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Abstract: *Il posizionamento di Taiwan nel contesto regionale tocca inevitabilmente la sua relazione con la Cina e solleva importanti questioni sulla sua formazione storica, tuttora di grande interesse per gli studiosi internazionali. Questo articolo offre una lettura di alcuni eventi storici dell'isola con un focus particolare sui fattori che hanno contribuito alla formazione di un'identità taiwanese. Tra questi eventi vi è la presenza a Taiwan nel XVII secolo degli olandesi, che sottomisero parti dell'isola e i suoi abitanti indigeni a quasi mezzo secolo di dominio coloniale. L'espansione della Compagnia olandese delle Indie Orientali (VOC) sull'isola rese necessaria l'importazione di manodopera maschile cinese, mentre si tentava la creazione di una comunità calvinista olandese. Qual è l'eredità di quella presenza olandese nella società taiwanese di oggi? I manoscritti Sinkan, la rivitalizzazione della lingua Siraya e la prospettiva marittima forniranno esempi della narrazione storica di Taiwan e aiuteranno a comprendere come l'identità taiwanese e l'attuale politica identitaria siano ancorate alla storia dell'isola.*


Introduction: An Indigenous Beginning

A popular saying, 'All waterways lead to the sea', holds true when considering Taiwan. Throughout its historical development, a diverse array of images and stories depicting the maritime world can be found. The question of concerns here is the extent to which water, coast, and sea imagery have influenced an island mentality. In the case of Taiwan, such influence is not readily apparent. The geopolitical status of the island is often described in academic literature as a 'divided nation', or a frontier region dependent on the Chinese mainland. Only recently has the notion of an island identity gained momentum. This historical overview explores the journeys and voyages of the peoples who have shaped Taiwan's history. Special focus will be given to the legacy of the European presence in the 17th century.

Even if, at one point, the island of

Taiwan, as we know it now, was connected to the Chinese mainland, a glance at one of the early modern maps leaves no doubt that its shape resembles that of an island in the sea. Some of its pre-modern inhabitants hailed from the surrounding Melanesian-Polynesian islands, while others originated in Taiwan (Alsford 2021). The Indigenous peoples in Taiwan were named Austronesians by their linguistic denomination, and their deep connection with the ocean is believed evident through their canoe craft culture, spearfishing, legends of the sea, and other fishing practices (Blundell 2009). However, not all Indigenous peoples maintain a seafaring tradition. In a resourceful island like Taiwan, some communities moved inland, giving rise to the Indigenous Mountain people, whose claim to Indigenous political status and sovereignty is based on traditions of mobile hunter-gatherers (Simon 2012).

Without a written legacy of their own, the Indigenous peoples' oral traditions have endured the test of time, providing us with insights into their histories and relationships with the sea, the land, the animal kingdom, overland voyages, intra-regional trade, customs of deer hunting, and swidden cultivation. As pointed out by Muyard (2015), scholarship on the geo-ancestral whereabouts of the Indigenous population has often been influenced by ideological undertones. These ideological undertones form one point of departure to illustrate the significance of the Indigenous in Taiwan's history. A first point of contention regards the lumping together of the origins of the Indigenous coming from mainland China. This was to justify the close connection between Taiwan and the mainland from an historical perspective. With identity politics gaining currency in the mid-1980s, this led to the debate known as the Out and In of Taiwan theory, of which the "Out of Taiwan" holds proof that Taiwan was the original location of one strand of Proto-



Austronesian language-speaking peoples (Bellwood, Dizón 2008; Bellwood 2009: 340). The implications extend beyond merely serving as an additional factor endorsing Chinese migration. Within Taiwan society and its geopolitics, this theory is contested, as it is not ideologically acceptable within the Greater China framework that there could be non-Chinese origins to the island, which obviously compromises the Chinese belonging of the island. The advocates of the “In of Taiwan” negate the possibility that Taiwan was the original place for the Austronesian migration. The ideological controversy still remains present, though the “Out of Taiwan” theory has found strong support with the political identification with Taiwan and holds a prominent place in identity politics.

However, the Indigenous peoples were not the only inhabitants of the island. Over time, Taiwan evolved into a trading hub and a stopover point for Japanese and Chinese seafarers who operated outside the confines of the imposed bans and elitist regulations that controlled the tributary trade between the Chinese and Japanese authorities. Consequently, smaller Chinese, but also Japanese fishing and farming communities emerged along the coastal plains, benefiting from the flourishing smuggling trade. While their presence was acknowledged in the Chinese imperial Ming travelogues, early modern cartography reflects some confusion regarding the naming and location of the island within the Chinese regional context (Cartier 1983; Chou 2012).

Ilha Formosa

The narrative of Taiwan as Formosa began to take shape in the late 16th to early 17th century due to power dynamics among the seafaring European nations in East Asia. In 1557, the Portuguese secured the right to settle in Macau through an agreement with Chinese officials. This led to

the establishment of a lucrative trade route between Macau and Japan, driven by the demand for Japanese silver in China (Ikuta 2003: 22, 24). In 1580, Portugal came under the Spanish crown, forming an alliance in the trade routes that served the Iberian ports in the Latin-American crown colonies and the Philippines. Around the same time, the newly established Dutch Republic, desiring to break the spice trade monopoly held by the Spanish and Portuguese in European harbors, set sail for the Far East. In 1602, the Dutch United East India Company (VOC) established its headquarters in Batavia (current day Jakarta in Indonesia).

In August 1624, a Dutch fleet dropped anchor off a narrow, sandy peninsula, enclosing a bay at the southwest coast of Taiwan. As earlier attempts to obtain a foothold on the Chinese coast had failed, the purpose of this fleet was to establish a trading post in order to open trade with nearby China. In step with the practices of European overseas mercantile expansionism, they built a fortress, deployed an army and plans were set in motion for developing a town to be populated with Dutch families from Batavia and with Chinese, Japanese, natives and all others who would be prepared to gather under the authority of the Dutch Republic, represented in Asia by the VOC. Even a coat of arms for the towns was proposed: seven silver arrows, tied together, surrounded by a branch with oranges and leaves (van Veen 2003: 142). After the lease of land was concluded, requests were made from Batavia to send a few able senior and junior merchants accompanied by a number of assistants, and two or three proficient clergymen or readers to spread the Gospel. The attraction of the island was its strategic location as a stopping place for water refreshment for ships on the way to and from Japan. At the time, trade between Japan and China was highly restricted, which had given rise to a flourishing black trade and pirating ventures using Taiwan as an illegal



trading stop (Nagazumi 2003).

Dutch Linguistic Legacy

The outcry ‘*Ibla Formosa*’ (beautiful island) recorded by Dutchman Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563-1611) sailing under the Portuguese flag when passing a landmass that had come in view, has been a defining moment for linking the island’s shores to what is known today as Taiwan. Until the mid-20th century, Formosa and Taiwan were used interchangeably, and still is in some specific scientific and literary-artistic circumstances. The Dutch legacy and its language have a special place in the early modern history of Taiwan. Their 17th-century VOC presence rendered Taiwan an official character in the intra-regional trading network, then recorded as the Tayouan Factory, Formosa. Dutch perceptions of encounters with the inhabitants, their habitats, languages and customs were meticulously noted in administrative records, and with this institutionalization, a Dutch Formosa terminology was born. This also extends to the classification of the local languages that the VOC employees encountered, and out of necessity mastered. Contemporaneous 17th-century surveys map the island into three distinct language groups. The first is classified together under the name Sinckan, consisting of the Siraya, Taivuan, and Makatau vernaculars spoken in the southwestern plains and which was the core area of Dutch rule. Further to the south, Dutch records mention the Pangsoia vernacular, which became the first of three southern languages, called *Zeydeytsch* or *Zuidsche taal*. The far south region was considered too hostile to live in, and no linguistics records from that region have so far been found. Expansion towards central Taiwan from 1642 onwards leads to the second large ethnolinguistic grouping of villages and peoples known as the Favorolang language. The exact boundaries of Favorolang and its linguistic classification are not clear-

cut. It was a common Dutch practice to group villages according to the similarity of spoken language. In this way, Sinckan stood for the language spoken in Sinckan and its surrounding villages. It was more complicated for the Favorolang language spread over a larger area. Preserved compilations show resemblance of varying vernaculars, but this may well be attributed to the scribes active in the area having simplified and merged their vocabularies.


What is the significance of this language elaboration in the context of this article? The significance lies in the contribution of the Dutch language and the efforts made by the 17th-century VOC employees to record two of these Indigenous languages, translate the mission literature (gospels, catechisms) as well as teaching the local population to read and write their language (Heylen 2001; Joby 2023). Not surprisingly, the Chinese gazetteers remarked on this, as can be seen from a 1696 Gazetteer:

Those who have learned to write the characters of the Red Hair are called *kauchbeh*. They keep records of accounting in them. Holding the goose quill lightly in the hand, they dip the sharpened point in ink and write horizontally from left to right, not from top to bottom. Now, the Government has appointed schoolmasters and order the natives children to attend school, so that they will be instructed in the Book of Poetry and the Confucian doctrine (Sung 1951: 23; cited in Heylen 2001: 240).

Even though a couple of decades later these practices were no longer existent and a fair amount of time was spent on the sinification of the Indigenous in the wake of a Chinese migration to the island, these Dutch installed literacy practices did stand the test of time, as the next section illustrates.

The discovery of Sinkang Manuscripts

In the middle of the 19th century,




Western missionaries in the southwestern part of Taiwan came across several old manuscripts on yellowish Chinese paper in 17th-century style handwriting, greatly varying in size and with affixed official seals. Some of these documents are written partly in Romanization and partly in Chinese characters; others are entirely Romanized. Examination of the Chinese texts reveals that the manuscripts are sale contracts, mortgage bonds and leases. Some appear to be lists of purchases or memoranda of sundry monetary transactions. Although the Indigenous could neither read nor understand the Romanized text, nevertheless, they had preserved these manuscripts with the utmost care as an expression of their cultural heritage. These observations stimulated academic research undertaken by Japanese colonists, and the Sinkang Manuscripts, named after the 1933 pioneering publication by Naojirō Murakami (1868-1966), gave rise to a concerted effort by linguists and historians to disclose further research after 1945. In this respect, noteworthy is the work by historian Ang Kaim and that of linguist Paul Li Jen-kuei which has lasted to the present day (Ang 1989, 2006; Li 2010, 2020; Joby 2021). Alexander Adelaar, a linguist based in Australia devoted a good many years of his academic career on the study of Siraya in historical linguistics (Adelaar 2007, 2011, 2013, 2023). However, the impetus was initially credited to clergy of the Presbyterian Church who followed in the Japanese footsteps. Their interest in the romanization of the church liturgy in the two Indigenous languages became one of the underlying forces in taking a stake in making Dutch Formosa accessible to the general public. And successful it was, although we cannot deny that this entailed an ideological and political opposition component.

Of importance for today, is that these contracts and transactions have become incorporated into the socio-politically motivated quest for authenticity and expression of Taiwanese identity, by

Indigenous and Han descendants alike. On the one hand, their existence testifies to the continuity into the next phase of intense Chinese migration during Qing-Manchu rule (1684-1895). On the other hand, the discovery of the Sinkang manuscripts established a legacy that empowered the Indigenous people to engage in negotiations with the Chinese settlers regarding their land rights and ownership, attributing significant value to these documents (Chiu 2008).

Siraya

Sourcing the Austronesian past, in a sense, has been spearheaded by the linguistic heritage of 17th-century Dutch language policies. The 1990s take-off in Dutch Formosa research has been facilitated by a wider accessibility of primary official administrative writings. These include the daily records, resolutions and missives compiled by the Dutch governors and other high-ranking officials as their correspondence to the VOC headquarters in the East Indies. Significant parts of the “Resolutions of the Formosan Council” and “Resolutions of the Church Council” have been preserved (Heyns, Cheng 2005: 3-4). In addition to the discovered land deeds, these primary sources handwritten in 17th-century Dutch – which at the time was not standardized - are useful for an inquiry into possible internal migration or settlement patterns of the Indigenous (Chiu 2008). But there is more to the story in sourcing Taiwan’s Austronesian past. Island-wide Indigenous language revitalization movements comprise of one of the main tenets that support Taiwanese identity politics today (Dupré 2018; Friedman 2018; Todd 2021). Siraya language ceased to be spoken towards the end of the 19th century, but thanks to the efforts of the Tainan Siraya people who have been engaged in re-discovering their ethnic identity, their traditional language has been revitalized (Huang et.al. 2013). The




extent to which this testifies to a growing Formosan-independent identity depends on their negotiating power with the Taiwanese government on the one hand and that of the Council of Indigenous Peoples, on the other hand. Their struggle has taken many years; one of the reasons for this is precisely their sinified nature, following centuries of racial integration with the Han. During the 17th century, their ethnic group is believed to have had the closest interaction with the Dutch, and later during the Qing times, they served as intermediaries between the Han and the mountainous tribes. Also known as Lowland Indigenous Peoples (formerly plains aborigines), the Siraya people are the current descendants, and as such have not been lost out of sight for academic research and/or activist purposes (Huang 2010; Heylen 2012; Shepherd 2015; Hsieh 2019). In particular, the support for their language revitalization movement since the past decade has been instrumental in gaining a broader audience (Joby 2020). Encouraged by the global Indigenous rights movements, the Siraya have resorted to constitutional means to obtain status recognition, a case which until today is still not resolved (Hsieh 2013; Tsai 2022). Together with nine other Lowland Indigenous Peoples, they are still unrecognized by the Council of Indigenous Peoples.

A Maritime Tradition

So far, the focus of this chapter has been on the Dutch legacy in relation to Indigenous identity recognition. What about the Han? The digital disclosure of the VOC archival materials has resulted in large translation projects into Chinese or English that are state or privately funded. As translation projects establish a link between local and global contexts, localization specifically involves using Dutch manuscripts to explore the Indigenous content. Irrespective of whether there is an activist/nationalist undertone,

the primary requirement for working with translations is to correct or complement the Chinese gazetteers that function as the authoritative documentation of Chinese rule over Taiwan and the formation of a Chinese society over the Indigenous Formosan ways of life. What makes this time period in history attractive, yet at the same time also complex, is the interaction between the European, Indigenous and Chinese who, in the 21st century, have their own historical narrative of the period. The legacy of Dutch Formosa is to be understood as the way in which the VOC presence facilitated mainland Chinese migration to the island. This established a Chinese migration history (*yimin shi*) narrative for Taiwan's historical studies, and as identity politics gained prominence in the 1980s, the theme of looking at Taiwan history from a maritime perspective came to the fore. Credit goes to two scholars. The late historian Chang Yen-hsien (Zhang Yanxian 1947-2014) suggested that China should not only be studied as a continent, but also as a maritime nation (Chang 1998). This would create room for 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 historical development. In view of the postwar politics, even if Taiwan's economy had been for centuries centered on maritime trade, this "overseas" vision was not endorsed by the Nationalist (Kuomintang, KMT) policy and cultural planners. Academician Ts'ao Yung-ho (Cao Yonghe 1920-2014) built his argument on four pillars which became known as Taiwan Island History (*Taiwan daoshi*) and regarded as the cornerstone of historiography on the Dutch period in Taiwan history since the late 1990s. Ts'ao's intellectual indebtedness of interwar Japanese scholarship combined with his interest in the *Annales* School's predisposition with the long term (*longue durée*) of mentalities and ideologies. Throughout history the island displayed a richness of cultures, peoples, languages and traditions




that are very closely related to a maritime lifestyle (Ts'ao 2000: 448). Taiwan Island History drew attention to study Taiwan as an island situated in the Pacific and to take the realities of its historical development into account. In order to document that, he suggested research on cartographic descriptions, to help positioning the island in the wider world, and he pointed to the need for collecting archival materials to interconnect Taiwan with other maritime regions in the Asia region and world history. From an ideological perspective, his approach took a detour from the old grand narrative that emphasized a Han-centric view of development and delineated a predominantly continental approach to the history writing of the Republic of China (ROC) that framed Taiwan as part of it.

The enduring presence of Dutch Formosa in the Taiwanese collective memory is closely tied to sustained commitments to scholarship programs supporting specialized 17th-century archival training at Dutch universities and the engagement of invited academic experts in collaboration with the Taiwan-based academic community. Funding for curatorial and manuscript translation work of primary source materials is complemented by the integration of AI and software tools, such as the GLOBALISE project, that aid in the reading and transcription of handwritten manuscripts. This integration provides broader access across multiple disciplines and contributes to an enduring attraction for researching the Dutch colonial period until today.¹

Cartography as Heritage Trajectory

The combination of textual research with accessible tools from the field of digital humanities (DH) in studying cultural encounters among diverse ethnicities and races that have inhabited, settled, or visited the island throughout centuries has yielded more detailed insights. Interdisciplinary

collaboration among historians, maritime archaeologists, architects, and scholars of the built environment facilitated research into technology transfer and knowledge dissemination, in exploring remnants of 17th-century settlements and use of aquaarcheology to digitally recover shipwrecks. This evolving research landscape spurred work beyond early modern cartography within the context of trade routes that predate the Dutch arrival. The interest in cartography equally reveals how a Taiwanese collective identity is informed by this Dutch linguistic heritage. 'Mapping Taiwan' inspired lay and academic projects that were part of the turn-of-the-millennium governmental branding policy in making Taiwan as a multilingual and multicultural island visible to the outside world. Concomitant with this phenomenon was a surge in collecting, printing and studying old maps, often guided by the imperative to delineate Taiwan as a distinct island entity detached from the mainland or to manifest its insular identity. But maps tell us more and are not simply a depiction of a landmass separated from another landmass. At first instance, 17th-century maps were collected and studied for their depiction of the island, the European settlements and their descriptions as ethnographic atlases. Especially maps that depict the imagery of the Zeelandia fortified town with the castle towers, the warehouse, and the Chinese living quarters complement the primary source reading. An in-depth engagement with maritime aspects in human geography extends to explorations of riverbanks, shores, inland rivers and waterways depicted on these historical maps. In addition to the map as a tool for navigation, it also invites for etymological research such as the use of toponyms and their variations, inclusions, exclusions, adaptations overtime. 18th-century European cartographers continued to use Dutch sources or those by contemporaneous French Jesuit geographical



disseminated knowledge from the Manchu Empire to inform their cartographic representations of the island (Kang 2018). Consequently, the VOC toponymic legacies persisted on certain maps well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, some of these Dutch-named toponyms that were erased on the Jesuit maps, were reinserted later on. The 1849 published map *Kaart van de Chineesche Kust en van Formosa* (*Chart of the Chinese Coast and of Formosa*) by von Siebold encompassed the entire island with place names from the seventeenth-century Dutch sources, and it is believed that von Siebold referred to another map from 1753 by Johannes van Keulen for locating certain Dutch toponyms (Gommans, van Diessen 2010: 240-241, cited in Kang 2019: 99-100). Today's maps have not preserved the VOC toponymic legacies, but as the next section shows, a number of Dutch linguistic elements have been reinscribed into the contemporary landscape.

The heritage industry in Taiwan is not only about the preservation of the stone remnants, discovery of burials or visualizing the sunken vessels of its early modern history. Dutch VOC toponyms have entered the heritage trajectory. For instance, in Little Liuqiu (or Lamay island),² the restaurant called Little Liuqiu Golden Lion Landscape Hot Fried Barbecue Bar is built in the shape of a sailing vessel, and the name *Gouden Leeuw* (Golden Lion 金獅子), in both Dutch and sinographs, is painted on the bow of the ship (Kang 2024). Another example is the toponym-story of what used to be called Sinackse river on VOC maps, but now is known as Gongsitian Xi (公司田溪) river. The *clou* is in the term *gongsi*, which means Company and debate centers on its etymological interpretation, referring to the VOC past or the local cooperatives – also called *gongsi* - established by Han migrants during the Qing times. Tamsui locals prefer to speak of VOC Company River, while the academics seek meaning in the latter (Wu

2024). Interestingly, this present-centered debate over the Sinackse river as Company River and the appreciation of the *Gouden Leeuw* restaurant testify to a subtle re-interpretation of existing popular memories in creating specific heritage stories rooted in linguistic evidence. Concern for authenticity is one of the major underlying tendencies that drive Taiwanese identity politics in its harking back to the past, but also needs to be seen in the context of a long-standing sustained linguistic activism that is part and parcel of Taiwanese identity formation.

Conclusion

This chapter guided the reader through an historical pathway as vector for its identity. The legacy of Dutch Formosa in Taiwan society today and its collective memory is less about the actual 17th-century presence of these Europeans and VOC employees, but how this facilitated Chinese migration and subsequent settlement. The democratization of Taiwan opened the door to diverse perspectives on its history, as shown with the ascendance and mainstreaming of a maritime discourse, while the academic investment for preserving the Dutch linguistic heritage has been favourable to strategies for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. Taiwanese identity continues to evolve, encompassing various narratives that shed light on the island's complex history and cultural sensitivities. The Lowland Indigenous Siraya's legal perseverance in their claim for Indigenous authentication showcases one of these cultural sensitivities, and it is hoped to be resolved within three years from now. The year 2024 marks the 400th year of Dutch-Taiwan interactions. Island-wide a number of artistic, popular media and academic activities have been planned, with the support of governmental and diplomatic agencies. Against the background of Taiwan's sociopolitical reality in the Asian region, the commemorative events of this

brief historical episode continue to play their part in keeping the relevance of the Dutch colonial memory and its legacy in the popular and academic fields alive. Taking a bold stance, I might predict that a reduced emphasis on its insular independence from mainland dependency does not necessarily mean a departure from identity politics. Rather, an intersectionality approach will likely be employed to examine Dutch colonial policies, leading to new research questions and nuanced interpretations. Although these may uncover some of the darker and less prosperous dynamics, involving VOC policies and Indigenous displacement resulting from Chinese migration, the overall interpretation of the 17th century historical past tends to favour appreciation over trauma.

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Notes

¹ GLOBALISE is a five-year infrastructural

project (2022-2026) that aims to make a significant part of the Dutch East India Company archives more accessible. It aims to convert the handwritten text in the archives into machine readable text: <https://globalise.huygens.knaw.nl/>.

² Little Liuqiu 小琉球 in Pingtung County, an island off the southwestern coast of Taiwan, was marked in the VOC cartographic works with three names: *Mattysen*, *Gouden*

Leeuw, and *Lamey*. *Lamey* was the appellation employed for the island by the other contemporary Formosan Austronesian groups on mainland Taiwan. For the history of *Gouden Leeuw* on the island, the murder of merchant Mathijs and the subsequent VOC's revenge that eventually led to the accident massacre and final forced outmigration of the local Austronesian inhabitants, see Blussé (2009).



Jan Jansson, View of Fort Zeelandia in Taiwan, Amsterdam, 1646, Private collection