

Book Review

Review of *Taiwan in Transformation: Retrospect and Prospect*, second edition, by Huang Chun-chieh. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2014.

This excellent study of modern Taiwan is a balanced and wise appraisal of the main historical forces that have shaped Taiwan in the past, and an insightful look into the possible future course of the complex relationship between Taiwan and mainland China. The book is divided into two parts. The first part, “Retrospect,” contains one chapter on Taiwan under Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945 and several chapters on postwar changes in the social consciousness of farmers and of Confucian intellectuals, particularly Xu Fuguan 徐復觀. The second part, “Prospect,” includes a new chapter on the postwar mainland experience, a chapter on the development of Taiwanese consciousness, another chapter on the need for greater historical consciousness on the part of both mainlanders and Taiwanese, and another new chapter on the postwar rise of individuality in Taiwanese society.

One of the strengths of this book is the combination of passion and balance in the author’s approach to the highly polarized topics of Taiwan’s identity and future course, which have divided the country, and even families, for the last thirty years. The passion grows out of the author’s deep roots in the countryside in southern Taiwan, which shaped his affection for traditional attitudes toward the land. The balance comes from his training as a professional historian. He combines the insights of an insider with the objectivity of a scholar.

The main thesis of the work is that China and Taiwan will not be able to resolve their differences until both sides more fully understand the historical circumstances that led to the present. On the one hand, China needs to understand that even though Taiwan was settled by immigrants from the mainland hundreds of years ago, its geographic situation as an island and its fifty-year occupation by an outside imperialist power (Japan from 1895 to 1945) have contributed to a strong sense of identity that is particularly Taiwanese. On the other hand, Taiwan needs to understand that it shares with China a profound connection with the Chinese cultural heritage. China is the fountain of Taiwan’s cultural identity. In language, history, literature, philosophy, and social thought, Taiwan is clearly Chinese. Moreover, after the end of the Second World War, most Taiwanese looked forward to reunification with

China as a natural process of restoration to the pre-1895 state of affairs. It was the brutality of the Nationalist (Kuomintang) administration—especially its massacre of intellectuals and Taiwanese leaders in February 1947 and its subsequent exclusion of Taiwanese from political power in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1980s—that alienated the Taiwanese and contributed to a sense of identity separate from that of mainland Chinese during those decades. Thus, in the larger context of the last century, Taiwanese identity was born in protest, first against the Japanese, then against the Nationalists, and now against the mainland's threats to occupy Taiwan by force.

The author's point is that those who argue for quick unification with mainland China and those who argue for quick independence from mainland China both fail to understand the complexity of the relationship and the likelihood that quick changes will be catastrophic for both Taiwan and China. For Taiwan, quick reunification would end the freedom and democracy won by so many decades of arduous effort. For China, quick reunification would end the hope that Taiwan can lead China toward the freedom and democracy necessary for China to flourish.

Quick independence for Taiwan would also be catastrophic, as it would almost certainly provoke China to recover Taiwan by force. Yet any such act would be disastrous for China as well, since it would destabilize the entire postwar equilibrium in East and Southeast Asia, isolate China from its neighbors, lead to a potentially dangerous arms race, and raise the specter of armed confrontation between two nuclear powers, China and the United States.

What about the future? The author is both pessimistic and optimistic. On the pessimistic side, he cites the change in social consciousness from a community orientation to a new form of individualism, which, when taken to excess, he worries, becomes a destructive form of egocentrism. He fears that the bitter polarization of politics in Taiwan and the inability of each party to work with the other for the common good will hamper compromise and lead to irrational and impulsive decisions.

On the optimistic side, he draws on the long heritage of Confucian governance rooted in the moral understanding that the welfare of the people is the basis of good government. Taiwan's evolution from an authoritarian system to a democratic one with a free press and the rule of law is a model not only for China but also for many other countries in the world struggling to cross that same institutional divide. Toward the end of the book he even speaks of the possibility of a Taiwanese renaissance, unleashed by the creativity and innovative thinking of an emerging generation of young people, born and raised in a free and open society.

So where does this astute analysis of Taiwan's modern transformation leave this particular reviewer? Am I inclined to favor the pessimistic or the

optimistic prediction? In the short term, I can see plenty of evidence for the pessimistic perspective, especially in view of the tendency of weak governments on both sides of the Taiwan Straits to exploit emotional nationalism to cover up their own inadequacies.

Yet there are also grounds for optimism, especially in the long term. My optimism comes from a lifetime of thinking and writing about world history as well as Chinese history. If one looks at the larger forces acting upon human civilization over time and the increasing power and complexity of human technology, there appears a pattern of change in human governance that is hidden when one's focus is only on the recent past or only on one region in the world. That pattern is the increasing participation in governance by a progressively larger portion of the human population, in other words, democracy. In the field of economics, that pattern of increasing bottom-up decision making was first articulated by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, wherein he argued that as a natural consequence of the increasing complexity of the Industrial Revolution, the most efficient way of organizing human productivity became a free market, in which decisions were made by individuals in pursuit of their own self-interest, rather than by the state.

Where does this pattern come from? It seems to be rooted in history itself. In the origin and development of human organizations, from hunter-gatherer societies through the agricultural revolution, the rise of states and empires, and the Industrial Revolution, this pattern exhibits the following characteristics:

- Movement from simplicity to complexity. (Improved technology enables increasingly complex human organizations.)
- A complementary and dynamic balance of opposite forces, each of which requires the other to function. (All historical actors, from the lowest serf to the mightiest king, act within a network of relationships.)
- Self-organization from the bottom up, without the intervention and guidance of a higher authority. This principle of self-organization is responsible for the astonishing creativity of nature and man. (Adam Smith's free market, alluded to above, is the quintessential example of a self-organizing process.)
- Greater complexity produces greater power and opportunity, but at the price of greater vulnerability. (The Internet confers greater opportunities but greater vulnerabilities as well.)
- Human societies, to manage (and reduce) such vulnerabilities, constantly develop new institutions of greater cooperation and communication. (New technologies of communication require vastly more complex institutions to protect against the abuse of these new technologies.)

So how does all this apply to my relative optimism about democracy in Taiwan and, more important, eventually in China? If the evolutionary processes of history I have sketched above are valid, then a highly complex system—say a nation like Taiwan or China—simply cannot function effectively by concentrating power at the top. When the government is in charge of the commanding heights of the economy (or of politics), as in postwar India, Maoist China, or the Soviet Union, the ultimate outcome is likely to be stagnation. In a complex system, the amount of information needed at the bottom of the system to respond flexibly and successfully to constantly changing circumstances is beyond the power of the top to manage. For any such system to respond effectively to sudden change requires creativity and innovation, initiative and responsibility, by those at the bottom on the front lines of whatever activity the system is engaged in. In an authoritarian system, where power is administered by fear and force, and where there is no transparency or accountability as provided by a civil society with a free press and the rule of law, those at the bottom do not have the freedom or incentive, and those at the top do not have accurate information, to make realistic decisions. Hence, an authoritarian system, no matter how efficient it may be at the beginning, is doomed to a gradual process of decline and stagnation simply because, over time, it becomes inefficient and ineffective at best, and incompetent and corrupt at worst (Singapore, beware!).

Thus, China must democratize if it wants to develop fully its own potential. The Communist Party cannot continue its present monopoly of power indefinitely. And Taiwan needs to show the way. My fervent hope is that more Taiwanese politicians and intellectuals will one day understand—perhaps by reading this book—how significant their role is on the global stage. If China does not enter the family of democratic nations—and it can only do so with the guidance and model of Taiwan—then the future health of the entire global geopolitical order will be in peril. That is the true significance of this wonderfully balanced book by Huang Chun-chieh. He fully understands the larger role that Taiwan needs to play on the global stage, and is trying to encourage his readers in Taiwan and elsewhere to accept the Confucian mantle of responsibility that their heritage has bestowed upon them. I applaud his insight, and his courage.

Alan T. WOOD
Professor of History, University of Washington Bothell