Samia Ferhat, Sandrine Marchand (ed.), *Taiwan - Ile de memoires* (Taiwan: Island of memories)

Lyon, Éditions Tigre de papier, 2011, 284 pp.

Vladimir Stolojan

Translator: N. Jayaram

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5981>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5981

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2012

Number of pages: 92-93

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Vladimir Stolojan, « Samia Ferhat, Sandrine Marchand (ed.), *Taiwan - Ile de memoires* (Taiwan: Island of memories) », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2012/3 | 2012, Online since 01 October 2012, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5981> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5981>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

Samia Ferhat, Sandrine Marchand (ed.), *Taiwan - Ile de memoires* (Taiwan: Island of memories)

Lyon, Éditions Tigre de papier, 2011, 284 pp.

Vladimir Stolojan

Translation : N. Jayaram

- 1 At a time when Taiwan is habitually thought of as an “identity laboratory,” Samia Ferhat and Sandrine Marchand seek to present it as an “island of memories.” As memory plays a major role in the construction of identity, this shift in emphasis is quite logical. While collective memory ought to be singular, the diversity of the island’s affective communities, and therefore of experiences and memories, fully justifies the plural in the title. Plurality is also reflected among the authors: the book is the fruit of collaboration among scholars from three countries – Britain, Taiwan, and France – drawn from different disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, and literature).

- 2 The book opens with a reflection on Taiwan being an island and its ambiguous relation with the mainland. It comes across as a place of churning, its diversity offered as a counter model to a mainland steeped in homogeneity and stability (p. 10). With its diversity and its dynamism born of inter-mingling, Taiwan is a creation that is creating

itself (p. 11). The introduction goes over the major episodes in Taiwan's history through the prism of what is at stake in current memory, such as the Japanese colonisers' cultural assimilation policy, the re-Sinification to the detriment of Taiwanese heritage during the Nationalist dictatorship, and finally the democratisation supposedly tending towards a multicultural national identity, although, of course, it was mostly the formerly subjugated groups that expressed the greatest desire for memorial recognition (pp. 24-25). This reflection concludes by noting that Taiwanese youth hardly pay heed to the quarrels of previous generations. They even seem to have overcome such quarrels, given their relaxed memory of reconciliation.

- 3 Apart from this rapid overview of Taiwanese history, essential in order for the work to be accessible to non-specialists, the introduction posits some theoretical bases to dispel any misunderstanding over the notion of memory. While individual memory is evoked and would be mobilised through the figure of the exile, the accent is on the collective and identity dimension. Collective memory must not be confused with official ideology. On the contrary, it has helped preserve memories of often sorrowful experiences that did not adhere to what was authorised but which found expression with democratisation, heralding renegotiations over interpreting the past. The normative function of collective memory for strengthening group cohesion is also dealt with, notably by Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Marie-Claire Lavabre. Despite the clarity of the explanatory work, the book might have been sharper had it included a more explicit framework around two or three main thematic issues. This has not been the case, as various researches are presented in a detailed manner but the authors have not explicitly set out the inter-relationships among them – all the more regrettable because the book contains transverse axes amenable to such a treatment. For instance, it might have been presented in chronological order (different temporalities being brought out clearly), thematically (memory of colonial time, memory of war, emergence and then affirmation of a new memory after the regime's liberalisation, indigenous memory), or in terms of the various communities mentioned. As the last of these appears most interesting, this review retains that framework in examining the book.
- 4 The first chapter stands out from the rest as it is the only one dealing with the Qing domination over Taiwan. Edward Vickers convincingly shows that the island was treated by the Manchus as a colony to be populated, but he does not seek to add another pillar to the edifice of colonial studies, rather rising above the ultranationalist Chinese and Taiwanese discourses, both of which tend to be mired in victimhood with insufficient attention to Taiwanese Hans' role as actors in the colonial mission.
- 5 Other contributions deal with the dichotomy between *benshengren* 本省人 (Taiwanese who had been on the island since before 1945) and *waishengren* 外省人 (those who arrived gradually with the Nationalist retreat from the mainland, also referred to as Mainlanders), which structured Taiwan throughout the authoritarian era. It is still perceptible today, but less obtrusively. Wu Nai-de reviews research on the "28 February 1947 incident." This episode, in which Nationalist troops massacred a large part of the local elite and many thousands of innocent people, poisoned relations between the two communities for more than half a century. Despite a prohibition on any mention of the tragedy during the dictatorship, memories have remained vibrant, especially among families. Democratisation helped begin memorial work that remains incomplete. Marchand focuses specifically on Mainlanders, not those who joined the Nationalist

regime's elite but the uprooted ones, the indigent *waishengren* who were unable to integrate once exiled in Taiwan. She seeks to explore the feeling of nostalgia expressed in works written by *waishengren*, with special attention to those of the second generation, that is, those born in Taiwan.

- 6 The 1970s and the emergence, followed by affirmation, of a collective conscience centred on Taiwan form the common theme in the chapters by Hsiao A-chin and Damien Morier-Genoud. Until then, official ideology emphasised Chinese traditional culture as well as a glorious vision of a merely temporary island retreat that would lead to a triumphal return to the mainland. Meanwhile it downplayed heritage specific to Taiwan. The Taiwanese sociologist shows how the maturing of a new generation of Taiwanese intellectuals helped shed more light on the struggle against Japanese occupiers so as to promote a greater participation of local people in the island's governance. This marked the start of the "non-party" (*dangwai* 黨外) movement, which played a leading role in the regime's democratisation. Morier-Genoud holds that a key moment in the formation of a "native" historiography, i.e., free of Nationalist ideological shackles, came in the early 1970s. Thus an anthropological study came out in 1972 stressing the "indigenisation" of Han Taiwanese, as opposed to the "integration of the periphery," which was dear to Nationalist historiography (p. 268). Democratisation led to an institutional and academic recognition of such new reading of the island's past, with for instance the setting up in 2004 of the Institute of Taiwan History in the Academia Sinica.
- 7 The chapters by Samia Ferhat and Peng Hsiao-yen introduce a new memory, that of the second Sino-Japanese war, focusing on different assessments observable on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Ferhat captures the changes in perceiving the past by looking at official commemorations. In China, they closely reflect current political concerns. During the Cold War, these concerns centred on the importance of confronting the United States, but with the rise of nationalism, it is Japanese crimes and the experiences of the population that are in the limelight, swinging between heroism and martyrdom. Feelings are more complex in Taiwan: anti-Japanese resistance is a source of Nationalist pride, but the pro-independence forces are unconcerned with this heritage. Peng chooses to analyse Taiwanese director Ang Lee's 2007 film *Lust/Caution*. Given the theme, which could seem anachronistic considering Taiwanese society at present, and also because of his origins, Ang Lee was quickly seen as representing "the viewpoint of the second generation of Mainlanders" (p. 190). The way in which he invokes the Sino-Japanese war takes after the official historiography of the authoritarian period, characterised by a glorification of the resistance in the face of Japanese invaders and a celebration of Chinese nationalism. However, the director steps back and reverses this viewpoint via the main protagonist, a young Nationalist spy who finally allows the escape of a collaborator she was to kill, thereby condemning herself and her companions to certain death. The character's ambiguity is well brought out and the author goes on to a very detailed reading of the film, but Peng's conclusion is contradictory because she asserts that "Taiwan has not built a collective conscience," while at the same time saying, "The problem of identity is no longer an issue" (p. 219). Further, she interprets Ang Lee's tears following the film's premiere as a sign of "relief at seeing his country recognising his emotion" (p. 222): would the recognition then not signal that despite the disparities in family trajectories among Taiwan's population, there still exists a commonality of feeling?

- 8 The last memory the book deals with is that of the aborigines. Using Sandimen village as an example, Chantal Zheng shows how the Paiwans' re-appropriation of Christianity helped them revive and reclaim their own traditions, which until then seemed destined to disappear. Thus, the snake painting in the church is part of the Genesis tale but is also, and above all, the totemic animal at the centre of Paiwan cosmology. Other elements from Christianity find an echo in traditional religion, which has been able to persist through them. The church also helps preserve languages, as it has been one of the few places where inhabitants could speak in their own tongues (p. 244). Liu Pi-Chen shows that aboriginal heritage, at first stigmatised, has emerged as an object of reclaiming and a source of new-found pride. Liu describes the discriminatory policies under the Qing, the Japanese, and the Nationalists, and the initial movements for reclaiming identity in the 1980s. One of the results was a jettisoning of old categorisations such as "mountain compatriots" (*shanbao* 山胞) in favor of "aborigines" (*yuanzhumin* 原住民). Finally, there is a study of the Kavalan ethnic group, which had to wait until 2002 for recognition as a separate entity. In order to ensure its cohesion, the group has focused its memory on a short account presenting them as originating from the Ilan region three generations ago, although the Kavalan today mostly live in the island's south and centre. It does amount to a recreation of collective memory.
- 9 Most of the accounts in this collection are concentrated around studied populations. A chronological approach could also have been attempted, if the idea was to study the constitution of the island's own collective memory. While a few minor oversights have been touched on in this review, they do not diminish the high quality of the book as a whole. This rich and diverse work can be recommended especially to those interested in the issue of memory in the Chinese world.

AUTHORS

VLADIMIR STOLOJAN

Ph. D. candidate in sociology at Paris VII University (vladimirstolo@hotmail.com).