

Nationalizing Collective Memory in 1970s Taiwan: The Postwar Generation and Its “Rediscovery” of Taiwanese Colonial Literature as Anti-Japanese Resistance

A-chin Hsiau*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how during the 1970s Taiwan’s postwar generation rediscovered Taiwanese literature written during the Japanese colonial period and how that literature represented a form of anti-Japanese resistance. I argue that the postwar generation drew upon a Chinese nationalist narrative of history to “nationalize” the island’s colonial literary past so as to claim affinity with a Chinese nationalist discourse of anti-Japanese resistance. The exploration of the past helped this generation to make sense of the dramatic sociopolitical changes affecting Taiwan in the 1970s and, in turn, to form a sense of their collective self. The dialectical relationship between collective memory and the present, however, was also infused with contemporary political meaning. I reveal how the construction of the collective memory carried politically reformist implications that reflected the postwar generation’s social and political activism during the 1970s. For members of that generation who were born in Taiwan and whose parents suffered under Japanese colonialism, the rediscovery of their colonial literary past as a form of anti-Japanese resistance constituted a political claim to “Chineseness” and therefore a demand that Taiwanese were equally full citizens of the Chinese state. This case study suggests that although such a form of subjectivity based upon the nationalization of collective memory might serve to advance immediate political goals, ultimately it constitutes a barrier to understanding Taiwan’s past and thus to enlightenment.

Keywords: identity, narrative, nationalism, collective memory, public sphere,
Taiwanese colonial literature

* Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of Taiwan History, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica.