Colonialism and Modernity in Taiwan: Reflections on Contemporary Taiwanese Historiography

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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, research in Taiwan on Taiwan's history has led to important developments in the discovery of historical materials and the exploration of research topics and has thus started to attract the attention of the international scholarly community. During the 1990s research on the period of Japanese colonial rule turned into one of the liveliest new fields of research in Taiwan. How to understand and evaluate the period of Japanese rule and the respective ideological and theoretical differences between various scholars has recently become a major arena of scholarly and public debates as can be seen from the disputes on the school textbook “Knowing Taiwan” and the historical comic “On Taiwan.” However, it deserves our attention that these diverse and tumultuous debates have not led to profounder research or to interpretative innovation. “Taiwan's History” as discussed on conferences and in research publications consists to a large degree of empirical case studies and discoveries on highly specialized topics. Comparisons from a bird-eye's perspective and profound discussions of conceptual issues can hardly be found. Preliminary attempts in writing the history of Taiwanese historiography thus still heavily rely on the dominant discourse on Chinese historiography and lack a native academic perspective as well as a critical methodological approach. Instead we observe among Taiwanese historians ideological disputes on the issue of national identity (independence vs. unification) and deplore the absence of debates on historiographical paradigms.

1 The article was translated from the Chinese by Axel Schneider and double checked by Jiagu Richter. The text was originally published in Wakabayashi and Wu 2004. For further discussions on Taiwanese historiography, please refer to Chang Lung-chih 2008 and 2009.
2 For a critical overview of research on Taiwan's history since the 1980s see Wakabayashi 1996.
When compared to the work of previous generations of scholars who worked under political limitations, research on Taiwan's history has at the beginning of the 21st century already achieved outstanding results in establishing its legitimacy, institutions and disciplines. However, despite its popularity and the ongoing discussions on indigenization and internationalization, the question remains unanswered whether research on Taiwan's history has already turned into an independent academic field. Has it, indeed, developed its own problem consciousness, methodological character and paradigmatic tradition? Before the initiation of native research in the late 1980s, Taiwan was regarded by the mainstream as a topic of Chinese local history, as part of Japanese colonial history or as a case of development in the third world. Up until today no long-term historical research has been conducted on topics such as Taiwan's multi-ethnic society, its complicated spatial character, and the continuity and transformations it underwent as a consequence of its diverse colonial history under the rule of multiple colonialists.

Starting with the “controversy on Taiwan’s modernization” of the mid 1980s, this article will look at major results and paradigms in the interpretation of Taiwan's history, and will indicate their meaning for research on the transformation and periodization of Taiwan's modern history. Subsequently, I will look at the developments in research on Taiwan's history of the period of Japanese rule and reflect upon the discussions of American, Japanese and Korean scholars on colonial modernity and their potential contribution to the interpretation of Taiwan's modern history. Due to limitations of time and of my own knowledge I cannot provide a comprehensive overview of modern Taiwan's history. My focus will be on the methodological perspectives and research orientations of relevant scholars in their research on the periodization of Taiwan's history and on the meaning of colonial modernity. I will neither discuss the evidential basis nor political and social thoughts as expressed in individual publications. By evaluating the discoveries and methodologies generated by Taiwanese historiography I hope to provide a discursive basis for renewed reflections on and constructions of the image of the (post)-colonial history of Taiwan.

An Unfinished Debate on Native Historiography: Revisiting the “Controversy on Taiwan’s Modernization”

In May 1983 the hobby cum academic historian, former political prisoner Yang Bichuan published the article “Gotō Shimpei: The Founder of Taiwan’s Modern-