

## **The Liminality of Taiwan: A Case-Study in Geopolitics**

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### **Abstract**

*This article tries to adapt the anthropological concept of 'liminality' to three fields of research: China–Taiwan relations; the ontology of Taiwan Studies; and the conceptual development of geopolitics. Liminality, as translated into these fields, refers here to a spatial/temporal position of 'geopolitical threshold', rather than to an in-between, transitional period of time. The concept is used here as a substitute for, or nuanced alternative to, 'marginality', with reference to the growing debate over the significance of Taiwan as a geopolitical entity in the face of a China experiencing global renaissance. Beyond this, the paper is also an attempt to reflect upon the historical significance of the emergence of Taiwan since the early seventeenth century, first as a geopolitical object of appropriation or control, and later on as a geopolitical subject of its own, to help reassess Taiwan's global significance. Finally, this is a contribution to the better understanding of the geopolitics of asymmetrical interdependence between a major state and a minor, neighbouring one, within the wider frame of a geopolitics of values.*

### **Introduction**

Since the spring of 2011, a debate has agitated American scholars, observers, and policy-makers about the extent to which Taiwan matters with regard to the national interest of the United States of America. A new perception of Taiwan as an increasingly marginal geopolitical entity in the face of China emerging as a global superpower raises the question of how relevant it is today either to defend or to study Taiwan. At the same time, and since the 2000s at least, there has been an introspective movement among Taiwan specialists about how to define their field with regard to Chinese studies.<sup>1</sup> The convergence of these two issues has produced interesting debates in recent symposia and their preparatory meetings, such as the First World Congress of Taiwan Studies (held in Taipei in April 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> For how Taiwan has been misinterpreted as a local example of Chinese culture see Hong and Murray (2005); for what can be said about the ontological relations between Chinese studies and the study of Taiwan, see Corcuff (2010a, 2010b); for how to connect the study of Taiwan, with its specificities, to wider Chinese studies see Lupke (2012).

and recent regional congresses of Taiwan Studies held by the North American, European, and Japanese Associations of Taiwan Studies.<sup>2</sup>

### *Taiwan's Geopolitical Importance*

Taiwan's integration into the world's written history started late, in the sixteenth century. However, being situated close to both the Japanese and the Chinese empires, and from the early seventeenth century being a European colonial outpost in East Asia, Formosa rapidly emerged as an important geopolitical element of the earlier process of globalization that started with Europe's colonial expansion. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Taiwan has had a significantly more important geopolitical role than the size of its territory or population would appear to entail. Is this a 'Taiwan Paradox'? And is Taiwan unique in this matter, as there are quite a few other places around the world where a small territory has yielded strategic importance, due to reasons such as the positive value attributed to its geographical given, or processes of human settlement, international trade, territorial and national building movements, wars, etc. Examples are numerous, from Gibraltar to Bali or Singapore, from Panama to Okinawa, from the Spratleys and Paracel Islands to the Falkland Islands or Pinnacle Islets.<sup>3</sup> Many, obviously, are islands, peninsulas, archipelagos, or straits, and reasons for their special significance may include: being situated on the immediate periphery of one or more important power(s); being on the crossroads of important trade routes; being able to deny or facilitate access to inland or deep-sea regions; possessing, or being reputed to possess, key natural resources; or being on a frontline between two areas of influence.

However, Taiwan's geopolitical position *vis-à-vis* China certainly presents an especially high degree of complexity, notably due to the island's cultural links with China, and to China's irredentist posture on the Taiwan issue. It is not a mere geographical question of commanding a strait or of access to inland regions.<sup>4</sup> For geopoliticians, could the study of Formosa's relation to China help further develop new paradigms applicable to other geopolitical case studies in which a smaller entity has to deal with a larger one, without necessarily being either subject to it or fully free from its influence? Is Taiwan simply a modernized version of 'Finlandization', a case among many others of delicate relations with an important neighbour, or is it a specific case, which nevertheless can be compared to others in order to develop geopolitical theory?

### *Political Agendas and Historical Discourses*

Although many studies have reflected on Taiwan's relationship with China (from historical, economical, societal, and military points of view, among others), these

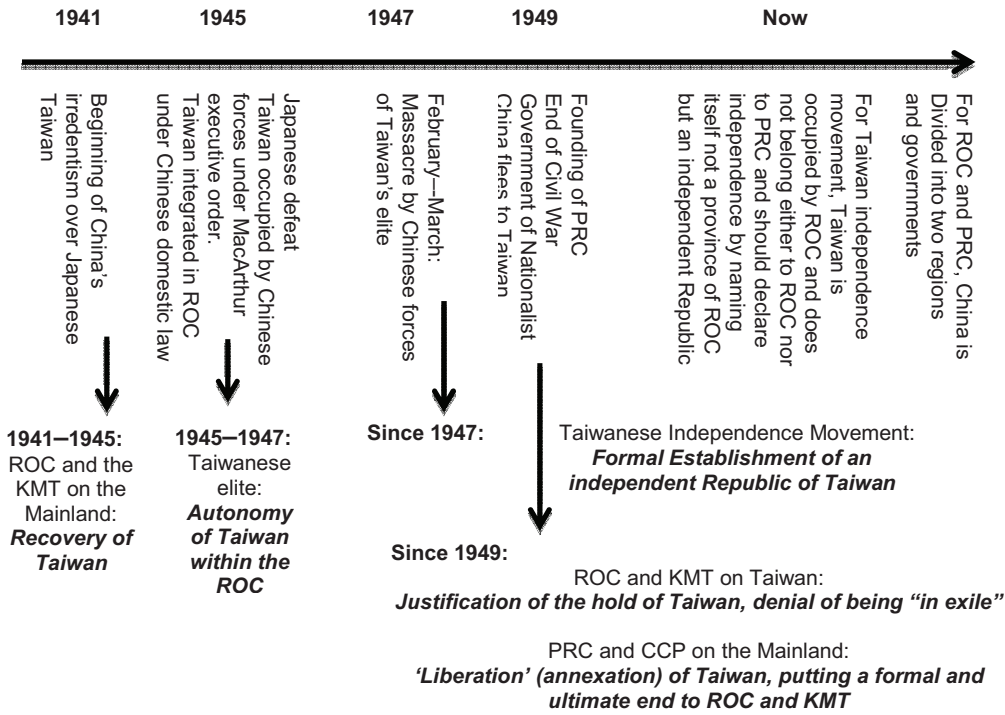
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<sup>2</sup> Respectively NATSA (<http://www.na-tsa.org/new/>), EATS (<http://eats-taiwan.eu/>), and JATS (<http://jats.gr.jp/>).

<sup>3</sup> Better known as Senkaku by the Japanese or Diaoyutai by the Chinese. On this point, please also see the caption for Figure 2.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, relations with China appear to be an important dimension of Taiwan Studies, together with more local and domestic issues.

have, regrettably, often consisted of directly- or indirectly-politicized discourses as soon as they have touched upon issues of Taiwan's history, identity, and belonging. Figure 1 below shows this plurality and evolution of the most vocal discourses over time.



**Figure 1: Competing Discourses of Legitimization Regarding the Taiwan Issue by Political Actors of the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait Since 1941**

Such politicized discourses have generally been formulated with the purpose of justifying a particular situation or desired outcome:

- *For China's Nationalist Party [KMT] and the Republic of China [ROC]:* while still based on the Mainland at that time, the KMT's aim from 1941 to 1945 was to recover the island ceded to Japan in 1895 by its predecessor regime, the Manchu empire;
- *For the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] after the foundation of the People's Republic of China [PRC] on the mainland in 1949 and since then:* the CCP's aim is to annex the island where its archenemy, the KMT, had retreated after losing the civil war, and where the ROC had managed to survive;
- *For the KMT after its retreat to Taiwan:* the KMT's aim now was (and still is) to justify its hold on its last shelter, which had been integrated into China only recently before the KMT's exile to the island, and with difficulty (the 1947 massacre of the Taiwanese elite by Chinese troops);
- *For the movement for Taiwan's autonomy within China (1945–1946, after Taiwan's integration in ROC), and the Taiwan independence movement*

(since the 1947 events): the aim is to justify Taiwan's independence *vis-à-vis* the now-insularized Republic of China, change its name, and sever relations (including constitutional links) with the continental past of the Republic 'of China'.

Each constructed discourse was aimed at describing the nature of Taiwan–China relations in a way that justified inclusion, appropriation, or independence, subjection, proximity or distantiation. The politicized rewriting of Taiwan's history by Chinese authorities started in fact with the 1937–1945 Sino-Japanese war, and not before. More specifically, the changed started with Chiang Kai-Shek's first mention of Taiwan, around 1941, as a topic of modern Chinese nationalism, in the context of mobilization against Japan.

#### *A Recent Element in Chinese Nation-Building Discourse*

Before 1941, Taiwan was of little interest for China and the Chinese. 'In the 1930s, before the war against Japan, none of us in China would really care about Taiwan', recalled an old, first-generation 'Mainlander' (外省人) resident of Taiwan in a discussion with the author in 1997. As this interviewee suggested, with the war against Japan, perceptions started to change.

After the 'Mukden incident' of 18 September 1931, by which Japan started its invasion of Manchuria, mobilization against Japan was launched. Maps of the Republic of China started specifically to emphasize the loss of Taiwan to Japan in 1895, in accordance with the treaty of Shimonoseki, by the Manchu empire after its defeat by Japan in the 1894–1895 war. For instance, a learned society in Shanghai, by the name of Rixin Yudi Xueshe (日新輿地學社), published in 1932 a 'New Map of China's Situation' ('新中華形勢大地圖') (see Figure 2 overleaf), listing recent foreign aggressions which had led to portions of Chinese territory being 'cut off' ['割'] from the motherland. An emphasis was clearly put on Manchuria, called (for political reasons) the 'Three [North] Eastern Provinces' ('東三省'). The map also listed all previous losses, including feudatory but independent states, such as Burma, while, interestingly, nothing was said about Hong Kong. Taiwan, however, was now listed as having been 'cut off and given to Japan' ('割於日') in the twenty-first year of Guangxu, or 1895.

Taiwan had thus become a new element in China's discourse on national humiliation. However, if 'irredentism' is the refusal to accept current boundaries and the wish to see a territory that has been lost to a foreign country, or which has declared independence, incorporated back into the motherland,<sup>5</sup> the young Chinese Republic in 1932 did not yet express irredentism over a small island lost decades before by another regime, the Qing dynasty.

In 1936, just a few months before Chiang Kai-Shek was forced by the 'Young Marshall' Chang Hsüeh-Liang, during the Xi'an Incident, into a KMT-CCP alliance against the Japanese, Taiwan was still not yet an issue in mobilizing China against Japan: it was simply an argument in a discursive construction of the Japanese enemy, in reaction to Tokyo's imperialism in China. That year, in a government map published by the Bureau of Roads of the Economic Council of China (全國經

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<sup>5</sup> See also note 10 below.

濟委員會公路處) featuring the railroads built by the young Republic, the island of Taiwan was simply hidden behind the caption (see Figure 3 opposite<sup>6</sup>). It was five years after the Mukden incident of 1931 over Shanghai in January and February 1932; a clear sign that mentioning Taiwan as having been ‘cut off’ from China was not (yet) equivalent to ‘claiming it back’.



**Figure 2: Details from the ‘New Map of China’s Situation’**

(‘蘇甲榮編裝，新中華形勢大地圖，上海’), 1932 (Private collection).

(Left: ‘Do not forget national humiliation [毋忘國恥]: swift occupation [本佔] of the three [north]eastern provinces of our country [after the incident of] 18 September 1931; the [first] war of Shanghai of 28 January 1932’. Right: ‘Taiwan. Cut off in the twenty-first year of Guangxu [1895] and given to Japan’ [In red: ‘光緒二十一年割於日’])

Pictures by Stéphane Corcuff, 2007

<sup>6</sup> One may notice that the then-named Pinnacle Islets do not appear on this map, even though the scale would have permitted it. These islands have been hotly disputed territory between China, Taiwan, and Japan since the 1960s, and are now known as either the Diaoyutai or the Senkakus.





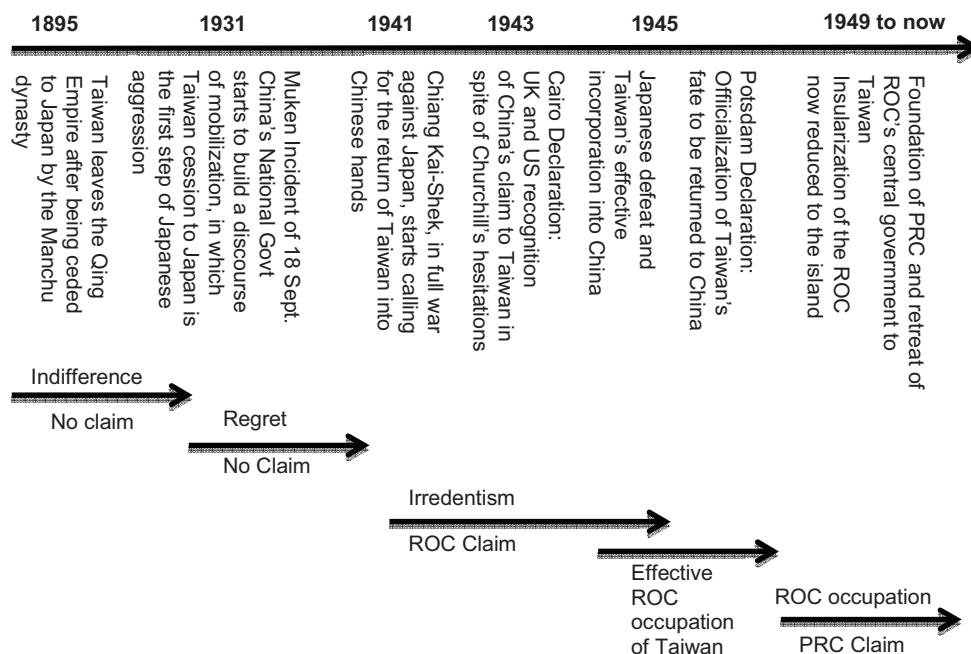
**Figure 3: Detail from the 1936 government map of China's roads and railroads (Private collection)**  
**Picture by Stéphane Corcuff, 2007**

Around 1941, Chiang Kai-Shek started to incorporate Taiwan into a discourse vilifying Japan and aimed at mobilizing China against the Japanese, or rallying the people behind himself. Since then, Taiwan has remained constantly on the Chinese agenda as a symbol of national division, except during the years 1945–1949, when it was effectively integrated into the Republic. From ‘cut off and given to Japan’, Taiwan would become ‘stolen by the Japanese’, as indicated in the joint declaration made by the press attachés of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-Shek, the three allied leaders who had met in Cairo in December 1943. This was part of the so-called ‘Cairo Declaration’; from a neutral mention of a historical fact, the discourse had changed into a political claim: China had become irrendentist.

However, it is still only with the retreat of the central government of the Republic of China to Taipei on 7 December 1949 that Taiwan specifically became a stake – both in China’s domestic geopolitics (between the now two Chinese governments) and in Chinese historiography. Not even the Sino-Japanese war of 1937–1945 had achieved this. With the events of 1949, Taiwan became a place of exile for the defeated regime of the Republic of China, and a place to be conquered for the newly founded People’s Republic of China, which was unhappy to see the ROC still surviving on the other side of the strait. Both regimes had to legitimize their official goals: on one side, ‘Taking back the Mainland’ was the stance of the ROC, now reduced to the recently recovered island; on the other, ‘Liberating the Island’ was the goal of the PRC on the Mainland. Both regimes, though, also tried to legitimize another agenda: for the ROC on Taiwan, emphasizing that Taiwan belonged to China was a justification for the policy of suppressing the Taiwan independence movement, which threatened to eradicate the remains of the Republic of China. It also helped to avoid facing the truth: the regime was in a sort of exile, as the so-called 1945 ‘retrocession’ had not technically happened in international law, in the absence of a formal treaty between the ROC and Japan at

that time. For the PRC, meanwhile, the goal was to eradicate the Republic of China, which had not fully disappeared, to bring Chiang Kai-Shek back to the Mainland and to put a formal end to the civil war. This would consecrate the People's Republic's full and undeniable status as successor to the Republic. Figure 4 below shows how claims by Chinese government(s) regarding sovereignty over Taiwan have evolved.

The exile of the KMT on Taiwan represents the opposite end of the spectrum in historiography of Taiwan's years of change, starting from 1941. Both the ROC, reduced to Taiwan, and the PRC, longing to put a formal end to its predecessor regime, had to explain that Taiwan was fully a part of China, had always been so, had been wrongfully stolen by the Japanese in 1895, and had been formally restored to China in 1945.<sup>7</sup> Such a discourse was formulated with China's division into two competing governments, and not earlier. In September 1945, after the Japanese capitulation, although General Douglas MacArthur had agreed to the occupation of Taiwan by Chiang Kai-Shek's troops, the island was still not mentioned as a part of Chinese territory in official documents (which the ROC would discursively turn into a formal 'retrocession' act), such as the official *China*



**Figure 4: Evolving Discourses Regarding the Issue of Sovereignty over Taiwan by Mainland Governments since 1895**

*Handbook 1937–1945*, published by the Chungking (Chongqing) government of Chiang Kai-Shek. This remained the case in the updated edition of 1946, posterior by many months to the actual occupation of Formosa by ROC forces, which had begun on 25 October 1945. Although the opening chapter, entitled 'General Information', devotes its last two pages to a few paragraphs about Formosa,

<sup>7</sup> The legal reality of that 1945 'restoration', called 'glorious' in Chinese ('光復'), being a much more complex issue than the two governments claimed.

insisting on the 'patriotic resistance' of 'Formosan Revolutionists' against the Japanese and in favour Chinese recovery of the Island, the passages about Taiwan in the edition published in 1947, more than a year and a half after Taiwan's return into Chinese hands, still had not been updated from the description of Taiwan as a Japanese colony in the first, 1945, edition (see particularly pp. 33–34). Similarly, Taiwan is significantly absent from a list of provinces of the official Chinese territory (p. 1–3, see Figure 5 below).

| CHAPTER I   |  |                      |           |
|---|--|----------------------|-----------|
| GENERAL INFORMATION   |  |                      |           |
| AREA  | Provinces  | Square Kilometers    |           |
| The territory of the Republic of China begins in the north from latitude 53° 52' 30" N. (Sayan Mountains) and in the east from longitude 135° 2' 30" E. (the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers). The southernmost and westernmost boundaries remain to be settled as the Pamirs on the west constitute an undemarcated area among China, the U. S. S. R. and the British Empire, and the sovereignty of the Tuansha Islands (the Coral Islands) on the south are contested among China, the Commonwealth of Philippines and Indo-China. The northern section of the boundary between China and Burma remains to be demarcated. | Kansu  | ...                  | 391,506   |
|   | Chinghai   | ...                  | 697,194   |
|   | Ningsia  | ...                  | 274,910   |
|   | Sinkiang   | ...                  | 1,828,418 |
|   | Suiyuan  | ...                  | 347,529   |
|   | Chahar   | ...                  | 278,957   |
|   | Jehol  | ...                  | 192,430   |
|   | Liaoning   | ...                  | 321,823   |
|   | Kirin  | ...                  | 283,380   |
|   | Heilungkiang   | ...                  | 449,623   |
| The Ministry of Interior, based on 1944 revised data, gives the area of China at 11,580,420 square kilometers distributed as follows:   | <i>Special Municipalities</i>  |                      |           |
|   | Nanking  | ...                  | 466       |
|   | Shanghai   | ...                  | 893       |
|   | Peiping  | ...                  | 707       |
|   | Tsingtao   | ...                  | 749       |
|   | Siking (Sian)  | (Included in Shensi) |           |
|   | Tientsin   | ...                  | 55        |
|   | Chungking  | ...                  | 300       |
|   | <i>Special District</i>  |                      |           |
|   | Weihaiwei  | ...                  | 663       |
| TABLE I—AREA<br>(December, 1944)  | <i>Special Territories</i>   |                      |           |
|   | Mongolia   | ...                  | 1,621,201 |
|   | Tibet  | ...                  | 1,216,788 |
|   | TOTAL ... 11,580,420   |                      |           |
|   | Source: Ministry of Interior   |                      |           |
|   | China is bordered by Korea, Siberia, Soviet Turkestan, Afghanistan, India, Burma, Indo-China, and the Pacific Ocean.   |                      |           |
|   | <b>POPULATION</b>  |                      |           |
|   | No census of the entire Chinese population has ever been taken and consequently estimates and reports on the total Chinese population have varied greatly. According to the Ministry of Interior, the estimated population of China in March, 1945, is as follows: |                      |           |
|   |  |                      |           |
| Provinces   | Square Kilometers  |                      |           |
| Kiangsu   | 108,926  |                      |           |
| Chekiang  | 102,237  |                      |           |
| Anhui   | 140,687  |                      |           |
| Kiangsi   | 172,494  |                      |           |
| Hupch   | 186,363  |                      |           |
| Hunan   | 205,590  |                      |           |
| Szechwan  | 375,540  |                      |           |
| Sikang  | 427,068  |                      |           |
| Shantung  | 143,900  |                      |           |
| Shansi  | 156,420  |                      |           |
| Honan   | 167,172  |                      |           |
| Hopei   | 140,258  |                      |           |
| Shensi  | 188,861  |                      |           |
| Fukien  | 118,739  |                      |           |
| Kwangtung   | 221,307  |                      |           |
| Kwangsi   | 221,321  |                      |           |
| Yunnan  | 420,465  |                      |           |
| Kweichow  | 176,480  |                      |           |

Figure 5: Chinese Ministry of Information, *China Handbook 1937–1945: A Comprehensive Survey of Major Developments in China in Eight Years of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1947)



It was, apparently, only when Chiang started to consider Formosa as a probable retreat, around 1948, that Taiwan's strategic importance started to be seriously considered.<sup>8</sup>

### *Focus of This Paper*

As Duara (1995), Détienne (2003, 2010), and several others have reminded us, 'national narratives' have tended to cluster history into rigid and politicized historiographical frames. Following decades of such politicization in the historiography of China–Taiwan relations, there is, today, a need to re-examine the nature of Taiwan's complex relation to China, and to understand it from a pure, yet integrated and multi-dimensional, geopolitical perspective that does not aim at justifying a particular political or nation-building program. This understanding is a precondition for the development of Taiwan studies as a genuinely academic field both inside and outside the borders of Taiwan, including both in China and in the rest of the world.

This paper does not explore relations between aboriginal peoples and Taiwanese of Chinese (and often Chinese-aboriginal) ancestry, where the notion of 'marginality' can be mobilized in addressing the status of aboriginal people in Taiwan, at least before the early 1990s and the presidential administrations of Lee Teng-Hui (1988–2000) and Chen Shui-Bian (2000–2008).<sup>9</sup> Neither does it grapple substantially with Taiwan's relation to Japan, where some dimensions of what will be described here as 'liminality' can also be applied. When qualifying Taiwan as 'liminal', this paper is not either an attempt to describe or analyse Taiwan's ethnicity, pluralistic culture, national identifications, or position in the world (such as being a gateway to another region, a nodus of contacts in a globalized world, a territory unable to choose between different national identities or a state left in a limbo of poor diplomatic recognition and ambiguity about its status in international law). Though the concept may be extended in these directions if our use of liminality here is proven to be valid or useful, characterizing Taiwan as 'liminal' in this paper focuses on just *one* of Taiwan's important geopolitical relations with the outside world: the relation that the island has to, or with, China. Perhaps a paradigmatic element will be identified, which, *mutatis mutandis*, may guide geopoliticians in analysing relations in other, partially similar yet always specific situations in the world. Such situations may be found where there is, or has been, a strong geopolitical entity interacting with a smaller one that has, in spite of its smaller size, a word to say in an asymmetrical political and discursive exchange. This is often the case in the geopolitics of values; here, as often, an imbalanced one, in which actors mobilize what they see as worth fighting for – the difference

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<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Chiang Kai-Shek started to prepare for a retreat as early as 1948. Several signs indicate this, such as the transfer to Taiwan of the treasures of the National Palace Museum (initially to Taichung), and of some political prisoners, and of the faculty members of the Peking University (to Taipei) that year.

<sup>9</sup> In mentioning aboriginal issues, I follow here Scott Simon's (University of Ottawa) recommendation not to capitalize the words 'aboriginal' or 'aborigine', as they are not ethnic terms *per se*, and would deny each group's specificities as a nation equipped with its own language, cultural habits and myths.

between values and norms – in order (*a minima*) to protect their values at home, and (*a maxima*), when considered necessary, to impose them to others, outside their boundaries.

Following this introduction to a geopolitics of values in international society, as well as to the asymmetrical nature of cross-strait relations and the precautions to be taken when addressing questions of Taiwan's status, historiography, and belonging, the paper will continue with a brief review of different theories that can be mobilized to characterize Taiwan's relation to China, along with a short explanation of why they appear to be of little help. Building on this, the paper attempts to identify some of the most salient traits of Taiwan's relation to China, although it should be borne in mind that, depending on one's angle of approach, several other key traits could probably also be isolated, which are not mentioned here. The paper then proposes to translate, adapt, and further develop the anthropological notion of 'liminality' into the field of geopolitics. Such a translation has been attempted previously, but without the concept being substantially adapted to the specific needs of geopolitics, or at least without it being used in a way that really addresses situations that are both temporal *and* spatial ('*spatio-temporelles*'), rather than based only on a change in time, as supposed by the original anthropological approach of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The paper will then characterize Taiwan's 'discursive and geopolitical liminality *vis-à-vis* China', by mobilizing several examples pertaining to different disciplines. The paper concludes that translating liminality in geopolitics is not about describing a transitional phase, but rather about describing a space of connexion developed over a long period of time.

### **The Difficulty of Characterizing Taiwan's Relations to China with Existing Theories**

Understanding the nature of Taiwan's relation to China certainly has to be made with reference to what Fernand Braudel called '*longue durée*' (which can be rendered in English as 'history in the long haul'). Reducing the focus to the current state of cross-strait relations, or merely going back to the post-World War II period, would limit the capacities of an analyst to detect the complexities of a relationship constructed over a much longer timeframe. Unfortunately, proponents of politicized discourses justifying unification or independence often lack a sense of precise historical facts. For an analyst, whose purpose is to deconstruct existing historiographies, Taiwan's relation to China is a complex object that is 'neither this nor that', and that yet still needs to be identified and characterized.

#### *The Ancient Knowledge of Taiwan*

Clearly-documented relations between China and Taiwan started to develop in the late sixteenth century, when the declining Ming dynasty had fallen prey to Sino-Japanese piratical activity on its southeastern coasts and to Manchu pressure on its northern frontier. Earlier knowledge of Taiwan by China is possible, but it is neither formally attested to by historical documents, nor supported by the overall geopolitical logic of pre-Ming dynasties' weak interest in exploration and exploitation of overseas territories (the Song dynasty [960–1279] had developed a

powerful commercial navy, but we have no record of a discovery of Taiwan during this period). In the post-2008 political debate over textbooks in Taiwan, characterized by a methodical attempt at the resinicization of Taiwan (Corcuff, 2011, Chapter 2), an old idea has been advanced again: that the reference to the 'discovery' of a mythical territory – Yizhou (夷洲) – during an expedition in 230 CE, which is found in Chen Shou's *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志) (吳書, *Book of Wu*), written in the late third century CE, is the first mention of Taiwan in a Chinese text. But this cannot be scientifically established, considering the paucity and vagueness of information given, and could be equally the Ryukyus, the Penghus, or even north Philippines. And in any case, knowledge of a place does not mean possession, and discovery is not equivalent to actual appropriation: Wherever the explorers went, they did not settle there and never attempted to return. Instead, the debate exemplified the determination of the pro-unification camp of today (on both sides of the Taiwan straits) to justify Taiwan's belonging to China 'since ancient ages' ('從古時代', as the Chinese say), even though academic work in Chinese and foreign languages has long attested the limited, if not non-existent, knowledge of Taiwan by China before the Ming Dynasty (Cartier 1983; Zheng 1995; T.-J. Chen 2005).

#### *The Pivotal Seventeenth Century*

With wide-ranging geopolitical changes at play in the region throughout the seventeenth century (the arrival of Western colonial powers, the decline of the Ming Dynasty, the beginning of the invasion of China by the Manchus, and the last decades of Japan's maritime activities followed by the Shogunate's 'Closed Country' policy for Japan), China's perceptions of Taiwan started to evolve from a historic attitude characterized by poor knowledge and cultural prejudice, suspicion, and even fear, into a more acute perception of Taiwan as bearing a geopolitical significance. The process was long, spanning all of the seventeenth century, but it was especially the case after Taiwan was seized from Dutch colonial hands in 1661 by the Chinese Zheng clan, a pro-Ming Chinese family of businessmen at sea (or, to some, 'pirates'). However, this sudden interest in Taiwan by the Manchu court post-1661 was prompted by the Zhengs' aggression against the newly conquered Chinese territory of the Manchu empire, and did not include an interest in Taiwan *per se*. Nor, until the early months of 1684, did this interest mean any desire to incorporate the recently Sinicized regions of Taiwan as parts of the Qing/Manchu Empire. The aim was primarily to put to an end to the Zheng family's attempts to restore the Ming Dynasty in China, and to the Zhengs' constant denial that the Manchu people had now the heavenly mandate to rule over the Chinese people. For that, the Manchus had to destroy the Zhengs' island bastion (Wong 1983; Corcuff 2011).

During the pivotal decades of 1624–1684 – between the arrival of the Dutch on Formosa and the incorporation of the newly Han-populated plains of the island into the Manchu Empire – not only the court in Peking, but also a multitude of other actors developed their own perceptions of Taiwan and of continent–island relations; perceptions that were varied and complex from the very beginning. With the great development of Taiwan historiography in recent decades, in no instance can it be suggested that Taiwan was simply 'this' or 'that' for the Chinese, or for

the Manchus, or for itself, without the risk of simplifying what is now known of the past.

*Geopolitics and Axiological Neutrality*

Geopolitics studies how geographical territories are turned into places invested by human memories and projects in contexts of interaction and competition over land and power when bare geography is augmented by memories, projects, and values. Geopolitics, as a study of this augmented reality, is supposed to listen to a plurality of competing discourses and projects that make territories multi-dimensional – from the geographic to the historical, and from the ideological to the emotional – without making distinctions between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’, at least in the personal values of the analyst. It is by its nature an invitation to take into consideration the multiple ways that situations are perceived by a great variety of stakeholders, rather than an attempt to determine an essential geopolitical ‘truth’.

Can such a geopolitical approach be of help to better understand the plurality of actors in the history of cross-strait relations and their respective perceptions?

*There is not ‘One’ Single Chinese Way to Look at Taiwan*

In the decades and centuries that followed the progressive integration of initially limited portions of Taiwan’s southwestern plain as an overseas extension of the Qing Empire, Manchu and Chinese actors developed a set of perceptions, in which different and sometimes self-contradictory dimensions were intertwined: fear and prejudice, estrangement, appropriation, rejection, policies of subjectivization and dependency, jealousy, hate, and a feeling of cultural proximity. Each can be historically dated; they form a nexus of interrelated passions (clearly an object of interest to geopolitical studies), and a system of perceptions that have shaped policies as well as individuals’ decisions over the course of cross-strait history.

Taiwan’s relation to China cannot be reduced to one of subjectivization only, of merely a succession of waves of colonial or colonial-like domination by powers originating from the mainland.<sup>10</sup> As a brief introduction to the idea of Taiwan as a liminal territory, it could be noted that, from the onset, Taiwan was in many respects treated differently from other Chinese provinces by the ruling Qing/Manchu dynasty (Corcuff 2006). The relationship was not, or not only and not always, that of a sheer and self-confident domination by the centre over a docile periphery. Among the theoretical tools that can be mobilized to better understand the nature of such a relationship, which ones could be of help? Could hegemony, imperialism, centre–periphery relations, be useful keys?

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<sup>10</sup> These are the Zheng (1661–1683), the Manchus (1684–1895), and, following the Japanese period, the Republic of China. This third period can be divided into (1) 1945 to 1949, in which year the KMT government crossed the strait to relocate itself at the margin of its official national territory; and (2) the period up to the years of 1992/1996, before the Taiwanese were finally allowed to elect representatives (for parliament in 1992 and the presidency in 1996) solely elected by the inhabitants of Taiwan and its associated islands of Lanyü, Lütao, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu.

As discussed below, various notions, concepts, and paradigms are available to help us characterize aspects of this relationship. However, these can never be fully applicable; hence the need for a further concept that may, initially at least, be applied specifically to Taiwan's relation to China. It would then remain to be seen whether this could be adapted into a paradigm applicable to other case studies, to help Taiwan studies, from an epistemological point of view, to consist not only of concepts imported from abroad and applied to Taiwan (particularly from the European and American academies), but also of elaborations derived from Taiwan studies and exported abroad into relevant disciplinary fields of study.

### *Centre–Periphery*

It is tempting to characterize Taiwan's relation to China as one of periphery and centre, after the large Manchu empire progressively established a Qing administration on part of the small island in 1684. This perspective may also be commonly applied in the future, if growing economic integration between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (or whatever regime may succeed it), leads to the reorganization of cooperation between the two on the world economic stage, and, perhaps, of a political restructuring of the China–Taiwan ensemble.

The complexity of the *centre–periphery* paradigm was illustrated long ago, when Chen Chi-Nan elaborated his notion of the '*indigenization*' (土著化) of Chinese culture in Taiwan in 1975. This was subsequently critiqued by Lee Kuo-Chi, who opposed it with the idea of Taiwan's '*integration into the centre*' of the Chinese Empire (内地化) (C.-N. Chen 1991). Political passions in this debate usually hide the fact that the two ideas address different dimensions of the Taiwan–China relation over the *longue durée*; one cultural, the other geopolitical. In some respects the two views are not incompatible. Integration into the Manchu Empire is a fact, but it was made possible through the localization and hybridization of Chinese culture in Taiwan, in a society where non-Chinese influences have been numerous and are more ancient than Chinese influences. Further, more than an *integration* of Taiwan within a neighbouring empire, we can consider the events of 1684 and the subsequent extensions of Qing rule on parts of the island as an overseas *expansion* – in French, we could here coin the word '*outremerisation*' (and, in Chinese, '海外化') – of the empire. Is there room for an approach that could reconcile the two points of view, and which could allow us to understand Taiwan in its complex specificity, apart from any political agenda?

The centre–periphery paradigm, however, seems to lack historical validity, for several reasons. Less than a century after Taiwan's integration into the Manchu empire, China's southern provinces had already become dependent on Taiwanese grain, to the point that when typhoons or social unrest in Taiwan destabilized transportation, there were food shortages on the mainland (Corcuff 2006). In terms of economic development, Taiwan in 1945, when the latter integrated the island into its territory following fifty years of Japanese rule, was considered to be much more advanced than China. In 1949, the periphery (Taiwan) of the Chinese metropole was chosen for the relocation – in Taipei – of the central government of the Republic of China, and the Chinese mainland political centre (as perceived in the Republican Chinese and Chiang Kai-Shek's eyes, at least) was thus displaced onto its own, recently re-included insular periphery, while claiming to be a centre



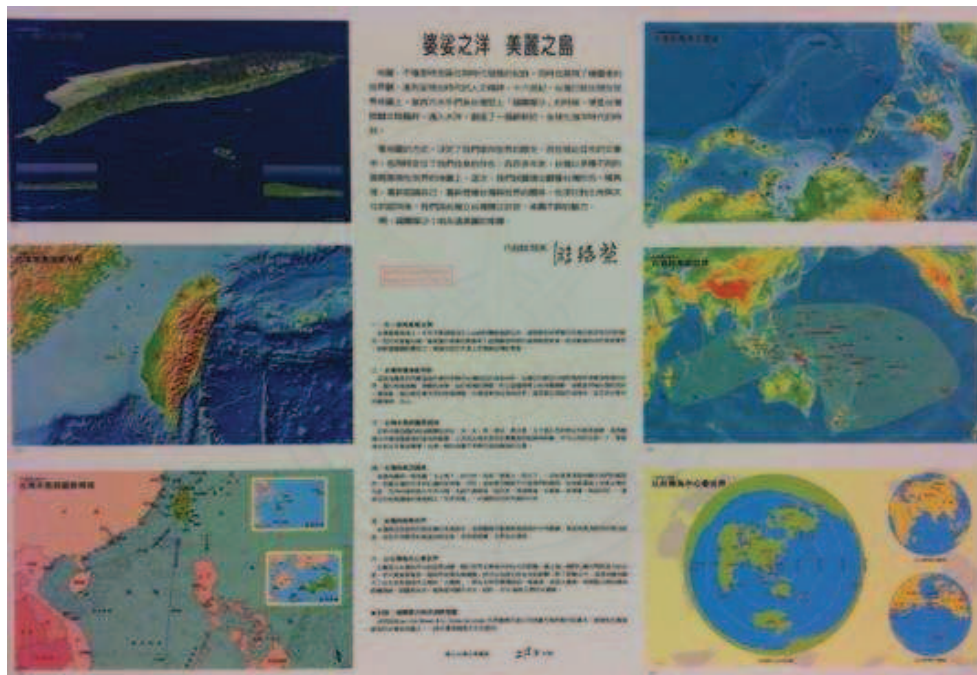
only temporarily displaced, with legitimacy to rule over all of China. As for the present situation, China and Taiwan are, in purely geopolitical terms, two sovereign states, each of which considers itself to be a centre *per se*, at times contesting the other's legitimacy to speak for itself. This is even the case in the complex discourse of the Ma administration since 2008, which tries somehow to combine antagonistic objectives: the defence of Taiwan's interests; progress towards unification; engaging China; and clinging to an outdated definition of the ROC's national boundaries that encompasses the mainland. That definition had been virtually abandoned for nearly two decades already, by the previous KMT administration of Lee Teng-Hui (1988–2000), not to mention by the pro-independence administration of Chen Shui-Bian (2000–2008).<sup>11</sup> In addition, although most observers see the balance of forces between the two states, in both military and economic terms, as shifting towards China, China cannot yet regard Taiwan as a 'small problem'. Instead, it still has to patiently negotiate with Taiwan's authorities, whether these authorities be cooperative or reluctant.

To conclude, viewing Taiwan as 'peripheral' is by definition a continent-centred point of view, which appears legitimate only because of China's past and present influence over Taiwan. However, it forgets the amount of historical material that can establish Taiwan's insertion into world (economic) networks since the early seventeenth century. In great part, this is a bias induced by our habit of looking at, assessing, and interpreting Taiwan from the viewpoint of the Continent, of China, of Chinese archives, and of an Empire. An insular-centred point of view would reject this, 'disimperializing' and 'decontinentalizing' our perceptions of Taiwan. A good example was given by the Chen Shui-Bian administration when it published a series of maps showing different Taiwans: Taiwan facing the sea, or with a south orientation, or placed at the centre of a world projection. The series (see Figure 6 overleaf) was entitled *Whirling Ocean, Beautiful Island* (婆娑之洋, 美麗之島), reflecting a rhetoric typical of the pro-independence movement, which considers Taiwan to be a 'beautiful ocean nation'.

This illustrates the limited validity of the classic centre–periphery frame of analysis. Perhaps the China-leaning policies of President Ma's administration (2008– ) are indeed giving more validity to this perspective (Chow ed. 2012); however, for reasons linked to Taiwan's democratic structure, a now China-leaning government of Taiwan can go only so far in accommodating Beijing, at least officially. In an unofficial dialogue at South Taiwan's Chang Jung Christian University in November 2011 between scholars across the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese scholar and Taiwan specialist Liu Guoshen (刘国深), head of the Taiwan Research Institute at Xiamen University, noted for instance that 'now that China and Taiwan are developing relations, we cannot continue to oppose centre and periphery'.

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<sup>11</sup> Arguably, the KMT's stance on the issue is very complex, especially since the return of the KMT to the presidency of the Republic in 2008: while it is still trying to maintain that Taiwan is a centre of its own (but not as an independent country *per se*), in order to defend its interests, the KMT has however returned to a former rhetoric of insisting heavily on the idea that the official and constitutional territory of the Republic of China, now reduced to Taiwan, is the whole of China.



**Figure 6: De-Imperializing the Perception of Taiwan: Introductory Documents with Reduced-Format Maps of the Series *Whirling Ocean, Beautiful Island* (婆娑之洋，美麗之島), published by the Ministry of Culture (文化部, then called 文建會); Centre de Documentation Taiwanaise de Lyon / Institut d'Asie Orientale.**

**Picture by Stéphane Corcuff, 2012. The sixth map shows Taiwan explicitly as a centre *per se*.**

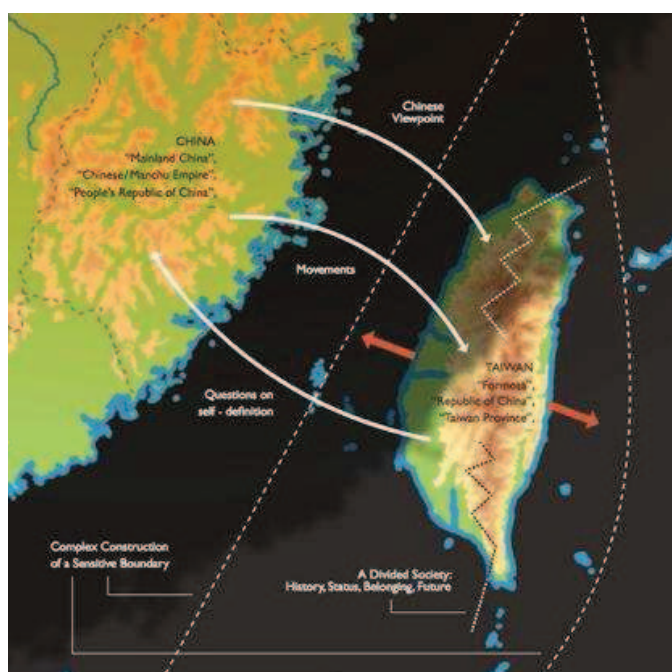
### *Dependency and Empire*

Taiwan being governed by the Republic of China, although recognized as a sovereign entity by a few states only, invalidates the possibility of using the classic paradigm of *empire* to analyse relations between the island and the People's Republic of China. How about *dependency theory*? The current administration's strategy of progressively opening Taiwan to Chinese investment may increase this interdependence, but it may also, by providing Taiwan's economy with an increased source of speculation, undermine efforts to diversify sources of profit and increase China's influence over Taiwan's economy (Chow, ed. 2012.). Dependency may increase if Taiwan's administration focuses primarily on one market, whether or not this is done with a view to future unification with China. However, dependency theory cannot be completely helpful, as Taiwan does not play the role of provider of raw materials for China's industrial machine. Although Taiwan is increasingly dependent economically on Chinese manpower, the island continues to provide capital and high technology to China, and uses China's cheap labour to export to the world. There is also Taiwan's contemporary cultural influence on China: in addition to exporting capital and technology, Taiwan exports (at least to the youth, and to Chinese urban areas) its way of life, including its pop

music, food habits and delicacies, and some screen productions (films and entertainment). In terms of cross-strait economic relations, *asymmetric economic interdependence* seems a more accurate way to characterize the situation.

### *Hegemony and the Geopolitics of Values*

In the early 1990s, a group of scholars around the UK-based Hong Kong academic Steve Tsang started to raise the issue of a 'shadow of China' over Taiwan (Tsang ed. 1993). Twenty years later, the issue had become central to political and academic debates in Taiwan (see Figure 7 below). Could *hegemony* therefore be a more interesting approach? After all, as China appears to be in the process of becoming a regional hegemon, one can suggest that Taiwan might well be its primary target, due to the PRC's longstanding irredentist posture on the issue of sovereignty over the island.<sup>12</sup> As the theory of hegemony, properly speaking, postulates neither inclusion nor the full power of coercion, it could be an attractive concept with which to describe Taiwan–China relations.



**Figure 7: A Graphic Representation of the 'Shadow of China' in Interaction with the Taiwan Identity Debate**  
(Stéphane Corcuff/Joao Correia, ENS de Lyon 2011)

<sup>12</sup> 'Irredentism' is surprisingly often misunderstood as 'secessionism'. Irredentism does not designate the policies of a country wishing to obtain independence from another, but the policies and discourse of a country emphasizing its 'right' to rule, often justified by history, over a territory now independent or ruled by another country, which used to be part of its national territory. It denotes a rejection of the state as defined by existing boundaries.

In addition, the notion of hegemony, as most notably defined by Gramsci, refers to shared *values*: the hegemon cannot exert influence on states simply by pure force, but instead imposes consent on willing states because they consider the hegemon to be able to represent them and defend their interests. Several sovereign states can hence coexist in a system in which one hegemonic state has an enduring influence over others, without necessarily imposing specific demands. Although ‘*ba*’ (霸 – hegemon/y) refers today in Chinese to despotic rule, and to a government of force rather than law, in ancient times, it had a more sophisticated meaning. In Confucius’ *Analects* (論語), it refers to the legitimate authority that a central state has over feudatories; and as we know, legitimacy is a constructed perception of how a relation between a ruler and a ruled ‘must be’, based on the principle of shared values and explicitly consented submission to this authority.

As Robert Keohane (1984) has observed, a hegemonic state, as opposed to an imperial state, cannot impose its norms without a degree of consent from the other states. Here we find the fundamental difference between norms and values: norms are imposed, and they are respected because they have become rules, not necessarily because people believe in them; values, however, refer to shared beliefs; they are, at least originally, shared and accepted because members of a community – or at least the founding members of such a community – give or gave a fundamental value to such values. The international system is, to some extent, moved by and organized around a geopolitics of values (of States, NGOs, the UN...) that determines, along with other dimensions, much of the relations between its actors. In summary, if China exerts a strong influence on Taiwan; if Taiwan shares some values with China (Taiwan’s government oftentimes considers itself and Taiwan as ‘Chinese’); and if China has to negotiate with Taiwan, then *hegemony* as a concept seems to describe quite well some important aspects of this relation.

However, *hegemony* is originally and by definition formulated to analyse the power of one dominant or hegemonic state *among an inter-state system*, and it cannot be applied without adaptation to a *two-state system*. Simply adapting the concept and giving it a new dimension could certainly overcome this problem easily. However, another problem would have to be addressed: the particularities of Taiwan’s relations with China encompass more than these few elements, of a type of hegemony consisting of an imbalanced interdependence and shared values. The liminality of Taiwan is also based on a form of discursive power that Taiwan retains on Chinese affairs: as a free region close to China and heavily influenced by its culture, Taiwan has something to say about China and to China, which in turns makes it something more than a geopolitical entity to be merely ‘liberated’, controlled, or ‘pacified’. The small island retains this ability in spite of China’s immensity, prestige, wealth, and power, perhaps because Taiwan protected some of China’s treasures: knowledge, a memory, archives and cultural treasures, as well some of the world’s best expertise on Chinese affairs. And considering the propensity of Chinese to view their culture as central, immensely rich, and superior, the fact that Taiwan may keep a memory of things that China has forgotten, an understanding of subtle elements of Chinese knowledge that China has lost, is likely to be a complicating factor in an otherwise simple model. There is something more than a partially consented to, partially rejected hegemony

of China over Taiwan. Obviously, we need to add some more complexity to the model.

### **Comparison and Variation: Is Taiwan a 'Case Study'?**

Taiwan's relationship to China comprises elements of cultural proximity and difference, and factors bringing the two sides together as well as driving them apart. Within Taiwan, there are also processes of preservation, indigenization, and rejection of elements of Chinese culture. Does this make Taiwan specific in the world of geopolitics?

Samuel Huntington tended to establish a rather strict division of the world into clearly distinguishable cultures, as embodied by his 'map of civilizations' at the opening of *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) – a surprisingly simplified description in a book otherwise more balanced than it may appear. As an alternative to his view, can we view the world as composed of a continuum of human cultures, a *continuum of differences* neither in a homogenizing, linear movement nor separated into several perfectly distinct cultures? In such a scheme, what would make an entity specific would be less the various elements of human culture that it 'contains' than the specific combination of such elements of culture, combinations that would be specific to each given culture.

Geographic insularity probably does not suffice to make Taiwan a unique entity – which is not equivalent to saying that it does not play a role in shaping cultural, social, and political identities – and hence comparisons can and should be conducted with other parts of the world. However, are not the various 'elements' (geography, history of mentalities, geopolitical status etc.) that turn Taiwan into a distinct human society, into a particular geopolitical entity, and into a noteworthy spatial-temporal segment of the world's geography and history, combined in a way that is specific to Taiwan, and proper to that particular human society? Reflecting on Taiwan as a contemporary field of study, framed within the background of a *compared historical geopolitics* of Taiwan (from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries), the purpose of this question would be to consider to what extent Taiwan has a 'historical significance' that makes it a legitimate field of study *per se*, whether the study be limited to Taiwan's various levels of locality or enlarged to consider Taiwan's interactions with its regional and global environments. This possibly 'unique combination' of nevertheless shared features (in different combinations, by other entities) can be studied *geopolitically*. This is not meant narrowly, as studying a balance of forces (which is the field of strategic studies), economic interaction (or geo-economy), or Taiwan's place in public and private global society (sociology of international relations). Geopolitics is broadly conceived of here as including sociological, political, economic, historical, legal, and military approaches, providing a holistic framework for understanding a relation of power in tension. In our case, it addresses Taiwan's relations with China over a longer timeframe.

Our understanding of these multiple factors leads us to consider that the specific combination of geopolitical features that characterizes Taiwan's relation to China as a case study is composed at least of the following basic diacritical dimensions, to which numerous others could certainly be added, depending on perspective:



- A major state, internationally recognized, exerting diplomatic, political, economic, and societal influence on a minor state that is poorly-recognized diplomatically;
- A minor state, in which society is divided between different political identifications and programs: these include formal independence; recognition of its present status by the neighbouring hegemon; or compromising and avoiding conflict;<sup>13</sup>
- The culture of the hegemon being the principal but not unique source (nor, historically, the first) of the cultural matrix of the minor territory;
- A complex inter-dependency (economic links, but also global strategic situation), which means that the dominant or hegemonic state cannot use force to re-conquer the minor state;
- The unfolding of a series of strategies (including economic relations, influence on media, diplomatic pressure, or engagement) to constrain the policies of the minor and sovereign state, in order to obtain favourable changes within a wider *status quo* to ensure hegemony, and perhaps ultimately to alter fundamentally the *status quo* in order to overcome the minor state's sovereignty;
- A proportion of the society and polity of the minor state being sensitive to some of the discourses of the major state, for reasons of cultural proximity (common ancestry, diasporic identity, etc.), which prevents the minor state from adopting a unified and firm response to the pressure exerted by the major state.<sup>14</sup>

### Liminality and Geopolitics

We have seen that the specificity (as distinct from the idea of a 'uniqueness'), of Taiwan's relation to China cannot be explained fully by the few paradigms mentioned above; hence the necessity of a new concept with which to understand the complex frame of relations in their spatial and temporal dimensions.

Liminality is a concept well known to anthropologists, originating in the French scholar Arnold van Gennep's 1909 opus, *Les rites de passage*. The book addresses the transitional periods between two states of life, such as (among many others) between childhood and adulthood, which are often accompanied by 'rites of passage' established by group cultures to mark the passage symbolically and materially. Later popularized and extended by the American anthropologist Victor Turner at the very end of the 1960s, the concept of liminality addresses a

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<sup>13</sup> In Taiwan's case, it is understood that a formal peace treaty is too delicate to proceed with due to the hegemon's irredentist view of the adverse state's territory, as a peace treaty would give equal acknowledgment to the latter's sovereignty.

<sup>14</sup> As suggested by the author in a recent book, the mixed feelings experienced by most Taiwanese of recent mainland origin (the so-called 'Mainlanders') in terms of national identification towards both Taiwan and China, express Taiwan's position as a liminal place *vis-à-vis* the country from which they have come, at least for first generation migrants. In other words, the anthropological liminality (中介時期／地帶／狀況) of *Waishengren* in Taiwan is directly linked to Taiwan's geopolitical liminality (閹境性) *vis-à-vis* China (Corcuff 2011: 116–188).

phenomenon inscribed in a timeframe, although its Latin origin, '*limen*', or 'threshold', refers to a physical place. Liminality is an in-between period during which an individual is in transition between a state of life that (s)he has not yet fully left, and a new stage into which (s)he has not fully entered. Rites of passage are often public, as they have to be attended (at least at some point) by members of the community who witness, share, control, or support. As shown by Turner, the new status acquired after the transitional period confers an increased dignity or respectability, or in any case another status in life that may be conferred either permanently or for the duration of a period that precedes the next status.

A number of scholars have attempted to introduce the notion of liminality into the sociology of nationalism and into the study of international relations. However, their use of liminality most often still aims at describing an in-between, transitional position unfolding in most cases within a timeframe; in other words, and to put it simply, a period of change. Is it possible, and useful, to further import, adapt, reconstruct, and develop the idea of liminality by reconnecting the notion with its *spatial* dimension, as suggested by the Latin origin of the word? The aim is to construct a time- and space-based tool to analyse the relations of a smaller geopolitical object situated at the margin of a larger geopolitical one, and interacting with it in a scheme more complex than that of a dominant centre to a dominated margin. This integrated concept of liminality should not exclude timescapes: history in the long haul is the canvas on which geopolitical complexities progressively develop, and the means by which human-appropriated territories are turned, over extended periods of time, into social spaces of memories that bear political projects. This leads to the field of geopolitics as soon as any frontier is crossed by any actor, factor, or idea touching upon the balance of power between different centres of production of values.

The concept of liminality is not yet widely used in geopolitics and international relations, although it is a popular analytic tool in sociology, cultural studies, and post-colonial theory. However, a recent move to apply liminality to international studies (sociology of international relations/geopolitics) has started to explore how liminality can be adapted from an analysis of a transitional period into a focus on spatial inter-connectivity within a timeframe. Wang Hung-Luen (2001), who studies Taiwan, used the word in the early 2000s with the meaning of psychological inbetweenness, or, more accurately, of being 'neither-this-nor-that': he argues that Taiwan is presently in a state of liminality, being neither a state nor a non-state; at least inform the perspective of an approach focusing on the sociology of nationalism. This is based on an understanding, which is frequent, of 'liminality' as expressing vagueness, a limbo period, a time of 'undeterminedness', even though the original theorists of the notion, van Gennep and Turner, have on the contrary insisted on the codification (with rites of passage) of that non-status, which is *ispo facto* a sort of status, in a transitional trajectory from a clearly defined state to a clearly defined other state. Wang departs from this and uses liminality in a more 'common' understanding of the word. He also makes an implicit reference to space rather than to time, by changing the traditional '中介' (介 *jiè*, being between) into '中界' (界 *jiè*, territory, boundary) as his Chinese translation of the anthropological 'liminality' (Wang 2001: 286–287), as a subtle reference to Taiwan's situation at the margin of a huge country that denies it the quality of a sovereign state.

Another example is Higgott and Nossal (2008), who have written about how Australian society has been repositioning itself as a part of Asia's renaissance through an increasing perception of belonging to Asia, in contrast to Australia's traditional self-perception as an overseas Anglo-Saxon society closely linked to Britain. This is a first attempt to theorize a 'geopoliticized' liminality, although it still applies the concept to describe changing geographical perceptions *over a period of time*. For Higgott and Nossal, Australia is in a liminal phase of reorientation; they do not consider, for instance, Australia as being in a liminal state of connectedness between, or next to, both the East and the West. This approach, nevertheless, clearly applies to a situation that concerns contemporary geopolitics. It is also the case with Maria-Ruxandra Stoicescu's (2008) work on Romania's self-construction as a liminal place, first during the process of post-communist modernization, and then within the frame of its integration into the European Union, integrates both time and space, although over a shorter timeframe than is proposed in our analysis of the Taiwan case study.

As a fourth example, Lerna Yanik (2009, 2011) has shown how Turkey has attempted to construct, for itself and for the rest of world, an image of itself as an exceptional country (Turkey's 'exceptionalism'), imbued with an 'inbetweenness' that can be interpreted, in the author's eyes, in terms of liminality. Yanik notes that Turkey's discourse as a country where two continents converge – Europe and Asia, the West and the Orient – is based on geographical *and* historical approaches. This approach seems close to ours, as it mobilizes both the time and space references. There is, however, a difference: the timeframe used to characterize Taiwan's liminality *vis-à-vis* China is not that of a contemporary change (the *emergence* of Turkey as a middle-sized international actor, as an emerging economy, and as a self-envisioned mediator), but a long-term construction of a complex relation between the two sides of the strait. Compared to those papers, and especially Wang's interest in Taiwan's national identity question, the focus of the present paper is both narrower (Taiwan's relation to China) and wider (geopolitical relations in a 400-year perspective).<sup>15</sup> It considers that all elements of the relation between the two sides of the Taiwan strait contribute to a specific form of relationship. My work in Chinese language on this topic calls for a new Chinese translation of the word 'liminality', when applied to geopolitics and referring both to time and space: while it is translated as '中介時期' or '地帶' in the field of anthropology – representing an in-between period – I propose in geopolitics the use of '閾境性' (*yùjìng xìng*) – or a threshold character – with '閾' meaning precisely limen, the threshold (Corcuff 2011).

#### *Geopolitical Liminality: A Typology*

There are, indeed, several types of geopolitical situation that can be called liminal. It appears that the sudden vagueness of the concept, once it has been extracted, by geopoliticians, from its original field as studied by Arnold van Gennep and Victor

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<sup>15</sup> This article translates into English and further elaborates the content of Chapter Four ('臺灣閾境性', 'The Liminality of Taiwan') of 高格孚 (Corcuff) *中華鄰國·臺灣閾境*, (*Neighbour of China: The Liminality of Taiwan*), Taipei, 2011, as well as of a French-language paper on the ontology of Taiwan studies *vis-à-vis* sinology published in *Etudes chinoises* in 2010.

Turner, means that it encompasses already at least five different types of geopolitical realities:

- *the transition between two states* in a specific temporal sequence of the history of a region or a nation – this is the case of Australia as analysed by Higgot and Nossal (2008);
- *the 'inbetweenness'*, or the fact of being between two world civilizations and trying to be a bridge, which is how Turkey is viewed by Yanik (2009, 2011);
- *being in a limbo of unclear self-definition and self-identity* can be also characterized as 'liminal', as Wang (2001) has applied the term to Taiwan in the contemporary era;
- *being at the margin of a larger entity and trying to adapt to it*, as Stoicescu (2008) analyses Romania's position *vis-à-vis* the European Community;
- *being a historically constructed place of contact that has something to say to a hegemonic neighbour*, as shown in the case of Taiwan.

These approaches are either temporal or spatial, or a combination of both but not systematically explored as such, and in the first four cases history 'in the long haul' could have been a useful additional element, but was not mobilized. The case-study of Taiwan's 400-year relation with the Manchu empire, the Chinese Republic, and finally the People's Republic of China, is a stimulus to further elaborate the concept of geopolitical liminality and to propose a refined conceptual tool: liminality as the geopolitical *and* discursive dynamic produced by a historically constructed reality of being a zone of contact in a context of asymmetrical interdependence, a threshold situated at the border of a large entity that has influenced deeply the smaller one without having ever been able to swallow it.

There are a few other, perhaps slightly simpler (but not necessarily so), cases of small geopolitical entities in a relationship with a larger body in the world, in which what the smaller entity 'has to say' is a reversal of what would otherwise seem to be the natural order in which the bigger entity dictates its wishes upon the smaller. As well as multi-cultural, insular Taiwan *vis-à-vis* continental China, examples include Hindu Bali *vis-à-vis* Muslim Java, or Ryukyus *vis-à-vis* Japan, resenting Japanization efforts and the generalization of the name 'Okinawa'. All three cases share some basic similarities in spite of multiple contextual differences, and the smaller entity has been included in the larger's territory or empire at a late date (the early Manchu Empire and the Chinese Republic; the late Dutch Indies Empire and the young Indonesian Republic; the nineteenth century Japanese Empire and 1970s Japan).

By postulating that this asymmetrical relation does not result in the stronger party imposing its will without concession or negotiation, *liminality*, as distinct from *marginality*, restores the 'power of words' retained by the smaller entity: liminality is not only geopolitical, it is also discursive. Because an unstable smaller entity was obviously a danger to their empire, the Manchus, as noted above, adapted their rule when controlling Taiwan; and for complex reasons, the PRC, however strong it may become, today has to engage in negotiations with Taiwan. Meanwhile, Japan faces regular opposition movements both in relation to the increased Japanization of the Ryukyus/Liuqius and to the use of the archipelago for American military bases. Bali, further, has protected as much as it could of its cultural specificity and

autonomy, both as a part of the Dutch Empire (with the help of Dutch administrators) and after World War II, when it took an active part in opposition to the new republic and negotiated very stiff conditions for its eventual inclusion into it. By rediscovering today these alternative voices from the past, belonging to the then margins-to-be, we can better remember, long after re/integration has been acted or re-enacted (1945 for Taiwan, 1949 for Bali, 1972 for Okinawa), that the subaltern discourse has legitimacy, based on an original point of view on itself as a centre for itself. Furthermore, and as subaltern studies have emphasized, it is often at the margins that interesting and original phenomena can be observed, producing points of view that revisit hegemonic, centred perspectives from the so-called, but not self-called, 'periphery'.

### Taiwan's Liminality *vis-à-vis* China

Taiwan's liminality *vis-à-vis* China is intimately linked to the 400 years of history that connect the island and the mainland, including the period since 1949. Since the seventeenth century, cultural inflows from the mainland have not always been a merely natural, demographic, or societal phenomenon, but have also had, at times, a political and programmatic intention: from early on, successive Chinese or continental regimes have in several instances used culture to shape the identity of Taiwan's society. For instance, Chen Yonghua (陳永華) (1634–1680), under the anti-Manchu insular rule of Zheng Jing (鄭經) (1662–1681), actively created Chinese-style institutions, and built Taiwan's first Confucian temple as a message that government was to be virtuous and as a symbol of the Dongning kingdom's Confucian values. Another example is the decision of the Manchus, who traditionally considered the former Zheng rulers of Taiwan during the 1661–1683 period as their enemy, finally to accept, in 1874 (under the petition of the Qing imperial commissioner in Taiwan, Shen Baozhen, 沈葆楨), the officialization of the cult of the Chinese hero Zheng Chenggong, which had been observed unofficially in Taiwan long after the Qing takeover in 1684. Another good example is the policy of active re-Sinization of Taiwan under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and the KMT, not to mention, at this current moment, the policy of restoring elements of traditional Chinese culture in Taiwan since 2008 (in textbooks, in national cultural programs, in TV shows, etc.).<sup>16</sup> All are examples of the use of Chinese culture on Taiwan in support of a political project.

As a consequence of its China-connected history, Taiwan has become both a conservatory and a laboratory of Chinese culture(s). Both dimensions are known – Taiwan as a sanctuary, often idealized by the way, of Chinese culture, and Taiwan as a 'laboratory of identities'. It is less common to realize and acknowledge that those two dimensions are intertwined, and in fact can hardly exist without each other: the laboratory grows out of the conservatory, while the conservatory, if never a replication of the copied object, always supposes an evolution. The first characteristic of Taiwan's liminality *vis-à-vis* China is the conservatory and the laboratory in a dialectical relation.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf 高格孚 (Corcuff) 中華鄰國。臺灣閩境性, Chapter 2, '回朝退潮' ('Return to Power, Low Tide'), especially the passages about the resinicization of political symbols and textbooks.



The Taiwan Strait, originally only a geographical entity, from the seventeenth century onwards progressively became a geopolitical entity as Taiwan was colonized and the island was inserted into regional and global geopolitics. This new geopolitical identity of the Taiwan Strait became very singular. On the one hand, the Taiwan Strait is sufficiently narrow for Taiwan to have been the recipient of successive waves of Chinese culture and to have been heavily influenced by China over four centuries. As a result, Taiwan became a conservatory for many aspects of China's culture and memory. However, on the other hand, this same geographical-turned geopolitical entity is also wide enough to have provoked, by a rupture of geographical continuity (Taiwan's geographical insularity), an indigenization of that culture, or the process of its insularization: insularity is not only a geographical notion, but also a social construction. Added to this is the role played by aboriginal cultures and other non-Chinese influences over Taiwan's history and culture: Chinese culture was from the onset indigenized, hybridized, and pluralized in its Formosan context... and first of all because it did not start to develop out of a *terra nullius*, in a virgin island free of Mankind.

Further, the emergence of an open identity debate in Taiwan in the post-authoritarian era has enabled Taiwan's society to discuss a wide set of options in terms of identification, enabling Taiwan to become a 'laboratory of identities', ranging from modern ways to be Chinese, national identification as Taiwanese, or global citizenship. This laboratory is perhaps not as new as it appears. An illustrative example is the invention of the modern Chinese word for 'president': while the word used at the end of the Qing dynasty was a phonetic translation ('伯雷/理璽天德') that was adopted by Taiwan's gentry in the initial reflection on the founding of the short-lived Taiwan Republic in 1895, it was also during this period that the word '總統' was invented. The Republic soon failed, but the project was a modern one: by establishing a sovereign 'republic' with a 'president', the self-proclaimed 'sovereignty' of the island was supposed to appeal to European powers to defend Taiwan against Japan after the Manchu court had ceded the island in the Shimonoseki Treaty (Morris 2002).

It should also be noted that the Taiwan laboratory developed in great part due to the conservatory of cultures, which provided the cultural material to work with, to reflect upon intellectually, or to build up in contrast against. Further, the 'conservatory' has itself probably never replicated the mainland's cultures in their diversity and original shape, except perhaps at the sacrosanct National Palace Museum (at least until Du Cheng-Sheng's mandate, after the transfer of power of 2000, which tried to 'aboriginize', 'Taiwanize', and 'Asianize' its collections and exhibitions). In fact, in its efforts to build a new China on Taiwan, the KMT could not avoid creating something different and independent from the historical, mainland-based ROC. Dominic Yang shows in a 2012 paper that the KMT, after relocating to Taiwan, forbade military men from entering *tongxianghui* (同鄉會), locality-based associations which brought together people from the same native locations in China. This was to avoid reproducing on the island a problem that was one cause, in the KMT's eyes, of the regime's defeat on the mainland: provincialism. One can also suggest that Chiang Kai-Shek's so-called 'Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement' had little to do with China's vast, pluralistic, and ancient cultures taken as a whole, and rendered only an essentialized version of culture through a political movement.

The conservatory cannot but become a form of laboratory, just as the laboratory nurtures itself from the conservatory. One example of the delicate and interesting relations between the two is the creation of new Chinese characters in Taiwan, a complex issue in the Sinitic world. As Kaohsiung City and Kaohsiung County were preparing to merge in 2010, the city mayor and the county commissioner, both DPP figures, wanted to run in the December 2009 election. When the two teams were negotiating, during the previous November, negotiators from the camp of Kaohsiung city mayor Chen Chü (陳菊) proposed creating a new character merging the characters 縣 (*xiàn*), 'the district', and the character 市 (*shì*), 'the city'. A new character was officially proposed to Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior with the pronunciation of 'dū' (thus reminiscent of '都市', *dū shì*, the capital). The Ministry, however, refused to acknowledge the new character, for it was, arguably, a *zàozì* (造字) or 'invented character'. The laboratory had produced one effect, the conservatory another. In the meantime, local associations, as well as the municipal government itself, undeterred, started to use the new character, and even created a logo incorporating it (see Figure 8 below): a green chrysanthemum, reminiscent, obviously, of Japan's colonization of Taiwan, associated with the green colour of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party.



**Figure 8: The new logo of the Kaohsiung Government under Mayor Chen Chü**

**Picture by Stéphane Corcuff, 2012**

There is, in conclusion, a dialectical relation between preservation and creation, protection and modernization. The laboratory and the conservatory dimensions of this liminality are clearly linked in interaction.

#### *A Taiwan Detour*

A second dimension of this liminality is its discursive power. By this is meant that Taiwan's liminality in history produces a discourse, on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, which would not be produced without this tension between proximity and distance, or without push-and-pull factors, inclusiveness and independence, or inter-dependence. Such discourse, on Taiwan's side, is a discourse on China that is both informed and keeps a critical distance from its object.

Taiwan having been close to China (historically, geographically, culturally) for extended periods of time, numerous segments of Taiwan's society are familiar, and particularly concerned, with Chinese issues such as evolving identities, nationalism and national development, human rights, cultural issues, etc. Hence,

Taiwan's politicians, businesspeople, artists, scholars, intellectuals, and NGOs can produce informed and valid discourses on China. In other words, the discursive liminality of Taiwan is possible because the Taiwan Straits is narrow enough for Chinese culture to have deeply influenced Taiwan over centuries and because it is also wide enough to have given Taiwan the possibility of assessing such a cultural heritage (though of course not always without ideological biases) from a distance, as well as maintaining a critical perspective on its discourse on China. In that process, being a free and democratic country has been a valuable asset for Taiwan, in the sense that, after the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the debate on identities and national building has been relatively open. As a centre, and thinking highly of itself, China is not always in the best position to assess critically all questions concerning itself, though a large transformation of China's public debate freedoms has been underway for a decade. This is one of the interests of studying Taiwan: not only for the island's own social reality, but for what it has to say about China, which is, in fact, a part of that reality. The *Taiwan detour* is the possibility for China-watchers to learn about contemporary China itself by looking at ways Taiwan perceives China. But how many acknowledge this, or are even at all conscious of it, so imbued as they are with a Chinese and mainland perception of Taiwan as marginal? We speak here not only of Chinese themselves, but of course also of still so many China-watchers.

There is yet another dimension of Taiwan's discursive liminality, that justifies the Taiwan detour in another way: namely, what China and the Chinese reveal of themselves, in their multiple positions on Taiwanese questions, and in how they view China as a nation, territory, identity, and history. What China tends to see as marginal (at its margin, secondary) is nevertheless symbolically essential to that same country: post-1941 war politics, and then post-1949 cross-strait politics, have erected Taiwan as a symbol of national humiliation, incomplete victory, and the denial of its legitimacy to rule, and these are all elements certain to be found in a Chinese political psyche prone to building upon the romanticization of a traumatic past involving partially self-inflicted pains (of which Taiwan is the perfect example). In addition, due to geopolitical realities, Taiwan remained largely closed to Chinese action until recently, and it still remains, against Chinese will, an independent and sovereign entity. Elements of proximity, national frustration, and geopolitical deadlock combine to make Taiwan a delicate question for China, and it is no wonder PRC politics in recent decades have alternated a series of approaches to Taiwan, from conciliatory to bellicose, which reveal as much about how China views itself as how it actually views Taiwan. A simple example is how China, in its international public diplomacy, refers to Taiwan as belonging to China 'since ancient ages' (從古時代), yet prefers not to specify what actual 'ancient history' is meant beyond this vague expression, for fear of being too easily contradicted by even the least capable of historians. If we count Chinese history as consisting of over roughly 35 centuries (dating back from the invention of Chinese characters), Taiwan was integrated at century 32, which would not be considered 'ancient history', for a country so proud of being the oldest civilization still alive, were it not for Taiwan's historical belonging to China being such a sensitive issue *today*. More generally, China's utilization of trauma to legitimize irredentism reveals how China, in different periods, has viewed its own national identity, its links to history,

territory, and colonial aggression, and ultimately, perhaps, its mode of insertion into international society.

Taiwan's liminality is of course not only discursive: it also has a geopolitical dimension, in the classical sense of the term as relations of power with regard to territory. As said, China has to negotiate with Taiwan, even when a government more inclined towards unification leads the island. Taiwan, in other words, remains globally out of reach for China, even though the situation has been changing quickly since 2008. China postulates the inclusion of Taiwan into its territory as desirable, legitimate, and ultimately unavoidable, and is turning itself into one of the world's most powerful countries. However, China cannot impose itself upon Taiwan by sheer force; in order to achieve its goals, China has to compromise, make proposals, wait, and negotiate, seduce and manipulate (including by taking control progressively of Taiwan's print and electronic media). The reasons for this are many, and the military factor appears to be important – but for how long? However, it is probable that other factors are also particularly significant, such as the necessity of avoiding the political cost that a brutal intervention in Taiwan may have for China, both in terms of its international image and of its image in Taiwanese minds. In other words, Taiwan, as the weaker of the two, and by far the most vulnerable, still remains immune from having an imperial form of power imposed upon it; hegemony, as discussed above, would have been a better tool to explain the shadow of China, had the concept been able to encompass more dimensions than those mentioned.

Just as with the dialectical relation between the conservatory and the laboratory, the geopolitical and discursive dimensions of Taiwan's liminality are also intertwined, and as they influence each other they are sometimes difficult to differentiate fully. It is significant, for instance, that Taiwan, which has an economy now considerably dependent on China, still has the power to attract, but also to limit, regulate, and control, millions of Chinese tourists who wish to travel to Taiwan. Chen Chien-Yuan shows that in Chinese tourism handbooks newly developed for tourists leaving for Taiwan, the island is constructed as a repository of Chinese culture – the idealized conservatory. And while the tourists are on the island, insular travel and government agencies help them to see what corresponds only to what he calls Taiwan's 'constructed familiarity': they depart from China to have a sense of a 'real China', whether or not illusionary, and what they see in the concrete in Taiwan is limited to essentialized motifs of Chinese culture and of modern Chinese history (C.-Y. Chen 2012). This is obviously done at the expense of a fair description of Taiwan's pluralistic cultures, and such tourists never get an insight into what makes Taiwan pluralistic.<sup>17</sup> In addition to tourists, some Chinese (anti-communist) intellectuals eager to visit Taiwan also fall into the trap of 'Taiwan as the repository of true Chinese culture' – which appears radically to contradict their perception of Taiwan as an otherwise *minor territory* compared to the *great* Chinese motherland. For instance, Xu Zhiyuan (許知遠), in his latest book *Stranger to his Motherland* (祖國的陌生人) recalls his first trip in Taiwan in late 2008, and his

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<sup>17</sup> Simple observation shows that in addition, they tend to group together before entering the places visited and smoke while waiting for other tourists to exit. However, one taxi driver in Tamsui told me in 2011 that at night, some 陸客 (Mainland tourists) discreetly leave their hotels to freely tour the night markets and get another picture of Taiwan.

fascination in seeing the symbols of the Republic and of the true China, in contrast to the modern China that has erased, through communism and capitalism, the traditional one – but hasn't Taiwan also modernized? He finally 'confesses' that, though a self-described anti-communist democrat, he is unable to understand the legitimacy of the reasons why Taiwanese independence militants were rejecting the visit to Taiwan (at the same time of his own visit) of China's chief negotiator, and, beyond this, rejecting unification with China: as we know, being an anti-communist Chinese does not necessarily mean being able to deconstruct a communist-constructed Chinese chauvinism.

Yet, according to every available statistic, Taiwanese people's identification with Taiwan has never been stronger than it is today, and this is the moment when cross-strait relations are at their warmest. By almost entirely ignoring the local realities of a Taiwan that clearly thinks of itself not as a province of China, Chinese tourists and intellectuals bring back to China a confirmation of an idea of Taiwan that is more and more distant from the real Taiwan. It is a form of metaphor for a globalization that facilitates transportation and connects peoples, but does not necessarily allow individuals to understand others in a deeper way. This discrepancy is caused by the 'unreachability' of Taiwan, in that it remains outside of China's governance, as well as by the ability of some in Taiwan to mobilize Chinese culture, whether authentic or not, to satisfy the consumerist desires of people with whom they don't even share identification schemes. If, among Chinese tourists' destinations, the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial, the Sun Moon Lake (which was, by the way enlarged to its current size by the Japanese colonial authorities), or the Martyr's Shrine in Taipei are perhaps not embodiments of Taiwan's role as the conservatory of Chinese culture, the National Palace Museum undeniably is so, and illustrates that Taiwan's discursive and geopolitical liminality is far from marginal. Instead, Taiwan is both a depository of Chinese heritage and able to negotiate that heritage.

In sum, what is proposed here as the liminality of Taiwan is a combination of four major characteristics of Taiwan's relation to China:

- Chinese culture is the main cultural matrix of Taiwan's culture, but not the only one and not the earliest one; Taiwanese increasingly think of Taiwan as having a pluralistic and partially oceanic culture, even though they regularly vote for the KMT – these are distinct questions, one of national identification, one of political pondering; there is a debate on these issues and on how to view Taiwan's cultural identity (identity politics in Taiwan);
- Taiwanese society plays the role both of conservatory *and* laboratory of that major cultural matrix, preserving and modernizing elements of the Chinese culture in a movement that is typical of the normal life of any living culture (cultural anthropology of Taiwan);
- China would like to extend its rule to Taiwan and establish a political continuity to bridge a geographical discontinuity, but remains to this day obliged to negotiate with Taiwan to advance its agenda (geopolitical liminality of Taiwan; study of the geopolitics of the Taiwan strait);
- Taiwan is a topic through which China reveals a lot of itself, because Taiwan as a political, cultural and geopolitical issue is a complicated and



sensitive one (discursive liminality of Taiwan; study of Taiwan; study of China, especially its nation-building discourses).

## Conclusion

With regard to its relation to China, Taiwan is in a liminal situation that has slowly developed over four centuries. The term 'liminal' is proposed as an alternative to the term 'marginal'. It suggests acknowledging the complexity of a relation that can be called a 'marginal position' only if it is reduced to its negative elements and by viewing it from one particular point of view, the one of the centre.

Taiwan's liminality is derived from a complex heritage that obviously has not yet escaped from its politicized fate. The suggestion of using 'liminal' is also a call to abandon seeing Taiwan's identity as either merely 'Chinese', downsizing Taiwanese culture to a local one, or as 'Taiwanese', in a way that would consider Chinese culture in Taiwan as simply colonial, belonging to the past, and oppressive. Furthermore, it is a call to see that, in its discursive power in relation to China and Chinese affairs, Taiwan is still relevant. Ultimately, it is a way to better understand the complexity of China's feelings toward Taiwan, where self-proclaimed love and hidden hate, feelings of proximity and jealousy, appropriation, interdependency, fascination and contempt all mix.

The island, as a threshold of China, is in sum an excellent *topos* for understanding China itself. In ancient Greek, τόπος means both 'place' and 'subject', which fits the description of Taiwan's liminality as both geopolitical and discursive. This *topos* says a lot about China itself, because China reveals itself through this delicate topic on matters such as its perception of history, the nation, identity, and relations with the world.

The liminal position of Taiwan is also a consequence of the 'conservatory/laboratory' combination that the island has because of its multicultural society in which Chinese culture is an important matrix: as Taiwan protected Chinese culture, it also constantly revisited it, inventing new forms of Chineseness, a civic, if not national, Taiwanese identity, and ways to be global in the absence of diplomatic recognition.

In conclusion, liminality as a concept reframes an understanding of Taiwan that is, in each political program, usually simplified to fit an ideology revolving around a certain idea of the nation. I have tried to develop it to better accommodate the plurality of dimensions in Taiwan's relation to China, which includes cultural, political, psychological, memorial, economic, and military aspects. Some of these dimensions bring Taiwan and China close to each other, while others keep them distant. It is damaging to the understanding of Taiwan to deny either of these contrary and concomitant movements. This context of push-and-pull forces is also a situation of distance and proximity, or conservatory and laboratory. Summarized to its narrowest definition, geopolitical liminality here defines an asymmetric interdependence where the small entity has something to say in the couple formed with the bigger entity, thanks to the historical and cultural thickness of their geopolitical relation over time. A geopolitical understanding of liminality, in this sense, may be exportable to other fields in the discipline; perhaps not without the risk of losing some of its substance, but hopefully as a way to rebalance the analysis of the strengths of the weak, as well as of the weaknesses of the strong.

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