

Student Movements in Taiwan: then and now

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As you may know, Taiwan has recently experienced controversy over a Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services, and this has led to the development of a student Occupy movement. Further, we see the violent repression by riot police of a breakaway attempt to occupy central office of the Executive branch of the Government. I was contacted by the LSE Taiwan Student Society, which has shown great concern about these developments, and which has organized this panel discussion. I have agreed to help to design this event and to be the first speaker, and I am thinking about how, as such, an event structure can be designed that offers a common basis for all of us present – no matter whether we are ‘Blue’ or ‘Green’, or ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ the Agreement – to reflect on the prospects for the developments in Taiwan.

First of all, I would like to use a metaphor: after an airplane takes off, it applies its engine power to climb higher and higher, through the bumpy turbulence, to a space above the clouds where the air is calm. I am designing this event in the same way. I will begin at ground level, by talking about “Student Movements in Taiwan: then and now”. Then Dr Paul-François Tremlett of the Open University will take us higher, by talking about “Global Occupy: methods and strategies”, and then Dr Bill Kissane of the LSE Department of Government will take us to a general perspective with “Democracy and Democratization: theories and problems”. As the engine to launch us beyond the current economic and political turbulence in Taiwan, I will use my own experience of participant-observation of protests in Taiwan in 1988 to get us started. I hope this will work, and that dialogue will follow.

In 1988, I took part in student support for the 5-20 Farmers’ Movement. This was when about four thousand farmers marched to the government Legislature, as part of a protest that ended in violence around the Taipei Train Station area. The protest campaigned against the KMT government’s plan to open up Taiwan’s agriculture market to foreign imports, in particular, to the US. Being a farmer at this time meant working very long hours, but for very little profit. No young people wanted to be farmers: Taiwan’s farmers then were mostly in their 50s, 60s, and even 70s. These elderly farmers had no choice. The only way they could make their voices heard was by taking coach journeys all the way from their villages across Taiwan to Taipei, where they protested to bring attention to the hardship of their lives.

What happened was that after sunset, hundreds of students (including myself) came out to create a peaceful sit-in area between the police and the farmers. However, as it approached mid-night, the riot police forced us to leave, 'firing' water cannons which were so powerful that we were knocked down, and this was followed by extreme violence from the police. Many of us were hit with police shields and sticks. I remember some fellow students had blood all over their faces and heads, and others were dragged along the ground by their arms or legs, causing scratches and bleeding all over their backs. I was at one point arrested, and I remember that my whole body was picked up by a riot policeman. However, all of a sudden, he then decided to grab a big man instead, and he let go of me. I used this chance to escape. I ran to hide beneath a footbridge, watching the police turning crazy: they randomly hit passersby, including a pregnant woman and an elderly couple. When there was a break, I immediately ran over to join a column of people, who were lined up next to each other, pushing away from the police attack alongside the metal-shuttered fronts of some closed shops. Suddenly, a door was half-opened, and I followed some other people into a shop. Immediately afterwards, this shop door was closed and I heard many people who were outside shouting again and again for someone to open the door. I hid in the owner's home above the shop overnight; through the tiny gap in the curtain at the window I saw thousands of policemen sweeping along the streets and lanes. Some were even knocking at people's houses and searching for and arresting many more people. I was wet, cold and shaking: It was a sleepless night. When sunrise came, the whole street was empty, and nobody was there. It was hard to connect this with what I had seen during the night.

The present student movement is the 3-18 Sunflower Student Occupy Movement. I have been following live broadcasts and social media of what has been happening. On 17 March the ruling KMT government passed the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement in Parliament without even hardly any review, in just 30 seconds. In contrast, the Agreement has provoked considerable discussion and debate in Taiwan's society. The Agreement's proposals will bring about monumental changes to Taiwan: it will further open Taiwan's service market to China, in up to 64 categories of industry. These include the medical, transportation, and communication industries. The passing of this Agreement will thus have a significant impact on the livelihoods of ordinary Taiwanese people in various sectors; in particular, it may cause serious damage to Taiwan's economic autonomy and sustainability, freedom of speech, and even national sovereignty. This has the potential to alter Taiwan's character and to undermine Taiwan's democratic achievements. However, despite being such a critical decision for Taiwan's future, it has been passed via an unlawful process which violates the principles of democratic transparency and accountability.

Here is a metaphor for Taiwan's current crisis: "Taiwan's democracy had been pushed to the edge of the cliff, with nowhere to go. The only way out was by climbing over the wall" 臺灣的民主已經被逼到懸崖邊，沒有退路了。只好翻牆了 (quoted from one of the Sunflower Occupy leaders, Dr Huang Guo-Chang 黃國昌, Research Fellow, Institute of Law, Academia Sinica). Actually, the night after the Agreement was passed, a group of students, along with some scholars and NGO members, took this course of action; they climbed over the wall of the Parliament and occupied its hall.

Since that night (18 March), students have been occupying that space, peacefully campaigning against the unlawful and undemocratic ratification of the Agreement, and they are there with the acquiescence of the Parliament President, Wang Jin-pyng 王金平. The Student protest demands are twofold: 1) 退回服貿 Send back the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement; and 2) 通過審查條例 Pass a regulation for a thorough legislative review. The protest, which has come to be known as the Sunflower Student Occupy Movement, has gathered wide public support within the island as well as from various countries and cities, in particular, Hong Kong.

However, as I mentioned before, responses to the development of the campaign have included violent repression by riot police of a breakaway attempt to occupy the central offices of the Executive branch on Sunday 23 March. As I watched the footage on social media, I saw more or less the same kind of state violence against students and citizens at the Executive branch as I had experienced in the Taipei Train Station area in 1988. I am not the only one to see the link with the farmers' protest in 1988. On the same day, around 30 of these farmers returned to Taipei to join the protest. Let me quote Wu Chiu-ku, who is one of them: "We decided that we must come after seeing scenes on Monday of unarmed students being hit with police batons and bleeding. This is reminiscent of the old terror we suffered back then. It was totally unimaginable that such things could be repeated in Taiwan 26 years on. Twenty-six years ago, students supported us. Now we come to support the students."

Today, 26 years after the 5-20 incident, how is it that we see the same brutal state violence against unarmed and peaceful students in democratic Taiwan? How can the highest authorities of the government accuse these students, who are lying on the floor and keeping their hands raised, and who nevertheless still get hit, of being violent criminals? What should those riot police, who hit people for no reason, be called? On Monday, student associations all over Taiwan called for a strike in support of the peaceful movement. Many blog writers and social media users have turned their photo icons black, meaning 'lights off' (關燈), which signifies the darkest night of Taiwan's history and expresses mourning for 'the turning backward of Taiwan's democracy'.

It is a paradox, but it is also true, that some things are seen and known more clearly in the darkness of night. In the dysfunctional situation of power abuse, the trust between citizens and the police (who are authorized to use force to protect citizens) has been ruptured. But these events more than anything reveal truths about our own democratic development which, although difficult, nevertheless bring to us to face a diagnosis without which we cannot move forward. So in these dark events, there might just be signs of greater honesty, truth and light.

Now please let us also turn off the light, so that we may reflect in the darkness on the trauma caused by the recent state terror and violence, whether through experiencing it or witnessing it or watching it on the media.

Now, the light is back on. Is there any truth in the saying that “the darkest night is just before the dawn”? Certainly, it is particularly inspiring to see the protesting students studying at night and trying to imagine the future of Taiwan while lacking basic comforts. We do not want to be naively optimistic, but we also do not want to be without hope. This is why tonight’s panel discussion is entitled ‘Taiwan’s democracy in action’ (rather than ‘Taiwan’s democracy in crisis’). Occupy means to put yourself in a space, as a performance of subversion: How is the use of that space changed? How will this further lead to a change in the relationship between Government and people? Although we do not yet have the sufficient distance required to fully understand the Sunflower Student Occupy Movement, I invite you to reflect on your own responses to it.