

Rational State and Historical Contingency: Aborigine Land Rights and Ethnic Politics in Qing Taiwan

Chih-ming Ka*

ABSTRACT

Two confronting theories — state exploitation theory and rational state theory — constitute key interpretations depicting the political economy of aborigine land rights in Qing Taiwan. In addition to their disagreements upon the role of the Qing state, their contradictory assessments upon the effect of state's protection of aborigine land rights are unsettled. This study reviews memorials, contracts and policy debates as well as land cadastral data collected by the Japanese colonial government to test both arguments. The empirical evidence predicates the dissolution of aborigine lands in the west coast plains and the displacement of their traditional settlements. But, it also shows, in the post-1760 period, a policy-led reallocation of plains aborigines to border areas close to the foothills and the implementation of effective protection of aborigine land rights. The empirical findings do not support the rational state argument, that the Qing state achieved “ethnic status quo” in the island frontier through “accommodating” existing multi-tiered land rights between aborigines and Chinese. Nor the reallocation and protection of aborigine lands in the post-1760 period fit the state exploitation theory, which assumes a predatory Qing state uprooting plain aborigines. In this article, an alternative interpretation pivoting on ethnic politics is adopted. The ethnic politics model not only reveals how the Qing state uses its power to define and reallocate aborigine lands in order to manipulate ethnic relationships to serve its rule, but also illustrates the unintended consequences of the interaction among state, plains aborigines, mountain aborigines, and Chinese settlers. As a consequence, a path dependent model highlighting the historical contingency is preferred to the rational choice model.

Keywords: State, Land Rights, Ethnic Relationship, Plains Aborigines

* Researcher, Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica.