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In the Name of the State: Interactions between local administrators and citizens

Peter C.Y. Chow (ed.), *National Identity and Economic Interest: Taiwan's competing options and their implications for regional stability*

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 318 pp.

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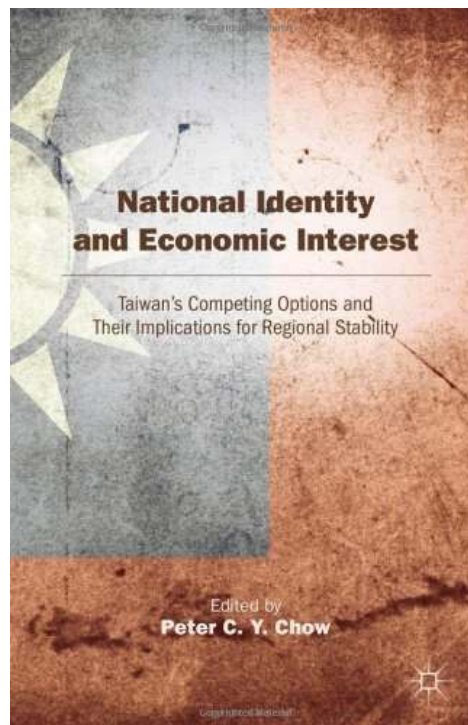
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1 Once again, Peter C.Y. Chow has edited a timely volume on pressing issues concerning Taiwan. This one sets out to provide a comprehensive understanding of the recent rapprochement between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. As the title suggests, most of the contributions from Asian, European, and American scholars aim to shed light on the relationship between the dynamism of economic relations across the Taiwan Strait and the consolidating national identity of Taiwan. By weaving together these two threads within the field of Taiwan Studies, the scholars provide a comprehensive picture of this crucial subject matter from political, geopolitical, economic, and social perspectives.

2 One major puzzle provides the *leitmotif* for most of the chapters: Against the often-voiced assumption that economic integration across the Taiwan Strait might lead to a common identity, the Taiwanese



identity is actually growing stronger. Is it a matter of measuring identity (unlikely, given the different but complementary sets of data used), was the prediction wrong (as Muyard argues), has the “identity battle” finished and has the issue lost its socio-political importance (Dittmer), or is the scientific concept in need of revision in order to be of value under these new conditions (Chen)? Situated in this broader perspective, the volume is not only about the empirical phenomenon of Taiwan’s evolving identity under conditions of economic Cross-Strait integration. It is at the same time an assessment of whether the concept of “identity” has lost its centrality in the field of Taiwan Studies. Is the discipline at a crossroads? Does the empirical observation that pursuit of profit seemingly trumps identity as the driving force of social interactions entail a decline of identity-based explanations in favour of economic explanations at the level of scientific inquiry? In this sense, this book is a thorough examination of identity as the cornerstone of how the discipline approaches Taiwan.

- 3 The volume’s eleven substantial chapters are grouped in three parts, each of which examines issues of identity and the economy from different angles. The four chapters comprising the first part deal with the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) as the culmination of Cross-Strait *rapprochement*. Jau-Yuan Hwang traces how Taiwan’s disputed status has manifested itself in the legal and democratic deficiencies of the ECFA, while Tsai-Long Honigman Hong assesses the agreement’s economic impact on Taiwan. Peter C.Y. Chow adds in the social and political costs of economic integration, such as a broadening gap in income distribution. He draws attention to “cultural flows,” which already affect Taiwanese media and might facilitate sinicisation, but which, unlike economic interactions, escape current frameworks. Stéphane Corcuff establishes an original historical perspective with a *longue durée* comparison between the end of the Zheng regime in the late seventeenth century and the Kuomintang (KMT)’s U-turn that led to the Cross-Strait *rapprochement*. It not only brings striking similarities to the surface, but also facilitates understanding and assessing the differences. Identity is here not only a discourse, but a process linked to material instances of what the author is hesitant to call re-sinicisation or de-taiwanisation.
- 4 The middle part addresses the question of Taiwan’s identity more explicitly. Although all authors agree that Taiwan’s identity as an independent political entity is growing and deepening, they accentuate different facets of it and grant it a different status in their respective explanations. Michael Danielsen contrasts the efforts by the Ma government to promote a Chinese identity with the actual phenomenon that the Taiwan identity is growing stronger. What bolsters Taiwan’s identity is the democratic system, which can accommodate a large spectrum of identities under a common roof. Consequently, Danielsen argues, the biggest threat to Taiwanese identity is a deterioration of democracy and civil liberties. The following chapter by Frank Muyard sets out to relate identity dynamics to economic interaction across the Strait. The empirical data are similar to those used by Danielsen, but Muyard views it from the opposite perspective: while the previous chapter examines the government’s efforts to promote a Chinese identity, Muyard is interested in the puzzle that Taiwan’s identity is apparently unaffected by increasing economic interaction. Contrary to this common assumption, the author argues that close economic cooperation even consolidates Taiwan’s identity. Not only is Taiwan’s nationalism driven by export growth and therefore compatible with liberalisation, but social contacts also increase the awareness of difference, while the increasing division of labour between China and

Taiwan is bound to create discontents, thereby fuelling nationalism. Naiteh Wu adds yet another perspective. Unlike Danielsen, Wu sees political parties not as promoters of identity, but as affected by the way a growing sense of Taiwan identity and economic integration with China condition party competition. Relying on a different set of data, Wu argues against the other authors that the group of citizens describing themselves as having both a Taiwanese and a Chinese identity is declining. But rather than having a direct influence on identity, closer economic integration structurally favours the KMT and marginalises the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

- 5 The first chapter of the third and final part, York W. Chen's contribution, marks the transition from identity to the geopolitical ramifications of closer relations across the Strait. Central to Chen's argument is the concept of strategic paradigms, which encompasses identity narratives linked to national security matters. Distinguishing between three of these historically situated sets of values, beliefs, and methods, he examines how the paradigm shift promoted by Ma Ying-jeou and the KMT has re-defined not only national security interests, but also Taiwan's identity in relation to China, therefore paving the way for the ECFA. In contrast to other contributors who see the current KMT government as promoting a Chinese identity, Lowell Dittmer suggests that Ma Ying-jeou had already conceded defeat on the identity issue before the 2008 presidential elections, and is now focusing on shifting public attention to economic performance. From this perspective, the identity battle is over, and the question has lost its relevance in favour of economic prosperity as a factor of legitimation. Dittmer argues not only that ECFA is a consequence of this shift toward economic issues, but also that it might provide a state of security, albeit a fragile one. The book closes with two chapters on the regional implications of the Cross-Strait rapprochement. While John J. Tkacik's pessimistic analysis of Taiwan's regional geopolitical role makes him conclude that Taiwan's absorption by China is only a matter of time, June Teufel Dreyer reconstructs Japan's assessment of the Cross-Strait *détente*, arguing that Japan is worried about closer relations across the Strait, but is unlikely to risk alienating China to support the island.
- 6 This collection of arguments demonstrates the versatility of identity as the concept that has so long structured public and scientific debates in and about Taiwan, as well as the difficulty of its operationalisation. The flexibility of the concept is the reason for the variety of insights that the volume provides: Not only does each chapter employ a slightly different notion of identity, the concept also appears as both a dependent and independent variable, as part of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches, and as both a product of and constraint on the KMT, and it is used to structure arguments on political, economic, and geopolitical issues. However, these arguments would be more convincing if specific mechanisms of how identity acts within the various contexts were provided. While Chen, for example, explicitly refers to a process of negotiation of identities through interaction with other groups, it is not clear how the changing patterns of interaction across the Taiwan Strait take effect. How much is identity based on grassroots interaction, and to what extent is it malleable by political elites? How do social interaction and material referents constrain the construction of identities? And even if a combination of elite-driven promotion, material referents, and social interactions are the main factors in identity formation, we are back to square one of the puzzle: why does the Taiwanese identity not crumble under economic and social integration with China? In order to enhance the persuasiveness of identity-based

explanations, specific mechanisms have to be provided. This is a weak point of quantitative approaches.

- 7 The most successful contributions, consequently, are linked to two research strategies. First, there are the chapters that question the validity of the puzzle in the first place. Muyard, for instance, casts doubts on the conventional wisdom concerning Taiwan's identity, arguing that there is actually little reason to believe that economic integration leads to a common identity. Rather, he highlights the tensions that may result from economic integration. A second set of successful arguments is related to the attempt to reconnect identity to tangible social processes and practices, and not simply understand it as an inter-elite struggle within a purely discursive realm. Chow's first steps to relate the elite-factor of both the KMT and the CCP to producers of discourse, such as media, is a promising path to de-idealising identity, thereby also revealing the crisis-prone nature of these identity negotiations. The changes to school textbooks and teaching guidelines discussed in the chapter by Corcuff provide a similar point of departure. In order to continue this path towards a political economy of identity politics, however, research has to go beyond its reliance on survey data and elite discourses.
- 8 Whether or not identity will continue to have a central place in future studies of Cross-Strait relations, this book provides a comprehensive reference point, situating identity in the dynamics of political, geopolitical, and economic developments. And whether or not this volume marks the renaissance or the swan song of the concept within the discipline, it is an eye-opening and informative read and therefore an essential contribution to the debate. All those interested in the dynamism of recent Cross-Strait rapprochement will find a valuable benchmark.

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