[POTS]

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Taiwan's post-post-coloniality
IMAGE : HOLLY

Taiwan's post-post-coloniality

A talk with M.I.T. professor Emma Jinhua Teng about new views on Chinese imperialism, Taiwan's colonial past, and how primary sources are now all online

By David Frazier

IN THE world of academics, Taiwan is often talked about as a post-colonial place. After all, like the nearly 100 new nations created with the end of World War II, it is trying to work its way out of massive identity crisis and towards nationhood, and that is what the theory of post-colonialism chiefly deals with.

In the eyes of many, Taiwan's big challenge is to fashion a future out of its tangled knot of historical legacies. And in a country that reveres scholars, scholarship will have something to do with that future.

But the problem with talking about Taiwan as post-colonial is that even though it has been *colonized* several times - the Dutch (1622), Qing Dynasty China (1684), Japan (1895), and the KMT (1945) - it is very unclear as to whether the island has ever been effectively *decolonized*, and if so, by whom? All too frequently, Taiwan's political reins have not so much been passed on from one government to another as much as left dangling. So while post-colonial theory works for India, Palestine, and many countries in Africa, whose writers engendered it, in many ways it is a tough fit for this island.

In a book published last year by Harvard University Press, *Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683-1895*, author Emma Jinhua Teng however discusses the dilemma of Taiwan's post-coloniality from a fresh perspective. After taking a long, hard look at Taiwan's longest colonial period, the more than 220 years under China's Qing Dynasty, she has carefully traced the historical attitudes of the Chinese literati towards Taiwan and their progression over that time. Underlying this evolution of thought, she further poses a serious question: how might Taiwan's situation change if we started viewing China as a historically imperialist power, which it most definitely was?

Last week on the morning before graduation ceremonies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Ms. Teng is an Associate Professor of Chinese Studies, POTS caught her on the telephone to discuss her ideas on history, theory, and a few other things as well.

POTS: Why is China generally not thought of as a historically imperial power?

EJT: Well, I think it has a lot to do with the immediate connotations of words. If you think of the words "imperial" or "colonial," most people think right off the bat of western powers going in and conquering non-western peoples and taking over their land. In fact, early on when I was working on my project, people would ask me, "What are you working on?" I would say, "Chinese colonial travel writing," [and] people would look at me a little funny and say, "European colonial travel writing about China?" So they would try to reconstruct my sentence to fit what their preconceptions were. Because they just couldn't conceive of a non-western power being colonialist.

A lot of people don't know that the Qing Dynasty essentially doubled the territory controlled by the Chinese empire. You know, they think that China has always been the same way for 5,000 years. Even a lot of my Chinese-American students, they're very surprised when I tell them that fact - they're like, "What do you mean?" And then I show them the map.

For hundreds and hundreds of years, the [Chinese] elites at least had been thinking of Taiwan as completely beyond the pale of civilization. It didn't belong to China. It was a savage wilderness. So how did they start to re-conceptualize that, so that by the end of the 19th century they thought: [Taiwan] belongs to China and we can't lose it. That was the evolution I was looking at.

POTS: Before the relatively recent trend of post-colonial thinking, was China given the short end of the stick in terms of not being viewed as an "imperial" power?

EJT: This is one thing that I found was quite interesting. When I went back and looked at some of the 19th century stuff, China was actually considered as an imperial power by Britain and the U.S. If you read a lot of the documents, they saw [China] as an "imperial power," though maybe not in the same sense [of the word] that we're using. I think that gradually this Chinese nationalist narrative of China as being a victim of imperialism only and not a perpetrator of it - I think that view has gradually taken over, so that U.S. perceptions of China are very different than they actually were in the 19th century.

POTS: Why is it important to start thinking of China, and other nations, as being historically imperialist?

EJT: It's important to understand that western nations were not the only ones with histories that were powerful and expansionist, and also, they weren't the only ones to dispossess aboriginal peoples from their lands. So once you start to see it in that context, it helps to get us away from a rigid polarization of the West and the Rest. That dichotomy was very useful for a long time during the era of decolonization, and I think it still has its place, but what I'm interested in right now is how we move beyond that dichotomy.

POTS: So, does that mean non-western imperialism is becoming a general trend in scholarship today?

EJT: I think it's definitely a trend. A lot of people have been working on Chinese imperialism, especially Peter Purdue, who's also at M.I.T. And as I mentioned, Ottoman imperialism, Russian imperialism - there are a lot of people working on this. There's a new book that just came out called *Bodily Encounters*. It's edited by Antoinette Burton, and it's a collection of different essays about colonialism and gender and the body, and that book is definitely taking the global approach. So I think it's becoming more and more popular.

POTS: So taking this back to Taiwan, what difference is it going to make in the way people see the Taiwan-China situation, if you turn around and say China was, historically speaking, an expansionist imperial power?

EJT: I think it makes a big difference. It almost surprised me how much. What most people know about Taiwan is that it's the so-called "renegade province" that broke off from China in 1949 - that's what you'll see in the *New York Times*. Or they see Taiwan as an electronics manufacturer. That's sort of all they know. They don't know that earlier history of how Taiwan was actually originally annexed in 1684 in the first place. They think it's always been a part of China since antiquity, and then the big split in 1949. But once you start to push the history back, and if you look at the process by which Taiwan became a part of China, I think it really gives people a very different perspective. 1684 is actually pretty recent in the scope of history.

The second point: once you start talking about imperialism or colonialism, it really brings the Taiwan indigenes back to the center of the story. Imperialism is always stories about conquerors and indigenous people, and once you start telling that story, the Taiwan indigenes have to be at the center of the story. I think a lot of contemporary discussions about the Taiwan issue really marginalize, or actually just completely ignore, the indigenes.

POTS: One of my criticisms of your book is actually related to this. How can you bring the Taiwan

indigenes more central to the debate when they make up such a small part of the population - less than 2 percent - and have almost no political power? The other 98 percent of Taiwan's population is descended from Chinese settlers in one era or another. So most of the population here can't say they were colonized - they were the descendants of colonizers. The history is more like that of America than say India or the Middle East.

EJT: I would probably consider the Taiwan situation to be more parallel to those settler colonies historically, but the true focus of my book is really the Chinese elite, who were traveling and writing and reading those texts. And what I found was that they were very interested in the indigenous people and they didn't write very much about the settlers. They wrote a little bit, but that wasn't so much the focus for them in traveling. They were interested in what was exotic, what was different, so that was part of the reason I chose that focus. A second reason was that there has been a lot written about the Chinese settling of the frontier. That story has been told a lot. So what I wanted to do was tell a different story.

POTS: I found your source material, especially primary sources, really amazing. How much time did you spend researching and digging up old texts?

EJT: A lot. I'd say start to finish, I probably spent a decade. And you know what's depressing - because I did spend a lot of time tracking down these old things - by the time I was finished, a lot of the stuff was online. Academia Sinica has put everything online.

POTS: At one point in the book you mention the announcements made on Taipei's MRT system, noting that there are no indigenous languages included. It seems you're pretty familiar with Taiwan. What's your personal background like?

EJT: I'm half Taiwanese and half English. I spent a lot of time in Taiwan growing up. I spent a lot of summers staying with my grandmother and my cousins, so I have a lot of Taiwanese connections. That's how I got interested in the topic in the first place. I was actually doing an assignment for a [Master's level] class and I came across this travelogue of Taiwan, you know the really famous one - Yu Yong-he's - and I was reading it and it was really fun. He had actually mentioned a lot of places I'd been to myself, but he's talking about them hundreds of years earlier.

POTS: When you were here working on your project, what kinds of reactions did you get from local scholars?

EJT: There were different reactions. People that were interested in theory in general - you know, theory, discourse, post-colonial theory - I think they were pretty excited about my project, because it's a new approach. Then there are a lot of people who don't like that approach. They like to talk about the Real, and I think that's what your original question got to as well. If I'm saying it's "imagined," does that mean it's not real? I had actually given one presentation at Academia Sinica, and I think some people were very against what I was doing. Like, "How can you talk about this as discourse? This was real, and this was what these Chinese travelers actually saw!"

One thing I kind of argued against in my book was using travel writing to reconstruct what the Qing frontier was actually like. There are a lot of problems with using travel literature. First of all, sometimes travelers lie. Secondly, I found one passage, where people were saying, "I'm only writing down what I saw with my own eyes." But then I found - actually through a computer search - that the passage was completely lifted from one of the Chinese histories and was talking about Thailand. The sources aren't necessarily reliable, so I didn't want to take them as a record of what happened. What I was more interested in was how these images were circulating in Chinese intellectuals' minds about what Taiwan was like. To me, the discourse is actually the important part of it; it's not whether something actually happened.

POTS: But how closely did the discourse relate to the policies of the Qing court? Is that correlation important?

EJT: It's always difficult to draw direct correlation between discourse and policy. One thing I tried to emphasize was that individual travelers had very different impressions of Taiwan. It had a lot to do with their personal stuff and didn't really correlate to the government policy. Part of what I found interesting

was the debates among travelers.

POTS: I see the possibility of reading this book, especially here in Taiwan where everything is so politicized, and seeing it as an argument for Taiwan independence. You show a past where Taiwan was not linked to China, which could imply, though you didn't say this, that Taiwan could be separate from China once again. Would you encourage or discourage this kind of reading?

EJT: I would say if [readers] draw that conclusion, they've missed the point of my whole book. I actually say very explicitly in the book that the question of Taiwan's independence or reunification with China or any other form of sovereignty is absolutely a question that has to be solved through a democratic political process. It has nothing to do with history, nothing to do with scholarship. My scholarship should keep its nose out of this. Maybe I should have put one of those warnings like on the cigarette packets: "Warning: Do not read this book politically," but obviously people will.

POTS: I noticed in the acknowledgements that you mentioned Tu Cheng-sheng (杜正勝), Taiwan's current Minister of Education. He's done a lot of things pushing forward the government's nativization policies. I interviewed him once before, and he said some things about nationbuilding that sounded very similar to the ideas of Benedict Anderson, a thinker whom you noted as a sort of inspiration.

EJT: [Tu] was very gracious. Early on in my research project, I was in Taiwan and still trying to feel my way on the project, and he agreed to meet with me. He pointed me in the direction in a lot of very important visual sources. He's a big expert on that. That's basically what we had discussed at that point, so it's interesting that you bring up these other things.

POTS: In your epilogue, you talk about the difficulties of discussing Taiwan as a post-colonial place. Could you elaborate a little on that?

EJT: I think the basic problem is that no one can actually agree on when Taiwan was actually colonial and then when it stopped being colonial. Some people like to pin it down and say it was the Japanese colonial period, but then not everyone agrees with that. Some people even say that Taiwan's sort of under American neo-colonialism today. So there's no clear moment to point to.

I think [Taiwan] is unique with this very highly ambiguous international status. Taiwan hasn't really experienced what you'd typically think of as the decolonization process. Leo Ching made this argument in his book [*Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*] that Taiwan and Japan have really failed to adequately address the Japanese colonial legacy.

What I did was to try to extend similar thinking to Taiwan's relationship with China. It kind of boils down to this. If we don't call the Qing annexation of China in 1684 a "colonial" occupation - and most people wouldn't - then you can't talk of Taiwan's post-coloniality in relation to China. You have to have colonialism in order to have post-colonialism. So once you start to theorize the Qing occupation of Taiwan as being colonial, then you start to open up the possibility of thinking of Taiwan's relation to China as post-colonial, at least in terms of what I call "deferred post-coloniality," because that is another legacy that hasn't been addressed.

Again, this is not just about the Taiwan-China relation, it's also about the relation between Han Chinese and Taiwan's indigenous people. So one thing that I was arguing was that once you start to address these legacies of incomplete or deferred decolonization, then I think it makes post-colonial theory more directly applicable, or maybe applicable in a different way, to Taiwan.

POTS: Where does your research continue from here?

EJT: My new research is actually on a completely different topic. I'm working on a comparative study of Chinese-Western intermarriage and Eurasian biracial identity - in other words the children - at the turn of the 20th century. It's sort of a comparative project that looks at Chinese sources and Chinese-American sources from that time period. Predominantly it's turning out to be Chinese men who married western women. It's kind of surprising. It surprises you too, right?

POTS: Yes, it is surprising. And very different from now.

EJT: It's different from now, and it's also different from the Hong Kong colonial context, in which you had a lot of western merchants and expatriates having affairs with the local Chinese women. That's sort of where the Eurasian community there emerged from.

What I found in my research was that there were a good number of Chinese scholars that came to the United States in the late 19th century and early 20th century - for example, Young Wing who was the first [Chinese-American] graduate of Yale - who actually married western women. The second aspect was Chinese immigrants to the United States, which was a predominantly male migration. It was predominantly west coast, but also New York. Many of them, especially merchants, intermarried with western women. In New York, it's interesting, it was predominantly Irish immigrant women.

Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683-1895 *by Emma Jinhua Teng, hardcover, 370 pages, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 2004, ISBN 0-674-01451-0.*

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