The Hidden Reason for the Deadlock in the Achievement of Ethnic Recognition for the Ping-pu in Taiwan

MING-HSI SUNG

1. Introduction

The question ‘Who are the Ping-pu?’ has long been a puzzle for those interested in this particular people. At the time when the Chinese first made contact with the peoples inhabiting the island of Taiwan, under the influence of Confucianism, the Ping-pu were called ‘fan’ (barbarians) and the Chinese did not distinguish them from the other indigenous peoples of Taiwan. After the arrival of foreign observers several centuries later, applying Western anthropological analyses, the Ping-pu were identified as a racially particular group and systematically categorized as such. Later, after the Ping-pu had been governed by other ethnicities for hundreds of years and as a result of colonization and assimilation, the once seemingly clear ethnic boundary of the Ping-pu became blurred again and most commentators regarded the Ping-pu as an extinct ethnic group. It was not until very recently (1999 C.E.) that the Ping-pu identity suddenly ‘re-emerged’ in Taiwan, accompanied by claims to officially recognized ethnic status.

Since the Ping-pu are highly sinicized, there is no obvious method by which to distinguish the Ping-pu from the dominant Han Chinese population. The Taiwanese government can not easily determine who would qualify as Ping-pu. The problem of whether and how to accord official ethnic recognition to the Ping-pu, according to an traditional but widely criticized “objectivistic element approach”1 underpinning the Taiwanese ethnic recognition policy, is thus unsolvable, though it is clear that the Ping-pu are an indigenous people from the perspectives of history, anthropology, and physiology.2 Debates about ethnic recognition for the

1 The concept of ethnicity has been debated in the Western scholastic field for a long time. After a long debate, there is no consensus on its precise meaning. The official and scholarly use of the concept may incorporate both objective elements (characteristics observable to those outside the group) and subjective elements (such as a communally held belief in common ancestry and customs). Because there is no widely agreed set of criteria for the selection and interpretation of objective elements, ‘objectivistic’ approaches to ethnicity have been heavily criticized as simply providing support for subjective bias. Nevertheless, in spite of its defects, objectivism has been a prevalent theory and is widely adopted in administrative matters. The governments of most countries, including Taiwan, adopt an objectivistic approach in their administration of ethnic/tribal recognition/acknowledgement.

2 Though there is no regulation specifically addressing ethnic recognition in Taiwan, the official use of an objectivistic approach can be discerned from both the traditional official stance of denying the Ping-pu’s status as an indigenous ethnicity and from official documents pertaining to the recent
Ping-pu seem to have reached a deadlock as a consequence of the implementation of the objectivistic theory adopted by the Taiwanese authorities. Nevertheless, the objectivistic approach in Taiwan has been applied in a flexible manner. As a matter of fact, many recognized indigenous ethnicities in Taiwan would likely be disqualified if elements of the requirements of the objectivistic theory were strictly enforced, since sinicization has been a prevalent phenomenon and trend amongst Taiwanese indigenous peoples. Hence it would be safe to assert that the objectivistic approach by itself need not prevent the Taiwanese government from exercising its discretion to grant recognition to indigenous ethnicities like the Ping-pu.

The concept of ‘protection’ underpins indigenous policy in Taiwan, and was proclaimed by the Constitution as early as 1947 C.E. Article 168 of the Taiwanese Constitution provides that: “The State shall accord to the various ethnic groups in the frontier regions legal protection of their status and shall give special assistance to their work in local self-government”\(^3\). Moreover, in Sections 11 and 12 of Article 10 of the Additional Articles of the Constitution (2000 C.E.), the government reconfirmed this policy and declared that “[t]he State affirms cultural pluralism and shall actively preserve and foster the development of Indigenous languages and cultures”\(^4\) and “the State shall, in accordance with the will of the ethnic groups, safeguard the status and political participation of the aborigines. The State shall also guarantee and provide assistance and encouragement for Indigenous education, culture, transportation, water conservation, health and medical care, economic activity, land, and social welfare, measures for which shall be established by law.”\(^5\)

In order to implement its protective obligations, since 1946, when the Chinese government took over Taiwan from the Japanese colonial authorities, the government has adopted affirmative action programmes for indigenous peoples, conferring exclusive entitlements to political participation, protections for land rights, and special educational and social welfare benefits.\(^6\) All these affirmative action pro-

---

1 See Article 169, Regulation For Identifying Indigenous People’s Ethnicity (Yuanzumin Minzubye Rending Banfa Sho Zheng Caoan) ibid.; “The State shall actively undertake and foster the development of education, culture, communications, water conservancy, public health, and other economic and social enterprises among the various ethnic groups in the frontier regions. With respect to land utilization, the State shall, in the light of climatic conditions, nature of the soil, and the life and habits of the people, adopt measures for its protection and assist in its development”.


3 Ibid., section 12.

4 See Taiwan Yearbook 2003: Social Welfare at <www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5–gp/yearbook/chpt15.htm?7>. Though some other ethnic minorities in Taiwan (like Mongolians and Tibetans) could also enjoy affirmative action programmes, the scope of their benefits is narrower than the indigenous.