



*Ya-Chung Chuang, Democracy on Trial: Social movements and cultural politics in postauthoritarian Taiwan,*

Hong Kong, CUHK Press, 2013, 269 pp.

**Gunter Schubert**

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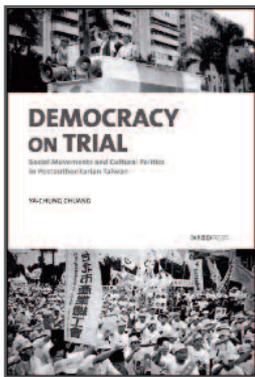
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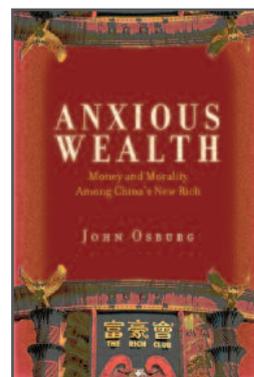
## GUNTER SCHUBERT

The “Sunflower Movement” of spring 2014 has re-activated much scholarly interest in the world of Taiwan’s social movements, which had somewhat declined over recent years. Ya-Chung Chuang’s book, although published before the events leading to the occupation of the Legislative Yuan last year, is therefore timely. One of its major intentions is to highlight the importance of a vital civil society and self-confident social movements for a stable and healthy Taiwanese democracy. Chuang is an anthropologist (teaching at Taiwan’s National Chiao Tung University), and he has written, as he notes himself, an anthropology of Taiwan’s democracy by looking at the relationship between *state and civil society* (Part I), *identity and ethnicity* (Part II), and *place and politics* (Part III). The six Chapters deal with topics covering a wide range of issues that the author has investigated since his days as a young researcher doing ethnographic studies in downtown Taipei. In Chapter One, he looks back at the 1980s and early 1990s when the Nationalist Party, the KMT, opened up the political system, entailing a new sense of community through which Taiwan’s society became deeply politicised. Chapter Two looks at the professionalisation of Taiwan’s social movements under these new conditions, which gave leeway for unexpected alliances between older and newly founded NGOs and triggered a political awakening among movement members. Soon many of them opted to cooperate with the state and push reforms from the top down. This cooperation, however, was critically observed by others who insisted on a strategy of persistent change from below – a cleavage within Taiwan’s social movements that plagues them to this day. Chapter Three traces the formation of a vibrant civil society by looking at the rise and significance of “talking public” in the 1990s, i.e., the politicisation of everyday life in Taiwan during that time. Chapter Four looks back at the highly controversial construction of *bentu*-identity starting in the early 1990s as both an intellectual project and a courageous undertaking of many social movements. Chapter Four continues this investigation by looking at those “ethnicities” that presented a counter-narrative to the *bentu* (*fulao*)-ideology: the Hakka minority and the aborigines. The rest of the book reflects on the authors’ field research in the 1990s and early 2000s, which was motivated by his attempt to explain the meaning of place in the production of community in democratic Taiwan, and the role that the politicisation of the neighbourhood (*shequ*) has played in this process. In Chapters Five and Six, he reports on neighbourhood mobilisation in Taipei’s Yongkang Street over a time span of some ten years in which he participated as both an activist and researcher. The epilogue engages the question of what the book’s findings can tell about the contribution of Taiwan’s young democracy “to a possible notion of Chinese democracy in the PRC.” This late question comes somewhat

unexpected in light of the author’s intention, spelled out early in the book, to critically discuss the nexus of democracy and social movements in Taiwan proper. However, Foucault’s spectre, as Chuang poses it, justifies such a reflection, as China “has transformed into an internal and political issue deeply integrated in fierce local, and necessarily regional and global, power struggles.” China is conquering the brains of the Taiwanese, one could say, and the author insinuates in the final passages of his book that Taiwan’s political and economic establishment is far from ready to defend Taiwan’s democracy under this kind of manipulative pressure. It is only “qi-powered collective action” by a lively civil society that ensures the critical potential within a community necessary to defend democratic dreams, political alternatives, and multicultural ideas – a potential that will, at some point, cross the Taiwan Strait to initiate a similar grassroots or bottom-up politicisation on the Chinese mainland as well.

This book targets (and needs) a reader who is rather well informed about Taiwan’s post-authoritarian political and cultural transformation. It is, at least in some parts, no easy read: the author often employs the “postmodern speak” of his discipline, which for a political scientist, at least, often sounds artificially, and unnecessarily, evasive. However, I read through this anthology with much pleasure, as it reminded me of a time in which Taiwan’s democracy was still pretty much a project to be shaped by concerned and idealistic citizens. Ya-Chung Chuang was part of this project, and one can easily feel by his writing how much he still is fascinated by those days, even though he always keeps a distance between himself as an observer and the social movement world that he describes. His book is certainly enriching for the study of Taiwan’s social movements and their significance for democratic change and cultural transformation in the postauthoritarian era. Although it does not produce many new insights, the specific theoretical perspective and the empirical data of the third part make it a valuable study for Taiwan scholars, especially from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and political science.

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**John Osberg,**  
**Anxious Wealth: Money and  
Morality Among China’s New  
Rich,** Stanford, Stanford University  
Press, 2013, 248 pp.

## ÉMILIE TRAN

John Osberg’s work was published at a time when China was engaging in an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign targeting “tigers and flies.” A far cry from the media headlines trumpeting the fall of the latest tiger, *Anxious Wealth* is an ethnography of the world of the “flies,”