

Is Taiwan Studies Dead?

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Introduction

For those of us who have devoted most of our academic careers getting to know, formally studying, and writing and lecturing about the island of Taiwan the question that I explore in this talk, “Is Taiwan Studies dead?” is sobering and disturbing. It is also a question that we here can find difficult to face when it is put to us in so blunt and cold a fashion.

As painful as the ITSD question may be, it is an important, and deeply relevant, question to keep in mind: We cannot but be aware that there are troublesome signs of our sub-field’s viability, if not its impending demise. Those signs that indicate problems of viability and continued evolution are related in good measure to real-world events and trends that center on the growing power of the Peoples Republic of China and the impact that this growth is having on many spheres of Taiwanese life—from the economic arena to the volatile domestic Taiwanese political battlefield, to the realm of an developing cross-strait culture. The battles being fought in these different spheres and battle grounds are now changing the very nature of Taiwan

Studies and of the problems and subjects that we, its members—whether in the west or on Taiwan--- research and write about.

What follows is a personal examination of the birth, life, death and transfiguration of a field we have each been a part of. It is one individual's view but it is based on an examination of various forms of published data as well as interviews and conversations with Taiwan hands on both sides of the Pacific.

Section I. The Evolution of an Island and a Sub-field Dealing With It, 1951-2007

How do we place the evolution of a literature that focuses upon Taiwan within the larger development of the post-war Republic of China and its socio-political environment? In the last fifty-six years, political, economic, socio cultural, and religious forces have reshaped Taiwan. This transformation—this “miracle” has produced a decided change in how Taiwan was and is now seen by the larger world. Western and Taiwanese reporters, scholars in a wide range of disciplines, governmental officials and corporate executives have all played a part in this process of studying and writing about Taiwan. What was an obscure little island with a history few knew about or showed much interest in, became the home of a rebel regime

that seemed to have little chance for survival. Then things changed.

Taiwanese were first reintegrated into a KMT-held China. They then revolted against the KMT regime only to be violently repressed. The people on the island, the Bendiren, many of whose families had been on the island for hundreds of years, then found, to their dismay that the regime that had smashed their hopes and had raped them—literally and figuratively---was losing its mainland base, was retreating to a now subdued (or cowed?) Taiwan and that their *meildao* was about to be the new home of the Republic of China. Fortuna, in the form of the Korean war--the UN-sanctioned American-led police action in support of the Syngman Rhee regime-- and the intervention of the PLA when the UN forces had reached the Yalu River--smiled upon the new ROC bastion. The United States government then placed its Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait. It then took moves to guarantee the survival of the failed KMT regime. It stationed military forces there and provided economic support and on-the-ground advisors that ROC's leaders needed so desperately. With these steps taken, the story of the modern well-governed and economically viable Taiwan began to take shape.

Those Westerners who came to Taiwan and took part of the multi-leveled Agency International Development AID efforts, as well as military,

diplomatic and intelligence personal, and members of the Christian missionary community that had been forced out of China all began learn about and then write about this small and quite beautiful—and still heavily agricultural island of some eight million people. Year by year, the amount of research and writing about this new American client—an island that one American official, the Consul, Peter Parker, suggested the United States take over and make a colony of three or four years before the Civil War of the early 1860s---began to appear in print and a new sub-field began to evolve.

By the mid-1980s the amount of published material available about Taiwan had reach a critical point and had produced a need for substantive and well organized bibliographic guide. Bruce Jacobs, the Columbia University-trained political scientist who has spent his academic career in Australia, did the rest of us in Taiwan Studies a great service by compiling his detailed and well-organized bibliography of English-language publications about Taiwan.

If there was a turning point in the ability to discuss and write and published about identity issues it came in 1986. The ailing CCK had not stifled resistance to his regime, seeing the dangers of such a step in Korea and the Philippines. He took a different path and began to open his regime by allowing the *dangwai* to have official status as a political party. In 1987,

he opened the government even more by allow larger amounts of currency to be taken out of country and permitting mainlander (post 1945) citizens to travel to the PRC to visit relatives. While thousands of these mainlanders took advantage of this opening many more Taiwanese did making use of the tours organized by some of Taiwan's largest temples. During these first years large number of these traveled to their ancestral home province Fujian for tourism, for religious pilgrimages and for more. The business contacts that evolved in these years would change both Taiwan and China.

These sets of openings to the larger world were accompanied by an end to martial law and a lift of restrictions on freedom of the press. This, in turn opened the way to a viable and open discussion of what it meant to be Taiwanese and how one could see ones local, regional, and provincial identities manifested in the world one lived in. These were heady years for the interested lay reader could now go to the ever-larger number of book stores and obtain books on topics that had been forbidden in the decades of martial law. New journals with a decidedly more radical approach to politics, social issues and environmental concerns began to appear as well in this new Taiwan. Scholars both Taiwanese and Western took advantage of this new climate and these now open topics for research and by doing so, change the very nature of Taiwan studies itself.

What no one quite realized was that a major change in the sub-field of Taiwan Studies was about to take place. This change relates to the opening to the Chinese mainland that CCK had allowed in his last full year of life. One can see this real-time issue when one covers the Taiwanese press from afar or watches TV while in Taipei or the other Taiwanese metropolises. To put it bluntly, the largest problem facing Taiwan is the growing role of the Chinese mainland. In international (or is it intra-Chinese?) politics for example, the out of power KMT makes overtures to the PRC or responds to entreaties from the government of the PRC, even as the DPP tries to ward off such informal approaches and entreaties and tries to play an anti-PRC card in major elections. In the economic sphere one can trace the process of hi-tech transfer. This is an economic and intellectual process that some observers on Taiwan and in the west have called, somewhat crudely, but correctly, industrial/technological suck-out and this has been taking place year after year since it began in the 1990s. This hi-tech shift is also seen in the movement of one million Taiwanese businessmen and their families to the Shanghai-Suzhou corridor and to Guangzhou as both low tech and hi-tech Taiwanese firms are transplanted in these areas of China. As foreboding is the flight of members and offices of large-scale American business firms reading the tea leaves and setting up large scale offices of their own firms in

Shanghai and in Beijing, as a look at American Chamber of Commerce websites in the Taipei and in the major coastal cities of the PRC will quickly confirm.

This shift in the “real world” has been accompanied by a shift in the nature of the scholarship on Taiwan and on the Taiwanese/Chinese relationship itself. Scholars in different disciplines who had once devoted their time and energy to Taiwan and Taiwan alone are now focusing on the mainland or on the evolving set of new people-to-people, if not government-to-government relations. While some of this has been going on since the Taiwanese opening to China in 1987, the amount of this new cross-strait work and also work that compares systems and structures in Taiwan with those in the PRC has increased. You author did research on contact between mother temples in Fujian with daughter temples in Taiwan in the early 1990s making use of material gathered during three trips made first to sites in coastal Fujian and then to sites on Taiwan. Myron Cohen of Columbia has also begun to do more work on the PRC and has written comparisons of patterns in local family and community organization on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and in non-Minnan China as well. Yet a third important and very recent example of this new scholarship is Dorothy Solinger’s important

article that compares the impact of SME *guanxi* on the democratization process in 1980s Taiwan and 1990s and early 2000s Guangdong.

This shift in scholarship is important as evidence of a certain expansion of Taiwan studies and a shift to the much-needed development of very useful comparisons, as I have suggested. However, even as this scholarly expansion has taken place, a loss of certain important publishing venues for Taiwan scholars has also taken place. Most disturbing, and here I speak very personally and with deep sorrow, is the decision to end the Taiwan in the Modern World Series made by the powers that be at M.E. Sharpe. It is a press that your author has called his home for almost two decades. To be sure, certain other presses, such as those at Harvard and Columbia, have taken up the slack, but I think it is fair to say that this loss is an important one to all of us in the field who published monographs and edited books and conference volumes in the M. E. Sharpe series.

Section II. Asking the ITSD Question to Taiwan Hands: Capturing Opinions of a Thorny Problem in San Francisco in March of 2006 and in Taipei in June 2006

On the surface, at least, Taiwan Studies remains a relatively living and breathing scholarly entity—one that may even said to be thriving. One can, at first glance, make a good case for its continued viability. Let me, playing

devils advocate against myself, though doing so does make me schizophrenic, I guess, but let me do so anyway. Books continue to be published in the field and in certain areas of concern, such as economic development, identity studies and in cultural studies, new and important book and a wealth of new articles continue to be written and published. University presses have published a number of such books, as had a major commercial press with an important academic branch, Palgrave St. Martins. Seminars and yearly conferences continue to be held with Harvard and the University of South Carolina leading the way in the United States and Chengda leading the way on Taiwan. A quick search of the Internet will also show that new institutes that focused on Taiwan have been set up in the ROC, in the US, in Great Britain and in Germany, for example.

However one must also admit that there are some among its practitioners, those who believe that it is fated for a painful and rapid demise. Optimist though I am, the words of such preachers of doom among us, some who do have positions of power and influence and who do contribute important articles and books to the literature, state their case effectively and thus their words about Taiwan and by implication Taiwan Studies must be taken seriously. The ideas and words of these prophets as found in their well-written Jeremiads, continued to echo in my head even as

I did my own research on issues of Taiwan's modern economic development and the related process of Taiwan-PRC hi-tech transfer. Certainly there was evidence of basic changes taking place in the realm of economics and in other realms of action as well. Thus I felt it necessary to see if others in our scholarly community felt the same sense of foreboding that I did. I thus asked that short and all too pointed question in my position as chair of the Taiwan Studies Group of the Association of Asian Studies. Three months later I asked the same question, but specific individuals I am acquainted in Taipei. In this section I discuss the nature of the answers I received to the "ITSD?" question and to sets of related questions on the evolution and present day nature of our sub-field, Taiwan studies in these two cities and in two different, but relatively close, moments in time. What follows is a brief summation of the discussions and interviews held in two very different environments half a world away from each other. The second environment consists of the offices of major social science/humanities institutes (and restaurants) that are part of the vast walled complex that is the Academia Sinica campus in one of eastern outer districts of Taipei City. The third set of discussions was held other more informal public spaces of restaurants and bars located in the neighborhood just north of Shida, general area that I call home when I am on Taiwan each year. In each of these venues I met

individuals, both Taiwanese citizens and who have spent their academic lives studying different aspects of Taiwan's history, society, culture, economy, religious life and political environment.

Let me add this caveat before I begin: What follows is not a rigorous or readily quantifiable body of survey data. Rather it is a more impressionist discussion based on memory, field notes, and taped interviews. It is an attempt to capture the flavor of discussion, not spell it out in detail so that we can find damning "smoking guns."

The first such environment was a formal, public of the Taiwan Studies Group's annual meeting at the San Francisco Marriott Hotel. It was a dark and stormy night—really—early in April of 2006. Deep underground in one of the conference rooms individuals from a host of nations, assembled for the annual meeting of the Taiwan Studies Group. Your author led that meeting, as he has done in every meeting since the "palace coup" that ousted Paris Chang in 1994. On this evening, April 7, already mindful of the Yale Taiwan Studies conference that he was committed to, he asked the ITSD question to the thirty or so people at the TSG meeting. He began by discussing just why he asked the question—providing the context that was covered earlier in this paper and then sat back and listened responses. The first came from some of the "old Taiwan hands" we all know. Among them

were Myron Cohen of Columbia, Jack Wills of USC, and Yvonne Chang of the University of Texas Austin. A host of others had their say as well. On the whole, the group felt that even to ask such a question was premature and that, given the body of scholarship still to be produced and published, the health of the field was good.

A certain degree of caution did emerge, for all recognized, even from work they themselves, were doing, that pull of China to the Taiwan hand was all too real and all too powerful. One no longer could say that “Taiwan was the only China we have access to.” Anxiety was also expressed here and at other venues about careers in existence of opportunity---of the availability of professorial positions those studying “Taiwan-as-Taiwan.” There seemed to be, in the view of some individuals a “green tinted” glass ceiling of sorts that existed above them and preventing them from rising to positions of prestige and comfort that seemed to be opening to those studying “greater China,” not “lesser China.” Even in the face of such doubts one could also see that hope was still alive and that it was placed in the emerging group of very talented younger scholars--from Taiwan and the west who just finishing their degree work winning academic positions and beginning to publish and give presentations at major venues could also be seen and heard.

What I have said expresses and sums up, I believe, the sense—the flavor--- of the thoughts and ideas that the participants did present to their peers.

The second environment for discussions and more formal interviews consists of the offices of major social science/humanities institutes (and restaurants) that are part of the vast walled complex that is the Academia Sinica campus in one of eastern outer districts of Taipei City.

Over the course of my two weeks in Taiwan, I spent much of my time at my usual haunts. I visited the Taiwan History Institute, located near the Academia Sinica post office as I do each year and conducted interviews with the Institute's chair, its most eminent visiting member, Henry Tsai, a number its founders including Chen Chiu-Ku and Tsai Wen Hui, and a new and very impressive new man on board, a Dr. Chang , a Harvard Trained historian. I interviewed each of them. Each gave me his or her own take on the state of their pioneering institute and the state of their field on Taiwan as they saw it.

I also visited the Institute of Modern History. I have been fortunate to have worked with the members of that institute since 1979, the first year I was on Taiwan and I consider a good number of its members old friends and collaborators in the various essays and books I have had published about Taiwan since that first “rookie” year. It was there I met my old friend, and co-panelist, Paul Katz. Paul has done very important work on Taiwan and

has published a number of major monographs, including his most recent study, *When the Rivers Ran Blood Red* (University of Hawaii, 2005), a detailed and multi-faceted examination of the *ta-pen-ni* incident, an anti-Japanese revolt with a millenarian flavor to it that took place in the second decade of the twentieth century in southern Taiwan. Paul and I co-edited a recent volume on religion and identity formation on Taiwan and worked together in a variety of ways over the last decade or so. I see him as one of the major students of Taiwan Studies and the individual who best our sub-field from the perspective of both the West and Taiwan. He gave me his time and gave me with real sense of what was now going on as he saw it from his vantage point at his institute and the vantage point his other role as an officer of the Chiang Ching Foundation, of the major grant agency on the island that is involved in the promotion of new research in our field.

My third home at Academia Sinica is a grand and striking building that houses two related institutes, the *shehuixuo* (Institute of Sociology) and the *Minzhu xuo* (the Institute of Ethnology). There I was able to visit and interview three scholars, the CUNY trained anthropologist and master documentary maker, Hu Tai-li, the iconoclastic and decidedly post modern anthropologist, Alan Chun and the sociologist and one the major figures in the social science on Taiwan, Chang Mao-kuei.

Again, I was able to have long discussions and more formal interviews with each these productive and path-breaking scholars and thus gained insight into how Taiwan-based social scientists saw the development of and the Taiwanization of their respective fields. As I will suggest in my long conclusion, those doing Taiwan centered history and those doing Taiwan centered anthropology and sociology have very different ways of doing research and are in fields that see Taiwan and Taiwan Studies –on Taiwan in very different ways.

The third set of discussions was held other more informal public spaces of restaurants and bars located in the neighborhood just north of Shida, general area that I call home when I am on Taiwan each year. In each of these venues I met individuals, both Taiwanese citizens and who have spent their academic lives studying different aspects of Taiwan's history, society, culture, economy, religious life and political environment. There I met with a number of the younger generation of American Taiwan scholars who were on Taiwan doing research on a variety of projects. One was Megan Greene of the University of Kansas. Megan had done work on issues of the KMT state development of science and science education in mainland China and on Taiwan. She is now working on the role of museums in Taiwanese life. A second scholar is Steven Phillips of Towson University,

the author perhaps the major book on Retrocession and 2-28. He continues to look at Taiwan's political development and has published an article in the new collection, *Dangerous Strait*, (Columbia, 2005) edited by his mentor, Nancy Tucker. The third is Avran Boretz, an anthropologist then at the University of Texas/Austin and a student of another major figure in our field, Steven Sangren of Cornell. During a long evening of good food and good beer we discussed our field and its directions. Just the fact that these three scholars are very active and publishing important articles and books related to Taiwan gives me hope.

But what did I take away from these discussions and comments and interviews. I will try to spell out what I learned and what I see as the complex shape of our sub-field in the final section of this thought paper.

IV. Death or Transfiguration?

What can we say about the state of Taiwan Studies as we meet here at the annual EATS conference in Madrid in the spring of 2009? Is our field alive and well and thriving or is it in its death throes? One may also ask are these two options or answers to the "Is Taiwan dead?" question truly reflective of possible and very different realities? There is a larger question

here—how do we view a given field? As I have pondered this question, I have one answer provided from particle physics—the Heisenberg Thesis or uncertainty principle which is the core concept in the still evolving field of quantum physics. Let me cite the Wikipedia Encyclopedia here:

“His (Heisenberg’s) uncertainty principle, developed in 1927, states that the simultaneous determination of two paired quantities, for example the position and momentum of a particle, has an unavoidable uncertainty. Together with Bohr, he formulated the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics.”¹

I think what we have in Taiwan Studies is somewhat similar. We think we look at the same thing—the same sub-field in the West and on Taiwan but we see the field differently and we also see that the field itself is moving in different ways. To some degree this is a matter of the perspective of the observer---the “uncertainty principle” as a tool of social science--but what see also reflects of real differences in the evolution of the sub-field itself in

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werner_Heisenberg

See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncertainty_principleIn quantum physics, the **Heisenberg uncertainty principle** is a mathematical property of a pair of canonical conjugate quantities - usually stated in a form of reciprocity of spans of their spectra. It therefore mathematically limits the accuracy with which it is possible to measure (actually even define) such pairs. In its simplest form, it applies to the position and momentum of any object and implies that if we continue increasing the accuracy with which one of these is measured (or defined), the other will be measured (or defined) with less and less accuracy.

America and Europe and in modern day Taiwan. To put it another way, what we must look realize is that the very different set of comments, and viewpoints can roughly speaking, be broken down by what continent one is on and what tradition one is a member of.

In the West, as I have suggested in this essay, we see Taiwan Studies changing as Taiwan itself is--- more and more--coming under the spell of --- and seen in the light of the growing and industrial monolith that is the post – Maoist and Marxist PRC. Many of those among us now take a broader view of things and start seeing things in either comparative terms or in ways that link Taiwan with its mother country—we seek those places where what we think of as call “Taiwanese culture” had its beginnings. Certainly that a route I did take in some of my work on the Mazu cult and the cult of Baosheng Dadi. Another seductive path is to track the evolving relationship between Taiwan and China in such sectors as the electronics and IT/IC industries. T.J Cheng has done this and a younger scholar, Douglas Fuller, the co-editor of a new edited book on Tech-transfer issues he and I are working on is one such scholar. Fuller, a recent PhD from MIT and a member of the faculty of George Washington University has already produced a number of important articles. Historians of Taiwanese culture do

so by studying the evolving Taiwanese community in Shanghai and in the Shanghai Suzhou Corridor.

Western scholars and western-trained Taiwanese scholars also work in a variety of post-modern problems and apply the new theoretical insights to seeing Taiwan as a post-modern and post-colonial realm. Leo Ching's stunning monograph, *Becoming Japanese*² is an example of this new literature.

Yet another example of the new literature is Melinda Brown's work on the role of *yuanzhumin* in Taiwan's development, *Is Taiwan Chinese*. Brown's work is centered on Taiwan and is both historical and anthropological and in its last section, comparative. It asks dangerous questions and places Taiwan within the context of the larger China, as much of the new western work tends to do.

This embrace of both new theory and a broaden sense of what Taiwan is and where it fits into the larger Chinese world seems to be one of the new trends in Western scholarship done by Euro-American ethnics and Chinese Americans, and Chinese/Taiwanese Nationals in the West: it is not ethnicity here. Rather it is the type of graduate training received and it is the Eurocentric modes of scholarship that are stressed. These include the older

² Leo T. S. Ching, *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

but still important structuralist related scholarship and the new game theory/model making forms of scholarship that we see in political science, sociology and perhaps social psychology or the deconstructionist, post-modern, or post colonial modes of scholarship often found in history, anthropology and in literary studies--that are considered proper and acceptable. While clash of civilizations theory is no quite acceptable—and Huntington is he he must not be named, comparative approaches and world systems approaches –or quasi-Marxist approaches are acceptable and this makes for a broader menu of both theory and large scale approach.

But now about the perspective on Taiwan—does the uncertainty principle work here as well? In Taiwan I have found a different type of scholarship evolve, at least in a number of the disciplines and sub fields where people concentrate on Taiwan ding-an-sicht—on Taiwan-in-and-of-itself. It is, as many of my informants have told me, a more restrictive, more narrowly focused, and more geographically limited form of study of the island in many of its manifestations and modes of life. It is a mode of study—of research and presentation of scholarship---that is far more inward looking and in certain ways more didactic and functional—it is scholarship that meets the needs of a new nationalistic or ethnocentric turn in Taiwanese life in general and in the disciplines that attempt to capture that life as it was

and as it is now being lived. Furthermore this new closed-island agenda—this Taiwan-centered perspective---has had its effects on the types of training many in the new generation of Taiwan-based scholars are receiving. These comments may sound harsh, but they reflect the gist of most of the interviews I had on Taiwan when I was there in June. Those outside of academia expressed worry and doubt about where Taiwan was going and also feared marginalization and suck-out (or hollowing out) of Taiwan's knowledge-based economy and high-tech cutting edge economy and about the number of middle class hi-tech managers going to coastal China. The also were worried about an inept president and his corrupt family. Even DPP staff expressed their sense of depression in the face of Abian's failed presidency knowledge. Western expats and high level individuals in the private sector expressed similar doubts about the state of domestic affairs and Taiwan's reduced visibility in the world.

Yet, at the same time scholars are look inward and seeking a new vision of Taiwan not tainted by out side sensibilities. There is a sort of building stockades with high walls and hunkering down. Now all of what could not be studied about Taiwan—most especially its neglected history, is fair game for the Taiwan-trained scholar. Such scholars lack knowledge of Japanese and English and thus cut themselves off from the larger world of

scholarship. To be sure the older western and Japanese-trained generations do not do this see this as acceptable and have said so me at some length in these interviews. They did their work abroad and keep up wit the literature and realize how narrow the new generation's work may become. While some older scholars who remember the KMT oppression and China-centered approach understand the nature and the rationale of this new scholarship, they, too, remain wary and try to find a middle ground.

To be sure many disciplines, most notably anthropology and sociology have not fallen into this Taiwan-centric approach, as dramatically as history may have. Rather in each field there have been attempts, and quite successful ones, to become an integral parts of the larger world community in each discipline. At the same time, key figures have also tried to create a Chinese and then Taiwanese sociology and a Taiwanese anthropology. This approach can be seen at its best in the work of Chang Mao-kuei (Zhang Maoguei).

Chang's recent article, "The Movement to Indigenize the Social Sciences in Taiwan: Origin and Predicaments," in a book edited by John Makeham and A-chin Hsiau, *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in*

Contemporary Taiwan,³ examines this issue and provides a new and important way of understanding the indigenization/westernization (or globalization) issue in modern Taiwan Studies. This a masterful piece of scholarship and it is an article anyone interested in the nature and fate of our field must read. I cannot do it justice here but simple want to suggest that in dealing with the problem historically and then in terms of its present day status, Zhang gives us a way to approach the issue—or dilemma faced by other scholars on Taiwan and in China of how make use of western theory and still be loyal--or better—in concert with ones own national/cultural mores and perspectives.

Let me conclude by trying to pull things together a bit. I have suggested in my introduction that I see us at a critical juncture in our sub-field. The challenge of a powerful and aggressive China that is dominating East Asia as never before is challenging Taiwan and the West . Players in the real-time game recognize that Taiwan faces marginalization and one might add that perhaps Taiwan Studies might as well. Yet is the answer play the ostrich? Or does it, as Zhang suggests—if I read him right, lie in

³ Chang, Mao-kuei “The Movement to Indigenize the Social Sciences in Taiwan: Origin and Predicaments,” in John Makeham and A-chin Hsiau, eds. *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan*(New York : Palgrave St. Martins, 2005, 221260

developing coping strategies and finding meeting points and places where one can develop a powerful form of scholarly hybridity.

Abraham Lincoln, a leader and sage, writing, I must add, at a time when the United States was not only on the verge of fighting itself, but also making Taiwan an American colony stated that, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present” When we consider the state of contemporary Taiwan and the state of Taiwan Studies today, we hold fast to Lincoln’s words and find our path to the transfiguration that the United States went through in the years soon after Lincoln spoke that prophetic sentence.

