

Taiwan's Feminist Discourses and Women's Movements: The State of the Field and Future Prospects

Doris T. Chang

Center for Women's Studies and Religion, Wichita State University, USA

Abstract

Studies of Taiwanese feminist discourses and women's movements have blossomed in the 1990s and thereafter. In this paper, several representative scholarly works pertaining to Taiwanese feminist discourses and women's movements published in the 1990s and thereafter are chosen for discussion and analysis. Yang Ts'ui, in 1993, published *The Taiwanese Women's Liberation Movement under Japanese Colonial Rule*. In 2000, Yu Chien-ming published a book chapter on women's movements in the Taiwan area in an anthology titled *The History of Women's Movements in Modern China*. In 2009, Doris T. Chang published a monograph titled *Women's Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan*. She illustrates the ebb and flow of Taiwanese feminist discourses and women's movements within the context of the changing political dynamics on the island and against the historical backdrop of Taiwan's contested national identities, first vis-à-vis imperial Japan (1895-1945) and later with post-WWII China. As a study of a non-Western society's selective appropriation of Western feminist ideas to meet the needs of women in a Confucian culture, Chang's book sought to integrate Taiwanese feminist discourse into the mainstream of historical narratives on international women's movements.

While scholars have already reached a consensus that the lifting of martial law in 1987 created the political climate that enabled Taiwanese feminists to lift their self-censorship and contribute to the diversification of feminist discourses, I also concur with several scholars' assessment that the mid-1990s was another watershed in the transformation of women's movement strategies and feminist discourses. The mid-1990s saw the transformation of the women's movement from elite-sustained to a mass-based grass-roots movement. The mid-1990s was also the time when Taiwanese feminist leaders began to enter the government bureaucracy as a means to formulate social policies from women's perspectives. In terms of the transformative changes in feminist discourses, the discussions on sexual liberation emerged in the mid-1990s, so was the debate between the lesbian minority and heterosexual majority in Taiwan's feminist community. At about the same time, there was an ideological rift in Taipei's feminist community between those who supported licensed prostitution and those who opposed it.

As Taiwan was transformed into a democracy in 1990s, Taiwanese feminists created numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to advocate for a diversity of women's issues. According to Chang and Fan Yun, most pro-women legislations were authored by Taiwanese feminist lawyers in NGOs and subsequently sent to the Legislative Yuan for debate, revision and final passage. Since Taiwan is not an UN member, Taiwanese feminist NGOs, as non-state actors, have played critical roles in exerting the island's soft national power abroad through active participation and transnational networking in international NGO forums. In 2001, the DPP government, in response to the pressure led by feminist NGOs and the global trend toward implementing gender-mainstreaming policies by various governments, invited feminist leaders in Taipei to integrate gender into the formulation of public policies and legislations. Among the government-sponsored policies since 2001 included legislations for narrowing the gender wage gap, ensuring that qualified women are selected to fill at least a quarter of all government posts, safeguarding gender equity in marriage and the family, and for the prevention of and redress for violence against women.

A marginal group in Taiwan that has been brought to the center of academic inquiry in recent years is the island's indigenous women. Scholars have analyzed the results of ethnographic fieldwork in the matrilineal and bilateral cultures of Taiwan's Malayo-Polynesian communities to gain fresh insights for gender-egalitarian family structures. Sharing these research findings with transnational feminist NGOs can potentially be Taiwan's indigenous contribution to gender egalitarian discourses in the international community. Safeguarding indigenous women's rights is another important area where Taiwanese feminist NGOs can collaborate with their counterparts in other countries.