Forum 2: Linking Taiwan Studies with the World

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Position Paper: Linking Taiwan Studies with the World
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This essay proposes a new method for studying Taiwan, explains what it is and how it works, elaborates on the implications of this method, conceptually as

* Kuei-fen Chiu has written extensively on postcolonial literary historiography, contemporary Taiwan documentaries, and indigenous literature in Taiwan.

** Michael Berry’s work addresses the richness and diversity of Chinese art and culture as it has manifested itself in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Sinophone communities.
well as practically, and invites discussion and debate. I have been calling
this method ‘relational comparison’ (Shih, 2013, 2015, 2016a, 2016b), which I
think can help position Taiwan studies beyond the traditional area studies
mode and into multiple interdisciplinary fields (such as American studies),
while simultaneously situating it within specific disciplines of the humanities
and the social sciences. I believe that this approach has far-reaching implica-
tions for what it means to do Taiwan studies in Western academia not only
in terms of research content but also the potential for securing academic
positions.

What It Is

The ontological premise of this method is that the world has always been an
interconnected place and a site of infinite interrelations. The study of any giv-
en place or region therefore requires both vertical and horizontal perspectives
to understand the interrelations across time (vertical) and space (horizontal).
Just as vertical relations are simultaneously crisscrossed by horizontal ones,
horizontal relations are also influenced by the palimpsest of time. Situating
Taiwan in this relational world thus necessitates a comparative view of other
times and places. But this comparative method, contrary to most comparative
practices, is not for the comparison of similarities and differences, but to ex-
cavate relationalities between Taiwan and the entities to which it is compared
across time and space.

My conception of relational comparison is influenced by multiple intel-
lectual sources. First, from the field of history, I take the argument by world
economic historians that the world has been an economically interconnected
place for a very long time, much before the sixteenth century that scholars
have called the moment of the rise of the West and the formation of a world
system led by the West. The world as an integrated economic system, where
the contributions of the non-West, especially the Middle East and the Far
East, are equally, if not more, significant (Hobson, 2004), has existed since at
least the thirteenth century (Abu-Lughod, 1991), the fifteenth century (Frank,
1998), or even since five thousand years ago (Frank & Gills, 1994). These and
other world economic historians offer a view of the world as always already
interconnected. Combined with developments in postcolonial historiography
that foregrounds histories of colonialism and imperialism (Chakrabarty, 2000;
Chatterjee, 1986; Stoler, 1995), and which world historians somehow tend to
miss, I emphasise that these interconnections are also inevitably relationships