Review Essay:

Response to Corcoff's 'Liminality of Taiwan'

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'The Liminality of Taiwan: A Case-Study in Geopolitics', by Stéphane Corcuff, in *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective*, 4, December 2012, pp. 34–64.

***Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, edited by Stéphane Corcuff, New York: ME Sharpe, 2002, 285pp, $39.99, ISBN 978-0-76560-7928.**

The ambiguous political status of Taiwan is of global political importance, given the significance of the island in China's self-perception as a great power and to the security interests both of China and of other regional powers. However, it is an ambiguity that presents a conceptual challenge to the conventional framework of international politics, which often fails to problematize the nature of sovereign states. To grasp the phenomenon of Taiwan's status properly entails new conceptual framework.

Stéphane Corcuff's work applying the term 'liminality' to Taiwan sheds a critical light on these issues. This review essay will focus on the originality of this application and the contribution it makes to China and to International Relations, with a view to developing a critical analysis of how Corcuff's post-structuralist approach might be generalized as an approach for studying the abiding tension between nation and state as a contemporary source of international conflict.

The State: Theory and History

In the Weberian conception, the essential characteristic of the state is understood to be the monopoly over the legitimate use of force within a given territory. The tolerance of the destructive force that is generated by the exercise of state violence in turn entails psychological affinity with the community order that the exercise of state coercion potentially serves: as Weber puts it in *Economy and Society*, 'the community of political destiny, i.e., above all, of common political struggle of life and death has given rise to groups with joint memories which often have had a deeper impact than the ties of merely cultural, linguistic, or ethnic community.' The political destiny associated with the state as a territorial political community can be fostered by particular notions of distinctiveness and moral purpose that endow the various groups under the same state authority with a

common identity. However, while this suggests a spontenous development, state formation may also be a product of expediency due to a hostile relationship with other, structurally similar, communities.. Thus throughout history, strategic incentives compelled the expansion of state, while ideational appeals helped to consolidate the existing power relationships between the ruler and the ruled.

International Relations has long been characterized by state-centric approach. In recent decades, as the case of China has become increasingly integrated with International Relations, China's security policy has tended to be conceived of as a product of domestic and international pressures; examples include Thomas Christensen's *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (1996); Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross's *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (1997); Allen Whiting's article 'China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan' (2001), and M. Taylor Fravel's, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (2008). The state-centric approach in works such as these implicitly assumes a unitary actor model of the state that operates between the domestic and international arenas.

This Weberian notion of the state lacks a sophisticated treatment of the intrastate dynamics that give rise to state authority. For international relations scholars, interstate relationships are assumed to differ characteristically from intra-state relationships: as Richard Ned Lebow argued in *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (2008), if the two were identical, it would become pointless to discuss interstate relationships in their own right. Efforts to differentiate between interstate and intra-state dynamics culminated in Kenneth Waltz's elaboration of the concept of anarchy in his seminal work *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Waltz argues that in an anarchical environment, where no supreme authority exists above the state to make and enforce law, states have no alternative but to act in their self-interest by building up arms, negotiating alliances, and making preemptive attacks on threatening states. Interstate power relationships are fundamentally determined by the contest of force. Within the state, by contrast, power relationships are mediated by commonly accepted norms, rules and decision-making procedures that help establish hierarchy among the relevant actors. With the state providing security as a common good for all social members, societal differentiation is possible as well as desirable, while the division of labor encourages diversification of expertise that contributes to social prosperity.

Corcuff takes issue with this widely accepted dichotomy between intra-state and inter-state relationships. For him, statehood is seldom uncontested and the state-making project cannot be done once and for all. Rather, the establishment and perpetuation of statehood within entails conflicts abroad. The more ambiguous the statehood, the more that interstate conflicts are likely. He characterizes situations in which statehood is contested over an extended period of time as 'liminality', and this sheds a critical light on a new source of international tension.

'Liminality' and Taiwan

An anthropological concept, 'liminality' connotes neither a transitional state of affairs nor a subordinate status. Rather, it suggests a 'geopolitical threshold for a

particular type of governing entity, thus differentiating a particular governing body from the category of the "nation-state" commonly understood'.

The evolution of Taiwan's political status, as Corcuff demonstrates in his works, was defined by Taipei's relationship with China, and it was the very ambiguity of Taiwan's political and cultural connections with China that defined Taiwan's liminality. Given the difficulty of characterizing Taiwan's relationship with China using existing theories, Corcuff's invocation of liminality is of particular importance to the fields of China/Taiwan Studies and of international relations. Few scholars have ever addressed Taiwan's political status as seriously as Corcuff does.

Corcuff narrates how various political parties throughout modern Chinese history 'talked' about Taiwan and made Taiwan's political status an issue to serve their own political agendas. In this sense, the nature of liminality is not only geopolitical but also discursive. It is embedded in continuous practices of power relationships that depend both on geographical location and discursive meanings that are given by powerful actors. According to Corcuff, Taiwan did not become a stake in Chinese domestic politics and in Chinese historiography until 1949, when the Kuomintang government was replaced by the Chinese Communists as the *de facto* governing body in Mainland China. Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government at this point took shelter on Taiwan, creating a cross-straits confrontation that has now continued for decades. In the process, the governments on either side of the Strait have endeavored to utilize Taiwan's historical connections to Mainland China as an ideological tool to mobilize their populations and legitimate their respective causes. The Chinese Communists under Mao Zedong claimed that liberating Taiwan would be a step toward creating a strong nation. Chiang's KMT, on the other hand, was committed to 'taking back the Mainland', and so made efforts to suppress the independence movement within Taiwan and to occlude KMT's status as a government on exile. But this was yet the beginning of Taiwan's liminality: both regimes claimed to incorporate Taiwan into a unified governing structure under the name of 'China', and Taiwan's *de facto* independence from the Mainland China was not viewed as permanent.

What helped to stabilize Taiwan's liminal status, according to Corcuff, was the democratization of Taiwan's political system from the late 1980s. With Taiwan's political spectrum becoming plural, various political parties within Taiwan came to express identities that reflected their political aspirations. This, in turn, has converted Taiwan into a 'laboratory of identities', in which only some identities are attributable to Taiwan's historical connections with Mainland China. Crucially, this constituted a dilemma in Taiwan's geopolitical relationship with the Mainland China, now under the CCP regime: while the CCP refused to recognize Taiwanese identity claims, the KMT has tended to identify with local aspirations for new self-understandings. The key to reconciling conflicting conceptions of Taiwan's status might ultimately lie in the wisdom of political leaders on both sides of the strait. A prerequisite for having that wisdom, however, is to develop a conceptual framework that captures the subtleties of Taiwan's claim to new identities. Corcuff provides just that.

Corcuff's Scholarly Contribution

By breaking down the stark distinction between intra-state and interstate relationships, Corcuff contributes to our thinking about how international politics is discursively and socially constructed. Further, by focusing on the ambiguity of Taiwan's political status, Corcuff also enriches the discussion of the implications of the instability of China's frontiers for international order.

   More specifically, Corcuff makes scholarly contribution to China and International Relations in two aspects.

   First, in narrating the formation of Taiwan's liminality *vis-à-vis* China, Corcuff helps to restore the centrality of Taiwanese people's own identity/identities to scholarly discussion. With a very few exceptions (particularly Alan Wachman's *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization* [1994] and Christopher Hughes's, *Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism: National Identity and Status in International Society* [1997]), English-language works have given insufficient consideration to how Taiwan's unique self-understandings have been formed and the way these self-understandings have become intertwined with the identity politics on that island. Corcuff thus enriches studies of China by shifting the focus to the concept of Taiwan itself. Furthermore, he even helps problematize the meaning of 'China' by highlighting Taiwanese identity claims which have maintained more robust continuities than those on Mainland China. Indeed, the coherence of Chinese identity remains at issue on Mainland China, where the populace has experienced political turmoil such as the Cultural Revolution in the twentieth century.

   Second, by laying out the concept 'liminality' Corcuff contributes to the discussion of international politics. International Relations often takes state sovereignty as given. While sovereign states are taken to be the primary actors of international politics, the nature of sovereign states is underexplored. 'Liminality', as Corcuff discusses it, implies an alternative conception of (contested) statehood, applicable to a range of geopolitical phenomena where these is asymmetrical political recognition. Sovereignty ordinarily presupposes reciprocal recognition of international status by the state actors involved. Liminality, in contrast, implies an alternative to this conception of sovereignty. Conflicts tend to arise between parties who embrace the legitimacy of liminality in practice and those who do not, and such circumstances are not unique to the China–Taiwan cross-strait relationship. As Samuel Huntington observed in *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), identity politics has become a global phenomenon and a new source of tension since the end of the Cold War. Despite many differences,, conflicting identity claims in Northern Ireland are another example. In this way, Corcuff develops a new conceptual framework applicable to cross-regional comparative studies.

Conclusion

Stéphane Corcuff regards Taiwan as an illustration of liminality, meaning that statehood has been contested over an extended period. This perspective provides much insight into a wide range of separatist movements at the core of international tensions. His work accordingly serves as a starting point for further exploration. However, he does not discuss the possibility of generalizing from Taiwan's experience and its relationship with Mainland China to other cases in other parts of

the world. Simply, the edited volume *Memories of the Future* doesn't have any comparative component in its discussion of Taiwan's independence movement. However, his use of the concept of 'liminity' opens up new potentials for scholarly advancement.

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