

# From colonial site to cultural heritage

The island of Taiwan, formerly known as Formosa, is part of the chain of islands lying along the Asian continent in the Pacific Ocean. Originally inhabited by Austronesian indigenous peoples, Taiwan became a Chinese immigrant frontier in the seventeenth century and has since witnessed different regimes, including the Dutch (1624-61), the Koxinga (1662-83), the Qing (1684-1894) and the Japanese empire (1895-1945). Unlike many former colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Taiwan's decolonization process after the Second World War was first disrupted by the Chinese Civil War and then the Cold War.

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## The past in the present: postcolonial identity politics in contemporary Taiwan

Due to the corruptive takeover practices of the Chinese Nationalist Government (KMT), the island's retrocession to the Republic of China (ROC) resulted in a tragic uprising and suppression in February 1947. Following the debacle in mainland China, the KMT regime led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) emigrated to Taiwan in 1949 and decades of authoritarian rule began. The dual political structure under Japanese colonialism persisted with the new Chinese ruling bloc, or the so-called mainlanders (*waishengren*), taking over all major state institutions and inheriting former colonial infrastructure on the island.

As Taiwan became the anti-communist bastion during the Cold War, the island's economy was rebuilt with US aid in the late 1950s and 60s and developed into one of the newly industrialized countries in East Asia (NICs) in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the Republic of China from the United Nations, and a series of diplomatic setbacks, led to the liberalization of the KMT and the formation of political opposition in the 1970s. With the support from the grassroots and urban middle-class Taiwanese, during local and national elections, the first opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was formed in 1986.

In the face of changing domestic and international situations, Chiang Ching-kuo (1910-88), the son of Chiang Kai-shek and the third ROC president, lifted the martial law and opened cross-strait family visits in 1987. Taiwan's democratization process continued under Lee Teng-hui (1923-), the first Taiwanese who became the KMT Party Chairman and ROC President. The new political trend toward Taiwanization reached its climax in 2000 when oppositional DPP candidate Chen Shuibian (1950-) won the presidential election. In 2008, Taiwan experienced another regime change with the KMT candidate Ma Yingjeou (1950-), who defeated the scandal-ridden DPP Government and became the new President of the ROC.

Controversy over national identity was fuelled in the 1990s, with advocates either for Chinese reunification or Taiwan independence, which split into different political alliances (i.e., Pan-Blue vs. Pan-Green camps). The domestic debate over constitutional reforms and Taiwanese nationalism was complicated by the changing cross-strait relations in the course of the island's growing economic ties with mainland China.

As the result of democratization of knowledge, in post-martial law Taiwan, the trend toward indigenization led to diversification of historical discourse among official, academic and popular histories on Taiwan. The various responses and reactions to the indigenization movement exemplify the complexity of national identity and cross-strait relations in contemporary domestic politics and international diplomacy. To be sure, the mingling of nativism, nationalism and globalization in Taiwan's identity debates testify to the unresolved historical task of decolonization since the end of the Second World War.

This paper aims to revisit this island nation's unique trajectory of postcolonial identity formation with a special focus on the heritagization of former Japanese colonial sites on the island. Taiwan's postcolonial heritage-making provides a unique angle from which to observe vicissitudes of resistance and possibilities of decolonization. The contemporary history controversies in Taiwan testify to the politicization of ethnicity and confrontation between Taiwanese and Chinese nationalisms that has resulted in history controversies regarding Japanese colonialism on the island. By recognizing postcolonialism as an important means of critical reflection and intervention, we discuss the new phenomenon of 'memory boom' in post-martial law Taiwan.

## When colonial sites became cultural heritage: democratization and community building in post-martial law Taiwan

Having undergone fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, the landscape of Taiwan not only consisted of modern infrastructure such as railroads, schools and hospitals, but also of imperial symbols, including Shinto shrines and official buildings and police stations. By viewing Japanese colonial sites as the "poisonous leftovers of Japanese imperialism," the Chinese Nationalist government adopted the policy of "De-Japanization" and "Re-Sinicization", after taking control of the island in 1945.

During the martial law period (1949-1987), Chinese language and culture became the new orthodoxy and Japanese sites were excluded from the cultural heritage category. While former Shinto shrines were converted into memorials of national martyrs, numerous colonial sites were either demolished or deserted. Even Taiwanese vernacular architecture struggled to qualify as cultural heritage. It was not until the late 1980s that the tendency of erasure and neglect of colonial sites began to wane.

Following the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act in 1982, new official and local initiatives gradually transformed the old anti-Japanese rhetoric. In 1991, a Western-style building of a former colonial bank became one of the first Japanese sites to be designated as a national historic monument. In addition, many Japanese heritage sites were renovated in the 2000s echoing the call of "revitalising unused spaces" by the architectural and urban planning specialists.

The re-evaluation of Japanese colonial sites occurred during the trend towards indigenization in the post-martial law era. In 1994, the KMT government under Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui promulgated the Integrated Community-

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Making Programme aiming for the creation of a new "living community". This new identity narrative of a "living community" was a strategy to incorporate ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese 1949 immigrants, with the Taiwanese group through accentuating common living experiences and shared future on the land of Taiwan. The programme has been extended by the DPP government since 2000 and a considerable number of Japanese sites have been designated and restored as historic monuments or buildings.

The transformation of Japanese colonial sites into Taiwanese cultural heritage reflects the flourishing localism in which grassroots groups and activists endeavour to evoke civic awareness. Different from the once dominant Japanese colonialist and Chinese nationalist conceptions, many Taiwanese people regard these heritages as intimate sites of memory that offer a new sense of place. The Japanese colonial sites have become an essential ingredient of a new Taiwanese identity and cultural narrative during the burgeoning memory boom.

In Taiwan, a 'memory boom' emerged in the 1990s; the number of museums and heritage sites – the 'sites of memory' as Pierre Nora (1989) named them – increased remarkably, in tandem with the transformation of identity narratives and eco-political changes of Taiwanese society. In the late 1980s the total number of museums in Taiwan was 99, yet increased rapidly to 580 by 2007 (according to the statistics of the Chinese Association of Museums). This phenomenon matched a growing public awareness and official designation of cultural heritage; in 1985, the number of 'historic monuments' (*guji*; an official category defined by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act) was 221 – by the end of 2008 the number had reached 688, accompanied by 827 'historic buildings' (see *The Almanac of Taiwan Cultural Heritage Conservation 2008*). The rising importance of municipal governments in the heritage designating process, and in using cultural sites for aiding political profile, as well as an emerging Taiwan-centred awareness, have allowed large amounts of local museums, historic monuments and historic buildings to appear and play a major role in the memory boom.

In accordance with the rapid increase of museums and heritage sites, large numbers of local historical writings, oral histories, geographical surveys, archives and local cultural festivals were produced by both public and private sectors in the 1990s and 2000s. Recollection of local memories, language and knowledge, which were once disgraced under the China-centred agenda, was encouraged by the state community-building programme and 'living community' narrative. This state project at the same time appropriated/interacted with former Taiwan-concerned initiatives of the Nativist writers, 'local cultural and historical workers', historical preservationists and grassroots activists. Together, these actors have contributed to the formation of the 'sites of memory' of Taiwan.



1.



2.

1: An old Japanese mining tunnel in Jinguashi; the renovation of this tunnel was included in a museum project, opened during the memory boom of the 2000s.

2: Qingxiu Yuan Temple in Hualian; the temple was designated as an historic monument in the 1990s and renovated in the 2000s for visiting.

# Rethinking postcolonialism and decolonization in Taiwan



3: Taoyuan Martyrs' Shrine in 2010 (originally Taoyuan Shinto Shrine); the shrine was one of a few Japanese Shinto shrines to remain in its original architectural form. Fierce debates took place in the late 1980s about whether to preserve the shrine's original style or to construct a new building, which would function as a KMT martyrs' shrine.

4: Japanese residences in the Meilun riverbank area, Hualian City; these residences were preserved after local community and social groups raised awareness in the early 2000s – they are now awaiting a decision on how to be used.

## Between international diplomacy and cultural tourism: situating Taiwan's Japanese heritage in the global sphere

Symbolizing the search for a new collective identity in the post-martial law era, Taiwan's cultural heritage movement reflects the changing state-society dynamics since the 1990s as well as the island's political and cultural struggles in the post-Cold War world. Meanwhile, the lack of international recognition and the impact of the tourist industry offer interesting cases for us to better understand the heritagization of Japanese sites in contemporary Taiwan, from the viewpoint of globalization.

The global order was reconfigured after the dissolution of the Cold War structure in the 1990s. In addition to national schemes, there emerged new regional and local heritage projects. Following UNESCO's emphasis on cultural diversity and universal value, many Asian sites have now been designated as world heritage. Once seen as embarrassing legacies, former colonial sites have been reinterpreted with new terms such as 'shared' heritage and 'common' heritage.

Despite the fact that the Republic of China was one of the founding countries of the United Nations, the KMT government under Chiang Kai-shek withdrew its UN membership before UNESCO adopted the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Although Taiwan modelled its heritage policies after the UNESCO and ICOMOS, its sites have not been included in the World Heritage List due to its ambiguous diplomatic status. The lack of international recognition thus constitutes one of the key challenges for Taiwan's heritage policy-making. Since early 2000s, the central and local governments have been nominating the 'Potential World Heritage Sites' in Taiwan and taking part in the UN and UNESCO-based international heritage events. These efforts can be seen as the island's search for a new position in the post-Cold War world.

The other international factors in Taiwan's recent memory boom are the Taiwan-Japan cultural and economic relations. As mentioned, Japanese sites gradually ceased to be seen as poisonous residues and became legitimate sites of memory in Taiwan. With the end of the martial law era, Japan started to play an active role in Taiwan's heritage policy and cultural industry. On the one hand, the successful area regeneration projects (*machizukuri*) in post-war Japan were major models for Taiwan's community-building projects in the 1990s and 2000s. More importantly, the increasing Japanese tourist market, especially those so-called 'nostalgia travellers,' has become an important resource for the local economy. As a result, many colonial sites in the metropolitan areas, especially in Taipei, were turned into museums, art centres, café houses, boutiques, in tandem with the fast-rising tourist industry in Taiwan.

## From sites of memory to sense of place: re-interpreting Japanese colonial legacy in Taiwan

No longer representing the material imprints of foreignness and discrimination, Japanese colonial sites have become new sites of locality in shaping Taiwanese subjectivity. Despite its contested nature, the process of heritage-making in contemporary Taiwan should not be reduced to an act of colonial nostalgia or the persistence of imperialist domination. It is also different from the 'shared heritage' projects, many of which are initiated by former colonizers. As a result the transformation of former colonial sites involves multiple levels of negotiation and reinterpretation among different grassroots groups in Taiwan.

Reinterpreting the ambiguous, if not often contentious colonial sites, has become a crucial task for policy makers, professionals and local activists, so as to create a new sense of place for civil, political and economic initiatives. There are three layers of ambiguity lying beneath heritage-making activities, namely the gap between the architectural fabric



5: Tongxiao Shinto Shrine in Miaoli County; the shrine was built in 1937, during Japanese colonization, and renovated by the local mayor in 1947, during the post-war KMT governance. During the renovation, the original architectural form was changed dramatically and became a visual hybrid, combining a Japanese gate (torii) and shrine lanterns, the Chinese Min style roof and brick walls, and the ROC (Republic of China) symbol at the top centre. Debates took place in 2000s about whether to renovate the shrine back to its original Japanese style or to its post-war condition.

6: A section of the torii (sacred gate) of the Tongxiao Shinto Shrine; the year inscribed in the stone, indicating when the shrine was built, has been made illegible. This sort of post-war defacing is typical of many contemporary Japanese sites.



and cultural context, the absence of a direct memory owner, and the structural residue of colonialism. Moreover, factors such as property ownership, bureaucratic inflexibility and profit-oriented developmental policy may prohibit wider grassroots participation.

The cases of Jinguashi mineral museum (figure 1) and Qingxiu Yuan Temple (figure 2) offer a nuanced operational model to tackle the conceptual and practical difficulties in representing Japanese colonial sites as Taiwanese heritages. The former used to be an old Japanese mining site in the northern Rueifang mountain area and the latter was located in a former Japanese immigrant village in the eastern Hualian area. Inspired by the awareness of diversity of memories and initiated by grassroots activist groups, these colonial sites went through two stages of transformation.

During the heritage-making process, these sites were first subjected to an open dialogue of multiple memories, through which a recognized representation of the past was gradually generated. This awareness of community then led to the second stage, during which the sites were transformed into sites of locality and commemoration. By means of an active process of reinterpretation and negotiation, the former Japanese sites are no longer legacies of a predatory colonizer, but have been transformed into new symbols of localism and grassroots activism aiming for a better future.

## Heritage, memory and identity: rethinking decolonization in postcolonial Taiwan

Taiwan is a distinctive case in the issue of colonial heritage. Instead of being a passive partner in a so-called mutual relationship, the island has been an active actor in the heritagization of former colonial sites. The politics of memory and the quest for a new identity became the key feature in the era of localism in post-martial law Taiwan. The bond between memory and place indeed inspired grassroots initiatives of conservation and triggered a sense of community.

The new collective identity is anchored in the multifaceted locality, which comprises dimensions of civil awareness, social welfare, environmental concern, and economic improvement. The twin issues of 'whose heritage' and 'what does preservation mean to the postcolonial society' have become the major focus in debates on Japanese colonial sites. 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.

It was by means of active reinterpretation and negotiation that former colonial sites have been transformed into cultural heritage for the local communities. This effort helps to explore and engage the once silenced, and to provide a platform for negotiation and meaning-reformulation. Through a memory approach that works at a deeper and more nuanced level than that of the state and government, and continuously engages multiple actors of a local network, these new cultural heritages also become a field of empowerment.

If heritage can mean more than political games, then its significance may lie in a better, equal platform open for negotiations, within which local autonomies are respected and able to penetrate the power hierarchy to create a better future and locality for them, and for us all. Hence, decolonization does not necessarily mean 'removing all traces of colonial material'. In fact, preserving colonial sites through the recognition of their contested nature, actively exploring and engaging controversial voices, discovering the historical depths of every memory attached to the site, and transforming structural inequality with persistent locality building, would more successfully trigger a decolonizing process. This may be one of the most important contributions made by the Taiwanese experience of postcolonial cultural heritage-making.

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