

Indigeneity, Localism, Sinophobia and the Politics of Apology in Taiwan, Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand

Apology 1—Taiwan

In her first term as president, Tsai Ing-wen apologised to Taiwan's indigenous people for the injustices that they had endured since the 1600s when speakers of Chinese languages migrated from the Chinese mainland to become Taiwan's majority population. This migration dispossessed the original inhabitants—speakers of languages belonging to the Austronesian family. Austronesian languages, whose oldest known representatives are found in Taiwan, spread out from there into Southeast Asia, eastwards into the Pacific and westwards to Madagascar; Indonesian, Tagalog, Hawai'ian and Te Reo Māori are all Austronesian languages. Although Tsai herself has indigenous heritage, she is primarily seen as part of the Han Taiwanese majority, albeit part of the Hakka-speaking group, a minority within that majority.

For many observers, this apology marked a significant reorientation of Taiwan's historical narrative. Tsai was officially the President of the Republic of China on Taiwan, a political entity which has less and less formal international recognition. As president she is a lineal successor to Sun Yat-sen who became the first president of the Chinese Republic in 1912. However, her party (the Democratic Progressive Party) is associated historically with the cause of Taiwan independence.

Taiwan independence advocates argue that Taiwan's Austronesian past and the distinctive experiences of Taiwan's peoples of Han-Chinese background distinguish it from China. Taiwan, they might suggest, resembles societies such as Aotearoa New Zealand, where the interaction between an indigenous Austronesian people and a settling majority (one which traces its ancestry primarily to the British Isles and Ireland) forms the core of the dominant national narrative. Taiwan's history and culture, this viewpoint would contend, can be separated from those of China in the same way that the history and culture of Aotearoa New Zealand can be separated

from those of the British Isles.

Chinese nationalists see Taiwan as an integral part of China's territory. For them Taiwan 'localism' is a product of a Sinophobia—a hatred of China, Chinese people and Chinese culture—that has been internalised by Taiwan's peoples, both Austronesian and Han Chinese, but which was ultimately produced by external forces: Japan, which colonised Taiwan between 1895 and 1945; and the US, the major military supporter of the Taiwan government. The Sinophobic imperialism of the US, this viewpoint holds, was manifested not only in incursions on China's territory and in the colonial subjugation across the Pacific (from Hawai'i to American Samoa to Guam and the Philippines) but also in its history of making it difficult for people of Chinese background to settle in the US and its territories.

Advocates of Taiwan independence oppose the Chinese nationalist narrative by presenting China as a colonising and imperialising force in Taiwan history. Taiwanese of Han-Chinese descent might denounce a long-term Chinese colonial project which could be depicted as having victimised and subordinated Taiwan's peoples, indigenous and non-indigenous. Just as the independent republics of the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries sought to de-Anglicise and de-Hispanise and to 'Americanise' themselves while continuing to use English and Spanish as their major medium of communication, Taiwan independence advocates seek to de-Sinify and to Taiwanise themselves while using Mandarin Chinese as their main language. This phenomenon is also found in Aotearoa New Zealand, where a pre-dominantly English-speaking society attempts its own de-Anglicisation. Just as the post-war history and literature curriculum in New Zealand schools was dominated by the history and literature of England, the post-war history and literature curriculum in Taiwan schools was dominated by the history and literature of China. The study of New Zealand history and literature and the study of Taiwan history and literature have both been associated with an affirmation of local experience and a rejection of 'cultural colony' status. This has intersected, and also conflicted, with movements by indigenous peoples in both Taiwan and Aotearoa New Zealand for political and cultural self-determination. The Austronesian-speaking peoples of Taiwan and Aotearoa New Zealand must contend not only with histories of the empires, Qing and British, which oversaw the settlement and colonisation process, but also with the localist ideologies of the settling peoples of Chinese and British and Irish origin, who now see Taiwan and Aotearoa New Zealand as their home and the source of their identity. This is a set of problems which also confronts indigenous peoples in another part of the Pacific where Austronesian-speaking first peoples have become a

minority in their own lands—Hawai'i.

Apology 2—Hawai'i

When Tsai issued her 2016 apology to Taiwan's indigenous Austronesians, the then US President Barack Obama authorised the establishment of a government-to-government relationship between the indigenous Austronesians of Hawai'i and the US state. This act followed the 1993 apology issued by then President Bill Clinton for the overthrow of the Hawai'ian Kingdom by US-affiliated businessmen in 1893. Obama, who was born and educated in Hawai'i but has no indigenous heritage, was a product of the network of private schools set up by New England missionaries in the 19th century to provide education to children of the native Hawai'ian upper classes and to the children of the elite families of whites who had come to live in the Hawai'ian kingdom and to exercise a controlling economic, political and cultural position within it. People who were neither white nor Hawaiian but who were socially or economically prominent also sent their family members to these institutions.

Perhaps the most famous product of the elite English-language schools of the Hawai'ian kingdom was Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China. Hawai'i can be considered the birthplace of modern Chinese nationalism because it was there that Sun and his allies inaugurated the revolutionary movement that would ultimately overthrow the Qing dynasty, Manchu rule and the dynastic monarchy and replace it with a Chinese national republic (actions that were taken in response to the Qing defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, which led to Japan's annexation of Taiwan).

Sun Yat-sen's Hawai'i can be seen as part of a larger structure of Han Chinese settler societies that spread from Taiwan, through Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Sun was of mixed Hakka and Cantonese background. His Hakka background is shared with Tsai Ing-wen, Lee Kuan Yew (the first prime minister of independent Singapore) and Yap Ah Loy (the founder of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia). The Hawai'i Chinese community of Sun's time was culturally and linguistically diverse. Some Chinese people in Hawai'i spoke Chinese languages and lived in ways that were similar to those in other linguistically and culturally Chinese communities across the settler zone. A Hakka-speaking person in 19th century Hawai'i might have encountered little that was culturally unfamiliar in a

Hakka community in 19th century Taiwan or in 19th century Southeast Asia. Other Chinese people in Hawai'i were localised, speaking Hawai'ian or the ancestor of Pidgin. Hawai'ian Creole English, a language whose vocabulary is primarily English but whose grammar resembles that of Austronesian languages and Chinese. This non-indigenous Asian Pacific population are now referred to in Hawai'i as 'Locals', to distinguish them from Haoles (English-speaking white people) and native Hawai'ians. In this respect, Hawai'i's Chinese locals are similar to the Chinese settler communities in Southeast Asia who adopted Malay or Javanese as their languages, and even to the early settlers in Taiwan who merged into Austronesian-speaking communities.

Both in their localised and 'non-localised' incarnations, these Asian and Pacific Chinese settler cultures in Taiwan and beyond were often the object of contempt. In Qing Taiwan, upper class status was achieved by distancing oneself from the rough world of the first settlers and from the world of the Austronesian-speaking 'natives', by acquiring a classical Chinese education. In Hawai'i, it was the cultivation of standard English and behaviour modelled on the upper-class cultures of the North Atlantic and on the aristocratic Christianised Hawai'ian culture of the royal court. It could be argued that this was the culture that Sun himself embraced, a culture whose backdrop was the Sinophobic value system of the English-speaking 19th century settler societies of the Pacific rim: Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, which, by the end of the 19th century, had come to define themselves as lands of promise for white English-speaking people from which Chinese people, and 'Asiatics' more broadly, would largely be excluded.

It was in this context that the US and Japan took control of Hawai'i and Taiwan respectively in the 1890s. The indigenous Austronesian-speaking peoples in each place had by this stage lost their lands and in many cases their languages. They, along with the 'locals'—the Han-Taiwanese and the non-indigenous Asian and Pacific majority population in Hawai'i—were subordinated to the colonial power of outsiders, Japanese and American respectively. As Taiwan was Japanised in the first half of the 20th century, Hawai'i was Americanised. Japan and the US, these two newcomers to the world of 19th century imperial power, were both engaged in attempts to purge their cultures of Chinese elements; their imperialism was Sinophobic. Colonial rule on Taiwan and Hawai'i sought to create spaces in which manifestations of Chinese culture were restricted to the domain of tourist exotica.

Both places were constructed as model colonies and the definition of success was arguably the elimination of traces of the culture of Qing China, something which modern Japan, modern North American and modern Australia and New Zealand defined themselves against. These structures and their Sinophobic drives provided the counterpoint and context for the modernising and nationalising revolutions which Sun Yat-sen and his successors pursued in the Chinese republic after 1911. This revolution was simultaneously Sinifying and de-Sinifying, in the sense that it sought to make 'China' properly 'Chinese', particularly through the promotion of Mandarin as a national language, and in the sense that it sought to purge 'China' of 'Chinamen' the queue-wearing, opium-smoking, clannish, idolatrous figures reviled by Sinophobic racists across the Asia-Pacific zone, especially in societies such as New Zealand that were dominated by English-speaking whites.

Apology 3—Aotearoa New Zealand

In 2023, Chris Tse, the New Zealand poet laureate, stated that he wanted to hear the Poll Tax apology read in Cantonese. The Poll Tax apology was issued in 2002 by then Prime Minister Helen Clark as a declaration of formal regret by the New Zealand government to Chinese people who had been obliged to pay a tax if they wanted to come to New Zealand or bring family members there which non-Chinese migrants did not pay. Tse's argument can be seen as localist. Those who paid the Poll Tax were Cantonese-speaking New Zealanders—those who were in the country in the 19th and 20th century, when Mandarin was rarely spoken. This affirmation of a Cantonese history of Aotearoa New Zealand—a history in which Cantonese speakers bore the full force of a Sinophobic Pākehā (white Anglo Celtic) culture that wanted to New Zealand to be white, or to keep it as Maoriland, a place where two peoples, Māori and European, supposedly lived in harmony (a central myth of New Zealand identity between the 1870s and the 1960s)—has parallels with the emphasis by Taiwan localists on Hakka and Hokkien as the languages through which Taiwan local identity is affirmed. It is an affirmation of non-Mandarin Chinese histories and identities, a refutation of the structures of the official Chinese Nationalism of the Republic of China (both in China between 1911 and 1949 and on Taiwan between 1949 and the 1990s) and the People's Republic of China which promoted Mandarin as the core vehicle for the expression of Chinese identity.

Tse belongs to a generation people of Chinese descent in Aotearoa New Zealand who have powerfully drawn attention to the continuities between the Sinophobia of the

exclusion era and Sinophobic prejudice and Anti-Asian racism more broadly in the present: Grace Yee's *Chinese Fish*, which recently won the Victorian Prize for Literature in 2024 is an example of this. But at the same time as attacking this Sinophobia and its widespread effects in many parts of New Zealand culture, contemporary statements by people of Chinese heritage in Aotearoa New Zealand challenge Chinese nationalism in ways that resemble the arguments of Taiwan independence advocates, who see themselves as engaged in a project of de-Sinifying and Taiwanising Taiwan, a project that pro-unification Chinese nationalists see as Sinophobic and ultimately the product of Taiwan's colonial history.

Yet the project of de-Sinification on present-day Taiwan can be traced back historically to the Taiwanese experience of the attempts by the Chinese nationalist authorities in Taiwan to 're-Sinify' Taiwan after the end of Japanese rule in 1945. This purported 're-Sinification' was an imposition of the official ideologies of the Chinese Nationalist Party and the promotion of Mandarin as the primary medium of language and culture and a China-centred account of history in which Taiwan experience was marginalised. It was only during the democratisation process of the 1990s and early 2000s that this structure was overturned, bringing in the current focus on Taiwan's histories and cultures, both Austronesian and 'local' in the Hawai'i sense of a non-indigenous Asian-background settler group formed by the structures of colonial power.

Conclusion

In Taiwan, people of indigenous Austronesian-background must contend not only with a PRC nationalism that sees the unification between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland as the end to an era in which Sinophobic powers humiliated China, but also with a de-Sinifying Han Taiwanese localism that focuses on the settler majority.

In Hawai'i, people of indigenous Austronesian-background must contend not only with a US state that has robbed Hawai'i of its sovereignty and independence and marginalised Hawai'ians, linguistically, demographically, politically, economically and culturally, but also with a population of non-indigenous non-European 'Locals' who distinguish themselves culturally from the mainland US but who often do not wish to ally themselves politically with a movement for Hawai'i's independence. This population, often the victim of white racism, is also vigilant against manifestations of Sinophobia and other forms of anti-Asian discrimination.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, an indigenous Austronesian-background population seeks to distance itself from a hegemonic Pākehā culture and from the history of imperial domination that saw that culture and the peoples associated with it become dominant in the way that Han Taiwanese culture became dominant in Taiwan. People of Chinese heritage in Aotearoa New Zealand struggle against a national narrative that has Sinophobic roots and seeks to marginalise Chinese histories in Aotearoa New Zealand by perpetually de-localising them, seeing them as marginal to the country's past and part of a history of New Zealand's 'others'. At the same they fight against forces which erase the specificity of their own histories to subordinate them to the idea of a greater Chinese nation to which people of Chinese descent, be they in Taiwan, Hawai'i, China or elsewhere, are all held to belong.

The various apologies and their politics that have been surveyed in this article display the overlaps and contrasts between the histories of indigeneity, localism and Sinophobia in Taiwan, Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand, where Austronesian peoples have been culturally, demographically and politically subordinated to populations of outsiders who have sought to localise themselves in those lands.

Want more on Taiwan? Click [here!](#)

Image: President Tsai apologises to indigenous peoples on behalf of the government, August 1, 2016. Credit: Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)/WikiCommons.