

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Taiwan's Austronesians, from Colonization to Neoliberalization: An Introduction to Ying-kuei Huang's *The Path Towards "Civilization"*

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Ying-kuei Huang 黃應貴. "*Wenming*" *zhi lu* "文明"之路 [The path towards "civilization"]. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 2012. ISBN: 978-986-03-2571-3.

Ying-kuei Huang, one of Taiwan's leading anthropologists, received his PhD in anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He was a research fellow at Academia Sinica's Institute of Ethnology from 1990 to 2012 and director from 2000 to 2005. Huang, who has published extensively on Austronesian cultures in Taiwan and on anthropological history and theory, is currently a distinguished professor at National Tsing Hua University, in the Interdisciplinary Program of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Ying-kuei Huang's recent three-volume work, *The Path Towards "Civilization"* (in Chinese), is the result of over forty years of research on an Austronesian group living in Taiwan's high central mountain range. It provides an ethnographic account of Bunun culture and society of a scope and breadth that has rarely been attempted. Huang's goal is to provide a description of Bunun culture and then show how it has changed over the course of colonization and modernization, and, most recently, under the new neoliberal order.

The first volume sets the stage by giving an account of what Bunun culture must have been like in the early years of the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945). This account follows a Durkheimian vein by detailing some of the Bunun people's primary cultural

categories, including notions of personhood (and how those notions are enacted in ritual), space, time, and objects. This is followed by a description of social life and organization during this time, as well as some of the changes that occurred as a result of Japanese colonial policies. Drawing on his own fieldwork and a wealth of information gathered by Japanese colonial ethnographers, Huang is able to provide a relatively systematic account of an Austronesian culture at a point in time when it was beginning to come under the influence of the “civilizing” process alluded to in the book’s title.

In the second volume of the series, Huang shows how the independent categories of politics, economics, and religion emerged under Kuomintang rule in the postwar period and began to affect the Bunun people. With a wealth of ethnographic data and precise analysis, he explains how these modern notions came to exercise an influence on the lives of the Bunun people even as they coexisted and competed with traditional categories and concepts. One striking example concerns deciding which crops to plant and where to plant them. Traditionally, dreams played a critical augury role in the decision-making process, and Huang found that still to be the case for familiar Bunun staples such as millet and sweet potatoes. Decisions about planting new crops such as tea, though, quickly came to depend not on the contents of dreams but on market forces. Huang shows that dreams continued to play an important role in other areas of life, just as other traditional concepts or mechanisms continued to play a role in daily life; however, new conceptual spaces were opened up for the Bunun as a result of the increasing influence of the state, capitalism, and Christianity. Interestingly, though, Huang finds that there was relatively little change in the area of kinship and marriage and that the family unit tended to become more important during this period, even as he noticed a general trend toward emphasizing the individual in other areas.

The third volume is by far the most ambitious of the trilogy in its attempt to understand and theorize the changes that have occurred, and are still playing out, in Bunun

society as a result of neoliberalism. *Neoliberalism* is a loaded term, and Huang fittingly begins by presenting his conception of it. His understanding draws on and synthesizes the work of an impressive array of theorists, including David Harvey, Jean and John Comaroff, Alain Touraine, and Jean-François Lyotard, but also seems to give the economic realm an ontological status or determinative role in the process. Huang argues that the Bunun people were brought into the neoliberal regime as a result of the reconstruction efforts in the wake of the disastrous 1999 earthquake. The results have been widespread and ongoing. At the most basic level, new highways helped break down the walls of “local society” by reducing travel times to nearby metropolitan areas and creating new opportunities for work, recreation, and consumption. Likewise, increased penetration by the Internet and finance capital have created a new class in Bunun society that is tied more closely with ethnic Chinese bankers and businesspeople than with fellow villagers. But other changes have been taking place as well: distinctions between the real and virtual and between the economic and noneconomic, which Huang argues were established in earlier decades, seem to have become blurred. At the same time, there has also been a noticeable turn toward an emphasis on the individual and the psychological that has begun to inform almost every aspect of daily life. Whereas members of an earlier generation believed that hard work would pay off in the form of a better life for themselves and their children, Huang sees younger generations as more intent on “being themselves” and doing things their own way, whether in terms of lifestyle, fashion, attitudes toward family, or even religious practice. Yet even while emphasizing the changes that have transpired in the past decade or so, Huang also takes pains to trace the continuities that connect the Bunun of today with the culture of the past and provide potential guideposts for future developments.

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