

Mikael Mattlin, (2018) *Politicized Society: Taiwan's Struggle with Its One-Party Past*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. xxx + 404 pages (9 figs., 8 tables., 10 illus.), £65.00 (hb) ISBN: 978-8776942083; £23.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-8776942137.

Back in 1966, Fred W. Riggs stated the following:

It was one of the favorite theses of colonial regime that political participation ought to begin at the local level. The administration of central government, it was said, ought to be left to the colonial bureaucracy; the development of village, communal, and municipal councils would provide ample opportunity for the political education of the indigenous population. After having mastered the techniques of democratic politics at this level, the population would be prepared to take over a major share in government at the provincial level, ultimately at the national. This theory was also propagated by Sun Yat Sen and the Kuomintang for Nationalist China, and has been tested in recent years in Taiwan. . . . Strangely enough . . . nationalist revolutionaries and the intelligentsia of the dependent countries never looked with favour on this thesis. They called it a delaying tactic of imperial rule, and sought to plunge immediately into national politics, bypassing the local level. The same tendency has persisted since independence in the new nations. (Riggs, 1971/1966: 338–339)

It is revealing to read Mikael Mattlin's 2018 book, an updated and expanded version of the 2011 edition, against the analysis Fred W. Riggs made more than 50 years ago.

Politicized Society: Taiwan's Struggle with Its One-Party Past outlines five structural features that determine the nature of Taiwan's democracy and the dynamic interplay between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP; *Minzhu jinbu dang*) as main players on Taiwan's political stage: (1) the gradual and incremental nature of dismantling the one-party legacy, (2) poorly suited institutional arrangements, (3) Taiwan's asymmetric integration with mainland China, (4) the patronage state legacy, (5) the social structure that facilitates political mobilisation.

To some degree, these five features all relate to China's Confucian past. Characterising the nature of Taiwan's democracy may indeed start from the observation that, in Confucian China, a civil society, understood as the intermediate public sphere between the state and the family that is used by its people—either individually or in-group—to interact with the state never

developed.¹ When societies develop, however, new demands by the people emerge. It is the absence of a civil society in which alternative political voices could be raised that allowed the foundation of the first successful Chinese political parties during China's transitory period from empire to republic. These 'were formed mainly in order to overthrow the existing system, not to seek representation for an un(der)represented part of the populace' (pp. 29–30). This peculiar motive for establishing political parties has fundamentally shaped the way Taiwanese democracy works. Taking Fred W. Riggs's words into account, the establishment of political parties did not primarily lead to citizens being 'politically represented'. Rather, at least until the period of *bentuhua* (Taiwanization) under Chiang Ching-kuo and Lee Teng-hui, the central political level was taken by the KMT, and the people resorted to their old (Confucian) structures of kinship groups, social networks, and patronage. This helps to explain what Mikael Mattlin calls the phenomenon of 'structural politicization' of Taiwanese society; that is, the phenomenon that, in Taiwan, 'political issues spread outside the formal political institutions to intrude on other areas of social life' (p. 3). This stands in contrast to Western democracies that 'tend to strive for a clear separation of social roles and institutions (separation of powers)', implying that 'representative democracy to some extent depended on the public not becoming too involved in politics' (pp. 8–9). This 'structural politicization' entails a few risks that threaten the functioning of democratic institutions: politics in Taiwan appear to be characterised by a great amount of opportunism with regards to party affiliation, and bandwagoning is rampant (p. 137); Taiwan's politics are inherently prone to factionalism (p. 210); ideological voting is especially present in elections at the national level, more so than at the local level (p. 237), a phenomenon which also helps to explain why political parties easily split (p. 220); hyperpoliticised legislative battles increase disrespect for the constitution (p. 179); and, ultimately, the public may lose faith in the political system (p. 208).

This situation did not fundamentally change when a multiparty system was introduced. As much as the KMT took over the centralised power of the Japanese colonial regime, the DPP in turn wanted to take over the centralised power of the KMT. Thus the DPP was basically confronted with the same political difficulty the KMT had faced in its early years. Because the KMT had gradually taken over the structures of previous loyalty and patronage groups, these

¹ Also, the call for political reform and the promotion of the idea of a division of political power and allowing more freedom for the people at the end of the Ming and early Qing periods remained idle. See Wu (2018: 252–253).

traditional groups, having become the stronghold of the KMT, now had to be won over by the DPP (pp. 19, 93). The first real chance to dismantle the old system only came after 2000 (p. 88), and the local elections of November 2018 have clearly shown the resilience of old patronage structures. Also, for the DPP, 'Immediately plunging into national politics, bypassing the local level,' to paraphrase Riggs, has proven to be a difficult task.

This resilience of patronage structures also explains why, in Taiwan, 'Political opportunism and seemingly strong political support . . . can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. Occupying a superior political position does not ensure automatic compliance by followers and seemingly strong political support can vanish as quickly as it arose, if moral leadership is lost' (p. 267). Victims of their own political system, Taiwanese politicians try to maintain moral leadership through their constant affirmation. This is done through, for example, organising and supporting mass demonstrations (p. 268), a phenomenon that also brings along the high degree of theatricality of Taiwanese politics.

The peculiarities of Taiwan's democratisation process also shed light on the possibilities and likelihood of democratisation in that other—larger—part of the Chinese imperial heritage: the People's Republic of China, ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. Beyond the Chinese political sphere, the book also provides ample opportunities to reflect on the viability of fragile democracies in Asia, as pointed out earlier by Lucien W. Pye (1971: 280), some of which face the threat of military takeover, as well as on the state of Western democracies, where democratic institutions are eroding and social trust is deteriorating and where science, intelligence, and economic policymaking are increasingly politicised.

To summarise, the question of the (possible) democratisation of East Asia is hotly debated. Taking Taiwan as a case study, this book shows both the successes and threats of this process, and as such also sheds light on the possibilities and likeliness of a democratisation of the People's Republic of China. The book is also interesting reading for all those who are concerned about the future of Western democracies.

Bart Dessein
Ghent University, Belgium
Bart.Dessein@ugent.be

References

- Pye, Lucian W. (1971) 'Armies in the process of political modernization', in Jason L. Finkle and Richard W. Gable (eds), *Political Development & Social Change*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 277–283. Reprint; originally published 1966.
- Riggs, Fred W. (1971) 'Bureaucrats and political development', in Jason L. Finkle and Richard W. Gable (eds.), *Political Development & Social Change*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 331–351. Reprint; originally published 1966.
- Wu, Genyou (2018) 'Striving for democracy: Confucian political philosophy in the Ming and Qing dynasties', in Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (eds), *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. East-West Center, 252–262.