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Review of "Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities"

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Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities. By Melissa J. Brown. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 333 pp. \$24.95. Paper.

Su-Mei Ooi

In this engaging and ambitious work, Melissa Brown seeks to answer the question “Is Taiwan Chinese?”—which is presumably at the heart of cross-Strait tensions—by unpacking the processes of identity formation. Through a detailed analysis of the experiences of two aboriginal groups in Taiwan and the *tujia* in China, Brown shows that individual and group identity is socially constructed. Thus, Brown attempts to argue that belying all the rhetoric, Taiwanese national identity is not merely an ideology manipulated to meet political ends, but an actual identity forged through sociopolitical experiences. Thus, the answer to the above question is not only a negative one, but also a legitimate one that needs to be taken seriously—with arguably important implications for the way cross-Strait relations are dealt with by policymakers.

In the introductory chapter, Brown introduces the central concept of “narratives of unfolding,” defined as ideological constructs based on fixed parameters of culture or ancestry that allow political and ethnic leaders to distinguish between groups of people, thus giving them considerable mobilizational potential. These ideologies obscure the fact that the borders of classification can shift irrespective of cultural content and ancestry (“fluidity”), that the content of individual or group identity itself may change (“variability”), and that individuals or groups can cross the borders of classification in order to change identity labels (“changeability”), cognitive limitations notwithstanding. These shifts are precisely driven by changes in demographic patterns, economic conditions, and political environments.

Here, Brown also attempts to explain how ethnicity and culture have come to be embroiled in what is essentially a political issue of territorial unification across the Strait. She demonstrates that the official narrative of the People’s Republic of China is precisely derived from ancient narratives that conflate Han ethnicity with the Chinese nation on the one hand, and link Han culture to Chinese national identity on the other, through the concept of Confucian culturalism. In this way the Taiwanese, who are considered predominantly Han in culture, are considered to be part of the Chinese nation, irrespective of ancestry. In actuality, however, the markers of Han identity are based more on ancestry than they are on cultural practice. Brown points out, however, that the “distancing strategies” used by the Taiwanese in their “narrative of unfolding” have been largely confined within the Chinese framework linking Han ethnicity and culture to the idea of a Chinese nation. They have failed to question the link between Han ethnicity and Chinese national identity and the actual role of Han culture as a marker of Chinese national identity.

Brown believes that underlying the linkages made between Han culture and ethnicity and the Chinese national identity in these narratives is the assumption that the borders between Han and non-Han are distinct and unchanging. As such, it is important to show, if one were to argue that

Taiwan is not Chinese, that this is in fact not the case. The rest of the book is dedicated to this purpose. The next four chapters trace the experiences of the aborigines in Taiwan and the *tujia* in Hubei China, whose identities have been transformed in ways that demonstrate that the boundaries between Han and non-Han are indistinct and change according to patterns of migration, intermarriage, economic conditions, and the policies of particular political regimes. In what Brown calls the “short route to Han,” the southwestern Taiwanese plains aborigines of mixed parentage reclassified themselves as Han between the 1660s and 1730s on the basis of patrilineal ancestry, despite the fact that their cultural practices remained distinct from those of Han culture, because under the aborigine identity label they were stigmatized and exploited by the predominant Han. Between 1730 and 1915, however, through another process termed the “long route to Han,” plains aborigines who had not previously changed their aborigine identity label but had nevertheless been assimilated to Han culture also adopted the Han identity label. What allowed this shift was the abolition of foot binding among the Han by the Japanese colonial administration, which was by this time the only remaining identity marker separating Han and non-Han.

How these aboriginal groups have since been reclassified underlines the political nature of ethnic classifications. In Taiwan’s “narrative of unfolding” of the 1990s, attempts were made to reinstate aboriginal groups as an important component of Taiwanese culture and ancestry in order to strategically distance Taiwan from the Chinese Mainland. As a result, the “long route Han” plains aborigines have ironically been reclassified as non-Han while the “short route Han,” most culturally dissimilar to the Han, are still considered Han. Brown compares this experience with that of the *tujia* in Hubei, who have since the 1950s been reclassified as *tujia* by the local government in order to obtain economic benefits, despite the fact that they considered themselves Han. This reclassification was based on patrilineal ancestry and not culture, a treatment inconsistent with that used for the Taiwanese. In this way, Brown exposes the tenuous links made between culture and ethnicity and the idea of a Chinese nation.

Brown’s empirical study has successfully shown that “identity is political” and should be very interesting to students of identity politics. However, it still remains unclear whether cross-Strait politics is actually about ethnic identity, bringing into question the usefulness of her work to those interested in the international politics of East Asia. Brown, in fact, conflates ethnic identity with political identity precisely because of the political nature of identity formation she describes, without considering if political identity formation is in fact a different beast. One of the more important reasons the Taiwanese are resistant to the idea of unification is that they identify themselves as democratic. Add to this problem the fact that this is a political identity at the national, not local, level, and it appears that a different process with different causal variables remains to be explained. This is a problem not only of disconnect between her empirical analysis and the political question she directs it at, but also of the very relevance of her research to that question.