

We Just Want to Lead Ordinary Lives – Internal Conflicts and Politics of Disintegration in Post-Disaster Indigenous Village in Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork to present an account of the current situation of one of the indigenous villages of Taiwan in the face of a natural disaster related interference of the state and non-government organisations, and the struggle of its inhabitants to maintain cultural integrity and socio-political independence. After Morakot typhoon hit the island of Taiwan in August 2009 causing numerous landslides, several indigenous villages including those situated in the mountains' interior, were permanently relocated to the vicinity of the plains and mainstream Han Chinese society. In the process of relocation the government as well as non-government organizations were involved. To the villagers who took an active part in the negotiations process, the new relocation site became an opportunity to unite most of the previously scattered members of the community. However the conflicts instigated during the negotiations led several families to refuse relocation. In order to survive in the abandoned village they have returned to traditional mode of subsistence. In their eyes they have become the protectors of their group's traditional territory and sole guardians of the village. Hence by the means of traditional and state provided socio-political structures the villagers have successfully blocked government as well as non-government projects regarding the village, which led to shift of internal authority. Through this experience the villagers came to realize increasing sociocultural differences between the mainstream Han Chinese society and their own heritage as well as growing distance between the inhabitants of the original village and the residents of the relocated settlement. Their experience led them to a firm conviction about traditional knowledge to be the guarantor of prosperity and solution to any problems.

Keywords: relocation, disaster, vulnerability

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Introduction

Natural disasters constitute a considerable challenge to the sociocultural systems of the affected populations, especially when the relocation or forced migration is involved. Those populations who were forced to leave their homelands due to the disaster have been recently described as 'environmental refugees' (Button, Oliver-Smith 2008) and inevitably are subject to uprooting processes. Hoffman speculates about the existence of the universal experience of disaster victims and recovery steps. The author's ideal model of recovery starts with the crisis phase, characterised by sociocultural context and liminal stage of the victims who experience individualisation from one side and mutual help and sharing from the other side. In the second phase victims become isolated from the rest of the community, start to create disaster related ceremonies, rites and rituals, rearrange their lives. In this phase social estrangement takes place. This is the time of the conflicts with the government, relief groups or insurance companies. When the third phase occurs, lives are restored and the ceremonies related to disaster almost entirely disappear (Hoffman 1999). One dominant question in such circumstances is how are the priorities of the state balanced between the needs of 'environmental refugees', other outside agencies and the government agenda.

This paper explores a case of Paridrayan village of successful mobilization of the potential of the group through its sociocultural means, and initial successful resistance to the government and non-government organisations' plans related to the relocation of the entire village and subsequent conflicts. It reveals two things: that through the mobilisation of these sociocultural means the group successfully could achieve expected long time goals and that the government interference induced conflicts between the villagers and extended the phase of individualisation and social estrangement of some of the members of the group far beyond the restoration phase.

Geographical Settings of Taiwan

Taiwan is an island whose inhabitants are used to the robust manifestation of forces of nature. Firstly, the earthquakes – as it lies at the meeting point of the continental Eurasian plate and the Philippines oceanic plate, it experiences several minor, imperceptible earthquakes every day and several stronger per year. The tropic of

Cancer sets the boundary of the two climatic conditions of the island, the subtropical northern part characterised by heavy precipitations and the southern tropical part, mainly Hengchun Peninsula characterised by clearly distinguishable wet and dry seasons. The climate of the island is heavily influenced by the northeast and the southwest monsoons, which vary in direction and the amount of the precipitation they bring. Whereas the northern part receives considerably equal amount of the rainfall throughout the year, the southern part remains dry for almost half of the year receiving most of the rainfall during the summer months (Chen 1982: 9). Mountains and hills cover approximately 70 per cent of the area (Chen 1982: 1). High mountains combined with the Kuroshio Current have a great impact on the local climatic differences of the island. Typhoon or tropical cyclone season lasts from May to November but most of typhoons occur from July to September (Chen 1982: 14). The island experiences several typhoons every year and 'these are the most destructive of the natural calamities' that affect the island (Chen 1982: 12).

Typhoon Morakot affected Taiwan from August 6 to August 9 of 2009. The slow translation speed of the tropical cyclone caused its long duration of the and brought unexpected rainfalls, which over the mountainous regions exceeded 3000 mm during four days.

Most of the rainfall occurred on August 7 and 8. On August 7, a 24 hour accumulated rainfall exceeded 500 mm over mountainous regions of southern Taiwan reaching 800 mm in certain areas, whereas on August 8 rainfall in the southern part of Taiwan exceeded 700 mm. Certain areas experienced the rainfall over 1200 mm (Chien and Kuo 2011: 3).

Typhoon Morakot caused floods and landslides all over the island resulting in 700 fatalities and substantial financial losses (Chien and Kuo 2011: 3).

Austronesian indigenous peoples of Taiwan have been adapting to these challenging climatic conditions for centuries as many other communities worldwide living in disaster prone areas, which use various adaptive and coping strategies to cope with disasters and crises such as, droughts, earthquakes, conflicts (Turton 1977, Torry 1978, Zaman 1989, Tobin and Whiteford 2002).

Characteristics of Paiwan Group

This paper is the story of the inhabitants of the Paridrayan village, who belong to Paiwan group of indigenous Austronesian speaking peoples of Taiwan¹. The inhabitants of Paridrayan village belong to the northern Ravar subgroup, which is significantly smaller than another major subgroup of Paiwan, the Butsul. As the consequence of the interaction with the Rukai, unlike the rest of Paiwan who recognize the primogeniture regardless of sex, the Ravar subgroup prefers males as firstborn heirs and successors (Chiang 1993: 56; Matsuzawa 1989: 255).

Unlike other indigenous groups in Taiwan, Paiwan live in relatively large (Ferrell 1982: 2) concentrated villages (Mabuchi 1960: 136). Traditional Paiwan subsistence includes swidden cultivation and hunting. Whereas both men and women conduct farming, hunting is the activity reserved for men (Chiang 1993: 30). Farming includes taro, millet and supplementary crops such as rice, maize, sweet potato and peanuts (Chiang 1993: 31). The importance of rice, especially in ritual domain is not as significant as that of millet (Chiang 1993: 32).

Hunting game includes such animals as boars, goats, deer, hawks and flying squirrels. Spears and bows are traditional hunting weapons, however nowadays firearms and traps are mostly in use. Although bows are not used as the hunting weapon any more, archery competitions of men and women alike are common features of each major communal event.

Two major institutions of Paiwan society are the corporate household and the stratified social system (Chiang 1993) comprised mainly of the nobles (*mamazangiljan*) and the commoners (*atitan* or *tsinautsau*)². Their legacy and social position is perpetuated in myths of origins of each clan. Thus the origin of the aristocrats always differs from the origin of the commoners. Paiwan household constitutes a basic social unit of economic production and consumption (Matsuzawa 1989; Chiang 1993). The house, called *uma* or *umaq* serves as a mean of identification and relation to other households (Matsuzawa 1989: 74) and 'represents a perpetual socio-cultural

¹ The Council of Indigenous Peoples currently lists sixteen officially recognized groups of Taiwan Indigenes.

² According to Matsuzawa, however, younger siblings and cousins of the chiefs should be recognized as a distinctive category, between the chief and the commoners (Matsuzawa 1989: 165). Also Chiang mentions that in some villages an intermediate class, *pualju*, can be found (1993: 62).

entity that is, in a sense, separable from the people who dwell in it' (Chiang 1993: 61). Traditionally Paiwan household is only carried by the first-born male or female (Matsuzawa 1989: 98). As the firstborn (or the eldest) is compared to the millet seed, he or she possesses magical power able to control the harvest, especially that of millet. As millet used to be regarded as the symbol of prosperity and happiness the first-born was to ensure the prosperity of his or her household (Matsuzawa 1989: 123) as well as the household of the siblings (Matsuzawa 1989: 142).

The most 'prominent aspect of the Paiwan economy is the redistributive feature of the offices of the chiefs (*mamatsangilan*). As chiefs and landlords, some, but not all, Paiwan aristocrats enjoy the privilege of collecting tribute and tax from commoners. The surplus thus accumulated is redistributed to commoners in a variety of ways. Ideally a chief is expected to support those of his/her subordinates who are in need, such as childless elderly persons and households that have suffered the tragic loss of 'bread earning' members. However neither the number of these recipients nor the amount of goods involved are substantial' (Chiang 1993: 37). The chief as the firstborn is the direct descendant of the first settlers, thus he or she has the power to control the spirits, particularly the ancestral spirits. Chief's spiritual power is enhanced by the possession of the heirloom. This ritual superiority contributed to the chief's political and economical status (Matsuzawa 1989: 204). Supernatural powers, which ensure success in hunting and farming, which in other words can be described as the ancestors' blessings are given in greatest amount precisely to the chief (Matsuzawa 1989: 204–205).

Chiefly position of Paiwan aristocrats is not followed by the economic privilege or political power, 'Only the ritual privileges of the aristocrats are common and prominent...' (Chiang 1993: 11). Chief was responsible for the fertility of game and crops and prosperity of the rest of the villagers (Matsuzawa 1989: 199).

Of a great significance is that the chief's role was also seen in uniting 'the village consciousness during times of severe disruption of traditional social and cultural systems' (Matsuzawa 1989: 159). For such we can consider the impact of natural disasters and sudden relocation in the aftermath of the disaster.

In most of Paiwan villages, land resources, such as farmlands, hunting fields and dwelling plots were traditionally considered to be the properties of the few noble houses (Mabuchi 1960: 137; Chiang 1993: 62). Chiefly families, in order to maintain their senior position prefer intermarriages between the families of the high rank (Mabuchi 1960: 137). This practice is maintained also nowadays.

The Village of Paridrayan

Paridrayan village has been located in its present site, traditionally called Pakaljivungvung ('the place where the mist arise') for more than 300 years. Its inhabitants resisted relocation during the Japanese era as well as later, during subsequent Chinese rule (Chiang 1993). Traditional territory of the Paridrayan, which is considered to be the cradle of the northern Ravar subgroup, extends to Taitung County.

Before typhoon Morakot, over six hundred people inhabited the village, most of whom worked outside, in the plains, whereas their parents took care of their children. Most of the people worked in the factories or in service industry and used to come back to the village only for weekends, holidays and major social events. Many villagers state however that if they had a choice, if not for the purpose of income, they would rather remain in the village than live outside for the reasons of considerable difficulty in adjusting to the outside environment and lifestyle, especially when it comes to live in big remote metropolis such as Taipei. Thus usually after several years a number of people used to come back to the village, at least temporarily. This was also the case before the typhoon that led to events described in this paper.

There were several breakfast places in the village and the grocery shops. There was a video games shop and the workshop for making clothes. One of the breakfast places, located in the central part of the village, was the gathering place for the villagers coming back after a week of studying or working outside. Thus it was considered to be almost a '24 hours' breakfast shop where people could meet and discuss events of the past week. There were two churches in the village and the activity centre, which was destroyed during the typhoon.

Since most of the young people lived in the plains, those who cultivated the fields were mostly elderly men and women. Their working children were helping whenever they could. Men occasionally would go hunting, as it is one of traditional occupations of indigenous peoples in Taiwan.

The inhabitants of Paridrayan being a village of the Ravar northern subgroup, prefer male to be the successors and inheritors. While nowadays most of the residences are virilocal, sometimes uxorilocal residence takes place, usually when the man is not the firstborn and his future wife's social rank is higher. When this occurs, other women pity him, as they believe that a man does not possess the perseverance and

patience of women to be able to endure the pressure rested upon him by his wife's family.

Typhoon Morakot

The inhabitants of Taiwan are used to several typhoons approaching the island every year. Typhoon Morakot that hit Taiwan on August 6th 2009 was not expected to be any different from other stronger typhoons. However Morakot brought precipitations of unexpected amount. Within four days the mountainous areas of Taiwan received rainfalls exceeding 3000 mm, whereas Central Weather Bureau had estimated precipitation reaching approximately 800–1000 mm. Southern part of the main island was flooded almost entirely. Landslides and floods affected many mountainous villages. The most tragic was the landslide in Xiaolin village, which killed over three hundred people.

It happened that the wedding ceremony and reception was held in Paridrayan when typhoon hit, therefore more people than usual were present in the village. It soon occurred to the villagers that the rain and the wind would not stop quickly. After few days the connection with the outside world was completely lost and the weather conditions were not improving. The village is composed of the two main parts, which had become cut off from each other by the landslide. The village head, risking her life, was patrolling the village all night and warned one of the household's residents to leave immediately, just right on time before their house was swept away by the landslide. Except of this house three more were damaged to the point that it is impossible to live there now. Fortunately nobody was seriously hurt. For the next several days the villagers organised themselves into the support groups. Some of the inhabitants have gathered in the Adventist church, which is located in one of the highest grounds in the village, others remained in their own houses or with other family members. During the first few days the villagers experienced what Anthony Oliver-Smith described as the 'brotherhood of pain' (Oliver-Smith 1999) – residents shared all the food they had left. During subsequent days, the villagers organised several spots for food preparation. Men, mostly young and strong, were still patrolling the village to check for the further landslides. The village head, assisted by the pastor of one of the churches was assigning tasks to the villagers. After several days when the rain has stopped and it became clear that nobody from outside would

reach the village, the village head had decided that those who were strong enough would walk over the pass that separates Paridrayan from the rest of the world to seek for help in order to transport others. Eventually after a daylong walk, which in normal circumstances would not take longer than two hours, the villagers reached village of Dewen located on the other side of the pass and asked for help. Others were taken by the helicopters in subsequent days to come.

Relocation

First, the villagers were located in the gym of the primary school in the township capital. As the villagers were supposed to spend there entire month soon it became clear that the space needs to be arranged in more organised way. For many people of the village, including the village head, such a close contact with the outside world was an unusual experience. The village of Paridrayan was the most isolated of all ten villages of the Township. Sudden interest of the media, government and non-governmental organizations combined with the shock related to the preceding events did not have a positive psychological effect on the villagers located in the gym. Women took on the roles of the organizers of the immediate environment and caregivers to the rest of the villagers in the temporary camp. They started to organise in teams in order to manage the surroundings and charity donations, which according to villagers started to flow into the gym in great amounts. The number of clothes, items of every day use and food was so overwhelming that soon the villagers were not able physically to handle it. The food donations constituted a particular problem. For instance the number of lunchboxes was so great that one person would receive three per meal. It was impossible to finish it all at once and due to the insufficient number of refrigerators and high summer temperatures, it was difficult to maintain the food fresh for a long time. The diet represented the problem especially for the elderly people. The simple diet of elderly inhabitants of the mountains constitutes mostly of cooked vegetables, rice, soup and very small amount of meat. Most of the food used to come from their fields. Since they moved to the gym however their diet consisted mostly of fried, oily food, rich in meat and various spices. In the result many of them soon felt uncomfortable and became sick. Women were those who were the immediate targets of critique by the outside organizations for lacking of organising skills and were blamed for wasting the food. Media described the villagers as disaster victims wasting the food donations. Women were reminded that everybody should

be grateful for all the gifts the villagers receive during their stay in the gym. Being constantly under pressure from outside, women felt that they have lost their dignity and competence.

The last few decades of the Paridrayan history includes the pursuit of the villagers to find the new site to relocate their village. The reason for that was that the slope to which the village is attached to had become unstable. The villagers told the stories of the stones rolling down the slope into the middle of the village, right on the road, which sometimes made walking through the village impossible or dangerous. There were also minor landslides at the back of the village. The reason for such situation is not clear but some villagers said that in the past the intensive logging carried on at the back of the village, logging that the villagers had no influence on, had caused such a state of being. When the Morakot typhoon came, the villagers decided to leave the village and find the way to relocate at least some of the people. The villagers engaged vigorously in finding a new place for the new village, which involved numerous meetings with the officials from the central and local governments. To achieve their goal the villagers had mobilised the members of aristocratic families, which are traditionally considered to be the guides and leading authorities of the entire village, but also the pastors of two village churches, the village head and other leading figures of their community, including teachers, police officers and artists. They managed to meet with the representatives of the central government, including the president Ma Ying-jeou and held negotiations with the members of other Paiwan village in order to establish the new village on their traditional land. Up till that moment the villagers felt they were in control of the events, supported by members of the paramount chiefly family. Most of the people taking part in these talks were men, while women were organizing the charity work.

As the result of the negotiation process the villagers were relocated to the military camp while the new houses were being built, where each family, regardless the number of members, occupied one room. The villagers of Paridrayan thus spent there almost two entire years. Many residents of Paridrayan thought that time that the new village would be only a temporary housing before the road to their own village was repaired, which would eventually become a shelter should another typhoon approach the island next time. However as the villagers said, while in the military camp the government started to change its approach. Thus the villagers learned that what was supposed to be temporary houses they were going to be relocated to, will be their permanent housing. From that point the whole process was marked with considerable amount of misunderstandings between the government and residents, lots of stress, that affected also the families of those who were immediately involved

in the negotiations. Some people quit their work and devoted their time to meetings and negotiations for the sake of the whole community, which had negative impact on their families' economic situation. For the next several months the villagers were not allowed to go back to the village of Paridrayan as the area was considered to be dangerous from the geological point of view. However as soon as the villagers learned they were not able to return to Paridrayan, tired and not adjust to living in plains, some elderly women had decided to go back to Paridrayan. After the road to the pass was open, they asked their family members to take them back to their village. From the pass they had to walk down the village, which had neither running water nor electricity.

In the meantime the villagers were negotiating with the government the best way of relocation. However the kind of rules the government applied to the villagers regarding the eligibility of applying for the houses in relocated area inflicted the conflicts between the inhabitants. Since the government criteria of the house allocation were incompatible with traditional household eligibility rules, many people who possessed houses in the original village were unable to obtain the house in the relocated village. However those who had no right to apply for the house according to traditional rules would still acquire one. In this way, the member of the paramount clan had lost the eligibility to acquire the house, although according to the villagers, as the member of aristocratic strata who was engaging most vigorously in the negotiation process and was the most supportive of the villagers' plans, the villagers should have the right to build a house for her in the relocated village even if the government refused to do so. Ultimately, out of 224 applications only 174 were accepted. One of the points of the contract between the government and people stated that their houses in Paridrayan would officially be qualified as 'farmhouses', not permanent houses anymore. As the result of this change, the villagers were not allowed to spend the night in the original village. They were also required to move the household registration to the relocated village. At this point many inhabitants became suspicious regarding the intentions of the government towards their original village. Until today several dozens of the household heads did not move the household registration and some of families have decided not to sign any contract with the government, not to relocate, and move back to Paridrayan.

Back in the Village and Return to the Traditional Way of Subsistence

As the negotiations with the government in the opinion of the villagers did not go as expected, two families have decided to go back to the original village of Paridrayan. At first they met with strong opposition from other members of the group who considered their decision to be a threat to the integrity of the entire community. Their return to the village was not easy. All the basic facilities were out of order. There was no water, nor electricity. It was impossible for those families who moved back to keep their jobs outside, since there was so much to do in the village. Frustrated and disappointed with the government, for the first two years after their return, the villagers did not let any non-governmental organizations' programs, nor governmental projects to be implement in the village, as they were afraid that these organisations would try to alternate their way of living. The villagers were also blaming the actions of the government for worsening the relations amongst the inhabitants of Paridrayan. The frustration and disappointment led the villagers to make decision about withdrawing their children from school and start home-schooling program since in their eyes the program of the ministry of education is not suitable for young indigenous people and not helpful in forming their indigenous identity. These two families decided to implement traditional farming knowledge as the main mode of subsistence. Since they used to work outside prior to Morakot, they did not have much experience in farming. Thus the families had to ask for advice the elderly members of their families to share that knowledge with them. Consequently they implemented organic cultivation of traditional crops such as millet, taro, and peanuts. During the season they also gather bamboo sprouts and rely on local herbs, which are sold as natural medicine to the customers from outside. The surplus of their crops is used for sell as well, and for preparing the food in the organic restaurant that the families had built in the centre of the village on the plot of land belonging to the mother of one of the women. This restaurant has become the main location for social gatherings regarding any issues related to the village.

The Mission

After relocation, many inhabitants of Paridrayan have become concerned with the continuity of Paiwan culture. In their eyes in the relocated place, which is located much closer to the plains and susceptible to the influence of mainstream Han culture it will be much more difficult to pass the core of the culture to the next generation. The considerable geographical distance between the original and the relocated villages also constitutes considerable concern to the villagers. To Paiwan the land lies at the core of the group identity. However now they are physically separated from their land. It takes about one hour-long ride to reach the fields nearby the original village. Although each house was given a plot of land in the relocated area, it is too small (10 meters long and five meters wide) to cultivate considerable amount of crops. Additionally the inhabitants are afraid that people from the villages neighbouring Paridrayan will cross into their hunting grounds since most of the inhabitants are no longer there. This fear combined with fear towards the possible influence of the mainstream culture is also present in minds of those families who refused to relocate. The burden is especially heavy to one of these families since the head of the clan is the 'millet seed' of one of the oldest and most powerful commoner clans in the village. Thus nolens volens, during the absence of the aristocratic clans in the original village, the members of that clan took upon themselves the responsibility of taking care for the elderly inhabitants of the village and a long-term project of rebuilding the Paridrayan's infrastructure, from water supply to creating job opportunities for young generation. Every project takes time as for example it took almost two years to negotiate with the local government the garbage truck that would reach the village on regular basis. As one of the women admits, their biggest dream is to lead a simple undisturbed life, however, given the circumstances and their responsibilities it is impossible for them to lead the lifestyle they wish. As they remark, the villagers are used to the manifestations of nature, the word for disaster does not even exist in Paiwan language. Thus in the course of events related to Morakot typhoon some of the inhabitants started to describe current situation as the 'government disaster'. Their existence is marked by the distrust towards the government, outside organisations and belief that all the problems will be solved by following the rules of traditional culture. Thus the elderly people who after relocation willingly go back to the village of Paridrayan have become a great source of traditional knowledge to these families. The hunger for this knowledge among the younger generation is not limited to farming

but extends to complexities of social relations, such as patron client relationship or the rituals related to the harvest cycle.

Concluding Discussion

The case of Paridrayan demonstrates an example of what Oliver-Smith termed as 'disaster vulnerability', which 'expresses multidimensionality of disasters by focusing attention on the totality of relationships in a given social situation and the formation of a condition that, in combination with environmental forces produces a disaster' (Oliver-Smith 2002: 28). As this research shows, the vulnerability of the villagers was revealed in the post-disaster phase, upon the negotiations with the government. Until then, they had demonstrated their sophistication in successful implementation of available sociocultural means in order to achieve their goals. As in other parts of the world, societies adapted copying strategies for dealing with disasters. Anthropological research shows that many societies adapted long-term strategies in order to cope with unstable harsh conditions, which Van Arsdale described as 'adaptive influx' (1989). Societies are able to motivate family members and whole communities to implement adaptive strategies, such as for example sending country inhabitants to urban areas, introduce crop rotations in order to secure harvest, use grass-roots organizations to ensure food sources or share draft animals, like for example in Ethiopia where 6000 peasants were mobilized to build the road to eastern Sudan, which was eventually used in relief assistance during the famine (Hailu et al. 1994). Thus Zaman and Haque (1986) propose we also should look at those events as 'normal' order of things. The authors suggest that coping with disasters, such as for example floods is determined by the social and cultural dynamics in which people rely on mutual help and traditional organisations. Often, when communities receive little or no assistance from the local government they rely on their kin and local corporate groups (Zaman 1999). Even during the forced relocation, social organization, relative ties or belief systems are the basis to create coping mechanism in the time of social rupture (Colson 1973, 2003).

Conversely, intervention of the state sometimes undermines community's socio-cultural capabilities for coping with disasters. Community's strategies, particularly social networks are being disrupted by the government's programs, which in some cases weaken social ties and jeopardise process of recovery from disaster (McCabe 2002: 227). In case of Paridrayan the villagers were successful in negotiation of their needs with the local government but they have lost in the confrontation with the

central government and non-governmental organisations, which were responsible for the construction of the relocated village. What this case demonstrates is that there is still substantial discrepancy between the government programmes and the needs of disaster victims and there is still much to be done in terms of the mutual understanding to facilitate disaster recovery policies in the future.

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