

Rethinking Taiwanese and Chinese Identity: Melissa J. Brown's *Is Taiwan Chinese?**

MURRAY A. RUBINSTEIN*

Melissa Brown's *Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* is a challenging book, one that will be the starting point of future discussions of the very nature of identity and the role that identity as a construct plays in Chinese and Taiwanese intellectual and political life. By developing a set of provocative and very useful analytical constructs, and by demonstrating how one may see Chinese and Taiwanese identity construction anew, Brown has forced us to revise the way we think about questions of identity and the evolution of identity. In her provocative and very timely monograph, this University of Washington-trained anthropologist very boldly suggests that we must totally rethink the ways that we approach, conduct research on, and write about the nature and multi-leveled meanings of identity in the Chinese cultural universe.

She begins by laying out a set of schemas and arguments that suggest new ways to consider just what identity is. She then proceeds to show how different forms are created in two very different provinces and among two strongly diverse minorities (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*) populations—the *yuanzhumin* (原住民) of the Taiwan plains and the Tujia of Hubei (湖北省土家族). Her argumentation is built on the core processes she has been able to discern from the historical, mythical, and modern-day data she has obtained through her reading of the existing scholarly literature, the historical archives, and the ethnographic data that she gathered in her own fieldwork. While she stands securely on the shoulders of her predecessors, she makes clear to us that these distinguished scholars—two of whom are colleagues of hers at Stanford—

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- **MURRAY A. RUBINSTEIN** received his Ph.D. from New York University in 1976. He is currently Professor of History and Chair of the Asian/Asian-American Studies Program at Baruch College of the City University of New York. He is also chair of the Taiwan Studies Group of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). He has written/edited five books on Taiwan and on Christianity in China. Among the monographs is *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1991). The edited books include *Taiwan: A New History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999) and *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities* (with Paul R. Katz) (New York: St. Martin's/Palgrave, 2003). He can be reached at <maruby1@msn.com>.

* A lengthened version of Rubinstein's comments can be found Klaus-Peter Köpping, Bernhard Leistle, and Michael Rudolph, eds., *Ritual and Identity? Performative Practices as Effective Transformations of Social Reality?* (Hamburg: Münster/London: LIT, 2005).

may not have seen the total picture nor understood the implications of the results of their own research. She may not be so bold as to say this (though I can), yet still remains convinced of the value and the pioneering nature of that research itself.

The book is organized into six chapters. The first is a carefully presented introduction. Here, the author skillfully places identity issues into the context of the modern political realm of Taiwan/mainland politics. She then lays out the various schemas and approaches to data that both drive her argument and make her case of seeing identity formation in a way not usually thought of or even approached. I see the value of these constructs and admire the way Brown makes use of them, but I do have some problems—writ large and also writ small—with the approach itself, and will suggest these problems as I conclude this review.

The second chapter is a history of the relationship between the Han immigrants to Taiwan and the *yuanzhumin* (here the Plains Aborigines 平埔族), that—following the lead of John Shepherd¹—links the history of both groups together. This approach is a powerful and challenging one that confronts those scholars, like myself, who usually present Taiwan’s first centuries of development as Minnan Han (閩南漢族) conflict with Hakka Han (客家漢族) and also (but to a lesser degree) with the island’s indigenous peoples. However, it is an argument in line with those that Taiwanese historians are putting forth in both scholarly literature and in textbooks and popular literature, for it makes the case for a Taiwanese difference based on the embrace and integration of the aborigine “other.”

This line of argument is then laid out in greater detail in the two chapters that follow. In chapters 3 and 4, using constructs introduced in chapter 1, Brown presents two narratives of Han/Plains *yuanzhumin*-Han integration. This integration produces Plains *yuanzhumin* as Han. She argues that there are two distinct strategies at work—a long-term cultural strategy and a short-term inter-marriage strategy—that have different results and produced different forms of what is nominally Han identity.

In the final substantive chapter, chapter 5, Brown takes the issue of identity across the Taiwan Strait to the northwestern province of Hubei. It is here that Brown undertook fieldwork among and archival work about the Tujia, a major ethnic

¹ John Robert Shepherd, *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier, 1600-1800* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).

minority in that province. She then spells out the approach to minorities adopted by the PRC and ROC, and then contrasts the two.

The final chapter, one neatly titled “Theory and Politics,” adroitly brings the various schemas and modes of analysis together and also returns to the problem of identity and politics.

My simple laying out of the book’s chapters can do little justice to the well-integrated and carefully thought-through whole. Let me thus return to the introduction, the place where Brown opens the intellectual battle with her first and very powerful salvo. I must ask forgiveness for the following early nineteenth century naval metaphors, but will admit I am addicted to the Aubrey/Maturin Series of Patrick O’Brien and tend to see even scholarly conflicts of our day in these “Age of Fighting Sail” terms.²

When we look closely at the introduction, we cannot but admire how the plan of battle is so neatly set. I confess here that as one who has recently edited and published, with Paul Katz, a book on Taiwanese identity, I feel I am on that field of battle standing, with weapons in hand, opposed to the powerfully equipped Queen of Ideas that is Melissa Brown. Brown sees “identity” as a problem of rhetoric—with all the slipperiness that the very word “rhetoric” implies. Such rhetoric does not, if I read her correctly, match the nature of identity and the process of identity formation as it has taken place over the last five hundred years. By stating matters as she does, Brown challenges the very idea of “identity” as it is now usually conceived by most who write on the subject. She suggests that both the Chinese and the Taiwanese all too narrowly conceive the argument over identity, and also holds that what exists can be seen very much as a case of building a foundation upon shifting sands. She argues that identities must be negotiated. She also argues—and this is very much in concert with the new Qing-as-Manchu (滿清) school of recent eighteenth-twentieth century Chinese imperial historiography—that we must go beyond questions of the Han perspective. She goes further and suggests that the very way both China and Taiwan deal with identity is to forget about certain realities such as the “slippery,” culturally constructed quality of identity, and also the way outsider groups have defined

² The series of more than twenty volumes constitutes one long novel, which explores both naval history in the Napoleonic Age and British social history—a la Jane Austin. The first of the Aubrey/Maturin series is *Master and Commander* (London: William Collins, 1970).

themselves and evolved their own societies as a means of coping with the very challenge of Han identity and what it means to be “Han.”

I do not believe, however, that one can go that far. If we try to see identity a bit differently, we reach another set of conclusions about its nature. Where Brown sees identity as construct, I tend to see it “organically,” as a natural survival mechanism—perhaps even as an atavistic form of behavior—that helps individuals and groups adjust to their different physical and sociocultural environments and allows them to come to terms with different sets of relationships and sociopolitical and sociocultural circumstances. Yet I also see identity—and the forms that it takes in China and in Han areas beyond the center—as playing out early sets of absorbed Confucian mind-sets and norms. This localized, lower, and middle class form of adoption of elite ways of seeing one’s self in the world allows them to identify themselves with the “Great” tradition. Richard Lofrano has made this argument, quite persuasively in his monograph on merchants in the later Qing.³ To that degree, identity is socially, culturally, and situationally determined. If one wants to see the process at play in modern America, one need not go any further than to examine the dynamics of the relationship between the Ivy League-educated Wasp aristocrat Charles Van Doren and the Ivy League-educated Boston Jew, Richard Goodwin in Robert Redford’s masterful tale of morality in 1950s America, *Quiz Show*.⁴ Perhaps these points are minor and Brown and I differ but little, but I certainly see them as points of difference to be discussed.

When one moves to chapters 3 and 4 where Brown develops her two forms/patterns of identity change, we encounter another, related set of problems created in good measure by Brown’s decision to focus on the *yuanzhumin* and not the Han as the focal point of the problem of “identity.” The step Melissa Brown takes is a bold one, for if one follows each argument to its end, one must wonder to what degree many “Minnan Han” Taiwanese are Han at all given the amount of marriage and cohabitation that has taken place over the decades. I am putting things in terms of “blood,” a dangerous thing to do given events in Germany, Kosovo, Croatia, and Africa in the twentieth century, but so does Brown by implication. Is this “purity”

³ Richard John Lofrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

⁴ The movie is based upon Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America in the Sixties: A Voice from the Sixties* (New York: Little Brown, 1988).

argument a valid one? Certainly the officials in the PRC seem to treat it seriously, within limits. However, do Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) members also do so? I think this is indeed the case: being Taiwanese is unique in cultural terms, they would argue, but not in terms of “Han-ness.” The implications of the Wolf/Shepherd/Brown argument are not ones the “Taiwanese” on Taiwan might accept, but the arguments make perfect sense given the wording of the title.⁵

Melissa Brown has produced a masterful, exciting, and very challenging book. No one person will see it the same way and each scholar will argue against or for it on the basis of his or her own area of expertise and concern. As a historian who has more than once assumed the mantle and made use of the “weapons” of the anthropologist, I see this book as a brave and largely successful inter-disciplinary tome. The forum that *Issues & Studies* has given us in this special issue is an excellent arena (or is it coliseum?) to test our skills and our weapons. Let the games begin!

⁵ Arthur Wolf and Chieh-Shan Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China, 1845-1945* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University press, 1980).