Writing this book has been a long journey, which started in the 1980s. As a Taiwanese sociologist, I have long viewed myself as a “child of the 1980s” in spirit. It was a decade of radical pursuit of “Taiwan subjectivity” (Taiwan zhutixing) based on beliefs in liberty, equality, democracy, and human rights that shaped me during my formative years and drew me into sociology, a discipline dedicated to grasping “history and biography and the relations between the two within society,” as C. Wright Mills puts it in *The Sociological Imagination*.¹

I started my PhD degree in San Diego in the early 1990s, the crest of the “third wave” of democratization, according to Samuel P. Huntington’s periodization. Taiwan rode, and continues to ride, this wave. Locally and globally, public opinion and academic research were thick with the discourses of democratization, civil society, and public sphere, along with related issues of ethnicity, nationalism, historical narrative, collective memory, and identity. In dealing with these issues, I reflected on my own political positioning and cultural belonging.

My first book, which was based on my dissertation, was the product of that reflection. *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism* examines how Taiwanese nationalism swept through intellectual and cultural circles in the 1980s and 1990s, the two crucial decades of “indigenization” or “Taiwanization” of politics and culture in the country. It embodies my attempt to make sense of what I had experienced growing up, to grasp the history
of Taiwan and my personal biography and the relations between the two. In my mind, I completed the quest: there’s a place for me in the collective life story of one of the world’s most recent cases of natio-genesis.

When I was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript, I became intrigued by the connection between the politico-cultural change in the 1970s and the rise of Taiwanese consciousness and nationalism in the 1980s and beyond. I became convinced that the 1970s was a pivotal decade in postwar Taiwan. Much research literature, like the abundant studies of xiàngtù wénxué (Nativist literature) of the 1970s, had indicated the importance of this decade. But whereas this research literature focused on shēngjī wèntì—the issue of province of origin (local Taiwanese vs. Mainlanders), I intuited that the Nativist literature was part of a larger generational transition. My intuition has developed into the book you hold in your hands.

This book is another attempt to understand my personal life in historical context. In it I understand myself by comparing myself with the young intellectuals of the return-to-reality generation in 1970s Taiwan. Many members of this generation became Taiwanese nationalists in the 1980s. In documenting that they had been ardent Chinese nationalists just a few years earlier, I may appear to be digging up dirt, muckraking. That is not my intention. Who am I to decide who was right, who am I to pass judgment? I reject an “instrumentalist” explanation of identity change, according to which Taiwanese nationalists were opportunists. I think they were genuinely Chinese nationalists in the 1970s and that they had a sincere change of heart in the 1980s for which their return to reality had prepared them. They were characters in quite a different historical narrative than the one I wrote myself into. They cast themselves in different roles in a different drama, but the casting made sense at the time. As a Welsh proverb says, “The best candle is understanding.” I have tried to understand the choices they made in the light of history.

In his The Old Regime and the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

I hope and believe that I have written the present book without any parti pris, though it would be futile to deny that my own feelings were engaged. What Frenchman can write his country and think about the age in which he lives in a spirit of complete detachment? Thus I confess that when studying our old social system under its infinitely various aspects I have never quite lost sight of present-day France. . . .
My aim has been to supply a picture that while scientifically accurate, may also be instructive. . . . With this in mind I have not shrunk from wounding the feelings of individuals and classes in present-day France, or of affronting certain opinions and ancient loyalties, laudable though these may be. In so doing I have often felt regret but never any qualms of conscience, and I can only hope that those who may be inclined to take offense at anything in this book will realize that its author has aimed at complete honesty and impartiality.2

I kept thinking of Tocqueville’s confession as I wrote this book. I’ve tried to follow in his footsteps, to write impartially, without regard for my feelings or anyone else’s. But while Tocqueville painted a realistic “picture,” I have tried to tell a true “story.” This story is my reply to the oracle at Delphi’s imperative. We have to know ourselves as historical beings, by casting ourselves in larger stories. No story, no identity; without narrative identity, life is bare. Every society needs to keep telling stories about itself.

In his 2007 study of the public religious revival or renewal of Buddhism and Daoism in Taiwan since the lifting of martial law in 1987 as a contribution to Taiwanese democracy, Richard Madsen observes:

Everyone should be concerned about the fate of Taiwan. Although it is a small island with only 23 million inhabitants, it is worth close attention because it sits on top of a highly unstable political, social, and cultural Asian fault zone. The rise of Asia as the world’s most dynamic center of wealth, power, and cultural creativity is perhaps the single greatest challenge for a global order that has for centuries been dominated by Europe and now the United States. A breakdown along some of the fault lines centered on Taiwan could, in the worst-case scenario, become the epicenter for a catastrophe of global proportions.3

Human history is contingency. With the rise of a self-assertive China, the future of the island country of Taiwan is, it goes without saying, hard to predict. I would like to end this book in sight of a safe anchorage, but I find myself in stormy seas.