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- 1 The story is familiar enough : Taiwan is settled by people from the Chinese mainland, colonised by Japan, ruled by the KMT (*Guomindang*), nativises its political system through democratisation, only to be denied its rightful identity by an international society that privileges sovereignty over national self-determination. Yet, as this book makes clear, identity transformation in Taiwan has not been so simple, having been more of a gradually negotiated process with no clear goals and no clear outcome. The irony of the present situation is summed up when Corcuff observes with characteristic flare that “The frontier goes through the Taiwanese society itself, and as stated earlier, not all Taiwanese yet identify with Taiwan as a separate nation, for several complex reasons”.
- 2 On a number of issues the contributors to this volume are in agreement. All show a reassuring commitment to a pluralistic society and refrain from prescribing what Taiwan’s identity should consist of. They also wisely hold back from making any predictions as to the final outcome of this long history. As Rwei-wen Wu puts it, the Owl of Minerva is still waiting for the arrival of the dusk when it comes to concluding whether the “renegade province” will be absorbed into the motherland or “a new dialectic synthesis [...] reconciles the mutually antagonistic Chinese and Taiwanese nationalisms into a union with separate sovereignties”.
- 3 There are also some important differences among the authors, though, which is what makes this collection so interesting to read as a whole. On the one hand, despite frequent notes of caution, many of the contributors are inevitably attracted to an implicit narrative of the suppressed nation realising itself through history. Rwei-wen Wu thus presents democratisation as the outcome of a synthesis between the strategies of a radical DPP and a reforming Lee Teng-hui, both committed to the goal of creating a

new, sovereign, native-dominated democratic state ; Tsong Jyi-lin draws on opinion polls to demonstrate the trend of an increasing Taiwanese identity and decreasing Chinese identity ; Chia-lung Lin uses the same kind of evidence to propose that whenever animosity from China increases, Taiwanese consciousness rises. Even Corcuff himself finishes the work with a quote from Hegel, stating the inevitability of maritime countries achieving independence from continents.

- 4 An alternative interpretation emerges, however, from chapters that emphasise the weakness of Taiwanese national identity. Andrew Morris, for example, observes that when Taiwan was invaded in 1895, although the islanders were not too displeased to see the departure of the Qing administration, they were also quite indifferent to foreign rule by the Japanese. Robert Marsh's chapter on public opinion trends in the 1990s produces conclusions that are at odds with other chapters that are based on the same kind of evidence. Whereas these argue that Taiwanese consciousness has grown stronger, Marsh remarks out that a mere one-fifth of the population favoured independence even after the military threats from the PRC in 1995-96. Ultimately, he notes, the large segment of swing voters could go towards either independence or unification, depending on circumstances in mainland China.
- 5 The substance of the chapters appears to have been written before the victory of Chen Shui-bian in the 2000 Presidential election, although the implications of that episode are discussed briefly throughout. The work has stood the test of time well, however, with most of the problems discussed remaining unresolved even since Chen's second victory in 2004.
- 6 Some weaknesses have inevitably been brought into relief by events. Primary among these is the failure to explore in sufficient depth what Corcuff describes as "the pragmatism of the Taiwanese, who do not all want to risk their wealth on an adventure called nation-building or the Republic of Taiwan". Other issues that Corcuff only raises in passing but which could have been acknowledged and explored more fully are the positive impact of the long period of economic growth under the KMT's stewardship and the security provided by the United States, the role of Chiang Ching-kuo in promoting democratisation, and perhaps also the role of second generation mainlanders in pushing forward political reform and cultural pluralism. The need to supplement historical and sociological methods with more orthodox political science is illustrated above all by the way in which the DPP won the presidency in 2000 due to the division of the KMT by its feuding leaders rather than a burgeoning nationalism. The authors could certainly have drawn more widely on the now very well developed secondary literature in Taiwan studies to develop these themes more fully.
- 7 While narratives and identities are important, politics is also messy and full of accidents. It makes a nice ending to finish this book with a quote from Hegel on the inevitability of islands moving away from continents. Yet it may have been just as appropriate to end with his illustration of the cunning of reason by the parable of the man who sets fire to his neighbour's house out of petty jealousy with the unintended consequence that he burns down the whole neighbourhood.