

## The historical narrative comes first

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Constructing a historical narrative is crucial to developing a national identity. Such a narrative is primarily relayed through a nation's education system, media and cultural environment. The identity that is molded in turn determines what government policies the public supports, and how the nation develops economically and otherwise.

In Taiwan, the issue of identity is complicated by a lack of consensus over what historical narrative to embrace.

Some recount a history that emphasizes the Chinese heritage of a portion of the population, while describing the Japanese colonial era as a dark period. Others embrace the Japanese colonial period — while some prefer the earlier period of European settlers — as having made important contributions toward developing a unique Taiwanese identity. Others see the nation's Aborigines as its true progenitors.

German historian Karl-Ernst Jeismann said that historical consciousness produces an “inner coherence of interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and perspective on the future.” How we understand the world we live in is tied to how we understand the past.

In Taiwan, with its strongly bipartisan political environment, the historical narrative an individual subscribes to is invariably manifest in their political alignment.

It is no surprise that the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) favors the prominence of Chinese history and classical Chinese literature in curricula, while the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) opposes their prominence, but favors fostering cultural ties with Japan.

The restoration and preservation of Japanese historical architecture might advance or hinder each party from constructing their version of history, depending on how it is executed and what aim is expressed.

For example, how should the preservation of Imperial Japanese Army barracks be

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contextualized? Should they be presented as sites of solemn reflection on a period of oppression, such as the 228 Peace Memorial Park in Taipei?

However, how could such a construction of history be reconciled with the fond memories of some of the older generation who remember a safe and stable society under Japanese rule?

Would it not contradict other sites where Japanese are honored, such as the statue in Tainan of Japanese hydraulic engineer Yoichi Hatta, who designed the Chianan Canal and the Wushantou Reservoir (烏山頭水庫) during the colonial era? Would it not conflict with the admiration given to a tablet dedicated to the eighth-century Japanese Buddhist monk Master Kukai, as well as a tablet memorializing six Japanese teachers who were slain in 1896 by insurgents in Taipei's Beitou District (北投)?

Such sites have been vandalized by pro-unification constituents who disagree, as does China Unification Promotion Party member Lee Cheng-lung (李程龍), with the version of history that these monuments tell.

Officially, the DPP has always been quick to restore these sites. Some DPP members, such as Premier William Lai (賴清德) when he was mayor of Tainan, have been criticized by the KMT for prioritizing the restoration of Japanese monuments over those of Chinese leaders, including those of the Republic of China founder Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) and former president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石).

Both parties are under pressure to handle site preservation in a way that satisfies their supporters' understanding of history.

This year has seen the completion or announcement of several restoration projects: Work on the 100-year-old Sanjia (三脚) station in New Taipei City's Shulin District (樹林) was completed in February; work on a police station and police chief's quarters built in 1912 in Hsinchu was finished in July; work on colonial-era residences in New Taipei City's Tamsui District (淡水) was announced in July.

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Meanwhile, the Kaohsiung Water Resources Bureau on Thursday destroyed a 90-year-old Japanese building, with officials saying that police and workers did not understand the regulations.

While Taiwanese must form a consensus about their national identity, politicians and educators must first come to a consensus on Taiwan's historical narrative.

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