

## ***TAIWAN SYMPOSIUM***

### **Introduction: Neoliberalism, Social Movements, and the Environment in Taiwan**

*Jane Hindley and Ming-sho Ho<sup>1</sup>*

This special issue of *CNS* presents a set of articles on neoliberalism, social movements, and the environment in Taiwan. It brings together four articles by Taiwanese scholars that document and analyze the role of the labor, environmental, and educational reform movements in Taiwan's twin transition from authoritarian to neoliberal capitalism and from one-party rule to democracy. Two further articles in this set—one on media reform movements and the other on the conservation and indigenous rights movements—will be published in the next issue. These articles all share a concern for the restructuring of relations between the state, citizens, and nature that has occurred in Taiwan over the last 20 years. They are also of special interest, because in addition to teaching and researching on these themes, most of the authors are also social movement activists, and some have played (and continue to play) prominent roles in the movements they discuss. As such, they bring to their articles an unusual depth of knowledge, a concern for strategy, and a desire to analyze and overcome movement limitations—which are often missing in the work of academics confined within universities and detached from grassroots struggles.

This is the second in an occasional series of *CNS* issues to focus on a particular country. The first was published in Volume 18, over issues 3 and 4, in 2007. It focused on the metabolism between society and nature in the U.K. and comprised a set of articles by members of the U.K. Red-Green Study Group. This second issue grew out of connections between RGSG members and Taiwanese scholars also working on red-green issues from a historical materialist and/or a more specifically political ecology perspective. Although this was more a result of serendipity than intention, Taiwan, where industrialization and democracy came late, makes an interesting contrast to the U.K.—the first country to industrialize and one where democracy was established early. Moreover, the difference in the focus and the preoccupation of contributors in the two issues are not a coincidence. They reflect the particular historical trajectories and the specific positions of the two countries within the changing configurations of global capitalism. As Hwa-jen Liu's elegant discussion of Polanyi demonstrates, comparison between the two cases can be very fruitful in terms of rethinking theory.

However, while it is hoped that this issue will stimulate further theoretical and comparative debate, it also has a further, broader aim. One of the key questions that guided the range of movements covered in this set of articles was, what are the progressive forces working to further social justice and ecological sustainability in Taiwan

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<sup>1</sup> The idea for this special issue came out of the first conference on "Social Movements in Taiwan" organized by Ming-sho Ho held at National Sun-yat Sen University, Kaohsiung in June 2009. Special thanks go to Hua-Mei Chiu for her help in liaising with the authors, and to Chin-ju Lin who organized the workshop, Social Movements, the Environment, and Neoliberalism in Taiwan, held at the Institute of Gender Studies, Kaohsiung Medical University in May 2010. Thanks also to those members of the U.K. Red Green Study Group who reviewed and commented on the articles, and to Karen Charman at *CNS* for her patience and help with editing.

today, and what are the specific challenges they face?<sup>2</sup> In other words, by presenting this set of articles, a key aim was to foster understanding about progressive movements in East Asian countries and thereby strengthen the ground for international linkages and networking in the future. As the East Asian core of the global capitalist system has become consolidated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, these are increasingly urgent tasks for anyone concerned with constructing an alternative, more sustainable and socially just global system. In this regard, it's worth noting that there seems to be much greater understanding and stronger links between progressive forces in North and South America and Europe than with East Asia. While it seems likely that most *CNS* readers, for example, will be familiar with the role of social movements in Brazil or Bolivia, fewer will be aware of the achievements and ongoing struggles of social movements in Taiwan. Among other factors, this reflects the way East Asian countries are represented in the mainstream media outside the region and (as various contributors stress) the fact that mainstream scholars have neglected the role of progressive social movements in East Asian transitions. But it is also due to the authoritarian closure and censorship endured by many East Asian societies for long periods of time during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Given this lack of familiarity, each article provides some historical discussion in order to situate current struggles, movement demands, dilemmas, and strategies. But it is important to stress that Taiwan's twin transition threw up a particularly complex set of problems. At the risk of simplifying the process, Taiwan's democratic transition occurred between 1987, when the Kuomintang regime (KMT) finally ended nearly 40 years of Martial Law, and 2000, when the first opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was elected to the national government. This thirteen-year period also witnessed a dismantling of the dirigiste economic policies pursued by the KMT-controlled developmental state from the 1960s onwards, and the adoption of neoliberal doctrines and policies. Effectively this meant that regulatory controls over the economy and civil society were lifted at the same time, and much of the state's former economic power was passed to (often KMT-linked) business elites. Because these two processes occurred simultaneously, many of the social movements that emerged and fought to change authoritarian policies, exercise civil and political freedoms, and secure democratization were very quickly faced with a new set of challenges posed by the new configurations of economic power. In some instances, as the case studies show, this involved a major rethinking of strategy and orientation.

One of the interesting features of Taiwan's democratic transition is the early emergence of the environmental movement and the key role it played in opening up political space for subsequent movements to articulate demands and press for full democratization. Hwa-jen Liu's article describes the proliferation of anti-pollution protests from the 1970s onwards, and Yih-ren Lin (next issue) describes how the nature-conservation wing of the movement emerged and had some success in the early 1980s. Hwa-jen's article, moreover, seeks to explain this unusual early riser role. She shows that whereas the regime was able to control and resolve labor disputes, it was unable to contain or solve anti-pollution protests. She also argues that the form assumed by the anti-pollution movement's interactions with the state set a pattern that shaped the subsequent strategic orientation (and limitations) of the labor movement.

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the selection is obviously not intended to be exhaustive. It is important to note that Taiwan's transition has also opened up space for feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-sexual, indigenous, disability, indigenous, migrants and other movements to articulate their demands and fight for their rights.

The articles by Hua-mei Chui and Yubin Chui pick up where Hwa-jen leaves off, and track the evolution of the anti-pollution and labor movements from the 1990s through to the present. Hua-Mei focuses on the second wave of anti-pollution protests in Taiwan: the movement against hi-tech pollution (from the late 1990s through to the present). In addition to highlighting the continuity between the KMT and DPP's support for this supposedly "clean" industry, her paper also uncovers a common social movement dilemma: whether to pursue demands through protest and mobilization from outside or through participation in new institutional channels and risk cooptation. Yubin Chiu's article seeks to answer two very important and related questions: first, why is it that despite its initial radicalism, the Taiwanese labor movement has failed to rise to the challenges of neoliberal globalization and combat growing trends of casualization?; and second, why have the labor and environmental movements in Taiwan failed to join forces to form a united front against capital as they have in Hong Kong and South Korea?

The articles on the education and media reform movements are both concerned with three pre-conditions of issue politics that are especially important in countries recovering from long periods of military-authoritarian rule: strengthening civil society, active citizenship, and the public sphere. Our article highlights the way the humanist education reform movement led by the remarkable thinker Huang Wu-Hsiang developed a cogent critique of the military-authoritarian ethos of the KMT's education system, drawing parallels between the domination of nature and the domination of children. It also discusses the movement's efforts to foster egalitarian and ecological values and citizenship through the more recent Community University system and the Natural Trail initiative. Chung-Hsiang Kuang's article (next issue), emphasizes how Taiwan's media went from being a strictly controlled propaganda mouthpiece for the authoritarian regime to being dominated by hyper-commercialized and sensationalist media companies in just a few years. His analysis shows how media reform movements have sought to open up space for public broadcasting, as well as greater civility, accuracy, and balance in the coverage of social and environmental movements. In this regard, the alternative media movement, comprising citizen and independent journalists, has proven especially important in providing voice and coverage for environmental struggles.

The last article in this set by Yih-ren Lin discusses the Maqaw national park controversy. Through his analysis of this exemplary case, he emphasizes the crucial social and cultural role played by conservationists in fostering ecological literacy in Taiwanese society and challenging the commercial orientation of state forestry agencies. He also shows how the campaign to save Taiwan's largest remaining native cypress forest provoked a range of public debates, including for the first time the question of the exclusion of indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories within national parks. In this way, although the Maqaw national park is on hold, it nonetheless opened up space for indigenous peoples to articulate their demands and provided a catalyst for wider policy changes based on the principle of indigenous co-management of forest resources.

In sum, the articles uncover both the recent achievements of Taiwanese social movements and their ongoing struggles. Movements still face vestiges of the authoritarian period in terms of institutional legacies, social inequalities, and estrangement from nature, as well as new challenges that arise from the ascendancy of business and the deepening commercialization and commodification fostered by neoliberalism. Nonetheless, one of the striking features of many of Taiwan's social movements is their resilience and persistence. They have consolidated an alternative critical tradition, established repertoires of protest, and fostered active citizenship. In this way, they continue to hold the state to account in its alliance with capital. The notable exception is the labor movement, which, as Yubin Chiu underscores, is in urgent need of internal restructuring and re-constitution. Perhaps a simple way to sum up some of the achievements is by emphasizing the counter-factual. Without the countless mobilizations and protests that propelled Taiwan's democratic transition, Taiwan could easily have moved from authoritarian to neoliberal capitalism without democratization. Likewise, the orientation of the state towards the 23 million people comprising Taiwan's population might simply have shifted from a modality of interpellation based on inculcating obedient authoritarian subjects to one based on fostering unthinking neoliberal consumers, atomized by the market and competing for wealth and status. Put differently, the vibrant reality of civil society in Taiwan today was unthinkable 25 years ago. It also provides a robust ground from which to challenge the global trend of deepening neoliberalization and the concomitant destruction of nature.