

Taiwan's Changing Political Landscape

A Reflection on the 2018 Midterm Election

An Interview with Shelley Rigger

In recent years, Taiwan finds itself at a crossroads. A small island of 23 million people is now facing many challenges, from economic transformation to a struggle over its national identity. In this wide-ranging interview, Shelley Rigger, the Brown Professor of East Asian Politics and Chair of Chinese Studies at Davidson College, deconstructs Taiwan's political culture by offering her thoughts on the 2018 midterm election, Taiwan-China relations, the LGBT Referendum, and the 2020 presidential election.

Taiwan and Academic Interests

Journal: You have said that your interest in Taiwan goes back to the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. What was it like studying the democratization of Taiwan in the 1990s and how does that compare with the Taiwan of today? What about your interest in Taiwan has changed over the years?

Rigger: I was interested in Taiwan before 1989, but I was redirected back to Taiwan by the Tiananmen Crisis. Actually, my first visit to the island was in 1982. It was the summer after my junior year of college and I had been assigned to write a history of Taiwan for a seminar on Sino-American-Taiwanese relations. At the time, this was right after the United States had normalized relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), so we really thought that Taiwan's future was not bright and the seminar focused on how the U.S. could help direct the future of PRC-Taiwan relations.

For the assignment, I had to write a portion on Taiwanese history and it was really striking to see all of the research on the Japanese occupation. Now, you could write a whole thesis on any number of specific topics within Taiwan's history using only English language sources, but at that time, there was very little about Taiwanese history written in English. There were only these big picture books that the Japanese colonial government produced to show what a great job they were doing in governing Taiwan.

In these picture books, the aboriginal people of Taiwan were a very important theme as was the subduing, suppression, oppressing, and repressing of them. I had never learned about that before, so I became very interested in Taiwan's aboriginal people. However, when you get to all of the post-45 era research, there is literally not one single mention of indigenous people in any source. I was curious to know what happened to Taiwan's indigenous people after 1945, so I ended up spending that summer in Hualien finding out what had become of the *yuanzhumin* (原住民 or indigenous people). In those days, we called them *gaoshanzu* (高山族), which in English means "mountain people," but now we know that they do not prefer to be defined that way.

1982 was still the authoritarian era, so things were very different in the early 80s than even the early 90s, and extremely different from the late 90s. During my research, I had encountered George Kerr's *Formosa Betrayed* about the 228 Incident where the government killed many Taiwanese critical of the Kuomintang. As a young college student, I stupidly asked people in Taiwan about it. At the time, I was living in Hualien with a family. The father was a doctor and the grandfather had been a doctor, so they were exactly the kind of people — Taiwanese people or *benshengren* (本省人) — who were targeted in 228. But being naive and not understanding the sensitivity of the issue, I asked the grandfather about it and he acted as if he had no idea what I was talking about. At the time I wondered if the problem was a language barrier because he spoke Taiwanese and Japanese, and I was speaking Mandarin to him, but now I realize that he was scared to death.

Another thing I did that scared my host family a lot was whistling that song, *molihua* (茉莉花), and the kids always said, "Stop it!" The song is politically sensitive and it was almost as if I had been whistling the national anthem. During that summer, there was a foreign affairs police officer who was assigned to me. There I was, a college student, but I had a foreign affairs police officer assigned to watch me. Every couple of weekends we would go do something fun and somewhere along the way he would ask me questions, but his English was worse than my Chinese and my Chinese was pretty awful at the time. He never got any good information out of me at all, but I got quite a few fun afternoons at the beach baking sweet potatoes in the sand with a bunch of young people. It was really fun, hanging out with my police officer. Before I got ready to leave back to the United States, the father in the family took me aside and said, "I think you should know, not only are we not the same country as China, but we are not the same nationality." That was as close as anybody got to saying anything politically incorrect the whole summer.

Fast forward to 1991 when I was doing my dissertation research and there was a line of flags down the middle of *Zhongxiaodonglu* (忠孝東路 or Zhongxiao East Road) advertising the World United Formosans for Independence slate of candidates in the 1991 national assembly election. So, in 9 years, 1982 to 1991, Taiwan had gone from not acknowledging any of its authoritarian history to openly advocating for Taiwan independence in politics, and that was okay.

Journal: Your research on Taiwanese youths suggests that they are more pragmatic than conventional assumptions. And now, polls show that young Taiwanese are more in favor of Ko Wen-je, a politician who is relatively pro-China, as a candidate for the next president. Do you think this situation supports or contradicts your previous research?

Rigger: First of all, I think it is really important to recognize that my previous research is very old. When talking about youth politics, 12 years is a long time. All of those young people are old people now, or at least they are not young people anymore. I am actually hoping to repeat a similar kind of research next year to learn about this generation of young people in Taiwan. However, my preliminary impression is that I may not find much of a difference. It seems to me that young Taiwanese still think of themselves as Taiwanese. That is, the whole idea that they have in their minds about whether they are Chinese or Taiwanese is not relevant. But they are not necessarily anti-China and they are not as hostile toward the mainland in the way as older Taiwanese people. My feeling is that young people have a preference for Ko Wen-je because he is also walking that line of not making a big deal about national identity but also not excluding the possibility of interacting with the mainland. It does not surprise me then, that young people are drawn to him.

Journal: What do you think about Tsai Ing-wen's performance in foreign policy? Has her hardline stance against Beijing helped or hurt Taiwan's reputation and diplomatic opportunities abroad?

Rigger: I would not characterize her stance as hardline. I would characterize it as very moderate, but not moderate enough to satisfy Beijing. Thus, the way I describe her policy is asymptotic to the "92 Consensus" or as close as you can get, but never actually touching the words "92 Consensus." And the reason for that is that first of all, "92 Consensus" has always been a problematic phrase for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and second of all, the meaning of "92 Consensus" is very slippery and Beijing is changing it constantly. I think now it is really impossible for Tsai Ing-wen to accept the "92 Consensus" because the content has been redefined as the PRC has acted on the One China principle. But in every other way, I would characterize her position as very moderate and also impressively steady. I think it needs to be steady because of the environment that she is in, and especially in regard to her cross-strait or external/international policies. They are quite healthy for Taiwan because they are predictable, consistent and other governments know what to expect from her.

Midterm Election

Journal: In your 2011 book, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse*, you make the case that Taiwanese domestic politics has shifted to a Taiwan-centered strategy. How much of this strategy impacted the midterm elections where Tsai Ing-wen's party was thrashed for their stance towards the mainland and the country's stagnating economic growth?

Rigger: I do not think that President Tsai's stance towards the mainland was why the DPP did poorly in this election. I think they underperformed because of domestic policy factors, which made sense as those policies were unfolding and as Tsai Ing-wen was enacting her programs. But in retrospect, this was destined to have really bad consequences in the midterm election. I think a lot of us have recognized this all along and perhaps have been overly willing to congratulate Tsai Ing-wen for doing it. A lot of her policy positions were calculated from the very beginning to have long-term benefit but short-term costs. I think that we need to recognize that leaders sometimes have to do that. Our leaders in this country are running up a jaw-dropping deficit in order to avoid short-term sacrifice or pain. That is, cutting everybody's taxes, raising all the spending, guns, butter, all of it, and a still delivering a tax cut. This is a recipe for catastrophe in the future, but it looks great in the short-term.

Tsai Ing-wen did not do that. She said that Taiwan could not afford to support pension levels at the level that they have been, so they needed to find a way to reduce the government's spending on civil servant and military pensions. They needed to figure out solutions to some of their environmental problems. They needed to figure out how to make the labor laws more flexible and how to recalibrate their economic policies so that they have a long-term outlet for production — but none of these things were going to pay off in the short-term. But we did not understand how much they were going to hurt people in the short-term.

I learned only after the election that there were people who were simultaneously seeing their pensions reduced and their spending increased. If they were retired, they had their income cut, or if they were working, they saw their hours cut because they were not allowed to do as much overtime as before. They were also being required to upgrade their vehicles because they were being asked to trade in old motorcycles for the more energy and environmentally friendly motorcycles. Thus, for many people, their incomes were reduced but their obligations to spend money increased. When you look at it from that perspective, it is unsurprising that the DPP did not do very well in the midterm election. The DPP leadership always had their eye on the long-term benefits of their economic policies and maybe they paid less attention to the short-term costs. There were some really interesting Kuomintang (KMT) candidates as well and I think Han Kuo-yu, in particular, created a wave of enthusiasm that was timed very well. He did not peak too early but right on time. He lifted some other KMT candidates with him as well.

Journal: Do you think that the DPP will be able to recover their position before the 2020 presidential election?

Rigger: I believe that it is very likely. Taiwan's presidents often have terrible approval ratings all through their presidencies but are reelected. A politician, for example, can have very high approval ratings — Chen Shui-bian had around 70 percent approval ratings when he was mayor of Taipei City, but he lost the reelection to Ma Ying-jeou. I am interested in thinking about how the Taiwanese use polling, perhaps as a messaging strategy more than as an indicator of future action. We tend to think that when people

are asked about what they think of Tsai Ing-wen, that their answers would be a one-to-one correspondence. However, I sometimes think that Taiwanese voters say, “Well, Tsai Ing-wen is president now, so what is what is she likely to do?” If voters believe that her policies were a little too extreme, they might express interest in the other party as a way of moderating her. But if Ma Ying-jeou was president, they might express interest in Tsai as a way of moderating him.

I have actually charted this kind of data before. Some of the questions asked participants if the pace of cross-strait relations was too fast, too slow, or just right. There are always weird fluctuations. For a while, the survey data might show that participants thought relations were moving too fast, but then all of a sudden it would change to too slow and then back to too fast again. If you account for the change of president, all of a sudden, it becomes clearer. For example, when Chen Shui-bian was president, respondents thought the relationship was moving too slow, but when Ma Ying-jeou was elected, suddenly it became too fast. Now, Tsai Ing-wen is president and respondents think the pace of cross-strait relations has slowed down again. I think we have to be careful how we interpret polling in Taiwan so I think it is possible that Tsai Ing-wen could come back. I think the DPP will not do as well in the next round of legislative elections because the KMT has repaired some of its local organizational structures in ways that will allow it to be a more robust support network for 2020 candidates. However, I still think Tsai Ing-wen has a chance at reelection.

Journal: What can we learn from the results of the 2018 midterm elections about the Taiwanese people’s opinions, especially with regard to Taiwan-China relations?

Rigger: The results were not so much something new, but rather a confirmation that Taiwanese voters are very conservative. They do not like politicians who move too quickly in any particular direction. Something like the marriage equality referendum is not necessarily comfortable terrain for a lot of Taiwanese people, especially rural and older Taiwanese. If we go to Taipei, one would feel as if they are in a very progressive, liberal and international city. If one were to go to Puli, Nantou, or Alian [district] in Kaohsiung, they would see some more traditional communities there. The DPP in this election also got out ahead of the electorate in terms of being characterized or even stereotyped as associated with post-materialist issues — environmental, economic, social — which outpaced the comfort level of a lot of voters.

LGBT Referendum

Journal: The referendum that the Taiwanese government conducted with the midterm election was highly controversial. Some people argued that the issue related to human rights, such as the rights of LGBT citizens, and that it should not have been brought up as a referendum. What are your thoughts about the referendum?

Rigger: First of all, referenda are not a good way to make decisions in a democracy. A certain faction within the DPP has had a strong preoccupation with referenda for a long

time. In part, it comes out of a democratic impulse, such as direct democracy. They think that if democracy is good, then direct democracy is better. But it also comes out of a tradition of imagining or believing that the solution to Taiwan's fundamental problem, which is a problem of national identity, is a referendum or a plebiscite on independence. The idea of a referendum has been linked with the DPP and deep green thinking. It has also been linked with independence from day one. Referenda are not only fraught in the way that they are fraught in every country, but even more so in Taiwan because they are connected too many other factors. Because of this preoccupation, the DPP made it easier to put a referendum on the ballot. This allowed competing referenda on the same ballot and that leads to a lot of crazy of things. There was a possibility that two things would pass that are contradictory, and then what would happen?

On the ballot, we had a marriage equality referendum and an anti-marriage equality referendum at the same time. What if they had both passed? Given the threshold for what qualifies as passing, they could have both passed. That does not make sense and that is not how you make policy. Social movement organizations that were aligned with the DPP, but were not under the control of the party actually put the referendum on the ballot, and that is important because the DPP saw this train wreck coming. What ended up happening was that the anti-gay marriage side did all the dirty tricks that you would expect them to do and successfully muddled this issue. I just read today that the DPP is proposing legislation. If they had done that two and a half years ago, it would have been no problem. Because they did not do it two and a half years ago due to timidity and indecision, now there is this referendum that says that the public does not agree with this. It is just a big mess. The way to avoid this mess would have been to just pass the legislation at the beginning of the new legislative yuan session when the DPP had the votes. Maybe it would not have been an easy vote but it would have been forgotten. Either that, or the DPP should not have let the referendum happen. Marriage equality was an opportunity for Taiwan to put itself forward as the most progressive country in East Asia. If they had passed it as a law, it would have been fine and the anti-marriage equality side would not have had the opportunity to run such an ugly campaign against LGBTQ people.

Journal: Taiwan has been lauded as the most LGBT tolerant place in Asia. The results of the referendum were shocking for many international observers. Could you explain a little more about why you think the referendum failed? Do you think the referendum has negatively impacted civil society and human rights organizations in Taiwan? Lastly, although the referendum failed in regard to amending the Civil Code, on February 20th, the Executive Yuan and Legislative Yuan passed a new bill that offers LGBT equality in marriage rights, complying with the ruling of the Supreme Court. This will make Taiwan the first country in Asia to adopt marriage equality for LGBT citizens. How do you think the Taiwanese public will react to this new law given their disapproval of the referendum?

Rigger: 63 percent of people voted “no” and 30 percent voted “yes” on marriage equality. Neither one of them was a resounding majority of all voters, and that is part of the

problem with referenda: the threshold is so low that you can get a meaningful result even though it is not a very large percentage of voters. It is similar to how Donald Trump was elected in the United States. If you look at all eligible voters in the country, how many of them actually pulled the lever for Donald Trump? It is a pretty small percentage. This is the same kind of problem.

I will say, I do not think it is the end of the world. I think the Taiwanese government is doing the right thing. They are repairing the mistake that they made for not taking care of this right away when they first came into office. I am sympathetic to Tsai Ing-wen for not doing it when she could have, so maybe I will tell that story too. I think why she did not make it a priority at the beginning was because it was never her priority. It was something that was pushed on her by activists who had worked on her campaign and helped her get elected, but she was really focused on bread and butter survival and economic issues. So, the fact that she did not want to spend her political capital in that first year on marriage equality makes sense to me, but I think given the amount of pressure she was under, maybe that was the time to do it.

In any case, the referendum was a self-made disaster for the DPP. The easing up on the referendum rules was something that happened because you have people in Taiwan who just do not understand how conservative a lot of ordinary voters are and they do not get it that you can get a result you do not want. For example, now, a group is pushing for a referendum on independence. Here is what will happen if they ever succeed in getting it on the ballot: someone else will put a ballot measure for unification, and I think it is just as likely that the unification one will pass as it is that the independence one will pass. You are playing with fire when you do these things, and I think that is what really went wrong. There was no discipline. People did not get the seriousness of what they were doing. I think it is easy if you live in Taipei to imagine that everybody agrees with you, but go visit your grandparents and their neighbors before you decide that everybody agrees with you. Lastly, in my personal experiences, I just want to clarify my earlier statement about rural and older voters. A lot of elderly people in Taiwan would not have voted against gay marriage or marriage equality except that they were fed some nasty propaganda by the other side.

Journal: What do you think of the new Permanent Partnership Law?

Rigger: The Permanent Partnership Law is disappointing to marriage equality activists who wanted real marriage equality. However, I think it is a good compromise and the best that people are going to get at this point. If I were advising politicians in Taiwan, I would tell them to move on.

The Future of Taiwan

Journal: Some veteran politicians, for example those of Formosa Alliance, recommend a referendum on Taiwanese independence. And the American Institute in Taiwan openly opposed it. What stance and strategy do you think the United States should adopt if

the Taiwanese decide to pursue independence in a referendum?

Rigger: If they decide to pursue independence in a referendum, the U.S. will not stand behind that.

Journal: Tsai Ing-wen has declared that she will run for reelection in 2020, but polls show that she could defeat no potential competitors. We did discuss earlier about polls, but also including Ko Wen-je and Han Kuo-yu. What do you think about Tsai's chances of pulling off an upset win? Will her incumbency help her?

Rigger: Xi Jinping helps her, for one thing, by redirecting the focus of the conversation in Taiwan away from domestic issues to cross-strait issues where people are fairly favorable toward her position. I definitely do not count her out. We could have said similar things about Ma Ying-jeou at a similar point in his presidency. As such, there are a lot of ways that the KMT can mismanage the situation and there are a lot of ways that the DPP can mismanage it too, however I am not calling this election now.

Journal: The KMT has shown strong pro-China inclinations recently. What strategy do you think the U.S. should adopt if a pro-China candidate wins the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election? What should the U.S. do if the next Taiwanese president accepts Xi's invitation to negotiate a reunification with the mainland?

Rigger: Those things are not very likely. If you look at the people who are on the list of potential KMT candidates, none of them are even as sinophilic as Hong Xiuzhu, so we are talking about people to the right of Hong Xiuzhu. There will not be anybody who is looking to complete a unification deal.

Journal: With China adopting a more assertive stance with Xi Jinping's leadership, leaving only 17 countries that still recognize Taiwan, in what direction do you think the Tsai administration will lead Taiwan's foreign relations in the future?

Rigger: Her interview with CNN was quite interesting because, in some ways, it was the first deviation from the straight, consistent, and moderate line she has held. She did not say it directly but implied that Taiwan was the canary in the coal mine. What happens in Taiwan is indicative of how the PRC government is likely to deal with other issues, so she issued a warning for other countries to be careful, and pay attention to what is happening. That is more of an assertive position than I have seen her take previously so I found that interesting, and that what she recognizes is that the tide is turning against Beijing in a lot of places — certainly in Washington, but to some extent, in the region as well. There seems to be an opportunity to say that the Chinese juggernaut is not absolutely unstoppable, and she wants us to think about how we might change the trajectory a little bit.

Journal: This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act. What should we expect to see from Taiwan this year in regards to its relationship with Beijing?

Rigger: With Beijing, there is going to be very little activity because the PRC decided early on in its relationship with Taiwan, but now it is firmly entrenched, that they cannot deal with Tsai Ing-wen. Indeed, they are waiting for the next president and they are certainly hoping it is not her again. At the moment they feel quite confident that they can afford to wait, and that the situation is not deteriorating. Their leverage is at a minimum consistent and steady, and at a maximum, increasing. Beijing does not feel any pressure to “get on it” with Tsai Ing-Wen, so I do not think there will be much change this year.

Shelley Rigger is the Brown Professor of East Asian Politics and Chair of Chinese Studies at Davidson College. She has a Ph.D. from Harvard University and a B.A. from Princeton University. She is the author of three books: Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy; From Opposition to Power: Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party; and Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse.
