

Why Taiwan? Geostategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity.

By ALAN M. WACHMAN. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007. xviii, 254 pp. \$65.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

doi:10.1017/S0021911808001393

Why does China claim Taiwan? It is not so much because the island has “always been part of China,” as the Chinese Communist government’s propaganda often states. Alan M. Wachman rightly tells us that the general principles used by the government to justify Taiwan’s status as part of China are not any stronger than the ones applied to other once-peripheral territories that China does not claim anymore, such as Burma, Korea, or even Outer Mongolia. However, the author goes further and attempts to demonstrate that Taiwan’s distinctiveness derives mainly from its critical geopolitical location. Although the case made by Wachman is carefully documented and, in many respects, convincing, this remains only part of the picture. Taiwan’s geopolitical location, in this reviewer’s estimation, is not the major explanatory factor in the intricacy and sensitivity of its status.

As we know, Taiwan became part of the Manchu Qing empire in 1684, after Admiral Shi Lang convinced Emperor Kangxi to launch an expedition against the pro-Ming regime that Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong) had established on the island in 1661. In a chapter provocatively titled “The People’s Republic of Qing,” Wachman underscores the importance of strategic considerations in the Manchu court’s decision: Its objective was to prevent Taiwan from falling into foreign hands (the Dutch or the Japanese). Since then, Taiwan has been part of China’s “mental map” (p. 47). Both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have inherited and tried to perpetuate this “mental map” and to preserve, as much as possible, the Qing dynasty’s territorial boundaries.

However, as Wachman shows, things are more complicated. Until 1885, when it became a province, Taiwan was a border area, the status of which was closer to other regions of the empire brought into the realm by the Manchus, such as Tibet or Mongolia, than to that of “China proper,” the territory controlled by the preceding Ming dynasty. In 1895, Taiwan was taken over by Japan. Although some Chinese nationalists, such as Kang Youwei or Liang Qichao, deplored the loss of the island, both the KMT and the CCP did not attempt to claim this territory until the late 1930s. Although well known, this fact is much better documented by Wachman than in other studies. Likewise, Wachman reminds us that the United States played an important role in helping Chiang Kai-shek make his case at the Cairo Conference in 1943, when both the KMT and the CCP changed their minds and seriously contemplated Taiwan’s return to China.

Taiwan’s strategic importance in the eyes of China’s rulers did not abate after the Communists came to power in 1949. From before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 to today, Chinese leaders have constantly considered Taiwan a dangerous bridgehead for any power attempting to contain China or prevent it from controlling the “first island chain” and thereby expand its reach into the western Pacific Ocean. As Wachman shows, the debates among the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) experts illustrate this major concern; the similarities between the geostrategic objectives of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Qing regime are obvious.

While Wachman’s argument is valid, the importance of Taiwan’s geopolitical position remains debatable in view of other factors and realities that constrain China’s policies. To be sure, on the one hand, in today’s world, as was the case in the seventeenth century, the Beijing government feels insecure when there is an ideologically parallel and defiant regime that exists on part of its claimed territory. Ironically, Koxinga initiated the “Sinicization” of Taiwan, a process that intensified with the arrival of waves of migrants from southern Fujian in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In that respect, Wachman presents only one side of the reality: control of migration. In 1895, the Taiwanese “nationalists” (p. 188)—an anachronistic notion in my view—did not claim independence but asked for the protection of the Manchu court and supported its suzerainty. And in 1945, most Taiwanese welcomed their island’s return to China.

On the other hand, after Taiwan's return to China in 1945, the nature of the dispute about Taiwan's status changed dramatically; it is still, of course, strategic, but it also became mainly legal and diplomatic. Since 1949, two states—the PRC and the Republic of China on Taiwan—have not recognized each other, forcing members of the international community to take sides, most of them now siding, at least diplomatically, with the PRC. More recently, the Taiwan independence movement that grew out of the island's international marginalization and then democratization has further complicated matters, contributing to the increasing military tension in the Taiwan Strait, without being able to modify the international community's legal and diplomatic position. Although today, as Wachman shows, some PLA leaders insist on Taiwan's strategic advantages and dream of gaining control of Taiwan militarily, this will not happen, at least as long as the United States supports the status quo. And Beijing is aware of this reality, showing more inclination to accept the status quo rather than speeding up unification as time passes. In other words, the crux of the issue is about how to stabilize and characterize the status quo and, for the PLA, how to circumvent the Taiwan obstacle in projecting its power in the western Pacific. Even in the case of "unification," it remains to be seen whether the PLA would be able to move its troops to the island (the late Deng Xiaoping promised not to do it). A strategic neutralization of Taiwan might be good enough for Beijing, which is a more realistic scenario that the author should have explored.

In spite of these remarks, *Why Taiwan?*² is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the future of relations across the Taiwan Strait.

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