Foreword: why start talking from 1920s?

Masahiro Wakabayashi¹

This book, edited by Professor Chow, is a volume of scholarly chapters that discuss the changes of Taiwan over the past century. Most chapters take the 1920s as a starting point of discourse. Since my field of research is Taiwan area studies, I would like to examine the meaning behind a starting point of the 1920s in Taiwan through the lens of area studies.

The motivation to determine an area as the research object for a researcher should be his/her belief that there is more beyond geographic existence in the area. Thus, the basic tasks for researchers in area studies should be guided by questions like how does the “beyond geographical existence” come into being, and what is the position of such being in the modern world.

Moreover, there must be an “origin” behind an area that caused researchers’ recognition of the area as being a worthy focus for area studies. In other words, studying the specific “origins” of the area, such as looking into “the (unique) origins of Taiwan,” is one of the essential ways of conducting Taiwan studies.

Nevertheless, the choice of “which time in history as a starting point of discussion” would naturally affect the interpretation of the “origin.” According to my understanding, the chapters in this book, some more broadly and some more specifically, take the 1920s as the starting point for the discussion. It may be fair to say, this book is an academic work that explains “the origin of Taiwan” through various angles and approaches.

Therefore, what does it eventually mean to take the 1920s as a starting point to discuss “the origin of Taiwan”? As far as the scope of modern history is concerned, it could be reasonable to start the discussion from a different time: We could choose either the late 1870s, when the Qing government considerably changed the policy towards Taiwan, or 1895, when the Japanese government launched a colonial rule in Taiwan. We could also take 1945 as the starting point when the Republic of China (ROC) was in power, or we could pick 1950 in which the territory of the ROC regime shrank to Taiwan. Therefore, what is the profound meaning of adopting the 1920s as the starting point?

¹ 若林正丈, March 15, 2021, Sagamihara, Japan.

There are two clues. One is what the editor, Professor Chow, has pointed out: the 1920s is a turning point when Taiwanese intellectuals started to promote the unique enlightenment campaign. Several chapters in this book mention specific events that echo this opinion. The *Taiwan Youth Monthly* (臺灣青年月刊), which later developed into an essential platform to represent Taiwanese peoples' voices, was published in 1920. One of the most important political campaigns, the Petition Movement for the Establishment of a Taiwanese Parliament (臺灣議會設置請願運動), launched in 1921; and in the same year, the Taiwan Cultural Association (台灣文化協會), the central organization that promoted enlightenment campaigns, was established in Taipei. This year (2021) is the 100th anniversary for the Petition Movement for the Establishment of a Taiwanese Parliament and the establishment of the Taiwan Cultural Association.

I also agree with Professor Chow's idea of taking the 1920s as a turning point of history. In terms of pragmatic results on politics, the various campaigns that took place in the 1920s achieved only a few effective fruits due to pressure and clever power manipulation of the colonial government. However, it did mark a unique era in the history of Taiwanese peoples' mindsets. The political scientist Wu Nai-teh 吳乃德 has mentioned in his recent book that the period 1977–1987 was the “the best moment” for Taiwanese people before breaking from the one-party dominance system of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) (Wu Naiteh, *The Best Moment of Taiwan 1977–1987* (臺灣最好的時刻 1977–1987) Taipei: SpringHill Publishing, 2020). In line with this idea, the 1920s was the glorious era before the war, as in which Taiwanese intellectuals' democratic spirits were awakened and thriving. I believe that the 1920s Taiwanese intellectuals' resistance to the assimilationist ideology of the colonial regime that infiltrated from the top-down initiated the “Taiwan vision of democracy and autonomy,” which was an important spiritual heritage for the following generations. This spiritual heritage was echoed in the 1980s when the “*Dangwai*” 黨外 (outside of the KMT Party) democratic campaign, proposed the “Taiwan Vision of Democratic Self-determination.”

Another clue is the historical view of “continuous colonization.” This historical view argues that the Japanese governance was undoubtedly a colonial rule and the Japanese Government-General of Taiwan represented the colonial regime; however, the Republic of China (ROC) that replaced Japan in dominating Taiwan after the war and before the democratization was also a colonial rule. Additionally, the authoritarian power of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) was another colonial regime. Such a viewpoint has been commonly expressed and widely accepted by Taiwanese historians in recent years. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, the authors of this book roughly adopt this historical view.

Considering the above two clues together, taking the 1920s as the starting point in considering “the origin of Taiwan” can be read as a historical view of “decolonization.” It has been well known that the cultural enlightenment and the autonomy movements in 1920s Taiwan all emerged in a wave of national self-determination after World War I. At that time, the administrative system and various facilities of the modern country had begun to take shape in colonial Taiwan. In this context, Taiwan experienced the awakening of a new political consciousness, a new rising identity, and a later dream of democracy. The success of such a dream of democracy was once again a process of awakening during the new colonizers’ suppression after the war. Taiwan also has faced new challenges after the democratization. Such a narrative should be understood through the logic of “continuous colonization” in history.

I personally believe that the phrase “colony” should be reserved for the subordinate regions that had been ruled by imperialism in world history, while not extending the concept of “colony” to refer to Taiwan in the postwar authoritarian period. However, distinct from the consideration based on a pure academic historical discipline, I believe that the historical view of “decolonization” can be one of the narrative strategies of reconsidering “the origin of Taiwan” and self-redefinition. Such a viewpoint can also inspire the understanding of Taiwan by the other in Taiwan studies. This should be one of the joys of reading this book.