

# **The History of an Alien-Nation, or the Alienation of History? The Controversy over History Textbook Reform in Taiwan in the 90s\***

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*"Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment."*

E. H. Carr (Carr 1962)

## **I. Personal Observation on a Not-long-ago History**

This paper attempts to examine the controversy over history textbook reform in Taiwan in the last decade. The request for textbook reform, although it was part of the reforms of education in Taiwan since the DPP came to power in 2000, can be traced back to the late 80s, an era that came immediately after the ending of martial law rule and that was part of the growing demands for democratization and indigenization (*bentuhua*) (Hsiau 2000). The textbook reform has gone through at least three different phases: (1) criticism in the late 80s and early 90s against old textbooks, (2) controversy in the mid 90s over the junior high school supplementary textbook "Getting to Know Taiwan" (*renshi Taiwan*), and (3) 2002's "nine-year integrated curriculum" (*jiunien yiguan*).<sup>1</sup> Each phase of the textbook reform has received significant public attention and has touched on

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<sup>1</sup> The dispute over the draft guideline for the high school history curriculums issued in the winter of 2004 was just the latest round in this long-lasting controversy.

many issues such as gender, ethnicity, identity politics, and national identity. Historical knowledge in Taiwan's curriculum has become a contested field, and this fact too reveals the reform's significant relevance to the current history of Taiwan.

Historians and social theorists have argued that history education has much to do with the rise of nationalism, as both its cause and effect. As a result, the history textbook, or historical curriculum, has occupied a hot spot of political and ideological controversy.<sup>2</sup> That too is the case in Taiwan. Over the past decade, the most significant issue in Taiwan's textbook reform has concerned the politics surrounding national history, or to be more accurate, two national histories. This controversy may have reflected the specific historical juncture of democratization and indigenization in Taiwan. Owing to the growing demand for the building of a Taiwanese national identity in the 90s, critics condemned the authors of traditional textbooks for fully expressing a Chinese national history and for intentionally ignoring the local culture and history of Taiwan. The controversy became apparent in the textbook *Getting to Know Taiwan*, and more so in the subsequent "nine-year integrated curriculum." While this controversy seems like an ideological conflict between two modes of historical knowledge, these two modes do share the common ground of national history; that is, the knowledge of the past has to be written in the form of national history, and history education accordingly plays a significant role in the making of national identity. The issue can be put this way: what is in dispute is actually the question of which nation's history should be taught in school, our nation's or an alien nation's.

I will first reconstruct a brief history of the textbook reform in Taiwan

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the "history war," or "culture war," surrounding the multiculturalism issue in historical curriculum in the United States during the 80s and 90s was a not-long-ago case. The history textbook controversy in Japan has lasted from its long post-war period down to the present. See Kondo (2001), Takahashi (2003), Nakamura (2004), Okamoto (2001) and Nash, Crabtree and Dunn (1997).

and contextualize this history in the past-decade's political-social change in Taiwan. Second, I will examine the assumption of national history as the basic framework of knowing the past shared by the most participants. Finally, I will address the problematics of national history as an unsatisfactory mode for contemporary Taiwan's learning of history, especially in the context of the global flow of people, capital, and knowledge.

In this paper, I intend neither to document all the details about Taiwan's past history-textbook disputes nor to provide the reader with a content analysis of any particular textbook.<sup>3</sup> What I wish to do with this project is to contour the controversy's multiple layers underlying the narratives that surround the history textbook reform. I will point out later that what underlies the apparent tension between China-centered and Taiwan-centered historical narratives in the textbook is a shared viewpoint of (1) taking the national history as the only framework for knowing the past and (2) taking the modernization narrative as the master plot of national history. It has to be mentioned here that this paper, based on my incomplete and partial observations as a student of history in Taiwan, is not so much a field report as it is a series of personal field notes.

## II. Getting to Know Taiwan

The history textbook in Taiwan had probably never received so much public attention as it did in 1997, when controversy erupted over the junior high school history textbook series *Getting to Know Taiwan*, which was published and used that same year (National Institute for Compilation and

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<sup>3</sup> There are several excellent works on these subjects available now. Political sociologist Wang Fu-Chang has provided a detailed context-analysis of the 1997 disputes over *Getting to Know Taiwan* (Wang Fu-Chang 2001). Cultural sociologist Hsiao A-Chin evaluates the social demand for a Taiwanese history as part of the emergence of Taiwanese nationalism (Hsiao 2000). And many curriculum and education scholars and historians have worked on content and discursive analyses of Taiwan's past history textbooks, from the Japanese colonial period down to the present. See Taiwanese Historical Association (2003).

Translation 1997). Before the three-volume textbook was officially issued in September,<sup>4</sup> the New Party legislator Lee Ching-hua organized a hearing attacking this supplementary reading for lacking the historical connection between Taiwan and China and for overemphasizing Japanese colonialism's do-gooder role in Taiwan's modernization.<sup>5</sup> The controversy soon turned into big media event—over three hundred reports, comments, editorials, opinions, letters, hearings, and TV talk show episodes accumulated by the summer of that year, just two months after the story broke (Tu 1998b; Wang Fu-Chang 2001). Politicians, school teachers, historians, critics, and high school students were involved; indeed, this episode is one of the few issues in the history of Taiwan that has attracted considerable public attention and energy. The controversy over *Getting to Know Taiwan*, at least as it appeared through the mass media lens, can be divided into two camps: those who supported this new textbook and those who did not. And the issues that became controversial centered on (1) how to evaluate the historical relationship between Taiwan and mainland China and (2) how to evaluate both the historical period when Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule and this rule's postcolonial effect on Taiwan. Of course, another of this textbook's disputed issues concerned the long forbidden publicly circulated narrative about the February 28 incident. Perhaps no previous government-issued history textbook had mentioned this issue. Particular issues divided these two camps from each other: Was Taiwanese anti-colonial resistance under the Japanese rule part of modern Chinese history? Was the February 28 incident an ethnic conflict or a local event related to the chaos present everywhere in postwar China? How did the modernization of Taiwan happen, and who should take credit for it? Who

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<sup>4</sup> They are volumes on history (*lishi pian*), on society (*shehui pian*), and on geography (*dili pian*).

<sup>5</sup> Some documents that criticize the textbook *Getting to Know Taiwan* (including this hearing's written records) can be found in *Weilishi Liuxia Jianzheng: "Renshi Taiwan" Jiaokeshu Cankao Wenjian Xinbian* (Wang Chung-Fu 2001) and *Taiwan Zhongxue Lishijiaoyu de Dabiandong* (Wang Chung-Fu 2003).

should take responsibility for the long authoritarian rule in postwar Taiwan, and how did democratization become possible? In short, is Taiwan a mere chapter in the history of China, or does it merit a whole new book?

It seemed that the textbook in question was too politically charged. As political sociologist Wang Fu-Chang has pointed out, the controversy over *Getting to Know Taiwan* stemmed from something more than the textbook itself. It reflected a long-lasting conflict of two opposed “national imaginations” in Taiwan: Chinese consciousness and Taiwanese consciousness, or put another way, Chinese nationalism and Taiwanese nationalism (Wang Fu-Chang 2001). To some extent, this controversy has made this textbook both a simile and a metonymy for the receiving tension between the two different national identities: as a direct text reflecting the already existing identity politics and as a pretext generating more discursive confrontations from, and between, both sides.

It should be mentioned here that even though so many disputes over this textbook concerned its purported re-writing of history in a way that satisfied the pro-Taiwan camp and that abandoned the old pro-China history curriculum, the *Getting to Know Taiwan* series was actually a mere supplementary reading to the official history textbook taught at the junior high school level. The content of the official history textbook then was still a china-centered narrative of history. Chinese history, from archaeological findings down to contemporary China, accounted (as usual) for the major portion of the text; furthermore, the historical connection between Taiwan and mainland China was emphasized (as before) as were the postwar (KMT's) government's project of modernizing Taiwan and the state-regulated economic “take-off.” Therefore, even though *Getting to Know Taiwan* was literally a whole new book with narratives concerning Taiwan's history, social development, and geographic setting, it was only a brief supplement to the official history curriculum. But this controversy did have some positive effect on history curriculum in Taiwan. Many historians considered the existing narrative in the officially issued textbooks to be

unsatisfactory and began to write a revised history textbook when the government gradually deregulated the writing and publishing of textbooks used at the junior and senior high school levels in 1998. The deregulation marked an end of an earlier state-controlled field that passed through a branch of the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Compilation and Translation.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the controversy surrounding the *Getting to Know Taiwan* series might also mark an ending of textbook regulation in Taiwan.

### III. National History, Yes, but Whose?

It should not be forgotten that *Getting to Know Taiwan* was edited and published by the Ministry of Education. Why did the government have to publish a text book supplement to the official history textbook?

This supplemental textbook was in fact a response to the public's growing demand for education reform, a demand that first made itself heard in the 80s. These demands continued into the early 90s and were part of wider social demands for democratization and idigenization; the official narratives in textbooks, including history textbooks, were criticized for lacking a comprehensive and multi-faceted representation of Taiwan's history and culture. For instance, one criticism about Taiwan's traditional textbooks was that "school children know too much Chinese history and geography, and nothing about Taiwan" and that these texts were loaded with conservative ideology—the narratives were biased ethnically, gender blind, and replete with cultural chauvinism (Shi Chi-Sheng 1993; Taiwanese Professor Association 1993). In early 80s, when the social demand for a Taiwan-centered history text emerged, some historian proposed reconstructing a Taiwanese viewpoint of history. Sociologist Hsiao A-chin indicates that, with the development of Taiwanese nationalism, the social need to craft a national history of Taiwan was manifest. One historian even

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<sup>6</sup> For a full analysis of the textbook regulation and deregulation in Taiwan. See Chen Jyh-Jia (2003).

argued in the early 90s that the most important task of the study of Taiwanese history now is to accurately analyze and explain Taiwanese nationalism (Hsiao 2000: 164-168).

Parallel to the emerging demand in the 90s for a Taiwan-centered history was the considerable boom in Taiwan of local histories (*difang shi* or *xiangtu shi*), common people's histories (*changmin shi*), and oral histories (*koushu lishi*), which respectively presented an aroused local identity, the everyday life of the common people, and suppressed historical memories. Some local governments such as I-Lan, Kaohsiung, and Taipei County, administered by the DPP, had issued textbooks, covering local history and language (*xiangtu* and *muyu jiaocai*), that functioned as supplementary textbooks and were taught at the elementary school level in early 90s. And the oral history boom during this period had two major subjects: (1) stories about the suffering that occurred as a result of the February 28 incident in 1947 and the later white terror in postwar Taiwan and (2) the historical memories about everyday life under Japanese colonization (Lu 2002; Yoshizawa 1997; Chen Wei-chi 2003). All these histories, re-told, were of experiences from the past that had been suppressed by the KMT's official mode of knowing the past, a national history centered on the KMT's purported role in the revolution and modernization that characterizes modern China. The upsurge in different—and sometimes competing—narratives for public consumption revealed that this moment in Taiwan's present had "too much to tell," and accordingly the existing narrative of Taiwan's history, which was a China- and KMT-centered narrative, no longer had any capacity to incorporate or filter these other histories. As a result, the form of textbook—the supplement—was created in response to the social demands. The supplementary form of *Getting to Know Taiwan* was simply a reflection of the text's supplemental status in relation to the official history curriculum. This form was intended to create a temporary junction for what Wang Fu-chang has observed "two national imaginations." (Wang Fu-Chang 2001) In general, the controversy over

*Getting to Know Taiwan* seemed to be more about getting to know whose Taiwan the island was. Was it a local history within the framework of Chinese national history, or a Taiwanese national history that forecasts a new sovereign nation-state in the future?

#### IV. What was Missing...

As Nicos Poulantzas argued decades ago, it seems that an unavoidable sign of being modern surfaces when “national unity or modern unity...becomes history of a territory and territorialization of a history—in short, a territorial national tradition concretized in the nation-state.”(Poulantzas 1978: 114) Although there was a tiny moment in the late 80s and early 90s when critics, social activists, and scholars tried to identify and assign value to social diversity and various historical narratives in multi-ethnic Taiwan, the polyphony of the diversified historical memories and narratives was soon nationalized and the newly released layered histories were too territorialized. From today’s vantage point, a review of the controversy over *Getting to Know Taiwan* reveals how the text’s supplementary form became allegoric. The two manifestly opposed national-history narratives are mutually dependent on each other’s existence. Even if someday Taiwanese national history becomes dominant in Taiwan, Chinese national history might, in turn, serve as a supplementary discourse or a mirrored image. Official history textbooks in Taiwan were once a historical narrative of becoming Chinese, and now are turning into a narrative of becoming Taiwanese. But within the process of the nationalization of history, there was still something missing.

What was missing in all these disputes (which is to say, in all these media events) was not either a certain narrative of a national history (no matter whose) or previously unmentioned historical facts (no matter which), or even the experiences and memories of suffering (wherever they took place, in mainland China or in Taiwan), but rather a critical re-examination of the form of national history and the modernization narrative that sustains

national history. The form of national history was, and maybe is, taken for granted, and the modernization narrative served as the master plot in national history. That was why the relation between China and Taiwan, and the evaluation of the modern Taiwanese social, political, and economic transformations under Japanese rule became key disputed subjects.

Of course, it is impossible for historians and school history curriculum to recount every event that occurred in the past. The necessary selection of stories, the structure of the narrative, and the mode of representation constitute three of the most important elements in how a story from the past poses a significant problem to everyone, not just history professionals. Is the national history narrative still a satisfactory mode for the telling of past stories? National history, as it was, might be a strong mode of knowing the past, but not the only mode. Historical experiences and memories not always fitted the fixed territorialized and nationalized narrative found in the national history. And the diversified narratives of modern life have no reason to be filtered by the framework of national history. I am not talking simply about the present historical experience of frequent exchanges of all sorts of materials and energies on a global scale, nor is it my intention to suggest that the national history be replaced with a transnational or global history. What I have in mind centers on the fact that, even in Taiwan's past, there existed many narratives and experiences that exceeded the boundaries of a national history, regardless of whether that history was a China-centered version or a Taiwan-centered version. For example, in 1928, the Japanese economist Yanaihara Tadao observed that in 1920s Taiwan, with Japanese capitalism fully developed into form of monopoly, "from the elder and young aborigines cleaning gravel on the newly cultivated ground, to the Taiwanese farmers working in the sugar cane field and workers in the colonial brown sugar factory, to the Japanese workers in the fine sugar factory, up to the beautiful waitress at the Morinaga Café (in Tokyo), they all have been united under the domination of Formosa Sugar (*Taiwan Seido*), that is, Mitsui capital.... The social force of the monopoly capital is indeed

penetrating and strong.”(Yanaihara 1928: 69-70) Of course, this statement about Japan’s exploitation of colonial Taiwan’s raw materials would satisfy one side, and this same statement, which is also about colonial Taiwan’s development, would satisfy another side. However, the statement indicates something else: that the social transformation in Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule crosscut horizontally and vertically many boundaries set in ethnicity, nationality, spatial location, mode of production, gender, and temporality. “They all have been united” under the invisible capitalist transformation.

A historical experience such as what Yanaihara had observed is something akin to what prewar German social theorist Ernst Bloch once termed the “synchronicity of the nonsynchronous.” (Bloch 1977) It goes without saying that the received narrative of national history cannot cover such historical experience. Maybe we need more modes of historical narrative. The recently issued draft guideline for the high school history curriculums, a fully world history informed historical curriculum project, may be serving as an encouraging step to go beyond the existing national history.<sup>7</sup> But history seems always redux.

## V. History Redux?

Three American historians have reviewed the controversy over national history curriculum that took place in the United States in the 80s and 90s and pointed out some lessons from the “history war,” or “culture war,” that colored this history curriculum controversy. In particular, these three historians conclude that “one of the signs of emerging democracy in countries that until recently have been ruled by authoritarian governments is that citizens start arguing publicly about history. In authoritarian regimes, those in power routinely represent the national past in any way they like,

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<sup>7</sup> The draft guideline for the high school history curriculums was just issued by the Ministry of Education in November 2004. See its website, [http://www.edu.tw/EDU\\_WEB/EDU\\_MGT/HIGH-SCHOOL/EDU2359001/main/1-3.htm](http://www.edu.tw/EDU_WEB/EDU_MGT/HIGH-SCHOOL/EDU2359001/main/1-3.htm)

and the public is instructed to swallow the story. The government's legitimation of its powers and the versions of the past taught in schools go hand in glove. In a genuine democracy, no such imposition of 'official history', of whatever stripe, is possible. Citizens value independence of thought, and scholars demand the freedom of follow where the data and their own insights lead them. This is the way of a democracy." (Nash, Crabtree and Dunn 1997: 259) If a democracy is going to be measured by whether citizens argue about their histories publicly or not, Taiwan may just be qualified as an emerging one.

The Ministry of Education in Taiwan issued a "draft guideline for the high school history curriculums" in the winter of 2004. It seems that this new project of education reform has turned into a déjà vu media event – reminiscent of the one seen in 1997. Again, there are two camps that characterize this ongoing dispute, and no surprise, national history matters again. With the ongoing dispute over the newly issued "draft guideline for the high school history curriculums," it seems that history is redux. In this paper, I have reviewed the history textbook reforms that, over the past decades, have had a significant effect on Taiwan's educational curricula. The dispute in 1997 over the *Getting to Know Taiwan* series reveals that historians in Taiwan, perhaps as historians everywhere have experienced, live a history still haunted by national history. But down to the present, no matter how people argue about history, what is on trial is still history, not historians. This is at least a good sign.

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