

National Imagination, Ethnic Consciousness, and History: Content and Context Analyses of the “Getting to Know Taiwan” Textbook Disputes

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the interplay of national imagination and ethnic consciousness in contemporary Taiwan by analyzing the content and the context of the disputes surrounding junior high school textbooks entitled “Getting to Know Taiwan” in 1997. The author points out that the disputes over the textbooks were a result of different historical visions competing for access to textbooks as a symbol of official recognition. The timing and the focus of the disputes can only be explained in the context of a long-term struggle between the camps of Chinese consciousness and Taiwanese consciousness over the past five decades. The two sets of competing national imagination in Taiwan diverge in their vision of Taiwan’s future (to unify with Mainland China or have Taiwan independence) and their interpretation of Taiwan’s past (especially Taiwan’s historical relations with Mainland China and the legacy of Japanese colonial rule). The paper explains how the three major focuses of disputes were brought together along the long struggle between national imaginations and their immediate contexts in the rise of ethnic politics in the 1990s. However, as the selection and the presentation of the past is greatly influenced by the vision of the future, complex historical facts were compressed into simple symbols and positions to justify visions of the future, which makes the dispute over history difficult to settle. Furthermore, the ethnic basis of national imagination embedded in the disputes over historical interpretation has reshaped and reinforced the existing ethnic consciousness. Finally, the author proposes that what motivates most people to participate in these disputes in particular and ethnic disputes in general is the worry about others’ disrespect or even erasure of one’s ethnic culture and collective memory, which is considered a sign of ethnic demise.

Keywords: Taiwanese consciousness, Chinese consciousness, history, textbook,
national imagination, ethnic consciousness

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