

The premiere of Taiwanese TV drama *Seqalu: Formosa 1867* (賽拉路) on the Public Television Service has sparked a considerable reaction and discussion, demonstrating that many Taiwanese yearn to learn more about the country's past. They have used social media to debate, explore and reconstruct Aboriginal history from multiple perspectives and specialized academic fields.

Government departments involved in funding the production of historical films and television series have naturally basked in praise for commissioning the well-received TV series, but officials involved in cultural affairs should ensure that the limited resources available to them are used to provide viewers with a complete and diverse viewing experience.

If Taiwanese audiences have to wait an inordinate time for another historical drama like *Seqalu: Formosa 1867*, the opportunity to capitalize on the momentum and further enrich the public's historical understanding of Taiwanese history will have been squandered.

To avoid this, officials should consider creating a "film and television universe" that guides the nation's television and film industries toward producing a range of historical dramas set during specific periods of Taiwanese history.

The idea of a film and television universe comes from Japan's taiga drama, or "big river drama," which is the name Japanese broadcaster NHK gives to its annual, year-long historical dramas.

However, the lesson to draw from Japan's "big river dramas" is not their never-ending nature, but the rotation of historic dramas spanning different time periods that builds a shared feeling of community and national consciousness.

Every year a new drama is released that focuses on a particular geographical region. The time period might be the same as the previous year's drama, or it might overlap and there is a degree of continuity to characters and events portrayed in each series, which allows for complex narratives that run the full gamut of good and evil.

The poet, literary critic and playwright T.S. Eliot coined the term “historical sense” to describe how each new play alters our perception of the past and of ourselves in the present by adapting the characters, events and other historical aspects of past plays.

The unique aspect of Japan’s televisual and cinematic historical universe is not the constant reappearance of familiar characters and themes, but that it allows for a plethora of competing viewpoints. This is because Japan’s “big river dramas” are not written by the same playwright or author, which exposes viewers to a diverse range of historical interpretations and allows them to form their own judgments while also leaving the door open for fresh interpretations.

Seqalu: Formosa 1867 has received criticism in some quarters not just over certain creative aspects, but because it is the only production, either on the big or small screen, that deals with the history of the Puyuma and Paiwan peoples. Taiwanese audiences therefore only have this single reference point on which to base their understanding of this period of Taiwanese history.

Additionally, the word “universe” contains connotations of time. As historical characters are performed and re-performed by successive generations, these characters enter into a nation’s inter-generational memory and form a dialogue between generations.

Furthermore, the skill of actors continues to evolve through the ages: In the past, actors simply assumed the role of a character; today the fathers or the mothers of historical figures often capture the imagination and have an important tale to tell.

If Taiwan is to create its own televisual historical universe, the government will need to provide appropriate funding. Every year, Taiwan awards countless literature prizes; a testament to the public’s flourishing creativity, and which provides the perfect starting point for the government. Hopefully, Seqalu: Formosa 1867 is just the beginning and Taiwan’s historical dramas will go from strength to strength.

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Supporting historical TV dramas

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