

The Peasant Movement and Land Reform in Taiwan, 1924–1951

SHIH-SHAN HENRY TSAI

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On 20 May 2016, Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was inaugurated as the eighth President of the Republic of China (Taiwan). A 20-minute skit titled “Taiwan Democracy March,” planned for the party on the eve of the ceremony, came under scrutiny from a number of social movements who accused the incoming government of using “their messages of struggle” for their own political gain. For many, the DPP represented only one part of the struggle of the Taiwanese people during martial law and the period known as the “White Terror” (1949–1987). The *Tangwai* (“outside of the party”) was in fact not singular, but rather a combination of many movements which often espoused different causes. Parts of these movements constituted a political Left. The concept of the “traditional Left” in Taiwan is complex, not least because during martial law, socialism, communism and arguably anarchism were all associated with the Chinese Communist Party. This left little space for civil rights movements, labour movements, feminism and environmentalism, many of which existed in Taiwan prior to the arrival of the Chinese Nationalists in 1945. Until very recently, politics in Taiwan did not necessarily fit the political spectrum which typifies most Western nations but was characterized by an issue-based divide. That issue was – and still is – China. Political parties took up their geometric axis depending on the issues of unification versus independence. However, since 1990, with the Wild Lily student movement, the island’s politically engaged youth have started, whether consciously or not, to re-assess this political divide. In 2014, the largely non-partisan, student-led Sunflower movement shouldered this much more effusively and this is perhaps most clear in the emergence of new parties. Shih-shan Henry Tsai’s *The Peasant Movement* is a logical place to start in the understanding of the history of the political left in Taiwan from the 1920s.

This book’s seven chapters chart the interconnectivity of Taiwan’s peasant movement with that of Japan’s tenant union and the Comintern, or Third International (1919–1943), up through to the turbulent period of the 1940s and 1950s with Taiwan as a subsequent site of land reform aided by the US via the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction. Although somewhat hagiographical, Tsai successfully gives life to the leaders of the peasant union who between 1924 and 1934 rallied the Taiwanese rural class behind a social and economic agenda. It is slightly unclear what his core argument is, but as a whole the book provides an interesting grounding in Taiwan social history. It provides a framework for understanding issues of landlordism (or its absence, in many cases in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period) and the subsequent rise of social inequalities in rural society. The marginality which the agrarian community suffered transcends national boundaries and as such it was not surprising to read that movements for social change became intrinsically linked to similar organizations elsewhere. The political landscape of the period globally meant that the movements in Taiwan were often plagued with factionalism and were divided along very different ideological lines. These divisions by 1934 had meant that for “all practical purposes, Taiwan’s tenant movements had withered away” (p. xiii). As such, rather than reflect on the factors behind this “withering,” this book argues that this left a legacy for future Taiwanese activism.

In certain ways this book complements Doris Chang's *Women's Movements in Twentieth Century Taiwan* (University of Illinois Press, 2009) and it is a shame that Tsai has not mentioned this book in the present work. Also missing were Ming-sho Ho's *Working Class Formation in Taiwan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), a book which examines in detail the rise of labour movements during the same period, and Paul Katz's *When Valleys turned Blood Red* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), which reflects on the voices of rural Taiwanese under Japanese colonial rule. Since Tsai chronicles the intertwining of the peasant movement with Japanese unionism, I was also surprised that Christopher Gerteis's *Gender Struggles: Wage-earning Women and Male-dominated Unions in Postwar Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2009) was not used, nor was Rana Mitter's *A Bitter Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), since he links (although to a lesser extent) the Taiwan peasant movement to the peasant uprisings in China. That said, drawing on an impressively wide range of archival material in Chinese, Japanese and English, *The Peasant Movement* does provide a refreshing direction to the kinds of histories that can be, and should be, written on Taiwan. Its suitability lies beyond Taiwan history and it would be a useful comparative text on early 20th-century social activism. What is more, like the socialist/unionist organizations in Europe during the same period, the movement's "emotion, zeal, intensity and idealism" were ultimately short-lived and reflect a transnational picture of the *années folles* that were the 1920s. It contributes not just to the fields of Taiwan and Chinese studies but has pertinence in studies on both Japan and Korea. The book fits the discipline of history but has relevance in political science, sociology and political anthropology.

I shall end this review with a quote from the book: "Invariably, peasant movements and land reform [...] are a question of power. Without power, one can make fiery speeches, but they do not fundamentally change anything." Chien Chi's tenant union lacked "real power" (p. 222) but it did attract attention. This book is testament to this.

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Revisiting Gender Inequality: Perspectives from the People's Republic of China

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This book presents in translation nine papers by scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC), which were published originally in Chinese. All of the chapters address gender inequality and, specifically, the disadvantages suffered by the least privileged women in contemporary Chinese society. Half are devoted to the particular challenges faced by women in rural China.

Before discussing the substantive chapters, I want to talk about how they've been framed. The book was published in a comparative feminist studies series, edited by the postcolonial feminist theorist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty. In her Series Editor's Foreword, Mohanty presents the volume as "uniquely positioned to challenge the hegemony of Western knowledge about China" (p. ix); a claim that draws on Qi Wang's Introduction, in which she portrays the book as contributing