



China Perspectives

2010/3 | 2010

Taiwan: The Consolidation of a Democratic and Distinct Society

Editorial

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5297>
ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 15 septembre 2010
ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

Paul Jobin et Frank Muyard, « Editorial », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2010/3 | 2010, mis en ligne le 09 février 2011, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5297>

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Editorial

PAUL JOBIN AND FRANK MUYARD

At the turn of the 2010s, Taiwan is once again facing considerable challenges in the political, economic, and security spheres to maintain and further its past and present achievements. For the people living in or closely watching Taiwan, it sounds like nothing new. Since the end of World War II, every decade, and sometimes every other year, the country has been confronted with a series of crises, threats, and pressures that have challenged its socio-political system or even the independence of the country and led many to wonder how the Taiwanese would be able to overcome such difficulties. And yet, not only have the country and its people survived and surmounted these obstacles, but they have even managed to generate two subsequent “miracles”: First, an “economic miracle” that saw the island rise from post-WWII poverty to create a prosperous economy, initially on the coattails of Japan and on the basis of the U.S.-led international subcontract system, then in engineering a world-leading high-tech industrial society; second, a “political miracle” with the transformation of one of the oldest party-state authoritarian systems into one of the most democratic and open societies in Asia and the world.

Twenty years ago, Taiwan entered an era of democratisation under the leadership of the Kuomintang (KMT)’s Lee Teng-hui, the first native Taiwanese president, with an implicit coalition between KMT reformers and the Taiwan-centred main political opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, *Minjindang*). During the 1990s, the political elites, with the support of the electorate, gradually but profoundly democratised and Taiwanised the political institutions of the Republic of China (ROC), originally founded in 1912 and transferred to Taiwan in 1949: full democratic election of the country’s National Assembly and Legislative Yuan by (and only by) the Taiwanese electorate in 1991 and 1992, direct presidential election in 1996, and a series of amendments to the Constitution to adapt it to the present situation. The native Taiwanese majority (at least 85 percent of the population), largely excluded from genuine national and local power until the end of the 1980s, ascended to the highest echelons of the state, in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as in the main regional and local governments. At the same time, the opening of China to Taiwanese tourism and investment started a process of industrial flight and hollowing out of Taiwan to the advantage of China and Taiwanese industrialists, while

the island gradually turned itself from a low-cost industrial economy into an electronic and silicon emporium and manufacturing base.

The 2000s witnessed the deepening of both processes. On the one hand, the surprise election of the DPP candidate, Chen Shui-bian, in the 2000 presidential election heralded a historical transfer of power to the opposition after more than 50 years of KMT hegemony, and symbolically and practically embodied the change of regime. Re-elected in 2004, but still unable to wrest control of the Parliament (the essential locus of power in all democratic societies) from the KMT, Chen Shui-bian’s DPP administration furthered the democratisation and Taiwanisation of the country, a process supported by the majority of the population, which gradually shed its former Chinese national identity for a new democratic, inclusive, and multicultural Taiwanese identity. But the rise of Taiwanese nationalism and the administration’s efforts to push for Taiwan’s international recognition abroad have also been a source of tensions, both in Taiwan and in the international community, since it threatens the old KMT Chinese-centred ideology and conflicts directly with the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s pretension of sovereignty over Taiwan. PRC’s menaces and military gestures against Taiwan have been part of the regular background since 1949. Their intensification in the mid-1990s at the time of the first wave of Taiwanisation of the ROC under Lee Teng-hui, manifested by the missiles crisis in 1995-96, continued unabated during the eight years of DPP government, and served to further radicalise the Taiwanese political spectrum between the pro-Taiwan independence camp and the pro-China camp led by a Chinese nationalism-reoriented KMT under Lien Chan and Ma Ying-jeou (with most of the population in favour of the present and future separation from China under the code-name status quo).

On the other hand, the Taiwanese economy pursued its dual development toward a high-tech, service, and export-led economy and a growing dependency on China for the low-cost manufacturing and selling of Taiwan-designed products, generating an increase in unemployment among the working and lower classes and a steady migration of Taiwanese white-collars and professionals to China in hopes of tapping into the vast pool of well-paid jobs and businesses among the Taiwanese and foreign companies installed there, especially in the greater Shanghai area.

The election of Ma Ying-jeou in 2008 seemed to signal the desire of the Taiwanese to put an end to the political tensions between the opposing nationalisms and between Taiwan and China, and to benefit more from China's economic growth. For some, this second transfer of power not only consolidated Taiwanese democracy but also announced a possible shift in national identity and future political prospects in regards to China and the unification of the two sides.

In hindsight, however, 2008 did not constitute a major change in any of the main processes and features that define the contemporary evolution of Taiwanese society, such as democratic politics, Taiwanese national identity, economic integration with China and rising income inequality, internationalisation of the population and lifestyle, or the building of a multiethnic and multicultural society (with more recognition of the various ethnic groups that compose the nation, including new communities of Southeast Asian immigrants and spouses). All these trends have tended to deepen and accelerate in the past 10 years, sometimes even against the wishes of the successive DPP and KMT administrations. Beyond the political tussle and in spite of the genuine national conflict and serious security challenges that Taiwan faces, the 2010 decade in Taiwan may thus be defined as a whole by the consolidation of a democratic and distinct society and nation that manages to accept its diversity and socio-cultural complexity rather well. The progress of collective and individual rights has also been accompanied by the building of a knowledge and culture-based free society that is more openly critical of itself and more open to the rest of the world.

This issue of *China Perspectives* therefore attempts to highlight the current changes and challenges of Taiwanese society, be it in redefining its relationship with China or in finding better solutions to the numerous political and socio-economic issues the Taiwanese engage in daily, while continuing to consolidate around its main features and values. The eight articles selected here touch upon some of the main aspects of Taiwan's recent and contemporary change: domestic politics, relations with China, economic transformation, labour and environmental issues, national history, cultural policies, and ethnic groups. Each study manifests in its own field how democratic dynamics, political change, individual agency, community building, and scientific knowledge have been shaping present society, and the way the Taiwanese view the country's present, past, and future.

The opening article by Frank Muyard looks into the first two years of the Ma Ying-jeou administration, stressing the

ambivalent results of his policy of rapprochement with China and the difficulty the KMT has had in responding to the expectations and needs of the Taiwanese. Analyses of recent polls and local elections also show the changing fortunes of the two main political camps, as well as the increasing gap between the Taiwanese mainstream and the president in term of national identity. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, in a thought-provoking paper, then analyses how the new détente with China initiated by Ma Ying-jeou is fraught with unanswered questions and dangers for Taiwan's security and long-term sovereignty: while Chinese economic influence on the island is growing and Beijing keeps increasing the number of missiles and weapons directed at the island, Taiwan's defence effort has been stagnating. Taiwan's security now increasingly depends on US support, opening new debates in Washington about the meaning and viability of its commitment.

The issue of Taiwan's economy and the challenge of its integration with China's is addressed by Philippe Chevalérias's article, which analyses the past 20 years of Taiwanese economic development and its transformation under the threats and opportunities of the Chinese market. Since the end of the 1980s, the liberalisation of trade across the Strait has pushed the island's entrepreneurs to restructure their activity on the island, but at the same time has made the Taiwanese economy increasingly tied to its mainland production base. While the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) recently signed with Beijing may generate increased trade and investment on both sides of the Strait, it does not directly help Taiwan to tackle the structural weaknesses of its economy. Moreover, it has created strong opposition among the traditional industries and social groups threatened by extended free trade with China. However, the future remains open precisely because Taiwan is a democracy, which might force the government and big corporations to partly modify their agenda. The next two articles address this *variable* of political sociology through various angles. Taiwanese democracy merits a plurality of approaches not only because of its colourful elections, but also for the dynamism of its civil society. Environmental protection has been at the core of the movement for democracy since the mid-1980s. Paul Jobin further shows how environmental and labour NGOs have been fighting the state and corporations through original forms of mobilisation in their struggle to increase the visibility of industrial hazards, from nuclear to chemical, electronics, and the like. Despite the fact that the Green Party and leftist parties remain marginal in the electoral contest, these NGOs do challenge the actions of Taiwanese industry in regards to environmental

protection, public health, and labour rights. Stronger trade unions will be necessary to support that effort on a larger scale. As Chin-fen Chang and Heng-hao Chang found out, regardless of political and economic changes, the working class and the petite bourgeoisie have consistently wished for stronger unions. But all past administrations have tended to yield to the influence of business groups in limiting union power, and unionisation remains low in Taiwan.

The last three articles address the interaction between history, politics, and academic research on three significant issues for Taiwan: national history, cultural and museum policies, and ethnic groups. Damien Morier-Genoud first retraces the development during the 1990s and the 2000s of a new scientific history of Taiwan, freed from the patterns of nationalist Chinese historiography. The article focuses on the conditions of this history and examines in more detail the work of two Taiwanese historians looking beyond the divisions of political periodisation into the long-term dynamics of Taiwanese history. It also highlights how the emergence of this new historiography has benefited from important institutional support, and has drawn from both postcolonial and world history approaches to further its understanding of the transition of the island's society towards the modern era. Edward Vickers then addresses the complex mixing of cultural and political agendas, and the controversies linked to different conceptions of the past and the country's national identity, in the recent DPP and

KMT museum policies. After decades of use by the KMT regime to nurture Chinese patriotism, museums have since the late 1980s increasingly reflected a growing consensus over Taiwan's historical and cultural distinctiveness. This trend was accentuated after 2000, although the new administration's more accommodative approach to China since 2008 seems to have also extended into the realm of museums. Yet, thanks to the democratic reactivity of Taiwanese society, as well as the increasingly scientific and professional background of museum administrators, museums have managed to maintain a relative autonomy and may serve as important forums for debate over the history, culture, and identity of Taiwanese society. Finally, Dominic Meng-hsuan Yang and Mau-kuei Chang present a seminal paper on the community of Taiwanese "mainlanders" (*waishengren*). Offering an overview of the research on *waishengren* in the past few decades, the authors analyse the socio-political context of the community's history since its arrival in Taiwan as well as the various approaches used to study it, and highlight the significant diversity and nuances within this community. They also propose a new research agenda for "*waishengren* studies" based on a perspective of migration studies and stressing the importance of both history and agency. Adding more complexity to our perception of *waishengren*, the paper could be a model for more such historical/sociological research on other ethnic and social groups in Taiwan. •