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Taiwan education at the crossroad: where globalization meets localization

Edward Vickers^a

^a Department of Education, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan

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BOOK REVIEW

Taiwan education at the crossroad: where globalization meets localization, by Chuing Prudence Chou and Gregory Ching, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 316 pp., \$95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-11089-2

Though not an internationally recognised nation state, Taiwan has all the usual trappings of one – including a national education system. Moreover, its ambivalent political status and experience of rapid social change over the past century or more make the development of this system a fascinating subject of study. Over a period of 120 years, the island has been a frontier province of the Qing Empire, a model Japanese colony (1895–1945), and the refuge of the Republic of China’s Kuomintang regime (ousted from the mainland in 1949). Spectacular economic growth from the 1960s to 1990s was followed, after the ending of Martial Law in 1987, by rapid democratisation – making Taiwan today perhaps the most open and liberal society in East Asia.

Chou and Ching set out to survey and analyse the relationship between Taiwan’s development, its evolving international and regional ties and shifts in educational policy and practice. This is a hugely ambitious undertaking and the resulting volume is impressively wide-ranging. After summarising the island’s history and providing a general overview of its education system, the authors focus on a number of specific problems, themes and issues. These include: educational funding; curricular change; cram schools, credentialism and access to higher education; the politics of higher education expansion and internationalisation; and the educational dimension of Cross-Strait relations with China.

This book will therefore serve as a very useful introduction to Taiwan’s education system for the uninitiated – but Chou and Ching also raise a number of issues of interest to more specialist readers. This is particularly so with respect to higher education, the authors’ main area of expertise; the chapters on tertiary education constitute the longest section of the book and its strongest component.

Like all other East Asian societies, with the sole exception of North Korea, Taiwan has in recent years witnessed both a massive expansion in the size of its higher education sector and a concerted drive to ‘internationalise’. As Chou and Ching point out, expanding participation in higher education has largely resulted from factors internal to Taiwanese society: demographic decline, societal and parental pressure for educational ‘success’, and an economic shift away from low-skills manufacturing towards

high-technology industries and services. Meanwhile, the growth of an international higher education market, the related rise in the significance of international indicators of university performance and neoliberal influences on public sector management have contributed to sweeping changes in the way in which universities are organised and their purposes conceptualised.

In Taiwan, this has led to certain developments that Chou and Ching evaluate positively, such as a rise in the number of overseas students and increasing opportunities for Taiwanese students and scholars to engage in international exchange. However, the underfunding of educational expansion (at both tertiary and lower levels) and a slavish reliance on crude quantitative indicators of academic 'quality' have in their view contributed to serious distortions and imbalances. Growing reliance on private sources of funding, including student fees, a heavy focus on science and engineering and the skewing of public support towards certain institutions at the expense of others (phenomena by no means peculiar to Taiwan), have all contributed to a stratification of the education system. Moreover, access to the best courses and best institutions has increasingly been determined by students' socio-economic background, in part due to the phenomenon of 'shadow education', which requires heavy parental investment in after-school examination cramming.

A particular target of the authors' criticism is the way in which pressure on local academics to score highly in the main international citation indices (SCI and SSCI: Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index) has turned Taiwanese scholars into 'paper producing machines' (200). This problem, they argue, is particularly severe in the social sciences and humanities. Since these international citation indices are overwhelmingly biased towards American and British journals, and hence towards topics and themes considered interesting or significant in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, Taiwanese (like other non-Anglo-Saxon scholars) find themselves pressured into producing papers to appeal to Western readers or reviewers, rather than focusing on research that is locally relevant or useful. The absurdity of this situation is reflected in the fact that, while Taiwanese scholars are relatively successful in publishing articles in 'major' international journals, they nonetheless 'score' rather low on the key citation indices. In other words, Taiwanese academics are producing lots of academic papers in English, but hardly anyone is reading them. This suggests, as Chou and Ching emphasise, a need to urgently reconsider the nature of the evaluation framework within which local academics operate.

This issue of academic publishing is just one of a number of areas in which Chou and Ching perceive an intersection of 'localisation' and 'globalisation', concepts that frame their entire analysis of Taiwan's education system. These concepts are certainly important to an understanding of educational change in contemporary Taiwan. However, when applied – as here – to a discussion of Taiwan's evolving relationship with the Chinese mainland, they seem of more limited relevance. Surely it is not the 'global'

or the ‘local’ that are the key dimensions of the Cross-Strait relationship, but still very much the ‘national’. Chou and Ching rightly point to some promising recent developments in educational collaboration between China and Taiwan (particularly in relation to higher education). However, when they speculate that this collaboration will help bridge the political divisions between the two sides, they are engaging in wishful thinking rather than analysis. There is no evidence to suggest that either educational collaboration or economic integration are softening Taiwanese opposition to ‘unification’ with China; quite the opposite. Meanwhile, as the authors’ analysis of curricular change implies, shifts in the way that Chinese and Taiwanese identity have been depicted in school textbooks (the object of repeated public controversy) have primarily reflected rather than caused the transformation in identity consciousness witnessed over recent decades.

One welcome feature of this study is the authors’ attempt to analyse Taiwan’s educational development in an East Asian context. However, this is somewhat undermined by resort to sweeping cultural stereotypes. For example, we are told that ‘East Asia has been renowned for its culture of frugality, hardwork [sic], and family values, which has distinguished it from the rest of the world’ (51). Some of those from ‘the rest of the world’ might beg to differ. Moreover, the authors’ engagement with existing literature is distinctly patchy. While a number of scholars have argued that the much-vaunted ‘East Asian Miracle’ was partly attributable to ‘Confucian culture’, others have disputed this; here, however, the contribution of Confucianism is presented as fact.

Nevertheless, as Chou and Ching themselves point out, publishing in English presents considerable challenges for non-native-speaking academics. We should bear this in mind particularly when assessing the editing of this volume. Here the authors – and their readers – have been badly let down by the publisher. It is simply unacceptable for a scholarly volume from a supposedly reputable academic publisher to appear with a typographical error in its title (‘Crossroads’ is invariably plural). This is symptomatic of sloppy editing throughout. The manuscript would also have benefited from rigorous peer reviewing, challenging the authors to refine and clarify their argument; there is no evidence of this. Globalisation compels more and more non-Anglophone scholars to address an international readership through the medium of English, but the reviewing and editing practices of major journals and publishers apparently take little account of the issues this raises. It is time they did.

Edward Vickers

Department of Education, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan
edvickers08@googlemail.com

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