

Conference Report

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Considerations on Planning the Theme, 'Translating Taiwan: 1947–1987–2017', the 14th Annual Conference of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), Venice, Italy, 2–4 March 2017

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Evolution of Taiwan Studies

The study of Taiwan has evolved since the 1950s. Heavily dependent on Chinese and China studies initially, it has become an increasingly independent field since the early 1980s. Today, 'Taiwan studies' has grown to be a much more defined multidisciplinary branch of area studies that focuses on Taiwan as a subject of analysis or employs Taiwan as a comparative case study. It should be emphasised that this general statement cannot encompass the complexity of issues facing Taiwan studies, including the contested boundaries between Taiwan and China studies and the never-ending debate between subject researchers versus area specialists. However, regardless of whether Taiwan studies is considered an independent study field or not, it cannot be denied that Taiwan—due to its unique political situation after 1949,

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remarkable economic growth since the 1960s, and democratic transition since the 1980s—has attracted much interest among social scientists across the world.

Therefore, it is not surprising that researchers tend to focus on the social sciences when they investigate the development of Taiwan studies as a whole. For example, Cheng and Marble (2004) have surveyed the field of Taiwan studies, paying attention to the English language publications in the social sciences, especially in political science, sociology, developmental studies, and economics. The authors identify three main stages in the evolution of Taiwan studies: the first period spanned from the end of World War II to the late 1970s and was dominated by a research interest in Communist China with a limited number of studies on Taiwan often employed as a case study to testify a Chinese phenomenon. The second stage covered the 1980s and the 1990s, which witnessed a rapid development of academic interest in Taiwan that was triggered by the democratisation process and the exceptional economic performance of the island. A reinvigorated social science interest in China marked the third stage that ignited in the twenty-first century. Cheng and Marble suggest that the rise of China studies in the new millennium may be seen as a challenge, but can also present new and fruitful opportunities for the further development of Taiwan studies in the new era.

A similar trend is observed by Bruce Jacobs in his review of the evolution of Taiwan studies in Australia, a country where Chinese studies 'are very strong, second in the Western world only to the much larger United States' (2007: 217). The author noted: 'Taiwan Studies in Australia, even when considered a part of Chinese studies in the 1970s and 1980s, have never been so strong' (217), but concluded that, despite the small scale, it made important contributions to the field via specific disciplines such as politics, international relations, anthropology, and history. It is worth noting that most of the researchers reviewed in Jacobs's article are actually social scientists who divert their attention to history and other humanistic disciplines such as literature.

In his survey of articles focusing on Taiwan published in 17 peer-reviewed area studies journals, Jonathan Sullivan (2011) has offered an interesting analysis of research output between 2004 and 2008 that he considered representative of Taiwan studies. Sullivan noted:

Research on Taiwan published in these journals is dominated by political science and its subdisciplines (political economy and international relations). More than half (51%) of the articles focused on subjects within political science, with national identity, public opinion, elections, and institutions (including political parties) among the most salient.

SULLIVAN, 2011: 710

With reference to articles in the humanities, Sullivan found only a ‘handful of outlets’ in this field, but suggested that this is due to ‘the marginalisation of non-political subjects in these journals rather than to a lack of scholarly interest’. He made this argument based on an observation that ‘the majority of panels at two major international gatherings of Taiwan specialists, EATS and NATSA, are in the arts and humanities’ (Sullivan, 2011: 710–11).

Arts and Humanities Versus Social Sciences in EATS Annual Conferences

My own observation of the EATS annual conferences is not as positive as Sullivan’s regarding the presence of arts and humanities. Considering the 13 annual conferences organised by EATS from 2004 to 2016, the number of panels dedicated to social sciences have always outnumbered those focusing on arts and humanities, with a ratio varied from 4 to 1 (in 2014) to 1.6 to 1 (in 2011 and 2013), together with some interdisciplinary panels which mixed humanities and social sciences. This is in clear contrast with the situation of the European Association of Chinese Studies, where the majority of panels are usually in the humanities. Perhaps this is not particularly surprising if we consider the importance of sinology within Chinese studies on the one hand, and on the other hand how political and economic research has taken a lead in originating Taiwan studies.

However, numbers can be partial, and we should always try to obtain a fuller picture from different perspectives. Without diminishing the important position social sciences occupy in Taiwan studies, the field also includes various disciplines from the humanities such as literary studies, cinema studies, and history, just to name a few. The growing representation of arts and humanities subjects in Taiwan studies must not be neglected. The contribution to the field by these disciplines is evident in the number of eminent scholars involved and the quality of their publications, including research papers, monographs, and edited volumes. For example, it is noteworthy that Columbia University Press has given valuable space to scholarship on Taiwan literature, including the launch of a book series on the translation of Taiwan literature, entitled ‘Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan’.

Rationale for the Theme: ‘Translating Taiwan: 1947–1987–2017’

The brief introduction to the development of Taiwan studies above offers historical background for the organisation of the 14th EATS annual conference in

Venice, 2–4 March 2017.¹ It was co-organised by EATS and the Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, with support from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD), the Institute of Taiwan History (ITH) of the Academia Sinica, the Lim Pen-yuan Cultural and Educational Foundation (LPYF), and the Taipei Representative Office in Italy.

The organisers have taken two important factors into account. First, Venice is a meaningful venue to host an EATS gathering as it is one of the most renowned centres for Chinese studies in Italy. Meanwhile, the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University has been engaged in the Spotlight Taiwan Project over the past few years, showing a keen interest in developing Taiwan studies. Ca' Foscari University has particular strength in literary studies and translation studies. Second, the year 2017 commemorates multiple anniversaries of historical significance, including the seventieth anniversary of the 2–28 Incident of 1947 and the thirtieth anniversary of the lifting of martial law in 1987. After much debate, the organisers agreed on the theme: 'Translating Taiwan: 1947–1987–2017'.

Translation has often been considered a subsidiary and practical act consisting of rendering a text in a different language while transferring its meaning and possibly its form. Nonetheless, this view of interlingual translation can be overly restrictive. Translation has been a fundamental human activity for thousands of years, and received much attention during the second half of the twentieth century when it was scientifically approached and developed theoretical principles in the field of *translation studies*. In addition to interlingual translation, Jakobsón (1959) suggested that the act of translation could also be intralingual and intersemiotic; semiotics help to inscribe the translating activity in a communication process, bringing attention not just to the text but also to the speaker of the message, the audience, and the relationship among the three. Torop (1995) went even further by conceptualising broader ideas such as metatextual translation and intertextual translation, and linking translation to the mutual influence among texts.

Far from being a mechanical process of transformation from one language to another, translation is a complex process that goes through interpretation of the source text and its cultural and social context and re-creation of the message in the target language and target culture. Several studies have also demonstrated how its processes can highlight the relationship between cultures, which are often complex and asymmetric (Spivak 2000; Venuti 1998).

1 Details of the conference can be accessed at <http://eats-taiwan.eu/conference/eats-2017>.

Translation can thus be conceived in a broader context and it is surely not just a challenge facing the translator and the literary scholar. It affects everybody's lives and in some degree every scholar's work, as it can be conceived as a cultural interpretation and mediation that applies to a number of social activities. As Steiner pointed out, 'Any model of communication is at the same time a model of trans-lation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance' (1992: 47).

When dealing with Taiwan history, and its cultural and social development in particular, we notice that it can be easily read through the lens of translation, if interpreted in this wide sense: the multiple colonial experiences, the relationship with Chinese and Japanese cultural legacy, its multicultural and multilingual reality, and the introduction of cultural contributions from abroad have all brought into play different types of translation dynamics. We are used to seeing the topic of translation encompassed in discussions related to literature, and this is only natural as translation is such an important means of diffusion of literature. However, translation can be considered intrinsically linked to Taiwan and a constituent part of its history, maybe because, to use the words of Stephanides and Bassnett, 'Islands place here and elsewhere in dialogue and, in this way, serve as sites of mediation between cultures' (2008: 7–8). This expanded definition of translation provided the organisers with an intellectual framework to shape the 14th EATS annual conference in Venice and offer a more inclusive and interdisciplinary view of Taiwan studies.

Participants were thus invited to see 'translation' as a cultural interpretation and mediation that applies to scholarship in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Researchers were encouraged not only to tackle the main theme addressing the theory and practice of translation in relation to Taiwanese literature, cinema, and the arts, but also to adapt the concept of translation for explaining Taiwan's social and political reality and transformations. Moreover, the conference also paid special attention to papers which subjected Taiwan's political, social, cultural, historical, and artistic development to fresh scrutiny and interpretation through scholarly reflections on the events in 1947 and 1987 respectively.

The Result of the Conference

The keynote speech delivered by Professor David Der-wei Wang of Harvard University, 'Worlding Taiwan: Translation, Transgression, Transmigration',

embodied perfectly the core spirit of the conference.² Wang started from the concept of ‘worlding’, which was not intended in the superficial way of globalisation or internationalisation, but as the Heideggerian being-in-the-world—a process of becoming. He linked the discussion with the Chinese concept of *wen* (the literary; literariness), which is not only representation, but also existence in itself. According to Wang, literature from Taiwan is extremely important because literature manifests itself as a representation of Taiwan existence, an existence considered in all its possibilities as being-in-the-world. Literature, thanks to imagination, is able to put into reality unlikely situations, and this is one of the most important contributions of all literature. Wang’s speech consisted of three parts: First, the concepts of translation and transculturation seen through the works of many Taiwan writers, including Lai He, Wu Zhuoliu, Liu Na’ou, and Luo Yijun. Wang critiqued here the concept of ‘Sinophone’ and argued how different generations of Taiwan authors have translated their life experiences to enrich the island’s literary world. Second, the concept of transgression, which was based on the transgressive nature of literature on both political and non-political levels. For example, Wang explained that translation can be a site for transgression, and discussed the capacity of literature to represent transgression. He illuminated how Taiwan literature has expressed political transgression throughout history and demonstrated its cultural ability to offer a shelter to writers from other parts of the Chinese world outside Taiwan. The third part of the keynote speech focused on transmigration, intended as a transgressive desire to cross the boundary that separates the present time from the ghosts and memories of the past. According to Wang, literature offers a space where transmigration can be represented and where coming to terms with the past can be realised in fictional terms and thus made possible. Wang pointed out the great potentiality of literature to cross the boundaries that so often tend to encompass and limit it. Literature, Wang said, with all its translational and transformational talents, can connect to many aspects of our lives in human society, not just reflecting reality as a mirror but contributing to shape reality through creative imagination.

Most participants at the conference took up the challenge of the theme on translation, applying the concept to their respective research field. The conference contained 18 panels in total, including two independently sponsored and organised panels by the ITH and the LPYF on ‘The Development of

2 A detailed biographical note of Professor Wang and a copy of his keynote address in the form of PowerPoint can be accessed at: <http://eats-taiwan.eu/conference/eats-2017/keynote-speaker>.

Dietary Life in Post-war Taiwan' and 'Taiwan's Economic Policies and Financial Transformation during the Japanese Colonial Period' respectively. The TFD also presented a special panel on 'Interpreting East Asian Democratization: Taiwan in Historical and Comparative Perspectives'.

Apart from the ITH and LPYF panels, there were seven panels in the field of social sciences (including the TFD panel) and eight dedicated to the arts and humanities. Additionally, there was one panel for MA students from mixed disciplinary backgrounds. While the MA panel had six presenters, all other panels consisted of three to four papers. Some discussed the different transformative processes that have taken place in Taiwan, translation of collective memory, and translation dynamics in linguistic issues. Several papers applied the concept of cultural translation to understanding the relationship between indigenous cultures and mainstream culture and politics; others employed translation to investigate material culture or to interpret the communicative processes behind historical phenomena or political ideas. Papers also addressed the cultural and political implications of literary translation, especially seen from a historical perspective. We then realise that dramatic changes in the domestic and international political context have repeatedly marked Taiwan's cultural scene.

The 14th EATS Annual Conference broke at least two records: The number of abstracts submitted reached 163 (or 175, including the 12 invited papers for the TFD, ITH, and LPYF panels), while the total number of accepted papers reached 60 (or 72, including the 12 invited papers). Both figures are the highest since the founding of EATS in 2004. Upon further examination of the institutional affiliations of the 72 paper presenters, 32 were from Europe, 27 from Taiwan, and 13 from the rest of the world (including Canada, China, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United States). Among the 32 participants with European affiliations, 19 were based in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and 13 from six other European countries (including Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and Poland).

We may be able to draw two conclusions from the above figures. First, there is still much potential for EATS to develop Taiwan studies in Europe. Many European countries are clearly underrepresented in terms of participation in the conference. Some of the European countries, for example France and Germany, are remarkable for the quality of research in the field at large, while others, such as Italy and Czech Republic, have a long tradition of Chinese studies but have only recently started to do research on Taiwan and would greatly benefit from contacts with the Association. Having organised the 2017 EATS conference in Venice is surely a significant step in this direction and would need to be supported and confirmed by future steps.

Second, the 14th EATS conference achieved a good balance between humanities and social sciences, a result perhaps facilitated by the unusual yet flexible conference theme choice. Moreover, the fact that the conference attracted the greatest number of abstract submission and participation suggested that a theme originating from the arts and humanities is far from being an obstacle to participants from the social sciences, but has served as a bridging element creating contacts and connections. As commented at the beginning of this conference report, the new millennium has set new challenges for Taiwan studies, but the positive response given to the 2017 EATS Annual Conference shows a willingness and openness to dialogue that should be developed in the future both for the growth of scholarship on Taiwan and for the growth of the European Association of Taiwan Studies.

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