

The Question of Taiwan's Discourse and Who Should Control it?

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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"Until the lions have historians, the tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." This African proverb reflects Taiwan's problem with its history and experience as it seeks to establish its own identity and imagined community. More often than not in the past, it has been the outside "hunters," the colonials, and economic exploiters and opportunists who have controlled the discourse on Taiwan, and portrayed it, in Edward Said's terminology, as an "imagined geography" to suit their needs. But now all that has changed. With the end of Martial Law (1987) and the ability of Taiwanese to democratically elect their Legislators (1992) and President (1996), the Taiwanese lions are free to give their side of the story.

History cannot totally escape a subjective element. From the multiple facts and happenings that historians must sift through and prioritize, to the decisions on what to include and what to omit as well, historians have their challenge. Even after they have the facts and happenings they want, they must still interpret them and assign select values and meaning to them. This is why one historian will praise a particular leader while another may condemn him, why different historians can reach different conclusions and why histories often express different conflicting perspectives. This is all part and parcel of the discourse on any given topic.

However, now that Taiwanese have their democracy, freedom of the press, the right to assemble and the right to choose their leaders, they can enter the discourse on their island with uncensored and unrestricted vigor. This does not mean that they will be the only ones telling the story of their island, but certainly at least, they will now be able to choose who and what they think should be glorified and what values and meaning should be attached to their past.

In the process of deciding what focus, values and interpretations that they, the Taiwanese, will include and attach to their past, the following are among those that should be considered. They are ones that were often neglected or Sinicized when Taiwan suffered under the martial law of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) one-party state. They should not be omitted from the future discourse of where Taiwan wants to go.

1) A variety of countries have occupied and colonized parts of Taiwan in the past, but Japan is the first country to unite, control, and rule the whole island of Taiwan. 2) After World War II ended (1945), the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1952) declared that Japan should surrender Taiwan, but it did not specify to whom. Two options were the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) that had fought a Civil War on the continent, which the PRC won in 1949. There was however a third option sought by various Taiwanese groups. 3) The third, often ignored, option was that Taiwan should be given to the Taiwanese under the

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United Nations principle of self-determination. The San Francisco Treaty never did specify which of the three Taiwan belonged to. 4) The United States, while it has a "one China" principle, has maintained to this day (some 67 years later) that the status of Taiwan is still "undecided." That is, any one of the three options above is possible and now that the Taiwanese have self-determination, and elect their President, this can clearly say that the choice is theirs. 5) The acceptance of a "one China" principle has two aspects. First, it is an acceptance that you cannot have two countries with the same name at the same time. There cannot simultaneously be two Chinas, thus one of the two countries would need a new name. And second, to accept or acknowledge that the PRC believes that the definition of "one China" includes Taiwan does not mean that one agrees with that definition and what it includes. It simply means that one acknowledges that this is what the PRC happens to believe, however misguided that may be.

Identity is something that both evolves and is discovered. One often discovers it by going where one has to go. So, as Taiwanese take this path of interpreting their past and their identity, there will for sure, be many other items and perspectives that they the Taiwanese lions will want to include in this discourse. One such may be that they will eventually need a new name, a name that no longer conflicts with the fact that there can only be one China. The important thing, however, is that they now realize that they can set the tone and direction of this discourse, that they with their newly won democracy must take responsibility for their future. Others may be undecided, but the Taiwanese are the ones who can decide (even if it means maintaining an ambiguous status quo). They can no longer accept the histories or definitions of others, or of outsiders, however related they might be. Until the lions have historians, the tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

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