

## PREFACE

*The presidential elections held in Taiwan this spring were widely felt within the island to be a critical moment in its history. A day before polling, incumbent candidate Chen Shui-bian, leader of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was grazed by a bullet from an unknown assailant, while touring his hometown in a jeep. The ensuing sympathy gave him victory in the election by a handful of votes over his Kuomintang opponents. The mystery surrounding the shooting incident, and the tiny margin of advantage it yielded, generated heated controversy. Massive demonstrations by supporters of the Blue camp—the KMT and its allies—protested against the upshot of the poll, claiming fraud by the Green camp—the DPP and its allies. Behind this political polarization lay, among other issues, tensions between the different communities that make up Taiwan's population, about two-thirds of which is of immigrant descent from southern Fujian ('Minnan' speakers); another ten to twelve per cent of Hakka origin, mainly from Guangdong; some fifteen per cent mainlanders who arrived in the island as KMT refugees in 1949; together with a third of a million aboriginal inhabitants of the island, of Malayo-Polynesian origin.*

*Concerned that a divisive identity politics, playing on ethnic frictions rather than resolving them, might loom large in the electoral campaign, a distinguished group of intellectuals, artists and activists formed an Alliance for Ethnic Equality before it started. Below is an interview with four of its founders. By common consent Hou Hsiao-Hsien is one of the world's greatest film directors, whose cinema has offered a series of unforgettable portraits of Taiwanese history and society. Chu Tien-hsin is an accomplished novelist, with more than a dozen works of fiction published, of which one of the latest—The Ancient Capital—will shortly appear in English. Tang Nuo, pen-name of Hsieh Ts'ai-chün, is a leading critic and publisher, author of six volumes of essays. Hsia Chu-joe teaches architecture and planning at National Taiwan University, and has written widely on urban space and architectural theory. He has also translated Manuel Castells' trilogy The Information Age into Chinese. The interview, which covers a range of social, cultural and political issues, as well as relations between Taiwan and the mainland, was conducted a few days after the presidential election.*

HOU HSIAO-HSIEN, CHU TIEN-HSIN,  
TANG NUO, HSIA CHU-JOE

## TENSIONS IN TAIWAN

*How did the Alliance for Ethnic Equality start? What immediately inspired it?*

**H**OU: I was not myself the initiator. Among our friends is a journalist from the *China Times* called Yang Suo. A colleague of his, Yu Fan-ying from the paper's foundation, told him that questions of ethnicity were likely to become very divisive during the election campaign, and we should get together and discuss this prospect. Many people including Tien-hsin, Tang Nuo, Chu-joe and I went there. After three or four meetings, we decided to set up the Alliance for Ethnic Equality. We wanted to warn against electoral manipulation of ethnic issues by either the Blue camp or the Green camp during the campaign. That's how the organization was set up. I was chosen to be the convenor, because I seldom say anything about political topics and am well known in Taiwan—or, as I said, I had a selling image. We started to work before the Chinese New Year, in January.

TANG: No guesswork was needed to anticipate that ethnic conflict would be whipped up again this time. It happened in each previous election, so we had a lot of experience of this. Chen Shui-bian, running for re-election as president, was at quite some disadvantage when the campaign started, and he supposedly represents the Minnan, the largest ethnic group in Taiwan. It could only benefit him if the issue of ethnicity became a major election topic, so it could be expected he would make a lot of play of it. In fact, it looked as if this might be the most serious case of identity politics ever in Taiwanese elections. That's why we set up this Alliance. Hou Hsiao-Hsien was selected because he had no political colour. In Taiwan, people tend to ask about your standpoint before you have even spoken—they want to know which side you are on. Most of

the other members of the Alliance have long been involved in variously-coloured social movements; therefore they could be easily categorized as belonging to one side or another. Hou is a person without political hue. There was no vote—he was approved by acclamation.

*Is it the case that democratization in Taiwan has paradoxically sharpened tensions between the different communities in the island, compared to the period of the dictatorship?*

HOU: Yes. To some extent that was inevitable. In the 1970s, under the authoritarian rule of the KMT, an opposition sprang up that was already closely related to questions of ethnicity— Islanders versus Mainlanders—which persisted through the *Formosa Incident*.<sup>1</sup> But after martial law was lifted by Chiang Ching-kuo in 1987, there was a change of fronts. For two decades the opposition movement had always used the signifiers of nationalism. But after 1988, when Chiang Ching-kuo died and Lee Teng-hui succeeded him, for the first time a Taiwanese became President. That was a dramatic shift. The old Mainlander forces within the KMT were increasingly marginalized by Lee, who started to cooperate with local forces, and to rely on so-called ‘black channel’ (*heidao*) and ‘black money’ (*heijin*) sources, connected to mafia and other interests. In that period, Lee and the opposition party, the DPP, were on the surface adversaries, but under the table they were supporting each other, since they both wanted to found a Taiwanese state, and based themselves on this project. So in that respect they were at one. In the election of 2000, the KMT split, allowing Chen Shui-bian to become president, to the surprise even of the DPP itself. Over the next four years, Chen’s administration performed very poorly, leaving him in a weak position in the opinion polls before the election this year. So he intensified nationalist appeals, calling for the building of a nation-state in Taiwan, and labelling the Blue camp fellow-travellers of the CCP.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In August 1979, an opposition journal named *Meilidao* (Beautiful Island, ie: Formosa) appeared, publishing articles critical of the lack of social justice and democracy in Taiwan, which soon gained such popularity that it became the focus of a broad public movement. When it called for rallies to celebrate International Human Rights Day in December, the police broke up the demonstration held in Kaohsiung, and then arrested and tortured eight of its leaders, who were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

<sup>2</sup> Acronyms: KMT (Kuomintang); DPP (Democratic Progressive Party); CCP (Chinese Communist Party); PRC (People’s Republic of China); ROC (Republic of China).

The DPP had been promoting 'localization' during his four years' administration, a policy affecting all areas of life, education and culture. The accumulation of measures had already generated very clear antagonisms. Many people in Taiwan felt increasingly perplexed. For instance in education, they wanted children to learn Minnan. Then there were protests—others saying that this could not simply be taken as the language of Taiwan, and questioning whether Hakka should not be taught as well. Since the government wasn't principled, it added Hakka. Then aboriginal languages were also considered. The result was to make life miserable for pupils in our elementary schools. It is the same thing in government offices, in municipalities or in Taipei. Since we have Chen as president, a chairman of a meeting may give a speech in Minnan. If anyone in the audience questions this, he will be upset. But no-one has decided to make Minnan the official language of the island yet. Such confusions now arise everywhere. For example, Minnan has suddenly appeared in the examinations for the civil service. But most applicants cannot understand it, since Taiwan has now experienced quite a lengthy period of economic growth and urbanization, producing a new social mixture in the cities. Mandarin has been taught in our schools for a long time, but now all of a sudden Minnan is required in national exams, with questions people often cannot understand, let alone answer. In this sense, so-called localization is simply Minnanization, excluding everything else. This is a programme of 'de-Sinicization', as some of its supporters term it, which continuously appears in each domain, and arouses strong repugnance. Since it got under way, we have had a more or less serious sense of being threatened.

TANG: You've asked whether there is a paradoxical relationship between democracy and ethnicity here. We should be able to avoid this in Taiwan, and in fact it's generally believed that ethnic conflicts in Taiwan are not serious among Hakka, Minnan and mainlanders, since these communities are not distinguishable in religion, dress, occupation or lifestyle. There are some genuine ethnic tensions, but these focus rather around the original inhabitants of the island, the native Taiwanese, and the new immigrants from contemporary Southeast Asia or elsewhere. But if the issue of ethnicity has nevertheless become so central in public life, this is not as a serious social phenomenon within the majority groups on the island, but rather as a product of political struggle. Most people would concede this. The KMT arrived from the mainland after the war and established a dictatorship that excluded the islanders from much

political participation. Therefore when the opposition movement started, before the lifting of martial law, it wore two kinds of colours. One was localization, the colour of Taiwan. The other was that of the Left, because the KMT was a right-wing political party. But quite soon, the Left was driven out of the political arena. Between localization and the Left, the movement chose localization. When Lee Teng-hui took over as the first Taiwanese president, the opposition lost much of its *raison d'être* because an islander was already in power. From that time on, the 'ethnic' question started to change character, in a dynamic culminating in the 2004 presidential election. It was no longer an opposition between islanders and mainlanders, but between Taiwan and the CCP in Beijing. Nationalism increasingly became a convenient way of avoiding social realities, problems in the economy, education and culture. It was also, of course, the best instrument for battling against the KMT. This is the mechanism the French scholar René Girard has described in his writings on the scapegoat. When the nation faces an external crisis or threat of invasion, it is the best moment for a ruler to call for unity and to ask for a blank cheque from the people. The KMT happens to be a party originally from the mainland. Therefore, from the later period of Lee Teng-hui through to the earlier period of Chen Shui-bian's administration, ethnic manipulation in Taiwan changed from local community conflicts to the forging of a new nationalism. However, since the US and PRC have agreed there is only one China, and Taiwan is part of it, this involves a project that cannot be talked about too openly. The result is a form of nationalism that is deeply ambiguous, suspended in a strange way somewhere between calling for Taiwanese independence and operating within the existing ROC. Ethnic tensions themselves were not a particularly serious social problem, and could have been gradually reduced within Taiwan's established democratic framework. Their fanning today is a pure product of political power struggles.

*If one were to make a comparison with Ireland, where the south was traditionally nationalist and the north unionist, and popular stereotypes of each community long persisted—Catholics regarding Protestants as oppressive, unimaginative and dull, Protestants viewing Catholics as lazy, slovenly, irresponsible, and so on—has there been anything like this in Taiwan? Such prejudices are capable of producing quite a lot of suspicion and tension in daily life, apart from any political manipulation of them. Has there been any analogy in the relations between Minnan, Hakka and the mainlanders who came to Taiwan at the end of the 1940s?*

TANG: Taiwan differs from Ireland in the lack of any religious factor. In earlier times, Hakkas, Minnan and mainlanders typically formed separate communities, each of whose lifestyles were slightly different. There were contrasts of music, language, and the position of women in the family. For example, Hakka women tended to be very strong in character, whereas Minnan women had a much lower status. Mainlanders had once been very patriarchal, but when they were separated from their original clans, and found themselves in a new setting on the island, couples endured the suffering of exile together—the older generation having usually stayed behind on the mainland—and so relations between them became more equal. From the sixties onwards, however, Taiwan's economy grew rapidly, and as society became more and more urbanized and intermarriage increased, a point was reached where it became difficult to tell by appearance or by accent which ethnic group a person born after 1960 came from. Some of the Hakkas, where they are still concentrated in self-contained highland communities, form an exception.

You also have to remember that our situation is very different from that of Ireland, because historical hatred and bloodshed have been so much less. The killings of the local population by KMT soldiers and police after the events of February 28, 1947 were for long a deep wound in memory. But actually the 2.28 Incident was not the most enduring political repression by the KMT. That was the White Terror of the 1950s, targeting the Left. The 2.28 Incident lasted only a few days, whereas the White Terror persisted for many years, with a huge gap in the victim tolls of the two. Neither of them were truly ethnic conflicts, but state political oppression of the population as a whole. The 2.28 Incident was in a sense an accidental conflagration; whereas the White Terror was a deliberate, concerted drive by the right-wing KMT regime to destroy any opposition to it from the Left.<sup>3</sup> Logically, the later revolts against the KMT in Taiwan should have been mounted from a position on the Left. But economic growth increasingly reconciled workers to their lot. Rising living standards gave them hope, while rebellion carried high risks. Moreover, developments in mainland China, once the Cultural Revolution was launched,

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<sup>3</sup> On February 28, 1947 a spontaneous rising by islanders against KMT misrule erupted in Taipei, which then spread to other towns. Chiang Kai-shek dispatched troops from the mainland to crush the revolt, killing somewhere between 8,000 and 20,000 people, and possibly twice that number. The White Terror began after Chiang Kai-shek had relocated to Taiwan in 1949, and continued through the 1950s, with perhaps as many as 45,000 executions.

compromised the very idea of a Left in Taiwan. The Left needed to be based on theories, while identity politics needed only to appeal to emotions. So the opposition movement in Taiwan shifted away from a Left that had been traumatized in its deep theoretical bases, to an ethnic agenda that was less fraught, which then evolved in the way we've talked about. Today it is an instrument of local power-politics. This is our major aversion. It is like a Pandora's box whose lid has been deliberately opened by politicians. The dying ethnic issue has surfaced again.

HOU: Taiwan is also not like Ireland for other reasons. Everyone shares the same religion here, but no-one strives for independence as eagerly as they've done there. Our politicians promote localization in a very crude way. They do not stick to the issue of independence and work towards it, either step by step or with a more radical approach. Their supporters only brandish rather simplistically such slogans as de-Sinicization. Actually we never believe that they can seriously carry out independence.

Hsia: Even most fundamentalists of Taiwan independence would admit that they do not plan to sacrifice their lives for this ideal. Indeed they insist it is a must to sleep soundly at home when engaged in a political movement. They say they can talk and act to maintain the movement in the daytime, but in the evening they have to go home and rest.

HOU: Much of the reason for the extent of their success lies in the resentment that the KMT dictatorship left behind. The elder generation of Minnan remember its repression and respond to the forces that once fought against it. That's understandable. But if you really pose them with the prospect of doing battle with the CCP to gain independence, not a single mother would be a taker. To be honest, nobody is willing to go to war.

*If there are so few cultural distinctions between the various communities on the island today, and a great deal of intermarriage and social mixing, what explains the very marked regional pattern of the vote in Taiwanese elections? The current one is more pronounced than ever. If one looks at the election map, it's not even a patchwork—the south is Green, and the north is Blue, virtually en bloc, with scattered enclaves of the opposite camp here and there. Normally, that kind of distribution reflects either an acute social polarization or distinct cultural identities. What explains it in this case? Another question would be this: if ethnic appeals sway mostly older people who suffered under the KMT dictatorship, why has the DPP scored best among the younger generation?*

CHU: Let me say something. From my own observation, I would very much confirm the belief that ethnic problems were not a big issue before. I myself am a typical example. My father came from the mainland in 1949. My mother is Hakka. So I could be labelled a 'second-generation mainlander'. But in my own experience, issues of identity—which community one belonged to—were not a significant problem until the last decade, when they started to be taken up for political ends. Since then, what was once make-believe has become reality. When Lee Teng-hui was in power, he wanted to drive those he had marginalized within the KMT out of power; these were mostly officials who had come from the mainland in 1949. For that purpose, he formed an alliance with the DPP, whose following was essentially Minnan, using the issue of ethnicity to appeal to the DPP, since he came from the same community. The main theme of his rule was that we Taiwanese should unite against mainlanders and eliminate the remaining influence of the foreign regime that descended on us from the other side of the straits. That slogan has now been declaimed for more than a decade, and has been very effective. Time and again it allowed the DPP to abandon completely its responsibilities as an opposition party in a democratic system, on the pretext that it could not risk threatening Lee Teng-hui's rule and restoring the mainlanders' power. This is our major dissatisfaction.

As for the graphic distinction between the north and the south, I take a different view of it. One often hears it said that historically the KMT valued the north above the south, because the capital was in the north, so they invested more in Taipei, while starving the agricultural counties in the south of resources. That would then explain why the north votes Blue, and the south Green. The reality, however, is that southern agricultural counties like Yunlin, Chiai and Tainan are forever faithful voters for whichever is the ruling party of the hour. They are neither Green nor Blue as such. In the election of 2000, Yunlin, Chiai and Tainan were solidly Blue—they all supported KMT, as a guaranteed bloc. This year they all voted Green. Have local beliefs changed? Not at all. They just vote for whoever is in power, in much the way that agricultural counties in Japan have almost always supported the LDP. In these areas, local people have limited access to information, and their educational level is low. In the cities, people can exchange information and ideas in many ways, via the internet, television, newspapers, magazines, or circles of friends, encouraging independence of thought. In agricultural counties, it is quite different. Most people cannot even understand Mandarin. Often their



sole channel of information is the powerful ruling party, through either the official broadcasting or leaflets distributed by local government offices in the villages. Thus they always tend to vote for the party in power. If you understand this, you won't be surprised why they can all turn Green or Blue overnight. If my explanation is correct, you will not be surprised to find that the Blue vote is not only in the north but in urbanized areas generally. In the middle zones of Taiwan, such as Taichung County and Taichung City, the Blue camp did slightly less well than predicted in opinion polls this time, but they went mainly Blue in previous local elections. The reason is simply that voters are—relatively speaking—capable of more independent judgement in semi-urbanized areas.

Moreover, in a cross-section analysis of party support in various opinion polls, probably everyone, including both the DPP and the KMT themselves, would acknowledge that the KMT's major strength lies among people in their thirties and forties. Its electorate is spindle-shaped, gradually decreasing towards the two ends of old age and youth. The level of education among Blue voters is relatively high, many having college degrees. This camp also enjoys more support among women. The polls show that most of the DPP's supporters tend to be older, people in their fifties and sixties, with less education. Generally speaking, if Taiwanese society wants to move forward, it would be reasonable to think that it should not depend so much on the too young or too old, the generations that point either to a future that is still some way off, or to a past that has now already receded.

HSIA: To some extent, I agree with Tien-hsin that 'Green south and Blue north' is a political construction of the past decade, or even the last five years. It was not like this before. Working in urban studies, I incline to believe that globalization has been the principal cause of this political distribution. In competition on the world market, Taiwan's best performance comes from the high-tech corridor between Taipei and Hsinchu. Our electronics industry is the most successful sector of our economy. It also invests more than any other in the mainland. So in a global setting, the most competitive region of the country is the north. The south used to be the centre of our heavy industry. But Taiwan can no longer sustain that kind of manufacturing. In the past, the productivity of the port of Kaohsiung ranked third in the world for its handling of cargo, after Hong Kong and Singapore. It continues to enjoy many natural advantages—freighters of any size or generation can dock there, unlike Shanghai, which is having to build new ports on the Yangshan Islands.

Nevertheless, Kaohsiung has now fallen far behind not only Hong Kong and Singapore, but is losing ground to Pusan and Shanghai. Why? One reason has certainly been political, the lack of any breakthrough in relations with the mainland. But more generally, a serious regional disparity has opened up with Taipei in global capitalist competition and the transition to a post-industrial economy. Politically, however, this uneven development has been displaced into identity politics, as if the regional distinction between the north and the south were essentially a question of ethnicity. This is really troubling.

Historically, the agricultural counties in Taiwan were all Blue. They were the firmest supporters of the KMT, whereas the stronghold of opposition to Chiang Kai-shek's regime—there was no DPP yet—was Taipei. That was so from the time of Kao Yu-shu, the first Taiwanese mayor of Taipei, when you could get killed for standing up to the KMT. People in the capital have long been the most open-minded, showing least trust in official propaganda. The first time Chen Shui-bian ran for an important position, he lost in his home county Tainan, which is rural. But when he ran for mayor in Taipei, he won. The city used to be the biggest supporter of the DPP, and it is extremely embarrassing for them that it has now swung against the party. Chen Shui-bian was originally very popular here. I too voted for him. But he has squandered this support. His rule as president alienated so many people in Taipei that the city has just voted heavily Blue. The DPP now claims that this is because the city is dominated by mainlanders, which is ridiculous. Pressed to explain what proportion of the inhabitants come from across the straits, they change tack and say the Minnan are so generous in character that they are willing to support mainlanders. Such ethnic explanations make no sense at all. The reality is as Tien-hsin describes it: the average level of education in Taipei is higher, women are more independent, and the citizenry is more modern in outlook.

CHU: Part of the reason for the DPP's popularity among the younger generation may be that this age group does not yet have to face the economic realities of having to support a family.

HOU: It's also because during Chen Shui-bian's tenure as Taipei mayor, and then as president, he mobilized youth culture—there were lots of mass dancing parties and celebrations held in front of City Hall, or the Presidential Palace, with a sea of 'Chen Shui-bian Caps'. The atmosphere

was carnivalesque, but also somewhat idol-worshipping. It was like a fan phenomenon. Taiwan's young people are easily attracted by that.

TANG: Previously the younger generations, including the middle cohorts in society, from twenty to fifty years old, used to be the main force supporting the DPP. The age group between thirty to fifty years old has gradually changed, mainly because of higher unemployment in recent years, and other economic problems. But the age group between twenty and thirty remains relatively unaffected. Some of the reasons have just been mentioned. They typically have no family to support and are not that concerned with economic pressures. But it also has to do with the leadership of the two political camps. Chen is much younger than either James Soong or Lien Chan, and consciously plays the card of his age.<sup>4</sup> Compared with them, he is naturally more attractive to young people. But when he competes with Ma Ying-jeou, the current KMT mayor in Taipei, who defeated him for the post in 1998, he does not have the same advantage. It's also true that Chen Shui-bian has put a lot of effort into wooing students and youth, including the holding of various festivities. The officials in his administration are generally quite young too. Moreover, student years are always a time of rebellion, and the DPP has reflected that spirit. It is a party that is radical in style and conduct, built on enthusiasm, that tends to break with the rules, be they moral norms or legal codes, of the establishment. It is quite an aggressive organization. The famous student movement of the early nineties, the years of the DPP's initial growth, naturally joined forces with the party. Interestingly enough, the first generation of the student movement, people now in their thirties, are among those who most frequently reject Chen Shui-bian today, because this is where unemployment is concentrated. But in the universities themselves, those remaining on campus have retained their earliest revolutionary fervour unfaded. Although the DPP competes within a democratic framework, it has always relied on something like a revolutionary dynamic in this sense. Even when it takes over power, it does not stop there, but aims at a target over the horizon, namely to found a nation—a Taiwan Republic, with its own independent constitution. So it stands for a kind of continual revolution. That too gives it a strong appeal to the younger generation, especially among university students.

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<sup>4</sup> James Soong: former secretary to Chiang Ching-kuo, who was the KMT's provincial governor of the island in the nineties, and now heads the People First Party, for which he ran as vice-presidential candidate on the Blue ticket in 2004. Lien Chan: former KMT premier under Lee Teng-hui in the nineties, and the party's presidential candidate in 2004.

*Why do the Hakka communities in Taiwan vote solidly Blue?*

TANG: They don't—rather, they vote solidly against Chen.

CHU: Exactly: it's the other way around. They refuse to vote Green.

HOU: Their situation is like this. I'm a Hakka myself, but I was brought to Taiwan by my family in 1947 right after I was born. Basically I am what they call 'mainland Hakka'. When I was a boy, I refused to admit this because my schoolmates all said that Hakkas were mean and stingy. Such stereotypes were very strong. Therefore I absolutely would not admit that I was a Hakka in my childhood. Later, I found that Hakkas tended to live in highland areas of agricultural counties, in self-contained groups with a very strong sense of clan self-protection. They were conservative in their ways, and had long been on bad terms with the much more numerous Minnan. Since they had so often been attacked or threatened in the past, going right back to the seventeenth century, Hakkas were reluctant to marry Minnan, or into any other ethnic group. Their rate of inter-marriage was always low. So after the KMT arrived from the mainland, maybe they looked to the Blue camp as some sort of shield.

CHU: Let me add something. Because my mother is Hakka, most of my relatives are Hakkas. I believe we should say that they have received neither preferential treatment nor special humiliation or oppression from the KMT, so their attitude towards the KMT is to stay at a respectful distance from it. But they are scared by Minnan and dislike them very much, because historically there were so many violent conflicts fought between these two ethnic groups. We have a saying that Zhangzhou people and Quanzhou people came to Taiwan one after another. Then there were Minnan and Hakka. Many died in the fights between them. So they have been enemies for ages. Tang Nuo is right to point out that Hakkas fear the Green rather than trust the Blue. The Green's ethnic base is the Minnan population who make up about 70 per cent of Taiwan's total population, and they have shown some increasingly exclusivist tendencies in recent years. They talk continuously about the Taiwanese people or the Taiwanese language, but these usages do not include the Hakka. They are referring only to the Minnan. That's why some Hakkas would reply, 'the state you want to establish is yours—we didn't say we wanted to found a state: have you ever listened to us? If in your Republic of Taiwan, it is only the Minnan who are going to rule and become masters

of the country, then what's the difference from the mainlanders ruling us, as it used to be? We are still the same, the ruled. Therefore we are not at all interested in your nation-building project.' I think this is their basic attitude.

*You have all been talking about the DPP's manipulation of identity politics. But if someone says to you—yes, we must do everything to fight the stoking-up of ethnic tensions in Taiwan, but we should also try to move ahead together towards an independent Taiwanese state, in which there is ethnic equality, would you agree to that?*

HOU: Yes, we certainly agree.

TANG: No, we will be extremely alarmed.

CHU: Exactly.

HSIA: Isn't this hypothetical?

TANG: We have historical lessons in this respect. Our experience in Taiwan is that when the ruling party—whichever one—starts to raise this issue, it usually wants to shift people's attention from more urgent substantial problems. Personally, I am Minnan and I don't reject the idea that Taiwan should be able to exercise various options. But I have always been sensitive to the sound of official nationalism. When you hear that voice, it is usually telling you how much you need to sacrifice for the nation. We are alert to this. In recent years, the voice of independence has become quite loud. But the essential character of Taiwan is, after all, that it is an immigrant society. It has been unwilling to face the real problem of independence seriously, namely its price. For everyone knows, that if the two sides of the Taiwan Strait were to go to war, it would be extremely high. On the whole, people here have tended to avoid thinking about this question. But if it were really posed, I don't know whether Taiwanese society, with its strong immigrant character, would still insist on independence. Nationalism should be handled extremely carefully in Taiwan, because it faces an inevitable opponent, which is the nationalism of 1.2 billion people a short distance away. I am highly skeptical whether Taiwan should move in such a dangerous direction.

CHU: I think one should adapt a slogan of the CCP's to the DPP: listen to what they say, and watch what they do. Take this election as an example. One day before the vote, the DPP told the country, over and over again, from Chen's speech to the last campaign leaflet, that if you didn't vote for them but for the Blues, you would be a fellow-traveller of mainland Communism, and effectively belong to another country. Yet after making this kind of claim, the next day people would be advised to go back to their normal life. I cannot be convinced by this. So I've spent a long time watching whether you mean what you say. Whose nation is it you are talking about? This is very important. I don't care whether it calls itself the Republic of Taiwan, or whatever. I want to know whose country it is. If it's going to be a country defined by a certain person or a certain ethnic group alone, with no space for me, then no matter what it is called, I cannot accept it. I can give you a very small example. Yesterday, I ran into a student who is studying my work in the Taiwanese department of Cheng Kung University. When she told her supervisor this, he upbraided her until she wept, telling her she should change her research topic. I asked her why. She said: 'he told me, how could you study a second-generation mainlander writer?' I asked her who her supervisor was. It turns out he was Lin Rui-ming, who is not just a professor in Cheng Kung University, but the director of the National Literary Museum, which is the highest independent unit in the field outside the Ministry of Culture, working with all writers, collecting relics or holding events. This is an official figure, who can tell his student straightforwardly not to study my work because I am a so-called second-generation mainlander. How could this kind of Taiwan Republic be meaningful to me?

HOU: When I answered your question, I said 'Yes'. What did I mean? I wasn't thinking of the current situation, but imagining the position Taiwan might occupy, if it overcame its internal problems, in the Chinese-speaking communities around the world. Also: what kind of role would it want to play in Asia? These two questions are, in my view, the most important for Taiwan's future direction. At the moment, I agree with Tang Nuo and Tien-hsin that we face a problem of mentality—an incomprehensible narrow-mindedness of the sort Tien-hsin has just described. But if we try to imagine a better future, I would say that if a Taiwanese government could truly resolve all ethnic questions, reconciling Fujianese, Hakka, mainlander, aboriginal Taiwanese and the new immigrants, through real equality and inter-marriage, then it would no doubt be capable of handling the question of Taiwan's position in the Chinese-speaking world

and Taiwan's role in Asia. Of course, such a notion remains an ideal. In present conditions, we are very far from that.

HSIA: I am on the Left, but I wouldn't emphasize this issue. For a long time, one of the principles distinguishing Left and Right has been their attitude to the nation-state. The Right typically aims at founding one, while the Left has rarely put its energy into that. How and why a national identity is constructed are issues worth serious attention. They are not to be casually dismissed. In Taiwan, we need sympathetic analysis of the historical and political causes of the emergence of its modern nationalism. But we also need to remember how often, in the history of developing countries, building a nation-state has come to a bad end. If there were no more ethnic conflicts inside Taiwan, what I would look forward to is a tomorrow in which we can go beyond the idea of nation-state, towards a cross-border world. I know that we still need a state to regulate, to protect, to construct. But does it have to be based on a nation? I would rather like to imagine a closer relation among Chinese-speaking cities, a kind of intercity networking in East Asia. I'd prefer to explore such new institutional possibilities. After all, they are trying to invent a new system in Europe. They didn't want to reproduce a nation-state, so now they have a European Union, which is not a super-state like the us, where there is a federal structure but basically the country is just a mega-nation-state. If we really want to think about the future, I'd rather we imagined one along these lines, instead of following a brilliant leader to create a new nation. I know it is difficult, but the price of trying to create another nation-state here would be too high—half the population would not approve it. How should we deal with a society traumatized by such a deep division?

CHU: There could be a civil war.

TANG: We more or less regard ourselves as intellectuals. The role of an intellectual is to oppose governments and criticize authority. As for the nation or the state, I often think of Graham Greene's words in *Our Man in Havana*: 'I wouldn't kill for my country. I wouldn't kill for capitalism or Communism or social democracy or the welfare state—whose welfare? I would kill Carter because he killed Hasselbacher . . . If I love or if I hate, let me love or hate as an individual. I will not be 59200/5 in anyone's global war.' So 'country' has no appeal for me. We need a wider horizon and a more universal idea than the empty concept of a nation,

or something that is more substantial and closer to our sensibilities and our lives as actual individuals than anything that some latter-day version of Rousseau's civil religion could offer.

*How would you describe the general situation of the arts in Taiwan today? In the mainland, cultural activities are subject to censorship by officialdom. Clearly nothing like this exists in Taiwan. Would it be right to think that the different arts can flourish here without any political controls or inspections?*

TANG: No, that would be misleading. There is no censorship as such, but recent years have seen an unofficial tendency towards a kind of selection, driven by the politically correct slogans of localization and de-Sinicization. This has become a very serious pressure, especially in academic and literary life, where it is now more acute than official censorship might be. In Taiwan's universities, dissertations, funds and promotions are all controlled by the ruling party. A recent survey reported that some 80–90 per cent of doctoral and master's theses in the humanities and social sciences now concentrate on the study of Taiwan. The result is that the atmosphere has become quite tense in academic institutions, more so than in society at large. The DPP has now been in power for four years, and has put a lot of effort into bringing this area of life under its influence. Relatively speaking, the KMT was more tolerant towards culture, not because it had advanced ideas, but because it was incapable of recognizing cultural issues—it had no understanding of culture whatsoever, and no policy towards it. In such circumstances, there was actually more space for scholars and artists. The DPP, on the other hand, had very definite ideas about culture from the beginning, related to its particular attachment to the myths of nation-building, and so has been much more inclined to interfere, as if intellectual and artistic life were a battlefield. This attitude is not unique to Taiwan, of course. Nationalism is a variant of Rousseau's civil religion. As a religion, it does not encourage you to think. It only asks you to believe. It is essentially the opposite of the principle of literature and the arts.

*What about the cinema?*

HOU: The situation is miserable. It's not a question of censorship. Mainland films are not banned in Taiwan, but people don't go to see them. They don't even see Taiwanese films. Nowadays they only watch Hollywood movies. Taiwan produces just a dozen or so films each year,



and most of them depend on official funding. There are perhaps only three exceptions—Yang Te-chang [Edward Yang], Tsai Ming-liang and myself—who can get financing in France or Japan.<sup>5</sup> So the problem is one of resources. In recent years, official funding has been controlled by a group of people, whose banner is localization. These people are very narrow-minded. They lack any talent or cinematic ability themselves, but want to impose a kind of political correctness, and look for directors to make films that will illustrate it. But they don't know how to find them. So they've only made a few soap operas, on which they've spent a lot of money. But they are very concerned to exercise control, and if they can't shape software—the script or *mise en scène* of a film—they try to make up for it with hardware, by supplying or denying financial support for post-production. Control of resources matters there. I've never had any problems myself, since I'm not dependent on this circuit. The only time I encountered any problem was when I made *Flowers of Shanghai*, and I was reproached for shooting a film with a mainland setting.<sup>6</sup> The government has no competence in cultural questions. The official unit in charge of the film industry is hopeless. No matter how often you talk to them, they pay no attention.

In literature, their people are similarly incompetent, unable to compete with real writers. But the government takes care to put various awards and prizes under its control. Real creative artists do not care about these at all. But there are constant examples of official meddling in the arts. When there is a project in the national theatre and a performing troop has to be found, they tend to look for obedient people to stage the play, and the outcome is usually poor. People seldom go to see these productions. Another recent example is the way a list of writers invited to France was altered by the government. The DPP eliminated authors it didn't like and added authors it approved of. Tien-hsin's sister, Chu Tien-wen, was crossed off the list.<sup>7</sup> The French were infuriated. They said, we don't want the names you've supplied, we want those whom we invited. Eventually, the government had to back down and Tien-wen was allowed to go. That was for China's cultural year in France.

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<sup>5</sup> See 'The Frustrated Architect' and 'Taiwan Stories', NLR II, Sept–Oct 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998): based on an 1894 novel by Han Bangqing, set in a traditional bordello of the city in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Chu Tien-wen: well-known Taiwanese writer and collaborator with Hou, author of the script for *A City of Sadness* and other films.

HSIA: I am the convenor of the architectural group for this year's National Arts Awards, which is a new category that will start giving awards in 2004. There will also be new awards for the cinema. It is generally acknowledged that Taiwanese cinema has much greater achievements to its credit than our architecture. We have already decided, in fact, to leave this year's award blank. So far there isn't any good architecture in Taiwan. We need to make further efforts.

CHU: Today, if you apply for a position in the Chinese department of a university when someone has died or retired or taken sick leave, they will tell you the post is not being renewed. No more faculties are being added or even replaced. But if you apply for a job in departments of Taiwanese studies, Taiwanese language or Taiwanese literature, things are different. Traditionally, to set up an institute or department in Taiwan, there are certain threshold requirements, concerning syllabuses, teachers, funds and so forth. But now, if you want to establish a Taiwanese institute or department, you get immediate approval once you submit your budget. The atmosphere is such, some teachers in Chinese departments are saying that after another couple of years maybe we will be shunted into the foreign language department. The situation is similar in the schools, where pupils are under a lot of examination pressure, as in other East Asian countries, and their scores can now depend on giving the politically correct answers to questions like: what country do you belong to? I know this from my own daughter, who likes Chinese literature and told me she would rather give up high marks than be forced to say what is expected of her. But there wouldn't be many children like her. For good scores, you have to be Taiwanese. So in your school days, you internalize those ideas in your formative years.

*You've spoken of the dangers of a divisive 'Taiwanization'—in effect, Minnanization—of education, culture and the civil service. But wouldn't Green supporters say: 'This is just correcting the many years of discrimination against Minnan by the KMT regime, when Mandarin was forcibly imposed on us. We are being more tolerant to Mandarin speakers than they ever were to us.' What's your view of this sort of argument, and more generally of the language and educational policies of the KMT when it was in power?*

TANG: This is the worst excuse of the DPP and could become an obstacle to further social progress in Taiwan in the future. What do I mean by this? To be progressive is continuously to upgrade our criteria of

performance; it is to feel that what could once be done has now become unacceptable. We often say that politics has always been the weakest link in the chain of Taiwanese development, where progress has tended to break down. For a long time, we've seen a race between society and politics in Taiwan. When society took the lead, it could improve everything else, including even politics, as happened in the period around the lifting of martial law in the late eighties. When politics took the lead, social development would be dragged backward, as has happened over the issue of ethnic tensions.

Viewed from this perspective, the DPP is in some ways more worrisome than the KMT. For the corruption of the KMT was relatively confined within the 'political' sphere in a more restricted sense. The party did not concern itself overmuch with the economic, cultural or educational spheres. The DPP, however, wants to meddle in all these realms to serve its political ends. For example, it handles the issue of cross-straits trade from a single-mindedly party-political position. Similarly, it has raided or sued newspaper offices, bought up news media firms with public funds or money from private conglomerates, injected its political ideology into educational reform and textbook revision and so forth. The KMT committed similar mistakes before, but on a lesser scale and without the same extent of social damage. Since the DPP came to power, many people have become anxious—not just about their economic situation, but about the withering away of social life in general. Politics is getting the upper hand over the whole society. More than any particular phenomena, it is this trend that is the gravest cause for concern today.

CHU: When the DPP says: 'if the KMT could do this before, why couldn't we do the same now?', it reminds us that to observe a political party, it is not enough to look at its performance in opposition, we must also see how it uses its power after coming to office. If we do that, we can only conclude that the DPP is in practice not that different from the KMT. This ought to be a disappointment to many intellectuals and ordinary citizens who have long supported the DPP and had high expectations of it. Yet I believe this may not be an unhealthy way to view the situation. Both Blue and Green camps then lose their mystic haloes, and therewith certain burdens as well; they fall back to the earth of normal competition between parties in a constitutional democracy, in which neither is any more sacred nor more evil than the other. Seen in that light, this is not a bad development at all.

HOU: Taiwan has a folk saying: 'As soon as you get over a cough, you get asthma'. If the DPP is itself willing to be asthmatic, that is its own degeneration. Or to put it more crudely, if other people are dung beetles, and you want to be such beetles too, what choice is there for us but to get rid of you?

HSIA: We shouldn't reproduce the discrimination and ideology of the KMT regime. We need change, to change ourselves—this is the social transformation we expect. Otherwise, we would just reproduce the same logic as before. Isn't that the lesson of Lao She's *Tea House*?<sup>8</sup>

*How do you envisage the future activities of the Alliance?*

TANG: Before the presidential election, we had just one aim: to prevent further fanning of ethnic tensions during the campaign. Our original intention was that, if either of the two sides, Blue or Green, manipulated issues of ethnicity, we would stand up and stop them. With that immediate urgency prior to the election, when the whole society was charged with high tension, it was not easy to talk about long-term plans or theoretical constructions. Now that the election is over, we can develop a set of projects more gradually. We have some immediate plans to promote legislation against ethnic discrimination—in other words, a bill of equal rights. We will also press for commissions to be set up to establish the historical truth about our past, including the February 28 Incident and the White Terror, so that people don't have just to guess what happened, as they do now. We want to see the archives properly opened to the public, under professional guidelines set by the historical profession and by law. We incorporated this demand in our inaugural manifesto. Another issue that we insist needs to be faced is the situation of new immigrants in Taiwan today. Many of these are 'brides' from the mainland, or from Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. They usually live in the countryside in Taiwan. The babies of these brides now account for one out of eight of Taiwan's newborn population. If discrimination against them persists, this will very soon become a big social problem. There are also, of course, the long-standing difficulties suffered by the aboriginal peoples of our island.

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<sup>8</sup> Three-act play (1957) by Lao She, set in Qing, Republican and immediate post-war China, in which the same repressive roles are reproduced from one period and generation to the next.

Our initial intention was to extract some promises of restraint from the two camps while our voice could still be heard during the election. Many of us had been active in various particular fields—cultural activities or social movements. Some were engaged in working with aboriginal Taiwanese, others with foreign labourers and immigrants; still others in women’s movements. This time we came together because of the nature of the Alliance. Though we have had limited success so far, the experience has been very positive, since we have realized that when we are united we become more imaginative and more effective.

CHU: I would put it this way. Whereas social movements primarily face towards the people, or the public, the Alliance faces towards power-holders and political parties. Social movements agitate and educate. Our role will be to check and criticize. That doesn’t mean we don’t care about people. Actually we are all active in our own fields, working towards people’s positions. For example, Hou Hsiao-Hsien faces his audience, Tang Nuo and I towards our readers, Hsia his students, and social activists their public. I believe the job of the Alliance is to face the authorities, and speak with a critical voice to them.

HOU: Each of our members has long been active in their own field. In the cinema, aside from making my own films, I’ve also set up an association to organize different events. When I became more familiar with fellow members of the Alliance, I noticed that some of them had been working to help those with work-related injuries, others with aboriginals, others with foreign labourers. Their cases—like such historical events in Taiwan as the February 28 Incident and the White Terror, about which as producer I made two documentaries—reminded me that filmmakers could provide certain resources to collaborate with them. For example, we can make television documentaries, an hour or an hour and a half each time. These activists have a rich experience in their own areas of work, but the social movements they represent have a very hard time becoming visible in the media. It is extremely difficult for them to reach the public. The media do not care about them at all. So if we can make visual images of what they are doing, we may be able to empower them. We’ve discussed this, and will organize a team to work on such projects. In that sense, as well as criticizing the authorities, our Alliance also wants to do something to increase communication between different ethnic and disadvantaged groups, to help them understand each other

better, so we can see what the opportunities are for change. Even if they seem dim, we still need to try.

TANG: We also have to be able to speak honestly about nationalism. Taiwan has little experience of the scale of disaster that ethnic conflicts can bring. In principle, as a late-developing society, Taiwan could draw on the experience of Europe, of Central Asia and Southeast Asia. But there are two ways of learning. One is by acquiring historical knowledge, so that we can turn other people's experience to our own benefit, and not pay so high a price for it. The other is to learn by one's own suffering. Europe had to endure two world wars before it understood that there are things human beings should never do to each other. In Taiwan, we don't know which of these two ways of learning will prevail. We don't know if we can convince our next generation by using examples and words. We don't know if only disaster and pain can awaken them. There is currently a race in Taiwan between these possibilities: learning by knowledge or by calamity. We hope we can convince people, so that the society does not have to pay that price. But frankly, we don't have any assurance at all. For today's Taiwan is very indifferent towards other people's experience. Besides, when any nationalism emerges, it usually defines itself as unlike anything else—other people's experience is not the same as ours, we have our own national conditions, and our own unique path. Other experiences are irrelevant. But if we look around us, we can see that Taiwan is not that unique. Much that has happened and is still happening here was lived through by others elsewhere. This is why we are so worried about the rise of an anti-intellectual, populist nationalism in this island, and have a duty to warn of the dangers it ignores, in rejecting so much of the real experience of human history and the opportunity to avoid repeating its disasters.

*This is a question for Hou Hsiao-Hsien. You are world-famous as the director of a trilogy of films about the history of Taiwan: The Puppet Master on the era of Japanese colonial rule; A City of Sadness on the February 28 Incident; Good Men, Good Women on the period of the White Terror. Do you have any plans to make films on later periods of your history, episodes or themes after the 1950s?*

HOU: I think that should be done by younger generations. The trilogy of films I made was closer to the background of my own age-group. They were concerned with experiences that shaped the lives of the generations

just before mine. It was like shooting part of my own experience. I always wonder, why don't the directors who are ten or twenty years younger than I am record what was happening just before they grew up? We cannot record those experiences for them. The story of the opposition movement against the KMT dictatorship, the *Formosa* Incident—all that should be re-imagined by their generation rather than mine. Personally, after the films I made on Japanese occupation, the February 28 Incident, and the White Terror, which were based on what we heard from the elder generation and could learn from literature, I don't feel the strength to repeat this. Perhaps it is a matter of distance in time. I have moved to another stage in my own creative work, and it's difficult to go back to an earlier one. But I think some of those themes remain highly suitable for television films. My films on those topics were by no means comprehensive. There are lots of historical episodes and figures missing from them. Chen Ying-chen of the Jen Chian (Human Realm) Study Society, is trying to use images and films to present some of this history, and I've had discussions with them. There are lots of themes to work on. I will probably supervise and produce some films for them—organize a team, or let them organize a team, for this purpose. They've already started. They came to me for help, to provide equipment and negatives, because I have more resources. I've started to assist them.

*Edward Yang told us a couple of years ago that he thought it would be impossible for him to make a film about ethnic tensions, for example between Fujianese and former mainlanders, in Taiwan. Would you also say that such contemporary social realities can't be represented on the screen today?*

HOU: No, I think it's possible to make a film of this kind. The important thing would be to have enough cultural preparation, to have the right sense of the subject. I am now starting to make films entirely focussed on contemporary themes. Since *Flowers of Shanghai*, I have been returning to modern times, and thinking about the difficulties of representing them. Films cannot treat these as exhaustively as television or newspaper reports. So I have been wrestling with the problem of what angles or forms to adopt for them in the cinema. I don't think my ideas are very finely tuned yet, but I do feel that political issues always penetrate into daily life, and that to present that life from within would be the best way of tackling the issues you mention. Now that I have joined the Alliance, I might get some ideas from it that would move me in that direction. It is hard to say.

*A final question about your current movies. There is one clear continuity between your earlier films and your latest ones, which is your interest in the situation of young people. But how would you describe the differences between the worlds conjured up in *The Boys from Feng kuei* (1982) and in *Millennium Mambo* (2002)? Obviously, there are spatial and temporal distances—the former is about youngsters from the offshore islands when Taiwan was still a predominantly small-town and rural society, while the latter depicts metropolitan life in the new century. But what are the existential contrasts in these two epochs and settings for young people themselves, in your eyes?*

Hou: Let me answer that by saying something about my new film *Coffee Time*, which was shot in Japan. In one sense, it is a purely Japanese story, which I made in homage to Yasujiro Ozu on the centenary of his birth. Ozu made films on family themes, for example the predicaments of a father in marrying off a daughter. In Tokyo today, these daughters have now entered into a new state of being, identical to that of many of their contemporaries in Taiwan. So I adapted phenomena in Taiwan with which I'm familiar. We have many single mothers, about 300,000 according to official statistics. Typically, such a young mother is about thirty. She becomes pregnant accidentally with a boyfriend. She decides to have the child, but does not tell her partner. She is not going to marry him either. She wants to bring the baby up all by herself. She thinks that love is too tiring, relations between men and women have become too exhausting. Besides, she has learnt from her own family experience that she could be more devoted to her child if she doesn't have to waste time solving conflicts with a husband. I borrowed this phenomenon from Taiwan and filmed it in Japan. In the movie, the girl's boyfriend is Taiwanese. I based him on the experience of a schoolmate of my own daughter. She went to university in the us, where many of her classmates came from families that ran small or middle-sized firms in Taiwan and then emigrated to Thailand, because production costs were lower there. So their children had their elementary and secondary education in Thailand. Then they went to university in the us, studying subjects related to their family business. For example, if the family made tyres or leather, the child would study chemistry; if the family made umbrellas, the child would study management. Anyway, they studied whatever their parents wanted them to. They have all graduated now, and they are all working in their father's family factory. Nowadays those factories have moved from Thailand to mainland China, or Hong Kong. My daughter had many such schoolmates.



This interested me very much. So I combined this background with Taiwan's single mother pattern in my film and moved the story to Japan. Perhaps in the future young people will not be so fixed in a given place as they used to be. They may have some experience of mainland China, of Hong Kong, or of other cities in Asia. Or they may have studied in the us or Europe. This is very common in Taiwan. Often their experience of other countries is far more than that of the island itself. Their time in Taiwan may be quite limited. Many of my daughter's schoolmates went abroad while in middle school, and the earlier they go abroad, the harder it is for them to come back to Taiwan, because they are not used to its ways. Those who go abroad after graduating from high school are more acclimatized to Taiwan; those who leave after university still more so. There are now also many young Taiwanese who go to universities in the mainland. For example, the son of one of my schoolmates who is also a film director, Hsu Hsiao-ming, went to Beijing after studying at the National Taiwan University for one year. He didn't like the experience and insisted on studying in Beijing. Nowadays, young people share information, as well as much the same experience and memories, everywhere. Regional differences have faded. They listen to the same music. For them, unlike our generation, everything is similar. Their world has changed. I always say, why can't the DPP leave the possibility of nation-building, or many other options, to our next generation? How do you know what they are capable of? You should just mind your own business and leave resources to them. Perhaps their way of handling things will be far simpler than you imagine.

*Taipei, 23 March 2004*