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# Colonial legacies and the barriers to educational justice for Indigenous peoples in Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

Whilst in the past three decades Taiwan has developed a powerful policy and legal framework to protect and support Indigenous rights and development, culminating in the establishment of the Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee, Indigenous peoples are still the most disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable group in the country. This article draws on 24 in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews with Indigenous educators, leaders, and academics. Drawing on postcolonial and de-colonial lenses the analysis demonstrates how the legacies of colonialism prevent efforts to address and redress the inequities and injustices Indigenous peoples face. I argue that for transitional and historical justice processes to be successful in supporting Indigenous justice, decolonisation of education needs to become a central purpose.

## 殖民遗产与台湾原住民教育正义的障碍

### 摘要

尽管台湾在过去三十年间制定了有力的政策和法律框架来保护和支​​持原住民的权利与发展，并最终成立了历史正义与转型正义委员会，但原住民依然是该国最弱势、最边缘化和最易受伤害的群体。基于对原住民教育工作者、领导人和学者的二十四次深入的半结构化和开放式访谈，本文采用后殖民和去殖民的视角，论证殖民主义的遗产如何妨碍解决和纠正原住民面临的不平等与不正义的努力。本文认为，转型和历史正义进程若要实现原住民的正义，教育的非殖民化需成为一个核心目标。

## KEYWORDS

Indigenous education; colonialism; postcolonialism; Taiwan

### 关键词

原住民教育; 殖民主义; 后殖民主义; 台湾

## Introduction

In 2016, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, officially apologised to the island's Indigenous peoples – 'Taiwan's original owners' – for the 'pain and mistreatment [they] have endured' (Tsai 2016) since 1624. The 'original owners' are the 16 recognised and ten unrecognised Indigenous groups who account for only 2.48% of the total population (IWGIA 2022) and are distinct from the Han Chinese majority in their racial, linguistic,

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and cultural make-up. The mistreatment the President was referring to included physical and symbolic violence through military subjugation, cultural suppression, destruction of social organisation, and coercive assimilation and institutionalisation of Indigenous groups into ethnocentric frameworks which have their roots in first, European and, subsequently, Chinese and Japanese empires; or simply put, colonisation.

Whilst the apology and the establishment of the Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee<sup>1</sup> (henceforth, Justice Committee) were the first official acknowledgement of the colonisation of the Indigenous population and of the need to decolonise Taiwan, the process to undo their marginalisation has been ongoing since the pan-ethnic Indigenous activism which began in the 1980s and accelerated with democratisation following the end of martial law in 1987. Despite powerful legal and policy changes, including in education, Indigenous peoples continue to have significantly lower academic achievements and outcomes compared to their Han Chinese peers.

The latest available data for Taiwan show that 86% of Indigenous people over the age of 15 have no education above high school or vocational high school level (Ministry of Education 2013), only 38% complete secondary education and only 19.5% have opportunities to complete higher education (Chen 2016). In 2012, in the 9th grade Basic Competence Test Indigenous students' scores were 45.29 points lower than those of their Han Chinese peers (Chen and Young 2015). In a country that offers high-quality education (Lin et al. 2014) which Indigenous peoples have full access to (Ministry of Education 1998), their failure to succeed is explained through the discourse of cultural deficit that calls for correction of Indigenous 'difference' to improve their learning outcomes (Chen 2015; Lee and Chen 2014; Nesterova 2019a). This discourse places the blame on Indigenous learners, their families and communities, absolving schools and the wider society of responsibility to transform education to accommodate diverse needs. This article explores why Taiwan's education has been unsuccessful at supporting Indigenous students' learning and continues to disadvantage Indigenous peoples.

This article offers two contributions. First, Taiwan is undergoing a process of historical and transitional justice to face 'its dark history' (Yeh and Su 2019) and redress injustices Indigenous peoples have been subjected to. However, whilst the Justice Committee has sub-committees on historical fact-finding and reconciliation, there is no sub-committee or explicit tasks for education except for a brief mention of human rights education in the Department of Rebuilding Social Trust's mandate (Yeh and Su 2019) and the need to 'promot[e] Indigenous education' (Chang-Liao and Chen 2019) with no specification of what these entail. Moreover, despite a powerful policy landscape to develop Indigenous education that safeguards their dignity and identity, ensures their cultural vitality, advances their wellbeing, and helps achieve equality and justice for over 25 years, very little has been achieved. 'Serious discrepancies and contradictions in the legislation', partial implementation of the laws, (IWGIA 2022, 295), and 'lukewarm public support' for transitional justice (Chang-Liao and Chen 2019, 620) make it unlikely that Indigenous peoples will find remedies to injustices (Mona 2019). These range from 'encroachment onto their traditional land', 'stymied progress towards self-governance' (IWGIA 2022, 294, 295); vast disparity in health outcomes, life expectancy (Juan, Awerbuch-Friedlander, and Levins 2016), wealth and educational opportunities (Layman 2022); prevalence of Indigenous people in cheap manual labour (Hsieh 2016); to societal discrimination (Lin, Gao, and Lin 2017). Transformative changes are required, and I argue for the importance

of establishing a taskforce to focus on decolonisation of education as a key prerequisite to achieve justice. Otherwise, the remnants of colonialism will continue to permeate education. This can serve as a valuable reference to contexts beyond Taiwan that are undergoing similar processes of decolonisation, transitional justice, or historical justice.

Second, this article contributes to a much-needed expansion of the historical and geographic scope of colonial scholarship that has been preoccupied with the imperial pursuits of European states (Vickers and Morris 2022), and to an extent with Japan's expansion in Asia. That China has expanded its territory exponentially over the centuries and absorbed culturally and linguistically different groups has largely been overlooked. Instead, China, and Japan, have been viewed and positioned themselves as victims of Western imperialism. According to Vickers (2020), Japan has denied its violent imperial past and China believes that 'racism and cultural prejudice are distinctively "Western" pathologies' (180) at the neglect of its own 'drive to subordinate or marginalise other cultures or communities' (181).

It is important to note Taiwan's uniqueness in serving as a crucial case for other contexts. Taiwan can certainly be viewed as a typical case of Indigenous colonisation, albeit the colonial powers with more influence were not European but Asian. However, it has its particular characteristics. First is the layering of colonialism that has a complex and multifaceted impact on Indigenous rights and education. Second is the official acknowledgement of this history through the Presidential apology, the development of a policy and legal framework to support Indigenous rights, and the establishment of the Justice Committee, which are rather unique developments not present in most countries with Indigenous populations. However, there is a third, geopolitical, layer, and that is of China's threat to Taiwan's sovereignty and Taiwan's response to it, which shows why there is a strong focus on Indigenous rights. In particular, whilst the government's response to achieve Indigenous justice through historical and transitional justice processes is unique, it has been mired in its attempts to 'cynically' (Friedman 2018, 98) instrumentalise Indigeneity 'for the performance of national difference from China' to 'assert notions of "inherent sovereignty" for Taiwan' (Rowen 2019, 649). Using the example of education, this article will showcase that Taiwan's pursuit to redress and address historical and current injustices and inequalities is mostly instrumentalist and symbolic, as no genuine shifts to transform education to support Indigenous rights has occurred.

## Colonialisation of Taiwan's Indigenous population

Taiwan has a long history of successive colonialisms of two types: settler colonialism and nationalism as colonialism. It began in the seventeenth century when people who lived on the island, Formosa, now called Indigenous, became political pawns among rivalries in naval commerce in the East Asian region. They experienced waves of colonisation by the European empires of the Portuguese (sixteenth century), the Spanish (1626–1642), and the Dutch (1624–1662). The Dutch were removed by China's Zheng clan rule<sup>2</sup> (1662–1683) who began the displacement of the Indigenous communities from traditional territories to concentrated villages with restricted access to resources, which was intensified by the Qing Empire (1663–1895). Settler colonialism culminated with the 50 years-long occupation by the Japanese (1895–1945) and ended with the Kuomintang –

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) (1945–1987) who fled to Taiwan after defeat in the civil war on the mainland.

These players were attracted to the island's natural resources and strategic geopolitical location. European Church authorities saw it as a bridge to 'civilise' China and Japan, by converting their populations to Christianity. Common Chinese people sought shelter from poverty and civil wars and the KMT found refuge on the island to escape the Communist Party in China. Portuguese rule was short-lived and amounted to extracting natural resources from Indigenous lands. The Spanish sought to convert Indigenous people to Christianity which pushed Indigenous people to join forces with the Dutch to rid the Island of the Spanish.

The Dutch and the Zheng had a more profound, but still limited, influence. The Dutch established mutually beneficial relations with Indigenous communities with periodic violent outbreaks (Mona 2019) and 'catalysed the Sinification of Taiwan' (Andrade 2008, 118) by creating a safe and favourable environment for Chinese farmers and traders to move to the island. Sinification pushed Indigenous peoples off their land thus impoverishing them and fostered hostile relations between Indigenous peoples and Chinese settlers (Andrade 2008). This process proved devastating when the Zheng seized Taiwan and initiated a more intense Sinification of the island's culture, institutions, identities, and social structures. The Dutch and the Zheng initiated 'civilisation' of the Indigenous population by introducing schools to convert them to Christianity (the Dutch) (Tu 2007) and introduce Confucianism (the Chinese) (Chiu 2005). Such ideological interference was not welcome as the burning of Dutch schools and educational materials shows.

The colonial 'othering' and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples intensified under the Qing and the Japanese who developed their constructions of 'civilisation' to justify colonialisation and the resultant assault on Indigenous peoples. As Teng (2004) shows, the Qing discursively constructed Indigenous peoples as 'exotic, uncivilised, and barbarous' and Taiwan as the island of 'cultureless savagery' (12), a place that 'human footsteps do not reach', a no-man's-land (87). It was not that *no* human had ever stepped into this terrain, it is *Chinese* people – human beings – that had not entered it yet. The Qing divided the Indigenous population into 'cooked barbarians' (those who, through force, submitted to 'civilisation' and 'Sinicisation') and 'raw barbarians' or 'savage barbarians' (those who resisted colonisation) (Howard 1994, 43). The racial discourse towards the latter was militant. Teng (2004) describes how their portrayal as physically hideous was connected with 'moral reprehensibility' (220) and they were called 'cannibalistic monsters' (221) that had to be eradicated or tamed through force 'like animals' (120) whilst their land needed to be 'civilised' (i.e. transformed by Chinese farmers).

Whilst the Japanese officially renamed Indigenous people as 'Peoples of Takasago' ('Peoples of the high mountains'); unofficially, they were called 'cooked' and 'raw' barbarians. Japanese colonial writing framed their sense of superiority by presenting Indigenous peoples as primitive and savage hunter-gatherers in need of civilisation to justify their subjugation and appropriation of Indigenous land that was – as during the Qing era – viewed as no man's land (Blundell 2012). In some cases, as Chang (2012) exemplifies, authorities suggested that 'it would be good to eradicate' these 'ignorant', 'violent', and 'insane' 'beasts' (50). This denial of Indigenous peoples' humanity was on par with the Qing and the Japanese who laid a foundation to justify a militarised civilisational mission that undermined Indigenous cultures, institutions, social structures, and practices

(Simon 2002). These two periods saw the abolition of Indigenous rights to ancestral lands and the relocation of Indigenous communities to poor quality land. During the Japanese period, Indigenous villages were controlled with electrified fences, mines, and guard posts (Munsterhjelm 2010) which led to bloody rebellions that were violently put down by the military that used aerial attacks and poisonous gas (Morris 2007).

The aggressive assimilationist policies of the Qing and Japanese demanded that Indigenous people abandon their clothing, languages, arts, personal and geographical names, lifestyles, and cultures. This was pursued through education modelled on the values and systems of the respective colonial powers. The Qing believed in the superiority of the Chinese language, Confucian classics, civic values, Han ritual etiquette, social hierarchy, and moral authority, and referred to this process as the ‘cooking’ of Indigenous peoples. The Japanese used education to erase Chinese cultural influences, rewrite history, and teach Japanese language and ethics. To transform Indigenous peoples into patriotic citizens, the Japanese glorified violence and presented war and death as honourable and virtuous.

The Qing and the Japanese established a power imbalance and coercive relations between Indigenous peoples and the settlers, that were exacerbated by the KMT. The KMT brought an additional layer to this mix: ‘nationalism as a form of colonialism’ (Dirlik 2018) which relied on terror, oppression, and surveillance, which surpassed ‘its totalitarian Japanese predecessor’ (Mona 2019, 3). With the return of Chinese power to the island, there was mistrust on all sides (Caldwell 2018) as the locals perceived the KMT as an adversary and had developed patriotic feelings towards the Japanese. The creation of a new nation out of the disparate populations with a complex history required moulding the divided consciousness of Taiwan’s peoples. To unite them into a homogenous group, the KMT reoriented education to focus on de-Japanisation to erase all traces of Japanese influence and re-Hanisation through varied channels of propaganda (curricula, museums, media, and monuments) ‘to imprint on the minds of the populace its vision of a homogenous Chinese Republic’ (Vickers 2008, 76). Like the previous colonial eras, whilst the KMT called Indigenous people *shanti t’ungpao* (‘mountain compatriots’) to emphasise that they were no different, they were more commonly called *huan* (‘savages’), and the policies had a particular focus on their Hanisation (Hsieh 2006). Hanisation entailed centring Chinese heritage and history as the only culture on the Island and presenting the Chinese as bringing modernisation, prosperity, and freedom to Indigenous peoples. Again, Indigenous peoples were faced with another crisis of identity and another attempt to create a collective memory by erasing and re-framing their history.

## Colonial legacies

The complex mixture of ideologies, relationships, structures, and policies of the multi-layered colonial history has left an uneasy legacy for Taiwan. This legacy continues to negatively affect the present conditions of Indigenous peoples, including their life expectancy, employment conditions, unemployment rates, income, health, socio-economic status, political influence (Layman 2022; IWGIA 2022). In education, assimilation resulted in the isolation of Indigenous peoples from their cultures, institutional and personal discrimination, and the destruction of traditional educational spaces that were seen as not valuable or beneficial (Howard 1994; Su 2006).

The experience of assimilation into education systems that do not value Indigenous cultural references and intellectual traditions and explicitly reject Indigenous knowledges and cultures are similar to other countries with Indigenous populations (May and Aikman 2003; Nesterova and Jackson 2020). In these countries, Indigenous languages, knowledges, and cultures have been damaged and a sense of belonging to an Indigenous group and identity have been eroded (e.g. Khanolainen, Nesterova, and Semenova 2022; Verdon and McLeod 2015). Additionally, education provision to Indigenous learners continues to be inadequate and inequitable, largely due to the impact of colonial legacies on education and social structures more broadly (Breidlid 2013; Nesterova and Jackson 2020).

Two examples in the countries that colonised Taiwan's Indigenous peoples – China and Japan – are exemplary as local Indigenous groups went through similar processes of dispossession, de-humanisation, and marginalisation and for whom schools represent places of discrimination, alienation, and fear. Japan's Ainu Indigenous people only gained recognition in 2008 when Japan, as with Taiwan, recognised the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Despite some success in their educational journeys, the Ainu are still faced with significant socio-economic and cultural challenges, including the dominance of the Japanese culture, language, and virtue of *Wa*, group harmony (Gayman 2011). These processes perpetuate cycles of intergenerational poverty (Maeda and Okano 2013) and internalised oppression and humiliation which prevent the Ainu from embracing their identity and advocating for their rights and the Japanese from understanding Ainu culture and overcoming discriminatory attitudes (Gayman 2011).

China has 55 ethnic minority groups (who are essentially Indigenous peoples reduced to the status of minorities) who share similar experiences of colonial assimilation, mistreatment, and suppression of their languages and cultures. Constitutional guarantees to protect and develop minority languages and cultures lack legal force resulting in stigmatisation and repression of minority languages, cultures, and religions and education that alienates students (Phuntsog 2019). The state's top-heavy pursuit of national unity through Han dominance in education (e.g. language, history, morals, politics) has led to loss of dignity and agency among Tibetans and Uyghurs (Vickers and Morris 2022) and resultant resistance, violence, and separatist sentiments in Xinjiang and Tibet (Phuntsog 2019).

In Taiwan, current approaches to Indigenous education are different to that of China and Japan, but the outcomes are similar as education fails to address Indigenous students' academic failure and remove the barriers Indigenous peoples face in pursuit of their rights, cultural and linguistic revitalisation, and community development. Studies in Taiwan indicate that schools tend to offer synthetic and culturally insensitive education which prevents their successful completion (Wang 2014). Taiwan's education policies (Chou 2005) and the society (Chiu 2005) are blamed for being racially blind and for devaluing Indigenous cultures through Han-centric curricula and teacher training (Chen 2016; Hung 2013). Teachers are shown to be insensitive to the needs of Indigenous students as they lack knowledge of how to work with culturally different children and families (Chou 2005; Yen 2009; Nesterova 2019b). Even teachers who perceive themselves as open to Indigenous students, view them as less capable and uninterested in education and do not see Taiwan's education system as unfair or unjust to Indigenous people (Couch, Nesterova, and Nguyen 2023).

Several studies across the world show that the colonial lens through which Indigenous peoples are viewed affects the support that is offered to Indigenous education. In Aotearoa New Zealand, education 'continue[s] to be developed within a pattern of power imbalances which favours cultural deficit explanations' that blame Indigenous people for their lack of inherent ability, cultural inappropriateness, or limited resources (Bishop 2003, 221). In Bolivia, hegemonic culture 'denies a place for cultural diversity in the school system', including through the hidden curriculum that reproduces unequal social relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Regalsky and Laurie 2007, 231). In Peru, the hegemony of the dominant culture disadvantages Indigenous learners as inclusion within the education system exposes them to discrimination, structural racism, and inadequate content (Kirby, Tolstikov-Mast, and Walker 2020). This article thus adds to this literature as it interrogates how colonial legacies continue to affect education in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, Taiwan has made substantial progress in supporting Indigenous development. The establishment of the Justice Committee was preceded by implementing an array of policies and laws to promote Indigenous development and rights. The term 'Indigenous peoples' gained legal status in 1994 when the government amended the Constitution. The 2000 presidential election shifted the discourse on Indigenous affairs when Chen Shui-Bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (as is President Tsai) was elected president. Shui-Bian set to build a human rights state in line with international standards and break away from oppressive past, including by transforming relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous inhabitants (Chi 2007). The Indigenous self-government act the government drafted did not materialise, but a policy framework was developed to protect Indigenous rights and improve their status through education, employment, and political representation. These include, among others, the *Indigenous Peoples Basic Law* (2005, amended in 2015) to attach special rights to recognised groups, the *Indigenous Education Act* (1998) to provide Indigenous peoples with culturally appropriate education, and the *Indigenous Languages Development Act* (2017) to revive Indigenous languages.

In education, multiculturalism has been adopted as a remedy for the inequalities and injustices Indigenous peoples face (Nesterova 2019a). As Kasai (2022) notes, 'Taiwanese multiculturalism is a product of the ongoing politics of identity in Taiwanese society' (510) to 'distinguish Taiwan from China' (522), a process that has intensified following China's subjugation of Hong Kong. However, Taiwan's multiculturalism in formal education relies on an assimilationist notion that fails to engage with and address injustices and inequalities Indigenous peoples experience (Nesterova 2019a). Museums are another sight of education about the Island's multicultural identity, hybridity, and Indigeneity. As Vickers (2008) explains, they are 'inseparable from the exercise of political authority' (72) that assumes the 'pedagogical role' to promote the Taiwanising agenda of the Island's ethno-cultural distinctiveness from China. Koxinga is one example of a historical figure who is promoted in museums as a symbol of multicultural Taiwan due to his cosmopolitan roots and ties, largely overlooking his connection to China and his role in suppressing Indigenous peoples (Vickers 2021). Indigenous exhibitions are also part of this agenda although they are presented as 'living fossils of prehistoric Taiwan' (Vickers 2008, 92) to reinforce the image of 'a colourful Taiwanese multiculturalism' (87) at the neglect of 'coming-to-terms with the somewhat tortured history between the [I]ndigenous and



Han populations' (96). When an exhibition attempted to present a true history of colonial domination of Indigenous peoples by the Japanese and KMT, it was never advertised due to its potential to cause ethnic conflict (Simon 2008). Essentially, Taiwan's multiculturalism fails to be different from multiculturalism in China. Ferrer (2021) showcases how in both China and Taiwan 'multiculturalism signifies symbolic recognition of minority and non-dominant languages, involving limited redistribution of power' and the 'discourses of national identity centre[...] around Han Chineseness' (59). The question this article thus seeks to answer is why this mentality persists in Taiwan where, in contrast to China, Indigenous peoples enjoy official recognition, and their collective and cultural rights are uniquely protected by seemingly powerful policy and legal instruments.

## Postcolonialism and decolonialisation

I rely on postcolonial and decolonial lenses for three reasons. First, Taiwan's government acknowledged the coloniality of the island's past and set to redress the legacy of injustices Indigenous peoples face. Second, all participants of this study raised the issue of colonialism and the impact of colonial legacies and mentality on Indigenous peoples. Third, Taiwan can now be viewed as a case of internal colonialism which operates within nation-states and sustains structural and institutional oppression and economic dependency of colonised peoples (Gutiérrez 2004). This form of colonialism helps to understand Indigenous peoples' territorial concentration (e.g. impoverished remote areas), continued external administration, poverty, low levels of educational achievement, occupation as cheap manual labour, racism and discrimination with material consequences, and disappearance of cultural heritage and language (Gutiérrez 2004). What should be noted is that in addition to the stratification along ethnic lines, Taiwan is also stratified by class with Indigenous people who advance out of poverty and to higher socio-economic status, such as the participants in this study.

Postcolonialism helps to uncover continued ideological control over education and hierarchies of human worth and how it perpetuates the colonial impact on the mind and psyche of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Such reproduction is a result of constructing a certain stereotypical notion of the Indigenous Other and contrasting it with the familiar self. As Said (1978) describes, the Other is essentialised through over-generalisations, erasure, and misrepresentation of their identity, culture, and worth. Whilst this process creates a negative image of the Indigenous Other as a contrast to a civilised and superior image of a dominant group, it also affects the self-image of Indigenous people. Fanon's (1986) analysis of the impact of colonialism on psyche (how colonised people perceive themselves and their relationship with the world) is particularly pertinent here as it showed that 'an inferiority complex has been created [in colonised peoples]' (18) as colonialism dislocated and distorted their psyche. Education is where cultural and linguistic control of the dominant group persists and reasserts itself when colonial legacies remain uninterrupted and unaddressed. Decolonisation is thus a required process to recover from colonial cultural control and racism. It entails dismantling the monoepistemic and monocultural system of education, eradicating colonial psychological paradigms, and grounding and validating Indigenous cultures, knowledges, pedagogies, histories, and humanity (Andreotti 2011) in order to effect fundamental, and not symbolic, changes within education systems and the society.

## Research methods

The data is drawn from a large qualitative study conducted across Taiwan. The question this part of the study aimed to answer was ‘How does Taiwan’s education system challenge or enable Indigenous communities in achieving social justice?’ In the interviews, the participants discussed:

- The suitability of existing policies for Indigenous development and education, whether their implementation has been successful, barriers to implementation, and results.
- Indigenous peoples’ views on integration into the Taiwanese society, effects of integration, and conditions under which integration can/cannot work.
- Benefits of mainstream education for Indigenous peoples.

Twenty-four Indigenous persons with extensive experience in Indigenous rights, affairs, and education went through semi-structured (professors and leaders) and unstructured (educators) interviews to explore how Taiwan’s education system affects the development of Indigenous communities. The participants included six Indigenous leaders (IL), ten Indigenous professors (P), and eight educators (ED). They represented the diversity of Taiwan’s Indigenous groups and are respected members and leaders in their communities. All participants were above the age of 35 to ensure that in their interviews they could rely on substantial experience (at least 10 years) in Indigenous development and understanding of its complexities within the local and global contexts. I believe these groups of participants were best positioned to comment with authority on the questions outlined above.

As the participants live across Taiwan – from the western and more developed cities of Taichung and Tainan where Indigenous peoples were affected by colonialism the most to the eastern part of Hualien and Taitung where the mountains provided a barrier that kept the colonial powers away for a longer period – the interviews took place in these four counties. Each interview lasted from one hour to two hours and a half. The interviews were conducted in English except for one that required Chinese-English interpreters and five others that asked for an interpreter to be present to help them express themselves. The interpreters were two Indigenous women with full proficiency in the languages of the study and accepted members in the communities the participants came from. It was not my intention to interview people who spoke English, but people who agreed to participate when the interpreters and I reached out to them, all spoke English, except for one.

The interviews were audio-recorded with written consent of the participants after the aim of the study, its procedure, potential benefits, and consequences had been discussed in detail. Each interview was transcribed verbatim in English, and in the case of the interviews conducted in Chinese, Chinese and English transcriptions were prepared and cross-checked by another interpreter fluent in two languages. While deductive coding and theme development were used as I relied on broad pre-set themes (e.g. colonial legacies; politics, policies, and laws; challenges to Indigenous development; benefits and weaknesses of education; content of education, school environment, and teachers; transforming Indigenous education), the data analysis was largely inductive with themes emerging from the data. Data were analysed using cross-sectional and case studies approach. The

cross-sectional method consisted of identifying common themes, categories, and patterns and after that merging the participants' responses under them, comparing, and contrasting their views and insights. Then, each participant's story was approached as an individual case to tell a distinct story about the topic of the study.

I am not Taiwanese but have Indigenous ancestry of Karelian Indigenous group (Russia). I lived in Taiwan prior to the study and built strong relationships with Indigenous communities. During the research, to ensure that an Indigenous ethical research protocol was observed and that Indigenous views were interpreted and presented in a reliable and trustworthy manner, I worked with two critical friends who were trusted Indigenous leaders in their communities. We had individual meetings and email communication prior to and after each stage of data collection to discuss essential steps and critical ethical matters, including interview protocols, access to the participants, potential sensitive issues, and the findings.

## Results

This section presents and interprets the data from the interviews. Interestingly, despite coming from different Indigenous groups and different professional backgrounds, the participants' voices took the same direction and did not contradict one another. There was only one educator who mentioned a colonial mentality, but did not expand on it when asked. Below I show their voices, some in quotation marks to highlight the intensity and power of the words they used, some are my summaries of their collective concerns. I first present the overarching issue the participants highlighted – mental colonisation as they emphasised that continued colonisation of the mind of non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples continues to affect policy implementation and practices. As the participants connected mental colonisation to education, the second sub-section showcases how they believe educational content contributes to it as its colonial nature has not changed.

### *Mental colonisation*

For 23 participants, the colonial and nationalist mindset of all Taiwanese – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – is a stumbling block to Indigenous development. As participant #P7 put it, 'colonist thinking is still the deepest dimension of our people'.

### *Indigenous peoples: continued assimilation*

Twenty-three participants emphasised that education has contributed to Indigenous groups abandoning their identities, cultures, worldviews, knowledge, and lifestyles. They maintained that an absence of engagement with Indigeneity in schools makes it difficult for Indigenous students to find meaning in education and strengthen their identities. For example, participant #ED8 explained that if Indigenous children do not start education by developing a 'deep core of inner self, they can't establish and develop themselves'. Most participants said they have not observed significant changes in education despite policies to support Indigenous education and that, consequently, 'Indigenous people [continue to] fail schools' (#P1). For these participants, current education reflects the past policies of oppressive assimilation that require Indigenous peoples to

abandon their identities and assimilate into the dominant society. Participant #P5 clarified that.

Aboriginal people have their own value systems. Although these value system in some places have been destroyed ... These systems might conflict with Han's value system. But the state ... Han education make all these Indigenous value systems be discarded because they are different. And Aborigenes lose these systems, because they don't keep them in education.

Overall, even with more educational opportunities, education is still viewed as destructive. As participant #IL6 put it.

... for Indigenous peoples, it is difficult to learn their system, we need to overcome these difficulties that come from language and culture. This is not really known by the main society. They think we are not good people, we are inferior, and they have to help us.

The 'sad thing about education', participant #IL1 concluded, is that it still is the same. It denies Indigenous peoples a chance to engage with their cultures, languages, knowledge, and wisdom significantly and holistically. As a result, eleven participants suggested that many Indigenous people have internalised colonialism and thus disregard their Indigeneity and want to become like the dominant group. Participant #P3 explained that:

... they are colonised Indigenous people, they don't really speak for their people or fight for their people. It's ... like the black skin and white mask, that phenomenon ... So, they aren't genuine Indigenous people.

Participant #IL4 stated that the phenomenon of black skin and white mask extends to ordinary Indigenous people who 'are not interested in their Indigenous languages and cultures'. It was explained that this disinterest developed because Taiwan's Indigenous peoples were colonised by a succession of foreign government powers. If colonisation had not happened, they would perhaps be willing to sustain Indigenous cultures and see them as important.

### ***Non-Indigenous people: lack of understanding of indigeneity***

Most participants – from all three groups – highlighted the colonial mentality of non-Indigenous people. They reflected on how a lack of education about Indigenous cultures and knowledges, traumatic Indigenous history, and unjust socio-economic structures, prevents non-Indigenous people from understanding and supporting Indigenous development. This lack of awareness and knowledge, these participants believed, creates an unsafe school environment as it reinforces prejudices and discrimination against Indigenous peoples. Many participants proposed that as non-Indigenous people do not view Indigenous peoples' struggles and concerns as serious or urgent, they show lack of commitment to implementing policies to support Indigenous communities and disregard Indigenous voices on relevant matters. For example, participant #IL6 suggested that many people in charge 'refuse to accept Indigenous laws and would rather use their own traditional concepts inherited from the very long history of the colony to define Indigenous policy' whilst participant #P9 noted that because of 'the current education, it is doubtful they even know what the Indigenous community really wants or is'.

Twelve participants emphasised that the relationships between the state and Indigenous peoples remain as oppressive and unjust as relationships during colonial eras. In the words of participant #P6: 'most Indigenous nations see the government as still kind of

colonising them'. They explained that this legacy manifests in poor treatment and perception of Indigenous peoples by authorities which leads to marginalisation and abuse of their rights. As a result, the majority of participants shared that without whole society understanding and support of Indigenous issues, discrimination, disregard for Indigenous rights, and unequal power relations continue to be reproduced and Indigenous peoples will not be treated as equals and will not receive necessary support.

Thirteen participants claimed that whilst Indigenous policies and laws seem progressive as they outline, protect, and defend Indigenous rights, the biased perception of Indigenous people's means that they are not taken seriously and not implemented. As Participant #P9 noted, they 'have just become an *icon* that represents progress but that doesn't work at all'. Nine participants believed that agency of non-Indigenous people in policy implementation is an essential factor to address. As participant #P6 noted, 'it depends on who is in charge and what they are as people' whilst participant #IL5 explained:

This has to do with the overall climate of Taiwan people's lack of understanding of Indigenous peoples in general. It's up to the people, individual people, their professionalism, cultural sensitivity, whether or not they are able to carry out the law.

One example of this is the written and taught curricula. Most participants noted that whilst students may have opportunities to learn about Indigenous cultures, histories, and current issues, this is very rare and depends on 'the will of the school, principals, and teachers, whether they think it's important' (#P9) and whether they deem adding such material necessary. This also manifests in the financing of Indigenous educational programmes that tend to be heavily underfunded because the authorities and the public may not support substantial investments in Indigenous development.

### **Colonial nature of education**

All participants dismissed curricula as 'shallow' due to its focus on high-stakes examinations, dominance of Han Chinese culture, and neglect of Indigenous traditions, philosophies, and knowledges. Participant #IL6 explained that the absence of Indigenous cultures in academic settings makes Indigenous people 'double-blind: one blind for Indigenous knowledge, the other for Han culture'. For another participant (#ED7), education without references to Indigenous cultures led to feeling 'empty, miserable'.

Eight participants believed that the government uses education to control the minds of Indigenous peoples. Participant #IL1 explained that 'it feels like internal colonisation, colonisation of the mind and of the way of thinking continues as Indigenous people keep losing their traditional Indigenous perspectives and can't get away from the value concepts from the colonisers'. Ten participants emphasised that Indigenous peoples are very different from the dominant group in the way they see the world and themselves and how they think, express themselves, behave, relate, and communicate. For them, this difference requires another type of learning, but in its current form, education continues to assimilate Indigenous peoples. Sixteen participants reflected on how this mentality is a continuation of colonialism as modern schools were established by colonial powers and adopted and sustained by subsequent regimes with little to no modifications. Participant #P8 explained that.

... the modern state was established by the Japanese and then basically these institutions of Japanese colonialism, including their education system were basically taken over *as is* by the KMT, so many of the practices and power relationships continue to be almost unchanged.

Most participants raised concerns over textbooks as they contain little material about Indigenous peoples and do not reflect Indigenous cultures, histories, knowledges, and experiences. Instead, eleven participants explained, textbooks are filled with stereotypical stories about Indigenous peoples and overlook their contributions. Even though harmful and discriminatory stories have been removed from textbooks, they circulate in public as education does not challenge deeply rooted biases people hold. The participants thus discussed the symbolism such unchallenged stories leave in the minds of non-Indigenous *and* Indigenous people. For example, discussing a story about an Indigenous group that headhunted people, participant #P1 noted that Indigenous people feel ashamed and hide their identities, whilst non-Indigenous people stereotype and discriminate against Indigenous groups.

For nineteen participants, history lessons are particularly detrimental. Participant #P9 noted that history is 'much more terrible than other subjects'. Some participants discussed how the truth of colonisation is not part of the curriculum and history lessons teach that Taiwan is only 400 years old disregarding that Indigenous peoples have lived on the Island for thousands of years. Teachers teach colonialism in a positive way, referring to Chinese settlers as pioneers who were given the land by 'primitive' and 'barbarian' Indigenous peoples who they then civilised. Participant #P9 explained that 'the Han idea is that their ancestors came from Mainland China in difficult ways and times, they came here to develop this new land'. She emphasised that:

In reality, Indigenous people were chased away, killed, and forced to give up their land to Han people. So, while Han people believe that their ancestors got away from hardships and now live happily here, Indigenous people were sacrificed and still suffer.

As participant #P8 shared, 'they don't do reflections on what took place, for obvious reasons. They don't talk about the history from the Indigenous peoples' side'. Participant #P9 believed that by not including 'two sides, two ideas, two histories', education forces Indigenous students 'to accept this idea of their inferiority and their history instead of learning about the hardship of their ancestors'. Some participants noted that non-Indigenous people are unaware of the hurt Indigenous peoples have felt and that this historical view and the current situation of Indigenous peoples are thus normalised. For the participants who raised the issue of history lessons, the danger was that many Han people may still believe this narrative and thus view Indigenous peoples in a biased way.

Twelve participants discussed the introduction of multicultural content to establish a stronger sense of cultural diversity in society. Although an important step as, in their view, multicultural content is still perceived as 'empty' as education about colonisation, colonial legacies, or Indigenous peoples is missing. Where Indigenous content is included, it either presents Indigenous peoples in a negative light or as joyful and colourful peoples who sing and dance. Participant #P5 explained that 'this is what Indigenous is seen like, like this dancing identity, like this cultural speciality'. While these stereotypes were not viewed as negative by these participants, this approach represents a very small part of complex and rich Indigenous identities and lives. However, as participant #P3 stressed,

it seems to be ‘the only part of Indigeneity Han people are interested in, as they are not really interested in Indigenous people’.

## Discussion and conclusion

Taiwan’s Indigenous population is officially recognised and enjoys access to a unique framework of policies and laws to protect their collective cultural rights and historical and transitional justice processes to redress injustices committed against them. Yet, as this research reveals, as with other Indigenous peoples across the world, they still struggle with the impact of the perpetuation of a colonial mentality on their development and rights. On the one hand, the participants acknowledged that Indigenous peoples have internalised a colonial mentality which, according to Fanon (1986), means that colonised groups internalise and reproduce the forms of living, thinking, speaking, and morality of the dominant group. As this research shows, construction of their identity as inferior makes them want to become part of the colonising group to escape imposed inferiority and, in the words of Fanon (1986), become ‘a real human being’ (18), like their former coloniser. On the other hand, the participants believed that the colonial mentality prevents non-Indigenous people from seeing how the country’s social, economic, political, and education structures disadvantage and marginalise Indigenous peoples. This adds another element to why Indigenous policy implementation is unsuccessful: whilst IWGIA (2022) and Mona (2019) identify legal and political structural issues as a barrier, the colonial mentality is a significant stumbling block to transition to a just society. Colonial mentality prevents non-Indigenous people from seeing injustices and inequalities Indigenous peoples experience as urgent by the numerically and politically dominant non-Indigenous group which leads to a purely symbolic implementation of Indigenous policies and laws.

Here, it is important to emphasise Rowen’s (2019) assessment that Indigeneity in Taiwan is instrumentalised to assert difference and sovereignty from China. Indigenous peoples are thus useful in so far as they help the government to showcase how distinct the country is compared to China and Chinese homogenous identity. Friedman’s (2018) cynicism of Taiwan’s treatment of its Indigenous peoples is thus justifiable: as this research shows, the intrinsic worth of Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and languages is not recognised nor needed by the government and the mainstream Taiwanese society. What they need is an *icon*, as participant #P9 put it, to signal separateness and uniqueness of a localised multicultural Taiwanese identity. This is why powerful and transformative discourses and policies lack real transformation and power. And, as Ferrer (2021) explains, this is why education continues to be ‘a manifestation of reactive top-down Taiwanese nationalism, rather than the product of a determined effort to address’ socio-economic inequalities (71–72).

The participants’ voices agree with this assessment as they believe education plays a critical role in maintaining the unjust structures. Firstly, they noted, education reproduces the cultural hegemony of the dominant group as it relies on Chinese structures, thinking, norms, history, and knowledge. Because education side-lines and diminishes Indigenous peoples’ histories, cultures, knowledges, and identities, Indigenous peoples view it as lacking in relevance and benefit for Indigenous development. Secondly, despite the removal of harmful stereotypes from the curriculum and textbooks, they continue to

circulate informally, as education does not challenge notions of Indigeneity as ‘savage’ and ‘unhuman’ that have been in circulation for centuries. Indeed, as this research shows, the dominant discourse continues to construct an image of benevolent and brave Han settlers who overcame adversity and built a new life on the island at the neglect of the history of hardship and adversity faced by the Indigenous population in relation to these settlers. This finding is in line with Said’s (1978) conceptualisation of the image of the Indigenous Other as inferior to the dominant group.

As schools do not teach Indigenous cultures, the truth of colonial times, and other aspects that diverge from the Han reality and mentality, understanding of Indigeneity remains limited. Such structural erasure has several consequences. First, Indigenous self-value and esteem and inter-group relations are damaged. Second, for non-Indigenous people, learning a distorted, one-sided history and reality results in not seeing value in what the Indigenous world offers – whether it is linguistic diversity that transmits unique knowledge, another way of seeing the world, or the history of marginalisation of the Indigenous population. As mentioned above, there is thus little understanding of the need to alter unjust colonial structures to allow space and flexibility for Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and needs to be acknowledged as equal and worthy. This impedes the development and policy implementation that can initiate a comprehensive shift in the society to benefit all sections of the population. It can be concluded that as elsewhere, Taiwan only attempted to demonstrate that ‘racism and colonialism have been adequately addressed’ whilst no structural changes or power shifts occur (Ahenakew 2017, 85). As participant #ED4 emphasised, government initiatives are seen as ‘throwing a bone to Indigenes’ instead of as opportunities for substantial shifts in education. This echoes Tomlins-Jahnke (2008) who noted that the state implements policies to placate Indigenous populations instead of fundamentally changing how, what, and where they learn.

What is critical for Indigenous progress, is what Fanon (1986) referred to as the ‘liberation of the man of colour from himself’ (10) along with liberation of the mind of the coloniser. If internal colonisation is not addressed, the wound of losing a sense of self will keep leading to a loss of agency to act upon the world and change it. For this reason, this article stresses the importance of decolonisation as part of transitional and historical justice process as, without decolonisation, the outcomes of the Justice Committee are in danger of being a symbolic gesture. Decolonisation will require a concerted effort to incorporate Indigenous content to education to fundamentally alter the monoepistemic and monocultural system to support Indigenous peoples in recovering psychologically, culturally, and socially. Decolonisation will also support non-Indigenous groups in developing a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of Indigenous peoples’ cultures and histories to allow a move away from harmful stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as savages, from fetishising their identities in cultural villages for tourists that promote ‘authentic’ caricatures of Indigeneity, and from romanticising them, their cultures and knowledges.

## Notes

1. The Justice Committee focuses on the martial law period whilst previous colonial periods are overlooked (Caldwell 2018) which precludes ‘numerous Indigenous claims sourced back to earlier times’ and ‘eras[ing] the indigenous existence prior to that period’ (Mona 2019, 655).



2. It was led by Zheng Chenggong, known as Koxinga, who was a Ming loyalist general who defeated the Dutch outposts on Taiwan in 1662, which was then Dutch Formosa.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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