

Balanced, Judicious, But a Bit Too Optimistic

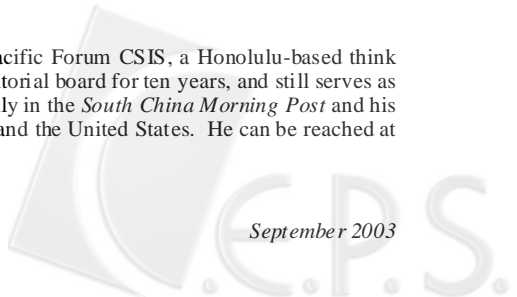
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

It is hard to come up with complaints about Roy's book without sounding churlish. *Taiwan: A Political History* deserves to be in the bookshelf of every China/Taiwan hand. It is a benchmark for scholars. It covers much terrain and provides a wealth of detail without becoming overwhelming or pedantic. The prose is easy to read, the judgments fair and thoughtful. Indeed, Roy deserves credit for tackling every difficult question, even when there are no easy answers.

For example, in his assessment of Taiwan's colonial experience under Japanese rule, he correctly notes the development that the Japanese brought to the island. "The Taiwanese gained in general and absolute terms, even if the system allowed some Japanese to gain more.... The Japanese constructed roads and railroads, built hospitals and harbors, established irrigation systems for the countryside and sewage systems and an electric power supply for cities, modernized Taiwan's banking and monetary system and established news media" (pp. 38, 39). As one measure, he notes there were 164 kilometers of roads when Japan took control over the island in 1899; by 1935, the number had reached 4,456 kilometers.

Roy also asks how the historian balances modernization with the protection of indigenous culture. On the one hand, he acknowledges that Japanese overlords tried to eliminate all negative Chinese cultural influences without regard for the long-term interests of the Taiwanese. Yet

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he also notes that the elimination of, for instance, foot-binding or head-hunting, may not have been a bad thing, after all.

Even more to the point, he rightly points out that if the Japanese could be accused of exploiting the Taiwanese, the mainlanders proved they could be just as rapacious when they resumed control of Taiwan after the war.

If I take issue with Roy it is in his conclusion, where he seems fairly sanguine about the possibility of reconciling Chinese demands for reunification with increasing ambivalence in Taiwan about rejoining "one China." He argues that growing sophistication on the mainland would recognize and celebrate Taiwan's accomplishments and vitality, and realize "whether as a province or an independent country, Taiwan offers China bright prospects for a fulfilling economic and cultural relationship, and that the absence of formal governance by Beijing over the island does not significantly undercut the security or prosperity of Chinese living on the mainland" (p. 246).

He is right, of course. However, I do not think the issue to mainlanders is security or prosperity. Rather, it is a question of history and national identity (whether rightly considered as such or not). The growth of democracy in China is not, if Internet chat rooms are any example, lending itself to measured and sober reflection. Rather, it appears to be giving vent to the worst forms of nationalism and even xenophobia. Public opinion on the mainland appears even more dogmatic on the Taiwan question than does the Beijing leadership. Indeed, fear of being outflanked on the right is what is pushing the leadership toward more doctrinaire policies on Taiwan. I hold little hope of moderation over time, especially so long as the leadership continues to play that nationalist card on its own.

Nor do I see Taiwanese leaders being sensitive to that problem. While it is not their burden to bear, Taiwan is the weaker party and thus will feel a disproportionate weight of the repercussions. Taipei will be accused of stirring things up, especially when the president promises not to unilaterally change the status quo (as he did in his inaugural speech).

Here, too, the dilemma is acute. Opinion polls regularly show that the Taiwanese favor the status quo, but my sense—which Roy acknowledges—is that this is so because the islanders fear the fallout from any drastic

change in their status. They are squeezed between economics which favor the mainland—increasing integration will slowly wrap Taiwan in an inescapable web of interests—and politics, which demands increasing expression of Taiwanese identity.

Americans can only hold their breath as this tension increases. The United States has made clear that it will honor its obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act, but Washington also views the recent statements of President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) as provocations. In a similar vein, questions have been rightly asked about Taiwan's pursuit of symbols of international prestige over practical and responsible diplomacy. For our purposes, the question is to what degree the ties to the United States encourage or allow Taiwan to be irresponsible. More to the point, how does the Taipei-Washington relationship impede serious dialogue across the Taiwan Strait? Answering this requires consideration of Beijing's behavior as well, since the mainland has also seemed on occasion to prefer to deal with Washington rather than Taipei.

That is to say, a book on Taiwan's political history should not be expected to answer these questions satisfactorily. To call them criticisms is unfair to Denny Roy and the effort that went into his excellent book.
