

BOOK REVIEW

Taiwan in Troubled Times: Essays on the Chen Shui-bian Presidency.
Edited by JOHN F. COPPER. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2002.
264 pages. Hardback, ISBN: 981-02-4891-1.

The six essays in the book, written by four different scholars, read like Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) propaganda against their political antagonists. If the authors are not chastising the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) government on cross-Straits relations, they are calling the DPP "undemocratic" and accusing it of winning elections by "foul play" and "dirty politics" (p. 148). The book's editor, John Copper, writes in the preface that these essays are an "assessment of the Chen Shui-bian [陳水扁] presidency's first eighteen months." What he has produced, however, is a collection of un-insightful opinions and criticisms of Chen's cross-Straits policy littered with cheap shots at domestic policy.

On the first page of the book, Copper writes that under the DPP, "Taiwan experienced political paralysis. This affected the economy. And it impacted relations with China" (p. v). These developments have placed Taiwan "truly at a crossroads" where the government "not only faces serious difficulties but presents challenges to China, the United States, and the rest of the world" (p. 18).

This characterization may be true, but is hardly the fault of one president and his party alone. Economically, Taiwan has done no worse than the rest of the world—and better in many respects. Everything in Taiwan always impacts relations with China. Moreover, the political deadlock the government (including the legislature) has trapped itself in over the past three years has been a result of irresponsible politicians from all parties, who act within self-interested political groups and are locked into a chronic blame-game over the nation's problems, choosing to point fingers rather

than work towards solutions. Constitutional reform has made little progress, and even a job creation program was shelved without any alternative proposals.

Yet within the pages of *Taiwan in Troubled Times* we gain little insight into these problems. Instead, we are treated to summaries of newspaper clippings, accounts of Chen's election, his China policy, the deterioration of the economy, and China's reaction to and dislike of Chen. Important issues are touched on in passing, but not taken in for careful analysis.

The author attempts to make cross-Strait relations the main focus of the book. Each essay deals with the topic, if not directly, then from the perspective of how internal party politics affect the president's policy, or how China influences elections. One of the most important issues in the 2000 presidential elections was cross-Strait relations, Copper writes (p. 21), but then in the next chapter Sheng Lijun, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, says that all candidates "de-emphasized the unification/independence issue" (p. 53). Well, which is it?

In fact, many have argued elsewhere that if voters were concerned more about cross-Strait relations, rather than, say, political corruption, they would have re-elected the KMT in the presidential elections and the 2001 legislative elections. And yet the voters did not.

China has frustrated Chen, to be sure. Indeed, Sheng Lijun has thus titled his essay "Whither Cross-Strait Relations." Unfortunately, Sheng offers us little insight. He tells us that China has threatened Taiwan; China's economy has strengthened, while Taiwan's has weakened; and Chen has received pressure to loosen economic links with China. Instead of putting these developments into critical perspective, the essay puts its overused cliché title to use by taking every opportunity to criticize the government. Sheng goes on for pages on "Taiwan's deteriorating economy" (p. 81), how the DPP government "has obviously intensified societal divisions" (p.78), and on the "government's incompetence" (p. 82), which have had indirect influences on relations with China. We are not, however, told how. In fact, at the end we are left with not much more insight than an editorial from the *Central Daily News* (中央日報).

George W. Tsai's (蔡瑋) article "Dynamic Stability in Beijing-Taipei

Relations" tries to pick up where Sheng leaves off by discussing why "peace in the Taiwan Strait is certainly not only in the interests of Taiwan, but is to the advantage of China" (p. 123). Here we hope for some analysis of Beijing's Taiwan policy, some insight on both Chinese leaders' views on the Chen government and why Beijing has moved from deterring independence to encouraging reunification. Again, however, we are given twenty pages of checklists of condensed newspaper reports interspersed with off-the-cuff assumptions like "a stable cross-Strait relationship will indeed enable Chinese leaders to continue to focus on China's domestic matters," and "a stable relationship across the Taiwan Strait will certainly help boost China's image among Taiwan's populace" (p. 124).

While this essay fails to fill in any details on China, it does, however, make an attempt to assess the fact that as Taiwanese voters stepped left in the face of China's threats, the DPP moved right. The one-time radical independence activists assimilated into the KMT machinery of the Republic of China in order to become a mainstream political party. As former DPP chairman Frank Hsieh (謝長廷) said at the party's year 2000 anniversary, "As a ruling party, it is inevitable for us to adopt a 'middle road', in order to follow current social trends."

This process began very early on, as Chao Chien-min (趙建民) points out in the book's most interesting chapter, "The Democratic Progressive Party's Factional Politics and Taiwan Independence." In 1991 the DPP passed the "Taiwan Independence Plank" which initially called for the establishment of the Republic of Taiwan but got watered down by Chen Shui-bian to become a call for a plebiscite over the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty. This was the beginning of the evolution of the DPP's independence position.

Chao tries to explain away this shift as being a function of elections, writing that "it is apparent that the hope for electoral victory was the catalyst behind the transition" (p. 114), a statement which is just plain wrong. In fact, the DPP had its greatest electoral performance under a pro-independence banner, when, in the 1989 legislative elections, the party won 41 percent of the popular vote. Under their independence modifications, the DPP has failed to perform as well. The dampening of the independence

line is not necessarily a calculated move made by a group of rational actors, but appears, rather, to hinge on personalities and personal interest. Yet we hear nothing of that here.

Each of the articles in this book reports on and gives great emphasis to the DPP's shift, but each fails to tell us why it happened. Copper, in context of the 2000 presidential election, states that Chen became "accommodationist" (p. 22), which Chen did, but not solely for votes, as Copper tries to argue. There is no mention of the need for financial backing, the conglomerates Chen wooed into his camp, or his courting of the business community.

Local names are spelled inconsistently, sometimes using Wade-Giles, sometimes *pinyin*, depending on the author's preference. Not only does this show disrespect to the person and confuse readers, but it also makes a mess of the index. For instance, Frank Hsieh will be found under "Hsieh Chang-ting," or a similarly unfamiliar "Xie, Frank," with neither being accompanied by a "see also."

These last points are minor perhaps, and may not influence the authors' arguments, but in a book by Taiwan experts these errors stand out like a sore thumb, giving the work that much less credibility.

Even the casual observer of Taiwan who checks in periodically on the political and economic developments of the island and its relations with China will find this work sorely disappointing. The pages between the glossy hardbound covers contain nothing we do not know already, and little or no analysis on why events have transpired or how they might evolve. Finally, for the student of Taiwan or East Asia, the book has the dangerous potential to mislead, both in terminology and content.

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