China–Taiwan Comparisons:
Still Promising Though Not "Ideal"

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Benjamin L. Read, University of California, Santa Cruz
http://benread.net

This paper reflects on comparative political research projects spanning China and Taiwan, two cases that have often been called ideal for comparison. It examines some of the fruits of such analysis, as well as some of the problems it poses. The commonalities between the two (in certain respects, at least) were once extensive, helping make comparisons of the PRC and ROC, or CCP and KMT, of the 1950s through the 1990s quite productive. Scholars even debated to what extent the mainland would follow Taiwan's path of political transformation. From the perspective of the present day, however, the political systems of Taiwan and China have diverged quite radically and seem to be growing ever farther apart. With Taiwan now more than 30 years beyond the lifting of martial law and more than 20 years past the first direct elections for the presidency, comparisons involving present-day politics are no longer so easy to frame. Yet these facts are hardly grounds for abandoning such lines of inquiry. On the contrary, political scientists have underutilized the potential of this pairing. Many fruitful possibilities await.

China and Taiwan

China and Taiwan have often been treated as two cases that make for "an experimentally ideal comparison" (Gilley 2008, 1). The basic logic of such claims posits a fundamental kinship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC). As their names suggest, both have roots in "China" and bore legacies of its long political history. Both states see themselves as heirs of the revolution of 1911. Both had authoritarian regimes led by Soviet-influenced parties with Leninist properties. Just as the ROC and PRC are something like mirror-image states in this perspective, so too are the societies that they govern. Weller, for instance, writes that "Taiwanese family structure, business organization, religion, interpersonal relations, and all the rest may now constitute a unique variation of Chinese culture, but no one would mistake them for anything else" (1999, 11).

The idea of China and Taiwan as separated twins is open to criticism on a number of grounds. Taiwan has its own distinct history; it cannot simply be reduced to an offshoot of China and interpreted through a Sino-centric lens. Sources of its distinctness include Taiwan's partial colonization by the Dutch in the 1600s; its centuries of only loose links to the mainland; its fifty years of transformation as a colony of Japan; and episodes of resistance against Japan and against the KMT's forces and supporters. While the Fujian cultural and linguistic roots of the majority of the Taiwanese, whose ancestors emigrated from the mainland many generations ago, are undeniable, this population's identity has also remained distinct despite decades of KMT efforts to impose Chineseness upon it. That is to say nothing of still other groups, notably the Hakka and the aboriginal tribes.

Explaining political divergence

Typically, those pursuing comparisons across the Taiwan Strait have seen such concerns as minor in relation to broader commonalities. This is particularly plausible in comparisons between authoritarian China and authoritarian-era Taiwan. Often, such comparisons pursue a Millian most-similar-systems design. They establish or assume many similarities, then search for one or more X variables that explain a divergence in Y. For many studies in this vein, the core outcome to be explained is precisely Taiwan's democratization and China's authoritarian continuity—or a factor that contributed directly to this outcome.

Dickson's comparison of the CCP and KMT is one example, finding that despite their common Leninist roots the latter party was more adaptable (more willing to respond to society and to democratize) because of "elite transition, feedback mechanisms, and a conducive environmental context" (1997, 242). Within a volume offering a sweeping comparative exploration of dominant-party systems in many parts of the world, Friedman and Wong provide chapter-length discussions of this same classic issue: ruling party stability in China and adaptation in Taiwan (2008). In their edited book on the topic of cross-strait comparisons, Gilley and Diamond also explain regime-level divergence, though both authors are relatively optimistic that China will eventually democratize and thus re-converge (2008).

Other comparative works, including several chapters within the Gilley-Diamond volume, explain specific events or processes that have played a crucial role in shaping regime-level outcomes in China and Taiwan. Cheng and Lin concisely explain why local elections contributed to democratization in Taiwan but not in China (2008). Solinger's discussion of business groups is another example, finding that "the existence or absence of tight, supportive bonds between the business class and its political regime" is the variable explaining why they have supported the CCP in China while non-mainlander entrepreneurs did not back the KMT in Taiwan (2008).

Teresa Wright's analysis of the student-led, Beijing-centered protest movement of 1989, and the 1990 student protest in Taipei known as the Month of March or Wild Lily movement, two cases she calls "ideal" for comparison, also falls into this category (2001, 4). Both marked turning points in their system's political development, with the latter reinforcing although not necessarily causing its transition to democracy under president Lee Teng-hui. In Wright's telling, students in Taipei prevailed because, in a somewhat more open environment, they were better able to cooperate with one another and thus could de-escalate the movement after government concessions. In Beijing, by contrast, fear and distrust pushed students to radicalize and dig in their heels, ultimately discrediting party reformers while pushing regime hardliners to the desperate measure of full-blown military repression.

There is no doubt much more work that could and should be done along such lines. Yet this research has already cumulated to a quite well-developed set of explanations for why authoritarianism persisted in the PRC but gave way in the ROC — particularly when we consider not just explicitly comparative work but also the extensive corpus of research that separately considers China's authoritarian resilience or Taiwan's transition. The remainder of this essay thus asks what <u>other</u> kinds of cross-strait comparisons are worth pursuing.

Beyond explaining divergence: Other approaches to comparison

Now that Taiwan is a democracy, large realms of politics there are strikingly different from politics in China. This is immediately evident in the electoral system, candidates' campaigns, the competitive party system, uncensored media and internet, and relatively unconstrained civil society. Apart from these first-order differences, contrasts also manifest in numerous other ways: from the ways in which electoral pressures shape leaders' calculations, to the political opportunity structures facing social movements. Freedoms of speech and association mean that Chinese and Taiwanese citizens face quite different incentives for modes of political action involving expression or joining with others. Consequently, establishing contemporary parallels between the two cases—never problem-free—has become far more challenging. What to do?

Comparisons can, of course, be pursued asynchronously, pairing China's today with Taiwan's yesterday and explaining outcomes other than regime change. It is common to compare China's version of a developmental state with those of Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan in their earlier stages of growth (Naughton 2007, especially chapter 17; Perkins 2014; Kroeber 2016, chapter 1). Kristen Looney's current research on the politics of rural development makes a good example of work that advances our understanding of political economy by focusing on (among other things) Taiwan in the 1950s–1970s and China's Hu Jintao-era New Socialist Countryside, exploring deep parallels and contrasts (2012).

What about comparing today's Taiwan with today's China? There remain many possibilities for comparisons that leverage features that these two cases continue to have in common. The point is not to explain the regime-level divergence — to the contrary, now it is sometimes *similarities or continuities* between China and Taiwan that are surprising or noteworthy. In other instances, this work retains a most-similar-systems design, identifying one or more causal factors that explain different outcomes. Either way, the aim is to derive findings of theoretical importance regarding other topics of interest.

The prolific China–Taiwan comparisons of anthropologist Robert P. Weller have focused on local associations, society, and culture, always with an eye on the political realm. He frames the comparison of these two cases in familiar terms: "A comparison of China and Taiwan is as close to a natural experiment as the social sciences can come." That comes in *Alternate Civilities*, which employed a most-similar-systems framework to advance the argument that democracy is not merely a Western import but in fact draws on roots in Chinese culture (1999, 11).

While accounting for cross-strait differences, Weller's work is premised on a common cultural heritage, and tends to highlight similarities. Sometimes he juxtaposes Taiwan of the past with China today. Both featured a "responsive" form of authoritarianism in which the state allows citizens some room for maneuver and obtains benefits from the feedback provided by "NGOs, petitions, complaints, and even local demonstrations" even as it also uses "a careful combination of co-optation, encapsulation keeping bottom-up forces confined to local levels, and repression" to minimize broader political change (2008, 123). Both have employed "governing by turning a blind eye" or "shared fictions," in which the state ignores violations of a clearly stated rule and in turn local people help "maintain the fiction that they are acting within the law"

(2017). Other observations clearly reach into the present day, such as Weller's book on nature as manifested in tourism, environmental movements, and environmental policy implementation (2006).[1] He highlights, for example, a pattern seen in China and Taiwan alike, in which local contention builds on kinship ties and community-based religious structures, while elite NGOs have different goals and draw on different resources and discourses. Taken as a whole, his work suggests the possibilities of analyzing elements of political culture by studying how the practices of citizens and local officials evolve under divergent political institutions.

Local governance institutions are another topic that presents opportunities for comparison (Hao and Liao 2008). Some of my own research has examined state–society interactions through the workings of the official neighborhood organizations, the Residents' Committees (RCs; *jumin weiyuanhui*) of the PRC and the Neighborhood Offices (*li bangongchu*) of the ROC. The former are larger and essentially appointed by city officials, while the latter consist mainly of a single leader (*lizhang*) who wins the seat in free and usually competitive elections. Despite these and other differences, I found that city residents of Beijing and Taipei had many similar patterns of interaction with and perceptions of their neighborhood leaders. I argued that this was because of, first, the similar webs of interpersonal networks that linked people with their community chiefs through social structures, activities, and services, and second, a widely prevalent vision of the proper state–society relationship as being close if not fused together, and intimately cooperative. More generally, what this suggests is that the ways in which government agencies and intermediaries interact with citizens in their everyday lives provide a fruitful avenue through which to explore important dimensions of the East Asian state (Read 2012).

Protests and social movements have provided opportunities for comparisons across the Taiwan Strait or even throughout the region, in ways already noted as well as others, such as seen in Weiss and Aspinall's volume on student activism (2012). At present, the extensive parallels between Taipei's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, both in 2014, are fueling a wave of comparative scholarship. Ho Ming-sho's book manuscript, for instance, dissects the links between the two protests in terms of economic and political context, legacies of previous protests, networks and experiences of youth participants, the causal effects of political opportunities and threats, as well as the role of "improvisation" and more (Ho 2017; see also Kaeding 2015; Jones 2017). As localist affronts to core tenets of Chinese nationalism, these occupations did not create much sympathy or resonance in the mainland. Still, they herald new opportunities for political comparisons among episodes of contention on China's periphery.

Cross-strait research also takes forms that go beyond the classic model of a paired, controlled comparison. Some research looks at Taiwan and China without the conceit that they are independent cases but rather as two entities linked to one another, both undergoing interrelated processes of change. Work in political economy often takes this form (D. Fuller 2008), with recent contributions on high technology industries detailing shifts in manufacturing and flows of knowledge between Taiwan and China (D. B. Fuller and Rubinstein 2013; M. M.

[1] Others, such as Ching-Ping Tang, have also carried out comparisons on the enforcement of environmental policies (1998; 2005).

Chu 2016). While contributing to international relations or other fields, these studies have much to say about domestic politics, whether we consider China's effects on Taiwan's elections or the political significance of tourists, businesspeople, families, and immigrants moving across the Taiwan Strait (S. Friedman 2015; Rowen 2016; Schubert 2016).

There are also many other topics with potential for creative comparative exploration. These include the politics of language: Thinking just about Mandarin, are China and Taiwan diverging or converging in the versions of *guoyu / putonghua* in use? The politics of education: What demands do parents make on public schools and how do they express them? The military: What attitudes do families have toward service in the armed forces? Gender: How are women leaders perceived in what traditionally were male-centered political systems? Gangs and secret societies: How do their dealings with the political world differ in a democratic as opposed to authoritarian context? Inquiry into such topics might help take research on political attitudes and culture, often pursued through surveys on values, trust, and support for democracy (Shi 2001; Y. Chu 2008), and connect it with more specific subjects of interest.

Conclusion

To the extent that it holds up under scrutiny, the idea of China and Taiwan as uniquely well paired for political comparison rested substantially on close parallels between their regimes and ruling parties during Taiwan's authoritarian or early transitional period. It is of course still entirely viable to conduct comparisons between (for instance) the KMT of the 1950s–1980s and the CCP of today or of the past. Yet present-day comparisons no longer necessarily fit this model. Democratization set Taiwan on a different path, and as the two cases diverge, their "ideal for comparison" qualities are attenuating somewhat. Now, differences between the two are often unsurprising and perhaps uninteresting because they simply resolve to the regime-type variable. There are nonetheless many promising opportunities for comparison.

Research explaining the contrasting trajectories of one of the classic cases of "Third Wave" democratic transition and the paradigmatic case of 21st century authoritarian persistence has certainly cumulated. Research on other topics, such as political culture and developmental states, has made progress as well. Yet scholars are just beginning to tap other possibilities. In exploring new directions, studies can leverage the two cases' remaining cultural, historical, linguistic, and institutional similarities without necessarily putting them forward as ideal for comparison or following a strict "most similar systems" logic. Many lines of inquiry for China–Taiwan research, whether on facets of the state or manifestations of youth activism, can also be extended into other countries in East Asia or even Southeast Asia. We can hope and expect that further comparative inquiry of the kinds discussed here can help to integrate China politics research into scholarly conversations that span the region, and beyond.

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