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# The Impact of Social Movements on Taiwan's Democracy

Stephen Phillion

**Abstract:** This article discusses and critiques the four articles that comprise this volume on Taiwan's social movement and democratization. I argue that the four articles suggest that while Taiwan's social movements have made a clear impact on Taiwan's democratization, they remain challenged by the neo-liberal orientation of elected governments, in both KMT and DPP forms. The article provides brief comparison to East Asian NICs and Western experiences with social movements. A strength of the articles is their attention to the complex ways social movements and democratization have impacted each other for the past two decades, with attention to unintended consequences. It concludes with some thoughts on the implications of how nationalism and globalization will continue to shape the potential of social movements in Taiwan.

**Keywords:** Taiwan, democratization, social movements, neo-liberalism, globalization, civil society

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## Introduction

As Ming-sho Ho lays out richly in the introduction to this volume, collective acts of social movement protests not only occurred with regularity in the run up to the ending of martial law in 1987, but played a critical role in accelerating the pace of Taiwan's democratization. On the one hand, the key role of social movements in Taiwan's democratization made not only such activity legitimate, but also the intellectual work of academics in Taiwan who contributed to the theory and practice of these movements as they emerged on the political scene from the mid-1980s onward (Chang 1990). The caution with which academics in Taiwan approached such work in the late 1980s has disappeared, and rightly so. Simply put, there is no need for such apprehension, concerns that Taiwan's martial law practices will reappear are practically nonexistent today.

The work that remains to be done is assessing the impact that democratization has had on Taiwan's social movements 20 years since democratization. The data and analyses contained in the four articles that make up this volume are a valuable source for moving such a discussion forward. Before assessing this question, although plainly Taiwan has its own historically specific features of capitalist development, cultural practices, and state organization, it's important to be clear that the challenges and contradictions that characterize Taiwan's social movements today are ones that are shared by most social movements around the world today. Such movements face ongoing neo-liberal strategies of development that simultaneously call for greater space for civil society *and* less regulations of investors in competitive markets (Harvey 2007). As a result, while the freedom to protest at the grassroots level has been won, nonetheless as Hsin-hsing Chen has argued, in Taiwan today:

Be it low wages and abusive employers for the workers, environmental degradation for residents of poor neighbourhoods, discrimination for women or ethnic minorities, suppression of local cultural practices, people angered by all or any one of these can be rallied under the banner of democracy and their rage steered against the state. However, it is undeniable that many of those concrete grievances raised back in the 1970s and '80s are still left unresolved or even aggravated in spite of the advent of liberal-democratic institutions (Chen 2007: 2).

Considering the accomplishments of Taiwanese social movements in light of Western European and US counterparts is instructive. In a nut-

shell, a large presence of social movement activism is not enough to win comprehensive redistribution of wealth or social power in a downward direction. Critically, social movements tend to accomplish less in the way of substantive welfare state reforms when not backed up by powerful working class political parties and trade union organizations (Navarro 1991; Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens 1992: 97). And arguably, the failure of the western new social movement *modus operandi* to speak a language that resonates with the working class has not helped the cause of expanding their membership levels, especially in the US case (Phillion 1998).

This is no small matter since many social movements that emerged in East Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) in the 1980s and 1990s borrowed heavily from new social movement theories that stressed their middle class *bona fides* (Koo 1991). Social movement activists in East Asian NICs hoped for a class compromise to come from collective forms of civil society based activism. However, in the cases of East Asian NICs such as Taiwan and Korea, unlike their American or Western European counterparts, as late developers they always faced (even as they developed “strong” state-guided economic growth strategies), greater and more sustained pressures from world markets to minimize investments in social welfare programs and to enact weak labour movement legislation (Deyo 1989). The room for Scandinavian style class compromises as the basis of growth in East Asian NICs has only been further attenuated since the Asian Financial Crisis (not to mention the current global economic “downturn”) (Cumings 1998). Time and place is everything; and in the East Asian NIC case, this is only more so as global capitalist competition has intensified in recent decades (Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2000; Bernard 1999; Brenner 2006). One cannot talk about prospects for social movements or democratization in Taiwan outside of this broader structural reality. While it does not determine, it certainly shapes the limits of the possible and, often enough, unintended consequences of both in Taiwan.

## Democratization, Juridical Independence, and the Limits of Elite Led Reform Campaigns

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Taiwan's political democracy is flawless or that institutional reform at the level of the state is complete. Chin-shou Wang's article is a reminder that there still is unfinished work

in the arena of judicial reform that contributes to an ongoing scepticism toward Taiwanese institutions of liberal democracy. While the other three articles in this volume focus on what are classically social movement level campaigns, Wang's focus is on a group of reform judges who mobilized likeminded judges to advocate for real judicial independence in Taiwan.

A noteworthy strength of the analytical frameworks employed in this volume is attention to process as complex, which requires a social scientific attention to and accounting for unintended outcomes of social action. And, as with the other three articles, Wang points to complex outcomes of mobilizations for reform in the democratic period; positive ones that in unintended fashion, can contribute to future impediments to further progress. In his case, beginning from 1993, lower-ranking young judges and prosecutors are successful at winning *some* judicial independence reforms, while how they organized their campaign limits the potential of future such gains.

These reform efforts, aimed at decreasing the direct politicization of case assignments, (even within the judicial arm of the state!) reveal a collective hostility in the society toward state power, or state over reach that drives social movements everywhere. It was certainly an ideological driver of Taiwan's democracy movements from the early 1980s. The material basis for this anti-statist thrust was sustained resentment on the part of Taiwanese elites (especially its small and medium sized factory owning component) toward Mainlander business elites' privileged access to Party/ state owned bank loans and market protections (Wang 1993). Judicial reformers' efforts toward real judicial independence was aided by not only an end to martial law in 1988, but a collective sentiment in Taiwan that increasingly valorized challenges to the illegitimate or corrupt exercise of authority by state actors.

Political interference in case assignments in the courts plainly qualified as a cause that would have won favour from the populace in the 1990s. Yet here is the irony. While the reformers were quite successful at winning reforms by challenging the judicial assignment system from within, the public remained rather unaware of the struggles or their outcomes. At the end of his article, Wang's argument is left undeveloped. What more reform is needed in the judicial arena (he implies more needs to be done, but there is no collective social movement basis for it), what is it? And how (or, for that matter why) would a collective organized movement emerge in Taiwan today to make such demands?

## Democratization and Disabled Rights Movement

Chin-shou Wang's focus on elite led efforts to reform Taiwan's judicial system suggests grounds for optimism as concerns democratization as a mechanism for progressive social change in Taiwan. However, if the focus turns to issues that social movements addressed in the pre- and post-martial law periods, it is not as clear whether the liberal democratization Taiwanese have now experienced for almost two decades has, or can necessarily be, translated into significant progress. An overarching theme in this volume is how the push for privatization in Taiwan shapes the potential of both democratization and social movements in Taiwan. The issue of disability rights in Taiwan (and, as will be discussed below, gender equality and labour rights) has been shaped more significantly by acts of collective disruption organized by social movements, which challenged institutionalized frames before and after democratization took firm rooting in Taiwan. While employing an institutionalist framework, Ming-sho Ho and I-lun Tsai avoid a grossly top-bottom approach to explicating the changes in how the disabled are framed by dominant institutions in Taiwan's society. These institutional frames are reshaped in part because of geopolitically shaped pressures (cutting of diplomatic ties with the US) on the Taiwan state to secure political legitimacy by winning consent in lieu of authoritarian means of coercion. However, the frames through which the concept "disabled" is signified are not reformulated merely because of changing institutional cultures or "external" geopolitical reconfigurations of interstate alliances during the Cold War era. Changing frames are as much structured by actions by social groups, most notably persons who were characterized as disabled, families of the disabled, and sympathetic professional caregivers who took to the streets with a new frame that asserted disabled *rights*.

Notably, Ho and Tsai's account suggests that the movements do not merely fight for welfare budgets for the disabled. In fact, those were already being dispersed by the Kuomintang (KMT) (Guomindang). This might lead one to easily dismiss the ways in which disabled rights activists and organizations competed for budgets as a sign that they were effectively co-opted by the KMT and, later, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)-led administrations, along the lines of how Piven and Cloward (1977) regard the fate of the US labour and Civil Rights Movements as they focused on developing organizational instead of organizing capacities. Instead, it would be more accurate to regard this pattern in a more nuanced fashion, recognizing that a major goal of the disabled

rights movement was not merely to win budgets, but to change the cultural understandings of the disabled as persons who were suffering from bad karma of one some sort.

It is ironic that a country shaped by the deeply social and anti-individualistic belief systems of Confucianism or Daoism could configure a national culture that seemed to revolve around blaming the victim (the disabled). However, as movement activists clearly recognized, it was not so much western individualism that was responsible for the pattern of governmental neglect of disabled persons' *public* needs. In fact, the problems faced by the disabled were very much not *individual* issues as much as familial ones, since it was the family that was traditionally the social unit that was obliged to care for the disabled. The government thereby could justify what little responsibility it took for the fate of the disabled as a group. And at all levels, the cultural meaning of disabled was embedded in the notion of retribution (報應, *baoying*).

The economic crisis that faced the disabled due to their loss of income when the Patriot Lottery ended provided the disabled with an opportunity to reveal that the karma frame no longer was a valid one through which to understand disabled persons' fates. Government policy decisions structured the outcomes the disabled experienced in markets, not karma like "retribution". Disabled persons' needs were not ones that could or should be resolved via charities that treated them as persons with a nature given minimum set of abilities. Demands for more than charity or low skilled job training sprung from a collective redefinition of self as an unintended outcome of the government's decision to end the Patriot lottery in 1989.

The timing seems impeccable. As this social group mobilized and redefined itself as a *social* group with social problems that required government budgets to resolve, the push for privatization took hold not only in Taiwan, but throughout East Asia and the global capitalist economy as part of a trend murkily known today as "globalization" or "neo-liberalism" (Harvey 2007; Smith 2005). Ho and Tsai indicate that all is not lost as global capitalist markets in their deregulated "neo-liberal" form impose their imperatives on Taiwan and the rest of the East Asian "miracle" NICs.

The disability rights movement only grew in number and mobilizations throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, on the face of it, disability rights organizations almost seemed to have their cake and eat it too (!), in that they not only were able to pressure the government to increase

budgetary allocations for disabled persons' services, but they were also able to land funds to carry out services as "subcontractors". Now, Ho and Tsai argue, disability advocates not only had an impact on the realm of discourse, in the material arena they could concretely carry out their "social" frame as social service providers. However, there remains the thorny issue of how much is being ceded by the neo-liberal state when the duties of the social welfare are handed over to civil society (Harvey 2006: 51). Henghao Chang (2010), argues that, as the Taiwanese state has evaded its role in delivering social welfare services, now disabled person become dependent on the "good will" of civic organizations. In a period of ongoing global financial downturn, this strategy is considerably risky and one that merits further critical inquiry.

## Taiwan's Feminist Movement and Memories of Women Workers under Democratization

Where Wang and Tsai/ Ho present a picture that is more sanguine about the prospects for reforms deriving from social movement activity in the last two decades since democratization, the remaining two articles suggest caution. The reason for this is straightforward enough: Taiwan's democratization has been accompanied by a combination of privatization and starker levels of class inequality in the two decades since the lifting of martial law. Anru Lee and Wen-hui Tang's discussion of the Twenty-five Maiden Ladies' Tomb in Gaoxiong highlights the cultural struggle to redefine "maiden ladies" as women workers and recognize their role in Taiwan's manufacturing "miracle" during the 1970s. This is not your ordinary middle class women's movement led identity war. In Lee and Tang's article, the links between gender and class are explicit and naturally interweaved (Brenner 1998). They do this by not only tracing the transformation of "maiden ladies" into "women workers", but also how this accomplishment by Taiwanese women's movement activists itself bore the markings of neo-liberal class based contradictions.

Ghosts of the women link linger in the discourses that come to mould the signification of the 1973 Ferry tragedy and the memorial tomb. They represent the spectre of Taiwan's export zones and the blood, sweat, and tears that were sacrificed not only that day, but throughout the martial law period when labourers had little in the way of either rights or dignity (Arrigo 1985). Putting bodies to rest is never a simple affair. What is remarkable about the choice of the name "25

Maidens' Tomb" is how consciously it was conceived as a means to wipe out not only memory of the dead as full persons before their untimely departures from this world, but the role corruption and despotic relations of production in the export zones played in these young women workers' deaths.

Yet, as Lee and Tang's historical recounting of the Taiwanese feminist movement's intervention in the renaming of the tomb shows, while activism did not bring the dead back, it did restore the actual memory of the circumstances that led to this tragedy. The process also reveals the tenuous relationship between Taiwan's democratization, social movement activity, and outcomes in a period of global financial crisis that has seen particularly severe price tags imposed on social movement constituencies. What is undeniable about the role of feminists in this matter is that the sacrifice that Taiwanese women workers made to Taiwan's economic growth during the martial law period is given its place in the symbolic arena. While struggles that go on over where and how to place the remains of these women workers are complicated ones, plainly democratization opened up space for how that process would work out (and that it could even take place).

The problem, as concerns the focus of this volume, namely the impact of Taiwan's two decades of democracy on Taiwan's social movements, is what relevance such victories have given how neo-liberal developmental priorities have shaped the nature of inequality and new injustices in Taiwan since the martial law period. Thus, on the one hand, feminists were able to play a role in pressuring the Kaohsiung City Government to rename the 25 Maidens' Tomb the 25 Women Laborers' Tomb. At the same time, the feminists had little of a social movement strategy, as seen in their failure to develop. As Lee and Tang put it:

the (feminist) activists' contact with the families of the deceased young women was minimal [...] [I]t is not clear on whose (or what) behalf the KAPWR initiative was meant to be, which, in turn, might have undermined the organization's ability to shape the actual course of the Tomb renovation but to submit the process to the city government.

I'd suggest that it is not necessarily the case that developing a more organic relationship with the presumed subject of the struggle would have changed how this process played out. It is true that it is not inconsequential that the city government eventually took a leading role in situating the memorial park as part of a theme park designed to attract tourism

Taiwan dollars, as opposed to a more explicitly politicized memorial. At first glance one might have expected a different result, since Gaoxiong Mayor Chen Chu (Chen Ju) was herself a well known figure in the democracy movement of the 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, the memorial takes on the trappings of neo-liberal design, peripheralized as part of the background scenery of Qijin Island. And this is not a unique circumstance in Taiwan, social movement history has become not merely institutionalized in democratic Taiwan, it has come to be, like social movement history elsewhere, a prop through which circuits of tourist capital can flow with a consciousness of social responsibility. The stamp of capital is now legitimated by the very movements that it once relied on authoritarianism to repress.

In the new Taiwan (now not that new two decades later), social movement history is celebrated, even what might appear to be the more radical elements of that history. Walking in Gaoxiong's downtown art district, you will find the Kaoshiung Museum of Labor, right next door to the Kaoshiung Museum of Fine Arts. Upon entering the former, visitors are immediately confronted with radical placards from the Paris Commune (!), exhibits featuring the labour union movement history from around the world side by side with ones on Taiwan's labour movement activism history and videos that showcase current efforts to organize young servers in the fashionable cafes that serve Taiwanese of all classes. There is even an exhibit that recounts the struggles of state-owned enterprise workers against the privatization rage of the 1990s and early first decade of the new millennium.

The problem for anyone who is familiar with the trajectory of Taiwan's two decade old liberal democracy is the air of unreality that accompanies such phenomena. For it seems, much like the feminists' relationship with the families of the 25 women workers, Taiwan's Museum of Labor has no concrete ties with Taiwan's labour movement (or labourers?). The reason is rather transparent; the institution is run by a city government that, while now legitimated by free and competitive elections, has no interest in promoting the cause of a present-day labour movement. After all, the (then) Mayor Chen Chu whose signature adorns a Buddhist lotus sculpture welcoming visitors to the memorial park, herself had fiercely criticized Taiwan's "privileged" state enterprise workers for their battles against privatization. And, as Lee and Tang's article elucidates the same mayoral government, as has the DPP generally, embraced the neo-liberal call for privatization and deregulation as the key

means to resolve the crisis of capital flight and deindustrialization that globalization brought the East Asian NICs from the 1990s onward (Chang 2001).

What stands out in Lee and Tang's article is the perennial sense of distance between the constituencies once mobilized by the social movements and the political party that carried the torch of democratization throughout the 1980s. The problem is not a new one. Since the early 1990s, others have theorized the incompatibility of Taiwanese social movements' mass working class based demands with those of Taiwan's small and medium size business owners who served as the core financiers of the DPP campaigns (Arrigo 1994; Wang 1989). Though one cannot generalize from Lee and Tang's article, it is indicative of a certain failure of social movement organization in Taiwan (albeit hardly unique to Taiwan), whereby the middle class orientation of organizing strategy simply vanquishes alternatives based on more working class militancy.

That is to say, taking as an example the feminist activists whom Lee and Tang discusses, on the one hand they secure a victory that does have significance – even if the memorial is transformed into a commodified locus for attracting tourist dollars. However, consider the wording on the lotus sculpture memorializing the 25 women workers. While the words etched into the sculpture honoured the memory and acknowledged the exploitative conditions of work that shaped the lives of women workers in Taiwan's economic “miracle”, they ring hollow since these are hardly distant issues to this day – if one considers that exploitation and abuse of women workers' rights remains a critical basis for the profitability of Taiwanese enterprises to this day. Only now the site of labour intensive exploitation for export is across the Taiwan Straits in Mainland China or a few hours away by air in Southeast Asia. When one adds onto this the role of immigrant workers (especially women workers in the domestic arena) in Taiwan's economic development (whether DPP or KMT led) for the past two decades, Taiwan's social movements appear to have had little significant impact on patterns of capitalist accumulation or exploitation since democratization.

## Taiwan's Labour Movement in an Age of Neo-liberal Democratization

James Wang's article on the political economy of collective labour legislation, in many ways throws into relief the remaining work social move-

ments in Taiwan have before democratization is experienced as universally meaningful. Wang's essay gives the most comprehensive overview of the political economy of democratization in Taiwan, without which making sense of both accomplishments and limits of contemporary social movements in Taiwan are hard to grasp. Wang lays out the challenge that arises in the 1990s to the East Asian NIC "developmental" thesis, which prioritized the role of the state in guiding capitalist development in East Asian NICs, places considerable challenges to the labour movement given its interests in winning greater governmental intervention in the structuring of labour markets. The ironic victory of democratization, which gave labour movements in Taiwan (and the East Asian NICs generally) new freedoms to organize and make demands on the state, failed to be accompanied by an increasing commitment by the state or capital to class compromise, much less social democracy. Instead, a new push to sustain the free flow of capital across borders with the aid of deregulation presented considerable challenges to Taiwan's labour movement as it essayed to draw up or redraw collective labour legislation. This is, as Wang puts it, an eclectic model which promises everything, but is wrought with internally driven contradictions. Thus, on the one hand the DPP was more willing than the KMT to pass labour legislation that encoded collective labour rights, yet these rights came in a "flexible" package that made unions "optional". The American "right to work" model was followed to a tee.

Still, the 1990s was a remarkable period that saw state owned enterprise workers, once a stronghold of KMT support, now turning to independent trade unionism as the means to protect themselves against loss of job security as markets opened that were once closed to foreign (or local) competition. In the competition for labour votes, concessions in the area of labour welfare were won. Freeing up of capital has not been uniformly welcome; at points in the late 1990s, the Asian Financial Crisis forced retreats from the blind embrace of free market. Such moments provided labour activists with opportunities to press forward demands for greater social security provisions for the growing numbers of unemployed workers.

However, factionalism based on party loyalty, which only intensified as the DPP won the presidency in 2000, did not help the labour movement to achieve much more. As Wang recounts toward the end of his essay, then (DPP) President Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian) reacted to declining growth and capital flight with predictable "business friendly"

measures in 2001. This laid bare, the limitation of the labour movement's attempts to build an alliance with a state that was free of the corporatist-authoritarian stain. Neo-liberalism was, ironically, solidified via the most symbolically important transition (i.e. Chen's presidential swearing-in) since Taiwanese democratization commenced in the late 1980s. Structural unemployment, capital flight, slashed welfare budgets, flexible union organizing rules, and increasing inequality continue as the norm. Referencing Ming-sho Ho, Wang makes the point succinctly: "developmentalism" has returned to Taiwan. Only now it sports a democratic visage.

## Where to from Here for Taiwan's Social Movements

That is to say, it is not sufficient to merely lament the return of the KMT to executive power (via truly free elections it should be noted). The context of social movement development in Taiwan today suggests a more nuanced picture. It is now apparent that, although the DPP's Chen Shui-bian sought to incorporate social movement activists into his administration, the KMT is no less savvy when it comes to this strategy. What is significant today is the reality that *both* political parties in Taiwan have little in the way of a political strategy that translates into policies that confront the neo-liberal model of development.

The consistent Achilles heel in Taiwan's social movements today is their failure, thus far, to break from a past strategy of pragmatic alliance making with the DPP. Plainly this is linked to the history of nationalism (and the political conflicts with both the KMT and Beijing) that shaped the earlier battles that laid the foundation for Taiwan's democratization. The National question cannot be wished away, but it continues to frustrate attempts to create alternatives to the ongoing attachment of social movements to the DPP. Nationalism, or middle class nationalism at least, has been a consistent stumbling block for Taiwan's social movements. It is one that is even more urgently in need of effectively coming up with an answer for, if Taiwan's social movements hope to effectively challenge the demonstrably limited social programs the KMT *and* the DPP have delivered *since* democratization took root two decades ago.

It is here where Wang's article is unique among the four in this volume on Taiwan's social moments and democratization. His is the only one that makes mention of the elephant in the room, namely China.

Global markets and globalization for Taiwan mean *China*, very simply put. The increasing integration of Taiwan into China's markets means that only greater pressures will be placed on Taiwan to employ deregulation as the means to stimulate growth. Wang's conclusion points to the need for a workers' party in Taiwan that is somehow able to transcend interparty factionalism, which invariably holds back any enactment of comprehensive labour reforms (be they stronger collective unionizing rights or social welfare benefits). I would like to suggest that something else is going to be needed, namely a strategy that calls for growing links with the vast network of social movements that are responding in China to shared crises spawned by China's embrace of developmentalism and global market deregulation.

I don't propose that this is a simple matter. Plainly, nationalism on both sides of the straits is not going to disappear. However, the articles in this volume suggest that there are potential bases now for links to be made between labour and social movement activists in Taiwan and China. On both sides of the Taiwan Straits, social movements exist that are asking questions that strike at the kind of democracy that social movements have the potential to build. Both are studying, in a period of global economic downturn, how capitalist markets often conflict with the goal of substantive democracy, regardless of the extent of civil society development (Wood 1995: 252-256). I don't wish to argue that they are the same questions or ones that lead to the same answers. Yet, as Harvey (2000) suggests in his *Spaces of Hope*, given the unprecedentedly flexible character and reach of global neo-liberalism, and the global character of crises that it fosters in every realm, there is really no alternative.

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