The Transnational in Taiwan History:
A Preliminary Exploration

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Abstract
Transnational concerns the movement of peoples, ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries. In view of this, Taiwan provides a rich "laboratory" for the study of transnational connections and comparisons. A comprehensive discussion of Transnational Taiwan cannot do without its historical component. I am interested in knowing the extent to which this approach has the potential to develop new understandings of the past by highlighting historical processes and relationships that transcend nation states and connect apparently separate worlds. The very geographical position of Taiwan Island puts it at the crossroads of maritime, cross-cultural, and interactional connections in the wake of the age of discovery. I start with a brief definition of the terminology, followed by a discussion that situates the transnational emergence in Taiwanese historiography. Special attention will be paid to the several discourses that have developed over the past five decades. The essay will conclude with some suggestions how transnational approaches to Taiwan history are promising in the context of the ever changing geopolitical situation present day.

Keywords
Transnationalism, Dutch Formosa, history, colonialism, cultural encounter
Introduction: Conceptualizing Transnational History

The Transnational concerns movements of peoples, ideas, technologies and institutions across national boundaries. Scholarship on transnationalism is growing rapidly, promising solutions for research questions that transcend the nation-state, empire or any other politically-defined territory. As a category of thinking the “transnational” has also drawn the attention of historians, as illustrated by the conversation between several USA-based historians in a special edition of the American Historical Review (AHR), December 2006. The social development of Taiwan provides a great “laboratory” for the study of such connections and comparisons.

In looking at transnational Taiwan as a cultural and historical imaginary, it will be worthwhile to take a closer look at its interactions with other countries and ponder the possibilities and promises of a (of its) transnational history. But this calls for an investigation of the connection between the efficacy of the concept of the transnational itself and empirical developments in politics and society, which is what the present essay will undertake. I will start with a brief explanation of what may be understood by transnational approaches to history. This will be followed by a discussion of the background against which we might situate the emergence of transnational approaches to writing history in Taiwan. Special attention will then be given to the several discourses that have developed over the past five decades before the essay concludes with a speculation with regard to future “movements” of the idea. My aim is not to present a transnational reading of Taiwan history. Instead, I will single out aspects and directions that explain why and how transnational approaches to Taiwan’s history are feasible in the context of its geopolitical circumstances. This essay is descriptive and experimental, and does not attempt to provide an updated literature review or an overview of the latest theoretical transnationalism discourse. My intention, rather, is to sensitize the reader to the double-edged sword of politically correct versions of Taiwan-centric perspectives.

The current “use” of transnational history, particularly in the world of Anglo-American scholarship, can be traced to the 1990s, with Ian Tyrrell as one of its most outspoken advocates. British enthusiasm for transnational history was inspired by a revived interest in British imperial history and by the desire to bring each of the

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1 “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History” American Historical Review (AHR), December 2006, pp. 1441-64.
national postcolonial histories back into conversation with one another (Curthoys and Lake 8). This grew partly in response to the influence of cultural studies and postcolonialism and the historiographical revolution in history-writing that began in Britain during the 1960s. Transnational history differs from world and comparative history. World history “seeks to understand the world as a whole” (as suggested by Tony Ballantyne); comparative history “is a form of history which crosses national borders by taking two or more societies (cities, regions, nations) and comparing aspects of their history” (qtd. in Curthoys and Lake 6). The purpose of transnational history, then, is to transcend the boundaries of nationalist historiography and enable an understanding of the connections between people, ideas, and political movements that are lost when a national framework becomes the focus. In other words, it aims to put national development in context, and to explain the nation in terms of cross-national influences. In so doing, it denaturalizes the nation. But, as Ulf Hannerz ironically observed, the “transnational draws attention to what it negates—the continued significance of the national” (6). Ideally, as suggested by Sven Beckert, “transnational history is a ‘way of seeing’” (1454). It is about recognizing the importance of the nation while at the same time contextualizing its growth. In that respect, a transnational narrative cannot be organized around one center; or give all agency to one set of protagonists (Connelly 1458). Transnational perspectives do not so much supplant as work in dialogue with concurrent theoretical approaches and utilize historical methods and methodologies that have proven effective in studies of local or national contexts. It does this within a framework that encourages new perspectives on major global events, politics that centralize issues of human rights, environmentalism and anti-racism, and processes like war, migration, or neocolonialism (Kozol 1462). As such, the challenge that transnational history poses to historians is that it offers opportunities to conceptualize new projects in different terms and situate the topic differently within a larger framework that is no longer taken for granted (Seed 1464).

How does this relate to Taiwan? Adopting a transnational approach may offer answers to what seems a confused understanding between doing Taiwan Studies and the imperative of globalization. I refer here to Tu Kuo-ching’s statement that: “Following the trend of globalization, Taiwan must have its uniqueness to attract global attention, while its native characteristics must share common features with other peoples and cultures to arouse worldwide concern. In the grand garden of the world, only exotic flowers and rare herbs will win the graces of appreciative eyes; similarly, when Taiwan can demonstrate its unique qualities and superiority can it surpass its opponents to gain applause and recognition on the worldwide
stage.” Indirectly, Tu’s reading suggests a plea for the further development of Taiwan Studies against the expansion of (Greater) China Studies and also the directions out of which Taiwan Studies have developed in view of Taiwan’s postwar and postcolonial societal development. Introducing the notion of transnational history and exploring its academic potential for the future development of Taiwan Studies is one step in this direction.

**The Gaze of the Global 17th Century**

Transnational history suggests that historical understanding often requires us to move beyond a national framework of analysis, to explore connections between peoples, societies and events usually thought of as distinct and separate. The very geographical position of Taiwan as an island in the Pacific Ocean puts it at the crossroads of maritime and cross-cultural connections in the wake of the age of discovery that began in the 1500s. It would, of course, be inaccurate to claim that the European powers “discovered” the island of Taiwan and its peoples in the 17th century. The European powers simply put Taiwan on the map as another territorial part of the European sphere of influence in Asia. This *mapping* of Taiwan, then, was a natural part of the exploration of East Asia by European nations that were adventuring overseas, competing with each other for mercantile and evangelical purposes. The two major European powers that settled on the island were the Dutch (1624-1662) and the Spanish (1626-1642), but the presence of the Portuguese and the English in the region should also not be underestimated.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to become active in Asian waters. They also were the first to set foot on Taiwanese soil, but no archeological evidence has been found which could testify to the existence of a temporary Portuguese settlement resembling those of the Dutch and the Spanish in the 17th century. Recollections of the Portuguese presence in Taiwan include the story of a junk belonging to André Feio which was shipwrecked en route to Japan (Borao 1582-1641; Chou 26-27). Father Pedro Gómez’s autobiography, both in the Spanish version and the translated Portuguese version, reveals that in 1582 there was living in Taiwan a small community of four Jesuits, dedicated to the spiritual comfort and material survival of almost three hundred shipwrecked Christians (Mateos 7).

The circumstances under which the Dutch came to Taiwan have been the topic of many stories, of which the best-known concerns the Dutchman, Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563-1611). Sailing under the Portuguese flag in 1543, van Linschoten recorded the sighting of the “Ihla Formosa” (beautiful island), the named called out
by sailors as their vessel sailed past the island’s shores. Dutchmen such as “Jan and Gerrit,” who were in the service of the Portuguese, kept records of the routes sailed by their ships at that time. Travel atlas notes, or itinerario, provided Dutch compatriots with travel routes so that they could undertake independent journeys to distant lands in search of spices from the East. One of the first big voyages based on such cartographic information was to the Indonesian island of Bantam (1595-1596). This represented the beginning of the Dutch mercantile ventures in the Far East and, in 1602, the United East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie VOC) established its headquarters in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) to coordinate Dutch maritime trade. The Dutch had to compete with Spanish and Portuguese vessels, which by then had established a monopoly on trade between the Philippines, China and Japan. The strategies employed by the latter to defeat their competitors included the capturing of vessels and the setting up of blockades, practices that are often described as forms of piracy.

The Spanish and Portuguese trading monopoly did not only affect the Dutch; English seafaring merchants were also prevented from gaining access to the China market. English trade in East Asia was limited to Japan, where together with the Dutch they had set up factories in Hirado, and where the English and Dutch were employing methods which can only be described as piracy in their efforts to compete with each other. In an attempt to bring an end to the Portuguese and Spanish control of the China trade, Dutch and English merchants decided to cooperate and, in 1619, they signed a “United Fleet” treaty. This treaty was called the Anglo-Dutch Fleet of Defense (1620-1622), and according to Van Dyke it epitomized “the economic and military forces that pressured China into opening trade relations with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1624” (61). From the very beginning, however, cooperation was anything but smooth, and the treaty was officially dissolved in early 1623, when the English pulled out of East Asia and the Dutch reinforced their position by replacing the five English ships with thirteen Dutch ones. After an unsuccessful attack on Macao earlier in 1622, the Dutch went on to occupy a point of land in the Penghu islands where they built a fort (Blussé, “The Dutch Occupation” 28; Wills, Eclipsed entrepôts xvii; Dyke 79). In view of Dutch intelligence about the existence of a Spanish report on the advisability of

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3 This report contained a memo (dated 1619) by Dominican Bartolomé Martinez regarding the advisability of establishing a port and stop-over point in Formosa, one which would safeguard the Spaniards and their China trade from the Dutch, who also were eager to find their way into China. The document fell into Dutch hands and was translated into Dutch two years later. See, Borao, “Fleets” 308. Both documents (Spanish and Dutch translation) are included in Borao, Spaniards 40-62.
establishing a port and stop-over point in Formosa, it is possible that the Dutch speeded up their expedition to China in 1622.

The enlarged Dutch fleet hindered Portuguese ships from going in and out of Macau and trade with Manila was again brought to almost a complete halt. Portuguese and Chinese vessels sailing for Japan had to change course and make lengthy diversions in order to evade capture. Dutch blockades and attacks on their junks were not in line with the wishes of the Chinese Ming government. In an attempt to deal with Dutch plundering at sea, the Ming issued a ban on all maritime trade, in the hope that the Dutch would leave once they found out that there were no more junks to plunder. This withdrawal policy, however, only worsened the situation and increased pirate activities along the Chinese coast (Wills, “Maritime China” 216). Finally, the Chinese launched a successful counter-offensive and surrounded the Dutch fort in Penghu. Negotiations between the two parties achieved an agreement: the Dutch would move to the wild shores of what is now known as Taiwan, from which vantage point they were finally able to commence trading with China.

In August 1624, the Dutch disembarked on a small sandy islet, very close to the main island of Taiwan. In this sandy bay of present-day Anping (southwestern part), in the southern Taiwanese city of Tainan, they started the construction of a castle. This castle eventually became the colonial town of Zeelandia or Tayouan City. With its small shipping yard, it served as a way-station for Dutch shipping passing from the Netherlands East Indies to the ports of China and Japan. Acting upon reports from two Dutch merchants who had visited the main island of Taiwan the year before, a small plot of land was leased from the native village of Sinkan (Blussé and Roessingh; Blussé, “Retribution” 159). In this way, trade with the Chinese government was effectively legitimized and the Japanese community was made aware of the new Dutch presence. The compelling interest was securing trade with China and Japan.

Colonization of the island of Taiwan itself resulted from changes in relations between the empires of Japan and China (Blussé, “Le ‘Modern World System’”). Dutch overseas mercantilism was accompanied by the religious zeal to promote Protestantism. Chaplains came along on the ships leaving Holland to look after the Dutch settlers, and also to evangelize the natives. In the case of Taiwan, evangelization was reserved for the illiterate natives or Aborigines, whose mind was a “blank slate” according to the prevailing logic of the European Renaissance (Goody, The Logic; Heylen, “From Local to National History”). Dutch rule was also favorable to Chinese migration to Taiwan, often made possible through pirate
intermediaries. For one thing, Chinese labor in Taiwan boosted Dutch revenue, while the Chinese also gained advantages from this practice. An examination of the interaction between the Chinese, Dutch and Aborigines reveals the ways in which they used each other to exploit the third party, sometimes successfully but relatively peacefully, sometimes in ways that involved warfare and casualties (Heyns 175-76; Andrade).

The Spanish presence in the region started to develop not long after the Portuguese came, in the second half of the 16th century. Old Spanish maps that mention Taiwan date back to 1554 and 1558. The Spanish interest in conquering Isla Hermosa is shown for the first time in a report sent by the city of Manila to King Philip II in 1586 (Borao, “Fleets” 307). The Spanish seizure of Isla Hermosa in 1626 was undertaken in order to expel the Dutch, who had arrived in Filipino waters around 1600 and were now obstructing the trade between Fujian and the Philippines. But this was also the last Spanish attempt to launch a conquest outside the Philippine archipelago. Through a system of relief-ships, or socorro, communication between Manila and the outlying satellite forts including Isla Hermosa was maintained, aiding the diversification of trade within the Manila network. This network reduced the negative trade balance with China, which had become a major concern ever since the appearance of the Dutch.

The Spanish founded a settlement at Keelung at the northern end of Taiwan, calling it La Santisima Trinidad. This was intended not only as a strategic counterweight to the Dutch Zeelandia, but also as an entrepot for trade and a ateway for missionaries to China and Japan (Borao, Spaniards ix). Spain’s mercantile intermezzo in Taiwan lasted from 1626 to 1642. The Spaniards were expelled by the Dutch, who captured their fortifications on the northern part of the island. From 1642 onwards, the Dutch were the only external power ruling over the parts of the island where the native inhabitants had been pacified. The extent of Dutch control is clearly illustrated in correspondence with their Chinese maritime-merchant counterparts, for example, in the letter addressed to Koxinga and dated 2 May 1654: “The Governor Cornelius Caesar who has the supreme power over the Zeelandia Castle and the subsidiary strongholds of the Netherlands and the peoples on the entire island of Formosa, Taijouan and the surroundings, herewith sends his friendly greeting to the Great Mandarin Cocxinja and also wishes His Highness a fortunate long life, victory over his enemies, and prosperity for his subjects” (qtd. in Huber 224).

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4 The map by Lopo Homen (1554) is preserved at Museo di Storia della Scienze, Firenze. The map by Diogo Homen (1558) is in the British Museum, London. The term for Taiwan on the 1554 map is “Fermosa”; on the 1558 map it is “Fremosa.”
The importance of the European gaze is developed elsewhere (Heylen forthcoming). However, for our immediate purposes, this brief exposé of 17th century Dutch Formosa and Spanish Hermosa, which obviously takes a predominanty Eurocentric perspective on Taiwan and East Asia, may push us to examine the more fundamental forces that connected and held people together in these pre-national communities, as well as the problems and conflicts that made people aware of their differences and pulled them apart. Yet Taiwan’s path toward transnational history obviously has its own story, one which is closely related to the development of contemporary Taiwanese historiography.

**Interpreting the Narrative of Dutch Formosa**

This section situates approaches to Dutch Formosa within the tradition of contemporary history writing. It will be argued that within the context of Republican Chinese nationalist historiography were planted the seeds of the first attempts at a transnational approach to Taiwan’s early history. In this section of the paper I will assess the background against which this became possible, touching on the crucial role of Taiwan’s insular status (as an island) in any attempt to write its transnational history.

The general characteristics of Taiwanese historiography, according to the modernist model, feature the great narrative that is also known as Sino-centric. Especially with nation building at stake, there was no space for alternative interpretations. In this framework, the understanding of Taiwan as a maritime or ocean culture was downplayed. Central to the creation of Taiwanese culture today has been the language of the nationalist discourse of written history. Retrocession and regime change under the auspices of the Nationalist Party (國民黨 kuomintang) implied the construction of a new master narrative. In the Taiwanese context, this meant the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial historiography. The difference from other former colonies was that Taiwan did not become independent. The new regime did not interpret the writing of history in postcolonial but rather in national terms that defined the Republic of China (中華民國 zhonghua minguo) as the nation of which Taiwan was but a province. The Republican paradigm of Chinese history writing was part of the cultural repertoire that the KMT implemented in Taiwan. In conformity with Chinese traditional historiography, the incorporation of Taiwan as a province of the Republic of China required the compilation of a “Local History.”
The re-writing of “Taiwan Local History” had to comply with the continuity of the orthodox Chinese past and with preserving the notion of “Greater China”; in this orthodox representation Taiwan’s local history was treated as part of the larger process of Chinese cultural, historical, and geographical development. Written in a tradition that purported to follow Han ideology, Taiwanese Aborigines were placed in the larger context of Chinese civilization. As for Taiwan’s development during the two hundred years of Qing-Manzhu rule (1684-1895), the emphasis was on describing how the island developed the characteristics of a Han society according to the Chinese cultural model. The Chinese migrant-farmers, hailing from the two coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, tilled the land; the mandarin bureaucrats stationed on the island institutionalized Chinese cultural life and were presented as heroic figures. The emphasis on the heroic deeds of the bureaucracy was not intended to downplay the role of the emerging local elite in the maintenance and further socio-cultural expansion of society, but rather was in total conformity with Chinese perceptions of traditional historiography (Heylen, “From Local to National History”).

Where does this locate 17th-century Dutch Formosa and the interpretation of the early European presence in Taiwan? Was there any transnational acknowledgement of early Taiwanese societal development in the 17th century, or any scholarship that demonstrates the effects on Taiwan, or even any indirect connection with Taiwan, of transregional and global historical processes such as large-scale migrations, cross-cultural trade, biological diffusions, technology transfers, and cultural exchanges? Such an academic understanding of Taiwan History was not included in the KMT nationalist state-sponsored narrative (Harrison).

Contemporary documentation of this Sino-centric viewpoint included the short essays published in the provincial local history journals and KMT-controlled publishing media. Some examples are the Report of the Historico-Geographical Studies of Taiwan (台灣文獻 Taiwan wenhsien), Taiwan Folkways (台灣風物 Taiwan fengwu) and the volumes put out by “The Bank of Taiwan” (台灣銀行 Taiwan jingjishi) known as the Economic History of Taiwan (台灣經濟史 Taiwan jingjishi) and the Collectanea of Researches on Taiwan (台灣研究叢刊 Taiwan yanjiu congkan) between the 1950s and 1970s. Interestingly, the scholarly articles on the Dutch period published in the Report of the Historico-Geographical Studies of Taiwan, and related journals such as Taiwan Folkways, drew heavily on materials accumulated and left behind by the Japanese colonial forces. Japanese interests during the Dutch period fit with their colonial efforts at the meticulous
documentation and extensive collection of materials pertaining to the social, economic and historical development of Taiwan. These documents were part of a large corpus on Western imperialism in Asia, stored in the archives of the Government-General and also in the Taihoku Imperial University (台北帝國大學) library (the present National Taiwan University 國立台灣大學 NTU).

In view of Taiwan’s recent past, it is not surprising that the Japanese legacy can be held accountable for the very foundations of a Taiwan-centered interpretation of Dutch Formosa and for the first attempt at a transnational approach to Taiwan history writing. Credit in this field goes to historian-scholar Ts’ao Yung-ho (曹永和). Ts’ao was born in 1920, and started his career as a library assistant at the Taihoku Imperial University Library. In the interwar period, he became acquainted with the generation of young Japanese researchers and junior university staff teaching at the university, some of whom were inspired by the Rankean view of the foundations of modern history (Mehl). Their research introduced Ts’ao to maritime history and the history of Chinese and Japanese relations with Southeast Asia (qtd. in Blussé, Around and About Formosa 2). After retrocession, Ts’ao continued to work as a librarian at the National Taiwan University (NTU), a job which he combined throughout the 1960s and 1970s with extended research stays in Japan and Hong Kong. During these years, he devoted himself to the study of Taiwan’s early history and, more specifically, to the history of the Dutch East India Company. In October 2009, on the occasion of Ts’ao’s 89th birthday, the Taiwan History Institute (台灣史研究所) at Academia Sinica organized a one-day workshop. In this workshop, Ts’ao once more stressed his intellectual indebtedness to Japanese scholarship.

Of immediate interest here is Ts’ao’s adaptation of the historical thinking of the Annales School. The Annales School is named after the French academic journal Annales d’histoire économique et sociale, set up during the interwar period. The school is known for applying social-scientific tools to history, and developed pioneering approaches that viewed history in its totality (longue durée), focusing on local experience and collective representations (mentalités). Among the leading exponents of these approaches were Marc Bloch, Lucien Fevre and Fernand Braudel (Dosse; Campbell). Regional approaches on the model of the French Annales School are considered one form of transnational history due to their emphasis on cross-cultural history and geography. One of the more famous examples in Annales scholarship is Fernand Braudel’s The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II (1949) which deals with geographical,

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5 It lies beyond the scope of this essay to give an in-depth analysis of Ts’ao Yung-ho’s thought.
economic and demographic influences. Cultural history in the *Annales* sense of the word includes the life of the common man, who is seen as an integral part of his daily surroundings. Thus Ts’ao adopted three principles, those of “man” (人 ren), “time” (時間 shijian) and “space” (空間 kongjian). He pursued an inclusive treatment of the aboriginal populations and their histories, and accounted for relations with the southern Chinese provinces as well as the international position of the island over a period of time.

Ts’ao’s intellectual indebtedness to interwar Japanese scholarship and his interest in the *Annales* School led him to develop the concept of “Taiwan Island History” (台灣島史 Taiwan daoshi). With this concept he drew attention to the need to study Taiwan as, or from the perspective of, an island situated in the Pacific and to take the realities of its historical development into account. Ts’ao built his argument on four basic points. First, a geographical understanding of Taiwan was supported by initial research on cartographic descriptions (Ts’ao, “Ou zhou”), which helped to position the island in the wider world. Second, for an economic understanding of the island he looked at the history of trade relations between the peoples on Taiwan and in the surrounding nations; in hindsight this may seem to be an exercise in Braudel’s theorizing on Chinese networks in the development of world capitalism (Goody, *The Theft* 198-205). Third, Ts’ao looked at Taiwan’s demographics in the light of the *Annales* School’s fundamental understanding that mentalities and ideologies deal with ways of thinking over the long term (longue durée), and he noted that throughout its history the island had displayed a richness of cultures, peoples, languages and traditions that are very closely related to a maritime lifestyle (Ts’ao, “Another Perspective” 448). Fourth, Ts’ao pointed out the necessity for collecting archival materials pertaining to the period.

When transnational historians look at *Annales* scholarship they tend to be critical. One of their main points of divergence is that *Annales* scholarship is not strictly transnational; even though cultural and regional prevail over national history, the larger frame remains that of dynastic rule and national identity. Ts’ao emphasized the need to recognize and explore in greater detail the long history of the interactions and connections between aborigines, Chinese people and other cultures on the island. This he elaborated in the article, “The Multiethnicity of Taiwan Island History” (Ts’ao 473-478). In hindsight, this was the best possible framework through which Ts’ao could have made his opinions known. In this way he was already unconventional, going against the mainstream of the historical Sino-centric master narrative. *Annales* scholarship provided here a welcome means of adapting the tradition of historical writing known as “Maritime China” (海洋中
haiyang zhongguo) discourse and at the same time formulating a critique of its contemporaneous “dominant political history model” and Han-centric perspective (Ts’ao, “Another Perspective” 448).

In Ts’ao’s opinion, it was time for Taiwanese historians to follow the new trend in historical interpretation, that is, to leave the political (top-down) model behind and focus on people’s history (bottom-up). This approach would also allow for a deeper understanding of the connections between the different epochs and rulers that characterized Taiwan’s historical development. Most importantly, it would create space for the nurturing of an ocean culture in Taiwan (Ts’ao, “Another Perspective” 449). In his postscript, Ts’ao (479) mentioned that he had employed a Han-centric perspective in the first book that he published on the subject, and given a central role to Han mobility. In Taiwan’s development history, for this had been the paradigm for Taiwan history-writing at the time. Later on, with the ascendance of the bentuhua (本土化) or native culture, this standpoint was criticized and Ts’ao also reflected on his own attitude toward historical research on Taiwan. He emphasized, however, that he did not radically alter his approach. Rather, he fine-tuned it so that it focused on the role of local conditions seen from the perspective of the peoples who actually live on the island (Ts’ao, “Postscript” 480). At the same time, he distanced himself from what he termed “the traditional way of local chauvinism,” but promoted research at the level where bentu and international meet each other, with the intention of developing a dialogue between Taiwan and the world (Ts’ao, “Postscript” 480).

Until the mid 1990s, Ts’ao’s numerous pioneering writings remained part of the framework of local history, and were not recognized as cornerstones of historiography concerning the Dutch period in Taiwanese historiography. In a recent article, historian Chang Lung-chih (張隆志; 150) categorized this Taiwan Island History approach as one of the new and alternative interpretative efforts in contemporary Taiwanese historiography. The “alternative” label does not only refer to the research focus on non-Han ethnic groups in Taiwan, i.e. to the possibility of creating a forum for Aboriginal voices in the historiographical trajectory and in society at large. The alternative of Taiwan Island History also promotes a region-centered approach; it creates space for a sea-centered geographical perspective, one that interconnects Taiwan with other “maritime regions” in Asian and also in world history. This maritime discourse is not new; it is featured in works by Takeshi Hamashita and Paul A. Cohen (7-9), among others. But why is this Taiwan Island transcultural/transnational approach an “alternative” approach or interpretation? In the next section, I will further explore the meaning of
“alternative” here.

**Typology:**
**Maritime China, Ocean Taiwan and Taiwan Island History**

Ts’ao’s adaptation of the “Maritime China” (haiyang zhongguo) discourse in the development of his indigenous perspective took a detour from the old grand narrative and its embedded “local history” writing paradigm, which Ts’ao conveniently called “traditional bentu chauvinism.” The former grand narrative emphasised a Han-centric view of development and delineated a predominantly continental (大陸 dalu) approach to history writing that framed Taiwan as part of the ROC.

Chang Lung-chih’s understanding of “alternative” may well suggest the “regional narrative” that was taking shape. As noted by Sutherland, the appeal was for these narratives to transcend the borders of modern states and find coherence through the delineation of specific traits (515). This delineation meant an emphasis on the southern Chinese culture of the 17th–18th centuries—that is, on the migration of Chinese communities to Taiwan from Southern China, their interracial mixture with the Plains Aborigines (平埔族 pingpuzu), and the different external rulers that informed the collective memory of the Taiwanese (本省人 benshengren) community. This historical experience was not shared by the postwar/postcolonial migration wave of mainlanders who came with the KMT nationalist government or who in any event immigrated between 1945 and 1956. But as Sutherland also adds, “It is problematic that they [regional narratives] lack the sweep, self-confidence, and political support of the old grand narrative” (515). Thus I would argue that there is an additional element which has been overlooked in terms of discussing history writing in relation to the transnational. In fact, as will be shown, this element is one of the complementary, underlying factors that gives support to the nationalist framework and is illustrative of KMT educational and cultural planning.

In his preface to *Selected Readings of Maritime Chinese Developmental History* (中國海洋發展史論文集 zhongguo haiyang fazhan shi lunwenji), editor Chang Yen-hsien (張炎憲) explained that China should not only be studied as a continent but also as a “sea nation.” This would create room for including research that dealt with the study of “overseas” trade, and with those patterns of Chinese eastward migration which were at the basis of Taiwan’s historic development. Even if Taiwan’s economy had been for centuries centered on maritime trade, this “overseas” vision was not endorsed by KMT cultural planners. The discourse of
Taiwan’s early history is found in the “Zheng He Sails West” (鄭和下西洋 zheng he xia xiyang) myth, which described the foundations of Taiwan maritime history. Recent scholarship acknowledges that the KMT adopted a “maritime ban” attitude, and prevented further development of an ocean culture which under Japanese rule had been promoted (Wang).

That is, the official KMT understanding of “Chinese maritime culture” was limited to a primarily Chinese historical viewpoint, hence the “Zheng He Sails West.” In addition, the theoretical continuation of the civil war between the KMT and CCP on Taiwan—vying over the “one China”—implied a military rule that heavily guarded the coastal line of Taiwan and made it a territory that was inaccessible to the public. The official representation of maritime Taiwan took the form of naval patrouilles, submarines and limited warfare directed from the outer islands of Kinmen, Penghu and Matsu toward the Chinese mainland. It was not until the 1990s that a change in policy took place alongside changes in administration and the increasing global attention to maritime-related issues that had begun almost a decade earlier (Wang 48). Politically speaking, the Ocean Taiwan (海洋台灣 haiyang Taiwan) discourse formed a counter-weight to the dominant “Continental China” (中國大陸 zhongguo dalu) discourse, and was to nurture a national identity and identification with Taiwan. Yet precisely these developments in Taiwan’s society make it hard to recognize the true nature of the transnational as a conceptual tool, for the Sino-centric/Taiwan-centric polarity dominates interpretation as well as the institutional infrastructure, political economy and modernization policy that define cultural planning.

It seems, then, that generating an approach which positions the island in the western Pacific and draws attention to its non-Chinese origins cannot fully account for the fact that Taiwan is no longer solely dependent on the Chinese frontier. Nevertheless, this interpretation is precisely the one that surfaced in the rewriting of Taiwan history within the discourse of Taiwanese subjectivity (台灣主體性 Taiwan zhutixing). The next section elaborates on these polemics in more detail.

**A Politically Correct Transnational**

Not everyone in Taiwanese social, academic and political life identifies with Ocean Taiwan. In view of the oversimplified polarization of pan-blue (pro-unification with PRC) and pan-green (pro-independence Taiwan) camps, “Ocean Taiwan” as a political discourse is closely associated with the latter faction, and fits well the “Taiwanese subjectivity” discourse. Critics in the “pan-blue”
faction use the argument that “Ocean Taiwan” calls into question the primacy of the Chinese cultural sphere of influence and, in its own way, challenges the adequacy of the China-centered approach. Yet in fact, even if the Ocean Taiwan view parts with the China-centered one, it does not necessarily deny this China-centeredness to the development of the region. But that is not how scholars writing within the discourse of pro-independence ideology give meaning to the Pacific in delineating Taiwan’s cultural authenticity (read “civilization”), or how such cultural authenticity is interpreted by those who do not share this particular view. To give one example, the economist-historian Lin Man-houng (林滿紅) took up this issue in an overview of the scholarship on cross-Strait relations, and was very critical of those scholars who argue that Taiwanese civilization is a part of the Pacific island civilization (164).

Obviously nationally-based historiographic traditions make comparative or transnational approaches difficult, and obviously these difficulties are only compounded by institutional barriers at the departmental, university and national levels that often curtail rather than encourage non-national approaches to research and teaching (McDonnell 45).

The Oceanic, transnational perspective on Taiwan is driven by a desire on the part of local, marginalized peoples to break out of historiographical marginality and isolation. In Australia, historian Donald Denoon, “with various collaborators, has long sought to place Australian history within Pacific regional history” (qtd. in Curthoys and Lake 16). However, in the case of Taiwan, the regional, transnational view was fuelled by the dangwai (黨外 the outside party) movement, and this movement, influential enough to challenge the state-sanctioned narrative and bring about a substantial rewriting, may be said to have its origins in an ethno-nationalist discourse first advocated by Taiwanese communities in exile that opposed the authoritarian KMT rule of Taiwan. As for the KMT nationalist narrative, it lay behind the common nation-building project of the 1950s, in which “vernacular versions of the past, recalling local cultures, regional inequalities, or cross-border connections were marginalized in favour of accounts that emphasised unity within state boundaries and difference across them” (Sutherland 494). The state-sponsored narratives that developed within the 1950s nation-building project were “modernist” in the sense that secular regimes were characterized by a commitment to state-directed development, while at least lip service was paid to democracy and progress (Sutherland 495). Yet the KMT’s rule of Taiwan provoked disillusionement with authoritarian technocrats, and reinvigorated ideas of community based on ethnicity. Hence dissident historians and intellectuals started writing their versions of anti-KMT nationalist histories.
These alternative voices asserted that the Taiwanese were a people (民族 minzu) whose fundamental right to universal freedom had been thwarted by the imposition of Chinese KMT minority rule. The problematic notion of being colonized and (quasi)-stateless may be seen as a symbolic reevaluation of the Japanese colonial experience, where now there were new cultural and structural inequalities under KMT rule. This anti-KMT government discourse was circulating around the same time that the ROC was increasingly finding itself in diplomatic isolation. Although these local narratives were denounced as ideological falsehoods in the Chinese nationalizing discourse, they were nevertheless perceived as true and valid for the growing communities of Taiwanese dissident exiles abroad. Evidently, the politicization of Taiwan history and the Taiwanese consciousness issue are closely related to one another. Attempts at political radicalization were made by the local dangwai movement, especially in the years following the Kaohsiung Incident (美麗島事件 meilidao shijian). Although a link between the overseas branches of the Taiwan Independence Movement (TIM) and the dangwai is often made, the latter was established in Taiwan and, given the circumstances, promoted democratization rather than independence. Significantly, the understanding of democratization at this time included steering away from a Sino-centric view of history towards a Taiwan-centric alternative view of it.

The body of literature produced by the overseas TIM over the years deals with comprehending Taiwanese ethnicity, and defining its characteristics in relation to all things Chinese. The importance of the maritime perspective in Chinese nation-building throughout the centuries, as e.g. mentioned in the preface by Chang Yen-hsien’s 1988 edited volume and Ts’ao Yung-ho’s writings, has also been taken into consideration by this project of defining Taiwanese ethnicity. In the pro-independence rhetoric of e.g. Yen Yin-mo’s (顏尹謨) 1983 work Taiwan Compatriots: The Vision from Abroad (台灣同鄉: 海外見聞錄 Taiwan tongxiang: haiwai kanjian wenlu), the migrants or “compatriots” (僑民 qiaomin) being discussed were obviously not considered part of the dominant one-China discourse.

6 Disclosure of the Kaohsiung incident is slowly appearing in Western languages. See Arrigo and Miles.
7 In retrospect, the dangwai movement was influential enough to challenge the state-sanctioned narrative and evoke a substantial rewriting of certain historical episodes, such as the politically sensitive history of Japanese rule. In addition, the dangwai efforts also succeeded in opening up the historical narrative to the inclusion of non-normative texts, which previously had been excluded or taboo. Reference is also made to an initial public disclosure of the 2.28 Incident (二二八事件 er-er-ba shijian) documents and to the rediscovery of the history of the Plains Aborigines (pingpuzu) (Heylen, “Narrating History” 110).
In the foreword, the situation of the Taiwanese is compared with that of the Jews before the founding of Israel: the Taiwanese too, Yen claims, are scattered all over the world and do not have a homeland, since their homeland, Formosa or Taiwan, was and is occupied by the Chinese. Here the Taiwanese are constructed as a kind of ethnic Chinese (華人 huaren) group who differ from the groups in “continental and northern China.” The Taiwanese are said to belong to the “blue ocean,” that is, to maritime China.

The Taiwanese ancestors, seen from the perspective of Taiwan’s history and of the developmental process of the ethnic group, were composed of ethnic Chinese from the southeastern coast with a distinct maritime mentality, who, in the past, had suffered political, cultural and economic oppression from the north. Their maritime mentality and sailing skills coupled with the desire to improve their arduous living conditions led them to cross the sea to the island of Taiwan and to Southeast Asia in order to survive and to develop a new land. (Yen 1, qtd. in Damm 87)

Although the Taiwanese have some of the characteristics of the ethnic Chinese, unlike the northern Chinese (read: Beijing, KMT and CCP), at least, they are held to be more flexible and more interested in opening up new horizons, and in this way they have more in common with the Nanyang Chinese. The special-ethnicity argument also claimed that the Taiwanese are of a different bloodline than the Han Chinese because of the historical and multi-ethnic development of their island, that is, as a result of inter-racial marriages between the migrating Han and the indigenous Aborigines.

It has also been claimed that, in terms of the relation between Taiwan history writing and transnationalism, the pro-Oceanic, pro-multi-ethnicity Taiwanese historians (history writers) were necessarily “isolated and inward looking” due to

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8 Yen also stressed the point that Taiwanese migrants to the US or Japan formed separate and specific Taiwanese organizations (19), but regarding the organizational and ideological stances of the different groups in Japan, he stated that only a small group belonged to the Taiwanese Associations and that the majority were organized in pro-communist and pro-KMT groups (71). For a discussion see Damm.

9 This sort of argument was boosted with the pingpuzu (Plains Aborigines) discourse (Pan; Wen) However, it lies beyond the scope of this essay to give a detailed analysis of sociological and historical research on pingpuzu and its application to the political discourse on/of Taiwanese identity.
the very limitations of the traditional framework of national history that they were rebelling against. A closely-related criticism is that they used conceptual insights to create narratives that “imaginatively” extend imperial and national boundaries, and move across (transgress or ignore) traditional chronologies which in themselves tend to support those boundaries. The most outspoken example is the heated debate over the (real or imaginary) importance of the date “1500.” This date was used in the new High School History (高中歷史 gaozhong lishi) curriculum and proposed to draw a historical line in 1500.\(^{10}\) As Chang explained, “Chinese history since 1500 including the latter part of the Ming dynasty, the entire Qing dynasty and the early history of the Republic of China (until 1949), was classified as part of ‘contemporary world history’. Furthermore, “Dividing history at 1500 was condemned as a scheming way of cutting off the cultural umbilical cord with China, and constructing an indendent historical subjectivity—‘post-Ming Taiwan’ (明後台灣 minghou Taiwan)” (qtd. in Chang, “Constructing the Motherland” 14).

The concept of “transnational history” entails looking at networks of influence and interconnection that transcend the nation. The study of overseas Chinese and of the Chinese diaspora has not yet been mentioned, though it would easily lend itself to the interpretation of the transnational. Chinese diaspora studies tends to emphasize the relation between the mobility of people and global business. If the transnational perspective on history also means that “historical processes are constructed in the movement between places, sites, and regions” (Hofmeyer 1444), how does this translate in the context of the Taiwanese case, past and present? Perhaps one could argue that transnational studies in general are characterized by an over-reliance on a one-dimensional understanding of these movements, a tendency to assume that the migrating peoples are themselves the victims of colonization or some form of oppression. Yet in the case, for example, of Chinese people moving into their diasporic communities, we could as well be speaking of colonizers, a privileged group who may not be so concerned about the impact their move has on the current local conditions and peoples.

**Moving Beyond the Strait**

Opening a wider range of political possibilities is one of the aims of transnational history, but apparently it is still difficult for the transnational approach

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\(^{10}\) The textbook is part of the 2001 new curriculum, known as “Nine Grade Curriculum Alignment for Elementary and Junior High Education (國民中小學九年一貫課程 guomin zhongxiaoaxue jinian yishi kecheng) (Chang 13).
to the cross-strait issue to fully free itself from the “Chinese civilization” paradigm, that is, from a Sino-centric model. One reason for this is that the international scholarly audience seems to be mainly interested in knowing about Taiwan’s current cross-strait relations with China. Because this international audience largely expects a Sino-centric paradigm, even scholars who seek to illuminate the transnational through Chinese diaspora research will tend to maintain this paradigm even if sometimes they may not realize it. This is precisely what the creation of a “post-Ming Taiwan”—cited above—tried to point out, but met with severe criticism because of its own limitations.

What then might be some ways of doing transnational research that would promote an understanding of Taiwan’s own Oceanic and multi-ethnic history? We need accounts of this history and these local communities that do not fit into existing narrative and ideological forms or formats. For example, one could consider the lives of the Plains Aborigines (pingpuzu) and the impact of their small communities on the larger politics of imperial rule and nation-building throughout Taiwan’s history. One of the articles in the special issue on Taiwan of The Journal of Asian Studies (Barclay) has briefly touched on this. Ch’iu Hsin-Hui’s work has also adopted a transcultural approach that extends the study of indigenous history beyond national, i.e. Han-defined borders, and seeks to place indigenous history and culture in a global perspective.

The interaction and interconnection between the aboriginal, Han and other East Asian/Oceanic cultures has a very long history that needs to be recognized in its own right and explored in greater detail. Reference to the European context would also not be out of place here: “From the start, most Europeans got a foothold along the coasts of western Africa and the Americas via a series of negotiations, invitations, and sought-after alliances amongst African and Americans, and all new Atlantic identities were forged from an amalgamation of sustained and intense European, African, and American contact, conflict, and cooperation.” (McDonnell 37) In a similar vein, there is a need for further study of the connections between and among the Plains Aborigines and other cultures at cultural meeting points like treaty ports, those still- neglected links to the outside world. Such a putting of the so-called periphery (or peripheries) at the center of the larger imperial story is crucial. It is also true that many stories have been fragmented and/or lost by historians, while others have not yet been published. For instance, the British tea merchant John Dodd (1830?-1907) left behind a Journal of Events during the

11 I have drawn a parallel with setbacks discussed for an Atlantic History approach referred to in Connected Worlds (McDonnell 45-62).
Blockade of Formosa by the French fleet in 1884-85;12 if published, this volume would add significantly to our knowledge of the European and Taiwanese populations in the Danshui (Tamsui) treaty port and their intercultural relations.

Generally speaking, there is agreement that studies on the intercultural interactions between Chinese, Aboriginals, Japanese and Europeans during Taiwan’s early history are still in the incipient stage. However, to get beyond this stage the history writers must to some degree break free from their traditional disciplinary models and paradigms and seek to achieve a more integrated view of the whole pattern, nexus, matrix or network here, one that gives equal weight to the different voices. We need to “radically reconfigure our narratives, rather than just incorporate scholarship on the so-called ‘borderlands’ in a sometimes tokenistic way” (McDonnell 54). This also means that the archival materials stored in the libraries of various European countries, those that once showed off their presence and power in Taiwan, be made more easily assessable to historical scholars, which to a degree may entail more translations from European languages into Chinese.13 The more extensive study of such materials by those of different nationalities, including Chinese and Japanese, can help to promote the comparative perspective essential to any transnational history. Moreover, we need to get beyond that traditional periodization of historical narratives which sustains the boundaries between the current “grand narratives.” For instance, to see Taiwan more as a “negotiated” concept or world involves a significant reworking of existing modernization paradigms which are the locus of the Sino-centric project. Yet such an approach is bound to be more fruitful than further applications or extensions of the models of decolonization or postcolonialism.

Conclusion

Dynamic tensions between different groups ensure that history is always being rewritten, and this rewriting reveals much about social change and the negotiating of power relations. The (re)writing of Taiwanese historiography may entail challenging the 1970s model of Western modernity upheld by the KMT nationalist narrative, and turning rather to local, regional, multi-ethnic and transnational narratives. Such a project has in some ways already been set in motion

12 A reprint of this journal in book form is currently being undertaken. See Niki J. Alsford (forthcoming).
13 The language barrier, while a significant factor, is among the “more mundane and practical problems standing in the way of producing solid empirical work” (McDonnell 57).
with the democratization of society, and the move toward developing a discourse of Taiwanese subjectivity during the Chen administration (2000-2008). Increasingly there has been felt the need to write Taiwan history as a story that is important in itself, and not merely as an epiphenomenon of events elsewhere.\footnote{14}{Comparison with Australian history until the 1970s was seen as purely a product of British history, of the transplantation of British people in a distant and alien land. See Curthoys and Lake 13.}

This critical interrogation of world history, an interrogation that would open it out into what in reality it already was, a transnational history, has a vital role to play: it can transcend identification with specific agendas, states, power blocs, “civilizations.” But whether we see the transnational as that which moves from colony to colony (or nation to nation), or that which belies constructed national boundaries by operating within, but not because of, their imagined parameters, we must be clear about what questions we are asking, why we are asking them, and what are our own investments in them (Woollacott 76). It seems we may need “an imagination capable of articulating an integrated world of multiple modernities, and a language that can accommodate, even facilitate difference,” but we must also understand that if we fail to realize what we imagine, or to develop such a language, then “this can turn into implacably hostile rejections of otherness” (Sutherland 509).

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