

7) Identity in Australia and Taiwan: Some Conclusions

The awakening of national consciousness by now has a long history in many countries. But it was the contention of this thesis that settler states have a particular difficulty in establishing such a consciousness. This is because much of what is important to national consciousness-raising belongs to the mythic, yet for the most part settler states have been created in the modern era, in a period when it has been hard for myths to gain currency. As I set what I called the “problem” for settler nations I quoted a piece from Renan in which he talked about “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea” in which he cited “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” And I remarked that one of the problems that the more objective analysts of Australians’ weak national consciousness cite is the thinness of its history. It originated as an offshoot of a major power, it was culturally dominated by that power for a long time—with the consent of the population—and it never came into such serious conflict with that power that it was able to clearly define itself.

As we have also seen, even the United States, which has long had a messianic view of its own destiny, could not escape from the British roots of its formation, indeed it was the pulling on these roots—as the colonists saw it—that led to the events of 1776. And yet the United States has a particularly rich repertoire of myth and national symbol with which it nourishes the idea of its own exceptionalism—the Pilgrim Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, the proclamation of the constitution, the Alamo, the Civil War (often simplified to the Gettysburg Address), Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Boone the settling of the West, Pearl Harbor and the day that will live in infamy—all of these, and many others, have been valorized, simplified and mythologized to become part of the meaning of “what it means to be an American.”

Australia has not had that luxury. Its founding was long regarded as ignominious, and its slow growth to prosperity placid and uneventful. It has no stirring foundation myth, it has no conflict or trauma that enabled it to define itself. The trauma that is most often cited as “Australia’s coming of age,” the mauling of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in the Dardanelles campaign in 1915, was originally undertaken by Australia as a part of the British Empire, and its unhappy result did not substantially weaken links between Australia and the mother country on whose incompetence the fiasco was blamed.

Jeff Archer's remark that, in Australia, "the struggle for the nation-state was a rather limp affair," and that, "A confused nationality was imported from Britain and was transformed by limp Australian resistance into an even more confused Australian nationality" are telling. Australia has always had a problem building a strong national consciousness because this kind of creative act needs drama as its raw material and this is something that Australian history simply lacks. The added problem with being a settler nation is that, since one's history has occurred entirely in an age well recorded, it is also difficult to make it up. Incidents of great historical drama do happen in the modern age, and are absorbed into national mythologies to add something more to the portmanteau containing "what it means to be an XXX".

Look, for instance, at the role in modern Irish national consciousness, by which I mean the understanding the Irish have of their own uniqueness, played by the Easter Rising. Israel, with a creation myth scarified in history and religion is always, perhaps a special case but there is no doubt that the events of 1948 and 1967 have been mythologized for nationalistic purposes. And it is hard to spend very long in Britain without encountering the regard that the British have for their own willingness to continue the fight against Nazi Germany in 1940 against formidable odds—albeit not as formidable as the British like to believe.

Even modern drama can be mythologized, but unlike that of the pre-modern era—take for example the stories of Charlemagne in France, or William Tell in Switzerland, or even King Arthur (who might never have existed at all) in England—it cannot be invented. It can be *reinvented* as part of the "imagining" that informs the community of the nation. But it cannot be made from whole cloth.

Let me summarize my argument so far:

- A historical heritage is essential for the development of a national consciousness;
- This heritage must have a number of great and dramatic events in it, events that can serve in the national iconography as emblematic of the uniqueness, the exceptional characteristics of the people of the nation;
- This heritage must be known to members of the nation;
- For settler nations in the modern era, the acquisition of this heritage is complicated by its having to occur in a comparatively recent and well-recorded time.

For settler nations to escape the cultural embrace of the "mother country" some

violent disagreement on principles, leading to armed conflict is usually needed—the United States, Latin America. Where this has not happened, there tends to be less redefinition of identity—Australia, New Zealand, Anglophone Canada.

7.1) Australia and Taiwan

At the end of Section 2.4, I said that it was my contention that neither Australia nor Taiwan has ever evolved an adequate narrative of its history and culture to act as a foundation for a national consciousness construction. As a result, they both suffer from weak national identities.

In Australia's case I have attempted to show that its relationship with Britain was simply not adversarial enough to produce the kind of strong exceptionalist identity—a belief in cultural uniqueness, a sense of historical destiny—the development of a strong national consciousness would require.

In Taiwan's case, I have argued that it was at first handicapped by its cultural heterogeneity, its lack of literacy, its lack of a written vernacular, and the restriction of the Japanese colonial regime on the means by which consciousness raising could be carried out. It was also compromised by the attractions of the idea of assimilation.

Latterly, the development of a national consciousness among Taiwanese might have been expected to be spurred by the apparently colonial nature of the KMT regime. This was not so for two major reasons, apart that is, from state coercion. These were the sheer vigor of the project to establish a Chinese cultural hegemony and to rebuild Taiwanese as Chinese citizens, and the fact that while Taiwanese might have been “colonial” politically, the economy was open to them in a way it had never been under the Japanese and the prosperity they achieved legitimized, to a large degree, the KMT's system.

As a result, opposition to the KMT which might have been Taiwanese nationalist in flavor—and was, in fact, widely assumed to be so—had more of a civil rights agenda, advocating national elections, restructuring the representative system, the abandonment of discrimination in jobs and education based on place of birth, the lifting of restrictions on local “languages.” While these goals could have been woven into an ideological narrative of Taiwanese repression that could have raised national consciousness—such a narrative would attempt to paint them as symptoms of an underlying problem that only a Taiwanese nationalist agenda could address—this did not happen. Instead, the grievances were

treated as practical matters to be redressed one by one, and once they had been the movements for their redress tended to disband. Taiwanese nationalism has not so far—it is possible that, in future, this might change—simply never evolved a narrative of the “Taiwanese historical experience” resonant enough to win the backing of the majority of Taiwanese. Why is that?

Obviously Taiwan has a history, one with great and dramatic events in it—the Zheng occupation and collapse, the rebellions in the 18th century, resisting Japanese and French aggression in the 1870s and 1880s, the Japanese takeover and the many rebellions against the Japanese including the Tapani incident in 1915 and the Wushe Incident in 1930, and of course retrocession and 228.

The problem is that none of this is easily reworked into a narrative of nationalist exceptionalism. The Zheng dynasty is irrelevant to most Taiwanese who can trace their lineage and the time their family came to Taiwan with remarkable accuracy (in most Western countries knowledge of one’s ancestors seldom goes back beyond four generations. The general haziness about origins this induces provides, strangely enough, greater identification with the shared historical narrative/myth). The rebelliousness in the 18th century often led to Holo-Taiwanese and Hakka fighting; it is hard to see how a unifying national mythology or iconography can be created around this. Few Taiwanese know anything of the French and Japanese attacks—I have seldom met anyone outside a university history department who can name anyone involved in the events or even knows in what year they took place. Liu Ming-chuan the great reforming governor of Taiwan came from and returned to the mainland, so is hardly a candidate for Taiwanese national consciousness (though his story, representing the traditional connection between Taiwan and China and the paternalistic concern of Mainlanders over raising the standards of Taiwan was used to effect in the KMT’s post war construction of Chinese Nationalist consciousness). The Tapani incident is too obscure, the Wushe incident involved Aborigines—still hard for Han Taiwanese to identify with, and the 228 Incident remains hugely divisive.

Here Renan, once again makes an important point. Almost all nations are born out of violence; all unity is the result of people being compelled to join together, often much against their will. In the creation of France, Frenchmen did bad things to each other. As a

result, he says: “Forgetting—I would even go so far as to say historical error—is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation”¹⁹⁷ Terrible things were done by Frenchmen to each other in, say, the Reformation, or during the 13th century was in central France. These are part of France’s historical heritage, and part of the French nation’s cultural exceptionalism. But it is good that no Frenchman today can identify which side of these events his ancestors were on, now can he identify those of the opposing side. The strange alchemy of forgetfulness has turned what could be divisive into what is unifying. “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common; and also that they have forgotten many things.” The “troubles” in Northern Ireland, and the wars of the Yugoslav succession are proof of the truth of Renan’s incite. This also complicates matters for the settler state of comparatively recent origin. As Renan points out, a closely kept historical record can be a burden when what is needed is the forgetfulness that breeds unity. “Take a city such as Salonika or Smyrna, you will find there five or six communities each of which has its own memories and which have almost nothing in common.”

For Taiwan, the 228 incident is too raw and too well known. Whilst it has certainly been used by Taiwanese nationalists as a symbol for Taiwanese consciousness-raising, it has failed to incorporate member of minority groups successfully. Indeed, a major part of the DPP’s Resolution on Ethnic Diversity centered on getting away from the idea that Mainlanders were—and are—collectively guilty for 228. Renan also talked about the future, doing great things together, as important to a nation. 228’s divisiveness was preventing the kind of togetherness needed.

But if the comparison between Taiwan and Australia teaches us anything it is that the influence of the “mother country” can be hard to shake off. Australians have no more in common with the British than the Taiwanese do with China, indeed perhaps less given that the difference in seasons gives a totally different feel to traditional festivals. Yes, they have been reluctant to break off their relationship with Britain, despite *bien pensant* opinion almost universally endorsing the republican program. In a similar manner, Taiwanese so see themselves as Chinese, not of course as PRC citizens, or even necessarily ROC citizens. It is not a political but a cultural identity that informs their judgment, for example the festivals they celebrate and the way they do so are Chinese in origin, common to the Han people.

¹⁹⁷ Renan, *op.cit.*, p3

In this thesis, I have attempted to show that national consciousness formation will be weak if there is no panoply of rousing historical narrative to inform a sense of cultural uniqueness. Australia was introduced to demonstrate this. Then we looked at the question of Taiwan. Taiwan might have a unique history, every nation does. But it does not have a specifically Taiwanese catalogue of great men and great deeds to make the chest swell and the heart beat faster. It is arguable that if Taiwanese nationalists had read their Gramsci better, and better understood his difference between a “war of position” a gradual protracted and many-fronted struggle, and a “war of maneuver,” a frontal assault on the enemy, they might have tried to consolidate a Taiwanese cultural hegemony, which appeared possible in the late 1980s and early 1990s, before assaulting the citadel of electoral politics. The kind of cultural change that I believe was quite apparent as a result of the release of Hou Xiaoxian’s film *City of Sadness* in 1990 needed to be followed up vigorously but it wasn’t.¹⁹⁸ Democratization in the end did not mean the kind of Taiwanization that they sought. It didn’t raise Taiwanese consciousness, it just gave people a vote.

It is my contention that settler nations can, but not always do have a particular problem in terms of identity and national consciousness-raising, a problem of newness. What we see from looking at the great 19th century tradition of nationalist consciousness-raising is the deliberate manipulation of a remote past to forge the myths and symbols of identity, the banners around which a national consciousness can rally. One problem of modern age settler states is that their history is mostly better-recorded and therefore not so amenable to nationalist embroidery. It is easy for the English to romance about the adventures of King Arthur, for example, of whom virtually nothing is known; less easy for the Australians to romance the Eureka Stockade incident—though this has certainly been tried—about which a very great deal is known. Certainly, some settler nations have a strong national consciousness—here one thinks of the United States, South Africa and Israel. Israel, because of its centrality to the Jewish religion is in a category of its own. But both the United States and South Africa have leant on a religious heritage to create foundation myths revolving around concepts of “chosenness” and “mission.”

¹⁹⁸ Only now has some interest in Taiwanese historical themes among popular culture reappeared, with the release of the film *1895* dealing with the Japanese invasion, and director Wei Te-shen’s *Seedy Bal*, a film project about Mona Luda and the 1930 Wushe uprising.

Immigrants to Taiwan did not see themselves as chosen, nor did those to Australia—in fact, in Australia’s case quite the reverse, they were outcasts, which might have bred its own strong consciousness but in fact never did. In as much as they were, for the most part, economic migrants, they were no different from the early settlers in the United States. But in the United States the use of the Pilgrim Fathers narrative at an early time—long prior to the War of Independence—imparted to the Americans a sense of community destiny, which very quickly could become a national consciousness, something both Taiwan and Australia completely lacked. Even so, as we have seen, the Americans rebelled in 1775 because they saw the actions of the British government in conflict with what they perceived as their rights, not as Americans, but as British subjects. It is hard to escape a culture of origin. Australia never tried until the 1980s and, even then, it failed to redefine itself as many wanted. Perhaps Taiwan could have been redefined by the Japanese, had the colonial authorities been more serious about integration. But this would have meant a surrendering of many of the privileges of the Japanese in Taiwan, it would mean admitting Taiwanese as equals in a way that the colonial government fought hard to prevent over the majority of the period of colonial rule, whatever the policy might have been in Tokyo.

But while it might be the case that Japanese colonial rule gave Taiwanese a first understanding themselves as “Taiwanese,” it is also worth noting that a political movement which promoted a separatist “Taiwanese consciousness” only emerged when the hope of assimilation had been effectively crushed. It is also worth noting that one of the major grievances among Taiwanese, if we are to believe informed observers such as the British consul, was lack of access to education—basically dissatisfaction with the degree to which their chances for integration were hobbled by the colonial government. In many “nations” subjugated by colonialisms, a strong “native” education movement—often parallel to the state-sponsored one, and sometimes illegal—emerged, to inculcate the history, culture and values of the subordinated culture to its members. This does not appear to have been the case in Taiwan, either under Japanese rule or later under Chinese Nationalist hegemony.

For a century, Taiwanese national consciousness has been hobbled by the hegemonic projects of “outside” governments. Under the Japanese the spreading of national consciousness faced numerous obstacles, especially the degree of literacy, linguistic fissiparous and restrictions on printing. In the Chinese Nationalist period, it has

faced a different set of obstacles. Among these we might include the plausibility of the Chinese Nationalist hegemonic viewpoint—that Taiwanese, whose ancestry lay in China, should “return” to China had logic which many Taiwanese found compelling enough—certainly compelling enough for many to acquiesce to the Chinese Nationalist belittling of Taiwanese culture as a primitive provincial culture, to abandon which was a sign of cultural advancement.

It has been said—in fact, it is almost received wisdom—that a Taiwanese national consciousness of some vigor has emerged since the late 1970s. In particular, this has been credited with the democratization process of the 1990s. And yet the overwhelming repudiation of the DPP government in both legislative presidential elections in 2008, would suggest that the movements of the late 70s though to say 2000, were not Taiwanese nationalist in orientation. Rather they wanted civil rights, such as free elections at the national level, the depoliticization of the civil service and the military, and end to restrictions such as the use of Taiwanese or Hakka in “official” circumstances, or punishment for using the languages in schools, and a reform of the school syllabus to equip students for the modern world, rather than inculcate them in the ethics of Chinese Nationalism circa 1950. Once these goals were achieved the impetus towards Taiwanese nationalism seems to have halted, just as once Australia threw off the cultural cringe toward Britain, and developed some self confidence in its own culture, the impetus toward nationalism as conceived as severing the long with the U.K. altogether faltered.

But the real problem for nationalists in both Australia and Taiwan is the lack of banners around which to rally. It comes back to Renan, to the pages quoted on page 6:

To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more ... more valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, a shared program to put into effect.

The problem for both Taiwan and Australia in developing a strong national consciousness is that their heritages have yet to be worked into the kind of narrative that evoked the feelings, the emotional responses to which Renan alludes. Both countries need to look into their pasts to find those “great deeds” and “common glories” around which a more vigorous nationalism can form.