

ETHNIC CULTURE STUDIES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AMONG TAIWANESE AUSTRONESIAN PEOPLES

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Summary

This chapter examines the history of socio-cultural anthropology and its contemporary development that contributes to the preservation and revival of ethnic cultures globally. Among Taiwan's indigenous Austronesian peoples, who constitute approximately 2.2% of the national population, or 504,531 out of 23,119,722 in 2009, we find a very similar development trajectory of rising ethnic consciousness and identity formation. Produced as they are in a multiethnic and multicultural social milieu, studies of ethnic cultures must be contextualized in the grand wave of global social change from the colonialism of past centuries to contemporary globalization. This article proceeds from previously published research findings to review major policy changes over the past quarter century (1983-2008) and their consequential developments—both the positive improvements in general well-being and the persistence of ingrained problems among these marginal groups. Employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study's multidisciplinary research team canvassed the entire island during 2006 and 2007. Major findings indicate that the increasing tempo of globalization has resulted in two contradictory trends among Taiwanese Austronesians. On the one hand, the rise of national consciousness has engendered renewed interest in their cultures and supported efforts to preserve and restore selected indigenous customs and practices, such as ritual healings, age-grade systems, and annual harvest festivals. The opposite trend is a continuous outflow of the indigenes from traditional tribal communities to urban centers for employment, education, or health care; those numbers had reached close to half of the entire indigenous population by the timeframe under consideration here. Their increasing urbanization also contributes to mixed marriages and the loss of indigenous

languages and practices. This paper points to some of the issues related to these developments, such as the syncretic merger of the old and new, and the persistent problems indigenous communities face in daily life. The case of Taiwanese Austronesians illustrates the impacts global historical and politico-economic processes are having on indigenous peoples around the world.

1. Introduction: Ethnic Culture Studies and Anthropology

Ethnic culture is a part of ethnic studies that represents contemporary concerns of anthropology. This young field has been transformed from a Eurocentric interest of studying “other peoples and cultures” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to a globalized vision of identity formation and ethnic consciousness in the latter half of the 20th century. Anthropology is the major discipline base most actively involved in the transformation of ethnic studies into a new inter-disciplinary field.

The germ of thought for contemporary socio-cultural anthropology, according to British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), can be traced back to the era of Enlightenment in European history when philosophers, discontented with the stifling theology of Roman Catholicism, began to explore an imagined natural state of human existence. Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s famous notion of the “noble savage”— simple people who lived a rudimentary but honorable way of life, as opposed to Europeans who existed under the dual yokes of feudalism and the church—inspired many scholars to look for ways of life beyond Europe. The romantic view of “uncivilized” peoples and cultures definitely played an important role in the later development of the discipline.

The establishment of socio-cultural anthropology (a term preferred by British and American scholars) or ethnology (preferred by continental Europeans) as a discipline came much later, during a period characterized by later historians as the “Age of Imperialism.” During the second half of the 19th century when European colonial powers had successfully carved up the world, they suddenly were confronted with an avalanche of information pertaining to the diverse peoples and cultures. Academicians responded by devoting themselves to the study of those alien ways of life. Great Britain, whose surge to a colonial zenith came in late 19th century, witnessed just such a development, as Evans-Pritchard points out: “The subject has been taught, under the name of anthropology or ethnology, since 1884 at Oxford, since 1900 at Cambridge, and since 1908 in London....” (Evans-Pritchard 1954: 3). Similarly, in the United States, the German Jewish physicist Franz Boaz (1858-1942) began to teach anthropology at Columbia University in 1896.

The relationship between European colonialism and the birth of anthropology through the “discovery” and “investigation” of ethnic groups in the colonies is well known. Initially, Eurocentric perspectives governed key scholarly viewpoints in racializing and ranking the colonized peoples on an evolutionary ladder, such as Lewis Morgan’s (circa 1818-1881) three-stage scheme of savagery, barbarism, and civilization, which was to become the officially sanctioned doctrine of Marxism. However, when anthropology became established in the New World, U.S. anthropologists were among the first to champion a cross-cultural comparative approach to the study of peoples and cultures, and challenged the Eurocentric way of classifying the “colored.”

With the end of WWII, as colonial powers collapsed one after another and the U.S. civil rights movement began to surge, the Eurocentric perspective gave way before new fields of ethnic studies that all emphasize respect for cultural differences and stress equality among different peoples globally. Anthropological perspectives are the foundation of modern ethnic studies and have been adopted by other disciplines such as history, sociology, and political science, education, and so on when research involves different cultures or ethnic groups. Campaigns to preserve or protect ethnic rights are also rooted in these concepts and such efforts have also become a major concern among scholars in these fields. But anthropology remains the major discipline primarily concerned with cultural aspects of ethnic studies, namely, the changing cultural identity and ethnicity of the indigenous peoples, as well as cultural revivalism among them.

Anthropology, among contemporary social sciences, has been especially effective at providing conceptual schemes and ethical guidance by which people can grapple with life's meanings and enhance cross-cultural understanding—both crucial building blocks in the current globalization drive. For instance, the discipline's long-held stance against racism and ethnocentrism, as well as its promotion of culturally sensitive understanding of "others," has contributed to the development of multiculturalism that helps shape contemporary national and international policies in areas such as education, labor policy, gender equality, and indigenous rights. Two anthropological concepts and approaches, namely cross-cultural ethnography and cultural relativism, have been crucial in setting the stage for contemporary ethnic culture studies.

A hallmark of contemporary socio-cultural anthropology is the ethnographic fieldwork an anthropologist carries out over the course of his/her professional life. Ever since the Polish English Bronislaw Malinowski's (circa 1884-1942) accidental confinement in the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia from 1914 to 1917, lengthy ethnographic fieldwork of at least one full year has become the litmus test for all aspiring anthropologists. Embedded in this notion of "ethnographic fieldwork" is a theme fundamental to the discipline that revolves around the issue of cross-cultural observation and experience. Since the term ethnography originates from the Greek *ethno* (the way of life of a distinct group of people) and *graphy* (a descriptive narrative of something), ethnographic fieldwork implies the study of an ethnic group different from that of the anthropologist. Cross-cultural studies allow the researcher to extract him- or herself from the socio-cultural milieu to which he or she belongs and by doing so may develop critical views towards the culture under study, reflect on his or her own culture, and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of human experience in general. This project requires an appreciation of the differences observed in cross-cultural studies, and anthropologists must rely on the concept of cultural relativism to achieve that perspective.

Cultural relativism advises that the researcher should not project his or her own cultural interpretations or values onto the practices and beliefs observed in the field. The rationale behind this is simple. Since different peoples and cultures may develop different ways of living and diverse ethical standards to cope with their unique living conditions, the researcher should defer making value judgments about the observed practices or phenomena until he or she has gained comprehensive knowledge about the culture at the level of an insider. This insider's perspective in cross-cultural studies is called an *emic* viewpoint, as opposed to an outsider's or *etic* viewpoint. Both terms are

borrowed from the linguistic concepts of phonemics (the study of meaningful sound units in a language understood by its users) and phonetics (the study of language sound units by using a universally applicable tool). Still, cultural relativism can be extremely fuzzy since there is no clear set of criteria that determines when the said researcher has reached the level of an insider or is competent to make judgment. A related problem is how an anthropologist, even as a relative insider, should behave when confronted with practices that seriously conflict with his/her own moral compass. There is no ready answer to either of the two issues. However, even with their imperfections, anthropologists have generally adhered to these two approaches and concepts in their professional training and practices.

On the basis of this disciplinary development and its progressive perspectives, we can take Taiwan's indigenous Austronesians as an example to understand one complex group's cultural identity and struggles for the future. The significance of the Taiwan case is manifold. For instance, the changing fortunes of Taiwanese indigenes illustrate that the transformational process toward ethnic culture studies has taken place not only in the West. Western-originated anthropology was adapted by Japanese colonialists to launch their own experimental investigations of racialized peoples in colonial Taiwan. Analogous to Europe and the United States, anthropology in Taiwan has been transformed since World War II from an empire-centric stance to a modern discipline that addresses issues related to identity consciousness and sensitivities of cross-cultural difference. Furthermore, the Taiwan case shows a dramatic turnaround, in which hegemonic powers over the ethnic "others" have gone from subjugating or assimilating those marginalized to acknowledging the rise of indigenous rights. China as an ancient empire and Japan as a modern colonial power had both imposed an "orientalist" governance over Taiwanese indigenous groups. But the drive to globalization has turned the table and restored, albeit partially, the autonomy of indigenes. The cause of ethnic rights has spread internationally and inspires Taiwan's indigenous peoples. The ostensibly marginal case of Taiwanese indigenes illustrates the long road traveled to arrive at global ethnic culture studies.

2. Research Goal and Methods

In 1983, the lead Taiwanese institute for ethnic studies, the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, under the guidance of academician Li Yih-yuan, published a major treatise on contemporary Taiwanese indigenous peoples entitled *Research and Assessment of Hill Aboriginal Administration Policies*. This book identifies major problems Taiwan's indigenous peoples face and the possibilities of alleviating them through administrative means. Unexpectedly yet importantly, this publication sparked indigenous social movements that gained tremendous momentum in subsequent decades. A quarter of a century had passed since this landmark research was published, and it became imperative that another broad-based assessment be conducted to evaluate current conditions in these communities. The questions we planned to pursue as we organized this project were: What major policy changes had been implemented by the national government to improve the lives of the indigenes? To what extent had the indigenous peoples changed over this past quarter century in terms of their general well-being? Had the grassroots movements launched by indigenous elites in the late 1980s and early 1990s produced tangible results and narrowed the gaps between their

communities and mainstream society? What features still hindered the improvement of their general well-being? A team of fifteen researchers representing diverse academic institutions and disciplines was organized by Shu-min Huang, the first author of the article and the primary investigator of an Academia Sinica Thematic Research Project. The team investigated the following topical areas: changes in national policy towards the indigenes, population movement and changing socio-economic status, labor and employment conditions, indigenous traditional land rights, general social welfare and health, promotion of cultural enterprises, language policy and preservation, education, and political development.

To collect essential data, the research team employed a multitude of research methods: archival data collection from government offices and libraries, current census data, site visits to indigenous communities, in-depth interviews with officials in charge of indigenous affairs, focus group discussions with experts and non-experts on pressing issues, and finally, survey questionnaires. In the last case, standardized questionnaires were developed to elicit quantitative data that would supplement general impressions gained through qualitatively obtained data. Following a rigid stratified sampling procedure, the research team covered all fourteen officially registered ethnic groups with 2,057 valid samples: 1,178 from traditional indigenous communities and 879 from metropolitan areas. The research period covered two years, 2006 and 2007. Research outcomes, written in Chinese by individual researchers based on their chosen topics, were published in a single volume titled *Government Policy and Social Development among Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples* (Huang and Chang 2010) by the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. The current article highlights the major findings of this project.

3. Profiles of Taiwanese Austronesians

Linguistically, Taiwanese indigenous peoples belong to the Austronesian language family, in close association with the Malayo-Polynesian and Oceanic languages that cover major islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. One school of thought, championed by Australian archaeologist Peter Bellwood, even argues that Taiwan must be the original home of all Austronesian peoples due to the extremely high complexity of the indigenous languages on the island (Bellwood 2005). To differentiate Taiwanese indigenous peoples from the majority Han people, we use terms such as Taiwanese Austronesians, indigenous Austronesians, Taiwanese indigenous peoples, or simply indigenes interchangeable in this article.

3.1 Historical Contexts

Historically, despite its close proximity to Han Chinese empires, Taiwan and its indigenous peoples made little impression on China's imperial historiography. It was not until the early 17th century, during European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, that the Dutch and the Spaniards began to explore the island's southern and northern ends, respectively, and established tiny fortified trading posts and harbors to guard their commercial interests. Rivalry between the Europeans lasted for two decades and quickly ended when the Dutch successfully drove out the Spaniards from northern Taiwan. Chinese sovereignty was extended to Taiwan in the mid-17th century during the dynastic

change when defeated Ming loyalists, under the leadership of Koxinga, in turn drove out the Dutch and established Chinese settler communities on the island. Even though the European colonial occupation of Taiwan had been short—a mere 50 years—it was the first encounter Taiwanese indigenes had with Christianity.

The Ming loyalists in Taiwan eventually succumbed to the consolidating Qing dynasty (circa 1644-1911), which had established formal sovereignty on the island by the late 17th century. For the next two centuries, this newly acquired territory attracted hordes of immigrants from China's overcrowded Southeast Coast, from Fujian and Guangdong provinces where land-hungry farmers had been spilling out across greater Southeast Asia in search of arable land.

Early Chinese records produced by travelers and government officials in the late 17th and 18th centuries depicted Taiwanese Austronesians as primitive and fearsome: practicing slash-and-burn agriculture (growing chiefly millet and hill rice as staples) with simple farm implements, hunting the widely abundant deer for their skins and meat, and raiding and killing each other and outsiders for their heads as war trophies. With a low level of technological sophistication and lacking written languages, the indigenes were considered barbaric and loathsome; they were to be converted to the Chinese way of life if possible. The ensuing encounters between Han settlers and the indigenous peoples had not been pleasant. Armed with more advanced weaponry and organizational capabilities, the Chinese settlers either subjugated the indigenes and turned them into dependent servants or tenants, or forced them to retreat farther into high mountains unsuitable for agricultural use—at least from the Han Chinese point of view.

Imperial Chinese policy towards Taiwanese indigenous minorities, like its treatment of other ethnic groups in the borderlands of the mainland, was an ambivalent one: a mixture of biases colored by a belief in Sino-centric cultural superiority on the one hand, and benevolent paternalism on the other. Whenever an ethnic minority was assimilated into the supposedly superior Confucian moral world, they were treated as genuine court subjects and protected by law. Thus, the degree to which indigenes complied with Confucian culture became a key benchmark to demarcate the various ethnic minorities. There were the “Cooked Barbarians” who had taken on some of the basic features of Chineseness, such as Han languages, costumes, sedentary agriculture, proper mannerisms and social decorum, and so on. From the court's point of view, the Cooked Barbarians could be further cultivated through education, so they would eventually be “civilized” and could enjoy the benefits of Chinese civilization (Harrell 2001). The so-called “Plains Aborigines” in Taiwan, a conglomerate of more than ten ethnic groups who lived at lower elevations throughout the island and who had long experience of Han Chinese culture, belonged to this category.

The term “Cooked Barbarians” was long considered derogatory in Taiwanese history and had been shunned for its implication of barbarian ancestry. This negative connotation, however, changed in the late 20th century when indigenous social movements awoke long-dormant nationalistic aspirations and ethnic pride (Brown 2004). One particular group, the Kavalan in Eastern Taiwan, for instance, reclaimed its non-Han ancestry and was recognized by the government in 2002 as the eleventh

indigenous group in Taiwan. Other Plains Aboriginal groups that have organized to reclaim their Austronesian ancestry and gain official recognition, however, have been stonewalled in recent years by the Council of Indigenous Peoples, due to the complexities of sorting out ethnicity and the politics involved.

Taiwan's "Raw Barbarians" were subjects of pacification from the imperial court's point of view. Since they were "uncivilized," they had to be fenced off so they would not encroach upon citizens of the Celestial Empire on the frontier. When marauding Raw Barbarians attacked early Han Chinese settlers or their communities, the government had to respond in kind, sending in troops or constables to arrest the culprits and defend the territory. The Chinese court's policy toward the Raw Barbarians, however, was more paternalistic than strictly punitive. Administrators at various levels of local government knew too well that Han immigrants were not always victims in those conflicts: they could easily outwit the less sophisticated indigenous peoples and used various forms of chicanery to steal their land. To prevent such encounters and their subsequent conflicts and bloodshed, the imperial court ordered to erect earthen walls called "bull's backs," to separate the settlers and the Raw Barbarians from late 17th century towards late 19th century. The dual purpose of the bull backs was to prevent the barbarians from attacking the settlers, and also to prevent the settlers from entering the tribes' territories. But due to the continuously increasing population pressure along Taiwan's western coastal plains, those earthen walls were continuously being pushed back towards the high mountains. This went on up to the tenure of the last imperial governor of Taiwan, Liu Ming-chuan, who launched ambitious modernization plans in 1885 to promote cash crop production such as tea- and camphor-planting in the hills. During the second half of the 19th century Christian missions, chiefly English and Canadian Presbyterians, also began to take an interest in Taiwan and established churches and hospitals on the island. Their initial targets were the local Han Chinese, but their efforts later expanded to the indigenous areas. In addition to introducing Christian gospels and modern medicine to the indigenes, the missionaries also used a Romanization system to translate the bible into Austronesian languages, thus creating a vehicle to record those languages. The establishment of the Tainan Theological College and Seminary in 1876 was a major development since the Seminary would train large numbers of indigenous pastors who became instrumental in their communities' subsequent development.

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Biographical Sketch

Shu-min Huang received his doctorate in Anthropology from Michigan State University in 1977, and is currently the Distinguished Research Fellow and Director at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica,

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Shao-hua Liu received her doctorate in medical anthropology from Columbia University in 2007, and is currently an Assistant Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, in Taiwan. Her research fields include AIDS, drug use, and leprosy among ethnic minorities in China as well as cultural movement and well-being of Taiwanese indigenous people. She has published one monograph *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China* (Stanford University Press, 2011) and several journal articles and book chapters.