

# Taiwan's Democracy: Some Reservations

PETER R. MOODY, JR.

Denny Roy's political history of Taiwan is comprehensive, lucid, and balanced. It integrates international and domestic developments and, while incorporating appropriate political science theory, is free of jargon—in fact, it is pleasant to read. It is mainly a work of synthesis, drawing upon an array of secondary works in English, Chinese,<sup>1</sup> and Japanese.

It is tempting to say the book is stronger as narrative than as analysis, but this is not entirely fair. The various chapters provide detailed explanations for how Taiwan's politics have developed. The chapters are in rough chronological order, but each focuses on particular topics, and some chapters overlap in time. The different emphasis in different chapters does not always show clearly how Roy sees the relationship among the events he discusses. Taiwan's politics is often paradoxical: one generalization may be balanced by an equally valid contrary generalization.<sup>2</sup> Roy should not be faulted for failing to resolve the paradoxes, yet he might draw more explicit attention to them.

If this is a defect, however, it is the reverse side of one of the book's

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<sup>1</sup>Roy mainly uses Wade-Giles romanization, but lists some references in the mainland's official *Pinyin*. There is no obvious reason for the inconsistency. Moreover, the Chinese titles are not translated nor are characters provided, so it is sometimes difficult to figure out the nature of the source.

<sup>2</sup>For example, on p. 162 we learn that the "public" (exact time unspecified) was content with martial law, but we also learn of the great popularity of *Formosa* magazine, which wanted martial law abolished (p.167). Roy says Lee Teng-hui's political power rested on moneyed interests, but also discusses Lee's attempts to develop programs reflecting the views of the international order of good-thinkers: ecology, poverty alleviation, and the like.

major virtues—its lack of tendentiousness. There are a few themes which run through the discussion. There is a tacit (somewhat Whiggish?) chronicle of the triumph of democracy. Roy details the distinctiveness of Taiwan and the difficulty "outsiders" have had in governing the island. Roy emphasizes the role of individuals. Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) gets a pat on the head for his willingness to adapt in his later years, while, more problematically, Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) is scolded for putting his ambition before democracy in seeking a second term.

The emphasis on Taiwan as its own self is perhaps characteristic of the newer generation of scholarship. Old-timers tended to see Taiwan as a special instance of a more general China.<sup>3</sup> Taiwan is certainly distinctive, but so, perhaps, is any other region of China. There probably has developed a special Taiwan identity (or several different Taiwan identities), at least among some; but that identity is more political than cultural, social, or even historical.

What follows is less a "critique" of Roy's work than a set of reflections occasioned by it, focusing on the more problematic aspects of Taiwan's democracy. Roy gives due attention to the "ethnic" division as the dominant political cleavage.<sup>4</sup> Taiwan is also a rare instance of democracy taking hold without a general consensus on just what constitutes the demos that exercises the "cracy." Roy discusses Taiwan's unresolved international status but, like the American government, seems to assume that if all involved continue to temporize and not face too severely into the logic of the situation, in due time the issue will fade away. With luck, moreover, Roy

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<sup>3</sup>Ralph Clough, *Island China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Leonard H. D. Gordon, ed., *Taiwan: Studies in Chinese Local History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); and Bruce Jacobs' seminal study of *guanxi* (關係) and *ganqing* (感情) was based upon field work on Taiwan: "A Preliminary Model of Particularistic Ties in Chinese Political Alliances," *The China Quarterly*, no. 78 (June 1979): 237-73.

<sup>4</sup>Roy refuses to simplify the ethnic (for want of a better term) division, noting the rivalry between the larger Hokklo (福佬) population and the Hakka (客家人), who, Roy says, are often compared to gypsies—an analogy I had not heard before. Roy focuses on the Hakka as a put-upon group, although in recent times Hakka ancestry, however tenuous or even fictitious, has become a point of pride among Chinese political figures. See Mary S. Erbaugh, "The Secret History of the Hakka: The Chinese Revolution as a Hakka Enterprise," *The China Quarterly*, no. 132 (December 1992): 937-68.

and the Americans may be correct—anyway, no one has come up with any better suggestions. As long as Taiwan's international status is unresolved, however, there are clouds over Taiwan's democracy.

In the past, open discussion of whether Taiwan was "part" of China or an independent country in its own right was taboo; those who advocated Taiwan independence, or even looked as though they might advocate it, might be imprisoned, sometimes executed, perhaps murdered. The overt justification for martial law was the communist danger, but its covert function was to justify the unchallenged domination of the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) and the Chiang regime, to the neglect of the democratic aspects of the ROC constitution. Democracy and independence therefore came to be linked. Conservative advocates of independence, such as Peng Ming-min (彭明敏), argued that independence merely meant that Taiwan should be ruled, via democratic means, by the majority (whereas for some radicals democracy was a means to independence). Liberal mainlanders such as Lei Chen (雷震), who in principle wanted a unified China but also a democratic Taiwan, could be jailed for advocating independence (in its "two Chinas" version).

A government fully responsible to the people of Taiwan and only to them can, of course, make no claim to represent China—and the ROC effectively renounced this assertion in 1992. By the same token, a democratic government cannot be subordinate to a larger entity over which the people have no control. It is not for nothing that China blusters and makes threats in response to every move Taiwan makes toward democracy—nor does such reaction stem entirely from Beijing's distaste for democracy, either.

China's consolation is that, barring some radical turn of events, the international community will never accept an independent Taiwan—not because there is anything inherently objectionable about the idea, but because China will not allow it. The only member of that community that might conceivably lift a finger to defend Taiwan is the United States. This is an actual, not potential, limitation on Taiwan's democracy. Roy details the cooperation of American and ROC intelligence services in covert action against the mainland during the Chiang era, but at the same time there were persistent rumors that the Americans were in cahoots with liberal and

independence forces at this time to undermine the Chiang regime.<sup>5</sup> In any case, American interests and those of Taiwan do not completely coincide.

The dependence persists in the democratic era. It is most obviously manifested in the American insistence that Taiwan not declare independence (unlike, say, Slovakia or the Ukraine or, potentially, Quebec—none of which incur American ire). In addition, Taiwan must tolerate American hectoring about its institutional arrangements and, as Roy shows, even American penetration of its government (pp. 143-44). It is easy to deplore imperialistic arrogance; but, should trouble come, America may find itself paying the bill in blood and treasure, and so it is inevitable that America should try to keep things under control. However, the dependence on America limits Taiwan's freedom of action, democratic and otherwise; this dependence is an artifact of the island's unresolved identity.

Roy rightly stresses the role of individuals (for example, Chiang Ching-kuo's alleged desire not to go down in history as a dictator, p. 115). But political outcomes are often the products of "vectors," the unintended results of conflicting desires and the play of fortune. By the mid-1960s the United States had accepted the PRC as a permanent fact of life.<sup>6</sup> To survive, the ROC regime could no longer function primarily as the rump government of China, but had to sink deeper roots into Taiwan. In the end, of course, the KMT regime, at least, did not survive: but it resolved itself in growth and development, not catastrophe.

Not all of the roots are wholesome. During the democratic era, Taiwan politics has been characterized by "black gold": the infusion of money from gangster sources into elections. Elections everywhere are expensive,

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<sup>5</sup>According to this lore, the 1957 attack on the American embassy was a cover for ROC operatives who wanted access to American files. For the rabidly nationalistic objections to the American alliance, see Zhou Zhiming, ed., *Fei Zhengqing jituan zai Taiwan de da yinmou* (The big plot of the John King Fairbank clique on Taiwan), two volumes (Taipei: 1969).

<sup>6</sup>Roy discusses how America thwarted ROC plans for an invasion of the mainland in the famous year of 1961 (p. 115). In his memoirs, Roger Hilsman seems to imply that the United States would have supported the invasion if the ROC could pull it off. In the end Chiang Kai-shek got cold feet, and the United States concluded that the division of China was permanent. See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City: 1967), 310-20.

and democratic politics often works to the advantage of the rich and those who can provide money to politicians, and not just to the poor (who, in principle, can provide votes). The connection between politics and crime, however, antedates democracy.<sup>7</sup> Roy details a series of apparently political crimes in the early to mid-1980s, culminating in the murder of the journalist Henry Liu (劉宜良),<sup>8</sup> which finally provoked the American government to pressure the Taiwan regime to shape up. This political criminality may have been perverse evidence of the regime's ongoing liberalization: the "soft authoritarian" system rendered the formal institutions of the state less effective as instruments of arbitrary repression, so those in power turned to informal, non-legal means.<sup>9</sup>

But the period is also an anomaly, the criminality a symptom as well of a lack of strong leadership in a state built upon the leadership principle. Chiang Ching-kuo was often in poor health, and in the early 1980s seems to have been sicker than usual, leaving the regime in the hands of ad hoc coordinating committees. The malfeasance of those years is partly a manifestation of a slackening of control.<sup>10</sup> When Chiang did recover, he had to take radical measure to restore regime credibility. Democratization was to some degree the consequence of the leader's need to compensate for the mess left by his cronies and family.

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<sup>7</sup>The KMT, of course, has a long history of connections with organized crime. For a sensationalized account, which purports to explain the murder of Henry Liu, see David Kaplan, *Fires of the Dragon: Politics, Murder, and the Kuomintang* (New York: 1992); for a more scholarly historical account, see Brian Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: The Politics of Organized Crime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Roy says that the morning after Chen Wen-cheng had been questioned by the Garrison Command he "tuned up dead in his office" (p. 163). At the time it was said that he was found at the foot of a tall building at National Taiwan University, giving the unconvincing impression that he had jumped.

<sup>9</sup>So the story is that the murder of Henry Liu was the result of a deal between certain KMT and security circles and the Bamboo Union gang (竹聯幫) whereby the authorities would go easy on a crackdown on black society activities and the gangsters would win merit by service to their country.

<sup>10</sup>The murders were not the only sign. Also during this era came the Tenth Credit scandal, which may have been even more debilitating in the short run in that it implicated many of the supposedly more respectable members of the KMT establishment. Roy does not deal with this, perhaps because since then revelations of financial shenanigans have become commonplace.

While Chiang Ching-kuo used to be praised to the sky for bringing about the change on Taiwan, today it is more customary to proclaim Lee Teng-hui as "Mr. Democracy." Roy goes against the tide in faulting Lee's personal ambitions for undermining democracy. This is insightful; but there are also understandable reasons for what Lee did, and it is not clear that any other course would have served as reliably to consolidate the new democracy.

At least once Roy slips, portraying the main conflict on Taiwan as between the "KMT and Taiwanese" (p. 153). Lee, of course, is Taiwanese, and for most of his life was a pillar of the KMT establishment. This is the reason he qualified as Chiang Ching-kuo's last vice president.<sup>11</sup>

Taiwan became a democracy by conducting politics (for a change) in accord with the formal provisions of the ROC constitution. The constitution was ambiguous, however, on whether the real center of executive power lay with the President or the Premier. Upon becoming President, Lee met resistance from other KMT poobahs, whose objection was not that Lee was Taiwanese but that he held the top office and they did not. Lee strengthened his own position by strengthening the institutional position of the president, turning the presidency into a popularly-elected office. While there are many good arguments for the superior democratic nature of a parliamentary or cabinet system,<sup>12</sup> its supporters in Taiwan expected such a system would serve better to preserve the power structure of the Chiang era; the powerful and popular presidency consolidated the democratic system.

This brings back the theme that a democratic Taiwan implies an independent Taiwan. In order to consolidate his position, Lee also presented himself as the leader of the "Taiwanese." For a time Lee elaborated a broad

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<sup>11</sup>The expected choice was Chiang's premier, the able mainlander technocrat Sun Yun-hsuan (孫運璿). Roy notes that Sun was disabled by a stroke. Actually the stroke occurred, I think, the day *after* Sun had been denied the nomination.

<sup>12</sup>The political scientist Hu Fu (胡佛), in his introduction to the memoirs of General Hau Pei-tsun (郝柏村), notes the academic consensus of the early 1990s on the superiority of cabinet systems. See Wang Lixing, *Wukui: Hao Bocun de zhengzhi zhi lü* (With a clear conscience: The political road of Hau Pei-tsun) (Taipei: 1994), xxi. An argument over the form of government was one of the decisive differences between Hau and Lee Teng-hui when Hau served as Lee's premier. See Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 188-89.

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interpretation of what it meant to be Taiwanese, the "New Taiwanese" being all those who lived on the island and shared its fate; this view has apparently dissipated since Lee left office. Perhaps for a time, in the late pre-democratic period, the question of "ethnic" (or provincial, or national) identity had been depoliticized, a consequence of the general revulsion against the system on the mainland, the overall optimism of the late 1980s, and Chiang Ching-kuo's anticipation of what was to become Lee's "New Taiwanese." The play of democratic politics has, however, repoliticized the distinction. Roy speculates that within a few generations the distinctions will disappear. Assuming Taiwan lasts that long as a separate political entity, it is hard to see how he could be wrong. In the meantime, however, the question of identity will continue to skew Taiwan democracy.