"We Are Not Content": Environmental Exploitation against Taiwan's Minority Populations

James Alfano
History

On a stifling August morning outside Taipei's Presidential Office Building, newly elected President Tsai ing-wen (蔡英文) stood before a group of representatives from each of Taiwan's 18 recognized indigenous tribes. As she addressed the public, eager spectators rushed towards the heavily guarded gate, hoping for an opportunity to witness a rare moment in Taiwanese history. To her side, Capen Nganen stood dressed in traditional regalia waiting for his turn to address the crowd. For Capen and the rest of the Yami tribe, their voices failed to resonate with previous political administrations. Despite Article 31 of the Indigenous Peoples Basic Law "forbidding the storage of toxic materials without tribal consent[1], former President Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) approved the development of a nuclear waste storage facility on Orchid Island in Lanyu Township without consulting the island's indigenous residents. Ten thousand barrels of nuclear waste were stored in a facility the Yami believed to be a chicken canning warehouse. Upon learning of the warehouses' true contents, large-scale protests extending well beyond Lanyu township's borders swept through the main island in a rare public showing of support for the Basic Law among Non-indigenous Taiwanese citizens who often criticized the law as "clear violations of normative standards of equality". [2]

After her inauguration in 2016, President Tsai quickly attempted to "correct our past errors" to the tune of just over $83 million USD for three decades worth of illegal dumping and associated public health risks on Orchid Island. [3] Rather than accepting the payment, Capen bided his time and hoped for something more meaningful: remorse for disturbing the sacred land of his tribe and deceiving the indigenous community. President Tsai's apology to all indigenous tribes and minority groups on that summer day is the first apology of its kind for the Yami tribe

and Taiwan's minority populations following an extensive history of environmental exploitation at the hands of Dutch colonists, Japanese military forces, and Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists.

This paper aims to analyze the historiography of Taiwanese environmental history, its shortcomings, and potential hurdles in analyzing sources subject to biases led by a disparity in works composed by underrepresented peoples. This brief segment is followed by additional research highlighting major environmental exploitation campaigns from Dutch colonization to topical "conservation efforts" in the 21st century. With just over 500,000 (2%) of Taiwan's population identifying as a member of a government recognized indigenous tribe (excluding the Hakka minority subgroup[4]), the need for further examination of past transgressions is critical to understanding the obstacles Taiwanese minority populations face and how progressive environmental movements are tied to indigenous rights and government accountability for past injustices.

Constructing Native & Hakka History

Scholarship of Taiwanese *indigenous* history (and the environmental issues encompassing it) frequently focuses on conflict-ridden relationships between tribes and non-indigenous "outsiders". In her article "Conceptualizing Indigenous Historical Justice…*",* Awi Mona describes Taiwanese indigenous history as "oppression by different colonizers".[5] Prior to President Tsai's apology, Taiwan's minority population was an ignored enigma with no place in any Taiwanese historical narrative. Han-Chinese author Lian Heng's book *The General History of Taiwan* affirms this neglectful stance with a simple but telling message: "Taiwan had no history. The Dutch pioneered it, the Tungning Kingdom built it, and the Qing Empire managed it".[6] President Tsai further articulated the problem of indigenous oppression at the hands of colonizing forces by conceding to the public: "...we only know to write history from the perspective of the dominant".[7]

Interdisciplinary Approaches

Let’s sing our mountain songs.
Let's sing to soothe our upset hearts.
Let's sing to transform the high-rises to green mountains.
Let's sing until the wide avenues become rivers

- Lin Shengxiang, “Let us Sing the Mountain Song”

With much of Taiwan’s history of minority groups shrouded in mystery due to imperial hegemony, language barriers, and frequent regime changes, academics have turned to analyzing songs to contextualize the environmental devastation inflicted on minority groups by imperial forces. Tse Hsiung-Lin is one scholar that aims to highlight the “collective consciousness of Taiwan’s Hakka minority in their struggle against socio-political suppression”[8], particularly through the verse of two prominent Hakka musicians: Chen Yongtao (陳永濤) and Lin Shengxiang (林勝祥). Both artists aim to, as Hsuing-Lin states, “sing of the beauty as well as their concerns for the ecological and cultural crisis of their Hakka homeland - a homeland that has undergone drastic change....”.[9]

Yongtao and Shengxiang’s Hakka ethnicity is a Han-Chinese subgroup with ancestral roots in southern Mainland China. Along with a considerable population in Taipei, the Hakka ethnic group has a strong presence along the coastal counties of Pingting and Taitung.[10] In Hualien City, Hakka culture is proudly displayed amongst a flourishing arts scene; school singing competitions, culture parks dedicated to Hakka culture, and vivid works of art fill recreational spaces in Taiwan’s largest county. Both artists are environmental activists that use their Hakka background to illuminate the antagonistic relationships between “corrupt” local officials and Hakka landowners, in addition to lyrics comparing urban vs. rural lifestyles.[11]

Scholars also analyze paintings and other artworks by minority groups to examine their relationship with nature and how contemporary environmental policy often clashes with those

ideals. While a mainstream art movement did not take shape until the late-20th century, indigenous artists began using their platforms to create what Wei Hsui-Tung describes as "nativist movements". Wei adds that the nativist movement helps create a "a sense of cultural identity expressed through the various art practices of Taiwan…".[12] With scarce primary sources from indigenous tribes available (especially in English), interpreting messages behind artwork helps historians bridge communication gaps and promote cross-disciplinary studies between art, history, and environmental studies. Through these analyses, scholars can develop a robust historiography that encompasses minority populations and their perspectives on the environment.

Indigenous artwork depicts a myriad of themes, some of which illustrate native views on the environment through childhood experiences. *"Don't Take too Much"* by Etan Pavavalung of the Paiwan tribe depicts Etan's grandfather directing his grandchildren to pick betel nuts from a nearby tree. The title alone suggests a relationship with nature based on mutual respect and only taking what is needed. In a recent interview, Etan reinforces this central theme by emphasizing the "ancient tribal wisdom about respecting nature and never exploiting natural resources".[13] Since the *Paiwan* language lacks a written form, responsible interpretation of Etan's art and others will aid scholars in crafting a narrative that pays dividends to Taiwan's indigenous population without "colonizer" historiography looming in the backdrop.

While analyzing songs and artwork helps spearhead new historiographical approaches, significant controversies persist. Prior to the advent of Taiwanese indigenous research in the 1980's, Taiwanese "history" was largely written through the lens of Japanese occupation or local Han-Chinese history with little room for Taiwan's diverse native population.[14] Several years later, a fierce debate among Taiwanese scholars emerged pertaining to *"indigenization"* (historiography centered upon Taiwan's Han-Chinese taking traditions and molding them in a

uniquely Taiwanese fashion) vs. *"mainlandization"* (historiography centered upon retaining Han-Chinese traditions from the mainland). Taiwan's indigenous population is omitted from both approaches.

As Taiwan and Mainland China continue to trade barbs in the public sphere, how scholars approach Taiwanese history is of paramount diplomatic importance. The word "indigenization" evokes controversy as the concept "risks" giving historical validity to indigenous origins (in other words, ceding land-rights back to natives) and overthrowing the Han-centric history that has helped define Taiwanese historiography for decades. Before a comprehensive, non-colonial perspective can be attributed to Taiwanese environmental history, scholars must find an answer to this historiographical dilemma by bringing indigenous groups into the narrative. As Chang Lung-Chich notes, this issue is still "waiting to be solved".[15] With these historiographical voids yet to be filled, it is worth noting that Taiwanese environmental history beyond the actions of colonial forces has yet to make significant traction in the academic community.

Dutch Colonization

The agonizingly long timeline of colonial intervention into indigenous inhabited land begins at the dawn of the 17th century in present-day Tainan along Taiwan's western shores. Here the Dutch East India Company established a lucrative deer-trading industry with the Tokugawa government in Japan and mainland China's southern port towns.[16] To facilitate an efficient trade network, Dutch merchants and soldiers constructed Fort Zeelandia, a sprawling facility that leaked into aboriginal villages further inland. The imposing fort immediately impacted the lives of indigenous peoples within its vicinity. Officers occupying the compound began imposing taxes, appointing Dutch-sympathetic chieftains to prominent administrative positions, and establishing Christian missionary schools throughout neighboring native

communities.[17] While originally small in scale, the construction of Fort Zeelandia created the infrastructure needed for Dutch citizens to intervene further into indigenous land with little resistance. As battles for resources along the Western Hemisphere waged on across multiple nations, the East India Company's foothold in Western Taiwan remained unchecked and allowed an abundance of natural resources to be exploited for ambitious Dutch merchants.

While the Spanish Empire frequently used Taiwan's northern coast as a trading port, the Dutch took it a step further by establishing sugar and rice plantations further south. To compensate for their small numbers (and a likely aversion to the heavy labor synonymous with plantation life), Dutch officials "imported" Han-Chinese citizens from Guangdong and Fujian provinces across the Taiwan Strait. As the population of new Chinese laborers grew, traditional indigenous hunting grounds gradually dwindled. Scholars Katsuya Hirano, Lorenzo Veracini, and Toulouse Antonin-Roy allude to the vicious competition that unfolded between aboriginal leaders and Chinese immigrants looking to sell deer hides directly to the Dutch.[18] Frequent fighting between immigrants and tribes occurred once the Dutch permitted Chinese immigrants to hunt deer through exclusive licenses. With over 30,000 settlers and the East India Company's blessings, Chinese settlers quickly chipped away at traditional hunting grounds for economic gain. Dutch traders, their pockets filled with money from Tokugawa shoguns desperate for new armor, had no problem turning a blind eye to increasing encroachment on native lands by Han-Chinese immigrants.

The East India Company paid dearly for condoning this behavior in the name of competition. With a booming new population and free reign over lucrative hunting grounds, laborers turned settlers invaded Dutch fortresses, kicked out the merchants, and set the stage for the Qing Empire to "conquer" Taiwan just two decades after Dutch ships first arrived. For

Taiwan's minority population, quality of life under Qing authority plummeted. In a dramatic policy shake-up, the empire implemented land redistribution systems rife with discriminatory undertones designed to exile indigenous tribes from fertile lands. Hakka speakers from Guangdong and native villages received small, infertile plots to provide for their families, while Han-Chinese immigrants from Fujian acquired more arable settlements.[19]

Indigenous Life Under the Qing Empire

With the Qing Empire in control, indigenous tribes experienced further discrimination under this new agrarian system with an added linguistic ingredient. The term *"fan" 飯* is commonplace in Taiwan, as it can be used to denote rice, food, or even an entire meal. However, the character for *fan* meaning *barbarian,* or 番, took on an offensive connotation when combined with culinary jargon. To measure the level of conformity among indigenous tribes to Han-Chinese customs, colonizers began using the term *shufan* "熟 番" ("cooked barbarian") to distinguish Han settlers from those with indigenous roots, or *shengfan "生 番*" ("raw barbarian"). In this case, "raw" corresponds with a "more savage" personality unwilling (or worse, incapable) of assimilating to Sinocentric customs.[20] The more "cooked" an indigene was, the better they "warmed up" to Han traditions. Qing government officials frequently viewed plains indigenous groups to be more "cooked", while tribes occupying mountainous regions were considered "raw". Beyond segregated land distribution, the Qing government used an individual's hometown landscapes to determine the severity of each tribe's "savagery". Mandarin Chinese frequently relies on double-entendre to express humor, irony, or elicit multiple interpretations of a given pronunciation. The widespread prevalence of *"fan"* in the Mandarin Chinese vernacular for more common characters, such as *飯,* allows the term to persist in the present day.[21]

Han-settlers utilized the *shufan/shengfan* system to encroach on indigenous lands high up in the mountains previously beyond the Qing Empire's political reach. Having abandoned all attempts at "civilizing" the native population, government officials now sought to preserve the island's demographic status quo.[22] The Qing Empire instituted a plethora of physical boundary lines and segregated spaces to distinguish between Han-residents, plains natives, and the "raw" inhabitants in mountainous regions. Initially designed to quell skirmishes between Han and indigenous peoples, physical barriers also prevented mountain tribes from straying too far beyond the government's watchful eye. Foothills and "earthen materials" helped established a buffer zone occupied by plains indigenous tribes who paid taxes and watched over mountain tribes from afar in exchange for bigger, more fertile land allotments.[23] These buffer zones ensured Han-Chinese loyalty to the Qing in exchange for better farmlands while establishing a social hierarchy based entirely on ethnicity and physical landscapes. In 1875, High Imperial Commissioner Shen Baoshen spearheaded the *kaishan fufan (*開山撫番) campaign, which directly translates to "open the mountains, pacify the savages". His ambitious plan to encourage mass-immigration of Han-soldiers into tribal lands was short-lived, however; just two decades later, the Qing Empire collapsed and ceded all territory to a new group of colonizers: Emperor Meiji and the Japanese military.

From Appeasement to Environmental Destruction

Indigenous life under Japanese rule introduced erratic periods of peace, armed resistance, and systemic environmental destruction. Emperor Meiji's military forces first sought to appease minority populations by portraying the former administration as cruel, unfair, and little better than common thieves. To separate themselves from the Qing Empire, the Japanese engaged in "wet diplomacy", an appeasement tactic grounded upon establishing relationships with local

indigene through gift-giving and social drinking in exchange for civilized behavior and obedience towards Japanese law.[24] This patronizing policy paved the way for additional trespassing upon native lands through newly erected "gift exchange posts" doubling as surveillance stations.[25] After multiple armed conflicts between tribesmen and Japanese officials over trespassing on indigenous-owned fallow fields, the imperial army's patience ran out. Paul D. Barclay refers to the eventual breakdown of wet diplomacy as a failed policy "that would not make indigenes into loyal, governable, imperial subjects in a timely manner....".[26] With little patience for wining and dining, newly appointed Governor-General to Taiwan Kodama Gentaro shifted his attention to aggressive guerilla campaigns with devastating environmental consequences.

Much like their predecessors, the Japanese empire saw ample economic opportunity in Taiwan's Camphor trees. Barclay makes note of Camphor timber's versatility to make an abundance of goods including "insect repellant and medicine...smokeless gunpowder...and the manufacturing of celluloid…".[27] Camphor "districts" swallowed up traditional lands and provoked hostilities between indigenous tribes and loggers looking to make substantial profits. Incessant fees bludgeoned native populations and prompted many to turn a blind eye or assist Japanese officials in protecting Camphor districts from rival tribes to avoid additional taxation. Former gift exchange posts morphed into Japanese military police headquarters, trade barricades, and collection facilities designed to discourage unruly tribes from moving beyond their already-diminished territories.

When wet diplomacy lost favor among military elites, Japanese commanders initiated a "scorched earth" policy designed to squash indigenous resistance with fire and forced relocation. Villages without an ample supply of Camphor trees became victims of *tobatsus,* or "punitive

expeditions" that incinerated entire settlements and displaced indigenous tribes from their homelands.[28] In 1897, these brazen operations reached Mabari Village, home to the Atayal tribe of north-central Taiwan. Japanese military forces responded to an isolated killing of one of their commanders by setting the entire village ablaze and forcing those still alive to submit to imperial authority. The incident at Mabari highlights one of many disproportionate atrocities committed by the Japanese Empire in Taiwan.[29] By burning traditional lands and displacing indigenous tribes, opposition forces sought disproportionate revenge for isolated skirmishes.

The dawn of the 20th century brought Japan's pining for Camphor timber to its apex. With lumber exports reaching an all-time high and deforestation wiping out numerous coastal areas, Japanese officials sliced deeper into indigenous territory well beyond their original starting point. In 1906, the Meiji government invested nearly six million yen (over $56,000 USD) in Jilong Harbor and its surrounding mountains to transport Camphor timber directly from the forests to the coasts. This ambitious project required a great deal of land in areas where Japanese soldiers were no longer welcome. Now permanently on the offensive, Japanese armed forces planted mortars, enlisted snipers along the mountains, and set up boulder cascades to herd tribes into smaller tracts of land. Domesticated animals essential to indigenous life were electrocuted on sight through wired currents strung along newly built "guard-lines", causing significant disruptions in the region's ecological balance.[30] The once sacred, spacious lands of Taiwan's indigenous populations now hosted guard stations extending up to 226 square miles, each post filled with armed officials intent on keeping natives confined to an ever-shrinking space. From 1905 to 1914, Japanese and Han-Chinese residents frequently clashed with natives in what came to be known as the *Camphor Wars.* Wartime environmental destruction was commonplace, as mass deforestation served as "scorched earth barriers" to keep hostile tribes at bay.[31]

While the Meiji Empire's insatiable desire for Camphor timber at the expense of Taiwan's environment was not unique to Japan, there is little doubt mass deforestation and deliberate slaughter of animals beneficial to native tribes harmed indigenous quality of life. However, the historical narrative surrounding Japanese colonization against Taiwan's minority population is subject to widely varying perspectives and controversies. While there are few outright denials of Japan's impact on the environment, those details are often ignored, and Japanese Occupation is instead credited with "opening up" Taiwan towards greater economic development.[32] Under Japanese control, indigenous tribes lost approximately 200,000 hectares of previously allocated land (over 772 square miles) through the *"Survey of Official Forests and Wild Fields"* plan implemented from 1915 to 1925.[33] Despite this blatant reduction of indigenous territory, several tribal elders still view Japanese colonization "in a positive light".[34] These perspectives demand further research to avoid generalizing indigenous opinions of colonial times into a single, unified consciousness. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that a more endearing view of the Japanese Empire is predicated upon the severe (and more contemporary) environmental offenses committed by the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalist Party under General Chiang Kai-Shek (蔣介石).

Property Disputes under the Kuomintang

Portraits of the Republic of China's first leader adorn Taiwanese classrooms and conference centers. As the founder of the KMT, Chiang represents the rejection of Mainland China's Communist values founded by Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and continuing under current President Xi Jinping (習近平). Immediately following his arrival in 1949, Chiang sought to transform Taiwan into a Han-dominated society devoid of the democratic ideals we envision when discussing Taiwan in the present day. Scholars point to the ruthless tactics of the KMT

government in the 20th century as the basis for Taiwan's "hegemonic view of sovereignty, power and property in which Taiwan was simply and unequivocally '"Chinese"'.[35] For Taiwan's indigenous and minority populations, KMT rule signaled the emergence of pollutant-heavy industries at the expense of their countryside.

In their quest for "an imagined Chinese state", KMT environmental initiatives among Taiwan's indigenous peoples predicated itself on compliance, "civilizing" tactics, and assimilation to Han-Chinese customs. Rather than abolish laws that sought to discourage traditional indigenous agricultural practices under the former Japanese imperial system, the Nationalist government retained them with additional measures.[36] Some mountain tribes were forced to abandon their shifting agriculture practices and instead utilize the same piece of land for at least ten years before they could claim a land title by the state.[37] Draconian measures and legal loopholes ensured most indigenous communities never received a state-sponsored title to the land they worked for centuries. Without legal documentation, precious land often went to corporations tasked with expediting Taiwan's journey towards industrialization.

Sedentary farming practices forced tribes into a bureaucratic system of obedience before becoming "owners" of the lands and served as a convenient mechanism for the KMT to strip tribes of land rights through what Yi-Shiuan Chen and scholars call "coerced dispossession".[38] Their article *"Decolonizing Property in Taiwan"* highlights a case study on the Tayal tribe, whose lands were "reclaimed" by the KMT through outright dismissals of Tayal agricultural practices. Traditional landscape practices under the Tayal methodology are "dynamic and embedded in a cyclical process that requires long-cycle temporal patterns…".[39] However, KMT law under the title program stipulates tribal families must not be absent from that land through the duration of the ten year period. When the Tayal tribes temporarily moved to consummate

their farming techniques, the government cited their brief absence as "not possessing" and thus ineligible for receiving a state-sponsored deed to that land. Adhering to this policy demands complete abdication of centuries-old farming practices and in turn, the declaration of allegiance to Han-Chinese government authority. Present-day efforts by the Tayal to reclaim that land continue to be bogged down by bureaucratic inefficiency.[40] Coerced dispossession through malleable legal language not only aims to promote assimilation and obedience among indigenous tribes, but also to "open up" newly acquired land for state-sponsored eco-tourist development with little regard for the indigenous communities residing there.

The Race for Resources

The sprawling gorges of Taroko National Park are a sight to behold for anyone interested in hiking, sightseeing, and competitive running. The name "Taroko" (太魯閣) is borrowed from the Truku tribe, formally recognized by the Taiwanese government as of 2014 with reservation lands in eastern Taiwan. The annual Taroko Marathon draws over 12,000 runners to Hualien County and is a premier event for citizens and foreigners alike.[41] Nevertheless, for all the publicity and popularity surrounding the race, little historical information about the *park* is readily available. A quick survey of their official website offers a glimpse into the Taroko Marathon's objectives with a startling lack of detail: "The Taroko Gorge Marathon began in Dec. 2000 and entered its 20th year this year. Since 2015, LDC Group has sponsored the Taroko Gorge Marathon. It is based on environmental protection, public welfare, and local development of Hualien".[42] While thousands of runners packing into taxis to descend upon the gorge is far from environmental protection, the pre-marathon history surrounding Taroko National Park's inception paints an even bleaker picture of environmental degradation in the name of ecotourism.

Taiwan's rural regions (and in consequence, the indigenous communities that inhabit them) began their slow descent into an ecotourist-dependent economy as a direct result of the open market system and what Chen Yi-fong describes as "the complete failure of small-scale peasant economy, a consequence of Taiwan's entry into the World Trade organization as a developed country and its subsequent surrender in the negotiation of opening its market to... agricultural products from abroad, mainly the U.S".[43] Similar to the fervent desire for Camphor timber decades ago, an exploding export market for Taiwanese rice and other agricultural products effectively ended subsistence farming among indigenous communities and encouraged unconditional surrender to commercial farming practices.

Eco-tourism is a paradoxical industry tasked with balancing handsome profits from tourists' willingness to pay for pristine, "untouched" landscapes and the environmental duress caused by their excessive foot-traffic. Taroko National Park is no exception, and Taiwan's blossoming ecotourism industry saw great economic potential within Truku reservations in the late 20th century. Chun-Chieh Chi makes note of the effect "nature conservation policy" has on Taiwan's indigenous populations, suggesting that constructing national parks "offer little to no benefit" for indigenous communities.[44] Furthermore, national parks on tribal reservations restrict movement and punish traditional agricultural practices. Of Taiwan's six national parks, three are situated in former indigenous hunting grounds belonging to the Truku, Tayal, and Bunun tribes. While drawing boundary lines for each park, government officials included indigenous homelands *within the park* without tribal permission.[45] Now under the thumb of national park conservation policies, indigenous groups within park grounds faced stiff penalties for continuing traditional practices. One native farmer received a fine $1,200 NTD ($40 USD) for moving a large rock from his field without first obtaining a license. Meanwhile, heavy mining operations

within Taroko National Park continued with the government's license-administered support.[46] In 2014, marathon organizers permitted Asia Cement Corporation (ACC) to serve as a sponsor for that year's race. Despite the race's current objective of "ecological conservation", the government has allocated a generous 441 hectares of land for ACC to operate a granite mining facility on Truku territory. Numerous protests have prompted "more humane" treatment from government officials regarding indigenous tribes, but as Chi concludes, "environmental injustice built into the park has yet to be amended".[47]The lack of legislative action thus far exemplifies the tremendous hurdles indigenous communities often face in the current political climate.

Beyond eco-tourism, Taiwan's ambitious projects to expedite economic growth inadvertently caused disastrous environmental consequences on indigenous communities caught in the crossfires. Yi-fong Chen points to conflicts in Li-Shan (梨山) in Taichung County as a battleground for environmental conflict resulting from KMT-led intervention within indigenous-held lands. As Chen points out: "…the economic potential of the region entangled with the ensuing environmental degradation has made the Li-Shan area a political hot spot". Land rights conflicts in Li-Shan have set the stage for numerous protests against the Taiwanese government and their respective contractors.[48] Similar to the land ownership laws that bound the Tayal tribe into ten years of stagnant usage, land within Li-Shan reservations occupied by the Atayal tribe could not be legally conferred to tribal families without proof of continuous land usage for five consecutive years. Likewise, legally conferred land to indigenous families cannot be used as a qualifying variable for loans or mortgages, thus "pricing out" natives from purchasing goods necessary to introduce cheaper production measures. Chen refers to these policies as a "semi-public" ownership system where the Taiwan Provincial Government has free reign on drafting environmental policies without approval from the indigenous communities living there.[49]

Environmental policies surrounding Li-shan in the 1970s disrupted indigenous farming practices and intensified damage caused by seasonal typhoons. Following a lift of a trade ban on imported apples, their market price plummeted under 50%, prompting local farmers to plant peach and pear trees to compensate for the loss of profit brought on by imported apples from the United States. By 1979, cultivated land in Li-Shan's elevated regions eroded the soil to such an extent that seventeen dams along Da-Chia river (大甲河) completely silted up, leaving all residents in danger of typhoon-induced deluge. While Chen does acknowledge other natural factors potentially linked to widespread soil erosion in Li-shan, there is little doubt excessive slope land cultivation accelerated the process.[50] Adding to the erosion issue in Li-Shan are: two farms for army veterans, a highway network, and widespread fruit tree cultivation for commercial use, all encouraged by the state under the "agriculture up to the mountains" policy.[51] Presently, Li-Shan and its surrounding areas are home to indigenous conservation efforts met with ample amounts of resistance. The Alliance of Taiwan's Aborigines (ATA) seeks to help indigenous settle land disputes, restore traditional farming practices, and reclaim homelands previously absorbed by the Provincial Government. Presenting a significant obstacle to ATA's objectives is the Plains People's Rights Association (PPRA), a group of elite, KMT-educated local leaders that insist "there are no indigenous people in current Taiwan".[52]

Natural Disasters and their Impact on Indigenous Tribes

Forced displacement and landslides caused by mismanaged environmental policies in Li-shan and elsewhere led to greater susceptibility to natural disasters among tribal communities, particularly during typhoon season.[53] In 2009, Typhoon Morakot swept through southern and eastern Taiwan, destroying over 40 villages and 13 schools occupied by indigenous children. In total, 85 students were reported dead or missing in Taiwan's worst natural disaster in over 50

years.[54] Extensive environmental damage and mass casualties caused by severe weather produced lasting psychological damage that left vulnerable populations struggling to pick up the pieces. A recent study by Hui-Ching Wu analyzes the psychological impacts on indigenous communities following Typhoon Morakot. As Wu notes: "relocation and loss due to disasters require people to face great changes in how they navigate within their environments. If unsuccessful, they may face misunderstanding and discrimination and be considered as maladjusted by people in the new environment". While the study emphasizes adaptability potential in displaced adolescents, Wu points to additional studies that show "intimate partner violence, child abuse, and sexual violence are more prevalent after disasters".[55] It is inaccurate to suggest that *only* human intervention via environmental policy incited domestic violence and caused psychological trauma during Typhoon Morakot. Nevertheless, overreaching environmental projects in mountainous terrains may have intensified flooding and prompted landslides into villages previously unscathed by large-scale natural disasters. Greater susceptibility to these disasters can exacerbate environmental damage and lead to deteriorating mental health conditions among its inhabitants.

The Tseng-Wen Reservoir Trans Basin Water Diversion Project of 2004 is often targeted by environmental groups for intensifying the damage to indigenous villages caused by Typhoon Morakot. Communities bordering the Water Diversion Project suffered extensive damage, leading to assertions that poor engineering practices and wanton neglect led to avoidable environmental destruction.[56] Despite outcry from residents (most belonging to the Bunan tribe) upset over lackluster compensation proposals and safety concerns, the Water Resources Agency (WRA) went ahead with the plan on the basis of "water supply and demand". One legal expert

interviewed by Mei-fang Fan during her case study on the Diversion Project condemned the government for never giving a "real purpose" for its construction.[57]

The Diversion Project had a profound impact on neighboring villages and their ecological surroundings. Drill excavations and controlled explosions across multiple fault lines rocked Taiwan's mountainous regions, causing unwanted gas emissions and unpredictable geological consequences. Despite assurances from the Water Resource Agency that groundwater levels would return to normal after the initial excavation of Shao-nian (少年) Creek, the tourist-dependent *Scenic Hot Spring Area* dried up in less than two weeks. Locals cited the negative impact as "considerable" following commencement of the project.[58] Fan notes "a lack of substantive participation and monopolized public communications…. although public hearings were held at the time, they appeared to be a mere formality".[59] When Typhoon Morakot rendered the previously excavated tunnels unable to hold water and thus useless to the project's goals, the WRA doubled down and sought to complete the project anyways. In one final effort to halt construction, indigenous villagers blocked the construction site following a rumor of "suspicious land clearing" by government contractors. The contractors responded by suing seven indigenous villagers for a total of $12 million NTD ($409,318 USD). Intimidated by the prospect of suffering devastating financial losses, the protestors backed off and the bulldozers toiled on.[60]

Excessive cultivation in Li-shan and the botched Water Diversion Project highlights the persistent attitudes of Taiwanese government officials, local contractors, and corporations in enacting environmentally damaging plans while simultaneously disregarding the input of the residents they impact the most. Areas subject to sweeping projects are often home to vulnerable indigenous mountain tribes that suffer negative consequences long after contractors retreat to their homes away from the mountains. Formal complaints against these projects frequently face

condemnation by business groups who insist unfamiliarity and a general lack of knowledge evoke baseless fears. However, this assumed “lack of knowledge” is rooted in the lack of transparency promoted by state agencies and corporations themselves. When a landslide triggered the elimination of Siaolin village in 2009, the Kaohsiung County Prosecutor's Office concluded that natural events, not a recent government-sponsored mountain demolition project, caused the landslide. The prosecutor’s office took it one step further by blaming the landslide on indigenous deforestation practices years ago, conveniently forgetting the Forest Bureau’s reforestation policy handed out ten-year subsidies to any indigenous tribe that cut down old trees to plant new ones.[61] Once these accusations receive publicity, indigenous tribes lack access to scientific resources to fend them off. As noted previously, the threat of lawsuits can quickly stifle protest movements conducted by native tribes lacking the financial capital to defend themselves. Without proper legal representation, indigenous tribes and their protest movements rarely gain enough momentum to warrant an apology let alone tangible shifts in environmental policy. To pave the way for eradicating indigenous environmental injustices, government transparency and additional funding for scientific studies highlighting the potentially dangerous consequences of environmental projects is imperative.

Signs of Change

> “Indeed, we are not content with the current state of Taiwan, the sovereign state that has been built upon our motherland. It has just begun to recognize its own ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as different understandings of history within its diverse peoples. Mr. Xi Jinping, you do not know us, so you do not know Taiwan.”
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> - Excerpt Joint Declaration by the Indigenous Historical Justice and Transnational Justice Committee, 2019

On January 2nd, 2019, President Xi Jinping spoke to government officials and distinguished guests in a fiery speech to mark the 40th anniversary of the Communist Party. In Beijing’s Great Hall, Xi labeled reunification between Taiwan and the Mainland as inevitable,

and that Taiwanese people should be proud of their Chinese heritage. Noticeably absent from the speech was any mention of Taiwan's diverse minority populations. Across the strait, it appeared that Xi's utopian vision of a singular Chinese identity was also unequivocally Han.

Back in Taiwan, perceptions regarding cultural identity are changing. The Joint Declaration written in response to Xi by indigenous representatives represents a healthy skepticism while acknowledging greater attention to indigenous rights following President Tsai Ing-wen's formal apology four years earlier. Environmental justice continues to play a major role in repairing trust between government agencies, corporations, and the native communities often damaged by their policies. After decades of tone-deaf responses, businesses are starting to listen. In Hualien County, CP Group received permission to build six poultry processing farms throughout rural neighborhoods. Citing environmental concerns, county residents marched in solidarity with indigenous villagers to protest their plans. After obtaining "local consensus", CP Group suspended production as of June 2020.[62] Formosa Plastics, a petrochemical company headquartered in Taiwan, has attempted to atone for their environmental pollution with their wallets. Formosa Plastics is an active benefactor of the Fulbright U.S Student Program to Taiwan, funding one full scholarship[63] and several English Teaching Assistant (ETA) grants. While subject to local county agreements and demographics, Formosa Plastics grants this funding with the stipulation of assigning ETAs to schools with a majority indigenous student body; however, the extent to which this type of philanthropy benefits indigenous communities is unknown.

But for every reparation and successful protest movement, setbacks continue. In 2016, the Council of Indigenous Peoples announced that only state-owned, not private land, could be transferred back to indigenous communities. For corporations, this was a significant political

victory that allowed them to continue to mine for precious metals on reservation lands with no legal repercussions. Activists staged a protest movement to express their disappointment with the decree but were charged with violating the Martial Law-era Assembly and Parades Act. In January 2019, an indigenous encampment and makeshift art festival constructed along NTU Hospital Station Exit 1 was torn down by Taipei police forces for leaving objects around in a disorderly manner. Despite government promises of greater understanding for indigenous concerns, these events demonstrate glaring discrepancies between public political statements and law enforcement actions.

Conclusion

Amidst lush forests, steep mountains, and pristine turquoise coastlines, Taiwanese environmental history appears sullied by an extensive timeline of natural destruction at the expense of non-Han populations. With Taiwan's historiography clouded by inherent ethnic bias and colonizer mentalities, what it means to be "Taiwanese" is subject to persistent debate with glaring deficiencies. To fill the void left by these fallacies, scholars should look to nature for an immediate glimpse into how centuries of human intervention can impact life deep in the mountains. In the 21st century, this small island nation holds a unique position on the world stage. To the north, a much larger threat seeks to swallow up indigenous identity and the landscapes that nurture it. Government officials are aware of the threat, and President Tsai Ing-wen appears ready to supplant Taiwan's own colonial mentality with an approach that fosters understanding and acknowledges its shortcomings. Through greater understanding of the environmental hardships suffered by minority populations throughout its beautiful landscapes, Taiwan can begin to mend broken relationships to create a blossoming, multicultural identity.

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