

Controversial indigeneity

Museums representing non-officially recognized indigenous groups in Taiwan

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Abstract: *This article explores how museums in Taiwan represent a group, called Pingpu, whose indigenous status is highly contested. Pingpu specific cultural features have almost disappeared as a result of centuries of exchanges with Han Chinese settlers. As a consequence, Pingpu groups have not received official indigenous recognition by the Taiwanese government. Yet Pingpu groups are actively seeking recognition through public demonstrations and promoting public awareness of Pingpu concerns. The official recognition of Pingpu's indigeneity is an ongoing, decades-long, controversial issue in Taiwan. Museums are one of the foci through which Pingpu issues are gaining visibility in Taiwan. But how are they dealing with this controversial issue? More broadly, what position can or should museums take in relation to contested indigenous claims to recognition? This article discusses recent exhibitions representing Pingpu at the light of the politics of representation of indigenous groups and the transformation of museums' social roles in contemporary Taiwan.*

Key words: Museums, indigenous peoples, Taiwan, activism, recognition, controversy.

This article discusses how museums in Taiwan represent a group – called Pingpu – whose indigenous status is being highly contested. Pingpu cultural features have almost completely disappeared as a result of centuries of intense exchanges with Han Chinese¹ settlers. As a consequence, Pingpu groups have not received official recognition by the Taiwanese government² as 'indigenous'. Yet Pingpu groups are actively seeking recognition through public demonstrations and events

aiming to put pressure on the Taiwanese national government for recognition, as well as to promote public awareness of Pingpu issues and concerns. The official recognition of Pingpu's indigeneity³ is an ongoing, decades-long, controversial issue in Taiwan.

Museums are one of the foci through which Pingpu issues are gradually gaining visibility in the Taiwanese national scene. Yet, interestingly, Taiwanese museums are dealing with this topic in an ambivalent manner:

18 whilst many museums shun engagement with Pingpu claims of recognition, others indicate a willingness to engage with such topics, though in a prudent, diplomatic fashion, whilst yet other museums are taking a more open position vis-a-vis the recognition issue. The latter do so through exhibitions that produce previously inaccessible and/or disregarded archival documents shedding new light on the history of Pingpu groups and on their relationships with Han settlers, and provide evidence of the revived cultural practices of contemporary Pingpu communities (such as religious ceremonies, festivals, language courses, folk tales, arts and craft traditions).

This article examines recent museum exhibitions representing Pingpu groups at the light of the concept of ‘activist museum practice’, and locates these initiatives within the broader frameworks of the politics of representation of indigenous groups and the transformation of museum’s social roles in contemporary Taiwan.

MUSEUMS, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CONTROVERSY

Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing emphasis in museum priorities on engagement with contemporary social issues (Cameron & Kelly 2010, Sandell *et al.* 2010). In the process, museums have been relinquishing their long-standing claims to ‘neutrality’, and have become sites of ‘contentious curatorship’ (Cameron & Kelly 2010) and activist practices – that is, practices designed to bring about social change, often in relation to issues characterized by moral, social or political contestation (Sandell & Dodd 2010:14, Marstine 2011:13, Sandell 2011).⁴

In particular, indigenous demands – to participate in their museum representations, to inform museum practices, and repatriate indigenous heritage, among others – have acted as triggers for major transformations in the realm of museums (see Cooper 2008). This is notably exemplified by landmark legislation such as the 1990 *US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* and the 1992 Task Force Report, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples in Canada* (Hill & Nicks, 1992). These transformations have set the conditions for indigenous communities to shift their position in relation to museums: from outsiders (merely consulted), to collaborators (brought in upon invitation), to insiders (as full participants in the decision-making process). Many factors – including national and local political support, committed directorship and staff, and availability of funds – contribute to enable museums to play incisive roles in relation to indigenous right claims. For instance the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia has been defined “a focus of progressive political activism” (Shelton & Houtman 2009:9), and has acted as stage for repeated First Nations rights protest. The Museum, whose advisory board includes First Nations representatives, actively pursues a policy of First Nations curatorship and in recent years it has undergone a complete refurbishment to better suit the conservation and display requirements of First Nations communities (Shelton & Houtman 2009:9, 12).

Museum studies scholars are rightly following very closely these developments (e.g. Simpson 2001, Peers & Brown 2003, Hendry 2005, McCarthy 2011) and are starting to pay attention to the modalities and

implications of indigenous contestation to museum practices (e.g. Cooper 2008, Sleeper-Smith 2009). In this author's view, one aspect that further deserves attention is the rarely articulated subjectivity of indigenous groups: not all indigenous peoples are equal. For instance, some may have been officially recognized as indigenous by their governments, whilst others might not. How do museums relate to the latter? Whilst the political correctness of collaboration with indigenous groups seems beyond discussion, does that also apply to collaboration with groups that have not been officially recognized? What position can or should museums take in relation to indigenous recognition claims? And how can museums represent an indigenous group whose material culture is very sparse and when no collections are available? I want to use the case of Taiwan and its non-recognized indigenous groups, the Pingpu, to explore how museums may respond to such challenges.

THE CONTROVERSIAL INDIGENEITY OF THE PINGPU

The Taiwanese government has so far recognized 14 indigenous groups; with the exception of the Kavalan group (recognized in 2002), all other groups belong to the so called 'mountain peoples' ('Gaoshan'), as opposed to the Pingpu ('People of the Plains'). Pingpu communities currently include ten sub-groups: Ketagalan, Taokas, Pazeh, Kahabu, Papura, Babuza, Hoanya, Siraya, Makatao and Tavorlong. Taken together, Pingpu groups include around three million individuals (Sung 2004a:125). With the exception of the Pazeh and Kahabu (and to some extent of the Siraya), the original languages of these groups

have disappeared. Pingpu activists caution that if the Taiwanese government fails to recognize and therefore to protect Pingpu groups, their already severely endangered languages will completely disappear (Pan 2011).

The very existence of Pingpu groups is object of debate. The Kuomintang – the Taiwanese Nationalist Government – declared the Pingpu officially extinct in 1954 due to assimilation to the Han.⁵ Pingpu activist groups however, counter that historical records, together with the revival of Pingpu cultural practices and language since the early 1990s (Hsieh 2006), in connection with the broader movement of revitalization of indigenous cultures in Taiwan, justify Pingpu claims to recognition as indigenous.

In the presence of historical records that prove the census registration of Pingpu as indigenous until as late as the 1950s, why does the Taiwanese government continue to deny Pingpu's indigeneity? There are two answers to this question. The first is the official explanation, also provided in museum exhibitions, invoking Pingpu's high degree of cultural assimilation to the Han Chinese. The non-official explanation refers to the economic un-sustainability of the extension of personal benefits currently granted to indigenous peoples (numbering around 500 000 individuals) to a much larger group potentially numbering millions. Moreover, this would also exacerbate social disparities, as relatively wealthy Pingpu communities living in Taiwan's plains would be entitled to the same economic benefits as the economically disadvantaged mountain indigenous villages (interviews with Chen Shu-Juo 2011, Shih Wen-Cheng 2013) (see also Sung 2004a:127, 2004b).

Further resistance to the recognition of

20 Pingpu as indigenous today is also linked to Pingpu's own self-denial of being indigenous in the past. Chen Shu-Juo, anthropologist, specialist of the Siraya group – the most prominent among the Pingpu groups – and museum curator at the National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, explains in an interview in 2011 that in the past Pingpu communities felt ashamed to identify themselves as Pingpu. As recently as 20 years ago, nobody in the Siraya communities with whom Dr Chen works would self-identify as Pingpu. However, since the 1990s Siraya communities launched cultural revitalization programs which brought about a sense of pride in being Siraya and in retrieving ancient and distinctive cultural practices.

INDIGENEITY AS POLITICAL TOOL

In Taiwan, official recognition of indigenous status is endowed upon a group's capacity to evidence cultural distinctiveness, for instance by documenting the continued use of an indigenous language, unique religious practices, housing styles, clothing and food traditions etc. 'Indigeneity' in Taiwan – as, or perhaps even more, than in other countries – is a politically laden concept. The history of indigenous groups in Taiwan has been brought to the forefront only relatively recently, in the 1990s, in connection with the rise to power of political parties favouring Taiwanese independence (such as the Democratic Progressive Party). Since the 1990s, pro-Taiwanese independence movements have contributed to re-evaluate indigenous cultures as a way to emphasize the historical cultural independence of Taiwan from mainland China. In parallel, linguistic, genetic, archaeological and ethnographic studies

evidencing the links between indigenous peoples in Taiwan and other indigenous groups in the Pacific and South-Asian regions – thus supporting the theory of their common Austronesian roots – have received increasing attention not only in the academia, but also in political fora and among Taiwanese society at large. Again, such links with other indigenous peoples in the Austronesian region have been instrumentalized in political discourses emphasizing the cultural distinctiveness of Taiwan and downplaying the Chinese heritage (see Rudolph 2001, Varutti 2012).

As a result of such political and cultural context, the gathering of evidence of 'indigeneity' has a political and constructivist facet. As Lin (2007:198) notes "in the cultural politics of contemporary Taiwan, every tribe is required to have its own clothing and weaving to distinguish one from another. Thus, tribes select some standard graphic motifs and patterns to be 'traditional' in order to represent themselves to outsiders. However, if these cultural expressions are studied more closely, it is clear that most of them have been 'invented' only recently."

Indigenous recognition in Taiwan is thus essentially a political affair. This is in no way new. 'Ethnicity' and 'indigeneity' are both concepts that lend themselves to be variously interpreted and deployed in order to define a group and its relationships with other groups and/or the nation. In particular, ethnicity and 'indigeneity' can be understood as inherent prerogatives of a group (in a primordialist or essentialist perspective)⁶ or rather as the result of the group's willingness and efforts to be perceived as distinct from others (in a constructivist perspective).⁷ In the case of Pingpu, genetic studies of Pingpu populations have been invoked by Pingpu activists as

evidence in support of their recognition as indigenous (due to the alleged genetic proximity between Pingpu and indigenous individuals). There is thus an essentialist element in Pingpu's claims to 'have always been indigenous', and an implicit rebuttal of attempts of reading their current cultural revival as 'the invention of Pingpu's tradition', to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) famous predicate. On the other hand, the very acknowledgement that Pingpu cultural and ethnic features have changed over time as a consequence of contact with Han settlers, contradicts essentialists' arguments that cultures are 'stable', 'unchangeable', 'reified' or 'indisputable' entities. Interestingly, it is precisely genetic studies that provide today an important basis and legitimation for Pingpu's ongoing efforts to change their public perception (in a constructivist approach). Essentialist and constructivist approaches appear to be intertwined in Pingpu's practices and discourses, and the two ultimately uphold each other to strengthen Pingpu's claims. The conflation of essentialist and constructivist elements in Pingpu's discourse can be better understood in the light of their current struggle to receive recognition. As Baumann (1996:14) notes, "in a discourse of political contestation reification may be desirable, and even seem necessary to effect mobilization". In the current context of political activism, the Pingpu need to both portray themselves as inherently and essentially indigenous, and to emphasize the liveliness of Pingpu's cultures evidenced by the recent retrieval of Pingpu cultural practices.

PINGPU IN TAIWANESE MUSEUMS

In the majority of national level museums

holding collections of indigenous cultures in Taiwan, indigenous objects are classified, interpreted and displayed as 'ethnographic'. One of the implications of this is that the structure of exhibitions reflects the criteria of categorization of indigenous groups. For instance, exhibitions are organized around such topics as natural environment and geographic location of indigenous settlements (mountain versus coastal villages), productive activities (agriculture, fishing, hunting etc.), housing styles, social organization, religious beliefs and material culture (everyday objects and tools, and indigenous crafts).⁸

Such exhibition approaches emphasize a synchronic perspective whereby the distinctive cultural characteristics of each indigenous group are brought into focus through cross-cultural comparison. Such approaches, however, present two problematic aspects. Firstly, they fail to represent the depth of the historical interactions between indigenous groups and the other communities on the island – including the Spanish and the Dutch (in the 16th and 17th centuries), Han Chinese (as of the 17th century from Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, and after 1949 from all over mainland China) and the Japanese (from 1895 to 1945). And secondly, they don't account for recent and contemporary efforts of Pingpu communities to revive their cultures and attract the government attention on their request to obtain official recognition as indigenous groups.

The absence in displays of a detailed historical reconstruction of the relationships between indigenous and settler communities reveals the difficulties inherent in the representation of an important chapter in Taiwanese national history – a chapter that

22 still awaits to be written, as Taiwanese national historiography has so far privileged Han Chinese perspectives and sources.

The lack of historical depth is all the more problematic in displays of Pingpu cultures for at least three, connected reasons. Firstly, as mentioned, the very existence of Pingpu cultures today is debated: each museum (and each museum director and curator) holds a personal and institutional position on this issue, which will affect displays. Secondly, hitherto historical research on Pingpu's past is relatively limited: given Taiwan's turn to democracy in the mid-1990s, national archives have only recently become accessible and historical research of minority groups such as the Pingpu is in its initial phases. Thirdly, due to cultural assimilation, colonization, and self-denial of Pingpu identities, there is a paucity of Pingpu material culture both in villages and in museum collections (interviews with Chen 2011, Shih 2013). Curators report that it is difficult to collect Pingpu objects today since there are very few left, and most tend to look like Han Chinese material culture (interview with Shih 2013). The National Museum of Taiwan History for instance, gathered the exhibits for its temporary exhibition *Seeing Pingpu* (discussed below) from various sources: it borrowed a significant amount of objects from museums in Japan; some objects were collected through anthropological field research, and some objects were commissioned to local communities. This is the case for instance of a traditional banana fibre jacket belonging to the Kavalan group, which was reproduced according to the traditional weaving technique by a private banana fibre weaving workshop on Taiwan's eastern coast.



Fig. 1. Jacket made of banana fiber, textiles and body ornaments on display in the Seeing Pingpu exhibition, National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan. Photo: Marzia Varutti 2013.

Some museums show great interest in Pingpu cultures and wish to include Pingpu items in their collections. For instance, the National Museum of Taiwan started to collect Pingpu objects among the Pingpu communities in Paze An-Li village in central Taiwan in the 1950s, and is currently conducting digital learning projects and archival projects focusing on this material (Hung 2009:17, 57). Yet this kind of historical research and collection among Pingpu groups remain relatively sparse.

As far as Pingpu revitalization efforts and activist practices are concerned, most museums still shun these arguments, although things are gradually starting to change however. Some national level museums have included in their permanent galleries references to indigenous right movements and to Pingpu demands for recognition, and some museums are using the medium of temporary

exhibitions to raise open questions on Pingpu's debated indigeneity. In what follows I will first consider how references to Pingpu groups are being gradually incorporated in the permanent galleries devoted to indigenous groups in major national museums in Taiwan. In a second moment, I will turn to examine three instances of major recent temporary exhibitions devoted to the Pingpu groups.

REFERENCES TO PINGPU IN PERMANENT GALLERIES

Although not always explicitly engaging with Pingpu claims, several national museums in Taiwan refer to indigenous activist movements in their permanent galleries. For instance, in the permanent gallery of the Cultural Park of Indigenous Peoples in Pingdong⁹ exhibition panels relate the creation of the Alliance for Taiwan's Aborigines in 1984 and its efforts at "voicing indigenous rights", for instance through the name-change campaign, aiming at "forsaking past references to 'mountain compatriots' and 'plain compatriots' and calling the Austronesian people in Taiwan 'indigenes people' as collective term".

In the same vein, the Austronesian Gallery of the National Museum of Prehistory, in Taitung, has been recently modified¹⁰ to include new panels bearing the titles 'Hidden history, years of oppression', 'Years of awakening' and 'Respect for indigenous groups'. The texts of these panels acknowledge the colonizers' exploitation of indigenous peoples in Taiwan and relate the achievements of the indigenous rights movement since the late 1980s. The Gallery includes a section devoted to the Pingpu with texts acknowledging the historical interactions between the Pingpu



Fig. 2. Portrait of Pingpu youth made by the photographer John Thomson in 1877, included in the exhibition *Seeing Pingpu, National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan*. The caption of the portrait reads "a kind of civilized indigenous". Photo: Marzia Varutti 2013.

and the Han, as well as the process of 'acculturation' whereby not only were Pingpu sinicized, but Han culture also incorporated Pingpu elements. The texts and the display however remain focused on the past. For instance, a large exhibition section displays 18th century pictorial images of Pingpu and 19th century contracts of purchase of Pingpu lands from Qing Dynasty officers. Although exhibition panels mention the ongoing movement of revitalization of Pingpu cultures, no reference is made to contemporary Pingpu claims to indigenous status.

Recognition of indigenous rights movements also appears in the permanent anthropological gallery of the National Museum of Natural History in Taichung, where a section entitled ‘Issues and prospects for the 21st century’ reports “Since the late 1980s, Taiwan’s Austronesian People have been working to call attention to their plight, to revive their culture and to gain autonomy and the rights to historical interpretation”. Also in the panel ‘Social and cultural diversity’ one can read “In recent decades a social movement among the indigenous peoples has resulted in better recognition and dignity for Taiwan’s indigenous peoples in the main-stream society”.

Similarly, the permanent gallery *Our Land, Our History* at the National Museum of Taiwan History in Tainan, closes with a section entitled ‘Democratic and multicultural era’ which emphasizes how the freedom of speech brought about by the democratic turn in the 1990s led to unprecedented demonstrations in favour of indigenous land rights and name change.

The significance of the acknowledgement of indigenous rights in the permanent displays of major national museums in Taiwan cannot be underestimated: only two decades ago such statements would have been still perceived as controversial. Nevertheless, it appears that Taiwanese national museums remain reluctant to engage with contested issues in their permanent displays. The situation is different if one considers temporary exhibitions, as I discuss below.

PINGPU IN TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

Legacy of the Pingpu Group

The temporary exhibition *Legacy of the Pingpu*

Group held at the National Taiwan Museum in spring 2010 was one of the earliest attempts to bring Pingpu’s past into focus and to locate Pingpu’s history within the broader framework of Taiwanese national history (see Varutti 2012). Exhibits included reproductions of 19th century land contracts, maps showing the ownership of land, as well as images (paintings, drawings and photos) of indigenous peoples as seen by foreign officers, missionaries and travellers in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Exhibition panels acknowledged that these illustrations were “deeply influential” and even “changed [Pingpu] self-images”¹¹ however the note only refers to illustrations, whilst engagement with the uses and misuses of the photographic material on display (especially dating from the period of the Japanese occupation) is shun in the exhibition. *Legacy of the Pingpu Group* was nevertheless a pivotal exhibition because it was one of the earliest museum initiatives solely devoted to the Pingpu group, and because it was one of the earliest attempts to cast light on the historical exchanges between Pingpu and settler communities. Its scope was however entirely developed in an historical perspective, whilst the contemporary situation of Pingpu remained out of the picture.

Seeing Pingpu

In Spring 2013, the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH) in Tainan, inaugurated a major exhibition entitled *Seeing Pingpu. The History and Culture of the Indigenous Plains Peoples in Taiwan*. The exhibition was co-organized by NMTH and the National Museum of Ethnology of Japan, which for the occasion loaned several of the over 300 objects on display. The exhibition aims to tell “the long and difficult road this group travelled as

they searched for their memories and regained their dignity”.¹² The display does include an historical section (tellingly entitled ‘Plains indigenous peoples in the Grand History’), however the exhibition makes a point of transcending the historical perspective: its main focus rests on contemporary expressions of Pingpu’s identities.

Pingpu songs, myths and folk tales are accounted through audio-video and illustrated through artistic drawings. A section devoted to everyday objects includes smoking pipes, textile looms, clothing items, ritual objects and musical instruments. The last part of the exhibition – entitled ‘Stories of the Pingpu: small stories, big history’ – is probably the most innovative and original: it includes five self-contained areas, each telling the story of a Pingpu family in a different historical period. The theme of historical continuity is here spelled out clearly in the exhibition panels, stating that the lives of these five families “demonstrate how they survived and maintained their identities throughout an often troubled history”. This is also the section of the exhibition where the collaboration with Pingpu communities has been more intense: Pingpu children were asked to take pictures representative of their villages and to write a story about it.

The curator of the exhibition, Shih Wen-Cheng, explains in an interview in 2013 that the exhibition has mainly an educational purpose, it aims to introduce Pingpu’s history and culture and to dispel the widespread belief that Pingpu’s culture have thoroughly disappeared. Moreover, continues Shih, the very concept of Pingpu is a construct manufactured by outsiders – Han Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Dutch settlers. Pingpu’s history has been told by external actors,

including the Han Chinese government. Thus there was a felt need to open up a new perspective not only on Pingpu but also on Taiwan’s history, by revealing its multicultural past.

Consistently with these aims, all aspects of the exhibition have been discussed with Pingpu communities, and are the result of in-depth interviews with Pingpu members. Artisans and elders from various Pingpu communities were invited to the Museum for educational activities and demonstrations (such as workshops of banana fibre weaving); in addition, the Museum collaborated with the Drama Department of the Tainan University in setting up a theatrical piece on historical events in a local Pingpu village, which was then performed in the Museum premises (Shih 2013).

One of the aspects that distinguishes *Seeing Pingpu* from the exhibitions on Pingpu at the National Taiwan Museum (*Legacy of the Pingpu Group*) and at the National Museum of Natural Science (*Siraya*, discussed below) is a focus on oral history, life-stories and first-hand accounts (most visible in the section devoted to the life trajectories of the five mentioned Pingpu families).

Seeing Pingpu exhibition takes a diplomatic position in relation to the open question of Pingpu’s indigenous status: the exhibition does not provide explicit support to Pingpu’s claims to recognition, nor does it deny it. The exhibition texts emphasize historical continuity “we have always been here [...] We are all Taiwanese indigenes [...] We did not disappear” and *de facto* by providing evidence of Pingpu’s cultural distinctiveness, it indirectly supports Pingpu’s political claims.

The ambivalence is wanted. The curator, Shih Wen-Cheng explains that an open

26 statement asserting Pingpu's indigenous status would expose the Museum to the risk of being questioned on the veracity of such statement. Whilst the illustration of Pingpu's uninterrupted cultural practices (epitomized by the sentence "we have always been here") is far less contentious. At the same time, continues Shih, due to the location of the exhibition – in Tainan, the stronghold of Taiwanese pro-independence movement, and an area with high presence of Pingpu communities – it would have been problematic if the exhibition had questioned Pingpu's claims to recognition. Thus the position chosen by the Museum in this case – as expressed in the wording of museum texts – reveals the necessity to negotiate between national and local politics, and between the official and the unofficial discourse on Pingpu's status.

Siraya

Between June and December 2011, the National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung hosted the temporary exhibition *Siraya. The Connection Between the Past and Present*.

The Siraya group is not one of the fourteen officially recognized indigenous groups of Taiwan, they are one of the Pingpu sub-groups. Siraya members have long been claiming the right to obtain official recognition, and to be recognized as 'Siraya' rather than as 'Pingpu'. As mentioned, Pingpu is used as a collective, generic term to indicate all those groups that have been assimilated into Han majority culture to such an extent as to not justify the appellation of indigenous group. Siraya activists demand the formal acknowledgement of the Siraya's cultural distinctiveness within Pingpu groups.

The exhibition at the National Museum of

Natural Science takes a slightly different angle on the representation of Pingpu cultures when compared to the *Legacy of the Pingpu Group* and the *Seeing Pingpu* exhibitions. In the *Siraya* exhibition, the narratives of the historical exchanges between Pingpu and other settlers are marginal, whilst prominence is given to the presentation of Siraya past and present culture. Chen Shu-Juo, curator of the exhibition reveals that Siraya communities were quite unsatisfied with the way they are usually represented in museums since exhibitions of indigenous peoples (and especially of Pingpu groups) mainly adopt an historical and colonial perspective, privileging archive documents and old photos rather than providing accounts of present day communities. In an effort to change this, Chen made a point to work collaboratively with Siraya members on all aspects of the exhibition, from co-writing museum texts to intense consultation on the exhibition structure and design.

The exhibition includes detailed descriptions of Siraya ceremonial and ritual practices and system of belief (such as ancestors worshipping through offerings of ceremonial pots containing betel nuts and rice wine) as well as the presentation of recent genetic studies proving the link between the Siraya and the officially recognized indigenous groups. The exhibition also includes elements that reveal how much Taiwan has changed over the last decades and how far it has moved along the path to democracy and freedom of expression. For instance, referring to the ethnic map of Taiwan emerging from the first census registration conducted under the Kuomintang government, exhibition panels state that "the KMT government cancelled the indigenous ethnicity of Siraya after 1949". Statements of

this tenure would have hardly been acceptable in a Taiwanese national museum until a few decades ago. Their presence is in itself a sign of the times.

The closing section includes photos of recent (summer 2010) Siraya's demonstrations in front of governmental buildings in order to request official recognition. The curator used this material to raise the central question of Siraya's contemporary status: "Should Siraya be recognized as a distinct ethnic group? Come visit *Siraya: The Connection Between the Past and Present*, you'll make it clearer in your mind."¹³ In the same vein, in the exhibition panels one can read "in a contemporary society in which value is placed on cultural diversity the Siraya should be recognized as a distinct ethnic group with a distinct culture and traditions".

The wording used in these texts is significant, since the Siraya haven't obtained recognition by the Taiwanese government neither as an ethnic group, nor as indigenous group.¹⁴ The exhibition therefore is not taking a controversial position in asserting Siraya's ethnicity. The real, and most contested question – 'Why are they not Pingpu aborigines?'¹⁵ – is raised quite discreetly in an exhibition panel, and does not feature in the exhibition advertising material. The exhibition underpins Siraya's claims to official recognition in an indirect way, that is by providing evidence of Siraya's cultural distinctiveness and its historical depth; this is done by reconstructing Siraya's history through archaeological finds and archival documents, by demonstrating genetic affiliation with recognized indigenous groups, and by showing historical continuity of religious practices and annual ceremonies.

The curator, Chen Shu-Juo points out that the exhibition uses an academic and scientific

perspective to illustrate Siraya's cultural distinctiveness, which remains open for academic debate. The images of Siraya activists' demonstrations in front of governmental buildings – continues Chen – do not aim to challenge the government, but are rather used to inform audiences of Siraya's commitment to the recognition of their culture.

At the same time Chen has been actively campaigning for Siraya rights himself. In a self-reflexive mode, he concedes that the Siraya exhibition he curated is part of a broader movement that aims to draw government's attention on non-officially recognized groups in Taiwan. As an anthropologist of the Siraya, a museum curator, and an activist for Siraya's rights, Chen is uniquely positioned to comment on the relationship between museums and indigenous activists in Taiwan. He notes that, tendentially, museum curators of indigenous collections are not interested in activist campaigns, and rather prefer to focus on the study of objects or intangible aspects of indigenous cultures, they don't consider people and their issues so much as a subject of study in its own right. Chen holds that today museums need curators that have an open mind and who are ready to open the doors of museum storages to share collections and their own knowledge with indigenous communities.

DISCUSSION

When set one against the other, the three exhibitions considered – *Legacy of the Pingpu Group*, *Seeing Pingpu*, and *Siraya* – reveal interesting analogies and contrasts.

Legacy of the Pingpu Group aimed to incorporate Pingpu's history into Taiwan's national historical narratives; here the museum is still looking at Pingpu from a Han Chinese

28 majority perspective. The exhibition *Seeing Pingpu* at the NMTH takes a more neutral stance, whereby emphasis is put on documenting the cultural distinctiveness of Pingpu. Conversely, the exhibition *Siraya* at the National Museum of Natural Science, whilst not fully embracing an emic perspective, makes a point to evidence Siraya's cultural saliency and ultimately supports Siraya's requests to obtain official recognition as a self-standing indigenous group.

The notion of historical continuity of Pingpu cultures in contemporary Taiwan, virtually absent in the *Legacy of the Pingpu Group* exhibition, is central in both the *Seeing Pingpu* and the *Siraya* exhibition. Chen Shu-Juo, curator of the *Siraya* exhibition, notes that there is a widespread understanding in Taiwan that Pingpu cultures have completely disappeared as a result of assimilation. Chen thus emphasizes the need for museum exhibitions to document the connection between the past and the present of Pingpu communities, to show that today's Pingpu are the descendants of Taiwan's indigenous peoples and not of Han migrants. In the same vein, the closing panel in the *Seeing Pingpu* exhibition asserts "We have always been here, we have not disappeared".

In the three cases, the curators are not Pingpu nor indigenous, but Han Chinese anthropologists with a profound knowledge of the cultural groups they are representing and a long-standing commitment to indigenous issues. Interviews with curators reveal that they are highly aware of the cultural and ethical importance of working collaboratively with source communities. As cultural interpreters and mediators, they negotiate the requests and expectations of Pingpu communities on one hand, and the

institutional needs and agendas of museums on the other.

Ultimately, these three exhibitions contribute to reformulate the notion of Taiwanese national identity, by integrating in the national framework the previously marginalized indigenous peoples. This process is emblematically illustrated in the closing panel of the *Seeing Pingpu* exhibition, entitled 'Seeing Pingpu, seeing yourself' where one can read "We can learn from the past and understand contemporary Taiwanese society through the stories of the plains indigenous peoples". In addition, exhibitions of Pingpu groups also contribute to recast the concept of indigenous people in Taiwan, by broadening its scope to include not only the indigenous groups inhabiting the mountains but also those inhabiting the plains (to this date, the Kavalan is the only officially recognized indigenous group that did not originally inhabit the mountains of Taiwan).

ACTIVIST MUSEUM PRACTICE IN TAIWAN

As we have seen, the permanent galleries devoted to indigenous cultures in major national museums in Taiwan include references to indigenous right claims, and some of them also introduce references to the non-officially recognized groups. This is an emerging topic in Taiwanese museums, and one that is mostly tackled in temporary, rather than permanent exhibitions.

I suggest that the ways in which the thorny and politically sensitive issue of Pingpu recognition is dealt with in Taiwanese museums are revelatory of the ongoing transformation of Taiwanese national narratives (increasingly inclusive of indigenous groups), but also of the transformation of museums

themselves, which are gradually taking up an active role in broad social and political transformations.

This is in considerable part the result of new, daring curatorial choices. The considerations developed about exhibitions representing Pingpu groups in Taiwan indicate that curators working on non-officially recognized groups in Taiwan face difficulties of at least two kinds. Firstly, it is difficult to represent the past of these communities since to this date there are limited historical documents available and even less historical research on this topic (as historical narratives have so far privileged the perspective of Han Chinese); and secondly, there are relatively few objects available (both within and outside of museums) to illustrate the cultures of these groups. Yet these difficulties have not prevented curators from setting up comprehensive and accurate exhibitions. Rather these obstacles spurred them to conduct first hand research and to assemble material from different sources, such as loans from other museums, national archives, private collectors, family heirlooms, anthropological fieldwork, as well as commissions of newly made traditional objects. In so doing, these museums adopted a constructivist approach whereby the history of a group and its cultural saliency are being reconstructed for the first time in the exhibition room. Here, the museum takes up on itself the roles of researcher, historical authenticator, interpreter and communicator. These are legitimate and potentially fruitful ventures for institutions devoted to the production of knowledge such as museums, though they may also harbour some risks. In the case of the Pingpu, as mentioned, most Pingpu material culture cannot be distinguished from Han Chinese. If museums,

in an effort to capture Pingpu's cultural distinctiveness, select the most unique, non-Han looking objects, there is a risk that that selection of objects is essentializing and non-representative. And the resulting exhibition can thus ultimately turn into an instrument of indigenous agendas, rather than an accurate representation of contemporary Pingpu cultures.

Ultimately, activist museum practices are not without risks of exposure to critiques, and call for a constant assessment of the balance of the various interests at play. Yet 'activist' approaches to curatorship also bear the potential to radically change museum practices. For example, still too many museums conceptualize new displays on the basis of the composition of their collections. If this had been the criteria for curators of the three Pingpu exhibitions discussed, none of these initiatives would have seen the light since there were virtually no collections of Pingpu cultures to start with. This suggests that contemporary, socially relevant and controversial issues can become a source of inspiration for new, thought-provoking, and potentially consequential exhibitions.¹⁶ Through engagement with new actors such as indigenous activists, and with contemporary, contentious, new or previously marginalized issues, museums can radically change the way they think and work.

NOTES

1. 'Han Chinese' denotes the ethnic and cultural majority of the population in mainland China (over 90%) and on Taiwan (around 98% – including populations that migrated from mainland China in the 17th century, as well as more recent waves of migration dating of after

- 30 1945). The expression however is also charged with political and ideological subtones as 'Han Chinese' allegedly descend from the mythical 'Yellow Emperor', considered the founder of Chinese civilization. As a result, the idea of shared Han Chinese roots has been repeatedly invoked by political authorities in order to foster nationalism and patriotism in mainland China, and to promote Taiwan's reunification to China.
2. The recognition of the Republic of China (Taiwan) as an independent country – and notably independent from the People's Republic of China – is an open and thorny issue. In this paper, I subscribe to the political stance that recognizes Taiwan as an independent country; this explains the use of the terms 'nation' or 'national' with reference to Taiwan.
 3. There is an ongoing debate among social scientists about what exactly defines 'indigeneity' (see for instance Merlan 2009). In this article, 'indigeneity' is understood as an attribute of indigenous people, a set of cultural features shared by groups defined as 'indigenous'.
 4. This trend is also evidenced by the creation of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums in 2010.
 5. Historically, the tribes inhabiting the mountain areas were considered by the Chinese Qing government as well as the Japanese colonial officials as 'raw savages', whilst the tribes inhabiting the plains were considered 'cooked savages', to indicate a higher degree of 'civilization' measured by the adoption of settler cultural features (language, clothing, food preferences, beliefs etc.) In the *Seeing Pingpu* exhibition, it is noted that as Pingpu shifted 'from raw to cooked, and from cooked to invisible'.
 6. Among social scientists that defend essentialist approaches are Nussbaum 1992 and Martin 1994.
 7. Constructivist theoreticians include Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and Garcia Canclini (1995) among others.
 8. This is the case for instance in the anthropological galleries of the National Taiwan Museum, the Museum of Ethnology of the Academia Sinica, the Shung Ye Formosan Aborigines Museum (in Taipei), the National Museum of Natural Science (in Taichung), and the National Prehistory Museum (in Taitung). All museums were repeatedly visited by the author between February 2010 and June 2013.
 9. This is a large museum and leisure park devoted to the representation of indigenous peoples in Taiwan and administered directly by the Council of Indigenous Peoples, whilst most museums fall under the competence of the Ministries of Culture or Education. Last visited 16 March 2013.
 10. The revision of the permanent gallery occurred since my prior visit to the Museum in July 2010.
 11. Legacy of the Pingpu Group, exhibition panels. Visited in Spring 2010.
 12. Seeing Pingpu, undated exhibition brochure.
 13. http://www.nmns.edu.tw/nmns_eng/04exhibit/Temporary/exhibitis/Siraya.htm (accessed 9 May 2013)
 14. The Siraya have been recognized as an ethnic group only by the Tainan City government, yet even the local government denies their indigenous status. It follows that the Siraya receive government support for their cultural activities, but are not endowed with personal welfare benefits, reserved to indigenous peoples. I am grateful to Chen Shu-Juo for clarifying these points.
 15. The term 'Aborigine' is used in Taiwan as a synonymous for 'indigenous'.
 16. See also Janes 2009 for a discussion of museum initiatives stemming from engagement with issues related to climate change.

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- Shih Wen-Cheng, curator, National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan. 4 June 2013, Tainan, Taiwan.

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