

Taiwan transitions and tribal tongues: From the language of reconciliation to the revitalisation of language?

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On 1 August 2016, a few months after being sworn in as Taiwan's first female president, Tsai Ing-wen accomplished another milestone: the first official apology to Taiwan's Indigenous peoples. In her address to representatives from the various tribes, Tsai apologised for multiple forms of damage inflicted during 'four centuries of pain and mistreatment', and outlined actions her government proposed to take as forms of redress.

In recent decades, other heads of government have apologised to Indigenous peoples: in 2008, Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd for the Stolen Generations; in the same year, his Canadian equivalent Stephen Harper for the Indian Residential School system; 2012, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos for brutalities perpetrated during the early-1900s Amazon rubber boom; and in 2020, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen for removals of Greenlandic Inuit children. Tsai's apology, in its historical breadth, was akin to the one proffered by King Harald V in 1997 for injustices of Norway's colonisation of Sámi territories, or president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's May 2021 apology to the Maya of the Yucatán peninsula covering both Spanish colonial and post-independence Mexico.

Indigenous peoples of Taiwan and their ancient export to the world

The government of Taiwan currently recognises 16 Indigenous tribes. Apart from the Yami or Tao people inhabiting Orchid Island off the southeast coast, all the tribes are on the main island. In 2020 those tribes had 559,036 members, equating to 2.37 percent of Taiwan's total population. There are also approximately 400,000 people belonging to 10 groups denied official recognition, collectively known as the Pingpu, whose traditional languages are no longer spoken. Language vitality varies among the recognised tribes, from moribund (only used by a few elders) to strong, but all have undergone significant recent language shift to Chinese. Thriving or silenced, all the languages belong to the Austronesian linguistic family, but in divergent branches. Taiwan's topography favoured linguistic diversification, as 70 percent of the terrain is mountainous, with many peaks surpassing 3,000 metres. There was also sufficient time-depth for diversity to evolve: while empires waxed and waned elsewhere in Asia, Taiwan's Indigenous peoples stayed uncolonised for millennia.

Around 4,000-5,000 years ago, some of those inhabitants sailed south. Their descendants mixed with pre-existing inhabitants in the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos, Malay peninsula, coastal New Guinea and nearby islands, and journeyed across the Indian and Pacific Oceans to unpeopled lands. The linguistic legacy of these voyages comprises over 1,200 Austronesian languages spread across a vast realm: not just Island Southeast Asia, but also Madagascar, Micronesia, Melanesia and the Polynesian triangle bounded by Hawai'i, Easter Island and New Zealand. Taiwan was thus the source of an extraordinary series of migrations and cultural diffusions that reached its full extent just a century or so before the European colonial expansion that would engulf all the Austronesian territories.

Colonial regimes and colonial wrongs in Taiwan: brief historical context

Tsai's speech referred to wrongdoings by 'every regime that has come to Taiwan' over '400 years' and explicitly named, in addition to invaders from distant Europe, arrivals from nearer Asian shores: Japan and, in three separate impositions, China.

Although Chinese and Japanese fishers, smugglers and traders were familiar with Taiwan, and passing Portuguese voyagers dubbed it Formosa (beautiful) in the 1500s, colonisation began when the Dutch East India Company established a base on the southwest coast in 1624. Spain had a small colony in the north from 1626 but yielded to the Dutch in 1642. The Dutch subjugated Indigenous communities and usurped their lands, encouraging immigration by Han Chinese settlers from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, immediately across the Taiwan Strait.

The Dutch were ousted in 1661 by Koxinga, a leader of Ming dynasty remnants holding out in southern China against the Qing dynasty imposed by Manchu invaders. Koxinga's kingdom marked the first installation of political institutions from mainland China to accompany the growing Han demographic presence on Taiwan's western plain. Qing forces conquered that domain in 1683, gradually expanding the area under Chinese control as they displaced, subordinated or absorbed Indigenous inhabitants. Most Han settlers spoke Minnan Chinese variants that evolved into 'Taiwanese', but Hakka-speaking communities maintained a distinct ethnolinguistic identity. Indigenous peoples of the western plains, today's Pingpu, were Sinicised in many aspects, including loss of ancestral languages. East coast communities were increasingly subordinated to state power and Han settlement in the Qing dynasty's final decades, but many mountain dwellers remained beyond Qing frontiers.

Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945 brought dramatic changes to all aspects of life in Taiwan. Mountain communities were incorporated into the empire's extractive

labour force and administrative structures after military ‘pacification’ campaigns in the face of formidable Indigenous resistance. Cultural patterns were undermined as hundreds of communities were forcibly relocated to facilitate control. The outbreak of war between China and Japan in 1937 intensified efforts to impose linguistic and cultural Japanisation, and by 1945 a high proportion of Indigenous children had been schooled in Japanese.

The final ‘regime that came to Taiwan’

After Japan’s defeat, Taiwan regained its pre-1895 status as a province of China, now configured as the Republic of China (ROC) and governed by the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalists. When Mao’s Communists won the Civil War and declared the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan with segments of the mainland elite. They transplanted ROC bureaucracies, industries, cultural institutions and universities—all with Mandarin as the spoken language. Mainlanders only comprised one-eighth of the population, but dominated administration, business and the military during the martial law period that endured until 1987. Nationalist soldiers and other non-elite mainlanders provided demographic weight that reinforced the use of Mandarin and support for the KMT. The pre-1949 population, whether from the Taiwanese Minnan speaking majority, Hakka minority or Indigenous peoples, generally had limited input into political decisions during the authoritarian stage of KMT rule. Their languages were excluded from state institutions and media, and from an education system directed at assimilating their children as Mandarin speakers with Chinese cultural identity and loyalty to the ROC. Political dissent was repressed in what opponents of the KMT label ‘White Terror’, starting in 1947 with killings commemorated as the 2/28 Massacre.

The ROC retained Japan’s tribal classifications as well as its refusal to give Indigenous status to the Pingpu, regarded as assimilated into the Han. However, the recognised tribes were given reserved seats in local government bodies (these levels

had elected councils through the martial law period, but within the framework of KMT one-party rule), and in the ROC parliamentary assembly from 1972 onwards. Western missionaries, whose work began in the late Qing period, now had great success converting Indigenous populations; sometimes this created spaces for native language use, such as bible translations and hymns. The economic development Taiwan achieved as one of the 'four Asian tigers' from the 1960s onwards created industrial jobs that drew rural dwellers to the cities, many Indigenous citizens amongst them. Urbanisation served to weaken use of Indigenous languages, as did the increased reach of schooling and electronic media in Mandarin (matching comparable transformations in Australia, New Zealand and the Americas).

Democratic transition and the call for Indigenous rights

In the 1980s there were reformist steps and society became freer, with burgeoning social movements making their voices heard. Martial law ended in 1987 and the death of Chiang Kai-shek's son the following year ushered in a democratisation process. Lee Teng-hui, of local Hakka stock (generational change within the KMT having brought people of pre-1949 background into higher echelons), was appointed to the presidency. After steering Taiwan through the transition, Lee became Taiwan's first elected president in 1996. Finally, uninterrupted KMT control ended in 2000 when voters chose the first non-KMT president, Chen Shui-bian, of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that Tsai Ing-wen now leads. The DPP grew out of movements emphasising Minnan language and a distinct Taiwanese identity. The KMT tended to attract votes from mainlanders and Hakka, and from those Indigenous communities where it had constructed patronage networks.

The Indigenous rights cause gained public attention during this transformative time. The first activist organisation formed in 1984 and 'Give Back Our Land' protests were prominent in the late 1980s. Indigenous campaigning achieved constitutional amendments that changed their official designation from an outdated term meaning

‘mountain compatriots’ to wording equivalent to ‘Indigenous people’ in 1994, and to ‘peoples’ in 1997. That 1994 amendment took effect on 1 August, a date later adopted as Indigenous Peoples Day— and therefore as the date for Tsai Ing-wen’s 2016 apology.

In 1995, Lee’s government permitted registration of personal names in Indigenous languages. The following year it acceded to insistence by legislators from the reserved Indigenous seats (less quiescent than in the past) that it establish the body now called the Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP). The Chairman of the CIP has a ministerial level position so, in effect, the cabinet automatically includes an Indigenous person, and it is she/he who has responsibility for Indigenous affairs. CIP functions include recognition of Indigenous peoples, a gatekeeping role that often attracts controversy, particularly its reluctance to give formal recognition to most of the Pingpu groups.

Much more could be said about the transition to democracy, debates around Taiwanese identity, language, and multiculturalism, or Indigenous activism and political roles. I will simply note a prominent goal of the DPP: establishing a transitional justice process to enable truth-telling and reparation for the White Terror and other forms of KMT repression under martial law. Tsai’s apology to Indigenous peoples was presented as fundamental to this quest, a framing apparent in her May 2016 inauguration address and in the apology, with its commitment to establish an Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee. Tsai’s apology also reflects an understanding of Taiwan’s Han majority—whether derived from early migrations or 1949 arrivals—as a settler society, and of China as a colonising power in all three guises, Koxinga, Qing and ROC.

Languages in and around the apology

Tsai delivered the apology in the Presidential Office Building, a grand edifice constructed as the office of the Governor-General heading Japan’s colonial

administration. For the first decades of its existence, the bureaucrats and military officers working in the building spoke and wrote in Japanese. After the KMT took over, governance in Taipei was conducted in Mandarin. This continued after democratisation, despite the move of Taiwanese and Hakka onto the airwaves and into classrooms, and almost every word of Tsai's speech was in Mandarin. However, the rest of the ceremony featured a linguistic diversity that would have been unheard in the prior lives of that building, although not in the lives of many thousands affected by decisions made there.

The event commenced outside the building with members of the Paiwan tribe, the third largest of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, performing a shouting ritual in their own language. Tsai's paternal grandmother was Paiwan; her possession of Indigenous ancestry is yet another first for a Taiwanese president. As representatives of Indigenous peoples entered, each tribal name was announced twice, first in Mandarin and then in Paiwan. This Mandarin/Paiwan bilingual narration continued throughout the ceremony. Two religious interventions preceded Tsai's address: a rite administered by an elder of the Bunun people, invoking ancestral spirits in her mother tongue; then, prayers uttered in six different languages by clergymen from some of the Christian denominations to which two-thirds of Taiwan's Indigenous population belong (another point of difference from the Han majority). Tsai herself, amidst all the Mandarin, used the Atayal language's words for 'truth' and 'reconciliation' to demonstrate how Indigenous wisdom connected the two concepts. Finally, a Yami elder accepted Tsai's apology, speaking in his native language about prospects for reconciliation and harmony.

Tsai's summary of historic wrongs included language prohibitions, assimilation measures and neglect that resulted in 'great losses' in relation to native languages, and complete disappearance in the case of the Pingpu. In turn, among her undertakings was one clearly directed at that cultural harm: a pledge to submit a draft Indigenous languages law to Taiwan's parliament. Since that day, Tsai's government has been criticised for a failure to deliver on some of the promises contained in the apology, notably regarding return of Indigenous lands. However,

the commitment to advance enactment of Indigenous language legislation was honoured, and the *Indigenous Languages Development Act* (ILDA) became law in mid-2017. ILDA confers official status on Taiwan's Indigenous languages, recognises a right to use those languages in dealings with administrative agencies, and assigns a range of responsibilities to public authorities.

What the *Indigenous Languages Development Act* means for Taiwan and its Indigenous languages

ILDA was not a completely new creation, as drafts were devised by the CIP in the early 2000s but not advanced further. Its absence did not impede work to protect and promote Indigenous languages, because efforts were already initiated by Indigenous organisations and educators, accompanied by non-Indigenous scholars and other allies. A Center of Indigenous Education and Research was set up in 1994, and the 1998 *Education Act for Indigenous Peoples* encouraged educational authorities to provide Indigenous students opportunities to learn their languages or be taught through them. The 2005 *Indigenous Peoples Basic Law*, while anticipating future language legislation, itself provided authorisation for certain measures.

Nor was ILDA's existence a prerequisite for governments and public institutions to support community endeavours outside the classroom. The CIP had been doing that since the early days of its existence, including involvement in the 2005 launch of Taiwan Indigenous Television, which provides airtime for the 16 languages still spoken—albeit with most programming in Mandarin, now the lingua franca for communication between members of different tribes, and first language for most Indigenous persons of middle age or younger.

Before ILDA the CIP had elaborated two consecutive *Six-Year Plans for Indigenous Languages Revitalization*, detailing the spectrum of activities it initiated or

supported. Those actions are all consonant with language maintenance and reclamation efforts occurring in other parts of the world. Some are innovative, such as subsidising childcare provided in Indigenous languages and a plan to sustain Indigenous language use in community churches. Activities funded or supported by the CIP include: sociolinguistic surveys to gauge language attitudes and usage patterns; language nests, where pre-school children acquire the language from staff and elders in an immersion environment; language camps for Indigenous children in urban areas; proficiency testing; production of teaching materials; linguistics research; adult education; master-apprentice programs; a range of other training programs; and development of digital resources.

Since 2019, the official status ILDA confers upon Taiwan's Indigenous languages has an alternative source: the *Development of National Languages Act* (DNLA). Drafted almost two decades ago but derailed by debates around language and identity politics, DNLA gives national language status to the 'natural languages and sign languages used by the different ethnic groups', thereby covering all locally spoken Chinese varieties as well as Indigenous languages. Nonetheless, there is symbolic value in having a law specifically for Indigenous languages in the form of ILDA, and a granting of official recognition that predates DNLA's officialisation of settler languages. Other provisions of ILDA possess both symbolic and practical value, such as exhortations to pertinent authorities to install signage and make transport broadcasts in local Indigenous languages.

In these aspects and others, ILDA imposes obligations that go beyond those stipulated in DNLA. ILDA strengthens justification for additional resourcing and attention for language revitalisation endeavours, whether at CIP level, within a small village, or by a cultural association for an urban diaspora community. Its creation of the Foundation for Research and Development of Indigenous Languages should result in enhanced expertise and pedagogical resources for languages. ILDA can reinforce the Ministry of Education's work to advance curriculum development and teacher training, and utilise pre-existing authorisations for experimental education to set up immersive programs for Indigenous children.

Recent studies confirm that intra-family transmission of Indigenous languages has fallen significantly in recent decades, so children are not raised with the capacity to use their ancestral languages. This is particularly the case now that over half the Indigenous population resides in cities, rather than rural villages where cultural activities and relationships with nature, along with the monocultural character of some communities, may favour language retention. ILDA may help focus energies on creating social spaces for language learning and use in the cities, while strengthening language practices in villages. Similarly, ILDA could be a tool for linguistically assimilated Pingpu communities to procure support for recovering languages that long ago ceased to be spoken, even for groups denied CIP recognition.

What ILDA says to the rest of the world

ILDA may have an additional function, likely to appeal to those seeking to cultivate a positive image for Taiwan in the international arena: another means to signal Taiwan's conformity with human rights standards, such as those enunciated in the 2007 *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Taiwan cannot participate in the forums that produce international law instruments, but its governments like to emphasise their respect for principles codified in human rights treaties. Since 2009 this extends to legislating to implement key human rights treaties within the ROC domestic legal system. There are even formalised processes whereby panels of independent experts assess Taiwan's compliance, accepting input from NGOs as well as government bodies—in effect, matching the review system of the United Nations bodies that monitor treaty observance.

ILDA aligns with the string of Indigenous language laws introduced over the last two decades in parts of the Americas and Oceania, thereby buttressing framings of Taiwan as a settler state. At the start of this century, although the US state of Hawai'i and several Latin American countries accorded constitutional recognition to Indigenous languages, only New Zealand and the USA had national-level legislation

specifically concerning Indigenous languages; Canada's Northwest Territories was one of the few subnational jurisdictions with a law. Between 2003 and 2017, nine Latin American countries enacted legislation dedicated to Indigenous languages: Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Paraguay, Bolivia and Ecuador. Most recently, Canada's federal parliament passed the *Indigenous Languages Act 2019*, and proposals have been presented in Chile. In 2017, the Australian state of New South Wales passed the first Aboriginal languages law in Australia. With the International Decade of Indigenous Languages commencing in 2022, more jurisdictions are likely to follow this legislative path.

Thus, even though Taiwan's passage of ILDA was, like previous actions concerning Indigenous languages, a response to domestic circumstances, it may have broader implications. Taiwan has long instrumentalised shared Austronesian language heritage to build connections with Southeast Asia and Pacific Island states, perhaps helping sustain the diplomatic recognition it still receives from some Pacific countries. Taiwanese Indigenous organisations already have strong international networks, particularly with their fellow Austronesian-speaking Maōri and Hawaiians. ILDA may create more opportunities for those organisations, and for Taiwan's human rights groups, universities, and research centres, to build relationships with counterparts in countries with Indigenous populations, including the South and Southeast Asian states that are the focus of the New Southbound Policy that is now crucial to Taiwan's international orientations. Drawing attention to ILDA could facilitate efforts by Taiwan's leaders to enhance soft power and create favourable conditions for the people-to-people relations seen as essential, given the reality of widespread non-recognition. Awareness of ILDA, and of initiatives made under it, could strengthen global perceptions that Taiwan is distinct because of its Indigenous peoples, and that institutional observance of Indigenous rights reinforces Taiwanese claims to statehood.

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Image: A harvest festival held by the Paiwan tribe and Rukai tribe. Credit: Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan)/Flickr.