



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TAIWAN STUDIES

3 (2020) 137-146



brill.com/ijts

Reports



Destabilising Empires from the Margin: Report of the 25th North American Taiwan Studies Association Annual Conference, Seattle, 16–18 May 2019

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Abstract

The 25th NATSA post-conference report documents the initiation, organisation, and proceedings of the event, followed by some general reflections on what we can further investigate in the future. This year, we invited scholars worldwide to come together and rethink and offer critiques on the possibilities and challenges facing Taiwan studies by unpacking the idea of 'empire' and 'marginality'. Given that agenda, we opened up discussions on some key topics around researching Taiwan and East Asia, such as political economy, democratisation, transitional justice, reconciliation, LGBTQ, and culture studies. Attempting to reposition Taiwan studies in the broader intellectual terrain, a series of insightful dialogues thus emerged, pointing out alternatives of Taiwan studies in the face of empire(s) and marginality. In all, the NATSA has formed one of the most widely known and vivid platforms for intellectual exchanges

on Taiwan studies and further conversation shall continue alongside the growth of the scholarly community.

Keywords

Taiwan studies – North American Taiwan Studies Association – East Asian studies – empire – marginalities

1 A Snapshot of the Conference

Titled 'Destabilising Empires from the Margin: Taiwan Studies in Reflection', the 25th conference of North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA) featured a three-day event from 16 to 18 May 2019 convened at the University of Washington, Seattle. This post-conference report documents the initiation, organisation, and the proceedings of the event, followed by some general reflections on what we can further investigate in the future.

NATSA's 2019 conference attracted expansive interest from the North American Taiwan studies communities and beyond. During the call-for-paper period, we received more than 130 paper and panel submissions across the disciplines, including philosophy, literature, history, art and performance, sociology, political science, gender studies, education, and environmental studies. From the review of the submissions and discussion on the main theme, the programme team organised a series of featured events, three workshops, and 20 concurrent panels that constituted this year's conference. The extensive number of concurrent panels, along with more than 150 attendees from 11 countries across four continents, marked a significant expansion in scale compared to previous years. We were thrilled to see the advancement of NATSA's annual conference as the key platform for intellectual exchange among academic communities doing research on Taiwan in North America and beyond.

To strengthen NATSA's role as a non-profit professional academic organisation, we openly incorporated proposals to provide academic professionalisation of various kinds. This included holding an author-meets-critics session on a newly published book, *Queer Kinship and Family Change in Taiwan* (Brainer, 2019), collaborating with the sociology department of Academia Sinica in Taiwan to feature a workshop on research methods, and offering a workshop on data visualisation. We also organised a professional development workshop, where previous NATSA conference organisers shared valuable experiences, career prospects, and survival tips with junior scholars.

2 Reposition Taiwan Studies at the Margin

Despite NATSA's persistent efforts towards institutionalisation and professionalisation at the board level over the years, its annual conference remains a graduate student or junior scholar-run event. While its attention to the wide terrain of the humanities and social sciences and its commitment to interdisciplinarity as a constant, the main theme and focus of the conference vary each year to reflect the social, political, and cultural milieu of the times, the general trends of academic fashion, as well as intellectual agendas initiated by the conference organisers.

As the co-programme directors of the 2019 conference, we are honoured to be part of NATSA's organisational and intellectual development. The motivation behind the main theme of the 2019 conference originates in our shared interest in critical theories—we are trained in human geography and sociology respectively. While fully acknowledging NATSA's overarching goals to promote Taiwan studies to the broader international academic community, to address the anxieties among scholars who face the challenge of defining and defending Taiwan studies in various settings, and to look out for new research avenues for the community, we both hold the belief that the value of Taiwan studies can be substantiated through revisiting the intellectual frameworks which have long constituted and conditioned the ways in which Taiwan has been studied. We embark on this task by locating our initiative in the spectrum of endeavours made by the community.

A review of the main themes from past annual conferences revealed a series of attempts to (re)position Taiwan studies in the broader intellectual terrain. The most common approach is to define Taiwan studies as an area study and to further highlight its importance to wider academic audiences. Yet, this inevitably leads to the question of boundary drawing and its associated politics, despite a potentially more 'fluid' or 'heterogeneous' approach it might take. The relative demise of Taiwan in the world political economy and international politics also poses a daunting challenge to its institutional competition with other Asian area studies, such as China studies. The second approach is to view Taiwan as a case study that can evaluate the applicability of universal theories. Despite its empirical richness, this approach faces the critiques of confining the value of Taiwan studies to a footnote of hegemonic knowledge production of the West and reproducing the centre–periphery dichotomy. The third approach is to put Taiwan into comparative frameworks with other sites sharing similar empirical traits in their social, political, and economic development. However, as comparative studies can easily slide into methodological expediency, this approach could generate as many problems as contributions.

Recognising the opportunities and limitations of the aforementioned approaches, the 25th NATSA conference proposed an alternative route. Instead of seeking to demarcate the terrain of Taiwan studies or to put it into quick empirical comparison, we proposed that Taiwan studies, or any research associated with Taiwan, should serve as a site for theoretical reflection and generation. This approach led to our commitment to engage the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of Taiwan studies that have shaped its contours. Given that Taiwan studies is an outcome of its encounters with multiple empires across various sites of knowledge production in history and geography, the notion of 'empire' emerged as the main theme of this conference. Specifically, as empire entails a comprehensive understanding of centre–margin dynamics, we hope to (re)position Taiwan in such a conceptual framework to generate critical discussions on issues of power and knowledge production.

3 A Critical Reflection of the Theme

Our theme was first explored in the opening forum, 'Engaging Empires through Border-crossing', where the panellists approached the issue from both personal and institutional perspectives. This forum reflected multiple understandings of empire. First, empires and their underpinning governing logics were viewed as the empirical subject of study, as portrayed in Dr Naoyuki Umemori's cross-analysis of multiple sets of metropole–margin relations between Western (British) and Eastern (Japanese) empires. Then, empire denoted a set of institutional structures that constitutes our ways of living, thinking, and knowing, as presented in Dr Stephane Corcuff, Dr Anru Lee, and Dr Derek Sheridan's discussion on positionality when navigating across different academic hegemonies in Asia, North America, and Europe.

During the forum, Dr Sheridan raised a series of semiotic questions to unpack the terms of the conference theme: What do we mean when we speak of empire? Should empire be in singular or plural form? To whom does Taiwan studies appear at the margins, and in what sense (Chen, 2010)? Furthermore, should Taiwan studies 'destabilise' or 'engage' the empire? Such questions poignantly captured the complexity and ambivalence we, as the organising team, sought to illuminate through the conference. If empire refers to Western-dominated academic institutions, then promoting Taiwan studies as a field of area studies in competition with China studies seems to 'engage' American empire, as Dr Sheridan cautioned, rather than 'destabilise' it. Moreover, if empire in its singular form denotes the omnipresent neoliberal capitalist world

we live in (Hardt & Negri, 2001), then Taiwan is by no means outside of it or at its margin.

The inquiry over empire and the margin, as well as where Taiwan studies stands in such a nexus, would re-emerge throughout the conference. It ultimately led to the discussion on analytical and practical connotations of marginal positionalities, as unpacked in Dr Amy Brainer's notes in the closing forum. Drawing from queer studies and its political advocacies in Taiwan, Dr Brainer argued that recognising the fluidity, complexity, and mundaneness of the margin and its associated struggles, can be an alternative way to move beyond the binary of embracing or rejecting normalisation of the power-loaded core–margin relations. As such, the position of 'strategic marginality' may be what Taiwan studies, and scholars studying Taiwan, can draw on for future thought and action.

4 Emerging Dialogues

The rich discussions on the conference theme were further elaborated in the events and panels. Unable to exhaust all the thought-provoking conversations that took place during the conference, we identify here several vital issues for consideration. Among them, political reconciliation was one of the central topics of the conference. Reconciliation is about how a society or a nation comes to terms with its controversial past (Nagy, 2008), most of which are unavoidably intertwined with the history of colonialism and imperialism. In pursuit of political reconciliation, transitional justice commonly serves as the juridical and political measure. To engage political reconciliation, the conference featured two events: a film screening on the documentary *Song of the Reed* (2015, dir. Wu Hsiu-ching) and a public event entitled 'Making the Past Present: Collective Remembering and Forgetting in East Asia and South Africa'.

Song of the Reed, a documentary on the comfort women issue in Taiwan, depicts a story about survivors of war, imperialism, and sexual oppression. Through the story of comfort women, conference participants were invited to rethink the relations between reconciliation and war responsibilities within and across East Asian countries. Several aspects were highlighted in the post-screening discussion with Dr Wu Rui-Ren and Dr Seiji Shirane. First, rather than viewing the comfort women issue as a battleground for war responsibility, compensation, or nationalist and ideological struggles, the focus should be on its human aspect—bringing humanity back to the survivor's lives—and on pursuing a transnational justice agenda. Second, given the complicated

geopolitical dynamics in East Asia during the post-war era, research should go beyond the dichotomous framing of comfort women as either war victims or as collaborators of the Japanese Empire. Instead, the comfort women issue in Taiwan and beyond demonstrates ongoing Cold War politics, with the United States playing a crucial role in shaping the forms and dynamics of political struggles in their name.

The public event, 'Making the Past Present: Collective Remembering and Forgetting in East Asia and South Africa', further investigated the theoretical and practical challenges of reconciliation and transitional justice through focusing on memory politics across various countries. Contesting identity politics in a divided society, as revealed in the cases of Taiwan, South Korea, and South Africa, illuminates a past that is constantly being concealed, wiped out, re-embraced, and revised. The ways in which the past is shaped and reinterpreted in the present day sheds light on the nature of our political life. Therefore, pursuing reconciliation through 'revealing the truth' about the past has proven to be far more complex than it seemed to be initially. Expounding on South Korea's decades-long pursuit of transitional justice against multiple waves of war, violence, and state oppression, Dr Youngju Ryu highlighted the moral dilemma in viewing truth as the prerequisite of reconciliation, the pitfalls of seeing reconciliation as a linear process, and the tendency to frame violence as justifiable for the sake of national economic development. Introducing South Africa's case, Dr Catherine Cole shared how the ANC¹ regime's pursuit of reconciliation in the post-apartheid era through public hearing was far more ambivalent than it is commonly celebrated today. Dr Cole argued that prioritising knowledge production about the 'truth' and personalising accounts of violence side-steps issues of systematic oppression and inequality, and therefore limits the 'restorative' agenda.

The rich discussion on memory, truth, and reconciliation provides an avenue to engage with the theoretical paradigm that has been primarily constructed on Western experiences. While East Asian societies in many aspects follow the idea and practice of reconciliation of their Western counterparts (e.g., Germany), their experiences also require a different explanatory framework. Specifically, the political project of reconciliation in East Asia often entails comprehensive dynamics as it touches on the complex legacies of colonialism, World War II, and geopolitical tensions during the Cold War, and therefore render a linear approach to reconciliation impossible. Moreover, the entangled race, ethnicity, political identity, and ideological conflicts in

1 African National Congress.

East Asia render its conditions unique to postcolonial societies. With such a distinct position in history and geography, East Asian societies' experiences have a potential to enrich the theorisation and practice of reconciliation.

Another focus of the conference lies in the extensive conversation on Taiwan's political economy and the ways in which we study it. Accentuating agendas of globalisation, modernisation, and development under the post-war world order, these discussions associated empire with the complex dynamics between politics of rule and the logics of capitalism. First, the roundtable 'Revisiting Democracy and Development', along with a panel titled 'East Asian Developmental States in Transition' and a workshop on 'Studying the Unfinished Miracle: Social Research Data & Methods', demonstrated a common effort to address the acuteness of Taiwan's social, political, and economic transition. While attending to the ongoing struggles over issues ranging from unsuccessful industrial upgrading, widening social inequality, to the rise of conservative populist politics, the panellists also invited the audience to re-think Taiwan's situation from a broader context of global political economic restructuring. For example, Dr James Lin emphasised the necessary distinction between 'development' and 'economic growth', as they each carry different moral implications in the era marked as 'capitalocene'. Similarly, Dr Karl Fields proposed that the challenges facing the Taiwanese state and society were local as well as global, as the entire world is undergoing a neoliberal/populist siege. Taiwan's struggle can thus generate insights for liberal capitalist democratic societies at large.

Together with a number of presentations on East Asian experiences of development, these endeavours represented a collective attempt to re-engage and refashion the seemingly passing developmental state theory on Taiwan and beyond. First, this attempt involves a careful examination of the business logic underpinning Taiwan's economic growth that has largely been overshadowed by the state-centred theoretical framing. While Dr Gary Hamilton highlighted the true logic of global market economy through which Taiwanese business has thrived, Dr Zong-rong Lee unpacked the networked business-political relationship and their impacts on the course of democratic deepening in Taiwan. The theoretical re-engagement also involved revisiting the less focused sites of social and cultural (re)production and resource mobilisation of the developmental state, including the media industry, housing policies, health insurance schemes, and national saving initiatives. Together, they provided a more holistic perspective on the functioning and sustainability of the developmental state; analysing the ways in which East Asian states integrated the societies over time and shedding light on how we theorise the 'decline' of the state today.

5 Unfinished Conversation

Building on these fruitful discussions, there are several areas that can serve as the basis for further conversations. First, while panellists and participants generally support transitional justice, opinions diverged on the roles of the nation-state and civil society in pursuing such an agenda. Some asserted that the state should take the lead, as argued by Dr Chang-ling Huang, while others advocated for civil actions in reconciling polarised identities and contradictory memories prior to rolling out state-led policies—a stance taken by Dr Horng-leun Wang. These different opinions reveal the unresolved tension on what characterises political reconciliation, who gets to define it, and how to achieve it—all of which are vividly demonstrated in the competing reconciliation discourses and dilemmas surrounding the comfort women issue. A critical inquiry of the nature of the nation-state and its people in postcolonial conditions, as well as the relationship between democratisation, decolonisation, and reconciliation may thus be needed to move the dialogue forward (Chen, 2002).

This unfinished conversation also indicates a broader issue at hand. Despite a number of thought-provoking dialogues generated in the conference, their theoretical intervention seemed to be limited to a specific disciplinary inquiry, rather than forming a collective attempt to ‘destabilise’ the epistemological underpinnings of studying Taiwan. For instance, in most of the featured events and many concurrent panels, the role of the state was highlighted across different disciplines and research topics from transitional justice and reconciliation to the transformation of the developmental state in the globalisation era. Besides approaching the state from a functional aspect, many of these dialogues hinted at the peculiar nature of the Taiwanese state, including its historical formation, its source of legitimacy, and its form of governance in handling ethnic conflicts, social-economic relations, and structural challenges. Apart from refashioning the popular framing of ‘the developmental state’, the question of how we can engage the social, cultural, and political theories of the state at large based on Taiwan’s specific historical geography thus became a wanting project.

Likewise, a number of widely utilised concepts such as ‘market’, ‘neoliberalism’, ‘civil society’, ‘nation’, ‘democracy’, and ‘justice’ were largely treated as given and therefore remained unquestioned. Indeed, unpacking the social-historical construction of these popular notions and their affective influences can yield not only theoretical insights but practical alternatives. For instance, the debate between the market and the state in driving Taiwan’s economic development, as reflected in the roundtable ‘Rethinking Democracy and Development’, could have moved forward with a critical examination of

the historical formation of the ‘economic-social’, the discursive construction of a SMEs²-led economy, and the structural feeling of the ‘market versus state’ dichotomy. This approach can also help address the puzzle on why the Taiwanese society encountered enormous difficulty in restructuring the developmental state and moving towards the model of social democracy—as advocated by some invited scholars—despite the overwhelming populist resentment over Taiwan’s economic downturn.

Another unfinished conversation is on the limited engagement with China and the possible ways of (re)positioning Taiwan in relation to it. Previously, such an endeavour prevailed in the field of literature, where recalibrating Taiwan’s position in Sinophone studies occupied the centre of the debate (Shih, 2010). Many papers presented in NATSA’s annual conferences in the past also reflected this trend. In 2019 NATSA’s award-winning undergraduate research paper demonstrated a historical approach to engage the issue. Titled ‘Searching for Taiwan in the Ming Dynasty: A Study of Luo Hongxian’s *Atlas – The Guangyu Tu*’, the paper traces the influence of the Sinosphere under the Ming dynasty and illustrates its continental consciousness that had kept China and Taiwan apart. Nonetheless, most of the dialogues during the conference treated China as a background or context from which their respective research agendas ensued—be it China’s magnet effect and its impact on Taiwan’s political economy, or the source of Chinese cultural hegemony underpinning the national identity struggles and transnational LGBTQ³ politics in Taiwan. The lack of substantial interrogation into China’s internal transition and in relation to the world economically, politically, and ideologically prevents theorisation of both China as a peculiar form of empire and of China within the dominant capitalist empire at large. As such, only through engaging China with ‘strategic marginality’ can Taiwan studies further the agenda of ‘destabilising empires’.

6 Conclusion

NATSA’s 25th conference demonstrated the vitality and relevance of studying Taiwan for the wider academic community. As an attempt to go beyond the limits of previous approaches to Taiwan studies, we invited critical inquiries of our current situation, encouraged difficult dialogues on power and knowledge production, and in turn demonstrated a spectrum of valuable attempts and possible avenues to ‘destabilise’ or ‘engage’ the methodological,

² Small and mid-size enterprises.

³ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning.

epistemological, and ontological underpinning of how we know and act upon the world. Looking forward, we hope that NATSA continues to play an active role in strengthening the North American academic communities doing research on Taiwan or related fields, cultivating intellectual networks across academic institutions, inspiring critical scholarship, as well as facilitating dialogues between academia and the general public.

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Filmography

Song of the Reed (蘆葦之歌, 2015, dir. Wu Hsiu-ching)

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