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The Shadow of China over Taiwan's Democracy

Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla and Stefan Fleischauer

Given the events of recent months, it seems that world affairs might very well be on the verge of entering a new stage. While this observation may not be very original, it is still of profound significance to the Asia-Pacific region: with respect to the new US administration that just took office, many observers are wondering about the possible consequences for US foreign policy in Asia and other parts of the world. The future progress of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) appears precarious in light of President Donald Trump's publicly stated reservations about this projected agreement, and it remains to be seen whether the United States will move away from the "Return to the Asia-Pacific" strategy (later labelled as "pivoting" or "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific) that had been pursued by former US president Barack Obama since 2009. These uncertainties are particularly troublesome for established US allies in the region, amongst them Taiwan, which has long relied on US support in its delicate political dealings vis-à-vis an ever-rising Chinese mainland.

At the same time, momentous political changes have taken place in Taiwan as well. In the general elections in January, the DPP scored a resounding victory, thus ending an eight-year period of continuous Kuomintang (KMT) rule. In the presidential elections, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文, Cai Yingwen) defeated her opponents from the Blue camp with a compelling 56.12 per cent of the votes (against KMT candidate Eric Chu's (朱立倫, Zhu Lilun) 31.04 per cent and People First Party (FPF) candidate James Soong's (宋楚瑜, Song Chuyu) 12.84 per cent). In contrast to the previous DPP presidency under Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁, Chen Shuibian) (2000–2008), the DPP is now, for the first time in Taiwan's political history, also in command of a comfortable majority in the Legislative Yuan, occupying 68 of the 113 seats, while the KMT was able to retain only 35 of the 64 seats it had hitherto held.

It has been widely assumed that the KMT's staggering defeat was largely due to popular discontent in regard to the way cross-Strait exchanges were managed under the administration of Ma Ying-jeou

(馬英九, Ma Yingjiu) over the last eight years. The “pro-China” policy pursued by Ma, most notably the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement signed in 2010, has undoubtedly led to a number of economic liberalisations and opportunities. Nonetheless, a growing majority of Taiwan’s voters were apprehensive about the island’s overdependence on China and harboured grave suspicions about the mainland’s true intentions. Related controversial issues, such as the growing economic inequality within Taiwan and the government’s opaque “black box” decision-making procedures, have further deepened the public’s disenchantment with the state authorities.

With the DPP now firmly in power, the delicate fabric of cross-Strait interactions has already experienced some definite changes – disquieting to some. A private ten-minute phone call between Tsai and then president-elect Donald Trump on 2 December 2016 made international headlines and enraged Beijing. On a more fundamental level, Tsai and the DPP in general are adamant in their rejection of the ambiguous “1992 Consensus,” which constituted the foundation of Taiwan–China exchange and dialogue under Ma Ying-jeou. While it is still too early to speculate about the future trajectory of cross-Strait relations, it seems obvious that the relationship between Taiwan and China is about to enter new and uncharted territory.

Against the backdrop of these global and regional changes, this volume brings together contributions on past and recent developments in Taiwan. By covering a broad range of topics important to Taiwanese society, the articles provide a nuanced picture of various aspects of international, economic, political, and social policies under former president Ma (2008–2016). Two threads run through the articles: the China factor in Taiwanese society and Taiwan’s identity as a young democracy, neither of which are new in the study of Taiwan, a fact that illustrates that Taiwanese society and the Taiwanese state, and the study thereof, demonstrate more continuity than change. The first two articles in this issue focus on the regional arena by scrutinising Taiwan’s regional integration and cross-Strait relations under the Ma administration. While Tsai and Liu analyse the state of Taiwan’s integration in the Asia-Pacific region, Lee and Yin focus on Chinese investment in Taiwan and its impact on Taiwan’s high-technology industry. While the topic of Taiwan’s democratic political system plays a smaller part in these two articles, the role of the Chinese mainland and its impact on Taiwan’s economy is central. The third

article, by Cheng and Momesso, while it deals less with the conflictual relationship between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, nevertheless touches upon the fraught issue of mainlanders migrating to Taiwan, and the ways in which Taiwan as a young democracy deals with the sensitive issues of human trafficking and human rights. Moving from international politics towards domestic political issues, the final two articles deal with Taiwanese youth, either as an object of politicised high school history curricula aimed to disseminate political ideologies held by Taiwan's past and present ruling parties (Stolojan), or as a critical subject to be mobilised by the youth wings of the two major parties (Brading).

Tung Chieh Tsai and Tony Tai-Ting Liu discuss Taiwan's sensitive status within the context of regional integration in Asia and, in particular, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland in 2010. Since the financial crisis of 1997, regionalisation has become a major trend in the Asia-Pacific region, with numerous projects – such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the China–Japan–Korea Free Trade Agreement (CJKFTA) – either proposed or under deliberation. Due to its unresolved political status vis-à-vis the Chinese mainland, Taiwan has been largely excluded from these regional integration projects, which is even more disconcerting as an economically rising China has increasingly taken the lead in further grand-scale schemes such as the “One Belt, One Road” initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). At the same time, the authors argue, Beijing has increasingly hardened its stance towards Taipei since China's leadership transition in 2012. China, following a “two-pronged strategy,” has made Taiwan's admission to integration projects contingent upon the island's willingness to confront the political problems between itself and the mainland. While the ECFA was originally intended to circumvent the political sensitivities of cross-strait relations and establish the island as a strategic hub in Asia and a window into the greater Chinese market, this *de facto* trade agreement is still contested, as many observers question its effectiveness and remain wary of economic overdependence on the Chinese market. The future development of Taiwan's regional integration will depend on the island's ability to balance between the leading regional powers, China and the United States.

On a related note, Chun-yi Lee and Ming-xi Yin focus on Chinese investment in Taiwan, which was first legalised in 2009, with further liberalisations in the wake of the ECFA the following year. Even though Chinese investment in Taiwan has increased proportionally over the last few years, the total amount remains rather insignificant, especially when compared to corresponding Taiwanese investments on the mainland. However, the exposure of Taiwan's IT industry to Chinese investors has been a matter of some concern due to strategic and security reasons. The authors further emphasise that the logic of Chinese investment cannot easily be rationalised by mainstream explanations of outward foreign direct investment (FDI) theories, but rather requires a more specific theoretical framework. In contrast to more developed countries, China is participating in the global market from a place of relatively low economic and technological development; the need to acquire advanced technology and know-how is therefore of prime importance for Chinese overseas investment. From this perspective, Taiwan is not necessarily an obvious destination for Chinese FDI when compared to even more advanced economies such as Germany or the United States. In addition, some lingering political restrictions and a souring of relations in recent years have further discouraged Chinese companies from investing on the island, and alternative strategies such as "headhunting" for professional know-how have become viable. Faced with increasing competition from China, the authors conclude that the main challenge for Taiwan's high-tech industries in the future is securing a niche in the rising Chinese market while at the same time strategically seeking collaborative opportunities with Chinese companies.

The topic of Taiwan's involvement in international supply chains is likewise addressed in Isabelle Cheng and Lara Momesso's contribution, albeit from a rather mirthless perspective: the authors highlight the issue of human trafficking in Taiwan, which has been a grave problem in both regional and transit migration since the 1980s. Based on a constructivist approach, the "spiral model" employed in this research takes into account a number of actors – in particular, the US government and transnational human rights advocacy groups – to explain how and why Taiwan's lawmakers felt compelled to take action, and to what degree legislation was influenced by these external factors. The authors note that the human rights record towards migrants remained a lamentable embarrassment even under the twenty-

first century DPP government, which calls into question the assumption that democratic states are naturally committed to human rights protection. Only after Taiwan was downgraded by international monitoring groups did the government under Ma Ying-jeou finally take decisive action, thereby restoring the international reputation of the country. Even though the strategy of “shaming” Taiwan into compliance was apparently successful, the article points to a number of deficiencies that still need to be addressed.

Two of the most defining events of Ma Ying-jeou's presidency are the signing of the ECFA in his first term and the related Sunflower Movement in his second term – both of which can be traced back to the shadow that China casts over Taiwan and the criticism expressed by segments of Taiwanese society against the ruling KMT and its allegedly undemocratic “black box behaviour” (黑箱作為, *beixiang zuowei*) when dealing with the issue of China. Such criticism has also been brought up in the context of other controversies surrounding the Ma administration that, to date, have received little attention in the Taiwan Studies literature. One of these controversies is the high school curriculum reform that dominated discussions in Taiwan in 2014 and 2015, spreading beyond education professionals and historians.

Vladimir Stolojan scrutinises the dispute over how the curriculum of history classes taught in Taiwanese high schools ought to be reformed. Since 1997, when the textbook *Knowing Taiwan* first challenged the dominant Sinocentric approach to teaching Taiwan's history, the issue of history textbooks for Taiwan's high schools has been at the centre of a heated and ideologically charged debate. The issues at stake are not limited to obviously sensitive topics such as the KMT's authoritarian past and the “White Terror” period – they also encompass different interpretations of Japan's colonial rule over the island, as well as Taiwan's status within the Greater China context since the 1500s. Unsurprisingly, these controversies were strongly affected by power relations in Taiwan, with new reform programmes resurfacing after each change of government. A meticulous comparison of the “98 Curriculum” and the “101 Curriculum” shows that some degree of consensus was finally achieved between the nationalist and the pro-independence camps of Taiwan's historians: while both sides retained their perspectives on Taiwan's history, some effort was made to offer a balanced account of historical events and to refrain from

overly derogatory and contested terms and concepts. This basic understanding, however, was reduced to shambles after a “fine-tuning” of the 101 Curriculum in 2013, which amounted to a drastic revision and – in the eyes of its critics – a reversal to a “Grand Han” narrative. Vladimir Stolojan assumes that with the renewed change of government in 2016, further adjustments to the curriculum should be expected. To avoid the chaos of previous attempts, he proposes the formalisation of a clear legal mechanism governing curriculum editing, which might lead to a more nuanced view of Taiwan’s past.

Ryan Brading’s article moves from the topic of Taiwanese youth as recipients of politicised history curricula to Taiwan’s “Millennial Generation” as active agents in the island’s democratic politics and their role in Taiwan’s political development. In contrast to commonly held prejudice, the young generation in Taiwan is not apathetic towards politics, but rather follows a new and unconventional approach to political expression and participation. Starting from a discussion of the historical background of Taiwan’s political history since the lifting of martial law, Brading shows how the participation of the young was an essential component of the push for democratic reforms in the 1990s, most vividly expressed in the Wild Lily Student Movement. During his first campaign for the presidency in 2000, Chen Shui-bian succeeded in branding his political image in ways that appealed to young voters, with “cute” A-Bian merchandise at the forefront of the DPP’s bid for youth support. Despite the fact that the votes from the young generation have arguably constituted the decisive factor in all nationwide elections since 2000, the two major political parties have struggled to secure a firm and enduring support base amongst the young. Attempts to institutionalise youth wings within the respective party structures (the KMT’s “Youth League,” closely followed by the DPP’s “Youth Council”) have largely failed, as the young generation is apparently unwilling to be absorbed into the political establishment, which is perceived as dull and tedious. Conversely, the “fun” and excitement of challenging the authorities, as well as living up to their self-cast image as defenders of Taiwan against Chinese encroachment was much better able to be realised through popular student movements, such as the Wild Strawberry Movement of 2012 and especially the Sunflower Movement of 2014. In the latter case, students’ representatives were utterly unsympathetic to the plight of the Ma government’s aspirations to enhance Taiwan’s economic performance

and competitiveness, and were likewise disinterested in “killjoys” such as debate and compromise through established political channels. Instead, they opted to perpetuate the vigour and authenticity of the movement by establishing new political parties, most notably the New Power Party (NPP), headed by Taiwanese rock star Freddy Lin. These newly established parties further opened up the opportunity for exciting political “fast-track” careers, bypassing the wearisome nomination process predominant within the established party system. This account of Taiwan’s young and fun-seeking “me generation” of self-adulation and ideological consumerism may seem gloomy to some, but Brading concludes that the changing political landscape in Taiwan may also hold some bright prospects for the future. With Tsai Ying-wen’s ascendancy, the DPP has gradually evolved beyond the old antagonisms embedded in the “Taiwanese Consciousness” discourse, while the newly arisen parties may usher in a new era in Taiwanese politics.

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