Introduction: The State of the Field of Taiwan Studies

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Articles about the state of the field can play a crucial role in any academic field. They are unfortunately often undervalued. Such essays are unlikely to contribute to a scholar's bid for promotion or departmental assessment. Having previously written state-of-the-field essays ourselves, we are aware that though it can be rewarding, putting such essays together is also an extremely time-consuming process (Fell, 2009). Unsurprisingly it can be hard to find scholars that have the enthusiasm and time required to construct such pieces.

Nevertheless, such pieces are extremely valuable for both scholars and students. Of course, we can get a long list of related publications by doing an online database search, but this is just a list and will not give us a sense of how individual publications fit into a field and how they have been received by academic peers. When a PhD student or scholar embarks on a new research project, a key initial step is to get a critical perspective on what has been done before. Then their task will be to challenge and build upon this existing literature in order to make an original contribution to their field. As PhD examiners or book reviewers, a key element that we look for is the degree to which an academic work not only builds on and engages with existing literature but also offers an original contribution to the field. Good state-of-the-field essays can
help PhD students build up their sound literature reviews and avoid getting lost amidst crowded literatures.

State-of-the-field essays are also invaluable for teachers that are looking to design academic courses or who wish to update their existing courses. This is particularly true of junior academics who are facing the daunting task of writing their first set of lecture notes and course reading lists. Junior academics are often pressured to teach courses they are not necessarily familiar with and thus state-of-the-fields can offer a crucial shortcut for course preparation. Such pieces are also critically important for undergraduate and postgraduate students. When they come to writing their term papers, they need to cite and potentially critique the most important works within a field in order to develop their own arguments and analysis. Good state-of-the-field essays can help students get to know the works they need to engage with and avoid misunderstanding them.

Of course, the field of Taiwan studies does have numerous high-quality state of the field essays already. Back in 2002–2004, Issues and Studies published two influential state of the field essays. The first by Shelley Rigger (2002) was titled ‘Political science and Taiwan’s domestic politics: The state of the field’, while the second by Wei-chin Lee (2004) was titled ‘Field of dreams: An overview of the practice and study of Taiwan’s foreign policy’. Taken together these pieces have offered a critical overview of the development of research into Taiwan’s domestic and international politics from the 1980s to the early 2000s. They were to be a key starting point for several Taiwan politics courses for well over a decade.¹ There are also a number of important state of the field contributions in edited volumes, such as Tseng and Lin’s (2013) review of migration studies and Keng, Schubert, and Lin’s review of the state of Taishang studies (2013). However, the field of Taiwan studies has developed significantly over the last decade and a half since the publication of the above influential pieces. A problem with many of the other state-of-the-field essays in Taiwan studies is that they are widely scattered among different edited volumes and journals.

We thus believe that this is a good time to bring together the first collection of Taiwan studies state-of-the-field articles. Therefore, when it came to proposing central themes for the Second World Congress of Taiwan Studies one of those we opted for was Taiwan Studies: The State of the Field. The conference was held in London at the SOAS, University of London, in June 2015 and was co-organised by Academia Sinica and SOAS. It was the largest ever Taiwan studies

¹ For example, they featured in the opening class reading lists for the courses, ‘Government and politics in Taiwan’ and ‘Taiwan’s politics and cross-strait relations’ at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.