

Reflections on the Second World Congress of Taiwan Studies

Dafydd Fell and H. H. Michael Hsiao

Between June 18 and June 20, 2015 the Second World Congress of Taiwan Studies conference was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. The event was co-organized by the SOAS Centre of Taiwan Studies and Academia Sinica in Taiwan. This was the largest Taiwan Studies ever held in Europe. It featured three keynote speeches, 16 academic panels, four roundtables, a concert and film screening. The conference welcomed over 80 of the world's leading Taiwan Studies scholars from Europe, North America and Asia to share their research findings and reflections on the state of the field. The three day event attracted an audience of over 500 people, with audience members coming from as far as Taiwan and California. One of the highlights was the concert on June 20 featuring the multi-award winning Taiwanese musician Lin Sheng-hsiang and the British Taiwanese band Transition.



2nd World Congress of Taiwan Studies - Opening Session



A key ingredient in the conference's success was thoughtful long-term planning. In fact the initial funding proposals for the Second Congress were drawn up in late 2011, well before the First Congress had actually been held. The first practical planning discussions were begun in September 2013 and the first planning meeting was held in December 2013 between the organizing parties.

The First World Congress of Taiwan Studies was held at Academia Sinica in April 2012. This was a historic moment for the Taiwan studies field as it brought together many of the world's leading Taiwan Studies scholars from a range of disciplines. With 26 panels and 102 papers, this was indeed an extremely large conference. However, the scale of the first Congress was rather daunting for any overseas Taiwan programmes. When they were asked of their interest in hosting a second Congress, the reaction was often not enthusiastic. How could the relatively small and under-resourced Taiwan centres abroad match the administrative capacity of Academia Sinica? While Academia Sinica can hold multiple large-scale international conferences on a monthly basis, the last time the SOAS Taiwan programme held a medium sized conference had been the first EATS conference back in 2004. The challenge for the organizers of The Second World Congress was to attempt to build on the experience of the First Congress.



We hoped that if the Second Congress could be successfully held using a more low-key and low budget approach, then it would encourage other overseas Taiwan Centres to take up the challenge of hosting future World Congresses. Overseas Taiwan programmes tend to be small and have limited financial as well as administrative resources. For instance the SOAS Taiwan Centre does not have its

own office and or even a part time administrator. Therefore a key factor in the success of the 2nd World Congress was thus the division of labour and financial responsibilities. While planning was carried out jointly by Academia Sinica and the SOAS Taiwan Centre, the administration base was at Academia Sinica. For instance the conference website and handling of travel grants was solely managed by the Secretariat in the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica. For that, our thanks go to Miss Ginger Chiang for her excellent job done in taking care of many businesses at the preparatory stage. This left SOAS to concentrate on the local organizing tasks.

At the early stage of the planning process there was some concern that organising such a large conference in London would have a negative effect on the European Association of Taiwan Studies' (EATS) conference to be held in April in Poland. The concern was that if scholars could only make one European conference trip they would opt for the World Congress and thus undermine the number of EATS submissions. However, as it turned out the EATS conference had a high level of submissions and was one of the best organized and largest EATAS conferences to date. The holding of two such large Taiwan Studies conferences within a gap of just a few months is a reflection on the strength and confidence of European Taiwan Studies. Although EATS did not play a formal role in sponsoring the World Congress, it did play a critical supporting role. The EATS Secretary General Ming-yeh Rawnsley joined the first planning meeting that set the conference planning framework, the EATS board offered an important list of recommended scholars for the conference and also EATS played a key role in publicizing news of the Call for Papers and Congress.



Since the two key themes of the Congress were Taiwan Studies State of the Field and Taiwan Studies Revisited, it was important that a large proportion of speakers would be veterans in the field. Thus in the initial round of invitations we focused on scholars that met two key criteria: (1) They had published an influential book or body of work in the field and (2) They had been active in the international Taiwan Studies networks. By international Taiwan Studies we were thinking in terms of the key Taiwan Studies conferences such as Conference Group on Taiwan Studies, EATS, North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA), Japanese Association of Taiwan Studies (JATS), as well as the various Taiwan Studies Centres/programmes at universities in Europe, North America and Australia.

During the Congress itself a number of people queried the disciplinary selection of the panels. To a large extent the academic panels were designed to reflect the key areas that are addressed in

international Taiwan Studies research and teaching. This meant that there some thematic differences with the First Congress. For the 1st World Congress, the ten Academia Sinica humanities and social science Institutes had separately planned and organized their own thematic panels and invited their respective scholars to attend. For the 2nd World Congress, the initial round of invitations was based on recommended lists jointly produced by SOAS, Academia Sinica and the EATS Board. The first round of invitations was sent out in the spring of 2014. We also tried to fill some of the remaining gaps on the panels by conducting an open call for papers in the autumn of 2014, with a specific list of paper themes we were looking for.

One of the key objectives of this Congress was to leave a publications legacy that would become important resources for scholars and students in the field of Taiwan studies. Therefore during the invitations we had already two future books in mind. A first was a collection of essays that assess the state of the field in a range of academic disciplines and themes and the second challenges authors of important books on Taiwan to revisit and reassess their earlier works. Once published we hope these will be milestone reference works for Taiwan studies teaching and researchers.

Another way we hoped to leave a legacy was by using the conference as a platform for sharing experiences in the field. With this in mind we included a number of practical roundtables on the third day of the conference that focused on Taiwan studies in comparative perspectives, Taiwan studies teaching, Taiwan studies publishing and new publications in Taiwan studies. In the roundtable on Taiwan studies in comparative perspective a number of scholars discussed the state of comparative Taiwan studies and the challenges facing overseas Taiwan studies programmes. On the panel on publishing in Taiwan studies a range of scholars shared their experiences and advise for young scholars on how to publish in the field. In the teaching panel scholars discussed how they established teaching programmes and how they faced the challenges of developing such niche teaching programmes. This panel revealed the quite distinct challenges being faced by Taiwan studies teaching programmes abroad with those in Taiwan itself.



Although the main organizing was done by SOAS and Academia Sinica, the conference also worked with a number of other partners to broaden the conference programme. For instance there was a book display and poster exhibition sponsored by the Shung Ye Museum. Since many of the audience members are interested in language or related academic research in Taiwan, we invited the Ministry of Education to host an information desk in the display area on scholarships and study opportunities

in Taiwan. Another related partner was the Centre of Chinese Studies, National Central Library. They hosted a book display on new books that will be part of the SOAS Library's Taiwan Resource Centre for Chinese Studies and also their representative Jane Liao gave a talk on Taiwan studies electronic databases and scholarships. Another important partner was the Routledge Research on Taiwan book series. They provided a book display on their recent book publications on Taiwan at the conference, with a particular focus on publications by authors attending the conference. However, the most important reason for their participation was to give the opportunity for new and established writers to discuss their book proposal ideas with book editors.

One area we tried to give greater attention to in the Second World Congress was Taiwan's popular culture, particularly film and music. These are two areas that have particularly attracted international Taiwan studies scholars and students. At SOAS our Taiwan film course is often our most popular Taiwan course and when I ask students what first made them interested in Taiwan, one of the most frequently heard answers has been Taiwanese music and film. With this in mind we included a panel on film and documentaries and ended the conference with a screening of Chienn Hsiang's film Exit. One of the most popular elements though was the coverage of Taiwanese music. The conference's special guest was the multi-award winning musician Lin Sheng-hsiang. On the evening of the second day of the conference he did a Q&A session chaired by Dr. Shrz Ee Tan discussing his music and music career. Then after the final panels in the afternoon of the third day we held a concert. First, the British Taiwanese band Transition returned for their second SOAS show, as they warmed up for a multi-city tour of China. Then this was followed by a set by Lin Sheng-hsiang from his award winning album I-Village.



We also hoped that hosting the conference would also benefit other Asian studies programmes with an interest in Taiwan in Europe. Thus we were delighted to help support Lin Sheng-hsiang's concert at the University of Leeds on June 21. In addition other World Congress speakers used the chance of being in Europe to present their research at University of Oxford, London School of Economics, and Leipzig.

There are many people who deserve thanks for making the conference a success, however, one group we would particularly like to highlight are the student volunteers that gave up their time in the build up to the conference and during the event itself. The majority of these students are from our Taiwan studies courses and this created a challenge as they did not want to miss any of the panels.

For many the conference was just a three day event. But for us organizers it was the culmination of years of planning and preparation. We hope that it will leave a positive imprint on the field and of course this means that for organizers the conference is not over. Our task is now to make sure that the lessons of the conference are learnt and to make sure the key conference publications hit the book stores.

Finally, we look forward to seeing many more Taiwan studies scholars and students at the 3rd World Congress in 2018 back in Academia Sinica.

