

## Taiwan

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**Kirk A. Denton, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan***

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Kirk A. Denton's *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* presents a timely, comprehensive, and meticulously researched study of museum politics and public memory in contemporary Taiwan. Relying on published sources, fieldwork observations, and interviews with key cultural actors, Denton moves away from ideological binaries imposed by divisive political discourses and focuses on the influential role of museum institutions in shaping the public memory of Taiwan's past and present.

The book includes ten body chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. Denton sets the stage by studying the mobilization of individual and collective memories for state-building and the expansion of the museum heritage industry as an integral part of urban planning and development. He then continues the discussion in a survey of public museums and memorial sites in the post-martial law era, giving us a compelling account of Taiwan's fast-growing political, sociocultural, and economic landscape. Methodologically, Denton employs a statist approach to illustrate how the varieties of exhibitions in national and local museums reveal the multiple layers of historical memories and how these cultural resources transform Taiwan's collective understanding from a unified homogenous Chinese entity into an inclusive, pluralistic democratic identity.

Chapter 1 looks at three museums that focus on Taiwan's ancient history: the National Museum of History, the National Museum of Prehistory, and the Shihsanhang Museum of Archaeology. Their latest exhibitions break away from the Sinocentric view of history and identify the Neolithic origins of Taiwan, centuries before the arrival of Han Chinese immigrants. Evidently, Taiwan had long been part of the non-Chinese, multicultural Austronesian world. Building on the same notion of cultural pluralism, chapter 2 discusses the inception of the National Museum of Taiwan History during the 1990s. This Taiwan-centered museum places the contributions of Chinese culture and Mainland immigrants on equal footing with the contributions of Japanese colonialists and Western missionaries. The rich heritage of diverse ethnicities and cultures is shown to provide a template for Taiwan to embrace political pluralism today.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss how to make sense of the decades-long Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorial rule. Widely praised as the shrine of Taiwan's democratic struggle, the 2-28 Memorial Hall reconstructs the painful history of KMT's brutal crackdown on citizen activists. In a similar fashion, the National Human Rights Museum was launched in 2018

to advance the pursuit of transitional justice rather than perpetuating the bitter divisions between Taiwanese and Mainlanders. As part of the efforts to stabilize the democratic transition, “the discourse of human rights and exhibition of past human rights abuses have become central to Taiwan identity” (89).

Because the KMT’s White Terror era (1949–87) still haunts the island today, chapters 5 and 6 re-examine several anti-Communist and Cold War memorial sites that the KMT regime built to legitimate its autocratic rule. In particular, Denton highlights the latest efforts by the pro-independence government to repurpose the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and other Chiang-related cultural sites in the public square. It is worth mentioning that a giant inflatable model of the powerful “tank man” was exhibited outside the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to commemorate the thirty-first anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre from May to June 2020. This icon of courageous resistance to military dictatorship inspired oppressed peoples worldwide and signified a new Taiwanese initiative to support human rights advocates in neighboring countries.

De-Sinicizing Taiwan and eliminating the legacy of Chiang Kai-shek would never be complete without celebrating Taiwan’s unique heritage. Chapter 7 draws attention to the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, an enterprise designed to cultivate a sense of public confidence in Taiwan’s “national literature” as opposed to “Chinese literature” and to archive the literary accomplishments of native authors who write exclusively about the island’s social and historical experience. Chapter 8 evaluates museums and recreational parks that promote Taiwanese Aborigines’ contributions to Taiwan’s multiculturalism. The Aboriginal influence serves as a powerful paradigm of constructing a multiethnic Taiwan against the hegemonic effects of Chinese nationalism, even though Aborigines make up just a little more than two percent of the population. Chapter 9 discusses new eco-museums and ecological parks that exemplify a deep attachment to the natural landscape and neighborhood community. The interactive ecological exhibitions transcend the museum space through a partnership with surrounding inhabitants, thereby integrating “the residential community into the larger memorial space of the complex” (213). This user-friendly approach prompts visitors to feel proud of Taiwan as a home of recognizable groupings that are both unique and part of a diverse body (215). Connecting Taiwan with the outside world is equally important, as we see through the Museum of World Religions in chapter 10. Taiwan’s religious landscape is both global and local and is composed of spiritual insights from the Aborigines, Chinese immigrants, and Western missionaries.

The remarkable transformation of Taiwan’s museum landscape owed much to the innovative programs launched by several democratically elected governments since the 1990s. Former president Chen Shui-bian and current president Tsai Ing-wen have reformed the management of museums, welcoming inputs from critical intellectuals and civic sectors. President Tsai’s decision to revisit the history of human rights abuses marks an important step in Taiwan’s search for truth and reconciliation. The human rights memorial sites provide an outlet for healing deep psychological wounds associated with violent political upheavals.

For anyone who has not been to Taiwan, this book is the next best thing to experiencing Taiwan’s museums as it includes over sixty images of museums and memorial sites. Denton brings the story up to date by documenting their changes and incorporating these visual materials into the narrative. *The Landscape of Historical Memory* convincingly shows that Taiwan’s museums help to mediate the past and the present,

as well as the global and the local. When the Taiwanese have the freedom to delve into their traumatic past, they are ready to explore the intersection between self and nation and to reconstruct their own identity in a globalized era. This is probably one of the most valuable lessons from Denton's research, and such analytical findings should appeal to Asian historians, Taiwan specialists, museologists, and heritage anthropologists.

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