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Topical Section: Taiwan as Epistemic Challenger



Introduction: Taiwan as Epistemic Challenger

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Abstract

Four articles are included in this topical section on 'Taiwan as Epistemic Challenger'. Two of the four contributions were originally presented at the 3rd World Congress of Taiwan Studies held on 6–8 September 2018 at Academia Sinica in Taipei. The main theme of this Congress was 'Taiwan in the Globalized World: The Relevance of Taiwan Studies to the Social Sciences and Humanities'. The other two contributions were accepted through a call for papers. The topical section aims to demonstrate that Taiwanese scholars and foreign researchers of Taiwanese society can transcend the competitive disadvantage of studying a single country and make Taiwan visible in international scholarship. The findings of relevant Taiwan studies research can instead modify the epistemic assumptions and methodology in different disciplines of the social sciences and humanities.

Keywords

Taiwan – global history – civil society – identities – knowledge production

The topical section on ‘Taiwan as Epistemic Challenger’ of this issue contains four articles from different research perspectives to address how Taiwan challenges epistemic fundamentals or the assumptions of their respective disciplines. They show what makes Taiwan an especially valuable subject of study for the international scholarly community, apart from its unique geopolitical status. In particular, this topical section demonstrates that Taiwanese scholarship of Taiwanese can transcend the competitive disadvantage of studying a single country and make Taiwan visible in international scholarship. Findings from these papers can modify the epistemic assumptions and methodologies of their respective and different disciplines.

Two of the four contributions to this topical section were originally presented at the panel titled ‘The Relevance of Taiwan Case’ in the 3rd World Congress of Taiwan Studies held on 6–8 September 2018 at Academia Sinica in Taipei. The main theme for the Congress was ‘Taiwan in the Globalized World: The Relevance of Taiwan Studies to the Social Sciences and Humanities’. After the Congress, we also opened a call for submission of papers to this topical section. Two additional papers were accepted as a result.

The first article is titled ‘Historiography of the Other: Global History and the Indigenous Pasts of Taiwan’ by Leigh Jenco and Birgit Tremml-Werner. This article kicks off with the challenging question of how Taiwan, particularly its Austronesian indigenous peoples, matters to global history beyond its Eurocentric focus. Taiwan is situated in a distinctive position as the subject of multiple overlapping historiographical traditions that offers a valuable opportunity to demonstrate how indigenous pasts played a role in disrupting or redirecting early modern narratives of global connection. Drawing on sources in Chinese, Spanish, and Japanese languages, Jenco and Tremml-Werner examine texts by Chinese travellers in the Ming dynasty and Spanish Dominican friars in the 1600s, and later by Taiwan-based Japanese colonial historians.

Each of these writers conceptualised Taiwan and the wider world differently. For Chinese writers, Taiwan lay in the ‘Eastern Seas’ outside the cultural and territorial jurisdiction of the Ming dynasty, yet trade and conversation connected its islanders to China, Japan, the Philippines, and beyond. The seventeenth-century Spaniards saw Taiwan as part of ‘the Far East’, a spatialisation nearly identical to the ‘Southern Seas’ geography of Japanese colonial historians in the nineteenth century. These foreign observers tried to integrate

the substance and sources of Taiwanese indigenous pasts into their existing grids of historical knowledge, space, and ideas of social organisations. Each account acknowledges clear differences between the writer's society and that of the indigenous Formosans: one of the most prominent of these differences is the Formosans' lack of a leader or head of government, which is noted by all of the sources examined. Yet these observations serve to redirect the writers' narratives of connection, rather than to prompt the articulation of hierarchical difference or the marking of progress in a linear developmental trajectory. By focusing on this 'historiography of the other', Jenco and Tremml-Werner show how Taiwan can actually play a role in challenging operating foci of global history regarding premodern foreign relations and indigenous forms of social organisation.

Present-day narratives of global history tend to ignore Taiwan and consequently marginalise the contributions of its indigenous people—particularly in the early modern period. This omission relates to broader and structural problems in the practice of global history that unduly bind it to linear narratives about the global expansion of European and American power. As a result, the field of world history has become much less capable of theorising the global movements and connections of ideas and peoples beyond Europe. Even in global histories that attempt to place indigenous experience at the centre rather than the periphery of their narratives, their interaction with European colonialism has remained the central focus. The role played by indigenous actors in modern and early modern connections, particularly salient in the case of East and Southeast Asia, remains being ignored and under-theorised. The materials Jenco and Tremml-Werner have analysed suggest that Taiwan might again, as it did in the early modern period, play an essential role in revising how global connections and interactions might properly be narrated.

The other three articles in this topical section shift the context to contemporary Taiwanese society, exploring civil organisations, values and identities, and academic production in Taiwan. Richard Madsen's 'Controversies about Religious Organisations within an Evolving Taiwan Civil Society' reveals and answers an intriguing question about the changing relationship between religious organisations and civil society: why have religious organisations, mainly Tzu-chi and Buddha's Light Mountain, once widely respected in the 1990s, lost their appeal and influence since Taiwan's democratisation period in the 2000s? Madsen points out that the answer lies in the systemic relationships among civil society organisations and their evolution over time. Specifically, the controversies involving Taiwan's major Buddhist groups are cause and consequence of the changing structure of Taiwan's civil society—a changing

sociopolitical context that has turned early virtues that were positive for religious organisations in the 1990s into liabilities in the 2000s.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Taiwan saw an emerging and dynamic civil society with social fragmentation that could potentially undermine a nascent and fledgling democracy. Meanwhile, these religious associations have attracted Taiwan's middle classes by providing bonds of compassion, social capital, tolerance, and social concern that could at least partially counterbalance the centrifugal forces of Taiwanese society. Madsen argues that these religious associations were important in maintaining social stability. Unlike in many other parts of the developing world, the religious zeal of Buddhist organisations in Taiwan did not exacerbate ethnic and class conflicts; it was a kind of soothing piety that mitigated potentially severe social conflicts.

However, since the early 2000s, Tzu-chi and Buddha's Light Mountain have begun to face controversy and criticism. Controversies have often stemmed from the fact that they have failed to meet the high ethical standards one would expect of a religious organisation. Examples include the arrogance and lack of empathy shown in the organisations' behaviour, the lack of transparency in their use of funds, their close ties to capitalists, and their relationships with the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Moreover, their large size means that those entrusted with leadership in these organisations begin to seem more distant from ordinary members and even more from the public at large.

Both Tzu-chi and Buddha's Light Mountain have drawn on a traditional Chinese moral tradition that emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships and what Buddhists call 'affiliations'— rather than impersonal and bureaucratically enforced rules. But with their growth in size within an increasingly complex social-political environment, the virtue of seeing itself in familistic terms can become a liability, and their top-down and elitist authoritarian tendencies can be magnified. All of this takes place when many in Taiwan, especially among the younger generation, are calling for the rule of law, are suspicious about interpersonal collusion between established economic and political elites, and advocate a flattening of social hierarchies. These are appeals that become especially prevalent in a later phase of the necessary consolidation of a new democracy in Taiwan. Philanthropic civil society associations like Tzu-chi and Buddha's Light Mountain may come to be seen as representing a past whose values are at odds with the kind of virtues cultivated by the Sunflower Movement generation and other civil society and advocacy forces, which sought the public good through principled confrontation aimed at opening space for free, changing, and open public debate. Madsen concludes that with the basic principles of electoral politics established, the

challenge now is to develop institutions that could constrain social inequality, ensure fairness and transparency in governance, and adapt to a changing Taiwanese identity, in the context of increasing economic interdependence with and political threat from the PRC.

The third article, 'Chinese and Taiwanese Identities in Taiwan as Epistemic Challengers' by Feng-yi Chu, aims to provide fresh insights into Chinese and Taiwanese identities in Taiwan. It switches theoretical emphasis from the macro to the individual aspect, addressing two questions: (1) What factors have made the original Chinese identifiers in Taiwan eventually accept Taiwanese identities? 2) For Taiwanese identifiers, what factors have made them firmly reject Chinese identity? Relying on 110 in-depth field interviews, Chu argues that a person's adoption of Chinese and Taiwanese identities results not only from the influence of nationalist ideology—be it Chinese or Taiwanese nationalism—but also from other value-oriented discourses. He interprets identity as a socially constructed product and identifies three types of value discourse—ethical narrative, cultural hierarchy, and political ideology. Within the discourse of 'ethical narrative', moral values operate and drive people to bolster the good side and fight against the bad side. Within the discourse of 'cultural hierarchy', operate evaluative systems that give social generic ideas (such as ethnic and racial groups) and their relevant concepts (such as their speaking languages) different sociocultural images and values. 'Political ideology' involves what value should be prioritised as the main goal of the state or the government.

Identity is thus reduced to a discursive field where various values compete for its representation. Not until an identity is associated with other discourses of value can it acquire its full functions, such as arousing people's nationalist sentiments and mobilising people to act. Understanding identification as a battle of values answers the two research questions of Chu's article. First, Chinese and Taiwanese identities have developed their own characteristics and are associated with unique value discourses. Second, it is possible for individuals to adjust and change their identities when they feel the original identities can no longer represent the values that they have long cherished. People may resist, avoid, or at least ponder the identity that others ascribe to them—be it national, ethnic, gender, or class identity, or other forms of social category—when they perceive the ascribed identity to be valueless, less important, or in conflict with their values. By viewing identity as a value-oriented discourse, Chu concludes that while people claim certain identities, it is not for the sake of those identities themselves. Instead, people are prompted to embrace an identity because of the values the identity represents. His article helps to provide a better understanding of the value mechanism behind the growing Taiwan identity.

The fourth article, by Chengpang Lee, takes the Taiwanese case to examine how knowledge production interacts with global forces and the local tradition of public engagement within social science communities. There exists a clear hierarchy between academic centres and peripheries in global knowledge production, mainly through international publishing. Because most international journals require the author to write in English, Taiwanese scholars are situated in a culturally disadvantageous position relative to their native English-speaking peers. Even scholars that have overcome the difficulty of the language barrier face a 'knowledge production regime' controlled by scholars from the central position. They need to tailor their studies to fit or catch up with trends in the interest of the centre in order to get their articles accepted.

Lee uses publications on Taiwan in the top four US sociology journals to show how in the past sociologists did try to make the case for the relevance of Taiwan to sociology. Given the existence of a non-neutral international academic market, he proposes that a potentially effective way to make Taiwan relevant to sociology is to turn the seemingly historical contingency into a theoretical puzzle. In this approach, Taiwan as a case is then situated in a theoretical tradition and is thus embedded in a larger academic community. The case of Taiwan shares similarities but also diverges significantly from other countries. To address a theoretical puzzle, researchers can and must grasp a discrepancy between the examined phenomena and a given theoretical prediction. Explaining these discrepancies will yield greater rewards.

This introduction briefly outlines the four articles in this topical section; they help us grasp the theoretical perspective and gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the global society by making Taiwan an especially valuable subject of study. We learn that Taiwan played an important role in revising how global connections and interactions might be narrated in global history. We also come to understand Taiwan's changing dialectical relationships between stability-oriented religious organisations and change-oriented civil society advocacy forces, the ways in which Taiwanese values and norms have influenced collective identity changes, and finally the call to present Taiwan's contribution to scholarly production as a theoretical puzzle of a research subject. We are pleased to see the presence of this topical section as it promises to promote the contribution of Taiwan studies to international scholarship in humanities and social sciences.

Notes on Contributors

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