

Writing in the Asian American Press, Richard Kagan provides a Book Review on Shih-shan Henry Tsai. *Maritime Taiwan: Historical Encounters with the East and the West*. M.E. Sharpe: Armonk, New York. 2009. 265pages. \$24.95.

There is a cultural and intellectual revolution occurring in Taiwan. It is about its national identity. While the new administration of President Ma Ying-jeou and his Kuomintang Party are preparing the way to unification with Beijing by stressing the common history of Taiwan and China, the intellectuals, human rights advocates, historians, and local Taiwanese are writing a new history of Taiwan.

The standard history from both Beijing and the current rulers in Taipei is that "Beginning from the mid-12th century, the Chinese governments of different dynasties set up administrative bodies to exercise jurisdiction over Taiwan. The social development of Taiwan continued according to Chinese cultural traditions even during its 50-year occupation by Japan after the war of 1894." (People's Daily Online.).

The new upsurge in research on Taiwan is a result of the end of the of the 40 year period of martial law (1949-1987). During this period the governments of Chiang Kai-shek and his son persecuted anyone daring to write a pro-Taiwanese history. Arrests and even disappearances struck down professors who wanted to maintain the Taiwanese language, who wrote exposes of the regime, and who engaged in the study and promotion of folk culture and local literature and art.

In the 90's, there was an explosion of works on Taiwan's local and international history.

The most remarkable change was to deny Taiwan's domination by China. Even the issue of the ethnicity of the Taiwanese challenged the usual claim that they were all Chinese.

Beginning with President Lee Teng-hui who wrote about Taiwan's identity as an island of immigrants, to President Chen Shui-bian who had a carpet in his office that looked like the waves of the ocean, the idea of Taiwan as part of an island culture began to be studied and advocated.

Maritime Taiwan, a New Book with a Different Perspective on Taiwan

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.

Wednesday, 22 July 2009 07:41

Henry Tsai's incredible book on Maritime Taiwan is a muscular argument for the idea that Taiwan's history is very separate from China's. This study is not your usual political science study of institutions, laws, religious influences, and ethnic relationships. Rather, it is an extensive and well-researched narrative and analysis of Taiwan's society and its life experiences that are shaped by its geographical presence as an archipelago in the ocean.

Professor Tsai's thesis is clearly and patiently stated: "Contrary to a widespread misconception regarding the history of China-Taiwan relations, Chinese influence was not significantly felt in Taiwan until the second half of the seventeenth century, even though the island is separated from mainland China by only a 100 mile strait. Moreover, the transmission of Chinese culture to Taiwan was continually met with competing countercurrents emanating from the larger maritime world."

From this declaration, Tsai utilizes Chinese, Japanese, and European sources to bring to life the exploration and impact of the Dutch, the Spanish, French, the Japanese and the Americans. There are many stories of adventure, of greed, of heroism, and of lost opportunities.

For instance, on the cusp of the Civil War, Admiral Matthew Perry, who later opened Japan, advocated with a host of political and missionary elites for America to turn Taiwan into a protectorate. In 1856, the U.S. Congress published his report, which included his dramatic proposal. "This significant island, though nominally a province of China, is practically independent. The imperial authorities maintain a feeble and precarious footing only in isolated parts of the island." He goes on to add that the Island is rich in exports but only a "little or none of [the profits] goes into the imperial treasury."

Before the Japanese took control of Taiwan in 1895, the local leadership in Taiwan invited France to take over sovereign rights.

The Chinese government consistently refused to take responsibility for international and local problems--from shipwrecked sailors, to trade. For years at a time, Taiwan was self-ruled, including a period when it forced on itself a policy of trade isolation.

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Henry Tsai's argument is not just an academic project to prove he knows history and his critics do not. Rather, he is warning that the acceptance of the standard Chinese history arguing that Taiwan is just a smaller image of China will inevitably destroy Taiwan's democracy, its freedom to think outside the tool box of Han Chinese nationalism, and will harm its traditions of maritime culture and pluralism.

The opening on Thursday, July 16, 2009 of the World Games in Taiwan's southern city of Kaohsiung clearly reflects the struggle of creating a new identity against the policies of China. The editor of the progressive Taiwan News, praised the opening of the games in this manner: Mayor Chen Chu and her Democratic Progressive Party administration deserve high praise for Thursday's inspiring launch of the 2009 World Games, the first major international Olympic level athletic event ever to be hosted in Taiwan, in a manner that manifested Taiwan's identity as a progressive and pluralistic "ocean country."

"With multifaceted use of modern international and traditional indigenous dance, Taiwanese Pili puppets, folk, rock and jazz music, and innovative multimedia and light shows, the segments of "Formosa" and "The Prayer of the People" segments highlighted Taiwan's history as a "beautiful island" and oceanic society whose origins lay with the Austronesian diaspora, of which Taiwan was itself a center, and an immigrant isle with people and culture from many lands, including but not limited to continental China."

However, Beijing boycotted the opening of the games because when Ma Ying-jeou welcomed the participants to the games, he was introduced as the President of the Republic of China. China regards Taiwan as part of China. And it refers to the Island as China, Taiwan. And even worse, President Ma's party praised the Chinese for being involved at all.

Neither side will accept the other's view of history and identity. The future must be watched carefully and analyzed in favor of freedom and democracy. Or else 23 million people in Taiwan will be forced to renounce their history, their identity, and the integrity of their island.

Richard Kagan Professor Emeritus, Hamline University

Source: [Jerome F. Keating's writings](#)