

Summary of the “Taiwan and its memory spaces: the question of the national narrative” seminar’s seventh session, Samia Ferhat (11 June 2018)

This session included two presentations given by Hsiao A-chin 蕭阿勤 and Wang Fu-chang 王甫昌 both Taiwanese researchers at the Academia Sinica’s Institute of Sociology (Taipei).

Mr. Wang Fu-chang’s presentation, entitled “From Villages, Tribes to Pan-Aborigines: the Historical Changes of Aborigines’ Identities in Taiwan,” focused on the question of identity in the context of indigenous people, more specifically the history of the concept of “tribe,” examining the origin and evolution of the word in particular. The concepts of identity, groups and ethnicity were also clarified.

Wang Fu-chang introduced the classification work done by Japanese ethnologists during the colonial period. The work of Wei Hwei-Lin (1904-1990) was highlighted especially. First of all, his classification of indigenous people into nine groups, each given their own specific name, was the official reference until the 2000s. Secondly, his work on the conceptualization of the notions of ‘group’ and ‘tribe’ served as a basis for this classification. In particular, he translated the term ‘ethnic group’ for the first time by “族群” using the words ‘tribe’ and ‘group’.

Since the ‘40s, ethnologists such as Mabushi Toichi worked on the notion of group identity and sought to understand if indigenous people were conscious of belonging to a specific group. Toichi revealed that indigenous people did not have clear sense of belonging to a specific tribe. Such awareness seems to have appeared in the wake of Chinese migration into Taiwan and the Sinicization of the island. Subsequently, the Kuomintang government tended to include indigenous people in Taiwanese society, whereas they had been excluded under Japanese rule. A specific policy was implemented which conferred a number of rights to indigenous people and which, from the start, also resulted in integrating them in the process of Sinicization put in place by the government for the whole of Taiwanese society.

Wang Fu-chang stressed that in the ‘80s a “pan-indigenous identity” emerged, an identity shared by all indigenous people who feel a connection to each other, despite their belonging to different groups. However, this collective identity displayed by some indigenous people hides some significant differences between groups, especially cultural practices and spoken languages. The indigenous identity may then appear to be a strategy designed to answer a situation of inequality in which they are outvoted, a tool to fight against unfair and unequal political treatment.

Mister Hsiao A-chin’s presentation, entitled “Narrating National Chineseness in 1970s Taiwan: the Rediscovery of Taiwan New literature, Collective Memory of Anti-Japanese Resistance, and the Origin of ‘Taiwanized’ Historical Rewriting,” was the opportunity to present the theme of next year’s seminar, which will focus on readings of the past. His presentation looked at the link between the experience of Japanese colonization and the “Taiwanization” policy of the ‘80s and ‘90s, by showing in which ways early 20th century “New Literature” was interpreted according to how the question of identity in Taiwan evolved.

This presentation focused especially on the ‘70s, a crucial decade because it was the starting point of a long process of “un-exile,” a transition period from a decade of policies for assimilation and political and cultural democratization, or “Taiwanization”, to an anti-Sinocentred period of political and cultural “decolonization” in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The ‘70s were also a time when the colonial period’s literary society was rediscovered, by young Taiwanese intellectuals in particular.

Authors such as Chen Shao-ting worked to lift the stigma carried by the Taiwanese, considered by the Kuomintang as “contaminated by colonial poison” or even “Japanized”, by highlighting the “national Chineseness” of writers during the colonial period. Many young intellectuals followed in Chen Shao-ting’s footsteps and adhered to this postcolonial literary

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heritage. Yang Kui was one of their major literary figures. He was seen as the representative of the “new literature of Taiwan”, a literature of the anti-Japanese resistance which grew at the beginning of the ‘20s. This new Taiwanese literature was inspired by the May Fourth Movement in China, notably characterized by a vernacular writing style (白話運動) based on Mandarin. The ‘30s also witnessed the beginning of literature written in local languages (台灣話文). Yang Kui was seen as a hero of the resistance who embodied the ideal archetype of national Chineseness.

This Taiwanese youth was also the drive behind the “return to reality” movement, a movement which existed in a period of diplomatic reversals in Taiwan during the ‘70s. Young reformists asked to leave behind the dream of reconquering the continent, refocusing concerns on Taiwan with social reforms and democratization at the political level. The steps they believed were needed to carry out these reforms were the rediscovery of Taiwan’s past, the promotion of local literature, and the emergence of a political force capable of competing with the Kuomintang. As for the ‘80s, they are characterized by a Taiwanese consciousness, namely through the transformation of national identity and the reinterpretation of Taiwan’s new literature in the mid-‘80s and ‘90s.