

Narrating National Trauma: The Return-to-Reality Generation and Political and Cultural Change in 1970s Taiwan

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Compared with the unrest caused by the sweeping student and youth movements in the United States, Europe, Latin American, Japan, and other places in the world in the 1960s, Taiwan remained tranquil and the postwar generation in this country was politically and socially passive. It was not until the 1970s that major political and cultural changes occurred in postwar Taiwan. The changes were striking at the time and broadly based. Their influence is still felt in contemporary Taiwanese society. The precipitating factors of these major political changes did not lie with the authoritarian state but were inherent in a new social force that formed into a popular trend in the first half of the 1970s and that constituted a challenge to the system. The main agent of this trend was members of the postwar generation. In the scholarly literature, there is almost no research on the importance of “generation” in politics and culture at the time. The purpose of my paper is to analyze the rise in the early 1970s of the postwar generation as the main challenger of the existing political system and cultural tradition as a result of the diplomatic setbacks – the failed movement to retain the Diaoyutai Islands and the ousting of Taiwan from the United Nations. The development of the ideal of “return-to-reality” around which the generational identity of postwar generation intellectuals gelled will be traced, and the realization of the ideal in political activism will be detailed. The focus of analysis will be on the formation of the “return-to-reality” generation in its early stage – how it became what in Karl Mannheim’s theory would be described as an “actual generation,” an agent of change and a challenger of the status quo. Theoretically, the interrelatedness of generational identity, national identity, and historical narrative of national trauma will be examined.