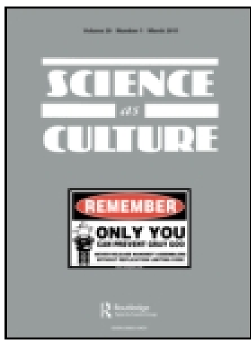

Science as Culture

ISSN: 0950-5431 (Print) 1470-1189 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csac20

# New democracy and old society: A personal journey through student and grassroots activism in Taiwan

Hsin-Hsing Chen

**To cite this article:** Hsin#Hsing Chen (1998) New democracy and old society: A personal journey through student and grassroots activism in Taiwan, Science as Culture, 7:2, 217-241, DOI: 10.1080/09505439809526502

**To link to this article:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09505439809526502

Published online: 23 Sep 2009.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 40

View related articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=csac20

**Download by:** [National Chengchi University] **Date:** 22 September 2016, At: 12:29

# NEW DEMOCRACY AND OLD SOCIETY: A Personal Journey through Student and Grassroots Activism in Taiwan

HSIN-HSING CHEN*

It was March, 1990, during the massive student sit-in at the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial in Taipei, that many of my fellow student activists and myself felt a paralysis at the height of our movement. We aspired to an egalitarian democratic society where neither intellectuals nor anyone else dominated over others, yet we were positioned by the society at large as 'pure and noble speakers for the people'. A completely democratically elected government—the foremost goal of the half-century-old Taiwanese democratic movement—was about to be won. Yet the various social inequalities under the old authoritarian regime turned out to be alive and well as the new era of democracy unfolded.

In this article, I will trace my own experience of involvement in the student and grassroot movements in the late 1980s. This past decade is now called 'the Golden Decade of social movements' by the Taiwanese mass media. I was among those thousands of people striving for a home-grown grassroot radicalism, which is critical towards both the authoritarian government and the bourgeois leadership of the democratic movement. Outside the mainstream democratic movement, which sought political liberalization, people organized themselves in a wide variety of forms: independent labour unions, farmers' organizations, dissident student groups, etc. My particular group—the Democratic Students' Union (DSU)—championed solidarity between student-intellectuals struggling for their democratic rights on campus, and the grassroots movements in other corners of the society. We attempted to engage in a series of

* Department of Science and Technology Studies, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY 12180, USA. E-mail: chenh2@rpi.edu

0950-5431/98/0200217-25 © 1998 Process Press

movements, most notably community-based environmental protests, and actively debated with other groups.

Without traditional oppositional political discourses such as socialism, most of the protests were spontaneous reactions to the discontent accumulated for ages, rather than strategic actions formulated through a theoretical tradition. We had to construct our own oppositional discourses, commitments and strategies anew, and draw upon existing norms and values in doing so. Theorization often followed action. This turned out to be inhibiting and liberating at the same time for the protesters and the movements. The same sets of norms and values that enabled us to struggle against the oppressions we perceived also held us back from advancing our struggles to a more radical level.

At one time, my fellow activists and I thought that our effort could free us and people in our communities from 'the mock of ages'. We have witnessed the dissolution of the fear of the omnipresent state power, the mistrust of our fellow humankind, the selfish careerism, and other qualities that we disliked about ourselves. Yet they seem to have all come back in a new form today, as if the rattan vines that you cut down in the jungle last month had healed and regrown—even stronger than before. It is, none the less, difficult to say that the social movements of Taiwan in the 1980s have failed, for there was no clear idea what kind of victory was possible in the first place. There was indeed a plethora of theorizing, along with the eruption of protests. By the mid-1990s these theorizations and revolts reached an obvious crisis and required radical re-examination.

## FROM HERMANN HESSE TO *LES PETITS* REBELS

The burgeoning of social movements in Taiwan in the 1980s no doubt tremendously benefited from the democratic movement. Social protests as consequences of political liberalization was also one of the dominant explanations in the press and mainstream academia (e.g. Williams, 1992; Hsiao, 1992) Many participants I encountered—workers, farmers, urban dwellers and students—also describe their personal experience of joining the collective protests this way: the democratic activists' struggles on the street and in the parliament made clear that airing grievances and confronting the authorities

would no longer be answered by prompt and harsh punishments. We therefore put the contradictions that had been suppressed for the past four decades into the open. Yet those contradictions had existed all along, and everyone had to find his or her own subtle ways to face it. For me and my small group in the National Cheng-Kung University, guidance first came through the writing of Hermann Hesse.

The university entrance examination, like the Civil Service Examination in old China, is one of the few institutions in Taiwan that is kept rigorously egalitarian, at least in appearance. Young men and women from all classes will have this one fair chance in their lives to compete for the elite status in the state-sanctioned hierarchies. Although urban middle-class kids do have some advantages in their upbringing and comprise the majority of the student body, it is not uncommon for a poor farmer or worker's son or daughter to excel in the exams and school work and eventually ascend to the top echelon of the bureaucracy in his or her career. However, career prospects aside, university life was much less rewarding than I had expected during my adolescence, and the double-binds that defined us as future technocrats often became unsolvable dilemmas on close examination.

Modernization brought about tremendous changes to our society, but the model of old Chinese gentry-literati can still be easily borrowed by the new technocrats of Kuomingtang's Taiwan. A gentleman of the old days often had to juggle with a dual role. He was a member of the literati-bureaucracy, which defined and maintained good morality and sound statecraft, and he was also a subservient son and loyal subject to the family, the lineage and the state.[1] Furthermore, since he was an integral part of the ruling system, he had to do more than yield passively to the dominant social–political forces, he also was obliged to actively defend them. It was a constant effort to juggle 'professional' intellectual and moral commitment on one hand, and social–political obligations on the other. These commitments often opposed each other, and individuals were torn apart by the double-bind. This tragic theme is repeated again and again in the school textbooks of history and classical Chinese literature classes. The historical figures who died for principle in the face of the unsolvable dilemma are passionately celebrated in the official moral didacticism.

Similarly, a modern technocrat of the Kuomingtang regime is

expected to uphold a set of universal values (which are now broadened by science, technology, Western democracy, free-market capitalism, etc.) on the one hand, and on the other, actively perpetuate the authorities that keep every member of the society in his or her suitable place. This was not at all an easy task under a regime that simultaneously prides itself as a defender of modern civilization against the barbaric communism across the Taiwan Straight, and asserts its stringent control over virtually every sphere of social life—much like what 'the communists' in Taiwan's anti-Communist propaganda do. Like most Taiwanese of the two recent generations, I have been constantly cautioned by parents and adult relatives to keep my mouth shut, to keep from being overheard by the seemingly omnipresent government informants and taken by the authorities as subversive.

Restraint was not much of a problem for a child or even an adolescent, as strict supervision from parents and teachers over youngsters is taken for granted. Upon entering college, I expected to be treated as an adult and enjoy an unimaginable abundance of freedom. The reality was that parental supervision was merely replaced with supervision from the 'Office of Didacticism' (*Xündao Chu*, renamed 'Office of Student Affairs' after 1991) and various other apparatuses of the martial-law regime and the ruling party. Moreover, the faculty members, who are supposed to be the cutting-edge generators of knowledge, were even more reserved than their students—and often appeared as conformist as docile children. Conformity and mediocrity were regarded as sure ways to survive. As a result, public discourses on campus were terribly dry—a sharp contrast to the idea that the university should be the temple of knowledge.

In search of intellectual excitement, I became active in a literary club which called itself the Sigma Society after I was admitted to the National Cheng-Kung University as an engineering major in 1985. Members of this club (about ten undergraduate and graduate students) met regularly to read books and discuss issues ranging from music to recent developments in quantum physics. The organization of the club was fairly non-hierarchical; the president is periodically elected only to perform the very limited paper work. The real leadership rested in the senior club members who were respected for their intellectual prowess, but junior member were encouraged to

take the initiative and challenge the seniors, even in playfully sarcastic ways. Each member had his own interests and specialties, and overcoming the communication boundaries was a constant effort as well as part of the fun.

However, there were some things that virtually everybody enjoyed. Men and women, majors in Chinese literature as well as mechanical engineering, were equally enthralled by Hermann Hesse's *The Glassbead Game* (1969). Like ourselves, Hesse resented the suppressive school education, had some aspiration for oriental mysticism, and yearned for freedom—even the least (or most) sentimental 'freedom of thoughts'. Indeed, the reality in Taiwan's universities at that time made Hesse's weird cult of bead players appear as a free-thinker's heaven. The suffocating atmosphere of Taiwan's college campuses enabled our peculiar reading of Hermann Hesse to be seen as a great rebellion. The very fact that the society was reduced into a pale shadow by Hesse was exactly his charm. The authorities can abuse their subjects and us in any way they like, but eventually our wandering in the cruel outside world will make us wiser in the most sacred temple of thoughts—just like Hesse's hero, Joseph Knecht the Game Master. Furthermore, like the buddhisatva-like figure of Knecht, we could still leave a little room for human compassion in our eventual nirvana.

Secluded intellectualism in itself did not really provide much excitement, but it was one way to respond to the dilemma—moral dogma and intellectual rigour on one hand and loyalty to the authorities on the other—in the elitist role which we were expected to play. Some students chose to cope with the double-bind and become part of the state technocracy; I would meet many of them working for the Environmental Protection Agencies during my participation in environmental movements. For me and many others, such a dual role was impossible, and we had to find ways out of it. The overwhelming majority chose to avoid politics and seek a future in the prospering private-sector businesses, where the official dogma was taken less seriously. Yet for me and my cohort, who were still secluded in the Ivory Tower, severing the social bind—as Hesse's story of the bead players suggested—sufficed as a way to reduce the double-bind into a manageable single goal.

Fortunately for me and my peers, the raging tide of democratization in Taiwan provided us with more alternatives to the official plan

of life than secluded intellectualism. Inspired by the struggle of the out-of-campus democratic activists, we in the Sigma Society and other student groups began to work towards a democratic movement of our own. We started out by countless midnight meetings (to discuss politics and to build rapport), well-calculated but provocative articles in legitimate campus newspapers, and surreptitious voluntary work in the election campaigns of the newly founded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, the first genuine oppositional party founded in 1986). One step after another, we finally found our organization strong enough and waged a protest that publicly broke the censorship rules of the administration in Spring, 1987. Literature from the democratic movements, underground histories of Taiwan, and translated writings of Herbert Marcuse (1969), Louis Althusser (1971)[2] and the like replaced Hermann Hesse as our new favorites, and we began to call ourselves a student movement. Political rebellion seemed to be a much more substantial way to liberate ourselves. Yet, as our movements proceeded, we found that we were also bound by another set of sometimes contradictory norms and values.

## OBJECTIVITY AND RATIONALITY

'Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men' (Luke, 5: 10, 28) quoted Pastor Lin, a DPP activist and Presbytarian minister, from his gospel book to me and several other dissident students sitting around his kitchen table. We hardly shared his religion, but that sentence surely came to us as a great comfort. It was also a novel idea: we were no longer confined to the pursuit of 'truth' or other universal objectives, so often thought to be the calling of intellectuals. "Once you are in politics, catching people's hearts and souls is your main business. To do so, you have to explore what people believe, and play with them to the advantage of your cause". This is the message we received from the quotation. Yet universal values, if no longer valuable in their own right, were still instrumental to our new endeavor. We relied on them to enlist support, and used them to paralyse the powers-that-be with their own double-binds. For instance, our protests on campus had to appear morally upright by the authorities' own definition, so that the administration and party apparatuses were faced with an agonizing choice between suppress-

ing us and facing embarrassment, and tolerating us at the cost of their authority.

Nevertheless, our move from the state-assigned role of intellectuals in technocracy towards the role of intellectuals in democratic politics did not free us from complex binds. It merely replaced the traditional and technocratic elite's double-bind (intellectual/loyal subject) with another set of responsibilities. On the one hand, I expected myself to be a critical (and self-critical) thinker who takes nothing for granted and rigorously measures every act against principles. On the other hand, I had to be a social actor, an activist, which (unlike in the elitist models) entails a double role. I took a position, identified myself with the oppressed people, appraised the situations, and formulated strategies for us to win the struggles.

These responsibilities we wanted to take on conflicted with each other. According to the norms of technoscience we were taught, thinking critically requires a mental distance; an 'interested' investigator is bound to produce biased results. Yet engaging in the day-to-day struggle as a democratic activist requires elimination of such a distance; I had to get down, get dirty, and get involved. Being an effective strategizer, I was compelled to marshal all possible resources, to 'catch (wo)men' with whatever means at hand, including the ruling ideologies. But playing with those ideologies often invoked the ruling hierarchies that placed us as intellectuals above the people with whom we wanted to identify.

Since the summer of 1987, our democratic movement on campus began to reach out and coalesce with dissident student groups throughout the island. Many of those groups had, like our Sigma Society, originated from student literary clubs, others from legitimate campus newspapers, and yet others from small underground study groups; all of them shared the same anarchist-like form of organization like ours. Besides cooperating in campaigns for democratizing college campuses, dissident student groups began to engage with other grassroots social movements. The implicit contradictions in the role of intellectual-in-politics unfolded in our grassroot engagement, and the different ways to deal with those contradictions subsequently developed into real political differences between the two major student movement factions. The first is the liberal dissident groups from the most prestigious National Taiwan University (NTU), who later won the NTU student government. The second is the Demo-

cratic Student Union (DSU), which includes groups from 13 other universities and a minority of more radical NTU dissident groups.

The first large-scale involvement of DSU in the social movements took place in January 1988. Some 30 students from Fujen University and my university organized a 'student investigation team' to the pollution-infested community of Houjin. A war between the mainly working-class community residents and the neighbouring state-owned China Petroleum Corporation was at its peak. We deliberately chose to board in the homes of local activists to mark our stance. At the beginning, we set out to do an opinion poll to attract the attention of newspaper reporters who craved a 'scientific' voice, and to allow space for deliberation within the team. During our three-week stay, we held three internal meetings every day to discuss our work, future positions, and perspectives on the movement. Then, we made a calculated turn toward publicly supporting the Houjin movement's cause. We began a publicity campaign—passing out leaflets to Kaohsiung citizens, sending news releases to media, and so on—calling for broader public support for the Houjin people's struggle. This was the beginning of the DSU's effort to forge solidarity between the students and the grassroots.

At the beginning, many of our team members abstained from the fight, preferring instead to stand aside, observe, analyse and comment. However, resistance to taking side quickly dissolved as we got to know local activists personally, and to experience the pollution with our own bodies.

The majority of the residents of the village of Houjin, which by the 1980s was already an integral part of the southern industrial city of Kaohsiung, had given up farming and had become factory or craft workers, or small capitalists. Men and women of Houjin sustained themselves in a wide variety of occupations, in diverse locations throughout Kaohsiung City, but they all shared one large problem—the refinery next door.

Initially built by the Japanese before WWII to supply their fleet at the nearby naval base, the refinery's odorous fumes have saturated the Houjin community for nearly 50 years; occasional accidents released toxic fallout that burned crops and even metal fixtures on people's houses. The burning tower several hundred yards from the densely populated community illuminated the night sky overhead, seemingly forever, and the noises from the refinery kept pounding at

the windows day and night. Waste oil and waste water constantly leaked into the underground water; the mostly working-class residents, too poor to install tap water pipelines, had to drink the oil-soaked water. From time to time, underground oil evaporated, filled houses with combustible vapour and exploded, killing or seriously injuring people. Those very tangible phenomena forcefully represented Taiwan's pathetic industrial development. As members of Taiwan's economy, we were implicated in the problem. But our involvement had never been clearer before we could hear, smell and literally taste the bitter fruit of industrialization ourselves.

Two years earlier, when Du Pont announced its plan to build a titanium dioxide plant in central Taiwan, residents in nearby Lukang township protested vigorously but peacefully against the potentially polluting plant. Defying great pressure from the state, the residents successfully forced Du Pont to withdraw the project. When China Petroleum announced the plan to build its fifth naphtha cracking plant (NCP-5) at the site next to Houjin, the residents looked to Lukang as a model and organized a series of petitions and protests demanding cancellation of the project, or at least suspending it until the current pollution problems were solved. When they were met with a brutal police crackdown, they barricaded a gate of the refinery complex and began a long stand-off that would last for three years.

Like the local activists, we also drew our inspiration from Lukang. But the experience of student engagement in that movement was not exactly positive. At the peak of the Lukang movement, a group of dissident students from NTU organized an investigation team in the township. With very limited contact with local activists, these students independently administered an opinion poll of the residents, analysed the data with statistical tools and 'proved' that the overwhelming majority was indeed against Du Pont's project. The students' study was widely appraised by the mainstream media as 'neutral, rational, and objective'—in sharp contrast to the (biased, irrational and subjective) locals. 'Conscience of the society' was the label given to the investigation team. Armed with the newly acquired high esteem, the dissident students argued forcefully with the NTU administration that college students were proven to be fully fledged social actors and citizens, and should be treated accordingly. This rhetorical strategy helped the NTU dissidents greatly in organizing

students on campus and in publicity campaigns, and soon their campus democratic movement became the strongest in Taiwan.

The student activists at NTU theorized this experience as a new paradigm for popular democracy. Using the ideas from Western theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), they argued that, instead of championing some hollow and old-fashioned universal values—such as Emancipation, the Nation, or 'Serve the People'—every social actor should pragmatically collect, manage and reinvest resources at hand, and form tentative coalitions in response to the versatile conjunctures (Guo, 1993). This model of 'political capitalism' operationalizes the then popular Taiwanese reading of Laclau and Mouffe as bourgeoise liberals. In spite of the apparent critical stance of Laclau and Mouffe to capitalism, their Taiwanese popularizers, such as the prominent social critic Wang Xingqing, interpret their idea of radical democracy as just a refreshed version of old-fashioned democracy (Nanfang, 1994). Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe as well as Wittfogel's (1957) anti-communist theory of 'oriental despotism' and a sundry of contemporary libertarian theories, Wang suggested a historical teleology of ever-advancing democracy. The Solidarity of Poland and Thatcherism in England are all part of this inevitable trend, and Taiwan should follow the tide by political liberalization as well as economic liberalization such as privatization of state-owned enterprises.[3]

For me and others in the DSU, the 'engagement' of NTU liberals with the Lukang movement amounted to using the local residents as stepping stones. While the students won fame and, subsequently, bargaining power with their own opponents on campus, those who actually fought the anti-pollution war with the TNC and the state gained little except some media attention, which they had already acquired through hard work in organizing and protests anyway. In fact, even the NTU participants in the investigation complained that news media only paid attention to the 'scientificist' opinion poll done by students, forging a role of neutral arbitrator for students, and ignored the more political content of their report (Lin, 1993). The mainstream media craved stories that affirmed conventional views. Thus, the intellectuals' roles in the movement were easily framed according to the elitist model, regardless of the actors' own intentions. Correspondingly, we had to work even harder to rid ourselves

of the image of outside observers, 'patrons of the people', and the like.

In the years to come, the DSU would call our out-reaching groups 'Student Work Teams'. We would identify ourselves as part of the movement we engaged in. Yet the question of 'objectivity' remained on the agenda all along. In 1990, after the DSU held its largest-ever 'Work Team' activity, with more than a hundred participants in seven locales, an article published by *Shijian Biji* (*The Praxis*, DSU's unofficial organ) still complained that there existed an 'intellectual's mysophobia' against political commitments, and some unpractical desire for an 'objective, neutral stance' (Ong, 1990). One reason this stance was so difficult to overcome was that most of the student participants lacked the sophisticated social skills necessary for active engagement in the rigorous day-to-day organizing work. We could only watch and learn. Or we could help out in the publicity campaigns, at which intellectuals were pretty skilled. So, in reality, many of us were still outsiders.

## SOLIDARITY AND TRADITION

One way for the student intellectuals to forge solidarity with the grassroots movements was through traditions. While the Kuomingtang perpetuated the elitist tradition of Chinese bureaucracy and modern technocracy, the various strands of democratic opposition actively constructed their own traditions, too. The dominant liberals in the Democratic Progressive Party advocated a capitalistic, adventurous, metropolitan and open-minded 'Civilization of the Ocean'. The radicals, heavily influenced by the Third-Worldism of the American New Left of the 1970s, favoured a down-to-earth vernacular worldview. The former sought solidarity with the economically successful but politically ill-represented class of small- to medium-capitalists. The latter tried to identify with the disenfranchised, especially the vanishing rural peasantry.

The 'Student Work Teams' of DSU began to collaborate with the newly founded National Farmers' Alliance in summer 1988. This relationship served as a prototype for many of our later activities. The student work team lived with farmers and helped with some farm chores. During the day, the students called on activists and common households in the village and talked with farmers about

local problems. In the evenings, we attended village meetings in the temples, communal halls or somebody's yard. And we made a presentation to men and women mostly the age of our grandparents as the young had all gone to the cities for waged employment.

We started the presentation by referring to some history: "In 1624, the Dutch East Indies Company imported 126 water buffaloes from Java to Formosa (Taiwan), their new colony, and plantation labourers were brought in from mainland China". (Don't quote me on this; historians keep changing the number of buffalos and the date they were imported.) And then, following a three-century time line, we recounted the stories of our ancestors' sufferings and resistance: from the peasant uprisings against the Qing Dynasty, Japanese colonization and peasants' movement, to the recent protests of NFA against the government's opening of domestic farm produce market to the United States under the threat of trade sanctions.

Telling those stories was no easy matter for us. The history of Taiwan was one of the most tightly controlled fields under KMT's censorship, and the information had to be gathered in bits and pieces from underground publications. Furthermore, there was a language problem for students to overcome. Although roughly 80% of Taiwan's population speaks Taiwanese (Hokkien) in daily conversations, this language, along with all other local languages, was strictly forbidden in school, and largely suppressed in mass media. So most of the students could only clearly express an idea in Mandarin, the official language, with some English terms. We all underwent a difficult process to relearn our mother tongue.

As the time of history proceeded into the lifetime of the speakers and the listeners, we recounted the memories and experiences of many of our families. We would recite the lyrics of popular Taiwanese songs of the 1960s and 1970s, such as this one, *Wishes of a Lonely Daughter*:

> May I ask the uncle planting in the field,
> Which road should I take, to Taipei,
> The glamorous city they told me.
> I am an unfortunate young daughter, leaving my parents behind,
> To spend my life as a woman worker.
> And nobody can comfort my sorrow but myself.
> ... (Ye, n.d.)[4]

Figuratively, the daughter leaving her village is our mothers, and the parents our audience. This and many other images we played out seemingly brought together the two groups—the young urban students, and the old rural farmers—into a lineal bond. Such a relationship is, to some extent, a reversion of the existing social hierarchy of the (future) technocrats over the peasantry; but, from another angle, it is born out of a secondary hierarchy—that of the senior over the junior in traditional Chinese kinship. Yet the form of our village meetings—young students presenting an oratorical narrative to the old farmers—was a different matter. When I spoke in front of the village meeting, I was constantly nervous, stuttering and trembling: partly because of difficulties in Taiwanese expressions, and partly because of the confusing situation of the young teaching traditions to the old (or the elite showing off their knowledge to the masses?). The peasant activists loved to joke about my nervousness and suggested that I take some booze before speaking! It worked, sometimes. But the feeling of muddling with the age and social hierarchies kept disturbing me and my fellow students, until we got so familiar with the script that playing it out required little concentration.

At times, we intellectuals seemed to be the ones most fond of vernacular tradition. In our stay at Houjin, we held a community youth camp for the elementary school children during their winter recess, and taught them about local history and the environmental movement. There was little need for us to educate anybody in the community about the hazards of pollution. From daily experience and from their elders' talk, even kids in Houjin knew pretty well about the stinking refinery and the government officials' reluctance to solve the problem. The camp was a great success; local parents were happy; newspaper reports were positive; and college students and local kids alike had a good time.

The only problem occurred when we had a slide show in the children's camp. One of the slides juxtaposed a brand-new, kitsch-looking concrete town house, and an old, elegant red-brick, tile-roofed farm house—a shot just taken in Houjin. We asked the kids which one they liked, they replied with an enthusiastic, unanimous, "the New One!". That was quite a surprise. I and other students had intended to use this image to talk about how modern, Western-style,

industrial development is destroying traditional ways of life. The red-brick one was certainly our choice.

Our attachment to the vernacular traditions was not simply a nostalgic, longing for the past. Instead, it was a spontaneous, unreflexive reaction against the present. It was a reaction against the KMT's technocracy, and against the bourgeois leadership of the democratic movement that posed as the only alternative to the former. It not only caused sporadic awkward moments, but also profoundly influenced our analysis of Taiwanese society, and our formulation of movement strategies.

## TECHNOCRACY AND MEDIATION

After our successful cooperation in Houjin and the NFA campaigns, a group of activists in the environmental and peasants' movement organized a 'Social Movement Workshop' in a squatters' community in Kaohsiung City. I later joined them. Similar to the dissident student groups, the workshop was organized in an informal fashion. Division of labour was vague and spontaneous devotion determined each person's work. Together, we reached out to a wide array of local peasants' protests, anti-pollution campaigns and trade union movements in southern Taiwan. The workshop served as an information centre and a bridge between local activists in different battlefields. As the movements grew stronger, our problem with the liberal and populist mainstream of the democratic movement worsened.

In the anti-pollution campaigns, for instance, the elected officials of the DPP often tried to play the role of mediators. In Houjin, the chairman of the 'Anti NCP-5 Self-defense Committee'—the steering body of the movement—was a DPP legislator himself. He was often regarded by the local militants as inept in promoting the movement. In addition, several DPP legislators and city councilmen, like the KMT ones, frequently came to the militants trying to pressure them to swallow China Petroleum's cash offers—in the forms of individual bribes or collective settlement.

In 1989, the Houjin militants coalesced with activists in nearby communities to expand the target of their protest from the refinery to other polluting chemical and plastic factories in the vicinity. They

organized a 'Clear Water Committee' comprised of activists from seven communities along the Houjin River, and waged several coordinated strikes against the near-by firms in the mid-stream of the petrochemical industrial system. Those firms are mostly owned by large native-Taiwanese capitals such as Formosa Plastic. The DPP politicians worked especially hard to pressure the protesters in this campaign. "We are all Taiwanese", said one of the legislators, and we should not fight our own people.

The DPP politicians had ample reason to be unfriendly to the environmental movement. In the Houjin movement, for instance, the medium- to small-sized native-owned capitals of Taiwan had much at stake with the polluting petrochemical industries. The naphtha cracking plants of China Petroleum are literally the life source of Taiwan's export-oriented industry. The benzene, ethylene and other chemicals produced by China Petroleum are sold to second-tier industries such as Formosa Plastic to be made into polyethylene, polychlorobenzene, polyester fibres and other synthetic materials. The downstream industries, usually privately owned and small in scale, then process the materials into toys, household products, garments and so on, and export these to the consumer markets in the US.

The Houjin people's obstruction of the building of the fifth naphtha cracking plant, if successful, or prolonged, would cause problems with this most important sector of Taiwan's economy. Even if the campaigns did not prevent the construction but merely raised the environmental standards for the petrochemical industry, the added cost would eventually be passed on to the downstream industries. For environmentalists and the Houjin people, this meant that the economy needed an overhaul, or at least a dramatic turn of direction. But for the capitalists, the only acceptable solution was to remove the obstacles to economic growth as soon as possible. The overwhelming majority of the politicians, DPP or otherwise, chose to stand with the latter.

While the class contradiction heightened in the local struggles, it was also increasingly manifested in one incidence after another in the mass street protests called by the DPP. For the democratic leaders, all the mass protests were to be shrewdly controlled by the leadership so as to achieve maximum efficiency in their bargains with the establishment for power. Yet, for the ordinary supporters of

the democratic movements, the marches and rallies were something like a carnival, during which even those at the lowest end of the social ladder got a chance to stand up, confront the authorities symbolized by the riot police, fight for a noble cause, and get back to their daily miseries the morning after, feeling dignified and filled with meaning.

The disparity between the elite and the masses caused increasing frustration on both sides. The elite was troubled by the uncontrollable passion of the 'irrational' masses, and the mass was discontented with the elite's timid calculations. Many of the DPP activists called for 'grassroots organizing' to overcome the disparity. Our old friend Pastor Lin was one of them, and various training workshops and institutions were set up. They used the writings of Saul Alinsky and other material translated from English as textbooks (Alinsky, 1971; Sanders, 1970). However, unlike the classical 'non-ideological' Alinskyism, the DPP training was generally aimed at persuading the masses to adopt the democratic or Taiwan-Independence causes, as defined by the elite, as their own.

The DSU provided one of the most straightforward critiques of the DPP. In *The Praxis*, we concluded that the DPP was 'populism, a Third-World version of fascism' (Cai, 1990).[5] Such a movement mobilized people with passionate metaphysical terms such as 'democracy' and 'the (Taiwanese) Nation'. In such a process, the mobilized masses see their daily grievances in those ideas and are rallied behind the bourgeois leadership, who cleverly divide the society into a binary opposition—the ruler and the ruled—and suppress all other oppositions.

Yet the particular grievances—pollution, poor working conditions, low wages, and so on—that made each one of the rank-and-file supporters willing to stand up in the face of the state violence can well be result of oppressions from the same class that lead them in the movement! Populist politics therefore seemed even more effective in dissolving oppressed people's power than the authoritative suppression of the KMT. Thus we put our hope for a better society in the social movements which originated from common people's spontaneous reaction to their real-life problems instead of politicians' deceitful agitations.

The DSU students and the group of movement activists we befriended did not see the social movements as revolutionary strug-

gles that could bring about a new society by themselves. The mere mentioning of a revolution would be suicidal; it was punishable by death under martial law and would scare away even the bravest of our supporters. We nevertheless understood the social movements as a great opportunity for the participants to educate themselves through their own struggles.

By collectively using their own minds and bodies to recognize the problems that troubled them, formulating strategies and organizing coherent struggle, common people would have the opportunity to learn vital political lessons which were previously reserved for elites who ran for political office. This process, at the least, can break down the political monopoly of the elite. In this light, we believed that social movements should not commit themselves to any single political parties or factions. Instead, they should make good use of any political forces that can be coalesced around some particular issues.

Taking advantage of this strategic orientation, we found the entrenched technocrats of the state to be allies as they were also feeling threatened by the growing power of the bourgeois politicians. This, of course, made for strange bedfellows. The Environmental Protection Agencies, for instance, became our ally in the anti-pollution campaigns. The officials at EPA had the mandate to deal with pollution problems, but they could hardly enforce the law effectively. In one case, we managed to created a tense cooperation with the EPA. Since 1989, we at the Social Movement Workshop and the DSU have worked with a better organized group of fisherpeople in Tainan County, southwestern Taiwan, against hundreds of polluters, large pig farms and small factories, along the Jiangjün River. Several student work teams were organized. This time, students and staff of the workshop played more complex roles. Ofttimes, the fisherpeople brought students to the local and central governments, asking for disclosure of information on polluters. They would pressure the officials with their strength, and when the requested information was released, students and staff were sent in to study the documents—making suggestions for further action.

The idea we had in the course of the Tainan campaign was that, with strong organization, we might be able to establish something resembling a state power beside the existing state. For instance, the county EPA pleaded that they could not effectively regulate the

polluters, because they are terribly understaffed and underfunded. The fisherpeople offered to organize a voluntary inspection force comprised of fisherpeople trained and equipped by the EPA, and monitor the polluters from the fisherpeople's own rafts on the river.

The national EPA, for fear of losing authority, quickly announced a plan to recruit inspectors on a massive scale. The county EPA also conceded that, even should they be able to catch the polluters on the crime scene, the fine often did not work well in preventing further pollution. The fisherpeople responded with a proposal that, if the EPA could give us information on the habitual polluters, we could force them into compliance with the regulations by blockading their facility with mass force, inflicting substantial monetary loss. This idea was too crazy for the government to accept, and the fisherpeople's blockades were met by massive police force protecting the polluters. Nevertheless, the fear of losing monopoly over their authority prompted the state to work harder at the bargaining table with the fisherpeople. Several special funds were created to assist bankrupted fisherpeople and to clean up the river in a long-term project.

As a show of good faith, the national EPA dispatched several 'surprise raids' in cooperation with the Tainan fisherpeople, the Houjin residents, and the Social Movement Workshop. The inspectors, armed with sampling and analysis equipment and citation tickets, bypassed the local chain of command for fear that local officials would leak the information to polluters. Activists then guided them to the hidden sewage outlets of the factories that we suspected to be illegally discharging pollutants.

My local colleagues and I still treated the EPA officials with some uneasiness. None the less, we saw some possibilities for the people's victory over the technocracy—not by destroying it, but by bringing it to the service of the disenfranchised—provided that the forces of social movements remained strong. This latter condition, however, turned out to be hard to fulfil.

We disliked the liberal student dissidents in NTU and Wang Xingqing who are Laclau and Mouffe's self-made agents. Ironically, we still picked up Laclau and Mouffe's hallmark 'popular democratic' politics even without referring to their texts. Furthermore, although Alinskyist 'non-ideological organizing' was trumpeted by our rivals—the DPP 'mass line'—it was actually the 'social move-

ment' groups like DSU and the Social Movement Workshop that appeared most genuinely Alinskyist. The DPP 'mass line' used Alinsky's method of organizing as a tool to mobilize people to pursue political objectives set up by the party leadership. By contrast, we in the DSU, by then having come to think ourselves as Marxists of some sort, were advocating the empowerment of people to pursue their interests *as they saw them*. As critics of Alinskyism have pointed out, while such a strategy may give previously suppressed people dignity and power to argue on their own behalf, it overlooked the possibility that the dominant mass ideology in the capitalist societies may be inherently undemocratic (e.g. Fisher and Kling, 1990, p. 85).

The limitations of our approach to the social movements would later become apparent in the way each one of our movements ended. In our constant struggling with ideology mongers in the DPP, such a strategy seemed like a natural outcome. Yet there were hints everywhere during the course of the movement that something was lacking. For instance, once, when I was chatting with one executive board member of the fisherpeople's organization over tea, he told me his most recent acomplishment. One of his prosperous cousins was facing a strike in his factory. The workers organized a picket line in front of the factory office demanding a raise. 'Unlike my cousin', this amicable old man told me, 'I am not afraid of mass movement, having led tons of pickets myself'. So he went out to talk to the workers, exploited their weaknesses, and won a bargain favourable to the factory owner.

This conversation was painful to me. Those of us in the DSU believed that anti-establishment struggles, if organized properly, would eventually unite all disenfranchised people in solidarity—making way for a better society. Now, it appeared that things could be more complicated than we had thought. Empowering one group can sometimes mean more domination over others, instead of fraternity for all. The politics of empowerment, in our practice, merely trained people for one part of the triple requirement for a good activist—that of an effective strategizer. As for the other two, political commitment was narrowed down to the perceived tangible interests, and critical thinking almost completely faded away.

## CLASS DEMARCATION

'Historical facts and personages generally appear twice ...', Karl Marx acidly said, '[T]he first time as a tragedy, the second as a farce' (Marx, 1859/1984, p. 97). But only in the electronic age would the repetition be as quick as within one year. In March 1990, when the much-hated majority old members of the National Assembly voted to use their exclusive power to elect the president to blackmail taxpayers into giving them a big raise, a constitutional crisis was triggered.[6] A mass student sit-in took place in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Square in Taipei. Initiated by 12 students outside of the existing dissident factions, the sit-in quickly attracted some 3000 students and 4000 other people. The DSU, NTU student government and other student organizations promptly came together and used our weathered organizational abilities to operate the movement. However, the real decision-making power rested with the school delegates elected daily or *ad hoc* from the mass of participating students. None of the existing dissent groups could direct the movement without mobilizing all their members to campaign among three thousand students for an agreement. For the latter three days of the six-day sit-in, I represented DSU as one of the three commanders-in-chief at the square.

In the previous year, coverage of the Tiananmen student movement of China was broadcast live almost 24 hours a day by KMT-controlled TV stations as anti-Communist propaganda. Although the issues and social formation of our movements in Taiwan were not quite the same, it was the image that grasped everyone's attention. The students at Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial spontaneously replicated many symbolic elements from the Tiananmen movement: white bandanas and hunger strikes, completed with tragically heroic last words from the hunger strikers to their parents asking for forgiveness for their death for democracy.

In addition, a symbolic line was erected to separate the students and few professors who took part in the sit-in from the supporting crowds outside just as the students of Beijing had done to show the authorities that they were pure and free of outside agitators. The DSU delegates in the steering committee agreed with the demarcation, believing that it could help differentiate us from the DPP. The liberal NTU delegates also agreed, hoping to maintain the independent, 'objective and rational' image of intellectuals. This

borrowed demarcation helped the media to represent us as pure and noble, elite intellectuals, different from the rioting mobs in previous democratic protests. This image was instrumental in evoking the ghosts of Tiananmen, and the KMT was forced to promise complete re-elections of the parliament and a constitutional reform in the face of great embarrassment.

Yet, for most of the student activists on the square, even the liberal ones, the 'class demarcation' virtually broke our hearts. After all, elitism had most definitely become a dirty word among dissident students through years of debates and attempts at social engagement. At this historical moment, the mass dynamics inadvertantly put us back in this privileged position.

I remember three leaders of the rural environmental movement in Tainan County, all elderly fishermen in their sixties, came to visit us at the square. They had to undergo questioning by student guards some 200 yards from me at the demarcation line, then make their way through the sea of students and ascend a long stair which led to my commanding position on the high balcony of the National Theater. They then congratulated the boys and girls who had been working with them for such a successful protest.

Witnessing the old fishermen's pilgrimage-like procession was a disheartening experience, for I knew that the boys and girls, *les petits* rebels, did not deserve such homage. We had set out to break down the binds that hold everyone in his/her place on the pyramid of power, but ended up firmly bound by the structure ourselves. We hoped to help transform Taiwanese society into a society in which nobody has the privilege to speak for others. In the end, we, *les petits* rebels, spoke for the whole nation. If this was not a failure, it was at least a great disappointment.

The year 1990 turned out to be the beginning of the decline of the social movements. The Houjin movement eventually disbanded after China Petroleum successfully isolated the local militants, bought up the moderate leaders with lucrative contracting jobs, and softened the residents' hostility with subsidies to local public constructions. Frustrated, the Houjin militants went on to run for city council on the DPP ballot and suffered a devastating defeat. Similarly, one after another grassroots activists resorted to election in the hope of expanding the clout of the movement, or just to do something when the movement was in arduous standstill. Most were

badly defeated. Politics remained a game for the professionals, even though these lay people had rigorously trained themselves.

By far the most fortunate of the rebellious groups of the late 1980s was the student activists. The thought-control treason statutes were finally abolished in 1991 after another student protest. This campaign turned out to be the last of the large-scale student protests. Afterwards, many student activists joined the DPP and were successfully elected into the Legislature and National Assembly. Today, when liberal democracy is fully established in Taiwan and the oppositional DPP is talking about joining the KMT government, many young people weathered in the previous movements—learning to be shrewd, confident, ambitious, diplomatic yet determined, and fluent in Taiwanese—are expected to become the next generation of political power holders in Taiwan. Social engagement, for them, was indeed a genuinely empowering experience.

Meanwhile, virtually all student movement organizations on campus experienced a drastic decline in participation after the 1991 protests brought down the political control systems on campus. Hence, the struggle for liberal democracy on campus has ceased to be an exciting enterprise that could attract young peoples' enthusiasm. A few students each year do come out to try participating in grassroots movements and labour movements, as the DSU did. They are becoming an increasingly small minority. Some of the intellectuals that came out of the waves of social movements in the 1980s kept working hard at the grassroots. One after another, struggles keep coming and going, but no substantial breakthrough has taken place yet. It seems that, for now, social movements are becoming fixed appendages to the post-authoritarian liberal capitalist society of Taiwan.

## DOUBLE-BINDS OF NEW DEMOCRACY

At the end of my personal journey through student and grassroots activism, I came back to academia, just like Hermann Hesse's Joseph Knecht went back to the spiritual kingdom of Castalia. Unlike Knecht, what I found in my wandering was not nirvana, but more questions and a better understanding of my own human limitations. As student-intellectuals, we liked to think of ourselves as exempt from the shackles of convention and as acting through critically

scrutinized strategies. Yet actors in all realms remain bearers of culturally mediated norms and obligations, regardless of their self-made or popular images. In every twist and turn, intellectuals and people on the street alike would see limited options—presented to us as natural sequences of events, as irrefutable moral responsibilities, etc. We all rely on these immediate meanings as resources to construct our oppositional discourse and strategies.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that every political action can only be guided by spontaneous impulses. It appears so only through the theoretical construction of Taiwanese student and grassroots activists, including myself, in response to a specific historical conjuncture. Our intellectual response—of reifying people's spontaneity against bourgeois ideological incantation—appeared to us as a natural consequence. The visions of us intellectuals may well be as limited as other members of the society, yet our discourses are almost always inflated and read as universal statements by ourselves and the society at large. This inflation brings a real danger for intellectuals to overlook our double-binds. Our dual roles as thinkers and social actors inevitably bind us to the social fabrics and delimit what we can think and do. For me and others who yearn for social–political engagements, analyses of dominant ideologies and hegemonies of dominant groups are no longer merely intellectual critiques of the society out there. Such analyses are vital personal concerns about who we shall become in struggling for a new democracy.

□ *NOTES*

1. Discussion of the Chinese literati-gentry abound in the field of sinology. Needham (1969) contains several insightful comparative essays. In addition, Chow (1994) provides a vivid historical account of the responses of this class to social–political challenges.
2. We were especially intrigued by his notion of the central role of school in the ideological state apparatus (pp. 153–155), which seemingly elevates student movement to the centre of oppositional movements.
3. Although it takes some stretch to connect Laclau and Mouffe with Margaret Thatcher, Barbara Epstein suggests that their work does provide for, if not imply, such a reading. (1991, pp. 245–250)
4. The song was made popular by singer Chen Fenlan in the 1960s. The script of this presentation is, of course, a collective production and cannot be attributed to a single authorship. But the main credit should be given to Chen Xiuxian, a

long-time activist in the grassroot environmental and peasants' movement. He participated in the training of the Rural Work Team and many of the subsequent activities.
5. This article was a commentary on an incident in which a group of DPP supporters rioted in support of their National Assembly deputies' aggressive protest in the Assembly, but was condemned by the party and the deputies, and then arrested and sentenced on charges of disturbuing public order. It was a product of collective discussion and was written by myself with a pen name.
6. Self-proclaiming its sovereignty over all China, the KMT government retained mainland representatives, who were 'elected' in 1947 during the civil war, of the three representative bodies. Those representatives were never held accountable to the population of Taiwan, and served as rubber stamps for the KMT. As of early 1990, these virtually permanent members accounted for 632 of the 712-seat National Assembly, 144 of the 274-seat Legislative Yuan, and 20 of the 51-seat Control Yuan. See Tien (1992).

## □ *REFERENCES*


Alinsky, S. (1971) *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals.* New York: Random House.

Althusser, L. (1971) *Lenin and Philosophy.* New York: Monthly Review.

Cai, J. (1990) 'Minjindang Dazhung Zhuyi Luxian de Fuxian'. [The Appearance of the DPP's Populist Line.] *Shijian Biji (The Praxis)* 2: 3–12.

Chow, K. (1994) *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China.* Stanford: Standford University Press.Fisher, R. & Kling, J. (1990) 'Leading the people: two approaches to the role of ideology in community organizing', in Kling, J. &. Posner, P. S, eds, *Dilemmas of Activism.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Epstein, B. (1991) *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Guo, Z. (1993) 'Xin Shehui Xüanyan' [Manifesto for a New Society], in Yün, F., ed., *Xinshengdai de Ziwo Zhuixün.* [The New Generation's Quest for Themselves.] Taipei: Qianwei, pp. 114–129.

Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.* London: Verso.

Lin, Z. (1993) 'Cung Fan Dubang dau Ziyuzhiai' [From Anti-Du Pont to the Love of Liberty], in Yun, F., ed., *Xinshengdai de Ziwo Zhuixün.* [The New Generation's Search for Selves.] Taipei: Qianwei, pp. 181–190.

Hesse, H. (1969) *The Glassbead Game.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Hsiao, H.-H. M.l (1992) 'The labor movement in Taiwan: a retrospective and prospective look', in Simon, D. F. & Kau, M. Y. M., eds, *Taiwan: Beyond the Economic Miracle.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 151–168.

Marcuse, H.t (1964) *The One Dimensional Man.* Boston: Beacon, Press.

Marx, K. (1859/1984) 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works in One Volume.* New York: International Publishers. Williams, J. F. (1992) 'Environmentalism in

Taiwan', in *Taiwan: Beyond the Economic Miracle.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 187–211.
Nanfang S. (Wang Xingqing) (1994) *Taiwan Zhengzhi de Shenceng Pipan.* [Deep Structural Critiques of Taiwan's Politics]. Taipei: Fengyun Shidai.
Needham, J. (1969) *The Grand Titration.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Sanders, M. K. (1970) *The Professional Radical: Conversation with Saul Alinsky.* New York: Harper & Row.
Tien H. (1992) 'Taiwan's evolution toward democracy: a historical perspective', in Simon, D. F. & Kau, M. Y. M., eds, *Taiwan: Beyond the Economic Miracle.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 3–24.
Wittfogel, K. A. (1957) *Oriental Despotism.* New Haven: Yale University Press.
Wong Z. (1990) 'Dui Xüesheng Canyu Shehui Yundung de Xingsi'. [Some Reflections on Students' Participation in the Social Movements.] *Shijian Biji (The Praxis)* 2: 58–60.
Ye J. (n.d.) 'Ko-lú ê Guän-böng'. [Wishes of a Lonely Daughter.]