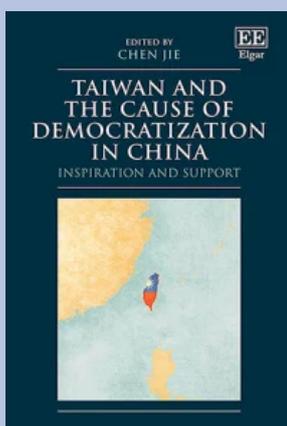


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**TAIWAN AND THE CAUSE OF DEMOCRATISATION IN  
CHINA: INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT**  
**EDITED BY CHEN JIE**

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This is a stimulating but rather depressing book. It is stimulating because it shows that not only democracy is living and dynamic in Taiwan but also that this democratic experience has inspired many Chinese-speaking people around the world. However, it is depressing because neither Taiwan nor the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are interested in the democratization of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Edited by Chen Jie, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Australia, who is well known for his deep knowledge of Taiwan, this volume primarily “intends to enrich the discourse on Taiwan democracy and its implications for China” (17).

Because of its “niche position in the Chinese-speaking world at the beginning of the 2020s” (1), Taiwan’s democratic experience has the potential to influence political change in the PRC. Indeed, Chinese liberals and dissidents have shown a strong interest in Taiwan democracy as a model for China; and often they publish their work in Taiwan. But as Chen Jie himself demonstrates, particularly in chapter 2, Taiwan’s support of the cause of democracy and human rights in China and Hong Kong, be it under former Presidents Ma Ying-jeou or Tsai Ing-wen, has been weak.

There are two major reasons for that: on the one hand, the fear of provoking China, which explains Ma's rare mentions of the human rights situation in the mainland; on the other hand, and this is the main cause, the emergence of Taiwanese identity and even nationalism or what the PRC and the Kuomintang (KMT) call the island's "de-sinification".

True, Tsai did welcome some Chinese dissidents; the Taipei-based Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) has funded works in China and Hong Kong. And after the introduction of the National Security Law in the former British colony in June 2020, Taiwan has received around 30,000 Hong Kongese; nonetheless, only 16% of them had been granted permanent residency by the end of 2022 (35). When Tsai came to power, 42,000 Chinese students were taking part in study camps (*yanxi ying*) (29), but their number dropped to 4300 in 2021 and after (34); China has remained a low priority for the TFD; and Tsai only made a few public statements on China's human rights situation and the need to democratize.

In chapter 3, Joseph Yu-shek Cheng, retired professor at City University of Hong Kong—who had to leave his hometown shortly after 2020 and is now a non-resident senior research fellow at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute—concur with this conclusion. Focusing on Taiwan's support for the cause of democracy in Hong Kong, his contribution shows perfectly well the influence of Taiwan's spring 2014 Sunflower Movement on Hong Kong's autumn 2024 Umbrella movement. He also convincingly demonstrates how much Hong Kong's 2019 protest movement helped Tsai's re-election as President of Taiwan in January 2020. However, Cheng also admits that, since 2020, Taiwan's interest in Hong Kong has been on the decline, which has been a source of frustration for the metropolis' democrats. Another source of frustration for the Hong Kong activists who decided to take refuge in Taiwan has been the lukewarm welcome they have witnessed from both the island's Government and society.

Taiwan remains a source of inspiration on same-sex marriage (SSM) and LGBTQ rights for the Chinese-speaking world. In chapter 4, Frédéric Krumbein, professor at Tel Aviv University in Israel, highlights how much the island-state is ahead of other Chinese communities in these areas. But he also carefully analyses how LGBTQ activism in Taiwan has been linked to the rise of Taiwanese identity and what he calls "Homonationalism" (93-94). In other words, "many LGBTQ are pro-human rights and pro-self-determination" (95) which obviously contributes to creating a distance between gay rights activists both in post-2019 Hong Kong and

mainland China. Moreover, Krumbein admits that there has been little media coverage of LGBTQ or SSM in the Chinese media. While on SSM this coverage tends to be more neutral in English than in Chinese (100), the Hong Kong media are more positive. However, although in September 2023 the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal made a decision in favour of SSM, in September 2025 the Hong Kong Legco, the local parliament, voted against its legalization, probably under the pressure of the PRC central government's Hong Kong Liaison Office.

Authored by Chia-chou Wang, professor at I-Shou University in Kaohsiung, chapter 5 provides some cautious optimism. It is a case study concentrating on Chinese students in Taiwan and the impact of their experience there on their political beliefs. His conclusion is that these students have become more critical and more sceptical towards the PRC Government as well as its achievements overseas. One can object to the small size of the sample on which this study is based (101 individuals, more than three-quarters of them being women). Yet, at the end of their stay, while some Chinese students have become even more patriotic, the majority of them go back to the PRC with a positive view about Taiwan's democratic experience.

This book's last chapter is probably the least innovative. Written by Yeau-tarn Lee, a Professor at National Chenchi University, its ambition is to unpack the theoretical debate on the relevance of Taiwan's democratic transition model for China. Nevertheless, inspired by Samuel Huntington's Third Wave and Larry Diamond's democratization theories, this contribution presents more about Taiwan's well-known success story than China's distinct and divergent political experience and future path. Lee is right to underscore the compatibility between liberal democracy and the Chinese cultural background, but he does not tell us much about all the obstacles the PRC political regime would need to overcome to democratize. The CCP is far from being divided about the need to keep a one-party system; authoritarianism has not prevented the PRC from developing and modernizing the country; and, while liberal values may be more common, they are much weaker than nationalism and a general support for the security that the regime offers. Moreover, while civil society exists in China, it has remained on a very short leash, highly dependent upon the Party-state and, although Christianity's influence has increased and may favour the dissemination of democratic ideas, Western religions will remain attractive to only a minority. And, contrary to the situation in Taiwan, external factors will probably not play a big role. In other words, the CCP has remained very strong and is equipped with the financial and technical capabilities to prevent any "snowballing

effect”. As Lee admits, a new form of “digital totalitarianism” (155) has emerged in China that has killed any hope in the foreseeable future for the emergence of a constitutional order and a civil society conducive of peacefully democratizing China.

This book’s conclusion can thus only be rather pessimistic. As indicated in the introduction, Taiwan’s overall agency in democracy promotion targeting China is “declining” (20). It is a “beacon of democracy by default” (166). In the early 2000s, Chinese pro-democracy promoters such as Liu Xiaobo had already invited the Taiwanese to get more interested in China’s democratization (15-16). And his successors, such as Li Weidong in 2020, have not been short of ideas, proposing for China a return to the Republic of China’s 1947 Constitution. But they may be out of touch with Taiwan’s new reality because the Democratic Progressive Party is opposed to Taiwan’s return to China and the KMT does not want to “provoke” Beijing (49-50). In 2022, Wang Juntao asked a group of young Taiwanese if they were interested in China’s democratization. Much to Wang’s chagrin, they candidly answered that it was not their business (48).

Despite the rather bleak picture that it offers, this book should be read by anyone who is interested in China’s democratization and Taiwan’s role in this process.

### **About the author**

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