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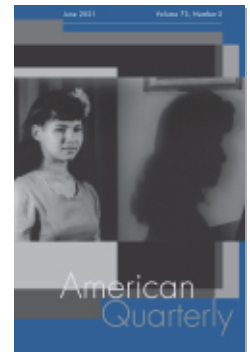
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Introduction: Against Empire: Taiwan, American Studies, and the Archipelagic

Wendy Cheng and Chih-Ming Wang

This forum originated as a roundtable at the 2019 ASA conference in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. At a moment in which US–Taiwan relations had seemed to reach a new historic height under Donald Trump’s right-wing, nationalist presidency,¹ it felt important to name and articulate Taiwan’s long and troubled relationship with the United States. Further, the conference’s location in Hawai‘i, touted since the Cold War by the US state as a crossroads and amalgam of “East and West” (a narrative that erases Hawai‘i as an Indigenous place and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi as a people), served as an apt setting for our discussion of Taiwan as an instructive yet neglected lens through which to view US Empire, militarism, multiple colonialisms, and knowledge formation. The islands of Hawai‘i, moreover, articulate an archipelagic history across the Pacific against dominant narratives of continental expansion and civilization as colonization.

Our forum follows on Funie Hsu, Brian Hioe, and Wen Liu’s “Collective Statement on Taiwan Independence: Building Global Solidarity and Rejecting US Military Empire,” published in *American Quarterly* in September 2017, which cautioned supporters of Taiwan independence to be wary of an alliance with then president Donald Trump. Instead of pinning the hope of independence on the US military empire, the statement encouraged supporters to build solidarity instead with “groups marginalized by American Empire and with other global movements for decolonization.”² As some Asian Americans—including many Taiwanese Americans afraid of a belligerent China—assert right-wing politics increasingly loudly and the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait increases,³ it is both pressing and timely to think about how Taiwan matters, if at all, in the US political imagination, and how Taiwan might navigate itself out of the treacherous waters of US–PRC contention that turns islands into frontiers of empire and reduces them to emblems of betrayal and threat.

We seek to place Taiwan in the US political imaginary past and present and to imagine transformative politics out of contradiction and ambiguity, as we engage in the material and ideological politics of the US–PRC–Taiwan triangle



Figure 1. “Conference notes” was created by Angel Trazo at the site of 2019 ASA Conference in Honolulu. We are grateful for Trazo’s permission to reproduce the image here.

and its implications for coalition politics in the larger Asian and Pacific island worlds. Individually and collectively, we consider how Taiwan’s conditions of being have been overdetermined by

the US military empire, and how understanding Taiwan as a frontier of empire can inform discussions in American studies about resistance and revolution, settler colonialism, Indigenous sovereignty, and coalition politics. By locating Taiwan in the US political imagination, we also reflect on American studies’ origin in Cold War politics as it pertains to US imperialism in shaping political ideology and changing the world order—or, as Judy Tzu-Chun Wu puts it in her commentary on this forum, “how American studies and orientalism are two sides of the transpacific flow of knowledge”—a condition that badly needs dismantling now.

The forum opens with two essays that locate both Hawai‘i and Taiwan in transpacific Cold War intellectual and political history. Wendy Cheng discusses the 1960s–1970s case of Chen Yu-hsi, a Taiwanese student at the University of Hawai‘i’s East-West Center, whose arrest and imprisonment in Taiwan inspired

a broad liberal, left, and internationalist coalition of supporters; Yukari Yoshihara delves into the imperial origin of American studies in postwar Japan via the career of George Kerr (also a University of Hawai‘i alum), whose sojourn in Okinawa and Taiwan was seminal to his vision of American studies. We then move into the present with essays by Funie Hsu and Anita Wen-Shin Chang: Hsu critiques bilingual policy in Taiwan as a sign of in/dependence where a form of benevolent imperialism harnessed Taiwan’s imagination of the United States, and Chang considers the feminist and popular democratic praxis and potential of the Taiwanese state today, as expressed by Digital Minister Audrey Tang, to demand a recognition of Taiwan’s struggle for coalition. Next, Wen Liu tackles settler colonialism and limiting notions of sovereignty in order to imagine a leftist vision of independence for Taiwan that is also—and must be—both decolonial and anti-imperial. Finally, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu and Leo T. S. Ching, bridging American studies, Asian American studies, and Asian studies, highlight the limitations of in/dependence for understanding Taiwan’s plight and advocate for an archipelagic epistemology that pushes back against the continental ontology of empire that treats islands as prey. As a whole, the forum enacts a relational comparative analytic, as advocated by Shu-mei Shih, Yen Le Espiritu, and other scholars,⁴ to explain why Taiwan matters and how an archipelagic coalition from and through Taiwan can help unfasten the grip of the imperial-nationalist double bind—not merely as a critique of US and PRC imperialism, but to explore the deep investment, if not complicity, of Asian states in the maintenance of a Cold War binary logic that fastens Taiwanese nationalism to US imperialism.

Revisiting the History of US–Taiwan Relations

While history is not necessarily a guide for the future, an understanding of the present cannot be separated from historical narratives. One understanding of US–Taiwan relations starts with the US decision in 1979 to establish official diplomatic relations with the PRC and de-recognize the ROC (Taiwan) as the official representative government of China. Since then, US–Taiwan relations have been governed by the Taiwan Relations Act, which remains effective to this day. It is an important historical moment because it not only made Taiwanese more aware of their “non-Chinese” status but also created the US–PRC–Taiwan triangle as an unresolvable political drama.

However, that was not the first contact the US had with Taiwan. As far back as 1867, the US had sent its navy and marines to Formosa (Taiwan’s former

name, given by the Portuguese) to punish the Paiwan aboriginal warriors for having massacred the sailors on an American bark that wrecked on the southeastern shores of Taiwan. But the punitive expedition yielded few results, since US soldiers, falling victims to deliria and tropical heat, were unable to capture any perpetrators. But neither was this expedition the first contact. In 1854 Commodore Matthew Perry sent a squadron of ships, led by Lieutenant George Henry Preble, to explore the northern port of Taiwan, Keelung, in search of coal. Preble found not only coal there but also a possibility of establishing a US presence for creating and maintaining a merchant shipping line between the US West Coast, Okinawa, the Bonin Islands, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Thus Perry proposed that the US annex Taiwan, while Townsend Harris, then a US businessman in China (later a diplomatic representative in Japan) recommended that the US buy it from China. Soon after, American merchants came to the island for businesses, and further call for annexation was sounded. But the plan for annexation failed due to a shift of wind on Capitol Hill. When William B. Reed succeeded Peter Parker as US minister to China in 1857, he made it clear that the US would not acquire territory at China's expense.⁵

Almost a century later, the US made another "contact" in Taiwan on May 31, 1945, with an air raid on Taipei (then a colony of Japan), which killed about three thousand people and left more than ten thousand homeless. Although the air raid caused great damage, it was rarely mentioned in the history of US–Taiwan relations until the board game *Raid on Taihoku* was released in June 2017.

Instead of these imperialist and devastating ventures, the US is remembered as Taiwan's staunch ally against communism. The most prominent American associated with Taiwan is George Kerr, US naval officer and diplomat, who was stationed in Taiwan in the 1940s (and whose doings are described in more detail in Yoshihara's essay in this forum). Kerr became famous in Taiwan for his eyewitness account of the February 28 Incident of 1947, *Formosa Betrayed*, which documents the early (and ultimately four decades–long) brutality of KMT rule in Taiwan. Kerr contended that Formosans were betrayed both by the Chinese who came to rule the island and by the United States, which abandoned them by handing the island to Chiang Kai-shek—a move that decidedly tied Taiwan to the Republic of China (ROC) created in 1911—for the sake of containing the PRC. Kerr's view, while condemned by the KMT, was appreciated by Taiwanese who did not consider themselves Chinese and sought a Taiwan independent from KMT rule.

Hence, throughout much of the Cold War era, US–Taiwan relations were in a tug of war, with a mutual defense pact since 1954 and US aid to keep

the ROC as an US ally, on the one hand, and an emerging campaign overseas for Taiwan independence, seeking US and international recognition, on the other. However, as the US moved toward reestablishing official relations with the PRC, throughout the 1970s the Taiwan independence issue was neglected by the US, both on the left and right. Until the late 1970s, the Taiwan issue was really a “China issue”—namely, the question of which government was the legitimate representative of China. The One-China policy, for which the US signed three communiques with China and created the Taiwan Relations Act, made “Taiwan independence” both a political reality and a contested sovereignty claim.

The Taiwan Relations Act ushered in an era in which Taiwan became literally a protectorate of the US military empire. Although the US withdrew its military from Taiwan in 1978, Taiwan remains well under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella stretching from the Korean Peninsula to Okinawa and the Philippines. As it is often invoked by US military personnel, Taiwan is within the radius of US protection should something occur in the region, and the security of Taiwan is a concern of US national interest. The patrol of the US fleet in the open waters of the Taiwan Strait since the 1950s, and especially during the missile crisis of 1996, is regarded as the most powerful endorsement of US protection of Taiwan.⁶ This, along with the expensive arms sales that aim to create a balance of terror, however, only increases the risk of war in Taiwan and makes Taiwan a bargaining chip in US–PRC relations.

Therefore, the call for Taiwan independence—to create a new Taiwanese nation-state with no political ties to China—however legitimate, is not a goal Taiwan can achieve by itself. It is significantly hinged on US political support and military protection. The 2018–2020 passages of the Taiwan Travel Act, Taiwan Assurance Act, and National Defense Authorization Act are clear signs of US support, but none of these are a sufficient indication that the US will support Taiwan’s quest for *de jure* independence at the cost of war. Instead, the US, especially under the Trump administration, has used these congressional acts as bait to win Taiwanese support for its contention with China; moreover, the increasing demand for semiconductors has made it necessary for the Biden administration to follow Trump’s anti-China policy by strengthening US–Taiwan relations without committing itself to Taiwan independence, as that would be deemed an infringement on Chinese sovereignty and a violation of the three communiques that uphold the One-China policy. Taiwan remains a test of will, if not a moral burden, for the US military empire in East Asia.

In the current political scenario where the PRC is deemed the US’s ultimate rival (as well as a covetable world market and a potential collaborator on the

North Korean issue), Taiwan is a wager that is too important for the US to lose and too trivial for it to risk its interest in China. Despite the discourses of democracy, freedom, human rights, and long-term friendship, at the core of US–Taiwan relations is the question of how much the US is willing to stand up against China. As long as this geopolitical structure of US–PRC rivalry remains intact, the US will continue to be Taiwan’s protector, and the issue of Taiwan independence will continue to stir up political drama, unless the people in Taiwan decide to change the nation’s political course by parting ways with the US military empire.

However, to entirely disentangle the Taiwan issue from the US military empire at the dawn of a new Cold War is an improbable, or at least unrealistic proposal, because the Taiwan issue was created by US imperial schemes to meddle with China in the first place. Preceding the Trump era, in acts of “civic transnationalism,”⁷ Taiwanese Americans joined the Taiwan lobby and asked the US government to recognize Taiwan as an independent country, or as some have petitioned, to make Taiwan the fifty-first US state. But these have always been conscientious efforts with an imperial unconscious deeply wedded to the vision of the US military empire. For some Taiwanese Americans, the Trump presidency seemed to represent a rare opportunity—but this only played into US-centric Cold War calculations that make Taiwan both an ally and a bargaining chip in US–PRC relations. In other words, if we keep thinking only in terms of national security and the US–PRC rivalry, there is no way Taiwan can escape from the US military empire. The Taiwan issue is a remainder of the Cold War and unfortunately remains part of a new Cold War’s formations. This is the conundrum out of which Taiwan must extricate itself in order to first imagine and then build an autonomous future.

How might we imagine a politics of coalition across the Pacific to decouple islands from, and even to decontinentalize, empires, as Judy Tzu-Chun Wu and Leo T. S. Ching advocate in this forum? Facing the pressure of imperial clashes on “our sea of islands,”⁸ we need more than ever an archipelagic articulation to decolonize empire from within and move “beyond nation and empire” (in Ching’s words). How could anyone blame a minor nation like Taiwan for pursuing autonomy against a belligerent China on the rise? How could anyone fault Taiwanese for wanting to separate their ties from China when the Cold War has already solidified the separation and made Taiwan perhaps more American than Chinese? Herein lies the challenge of the American Left, and American studies in particular: to uncover the historical and epistemological violences of liberalism; to recognize self-interest in the disinterest of the world;

to unfasten the US imperial grips on the islands; and to understand the power of the Cold War in an American unconscious that depends on a powerful military to uphold the “unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” To retrieve Taiwan from the new Cold War that is fast engulfing it, we must begin by dismantling US imperialism and the Cold War mentality that sustains it. Taiwan matters because it is a frontier state that empires made.

We hope this forum will invite you to this conversation.

Notes

1. During the Donald Trump presidency, the US passed a series of congressional acts, including the Taiwan Travel Act (2018), the Taiwan Assurance Act (2019), and the National Defense Authorization Act (2019), to support the visit of high officials from Taiwan and ensure regular transfer of defense articles to Taiwan. The apparent enhancement of US–Taiwan relations, however, occurred in the context of increasing US–PRC hostility and arguably paved the road for the US–PRC trade war that has rattled the world economy.
2. Funie Hsu, Brian Hioe, and Wen Liu, “Collective Statement on Taiwan Independence: Building Global Solidarity and Rejecting US Military Empire,” *American Quarterly* 69.3 (2017): 467.
3. See Xiaoqing Rong, “The Rise of Chinese American Right,” *National Review*, July 17, 2019, www.nationalreview.com/2019/07/chinese-american-right-new-generations-immigrants/.
4. See Shu-mei Shih, “Theory in a Relational World,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 53.4 (2016): 722–46; Yen Le Espiritu, “Critical Refugee Studies and Native Pacific Studies: A Transpacific Critique,” *American Quarterly* 69.3 (2017): 483–90.
5. See Thomas R. Cox, “Harbingers of Change: American Merchants and the Formosa Annexation Scheme,” *Pacific Historical Review* 42.2 (1973): 163–84.
6. On the history of the US Navy patrolling the Taiwan Strait, see Bruce A. Elleman, “High Seas Buffer” (2012), *The Newport Papers* 38, digital-commons.usnwc.edu/newport-papers/16/.
7. See Chih-ming Wang, *Transpacific Articulations: Student Migration and the Remaking of Asian America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013).
8. See Epeli Hau‘ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6.1 (1994): 148–61.