

Fragment of/f Empires: The Peripheral Formation of Taiwanese Nationalism

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Modern Taiwanese nationalism is a complicated case of peripheral nationalism that emerged, submergred, and re-emerged as a result of successive yet unfinished state-making and nation-building projects on the island by various imperial centers. Three historical empires present in Northeast Asia deeply shaped the formation and developmental trajectory of Taiwanese nationalism: the Qing Empire from 1683-1895, the Japanese Empire from 1895 to 1945, and the American Empire of the post-WWII era.

Following the classical pattern of state-formation in imperial China, the Qing Empire incorporated Taiwan through military conquest, sinicized a substantial number of *Pingpu* aborigines, and co-opted some of their leaders. By and large, however, the state ruled the island frontier *preventively*, in order not to turn it into a base for rebellion. As a result, Taiwan was for nearly 190 years heavily segregated from the

mainland. Still, a society largely made of Han settlers and their offspring gradually took shape. For a long time it was divided by sub-ethnic animosity among Han settlers from different ancestral places, but toward the 1860s signs of integration and indigenization began to manifest themselves. For one thing, the examination system of the Qing state created a class of local gentry. Late born, underdeveloped, and locally contained, the gentry in late imperial Taiwan, while serving the traditional function of linking state and locality politically and ideologically, had a rather strong localistic outlook compared to their counterparts on the mainland. Coming from different origins yet united by common Confucian education, this group of local literati was among the first to rise above ethnic division and articulated the earliest idea of island-wide Taiwanese identity. In a sense they were the pre-national archetype of the Andersonian nationalist bilingual intelligentsia that appeared later in many colonies,¹ only what they helped to forge was more a region than a nation. For another, the rapid growth of trade in tea and camphor during the same period created substantial common interests for—and thus greatly ameliorated the animosity among—Han settlers of various groups.

In sum, what we witness in Taiwan under the Qing rule was the belated emerging of a frontier region—a colony-cum-province—loosely if not precariously attached to what Vivienne Shue calls the pre-modern honeycomb polity of Qing Empire.² The state from the mainland ruled, not only preventively, but *indirectly*, through the mediation of sometimes unruly local elite, and *incompletely*, with its reach limited to the western part of the territory. Under such clientelistic and partial state-building the settler society grew indigenized while constantly negotiating with the state for its autonomy.

¹ In his discussion of the origin of colonial nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues that in many colonies the Western-style education offered by the European colonizers inadvertently created a bilingual elite out of natives of various origins that would later become the first nationalists. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), Chapter 7.

² Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), p.89.

With the Japanese takeover of Taiwan in 1895 the island province was detached from the loosely structured clientelistic polity of Qing Empire to be incorporated into the expanding Japanese state. It should be noted that Taiwan was broken off China *before* the latter began its transformation from empire into nation, and from this point on the historical trajectory of the two bifurcated sharply: while the nationalism in China rose after the moribund empire's 1895 defeat to imagine a Chinese nation *without* Taiwan, the nationalism in Taiwan emerged as a reaction to Japan's colonial nation-building to imagine a Taiwan that belonged *only* to the Taiwanese. In short, the bifurcated histories of China and Taiwan since 1895 created two separate political fields that induced in both places movements of nationalism paralleled to—yet separate and different from—each other.

In contradistinction to classical European overseas empires, the Japanese Empire was a *contiguous* empire that expanded into ethnically proximate neighboring areas, and like many contiguous empires in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia, the ultimate goal of Japan's territorial expansion, at least within its formal empire, was to absorb the newly acquired territories—the sovereign colonies of Taiwan, Karafuto, and Korea—into the Japanese nation-state. Indeed Japan's incorporation of these three territories should be regarded as the extension of Meiji state-formation characterized by the continuous expansion of a political core—the Southwestern domains—into outlying peripheries: from Northeast Japan, to Hokkaido and Okinawa, and then to Taiwan, Karafuto, and Korea.³ This was what Anthony Smith called the "bureaucratic incorporation" path of nation-state formation.⁴ Throughout the whole process, however, the Meiji state-builders had followed a consistent logic of *differential incorporation* that sought to incorporate various peripheral territories—hierarchically, not equally—into the Japanese national body. Both an expansionary and constitutive principle of the Meiji state, differential incorporation had its ideological origin in the corpo-

ratist discourse of *kazoku kokka*, or family state, which was at the core of pre-war Japanese official nationalism.

Under the system of differential incorporation, the Japanese official nationalists embarked upon projects of colonial nation-building—or nationalizing colonialism—in the peripheries which could be summed up by the principle of *assimilation before integration*. In fact, in putting tremendous efforts into assimilating the colonial subjects, the Japanese stand out among modern empires. The ferocious drive to assimilate its colonized was nonetheless defensive in nature: it was born out of a deep fear of being colonized by the hegemonic West. Hence the Janus-faced Japanese official nationalism/colonialism: it was a Chatterjeean anti-colonial nationalism that sought to resist Western domination and defend its cultural identity by dominating its peripheral subjects and depriving them of their identities.⁵ We may well characterize such oxymoronic "anti-colonial colonialism" as an *oriental colonialism*.

Japan's colonial nation-building in Taiwan produced three paradoxical consequences. First, by locking the Taiwanese into a state of institutional liminality where they became "Japanese that were not Japanese," it politicized the regional space of Taiwan, thereby creating the territorial basis for the rise of Taiwanese nationalism. Indeed nationalism did emerge in Taiwan in 1920 as a reaction to differential incorporation. Second, the neo-traditionalistic ideology of Japan's oriental colonialism compelled the Taiwanese nationalists to adopt a modernist and pro-West discursive strategy to critique Japan and construct their own identity. The experience of cultural resistance left an indelible imprint upon the Taiwanese self-understanding ever since—an understanding of themselves as self-determining and passionately aspiring for modernity. This ideological tendency was diametrically opposed to the neo-traditionalistic and centralizing Chinese nationalism on the mainland. Third, over time the aggressive assim-

³ For a comprehensive discussion of the nature of Japanese empire and colonialism, including my reconceptualization of the empire as a contiguous empire and thus extended state-formation, and a detailed discussion of the idea of differential incorporation, see Rwei-Ren Wu, "The Formosan Ideology: Oriental Colonialism and the Rise of Taiwanese Nationalism, 1895-1945," (Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science of the University of Chicago, 2003), Chapter 2.

⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 54-59.

⁵ In his analysis of nationalist ideology in the colonial world, the subaltern studies theorist Partha Chatterjee argues that all anti-colonial nationalism shared an intellectual structure that sought to synthesize *the national* and *the modern*. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

ilation backed by a strong state began to show signs of success in Japanizing the Taiwanese people and containing their nationalism. In many respects Taiwan toward the end of WWII was on the way to becoming a second Okinawa—vanquished, assimilated, albeit with shreds of residual identity.

And yet the twists and turns of History did not allow the Japanese drama to fully play out—with the defeat of Japan in WWII Taiwan was again transferred unilaterally by the victors, this time to the Chinese Nationalist (KMT) regime. The ruthlessly centralizing state-building by the Nationalists during the interregnum of 1945-1949 to integrate Taiwan to the Chinese nation-state proved less than successful: China's internal colonialism in Taiwan not only triggered fierce native resistance but also revived the once submerged Taiwanese nationalism, now with China as its other. But internal colonialism soon turned into colonialism without metropole: in 1949, a settler state, i.e. the émigré KMT regime, was imposed from without. Still, the émigré KMT state in 1949-50 was nothing but a flickering candle, and it was the American Empire of the Cold War that created a geopolitical space for its continuing existence since 1950. The KMT state on Taiwan after 1950 was a special case of what Charles Tilly describes as "existing states leagued to create new ones,"⁶ for although it was a settler state parasitic upon the native society, it nevertheless reigned under the American suzerainty. This dual colonial structure both enabled and constrained the development of Taiwanese nationalism. Domestically, the minority rule of the mainlander elite created a situation highly conducive to ethnic mobilization that could in turn easily escalate into nationalism. Moreover, under minority rule democratization practically means the nativization of the state. This, indeed,

is what has happened in the postwar Taiwanese politics: today Taiwanese nationalism has come a long way from heavily suppressed opposition to seize the state power. Externally, however, Taiwanese nationalism has been severely constrained by the changing American national interests: whether to flirt with Taiwanese nationalism or to crack down on it depends on how the US defines its national interest at the time. Thus the dialectics of dual colonialism enabled the domestic growth of a liberal Taiwanese nationalism that ultimately "decolonized" the state from within and below while constraining its further external development.

The protracted history of Taiwanese nationalism is completely written off by the teleological discourse of Chinese nationalism. From the Chinese point of view, Taiwan symbolizes the unfinished project of Chinese nation-state building: it is the crucial if not last piece to be re-attached to the geo-body of the motherland. Even if its action of freedom is temporarily constrained by the American hegemony, China does not feel any need to justify its irredentist claim over Taiwan. Under Pax Americana, the new imperial structure with a humane face, however, the peripherally formed and democratically empowered Taiwanese nationalism has to daily plead and prove in vain to the cynical world of *Realpolitik* that Taiwanese people do have the moral worth and right to exist merely as a *sub*-nation. Gridlocked in the American Empire's global strategy it must remain forever frustrated and unfinished, hoping against hope that another dire strait might one day open up between the gargantuan US and China, where the tiny fragment of and off many empires, the island of Formosa, could somehow break loose and sail—and sail through. The historical sociology of peripheral nationalism has now turned into a moral drama.

⁶ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol ed., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.185.