

UC Berkeley

Asian American Research Journal

Title

Settler Colonialism by Settlers of Color: Understanding Han Taiwanese Settler Colonialism in Taiwan through Japanese American Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mk3z9qk>

Journal

Asian American Research Journal , 2(0)

Author

Fei, Rosalyn

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/RJ42057362

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Settler Colonialism by Settlers of Color: Understanding Han Taiwanese Settler Colonialism in
Taiwan through Japanese American Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i

Rosalyn Fei

Abstract

My paper evaluates the United States settler colonial framework in relation to Han Taiwanese citizenship, independence, and rights to the island now called Taiwan. I use parallels from the Japanese American occupation of Hawai'i to investigate how white settler colonial logics, such as multiculturalism and the settler-colonial Unconscious, are instilled in East Asian settlers through the promise of democratic rights and sovereignty. Settlers of color, therefore, complicate the binary between the “colonizer” and “colonized” as demonstrated through the simultaneous oppression of people of color by the white settler state and the oppression of Indigenous peoples by settlers of color. With this, I reflect on the following questions: What does it mean to claim independence on land that is stolen Indigenous land, and how is this narrative further complicated when these settlers are people of color? Similar settler colonial tactics and commitments to capitalism are utilized by both the U.S. and Taiwan; therefore, it is imperative for Taiwanese and Taiwanese American people to recognize this and reject the white settler colonial framework to truly be in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Introduction

Modern-day Taiwan is internationally recognized as a Han Taiwanese, democratic state with complicated ties to the Republic of China. As international discussion surrounds whether Taiwan can claim independence as its own country, less recognition has been given to the Indigenous Austronesian peoples that have been living on the island of Taiwan for thousands of years. The erasure of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan parallels the displacement of Native Americans in the Global North due to settler colonialism. While settler colonialism has been

thoroughly analyzed in Western contexts, less discussed is how Indigenous peoples have been colonized by not only European forces, but also East Asian powers, which have all employed capitalist settler colonial tactics in Taiwan. It is vital that Han Taiwanese occupants of the island, alongside Taiwanese Americans whose descendants and families live in Taiwan, grapple with the complexities of living on occupied Indigenous land. While we can recognize that East Asians experience oppression under white colonial powers, when East Asians become settlers of color and conform to white colonial logics, they actively harm Indigenous peoples by claiming rights to citizenship and sovereignty on Indigenous land. To illustrate how settler colonialism can be understood in Taiwan, I draw from an understanding of settler colonialism in the United States, specifically in Hawai'i, with the suppression of Indigenous life and sovereignty by Japanese American settlers in conjunction with the United States government. I hope to offer an analysis that allows Taiwanese citizens and Taiwanese Americans to reflect on how the settler colonial past and present in Taiwan undergirds Taiwanese politics and citizenship-making.

Japanese Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i

As defined by Evelyn Nakano Glenn, the objective of settler colonialism is “to acquire land so that colonists can settle permanently and form new communities ... [and] to realize these ambitions, the first thing that must be done is to eliminate the indigenous occupants of the land” (55). Though settler colonialism is a logic rooted in whiteness and capitalism, people of color can be complicit in settler colonialism for either the benefit of the white settler state, themselves, or both. In Hawai'i, the United States government overthrew Indigenous Queen Lili'uokalani in 1893 and utilized Japanese American immigrants as laborers to harvest sugar for the settler colonial state (Trask 2). In this context, it is evident that the United States government stole land and resources from Indigenous Hawai'ians. While the United States

government was the central benefiter and actor, Japanese American immigrants were also complicit in the ongoing colonization of Hawai'i.

When Japanese Americans were first forced to work as harvesters in Hawai'i, they extracted resources while forcibly giving their bodies and labor to the white settler cause. However, when the United States government offered them rights to citizenship, Japanese Americans accepted their role as settlers of color and willingly suppressed Indigenous Hawai'ians to secure their rights. In the 1950s, the Democratic Party, hoping to overthrow the Republican majority in the Hawai'i state legislature, took advantage of the Japanese American majority in Hawai'i by offering them the right to vote; in exchange, Japanese Americans supported the Democratic Party and helped force out Republican legislators (Saranillo 289-90). Through this, Japanese Americans were finally naturalized as American citizens with the 1952 Walter-McCarran Act—at the same time, Japanese Americans failed to reject settler colonial logics at the expense of Indigenous Hawai'ians (Saranillo 290). Enticed with American political power, Japanese Americans argued instead that they deserved the full rights of white settlers, leaving Indigenous Hawai'ians to fight for their own livelihoods and sovereignty.

The abandonment of Indigenous peoples by East Asian communities is not unique to Japanese Americans in Hawai'i. These instances must be critically examined, as Asian American history, citizenship, and power is seldom analyzed alongside Indigenous sovereignty (Saranillo 292). Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of settlers of color, settler colonialism must be understood as an “ongoing structure” that strengthens itself through “inclusion and incorporation” (Glenn 55; Saranillo 292). With this understanding, Haunani-Kay Trask, an Indigenous Hawai'ian activist, argues that Indigenous Hawai'ians are continually marginalized by Japanese American settlers today. As Japanese Americans fight for political

power in the United States electoral system, they subscribe to ideals of multiculturalism, a settler colonialist tool used to legitimize the oppression of Indigenous peoples through rewarding people of color who are to assimilate to the white settler state and othering those who do not (Saranillio 285). In Hawai'i, the destruction of Indigenous Hawai'ian sovereignty was strategically devised through celebrating and acknowledging the various Asian Americans communities living on Indigenous land (Trask 4). As Trask explains, "through the celebration of the fact that no single 'immigrant group' constitutes a numerical majority, the post-statehood euphoria stigmatizes Hawaiians as a failed indigenous people whose conditions ... actually worsen after statehood" (Trask 3). As a result, the United States argues that their encroachment on Hawai'i is not of destructive "colonialism," which is associated with white settlement, if there are people of color inhabiting the island. Through this, settler colonialism weaponizes non-Indigenous people of color against Indigenous peoples to legitimize rights to Indigenous land.

Settler Colonialism in Taiwan

In comparison to the Japanese American colonial settlement of Hawai'i, Indigenous peoples in Taiwan also face ongoing settler colonialism by settlers of color. As explained in "Vanishing Natives and Taiwan's Settler-Colonial Unconsciousness," a brief history of Taiwanese colonization begins with the Dutch occupation of Taiwan in 1624. The Dutch East India Company aimed to export resources from the island to the Netherlands and brought over Chinese laborers from Guangdong and Fujian to work at their forts (Hirano et al. 198). Alongside Han Chinese immigrants who had already arrived before Dutch colonization, the additional influx of Han Chinese immigrants to Taiwan reduced Indigenous peoples' access to their land and resources through Chinese violence securitization of land boundaries and mass elimination of critical food, such as deer, for Indigenous peoples (Hirano et al. 198).

After Dutch colonial rule, the Qing dynastic government established claim to Taiwan and began legally separating Han Chinese immigrants from Indigenous peoples in 1683, forcing Indigenous peoples to consolidate from across the island. Han Chinese rulers developed agrarian settler communities and did so through establishing a land ownership system through taxation (Hirano et al. 199). A key tenet in settler colonialism, property is converted into capital and presumably owned by settlers while Indigenous peoples are displaced (Glenn 55). With Han Chinese immigrants claiming ownership to Indigenous land, Indigenous peoples who resisted were threatened by violent excursions, leading the Qing to adopt a boundary line near the central foothills to prevent Han Chinese and Indigenous peoples from interacting (Hirano et al. 201). Though trade among the Han Chinese and Indigenous peoples continued, by the 1870s, the Qing tightened borders and restricted Indigenous movement through infrastructure policy and military force (Hirano et al. 203-4). The Qing dynasty strategy was two-fold: settlers exterminated Indigenous peoples by confiscating their means to hunt and killing those who were considered dangerous to their rule through law and physical violence; at the same time, when trade among Han Chinese and Indigenous peoples was difficult to control, they attempted to convert Indigenous peoples deemed tolerable through marriage and re-education (Hirano et al. 203). These strategies led to the destruction of Indigenous life, both physically and spiritually.

After the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the Japanese government ruled Taiwan until 1948. Japanese government officials aimed to manufacture Indigenous consent for further land-grabbing by portraying themselves as more humanistic, reasonable leaders in comparison to the Qing government and their treatment of Indigenous peoples; however, such portrayal was predicated on the fact that the Japanese government viewed the Indigenous peoples as uncivilized and unable to live peacefully without Japanese intervention (Hirano et al. 205).

Rather than utilizing apparent strategies to displace Indigenous peoples, the Japanese government used the guise of economic and administrative reform and rule to obscure their colonial intentions (Hirano et al. 205). Additionally, the Japanese government implemented weapon bans to restrict Indigenous resistance (Hirano et al. 207). In the 1900s, when the facade of pacification was not useful to the Japanese government anymore, they inflicted genocide through multiple attacks, resulting in Indigenous death (Hirano et al. 209). Though the Japanese government attempted to disguise their settler colonial tactics, their consolidation of property and land through economic policy demonstrates the myriad forms of settler colonial violence inflicted on Indigenous peoples in Taiwan.

Finally, in 1949, the Kuomintang (KMT) Party left China and arrived in Taiwan, overtaking Japanese rule. Through intense KMT Martial Law, extermination and discrimination of former settlers and Indigenous peoples existed for about four decades, and “nativist” movements that center Han Taiwanese settlers that arrived prior to the KMT Party rule grew, leading to growing political dissent led by activists (Tsai 87; ch. 2). Their organizing eventually led to not only the creation of the modern-day opposing political party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), but also the end of Martial Law in 1987 (Tsai 87; ch. 2). During this governmental transition, Han Taiwanese settlers that arrived prior to KMT Party rule appeared to organize alongside Indigenous peoples under the nativist movement to recognize the people that lived in Taiwan before Martial Law. Consequently, legislative steps under the Taiwanese democratic government were taken to recognize Indigenous peoples and their rights. For instance, in 1996, the Council of Indigenous Peoples was established to manage Indigenous issues and serve as a medium between the Taiwanese government and Indigenous peoples; additionally, in 1977, the “Indigenous peoples” (“yuanzhuminzu”) and Indigenous human rights

were officially recognized in Taiwan's Constitution (Tsai 88; ch. 2). While these policy changes allowed Indigenous peoples to further assert their rights within the context of Taiwanese settler colonialism, this reform, hailed by Han Taiwanese people who regarded themselves as "pre-colonial" to the island, failed to recognize Indigenous sovereignty as separate to the settler state.

Han Taiwanese Settler Colonialism in Present-Day Taiwan

Though Taiwan now operates under a democratic government with the DPP and KMT parties as its main political parties, Indigenous peoples of Taiwan are still living under settler colonial conditions. The KMT Party has explicitly denied Indigenous peoples' rights to their land by claiming Taiwan as part of China while the DPP claims that Taiwan is its own Han Taiwanese nation. As Hirano et al. explains, "both positions demonstrate how the construction of a collective 'self,' demands the willful forgetting of the past. In this sense, Taiwan's current political divisions are a result of the forgetfulness of the past, namely, the settler-colonial Unconscious" (212-3). Similar to American claims to Hawai'i and North America, Han settlers rely on an intentional forgetfulness of the Indigenous peoples that have occupied the land long before they arrived. Current Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has attempted to reckon with this deliberate "Unconsciousness" by issuing a formal apology to Indigenous peoples in 2016, but her statement "provoked ... even deeper disappointment and indignation from the indigenous activist communities" (Tsai 10; intro.). Rather than offering material changes to Indigenous conditions, President Tsai's empty statement is a prime example of the facade settler colonialism creates under multiculturalism: Indigenous peoples who assimilate are "recognized" within the settler state but not given real sovereignty. Moreover, as settlers of color Han Taiwanese individuals benefit from this framework—in fact, settlers of color continue to preserve their

political power while creating the illusion that they are addressing the needs of Indigenous peoples, thus allowing them to justify the existence of the settler state.

The settler colonial governments of the United States and Taiwan further reinforce the forgetfulness of Indigenous peoples through creating an image of a barren, empty land before colonization. Both the Qing dynasty and Japanese governments drew boundary lines between colonial settlements and Indigenous peoples to create physical separation. However, as both governments wanted to extract resources from Indigenous land, they enacted laws and moved borders under the assumptions that there was an insignificant population of Indigenous peoples, and those that did exist were hostile and needed to be killed or civilized. Hirano et al. compares the movement of borders in Taiwan to the United States as “this steady dissolution of Taiwan’s middle ground bears a striking resemblance to other settler-colonial contexts, particularly North America ... and considerably shrank the political leverage previously afforded to different Indigenous groups” (203). Through suppressing Indigenous populations and pushing them out of their own land, these colonial governments continue to uphold a narrative that deflects blame from themselves while denying the existence of Indigenous peoples and their rights to sovereignty.

Though there are distinct parallels between settler colonialism in Taiwan and Hawai'i, the ongoing structure of settler colonialism in Taiwan has not been necessarily viewed as settler colonialism. This can be attributed to the political victimization of the Han Taiwanese settlers and the idea that Taiwan is now “post-colonial,” or the idea that colonialism and its impacts are an event of the past, contributing to the current Unconsciousness toward Indigenous communities (Tsai 9; intro.). In understanding that different forms of oppression can be “overlapping without equivalence,” there can be an acknowledgement that some Han

Taiwanese settlers have also faced oppression (Saranillio 293). For instance, with the takeover of the KMT Party in 1949, Taiwanese settlers that arrived before the KMT Party were often subject to the same forms of oppression as Indigenous peoples through exclusionary laws (Hirano et al. 212). Simultaneously, these Taiwanese settlers originally arrived under different colonial entities—whether it be during Dutch colonization, Qing settler colonialism, or their own decision—and continue to benefit from settler tactics at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Compared to our understanding of Japanese American settlers in Hawai'i, it is apparent that the binary assumption between the “colonized” and “colonizer” does not encompass the range of colonial dynamics. Despite such nuance, settler colonialism—in any global context—harms Indigenous communities in ways that settlers of color cannot relate to.

Conclusion: Taiwanese Independence and Indigenous Sovereignty

In discourse about Taiwanese independence, it is vital to question what independence and land sovereignty means to Indigenous peoples. For Indigenous peoples, Han Taiwanese political sovereignty and independence from China does not change the Indigenous material conditions. As demonstrated through President Tsai's apology to Indigenous peoples, performances by settlers of color ultimately do not give land back to Indigenous peoples nor address their access to food, housing, education, or their own culture. Therefore, as Taiwanese and Taiwanese Americans argue for Taiwanese independence and as political tensions rise with China, there must be consideration of whether arguing for Han Taiwanese sovereignty is compatible with Indigenous sovereignty of Indigenous peoples in Taiwan. In reality, the post-colonialism framework ignores the current struggles of Indigenous peoples and refuses to see the present, in-tact structures of settler colonialism. In this sense, a move towards the “post-colonial” through Taiwanese independence would be detrimental to Indigenous livelihood.

This contradiction of who is awarded sovereignty can also be examined in context to Taiwan's relationship with the United States: as both continue to exist as capitalist, settler states, both governments have similar interests in upholding this power dynamic. Erasing Indigenous peoples through selective Unconsciousness further ingrains settler colonial logics to settlers of color, ultimately pitting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of color against each other. A further examination of the role of white supremacy and capitalism through settler colonialism in Taiwan may provide critical analyses on the relationship between Han Taiwanese settlers and Indigenous peoples today.

Bibliography

- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Settler Colonialism as Structure." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 52–72., <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649214560440>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2021.
- Hirano, Katsuya, et al. "Vanishing Natives and Taiwan's Settler-Colonial Unconsciousness." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2018, pp. 196–218., <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1443019>.
- Saranillio, Dean Itsuji. "Settler Colonialism." *Native Studies Keywords*, 2015, pp. 284–300., <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/39810>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2021.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i." *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2000, pp. 1–26., <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.26.2.b31642r221215k7k>.
- Tsai, Lin-chin. "Re-Conceptualizing Taiwan: Settler Colonial Criticism and Cultural Production." *University of California, Los Angeles, UCLA*, 2019, pp. 1–269, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30h7d8r5>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2021.