

[REPORT]

A Conference Report on a Conference That Never Was: Connections, Collaboration, and Solidarity Among the Taiwan Studies Community

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Abstract

This essay reports on a Taiwan studies conference that did not take place in April 2020 in Europe. Recalling what has replaced this disrupted conference, this report provides a sketch of how the Taiwan studies community responded to the unprecedented challenges of the global pandemic by organising online events. It concludes by calling for comparative research where the experiences of Taiwan can be juxtaposed with underlying issues that have deepened the divide between those who have and those who have not during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also calls for solidarity among academics within and beyond the Taiwan studies community and for

a more sustainable academic infrastructure constituted by universities, research institutions, funding agencies, and academics themselves.

Keywords

Taiwan; Taiwan studies; online events; EATS; regional associations; Covid-19; academic community

12 March 2021 was the first anniversary of the day when we, the Board of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), reached the conclusion that we had to suspend the 17th Annual EATS Conference, due to be held on 4–6 April 2020 at Université libre de Bruxelles. Looking back, the days running up to this decision feel like a slow-motion film, watched on fast forward. Nevertheless, our memories remain fresh. The prolongation of the Covid-19 pandemic has kept us on our toes, as we critically evaluate the price we paid to suppress the spread of the disease and collectively take actions towards its eradication. We, in the community of Taiwan studies, are part of this global effort. While not claiming that this report is a representative reflection of everything that has happened in the past 365 days, it is intended to offer a sketch of what EATS and other Taiwan studies groupings have contributed to preventing the year of 2020 from falling off the academic calendar and making sure it flourished instead.

First of all, the suspended 17th Annual Conference, themed 'Narrating Taiwan', has returned in a different form. Incorporated into the 18th Annual Conference, the 'twin' conference, scheduled for 15–17 April 2021, has been expanded to accommodate another group of researchers who answered the call of the 18th Annual Conference to explore 'Taiwan in Transition'. The impact of Covid-19 is examined by several timely papers from the perspectives of digital democracy, public diplomacy, racialised discourse, and grassroots responses from the indigenous community. Although we still cannot physically facilitate this expanded conference at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, online technology has enabled us to build a global platform reaching out to researchers and students, familiar with or new to Taiwan studies, on YouTube in all corners of the world. Online discussion at the tyrannical mercy of an internet connection is a poor substitute for a chat over a cup of aromatic coffee at a grand conference hall. However, the potential to be linked to viewers regardless of where they are (and which time zones they belong to) is an advantage unavailable to a physical meeting. It also allowed us to make connections with those who were unable to attend EATS conferences in the past due to lack of funding.

Indeed, no longer seen as a novelty, online meetings have become a lifeline for researchers and research institutions during the pandemic. I recall that the last in-person meeting I had with a

Taiwan studies colleague was on Monday 10 February 2020 when Professor Chris Berry hosted the screening of the film *Rice Dumpling Vendor* at the University of Portsmouth. Originally hosted by Dr Ming-yeh Rawnsley, this event was part of the tour of the recovered and restored *taiyupian* (i.e. Taiwanese-language films) screenings in the UK and Europe. Dr Rawnsley's trip to the UK had been cancelled a week earlier by her airline, which cautiously reduced their services between East Asia and Europe. Initially disrupted or suspended, border-crossing mobility finally ground to a halt in the months that followed. Nevertheless, the *taiyupian* screening in Europe was quickly moved online and was joined by viewers near and far from each host institution's geographical locality. It is also included in the combined 17th and 18th EATS Annual Conference with the screening of *Tarzan and the Treasure*. While *taiyupian* of the 1950s and the 1960s seem to have aroused a strong nostalgic interest among the 'Gen Z' audience in Taiwan, it has also grown stronger online.

Not surprisingly, all Taiwan studies events have gone online. The disruption to two continent-wide conferences in Europe, organised by EATS, and in North America, organised by the North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA), was compensated by a series of online seminars held in July, August, October, and December 2020. Collectively known as the Global Taiwan Studies Salon, they were the intellectual products of the first ever coalition of EATS, NATSA, the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies (IJTS)*, and the Japanese

Association of Taiwan Studies (JATS). The first three Salons reflected upon lessons that Taiwan, a self-proclaimed multicultural society, can learn from the Black Lives Matter movement that rose to prominence in the US in May; Hong Kong's reduced opportunity for autonomy due to the National Security Act adopted by China in July; and Japan's relationship with Taiwan after the cross-Strait relationship plummeted further because of Covid-19. The fourth Salon updated the audience on the latest take of Taiwan cinema on youth culture, ghosts and horror, and the revival of *taiyupian*. Democracy Forum, a UK-based non-profit organisation, organised a seminar entitled 'Chinese Military Posturing and Pressure on Taiwan: Has It Impeded the Rise of Asia?' in October 2020. In addition to the debates on military and diplomatic manoeuvring that were expected at such events, the host also commented on the security implications of Kinmen's location in the Taiwan Strait. Responding to a comment left by a viewer, the host demonstrated his 'bombshell cleaver' bought in Kinmen, a 'must-buy' souvenir for visitors to this island known for being shelled by China in August 1958.

In addition to these online Salons, Taiwan studies related institutions continued to organise events. These included conferences, seminars, screenings, book launches, and a summer school hosted by the Centre for Taiwan Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the Taiwan Academy at the University of Edinburgh, the Taiwan Studies Programme

at the University of Nottingham, the European Research Center for Contemporary Taiwan at the University of Tübingen, the Taiwan Studies Program at the University of Zurich, and the Vienna Center for Taiwan Studies at the University of Vienna. The Taiwan Research Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong also organised an event entitled ‘Confronting and Communicating Covid-19 in Taiwan’ in December 2020.

Taiwan studies have been active not only at meetings but also on blogs since Covid-19 was first identified in China in December 2019 and later in Taiwan. In February 2020, two weeks before EATS made the difficult decision to suspend the Annual Conference, the *IJTS* announced the publication of a special issue on ‘Taiwan: Public Diplomacy and the World Health Assembly’. There could not be a timelier reminder of Taiwan’s unique position in relation to global health. *Taiwan Insight*, a Taiwan studies blog managed by the University of Nottingham, has kept its global readership updated on Taiwan’s attempts to ‘flatten the curve’ of Covid-19 infection. On this blog, researchers and activists have critically analysed Taiwan’s external relations with major powers and the World Health Organization, its public communication strategies, and its responses to the difficult situations that migrant workers, the perceived inferior ethnic other, have found themselves in.

In the midst of a pandemic, we have seen how ill prepared the world has been for a global health crisis. Nevertheless, we know that we have to rise to the challenges that the disease has posed to humanity. We know that diplomatic rows or even ‘wars’ have erupted between some states as personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccines have become ‘strategic’ commodities and securing their supply, nationalist programmes. We know that globalisation is much more fragile than we had foreseen: when airplanes are grounded, cargo ships are docked, containers are left uncollected, and workers along the assembly line are sick, national economies sink. We know that closing borders has left *our* citizens stranded abroad but it has also left *their* citizens—migrant workers—isolated on our soil and uncared for because of the loss of income. We know that online platforms, including those in a globally dominant position and those emerging as minor alternatives, can be utilised for collective action against injustice, but they can also be manipulated for verbal and physical violence instigated by individuals and governments. We know that inequality knows no borders or boundaries. It has worsened between men and women, between the rich and the poor, between those families who have multiple devices for home schooling and those who have none, and between the Global North and the Global South. We have seen how care workers are praised for their selfless acts that saved our lives or accompanied those lives at the last moment before their eternal departure. The loathed lockdown forced us to realise that those home-based care workers or domestic workers have been working in conditions that are not unlike lockdown—their restricted

freedom is a de facto lockdown. We must try to take actions to address their low wages that do not reflect their contribution. We know that ethnic minority groups have been more racialised when the pandemic coincides with several highly visible and publicised incidents of violence erupting between the majority and the minority. We know that violence has increased in private relationships, when home is not a safe haven but a walled space closed off from outside help. We have seen that when mobility was lost, urban streets were roamed by farm animals while residents in usually crowded tourist towns saw their rivers and canals revive with wildlife.

We, as human beings and as researchers, have been awed by all these developments. We need to respond to these latest challenges within and beyond the Taiwan studies community. The fact that Taiwan was much insulated from damage caused by lockdown until early May 2021 means that Taiwan offers different perspectives from which to gauge the lingering impact of the disease on diplomacy, security, economics, politics, culture, health, nutrition, mobility, and the environment.

In addition to the obvious digital divide that has affected the delivery of 'blended teaching', we, as educators, have learned new technologies in order to continue to teach, and inspire, our students. We have designed, researched, and recorded our lectures in our 'home office', as our students have been writing their essays and attending our seminars in their 'bedroom

campus'. Unable to meet our interviewees, we have been contemplating how to use secondary data or online posts to collect data; 'virtual ethnography' has ceased to be innovative and become necessary. We have seen some academics being particularly productive during the pandemic, churning out papers or research proposals with no conferences to attend. We have also seen male and female academics educating their children and attending to 'domestic chores'; they have become anxious about how their institutions will evaluate their 'output' when their 'productivity' is displaced by their labour for social reproduction: caring for and nurturing their children, parents, siblings, and students. We have seen how funding agencies are swift to propose new research subjects in order to mitigate the setbacks caused by Covid-19. We hope that funding agencies can be more flexible in terms of their support for academic events and research when there are no expenses for accommodation, catering, or travel.

We in the Taiwan studies community share this excitement, these anxieties, and these hopes with scholars in all disciplines. A year has passed when pleasantries exchanged in emails are often prefaced with 'in these strange/difficult/challenging/trying times'. But we have also ended our emails by telling each other to stay safe and keep healthy. In the midst of the pandemic, we have become more aware of the fragility of human life and craved signs of recovery. In my tiny garden on the southeast coast of the British Isles, hyacinth and camellia

are greeting us with full bloom, offering, as they did last March, a feast of splendid colours.

With care, they shall greet us again next April, when EATS will be ready to meet colleagues at our 19th Annual Conference.

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