

Viewing Taiwan From the Left

Monday 13 January 2020, by [HAACK Michael](#), [HIOE Brian](#), [LIN Kevin](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2020).

Taiwanese voters are going to the polls tomorrow for presidential elections as protests continue to rage in Hong Kong. But in order to understand Taiwan, we have to understand the power of China — and the looming shadow of US imperialism.

On Saturday, voters in Taiwan will go to the polls to elect the state's next president. The autonomous territory — officially known as the Republic of China, but unrecognized diplomatically by most countries around the world — has long been cast in the shadow of China and subsumed under Washington-Beijing relations.

In tomorrow's contest, China is again a major dividing issue between the two main parties, the conservative, pro-unification Nationalist Party (KMT) and the left-leaning, pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, the party of the current president, Tsai Ing-wen). The election is also playing out against the backdrop of the Hong Kong protest movement, with Taiwan watching nervously at how China rules Hong Kong under "One Country, Two Systems," the same arrangement that has been promised to Taiwan should it unify with China.

To get a sense of the state of play in Taiwan, we spoke to Brian Hioe, a founding editor of [New Bloom](#), an online magazine that covers political change and social movements in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. We talked about Taiwanese history and politics, the strengths and weaknesses of left-leaning social forces in Taiwan, Taiwan's relations with China and US imperialism, and much more.

KL/MH | Modern Taiwanese history has been complex and fascinating, with colonization, imperialist wars, industrialization, and democratization all in the last two centuries. For readers who are unfamiliar with Taiwan, what has historically shaped Taiwanese people and politics?

BH | There is a China-centric view of history shared by the pro-unification KMT (the "Nationalist Party") and the Mainland Chinese government that Taiwan has always been part of China. But there are a lot of historical nuances and subtleties which that covers up.

Taiwan was originally populated by indigenous people, but there have been waves of Han settlement over the last four hundred years. In 1895, after the Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan became a colonial possession of Japan. That was the last point at which technically the same government controlled both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. Then followed fifty years of colonization in which industrial modernization took place, and this sort of split Taiwan off from the history of the Chinese mainland.

Then, at the end of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1950), the KMT, defeated by the Chinese Communist Party, came to Taiwan and brought with it what later became 10 percent of the population — *Waishengren* ("the outside people"). *Benshengren* ("the local people") were the 88 percent that had already been there from early waves of Han migration, along with 1 to 2 percent indigenous people. *Waishengren* constituted a political and economic elite during the authoritarian period (1945–1987).

Eventually, after decades of authoritarianism, the democracy movement in the 1980s and 1990s turned Taiwan into a liberal democracy. The Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan's major center-left party, emerged from the democracy movement. However, the KMT still remains active as a major political force today.

KL/MH | What are the issues driving the presidential election? Are there any left forces at play? Would the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), for example, be considered a left party?

BH | The issue that always looms large in Taiwanese politics is independence versus unification. There are still left and right issues at stake, such as LGBT rights, the economy, labor rights, racial issues, and so forth. But when it comes to the election, historically it is still independence versus unification that has been the main political cleavage in Taiwanese politics.

The KMT, which was in power for many decades, is the conservative establishment and supports unification with China. The Democratic Progressive Party, which I would not really call a left force today, was much more left-wing in the past. The Taiwanese democracy movement was influenced by the global New Left. However, the DPP has become increasingly conservative on many issues. One can see this in the DPP undoing decades of labor reforms in late 2017, or the opposition of elements of the party to gay marriage, for example.

Even so, the DPP can be an ideological mix sometimes. Historically, the DPP has had some members and candidates who were unusually politically radical, including people with labor or environmental activism backgrounds. Even now, it is running many politicians who came out of social movements. For example, the number two in the party list is a prominent left-wing member of the Green Citizens' Action Alliance, an environmental group, and the founder of the Social Democratic Party is the number three candidate.

There is a broader history of social movement activists becoming electoral candidates in Taiwan, though they are often accused of having sold out the movement, or simply used movements as a means of building political capital for future electoral campaigns. But over the past year politicians from third parties that emerged after the 2014 Sunflower Movement, who originally hoped to establish a "Third Force" in Taiwanese politics separate from both the DPP and KMT, are aligning with the DPP or directly joining the DPP. This is sort of a united front strategy against the KMT, which seemed resurgent in last year's elections. It remains to be seen how successful this strategy will be.

Broadly speaking, the political left has been pro-independence; their notion of independence was historically shaped, particularly in the postwar period, by the wave of anticolonial uprisings across the world, as well as elements of [Leninist conceptions of self-determination](#).

KL/MH | Taiwan's modern history has been tied closely to mainland China, especially since the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) fled to Taiwan after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War. How would you characterize Taiwan's relationships and connections to China?

BH | China is always looming in the background. It overshadows Taiwan in terms of size and its economy, and its military threatens Taiwan. So its influence is always present.

Unification and independence come up in social movements as well. For example, the labor movement is not really on one side or the other, but at protests, you have these accusations that you are all secretly KMT, or you are all secretly DPP. It is true that some labor groups are aligned with the blue camp because they associate labor with China — as a kind of worker's paradise. But I think

young people have gotten beyond that.

It is not well known, but some of the key Sunflower Movement activists know activists in China and Hong Kong well, and knew them in the years before the movement broke out. But since the 2014 Sunflower Movement, it has become harder to have these kinds of exchanges with China because they can't get there (or even Hong Kong) without fear of being kidnapped or being blocked at the border. It would have to be Chinese activists coming to Taiwan, which is still possible through some means, though it is difficult.

KL/MH | Taiwan has been a US ally despite not having formal diplomatic relations since the United States switched recognition from Taiwan to China in 1978. Can you talk about Taiwan's relationship with the United States today?

BH | The United States is, in theory, Taiwan's guarantor of security from Chinese military invasion, and the DPP and other more pro-independence Taiwanese political parties bank on US imperialism as a way to ward off China. There is a romanticization and an idealization of the United States within the pro-independence camp. This kind of blindness toward US imperialism is a flaw of a lot of Taiwanese social movements.

The United States has backstabbed pro-independence forces. In a [phone call](#) to the *Financial Times* in 2011, the White House said that the United States did not have faith in the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen to maintain cross-strait stability. And that was a way of sabotaging her 2012 presidential run. America actually preferred to rely on KMT, pro-unification politicians because they viewed them as more stable regarding cross-strait relations.

There is also widespread romanticization of Donald Trump as sort of sticking it to China since the Trump-Tsai phone call in 2016. But I also think that Trump's racism, misogyny, constant flip-flopping on issues, and open statements that he is willing to take Hong Kong off the table in trade negotiations with Xi Jinping have managed to work against this idealization of America. This is a chance for the political left in Taiwan to really intervene against romanticized notions of the United States.

KL/MH | In recent years, we have seen major youth-led social movements in both Hong Kong and Taiwan: the Umbrella and Anti-Extradition Movements and the Sunflower Movement, respectively. How do these movements and activists connect to and influence each other?

BH | What is interesting with Taiwan and Hong Kong is that you have a sense of mutual projection. For example, you see the protest slogan, "today Hong Kong, tomorrow Taiwan," suggesting that Hong Kong is the future for Taiwan if they pursue closer relations with China. You see the opposite, too. "Today Taiwan, tomorrow Hong Kong," which poses a temporal relationship between the two.

This sort of cross-pollination goes back years. After the month-long occupation of the Taiwanese legislature in March 2014, there was an attempt to storm the Legislative Council in Hong Kong for the first time in history in June 2014. And right after the attempted storming of the Legislative Council on July 1, 2019, someone wrote "Sunflower-HK" in graffiti. The only protester who took their mask off and revealed their identity, Brian Leung, referred to the Sunflower Movement in his comments, when he urged people to stay and occupy.

With regard to the effect of Hong Kong on Taiwan, I think a lot of it is discursive, because the China issue is always present. The KMT claim that the 1992 Consensus it advocates — the formula that there is "One China" but "Multiple Interpretations" of that China — is different from "One Country,

Two Systems” while still advocating closer relations with China.

It opens up these old wounds in an interesting way. You have this kind of discourse circling back and forth, too.

With the current protests in Hong Kong, there is reference to the strange situation of many disappearances and talk of possible suicides and kidnappings and bodies found as being similar to the White Terror in Taiwan (the nearly four decades of authoritarian political suppression that followed the 228 massacre in 1947). It is very hard to figure out what is going on, and this is the way that authoritarian terror was carried out.

It is not surprising that the DPP has just tried to leverage all of this. Some of the KMT candidates running have, for example, praised the actions of Hong Kong police, and the DPP brings this up as a reason not to vote for them.

KL/MH | Can you elaborate on their relationship to mainland Chinese activists?

BH | The possibility for exchanges may be foreclosed now because it is harder for activists to travel from place to place. It’s quite a shame. At the same time, it is also true there are a lot of misleading views held by Taiwanese activists about China: pure fear, xenophobia, or racism.

KL/MH | Are you referring to democracy activists, labor activists, feminists, the whole spectrum?

BH | I would say so, yes.

Activists in different social movements — labor, environmental, feminism — should all align because they have shared enemies. Former presidential hopeful Terry Gou is a good example. He is Taiwanese, owns factories in China, and is openly for unification. He is an enemy of both Taiwanese and Chinese workers.

KL/MH | There seems to be some revival of the labor movement in Taiwan. For example, there was the eleven-day flight attendants’ strike in 2019. What do you think about the prospects for the labor movement?

BH | Taiwan has the [fourth-longest working hours in the world](#). College graduates are making [22,000 NTD per month \(or 730 USD\)](#). There are subsistence wages for everybody. People can’t get housing because of how expensive it’s become. There are conditions of precarity across the board.

The labor movement in Taiwan is historically weak because the KMT put down unions during the authoritarian period. The unions that were allowed to exist were state-sponsored — they were tools for regulating labor for the needs of the state. Labor has faced splits over unification versus independence, too.

There is contestation about what the relationship to political power should be, especially after some labor leaders went into the DPP. But the current wave of activism is very much tied to the Sunflower Movement. In many of the recent strikes, including the Chinese airlines and flight attendants’ strikes, a lot of the workers are quite young. Many of the key groups that were mobilizing, for example, against the Tsai administration’s reforms to the Labor Standards Act in 2017 were not traditional union groups. They were more like labor aid groups, and a lot of them were young activists.

In terms of seeing a party of the working class, a lot of the parties that have “labor” or “worker” in

their names are actually pro-unification parties that have this pro-China ideological orientation, which is what labor means to them.

KL/MH | Taiwan has seven hundred thousand-plus guest workers from Southeast Asia (6 percent of the workforce and growing). What are the organizing prospects there?

BH | I think migrant worker organizing is one of the key challenges and will be increasingly significant going forward. There are such a large number of migrant workers now that they are changing the demographics of Taiwan. For example, one in ten elementary school children in Taiwan has a foreign-born parent, usually a migrant worker who got married in Taiwan.

Then how do you organize migrant workers in different industries? The conditions are very different. Domestic workers, factory workers, and others who are working in the countryside — it is very difficult for them to meet each other and gather and congregate. They are different nationalities, and unions tend to organize one nationality or another. And there are disparities among migrant workers themselves: domestic workers and caregivers have been easier to organize, while other categories have been much harder, just because of the conditions of the industry.

Two of the main demands of the migrant worker movement are abolishing the brokers system, in which broker agencies arrange for workers' transportation and work arrangements but impose steep fees on workers, and allowing for government-to-government hiring, where the governments of Taiwan and their respective home countries would take on the role currently played by broker agencies. But the broker agencies in home countries are very close with their governments, and the government in Taiwan is afraid of upsetting countries that it has good diplomatic relations with because it is excluded from the international community writ large.

There will have to be much more public awareness among Taiwanese people. Just making this into a mainstream issue that could affect elections would be very difficult because migrant workers can't vote.

KL/MH | What are the possibilities for transnational migrant workers' activism?

BH | In terms of connecting to a broader migrant worker movement, there is a lack of discussion. The Taiwanese labor movement has been somewhat insular and has not sought to do international outreach. It is sometimes seen as unnecessary.

But you may have protests regarding domestic issues in the countries that migrant workers are from: for example, the Formosa Plastics incident in Vietnam, in which a Taiwanese-owned steel mill built by Formosa Steel, a subsidiary of Formosa Plastics, caused the death of millions of fish. Fish were washing up on the shores of Vietnamese provinces over hundreds of kilometers, and this devastated the fishing industry. There were protests in Taiwan by Vietnamese migrant workers in collaboration with Taiwanese environmental groups, targeting the Vietnamese government and the company.

KL/MH | Finally, how should the US left relate to people and movements in Taiwan in an era of US-China rivalry?

BH | I hope that the US left can see the Taiwanese left in a spirit of solidarity, since the problems faced by the Left are international in nature and cannot be addressed purely on a country-to-country basis.

Solidarity should be global, after all, without the view that all of Taiwan is undeserving of solidarity because some political forces have decided to bank on American imperialism as a means of

defending Taiwan's democratic freedoms.

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