rice production increased five-fold and sugar production doubled. Infrastructure to enhance transportation, such as railways and roads, and waterways to improve sanitation were built. Numerous hospitals, colleges and schools were also constructed. In a manner similar to French colonialism, the Japanese encouraged assimilation by promoting the Japanese language. Ong does not state so, but this was not only to promote national unity: western know-how was written in Japanese rather than Taiwanese or Chinese. A “new generation of Taiwanese” emerged “enlightened under the modern Japanese education system,” acquiring a “global vision and scientific mind.” A number of Taiwanese chose to further their education in Japan, which, facilitated discussion among Taiwanese of attaining political equality with the Japanese. Cultural and social assimilation with the Japanese “broke [the Taiwanese] out of a feudal society into a modern society.”

While Korea, also a Japanese colony, underwent a similar economic and social transformation, the “Koreans always condemn Japan’s imperialism [as] the world’s most ferocious sort.” Ong makes a “rational comparison of Korea and Taiwan.” Per area, Taiwan had more Japanese soldiers than Korea. There were fewer Taiwanese officials within the colonial government, whereas Koreans were appointed “to high posts of civil service—the Japan-Korea Treaty of Annexation made it a point to fill such positions with Koreans.”⁹ Ong also states that more repressive measures were enacted in Taiwan than in Korea, in an effort to stamp out a brutal anti-Japanese resistance that persisted from 1895 until 1902 and again from 1907 until 1915. While one Taiwanese language newspaper was allowed to be published, “several national and local newspapers were allowed to circulate” in Korea. The Taiwanese, while finding foreign occupation distasteful, sought greater autonomy and parity with their colonial masters. The Koreans, however, “wished for nothing short of independence.” Thus, Ong suggests that “Japanese imperialism” did not weigh as much on Korea as it did on Taiwan. Indeed, Ong further suggests that the relevant comparison should be between Kuomintang and Japanese rule—Ong does not hesitate to state that rule by the Japanese was much “more agreeable”.

*“Dogs gone; pigs come”: The Kuomintang dictatorship in the wake of Japan’s defeat.*¹⁰

⁹ That Koreans were in positions of political authority have been noted elsewhere (e.g.) Ireland, A. (1926) *The New Korea*. NY, NY: EP Dutton and Co.

¹⁰ “[The Taiwanese] scornfully called the Japanese “dogs”; the dogs barked at them but guarded them. The Chinese are pigs; the pigs devour food and do nothing else.”

The Japanese handed Taiwan over to Generalissimo Chiang in October 1945 as stipulated in the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations. In generating these declarations, the Taiwanese people were never consulted concerning their destiny—the US and Great Britain merely assumed that Taiwan belonged to China.¹¹ In fact, Taiwan was not even a part of the “Republic of China” at the time of its founding in 1912—it was a Japanese colony. Rather than independence, the wish of many Taiwanese, the Taiwanese were burdened with “corrupt and greedy” “pigs”.

While there are those that paint a rosy picture of the Kuomintang era, mainly for the benefit of foreign consumption, Ong presents the harsh reality. Chiang imposed Mandarin Chinese as the official language and began looting Taiwan. The governor of Taiwan had “far more legislative, executive, judicial and military powers than had any Governor-General during the Japanese era.” Kuomintang troops that arrived were “helplessly undisciplined.” In fact, a number of malcontent mainlanders, “poverty-stricken” and “many” with “mental disorders,” arrived with the Kuomintang and continued to flood Taiwan into the 1960s. One described the decline under Kuomintang rule in this manner: Taipei fell “to ruins right before your eyes.”

Repression was highlighted by the “Great February 28 Rebellion,” sparked by government officials beating, then shooting, unarmed civilians. In response, Taiwanese beat “every Chinese in sight” (presumably the newly arrived Han) and “burned Chinese-owned stores.” The Kuomintang appeared to cave into Taiwanese demands for political autonomy, but this was merely a feign. Kuomintang troops from the mainland arrived and began shooting “indiscriminately at every Taiwanese in sight.” Chiang ordered the “cleansing” of the “poisonous Japanese way of thinking” and “poisonous Japanese spirit” from Taiwan, which included the arrest, torture and murder of numerous Taiwanese “intellectuals” and “eminent figures” who lived during the Japanese era.¹² Ong estimates the death toll from the “White Terror” to be in the “ten thousands [sic] to scores of thousands.” Adding further insult to injury, the Taiwanese were to be saddled with restitution for property damage and any lives lost.

Kuomintang repression in Taiwan intensified with their arrival *en masse* in 1949. Martial law was imposed and remained in effect until 1987. Adding to Taiwan’s agony, about two million mainlanders arrived with the Kuomintang, boosting the island’s population in one stroke by 20%. Most of them were members of Chiang’s inner circle and

¹¹ By contrast, the Cairo Declaration stated that Korea “shall be free and independent.” The Atlantic Charter respected “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live,” but apparently this did not apply to the Taiwanese.

¹² One should remember Chiang’s ghastly guilt-by-association purge of Taiwanese in light of his silky words of conciliation with the Japanese at the end of World War II: “...we must not... impose insults on the innocent civilians...” (Dreyer, J.T. (2016) *Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun*. NY, NY: Oxford University Press).

Kuomintang apparatchiks (“Chinese parasites” as Ong describes them). The Kuomintang announced a disastrous land reform scheme, which forced farmers into poverty. No further investments were made in education. While there was the veneer of democracy, the Kuomintang selected the winners for local level assemblies and harassed, even terrorized, non-Kuomintang candidates. Just the same, as Ong points out, local assemblies held little political power.

Despite Kuomintang repression, Chiang continued receiving American aid, to the tune of about “\$100 million per annum.” Chiang further lobbied the US to back him in his “fantasy of liberating China.” Surely, this is the mark of a megalomaniac leader, one who dreams impossible dreams and expects his people to carry them out. Such was US policy during the Cold War.

Unsettled status of Taiwan following Japan’s compliance with the Potsdam Declaration. Ong points out that Taiwanese sovereignty was not solved with the end of World War II, despite strident PRC insistences otherwise. The Cairo and Potsdam Declarations were merely unilateral demands of a few countries, disconnected from any legal basis, akin to defrauding an unsuspecting victim by a gangster. Taiwan was to be “booty,” to be handed over to the Kuomintang to keep them on the side of the Allies.¹³ The will of the Taiwanese people was entirely irrelevant to the Allies; the Taiwanese were never consulted if it they would accept a wave of aliens with an entirely contrasting political, social and historical heritage.

Ong points out that President Truman stated in 1950 that the status of Formosa would be determined following “the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement in Japan or consideration by the United Nations.” The CCP rebuked the US, in that “Taiwan belongs to China... this is a historical fact.” This proclamation contrasts with a broadcast issued by the CCP shortly after the February 28 Rebellion, stating its support for Taiwanese “autonomy”: “Your struggle is our struggle... we will make every effort to encourage and support you.” Obviously, such words at the time were merely self-serving.

In 1951, Japan signed the Treaty of Peace and renounced its claims to Taiwan but “without designating a recipient.” Nonetheless, the Kuomintang retained its iron grip over Taiwan. American thinking changed after seeing the true nature of the Kuomintang: “Formosa’s ...new role in non-Communist Asia... cannot be stage-managed by American policy makers... Nor can it be arbitrarily imposed on the Formosan majority by the Nationalists refugees...”

¹³ On p. 27 of the current book, a photo shows Chiang, President Franklin Roosevelt, Churchill and Madame Chiang sitting together, apparently united in purpose, in Cairo, 1943. ¹³ In fact, Prime Minister Winston Churchill scoffed at the notion that China was a world power and questioned their value as an ally (Bradley, 2015, *China Mirage*). President Roosevelt, thoroughly believing that Chiang could defeat the Japanese, sent hundreds of millions of the US taxpayers’ money to the Kuomintang.

Today's ambiguous status quo is desired only by the US, PRC and the Kuomintang, which recently lost the presidency. It is the Taiwanese who reject the PRC's "One China" as well as the Kuomintang attempts to integrate Taiwan with the mainland.

Finally, unlike modern, fashionable narratives that describe aboriginals in romantic terms, Ong unflinchingly describe the aboriginals within a historical context. "Misfortune" has befallen indigenes elsewhere (e.g. Native Americans) but Ong spells out how the Taiwanese indigenes were "doomed" from the start: through their own actions rather than by acts of foreigners, including "a decadent sex life... unsanitary lifestyle... unpreparedness against hunger and contagious disease."

From the book, one gathers a sense of significantly different levels of sophistication between indigenes, the Han immigrants, Europeans, and Japanese. The indigenes were a "rock bottom primitive society" and "by nature brave and fond of fighting." (Indeed, numerous indigenes volunteered for service in the Imperial Japanese Army.¹⁴) Taking advantage of their lack of ability to read Chinese characters and naivety, the Chinese immigrants very often cheated the aboriginals.

"Farm work was done by hand, mostly by women. The men by contrast, would be "idle by nature..." "lazy" and "temperamental." "Neither horses, cows nor ploughs" were used until the Dutch brought over draft animals. "With no currency yet circulating," the indigenes' circumstance "was a downright poor self-sufficient economy." There was a huge demand for Taiwan deerskin, yet the indigenes could "hardly [be] countable for [a] steady supply of buckskin..." At the same time, over-hunting inevitably lead to near extinction of deer in Taiwan." The cultural behavior of the Taiwanese indigenes is reminiscent of the Polynesians—keeping to the simplest level of sustenance, a warlike and brave people.

A minor flaw in the current edition is that there could have considerable English language editing to enhance readability. For example, a wide range of meanings is attached to "immigrants," conflating "early" Han settlers with later Han settlers and the Kuomintang, who could be compared somewhat to today's Middle Eastern refugees. While many post-war Han refugees to Taiwan were unfortunate victims of circumstances, Ong points out that quite a few were mentally unstable and found ample opportunities to express murderous behavior.

The translator chose not to see assistance in this regard for the sake of "saving" the author's every "sigh and outcry," which was actually lost on a number of occasions to the current reviewer.

¹⁴ One of Ong's commitments after World War II was to help Taiwanese veterans of the Imperial Japanese military collect their pension.

Perhaps a future edition of Ong's work would seriously consider this and reach even more of the English speaking world. Ong states that the Taiwanese were "voiceless"—Dr. Ong's book is their resonating voice.