

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **The Relics of Modern Japan's First Foreign War in Colonial and Postcolonial Taiwan, 1874–2015**

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This photo essay was inspired by two visits, in November 2014 and June 2015, to a cluster of related historical sites in southern Taiwan's Hengchun Peninsula. These sites preserve the memories and relics of events surrounding the Japanese occupation of Taiwan's southern extremity in 1874. I examined these sites with Dr. John Shufelt, a professor at Tunghai University and co-editor of the newly released scholarly edition of the Charles Le Gendre papers (Le Gendre 2012). Le Gendre was a U.S. diplomat, Japanese official, and internationally recognized factotum regarding the peoples and places of southern Taiwan in the early 1870s. He was also a key player in the events commemorated at the sites visited by Dr. Shufelt and myself. As this essay demonstrates, the memorials that dot southern Taiwan's Highway 199 (one route of Japan's 1874 invasion) have been subject to alteration, contestation, reconstruction, reconceptualization, and vandalism for 140 years. The historical vicissitudes of this mnemonic landscape have responded to local and individual initiatives, while also echoing the tectonic shifts in East Asian history. This study would not have been possible without John Shufelt's guidance and love of Taiwanese history, and our long-term scholarly collaboration.

As a number of scholars of late nineteenth-century Japanese-Taiwanese relations have shown, the 1874 Japanese expedition to Taiwan generated a great deal of media excitement in early Meiji-period Japan. Woodblock prints, *kawaraban* [tile-block prints], war correspondence, editorials, and maps of Taiwan, its inhabitants, and the Japanese troops circulated throughout Japan at this time (Eskildsen 2002; Yamaji 2007; Yamamoto 2007; Fraleigh 2010, 2012; Chen 2013). These texts and images set the tone for popular conceptions of Japan's relationship to Taiwan as well as the young empire's place in the world at a crucial historical juncture (Eskildsen 2002, 389; Chen 2013, 2). In addition to these paper-based media, stone monuments,

battlefield relics, and preserved mementos from diplomatic exchanges also became subject to Japanese public consumption, either as exhibited items, sites of pilgrimage, or photographed objects. In fact, by the early twentieth century, Japanese publications about the events surrounding the 1874 invasion showed a marked preference for photographs of relics, landscapes, and monuments over the drawings, paintings, and sketches that proliferated in the 1870s. This essay explains how these various objects and landscapes were brought into play as symbols, and how they have been repurposed in accord with a number of viewpoints and subject positions. Our starting point is a commemoration project jointly undertaken by the Pingdong County government and Mudan Municipal Office to mark the 135th anniversary of the so-called Mudan Village Incident.

In May 2009, local Taiwanese officials unveiled a 5 million *yuan* (approximately \$170,000) memorial site consisting of a large welcome gate straddling Highway 199, towering statues of Paiwan military heroes, a striking eighteen-panel bas-relief mural, a visitor's center, and several other statues and inscriptions ("Mudan xiang shimen" 2009).<sup>1</sup> Located on the east-west highway that winds through southern Taiwan's Hengchun Peninsula, the memorial occupies the site of an intense but short-lived battle that occurred on May 22, 1874, in the valley known as Stone Gate 石門. There, a small band of Japanese soldiers dislodged local Paiwan defenders from the commanding heights that guard the pass into Pingdong County's mountainous interior, home of several large settlements of Paiwan people. At the expense of six lives, Japanese skirmishers seized the gate (Davidson 1903, 136). The Japanese chalked up tallies ranging from fifteen to thirty-eight enemy Paiwans killed in battle (Inō 1902, 73; Sugiyama 1916, 265).

Despite its short duration and ambiguous resolution, the May 22, 1874, Battle of Stone Gate carved itself into the annals of Japanese history as the opening salvo of the Meiji State's first overseas foreign war. Ostensibly, the Meiji Emperor sent troops to Taiwan to avenge a December 1871 massacre of fifty-four Ryūkyū islanders. The killings occurred on the heels of a storm-induced shipwreck. The identity and motives of the perpetrators are still topics of debate (Gao 2008; Ōhama 2007), but at the time, Japanese officials were convinced that residents of a settlement known as Peony Village 牡丹社 (Paiwan: Sinvaudjan; C: Mudan-she; J: Botan-sha) were guilty of slaughtering the innocent victims. Their settlement was duly burned to the ground by Japanese forces in June 1874. After a six-month occupation of the Hengchun Peninsula

(May–December 1874), Japan earned an indemnity far below the costs of the adventure and left Taiwan in Qing hands—although it was recognized for its suzerainty over the Ryūkyū Islands.

Because the 1874 confrontation almost brought Japan to blows with the Qing dynasty, it generated a massive paper trail and has become an object of fascination for diplomatic historians. However, the actual battles in this war were not fought against the forces of Japan’s neighboring empire. Rather, Stone Gate was the prelude to a week-long village-burning operation against Paiwan settlements just beyond the reach of regular Qing administration. Chinese soldiers were not involved. At issue in the run-up to the Japanese invasion was the political status of both the Ryūkyūs (now Okinawa Prefecture) and Taiwan’s Hengchun Peninsula (then known as Langqiao), both claimed by the Great Qing. Contesting Qing conceptions of imperial sovereignty and definitions of political space, the Meiji state asserted sovereignty over the Ryūkyūs as its southernmost domain, while arguing that Hengchun was *terra nullis*—and essentially up for grabs. The prolonged negotiations occasioned by conflicting territorial claims delayed Japan’s withdrawal until December 1874. As Qing and Japanese officials wrangled in Beijing over indemnities and issues of just war, 561 Japanese soldiers died of disease and illness while languishing in makeshift military camps (Sugiyama 1916, 262). After Japan’s forces departed, a chastened Qing government embarked on an energetic program to “open the mountains and pacify the barbarians” (開山撫蕃) in Paiwan territory, thereby extending the reach of its administration and transportation network (Inō 1902, 104–110). In short, this chain of seemingly minor local events, collectively known as the Mudan Village Incident, changed the political map of East Asia, as it altered or took the lives of thousands of Japanese, Taiwanese, and Ryūkyūan subjects—not to mention having a grave impact on Qing-Japanese relations.

The 2009 memorial complex introduced above puts local Paiwan peoples at the center of this narrative, although their lands and population were treated as peripheral in nineteenth-century diplomatic correspondence and twentieth-century state-sponsored chronicles. For example, the welcome arch is flanked by an imposing statue of the Paiwan hero and Mudan Village leader Aruqu (who died in the Battle of Stone Gate). In addition, the timelines, photographs, and capsule descriptions of historical events in the visitor’s center reconceptualize the Japanese invasion as a “Paiwan War.” On the western approach to the welcome arch, the mural by Silin Township 四林鄉 artist Xie Wende 謝文德 separates the highway from the left cliff of Stone Gate. It depicts Qing officials, Ryūkyūan mariners, rural Chinese civilians,

Japanese invaders, and local Paiwan defenders at various junctures in the three-year historical episode. Xie's mural avoids portrayals that directly demonize any of the parties involved, and has been interpreted as an ecumenical gesture.

According to a May 2009 issue of the *Liberty Times*, “visitors from Okinawa and Japan, and the descendants of Mudan Village Indigenous Peoples, joined hands in christening the battlefield entrance's new statues and explanatory texts, as well as the narrative mural—at the place where their ancestors' blood flowed in rivers.” At that time, Mudan mayor Lin Jiexi suggested that the purpose of the ceremony and the memorial park was to “heal historical wounds with the affection and peace that comes from cultural exchange” (“Mudan she shijian” 2009). A closer inspection of the individual elements in Xie Wende's mural, however, read in light of the 135 years of memorialization that preceded it, suggests that its major thrust is to revive Paiwan ethnic pride, while at the same time rehabilitating the Japanese invaders as worthy and honorable adversaries. This photo essay argues that the newly constructed assemblage is but the most recent in a long history of attempts, effected through monument construction along the Sichongxi 四重溪 River in Pingdong County, to shape social memory regarding the Mudan Village Incident. Each successive intervention throws a new sidelight on Taiwan's tumultuous past as an international crossroad and imperial frontier zone. For the purposes of this brief introduction to the more detailed story told in the photo essay itself, I will divide the history of this mnemonic complex into six eras:

- (1) 1874: Creation of Monuments, Relics, Landscapes, and Photographs
- (2) 1895–1925: Formation of a High Imperial Iconography for the Battle of Stone Gate
- (3) 1925–1935: Alteration of the Landscape by Okinawan Activists and the Tourist Industry
- (4) 1935–1945: Apotheosis of Commander Saigō and the Fallen Japanese Heroes
- (5) 1953–2000: Kuomintang Rule and the Effacement of Japanese History in Taiwan
- (6) 2000–present: Indigenous Renaissance and the Rehabilitation of Japan

During the 1874 occupation, the Japanese army built monuments, distributed gifts, extracted war booty, and generated documents. In addition, Japanese and foreign image makers produced line drawings, paintings, and photographs of Hengchun's people and places, as well as of Japanese forces. That year, the storehouse of visible markers of modern Japan's first foreign

war were constructed, collected, and preserved: an iconic tombstone, “flags of submission” 帰順の蕃社酋長に付与せし国旗, various Paiwan weapons, a couple of photographs, and a poster-sized “admonition to the Aborigines” 曉諭書. Most of the images in this photo essay trace their origins to this period of construction, collection, and preservation.

The second era marks the first three decades of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan. From 1895 to 1925, journalists, postcard publishers, magazine editors, photographers, exhibition curators, and historians molded the raw materials preserved from the first era into an iconography of Japan’s 1874 expedition to Taiwan. In the form of photographs, drawings, and exhibited objects, these icons were widely disseminated to the Japanese public at home and in the colony. The essay contains many examples from this period, with detailed explanations. During this era, imperial Japanese soldiers were the protagonists in a drama that saw righteous revenge extracted for a hideous crime. Brave infantry outfought determined and well-armed “natives” to both punish the killers of shipwrecked Okinawans and make Taiwan a safe landing place for distressed sailors.

In 1925, some important themes of Japan’s so-called Taishō Democracy Period emerged at this seemingly remote location in southern Taiwan. Most importantly, Okinawan activists remodeled the talismanic Tomb of the Fifty-Four Ryūkyūan Subjects of Great Japan 大日本琉球藩民五十四名墓 to include the names, occupations, and hometowns of the fifty-four Ryūkyūans who were shipwrecked and killed in southern Taiwan in late 1871. In addition, the construction of a road from the coastal city of Checheng to Tongpu and Sichongxi in the early Shōwa period made the ancient battlefield into a tourist attraction—as a short side trip from one of the many commercial hot springs resorts that popped up near the Stone Gate. During this period, a much less martial visual vocabulary emerged, emphasizing the scenic beauty of the Stone Gate valley and the picturesque “natives” who were now firmly within the fold of the Japanese Empire’s embrace.

As with the “home country,” Taiwanese civic culture was increasingly straitened by ultranationalist sentiment and militarism from the mid-1930s through the end of the war. Beginning in 1935, Japanese patriots in Tokyo and Taiwan lobbied and raised funds for a new monument complex to commemorate the 1874 expedition. Towering above all other markers of this event, an obelisk to honor Commander Saigō Jūdō (Tsugumichi) was built on a bulldozed hilltop overlooking the Stone Gate battlefield. Next to it, a large stone “Loyal Spirits Monument”

忠魂碑 was erected to commemorate the deaths of 547 Japanese soldiers from illness (“Sekimon no kosenjō” 1936). Completely absent from this new monument complex are any visual markers of Taiwanese or Okinawan participation in the events of 1871–1874.

The fifth era of repurposing reflects the priorities of the Nationalist government in Taiwan. In 1953, the lettering on the large Saigō obelisk was replaced by state officials with a phrase extolling the return of Taiwan to Chinese sovereignty—all references to Japanese rule were erased. Around this time, the Loyal Spirits Monument was toppled, and the placard on its base was replaced with blank, white marble. It was also during the era of martial law that the three characters for “Great Japan” were filled in with cement on the tombstone in Tongpu, leaving only the characters for “Fifty-Four Ryūkyūan Subjects’ Tomb” on the marker. Although Okinawan activists were able to raise money for repairs and the renovation of the tomb, which were effected in 1982, the cement filling remained on the tombstone into the 1990s (Matayoshi 1990, 323; Miyaguni 1998, 246, 253).

The twenty-first century has seen the rise of Taiwanese nationalism in tandem with an indigenous renaissance. Since the 1980s, democratic activists and indigenous rights proponents have drawn upon common themes of liberation, sovereignty, and Taiwan’s distinctiveness, but it was only with the defeat of the Kuomintang (KMT) as Taiwan’s ruling party in 2000 that such views became mainstream. Reflecting the rise of Taiwanese consciousness in the early twenty-first century, anonymous activists applied four carefully executed, bright red calligraphy characters for “Taiwanese People” (*Taiwan minzu*) onto the KMT monument that had once boasted Commander Saigō’s name. The photo in this essay illustrating this enhancement or defacement was taken in 2005. Since then, the red lettering has been sandblasted off. In the early twenty-first century, unknown municipal workers, contractors, or volunteers rehabilitated the three letters for “Great Japan” on the Tomb of the Fifty-Four Ryūkyūan Subjects of Great Japan. Another photo from 2005 shows the tombstone with the cement filling removed and the engraved letters for “Dai Nihon” painted bright red and restored. The paint on these three characters has since faded, but they have yet to be obscured by a replastering operation.

Lastly, in line with the resurgence of public displays of indigenous ethnic pride in Taiwan, the 2009 memorial complex at Stone Gate, as mentioned earlier, highlights the heroism of Paiwan combatants at the Battle of Stone Gate. In addition, as illustrated in this photo essay, several panels in Paiwan artist Xie Wende’s bas-relief mural have acted as a counterweight to the

destruction of the monuments to Saigō and the “loyal spirits monument” by reinstating these symbols in the narrative. If the movement toward a “localization” of Taiwanese identity has lessened the animus toward Japan brought over by mainlanders after 1947, then the recent rehabilitation of symbols of Japan at Stone Gate and Tongpu may reflect a wider trend toward softening views of the Japanese colonial period in Taiwan, especially as it is juxtaposed to the succeeding era of martial law from 1949 to 1987 (Huang 2015, 133–134).

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## Notes

- 1 Paiwans are one of the sixteen recognized ethnic groups of Taiwan Indigenous Peoples.

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