

Island X: Taiwanese/Americans and Oppositional Political Formation in the Diaspora

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Abstract

In the 2009 film *Formosa Betrayed*, the white, American protagonist, FBI agent Jake Kelly, stumbles into the mass violence and corruption of Taiwan's Kuomintang government and is emotionally stirred and angered. Agent Kelly's efforts are ultimately fruitless and in the end, Taiwan is abandoned as an unknowable, senseless place outside of the reach of Western political rationality. Probably unintentionally, the film shows how little known and understood the contemporary history of Taiwan and its continuing precarious political status still are today. The film was loosely inspired by American diplomat George Kerr's 1965 nonfiction exposé of the same name. In US government parlance, Taiwan was known for a time as "Island X" due to its strategic importance relative to US interests and warmaking in Asia: a metaphorically suitable name considering the elusive and shifting nature of its geopolitical and cultural identities for Taiwanese as well as non-Taiwanese. Kerr's book, in which he described the complicity of the US government with the oppression of the Taiwanese majority by the Kuomintang government in Taiwan, was deeply influential to a generation of Taiwanese who came to the US as graduate students during Taiwan's long period of martial law and became politically active in struggles for human rights, democracy, and Taiwanese independence. This paper examines the patchwork process of political formation in which diasporic Taiwanese in the US engaged; the objects and networks through which that political formation was achieved; and their potential significance for understanding Asian/American subject formation more broadly.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, during Taiwan's extended period of martial law, thousands of Taiwanese came to the US for graduate study, mostly in the sciences. For the US, they filled a Cold War-driven niche. But they remained tied to Taiwan in culture, spirit, and especially politics. Taiwanese students in the US became a driving force in opposition to the Kuomintang (KMT) regime, filling a spectrum from leftist, Third World-identified, revolutionaries to centrist proponents of US-backed democracy. Immediately upon arrival, recently established and newly formed Taiwanese student associations provided friendship, community, and support for incoming students. Further, in many cases, they served as the network through which Taiwanese could and would build

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political movements against the KMT regime and for Taiwan independence. Regular points of connection and congregation included potlucks, regional softball tournaments, self-produced political journals, group correspondence notebooks, and clandestine telephone news lines. More politically active members organized and participated in protests, and some of the innermost circles participated in facilitating and even carrying out radical guerilla tactics such as bombings and attempted assassinations. An examination of these nested circles shows how vital the social infrastructure of student organizations were to fostering political consciousness and creating the conditions for collective activism.

This paper considers the practices, conditions of being, and contradictions of these diasporic student activists, as well as questions of legibility and visibility for geographies and histories occluded by US ideological and geopolitical domination. It positions Taiwanese immigrant experiences as an important and largely untold segment of Asian American history, which link together previously assumed-to-be-disparate strands of Asian American culture and identity. In doing so, it contributes to recent work that engages the class, cultural, and political heterogeneity of Asian Americans; and to work on the transnational intellectual history and activism of Asian/Americans. It makes linkages between Taiwan Studies and Asian American Studies, and addresses the illegibility and occlusion of Taiwan and Taiwanese Americans from Asian American identity formation, history, and politics in the US.