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Report



The Fourth World Congress of Taiwan Studies: ‘Taiwan in the Making’, University of Washington, Seattle, 27–29 June 2022

Chun-yi Lee | ORCID: 0000-0002-2804-0659

Associate Professor, School of Politics and International Relations,
University of Nottingham, UK

Chun-yi.lee@nottingham.ac.uk

Beatrice Zani | ORCID: 0000-0003-0968-4368

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of East Asian Studies, McGill
University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

beatrice.zani92@gmail.com

Abstract

This report highlights and offers reflections on three unique features of the fourth World Congress of Taiwan Studies (WCTS4) held in Seattle in June 2022. First, following the COVID-19 pandemic, WCTS4 was one of the first large-scale conferences in the field of Taiwan studies to be held in hybrid mode. Second, although three previous editions have taken place since 2012, WCTS4 was the first to be held in the United States. Third, it is the first Congress to launch a major new publication, the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies*. Most media coverage of WCTS4 has emphasised only that it was held in the United States. This report goes further, focusing on *why* it was held in the US, and why Seattle in particular, and on the Congress’s importance more generally to the global field of Taiwan studies.

Keywords

Taiwan – Taiwan studies – World Congress of Taiwan Studies

The fourth World Congress of Taiwan Studies (wCTS4) held in Seattle in June 2022 was organised by Academia Sinica under the leadership of Professor Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao. It was hosted by the University of Washington's Taiwan Studies Program (led by Professors Bill Lively and James Lin) and received funding from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation. The Congress proved a fruitful and stimulating arena for scientific debate within and beyond academia. Broadcast on YouTube and followed by an international audience, it brought together the world's leading Taiwan studies scholars to share research and discuss the theme of 'Taiwan in the Making'; the processes, forces, and dynamics that have made and continue to make Taiwan.

It is evident today that the Taiwan studies field has been established globally: its ontological legitimacy and epistemological independence are no longer in question. Still, the discipline can develop further. As Professor Hsiao said in his keynote speech, as scholars of Taiwan, we need to engage in an 'epistemic journey' to 'theorise Taiwan' and create Taiwan-based theories that challenge and contribute to our global field of study. This report offers some reflections on the event, highlighting three features that make the fourth edition of wCTS unique.¹ First, after the COVID-19 pandemic, wCTS4 was one of the first conferences in the world to be held in hybrid mode, with 21 panels, two plenary presentations, and three roundtable discussions conducted in person and online. Second, wCTS4 was the first Congress to be held in the United States, with previous editions being held in Taipei and London.² Although media coverage emphasised the location of the US, it did not recognise the underlying reasons why this might be significant and the importance of Seattle in particular as the chosen venue. Third, wCTS4 was the first Congress to launch a major new publication, the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies* from Brill, heralding an epistemic turning point in the field and ushering in an era of new and diverse sources and perspectives.

1 It does *not* document the complete proceedings of wCTS4. For a narrative report of the plenary discussion, for instance, see Oates, Hu & Tu (2022).

2 wCTS1 Taipei, hosted by Academia Sinica (2012); wCTS2 London, hosted by SOAS, University of London (2015); wCTS3 Taipei, again by Academia Sinica (2018).

1 Going Hybrid

The world has been reshaped by the COVID pandemic, which emerged at the end of 2019 and impacted every nation across the globe. During the early stages of the pandemic, events were forced online, and academics were compelled to participate in webinars and online conferences. With the wider coverage of vaccines, many countries began to relax their travel restrictions. However, constraints still limited people's ability to attend conferences in person, and hybrid models started to emerge. WCTS4 was among the first to adopt and successfully implement such a model.

Like many academic conferences held in the last couple of years, WCTS4 demonstrated that the desire among scholars and students to engage and exchange is stronger than ever. The conference secretariat received 180 submissions, among which 88 were selected. Of those participants, 33 joined the conference online, and 55 attended in person. Participants from more than ten countries gathered at the University of Washington in Seattle for a three-day hybrid conference.

The hybrid mode of presentations and discussions allowed those unable to be physically present to participate. Robust IT support meant that every panel unfolded as planned, with participants in different time zones able to contribute to the debate through their screens. A live stream was broadcast on social media sites, and, at the time of writing, all panel discussion recordings are available on the website.³ They will remain there for the near future.

The eagerness of scholars to join the WCTS community to discuss and exchange ideas about the state of the field despite challenges of time zone and travel restriction demonstrates that Taiwan studies is thriving and that WCTS4 has built on the legacy of previous Congresses.⁴

2 Hosting in the US (and Seattle in Particular!)

Reading the media accounts of the Congress, one might get the impression that the decision to hold WCTS4 in the US meant that Taiwan studies could be brought to an international (especially North American) scholarly community for the first time (Yang, 2022). This is not the case. Taiwan studies has long engaged the international academic community. Moreover, the Congresses

3 See https://wcts.sinica.edu.tw/wctsIV/ProgramAbstracts/4th_WCTS_Program.pdf, accessed on 30 August 2022.

4 For a report on WCTS3, see Rawnsley (2019).

are built in part on this existing relationship, and the fourth edition brought Taiwan studies to ever wider audiences, engaging participants on changing international dynamics and pushing the field more and more into the global spotlight. There are two broad points the media coverage missed on why the US, and Seattle in particular, might be chosen to host WCTS4: the state of US–Taiwan (and China) academic and political relations and the importance of Seattle in particular as the choice of location.

In the inaugural volume of this journal, Dafydd Fell reviewed the state of global (and especially North American) Taiwan studies institutions in a position paper (Fell et al., 2018). Comparing it to the state of the field in the mid to late 1990s, Fell heralds what he calls a ‘golden era’ for Taiwan studies. In her response, Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang concurs, citing data from the NATSA Taiwan Syllabus Project that courses containing Taiwan-related content were being taught in 50 higher education institutions in North America.⁵ Chang also mentions the plans of ‘the newest Taiwan Studies Program’ in the US, ‘founded in 2016 at the University of Washington, Seattle’ (ibid., 384), the very same institute that hosted WCTS4. That a programme launched in 2016 could expand to a point where it can host the World Congress in 2022 (the youngest programme to do so) surely shows the growing strength of the field in North America.

In his own response to Fell, Kharis Templeman strikes a more pessimistic chord, arguing that Taiwan studies in the US and Canada is in fact undergoing long-term decline, with dormant or defunct Taiwan programmes now outnumbering active ones (ibid., 389). In the years since, however, two significant events have countered this decline and revitalised the field: the Sino-US trade war and the COVID pandemic. The ripples of the Sino-US trade war have reached academic exchange and technological cooperation. One study indicates that the Sino-US trade war reduced natural science research collaboration (Lee & Haupt, 2020: 61–63). Other studies reveal that interest in collaborating with China changed significantly after COVID, especially after China’s notorious zero-COVID policy, which prevented researchers and students from going to China.

In contrast, Taiwan’s handling of the pandemic has been viewed positively. The swift response of the Taiwan government to protect its citizens by applying big data analysis, an effective track and trace system, and proactive testing set an example to the world (Wang, Ngu & Brook, 2020). The ‘Taiwan model’ of pandemic management indicates that a democratic government can work

5 For a more detailed discussion about the Taiwan Syllabus Project, see Hsieh and Liu (2020).

with its citizens to survive the inevitable economic and social turbulence caused by a health crisis without citizens having their privacy invaded or freedoms curtailed by national lockdowns (Lee & Kuo, forthcoming).

It seems likely that all this has positively affected both the internal development and international reception (especially in the US) of Taiwan studies. Partly geared by this new state of affairs in relations, there are also US–Taiwan linkages in the focus of academic work on policy. At WCTS4, Russell Hsiao presented the promising work of the Global Taiwan Institute, based in Washington, the only think tank in the world focused exclusively on Taiwan. Kharis Templeman presented his work, centred on policy papers published by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, California (Oates, Hu & Tu, 2022). Taiwan studies, as a whole, is largely apolitical. But if one's research is about Taiwan in the international political arena, a policy orientation combined with analytical rigour is, in our view, to be welcomed. For this reason, we encourage further collaborations between the scholarly and think tank communities, building on the work presented at WCTS4 and drawing on the shared affinities in democratic infrastructure in the US and Taiwan.

If these reflections help explain why the US might be chosen as the venue for WCTS4, we are left with an obvious question: why Seattle? The media missed the significance of this decision too. There are two key affinities between Seattle and Taiwan: Indigenous culture and technology. The Seattle campus has a strong Indigenous heritage with connections to First Nations culture. The name of Seattle itself comes from the native Indian chief, Seattle (Thrush, 2017). Taiwan also carries a strong Indigenous culture, and the scholarly communities in both Seattle and Taiwan emphasise the importance of developing Indigenous studies.⁶ Moreover, Seattle is a major economic and financial centre, a city of start-ups, a technological hub, home to the headquarters of Amazon and Microsoft and the origin of Starbucks. Similarly, Taiwan is a technological island known as an IT manufacturing hub due to its strong IT industry base and robust semiconductor manufacturing clusters. We need only think of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, which manufactures the most advanced semiconductor components in the world (Rasiah, Shahrivar & Yap, 2016). One might say, then, that Seattle and Taiwan share similar trajectories, a rooted Indigenous history and a vibrant technological future.

6 A theme explored in session 7B of WCTS4; see Oates, Hu & Tu (2022).

3 Launching the Encyclopedia

We mentioned earlier that WCTS4 marked an epistemic turning point in Taiwan studies. We see this primarily in terms of the new sources that are becoming available to theorise Taiwan from different perspectives: local, regional, global, and comparative. In this respect, participants at the Congress were introduced to a major contribution: the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies*, which is currently due for publication by Brill in 2023. Professor Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao has led this monumental work as editor-in-chief, supported by several international associate editors: Lung-Chih Chang, Kuei-fen Chiu, Dafydd Fell, Nancy Guy, Ming-sho Ho, Anru Lee, Lih-yun Lin, Hsin-tien Liao, Scott Simon, Ming-yeh Rawnsley, Cheng-hwa Tsong, Robert Weller, Alan Hao Yang, and Elizabeth Zeitoun. As Hsiao explained at Congress, the project aims to show Taiwan ‘through Taiwanese eyes’, providing a Taiwan-based perspective of Taiwan.

This major work will be an essential resource for students and scholars in Taiwan studies, comprising 14 sections on anthropology, archaeology, art, film and documentary, history, Indigenous studies, international relations, languages, literature, media, music, politics, sociology, and women and gender studies. Across the humanities and social sciences, the epistemic autonomy and legitimacy of Taiwan, Taiwan studies, and Taiwan-based theories become, therefore, visible through a Taiwan-based approach that, both indigenously and globally, apprehends a wide variety of topical issues that characterise the dynamic reality of Taiwan’s social, economic, political, and cultural world.

This is the first time an international publisher has produced an encyclopedia on Taiwan. Moreover, this encyclopedia is not a collective edited volume, handbook, scientific journal, or dictionary. It is more than all of that. It is an academic, scientific, intellectual, social, cultural, and symbolic project of incorporating, compiling, and disseminating the world’s knowledge about Taiwan. Fully understanding its scope and importance is a challenging task. To do so, we might recall the etymology of the word ‘encyclopedia’. From the Greek *enkýklios paideía*, its pivot is an ‘all-around educational’ dimension, and its vocation is a reference work. One might inevitably think of the European Enlightenment and the exemplary experience of the *Encyclopédie* (1772). For its conceivers, the French philosophers Diderot and D’Alembert, the project aimed to change the way people think and liberate knowledge from prejudice and superstition. Today, the field of Taiwan studies has, by turn, embraced such an established tradition. The *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies* aims to establish a global knowledge of Taiwan and move it away from the longstanding

pan-Chinese perspective intrinsic to Chinese and sinological studies. It marks a clear boundary by echoing Hsiao's clear-cut argument, dismantling scientific bias and arbitrary understandings. It is from the very experience of Taiwan itself, for itself and by itself, that it establishes and frames the foundations of Taiwan studies and Taiwan-related theory. The globally recognised scholarship of the authors of some 600 articles included in the *Encyclopedia* echoes Hsiao's rationale, the autonomy and unicity of the unique research field of Taiwan studies.

This ambitious project has many keywords: advancement of science, the theoretical making of Taiwan, epistemic autonomy, independence, global cooperation, and vibrating intellectual activity. But, as explained by the scholars who, in person or virtually, presented their contributions during a lively but touching roundtable on 'Launching the *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies*', this work has not been without material, logistical, theoretical, and conceptual difficulties in its design and development. If one of the vocations of an encyclopedia is to disseminate knowledge within and outside academia, a significant challenge, as Scott Simon⁷ noted, has been to write theories in language accessible to both the academic community and the wider public. Nevertheless, the final product will be imbued with all the pride and joy of its contributors for their subject.

Beyond being an outstanding theoretical contribution to the field, the *Encyclopedia* draws the dynamic contours of a new epistemological horizon for the present and future of Taiwan's theoretical making. We do not doubt that this scientific and cultural enterprise will become a guiding publication for Taiwan scholars worldwide. Its innovative coverage and theory-making amplitude will make it a must-read, an essential reference work for the field. We envisage its influence to last long into the future and hope to see it updated with supplements, revised and enlarged editions, added contributions—who knows, even multilingual translations!

4 We Will Meet Again!

WCTS4 provided a platform for scholars to gather virtually and in person to discuss the making of Taiwan, regardless of what stage in their careers they are at. Across different disciplines, panels, topics, and events, a challenging puzzle has been debated: what makes Taiwan today? What characterises the field inside and beyond academia? What new directions will it take? These

⁷ Editor of the anthropology and Indigenous studies sections.

questions, and the many new ideas they have stimulated, will filter from the Congress into the wider world.

WCTS4 raised other questions for the field. How will Taiwan studies grow and develop in the future? What efforts can academics make to fortify and promote research and teaching about Taiwan? What approaches and methodologies will scholars adopt to preserve and strengthen the field's uniqueness? How will the new materials emerging at this epistemic turning point for Taiwan studies be received and mobilised? We cannot answer these questions yet, but we can echo the theme of WCTS4: Taiwan is in the making, and Taiwan studies will be made by dedicated and talented scholars and students.

With WCTS4, we may have witnessed the beginning of the second wave of the 'golden era' of Taiwan studies. We hope to meet again at WCTS5 in 2025 and continue riding it into a prosperous future for the field we all love.

Notes on Contributors

Chun-yi Lee

is Associate Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham. She is also the director of the Taiwan Studies Programme at Nottingham and is a board member of the European Association of Taiwan Studies. Her first book was published by Routledge in 2011: *Taiwanese Business or Chinese Security Asset*, part of the Leiden Series in Modern East Asia History and Politics. Chun-yi is working on a public policy research project comparing the Taiwan and UK governments' strategies to counter COVID-19. She is also working on her second single-authored monograph, *China's New Normal: The Impact of China's Rise on the Global Political Economy*.

Beatrice Zani

is a sociologist and postdoctoral research fellow in Taiwan studies at the Department of East Asian Studies, McGill University. Previously, she was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Tübingen (Germany) and a lecturer at Sciences Po Lyon (France). Her ongoing research looks at the links between migration, emotion, and digital platforms in the making of capitalism through the case study of migrant maritime labour and digital entrepreneurship in the shipping and logistics infrastructures in China, Taiwan, and Jinmen. Her first monograph, *Women Migrants in Southern China and in Taiwan: Mobilities, Digital Economies and Emotions*, was published in 2021.

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