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Taiwan: The Consolidation of a Democratic and Distinct Society

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Tanguy Le Pesant, *L'esprit de défense de Taiwan face à la Chine, la jeunesse taiwanaise face à la tentation de la Chine*

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- 1 Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Tanguy Le Pesant, *L'esprit de défense de Taiwan face à la Chine, la jeunesse taiwanaise face à la tentation de la Chine* (Taiwan's will to fight as China looms large, Taiwanese youth and the mainland's pull), Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009, 256 pp., bibliography.

This book is interesting on three counts: it throws the spotlight on a new generation of Taiwanese (in their 20s and 30s); it shows the gradual enrichment and refinement of identity representations in a “post-modern” society, which Taiwan has come to be in so many ways; and finally, by raising the notion of the “will to fight,” it offers a perspective that is original and well suited to a comparative undertaking.

After an introductory chapter on political changes in Taiwan between 2000 and 2008 and their cross-Straits and international implications, the first part is based on a detailed survey in 2005 of 564 students aged between 20 and 25 in a dozen Taiwanese universities. This survey was complemented by some 50 individual interviews with people aged 26 to 40, fresh interviews from 2006 to 2008 with people from the first age group, and finally interviews with Taiwanese business people implanted in China. Most statistics reported in the book relate to the initial 2005 survey. The multiplicity and relative heterogeneity of sources as well as the political changes between 2005 and the publication date lead the authors to be prudent and doubly circumspect in interpreting the data. While the passage of time renders some results obsolete, some broad trends do emerge, as diverse sources confirm.

In the eyes of young Taiwanese, China is above all an ever-expanding source of economic opportunity, a perception that only reinforces pessimism regarding the island's internal market. Actually, most young Taiwanese have never been to China,

and they're poorly informed (for their China news, they rely on television more than on the Internet.) Temporary migration to the mainland often leads to disillusionment. Long-term migration, when undertaken, is typically towards the United States, Europe, or Japan. The perspectives opened by the survey are most revealing in respect of politics. In sum: the Taiwanese identity is most pronounced in the youngest generation, but this identity is becoming increasingly open-ended and flexible. Nearly half the respondents define themselves as "Taiwanese," more than 40 percent profess a double identity, and only a little more than 3 percent say they are "Chinese." At the same time, they are open-minded on future policies, not rejecting a possible cross-strait unification (if and only if it proves beneficial to Taiwan): 75 percent of respondents would favour independence if peace would prevail, but 46 percent would accept some sort of unification (just 32 percent of respondents unreservedly reject unification). Other responses confirm the great flexibility of options. Deep down, young Taiwanese nurse a fond wish to live in a "normal" country, the authors say. Taiwan is seen less in traditional identity terms than as a "community of fate" whose inhabitants, irrespective of their origins, must be able to decide together (p. 65-66). It is interesting that study abroad usually strengthens the feeling of identity by making Taiwan's diplomatic isolation more intensely felt. A new "attachment to the flag" is aroused while abroad, the authors note (pp. 67-70). While on the island, however, the youngest adult generation is already a "post-reform" one, not much politicised, with a strong aspiration to "live their own life," rather fatalistic as regards world affairs (p. 85), and keenly pragmatic as to future policy options. But it is also a generation ready to rally to well-identified causes or to be mobilised if its interests seem threatened.

While China is seen as a place of economic opportunity, it also looms large as a political threat to Taiwan (p. 93). But then this perception is ambivalently expressed because it is sometimes accompanied by a sort of fascination for China's new-found might. This perception, too, is highly abstract: when it comes to the question of whether China will attack Taiwan, there is an almost even three-way split among those who think it plausible, those who believe it is not, and those who refuse to answer (p. 101). If a conflict did break out, however, pessimism as to its results is overwhelming. At the same time, young Taiwanese still believe the United States would intervene in case of conflict, especially if it is not provoked by a unilateral declaration of independence (p. 117). No surprise, therefore, that a majority prefers a peaceful and negotiated settlement of disputes. The authors point out a paradox: "the will to fight," as traditionally understood, is weak and declining further; at the same time, Taiwanese identity is being constantly affirmed; actually, it is the "politicised" minority in the age group, whose Taiwanese identity is most pronounced, that also shows the strongest will to fight. It is thus not impossible that following a "low ebb," the Taiwanese will to fight could grow alongside the general spread of a gradually more widely shared and less disputed Taiwanese identity.

The authors continue with a consideration of the Taiwanese business community based in China, often finding themselves in paradoxical situations as reflected in their contradictory statements, but with their Taiwanese identity well-anchored though not always loudly proclaimed. The authors note in concluding the first part that Beijing's ability to create confidence-building measures and attitudes while avoiding humiliating or provocative ones would play a big role in determining the choices of an indeterminate generation. In this regard, I would add that mainland China's Taiwan policy since 2008 has displayed greater moderation than earlier,

judging by Beijing's attitude during the 2009 World Games at Kaohsiung and the Taipei Deaflympics as well as the 2010 Taipei International Flora Expo.

The second section of the book, dealing with the external and international consequences of Taiwan's will to fight, contains little that is new. It includes useful indications of the security and defence policies being gradually developed by the new KMT government. It accurately reflects the opinions of the (pro-unification) "dark blue" camp, and compares them with subtlety and attention to detail with the more centrist positions taken by Ma Ying-jeou, who has been able to shroud his real options in mystery (pp. 193-197). The authors hold that notwithstanding the parliamentary and political twists and turns, a certain trans-partisan "pragmatic" consensus is clearly re-emerging as regards the minimal conditions for Taiwan's defence. They speak of a "minimum consensus" on the ROC's sovereignty, on strengthening budget allocations for defence, and on retaining close strategic relations with the United States (pp. 204-205). Finally, this complexity of the Taiwanese situation is matched by (as a direct consequence of this very complexity) a more varied and contrasted evaluation of strategic options than is generally expressed either in Beijing or Washington (pp. 207-230). While the political scenario has changed profoundly since 2008, the range of possibilities for Taiwan remains far more open than is often supposed.

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Translated by N. Jayaram