

HOW THE TIMES CHANGED: TSAI ING-WEN AND TAIWAN'S 8-YEAR TRANSFORMATION

時代如何轉了彎：蔡英文與 臺灣轉型八年

Over the course of Tsai Ing-wen's presidency, Taiwan underwent seismic changes that will have an impact far beyond her 8 years in office. Yet, these accomplishments are not the work of a single politician. This is the story of Tsai's core team and the epochal shifts they helped bring about, compiled from over thirty interviews with administration officials, political staffers, and leading figures in various fields.

The pandemic brought worldwide attention to Taiwan. It wasn't just that Taiwan enjoyed success keeping COVID-19 at bay, but that Taiwan managed it while still marking up points on the economic scorecard. As the rest of the world suffered under the myriad blows of the virus, Taiwan's outstanding performance attracted notice, and raised the question: how was this island nation thriving against the odds? Turning the spotlight on then-president Tsai Ing-wen and her inner circle, this book documents the remarkable success and transformation of Taiwan under the Tsai administration.

Holding office from 2016 to 2024, Tsai emerged victorious through two election cycles. A cool-headed rationalist, Tsai resisted the temptation to hoard political glory, instead attributed her successes to her policy team, a tendency which got her labeled an "atypical politician". Under this unique brand of leadership, she was unrelenting in pushing forward a broad range of significant reforms:



Category: Social Science

Publisher: Mirror Fiction

Date: 12/2023

Pages: 368

Length: 129,032 characters

(approx. 83,900 words in English)

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pension reform, energy restructuring, marriage equality, the Forward-looking Infrastructure Development Program, the domestic submarine program... Taiwanese society was visibly transformed in ways that will likely influence its future path for decades to come.

Targeting ten signature policies of the Tsai administration, the three authors of this book conducted over thirty interviews with political staffers, government officials, and influential figures of Taiwanese society to complete their research. Organized into ten chapters, the book coherently analyzes Tsai's policies from a variety of perspectives – national defense, diplomacy, the economy, etc. – giving readers valuable insight this critical period in Taiwanese politics, while also serving as a case study of effective leadership in divisive and challenging times. The foreword, afterword, and a valuable timeline of key events further aid in situating readers within Taiwan's unique political landscape.

In contrast to political retrospectives that focus on a single leader, *How the Times Changed* highlights the work of Tsai's entire policy team, giving credit to the important contributions of administration officials and political staffers. Though it addresses Taiwan's recent political history, the book adopts a distanced perspective, providing a complete record of a political era and demonstrating how the stage has been set for Taiwan's future.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

Stirrings of Love and Human Rights: The Story of Marriage Equality in Taiwan

One day in late 2012, Tsai Ing-wen was having a conversation in her car with her personal secretary, Lo Jung. Tsai had lost the presidential election early that year, and had resigned as Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairman, and so at this point in time she did not have any official position. Her campaign office had been disbanded, and the retinue that had surrounded her prior to that election – party officials, campaign staffers and grass roots volunteers – had been reduced in an instant from several hundred to a staff of only 5 or 6. This handful of staffers were now responsible for all the tasks for Tsai, arranging her schedule and dealing with the media. During this time, Lo Jung was one of this small group.

Many people expected Tsai to stand in the next presidential election in four years' time, but for now, the year following her electoral defeat, she could take something of a gap year. During this time, she travelled overseas on an itinerary arranged for her by Antonio Chiang, visiting Indonesia, India and Israel, as well as Silicon Valley in the US.

Not having any official position certainly came with its conveniences. Traveling around India by train, she got to meet local scholars, journalists and intellectuals; in Indonesia she met with Taiwanese businesspeople there; in Israel she inspected the creative industries and held meetings with national security personnel, and she was also able to go to the West Bank. In the US, she visited Silicon Valley tech startups and go to know Taiwanese businesses in the creative sector there. None of these visits were part of any official itinerary; they were more a series of personal trips. For example, in India, Antonio Chiang, who was accompanying her, said that their group of five stayed in a very ordinary hotel, that the streets outside were hardly pristine, and that they ate very ordinary food. This was the first time that Tsai had been to India, and she was curious about everything, and ended up falling in love with the country. She had some very fruitful discussions with local intellectuals, and even said that she could see herself living in India. Chiang observed her interactions with the baggage handlers and workers and concluded that she was very empathetic, and didn't see herself as above them." Watching her on the road, he discovered that there was a strength and resilience to her.

At the end of 2012, Tsai Ing-wen, still without an official position, was on the move around

Taiwan. First, she embarked on a tour of the island to thank those who had voted for her in the presidential election and visit local politicians around the country. She went to Taitung, Orchid Island and the Hengchun Peninsula, as well as the Takanua indigenous village in Kaohsiung's Namasia District, also visiting many social welfare organizations. She saw with her own eyes how the country was changing. At the end of that year, the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights launched a petition in support of diverse forms of marriage, signed by pop-singers A-mei, Jolin Tsai, Suming and Anpu, as well as Taiwanese writer Chen Xue. The support for same-sex marriage was strong, especially among the younger generation.

That day, Lo Jung mentioned the petition to Tsai Ing-wen in the car on the way to visiting a local politician. At the time there was also a conservative local DPP politician in the car, who jumped into the conversation, saying "That won't work! There is too much opposition to this idea in Taiwan." After this politician left the car, Lo continued to discuss the issue with Tsai, and after asking several questions, Tsai nodded and said, "OK, let's do it." Tsai signed the petition and made a post on Facebook, inviting everyone to get involved.

This, then, was an opinion that Tsai spontaneously endorsed while on her "gap year", when she held no public office and was without a job, expressing her support for same-sex marriage.

For these reasons, she was probably unaware of how much resistance her post would generate.

"Her greatest strength is the fact that she is different from everyone else."

Tsai Ing-wen is not your typical DPP politician.

Antonio Chiang has said, "Her greatest strength is the fact that she is different from everyone else." She is without political ambition and has no agenda. In the very beginning she did not even understand the history of the Dangwai ("outside the KMT") movement, or the DPP, and was often unclear as to who was who in party circles. Chiang, who had been involved from the 1960s and 1970s, had an insider perspective of the movement, and who had been there during the process of Taiwan's democratization, would from time to time give Tsai a few pointers.

However, this absence was actually an advantage to her. At the time (in 2008, when Frank Hsieh and Su Tseng-chang, running as president and vice president, were unsuccessful in their bid for election after the conclusion of Chen Shui-bian's second term), "everyone was ready to move on from the DPP's loud and constant appeals about democracy." Tsai Ing-wen was an entirely different political animal altogether. From his observations of Tsai, Chiang said, "Her strength was her rational approach, her willingness to discuss the issues with people, her fondness for asking questions instead of offering her own opinion. This made her very different from the other politicians, because all politicians love to hear the sound of their own voice. Tsai would ask questions because she would also be holding an internal debate with herself on these ideas. Also, she knew more about finance, negotiation, and international economics and trade than many of the DPP politicians of the time, she didn't have the bad habit of political scrapping that the DPP politicians had taken on."

It was precisely because Tsai Ing-wen's character were different from those of her DPP colleagues that many in 2008, when the party was at its lowest ebb, thought that it needed a new kind of leadership, and placed their hopes for its future in her. Tsai would later indicate, in a book, that Yao Jen-to had suggested that she stand for the party chairpersonship. In fact, it was not only Yao; many figures visited Tsai at her home to impress upon her their hopes that she would stand for the party leadership.

Tsai took the reins of a DPP in crisis and gradually led it out of its doldrums. That is not to say that she was universally accepted by the party; there were elements among its earliest members that did not get on so well with Tsai. Chiang's observation that Tsai's difference from others was her greatest strength was true, but this aspect of her character would subsequently lead her into choppy waters.

When she became the party chairperson, Tsai applied her characteristic approach of rational debate. In 2009 she began a debate on the party's 10-year policy platform. In 2011 the new platform was announced, followed by a succession of white papers elaborating its various aspects. During her "gap year" Tsai kept herself busy: in addition to her travels overseas and within Taiwan, she continued policy debate within her Thinking Taiwan Foundation. She gained a reputation among her staffers as something of a "policy wonk."

At times, between discussions on a range of issues, Tsai Ing-wen let the people around her in on her thoughts. Her staff often heard her use the phrase "second is best." According to Lo Jung, "she often said she thought that 'second is best.' During the process of reform, it is often the second-best option that is the one that actually gets implemented. She says that the best option is often met with more opposition, as people find it 'too idealistic' or 'unrealistic'... in the end, it is often the second-best option that can be coordinated and compromised upon, and that everyone is able to move forward with. That is not to say that we should not raise the optimal solution; it is just that we must bear in mind that in the end the one that we will proceed with is often the second-best choice."

The new 10-year policy platform included the phrase "respect for the human rights of people of different sexual orientations." In fact, Hsiao Bi-khim, then a legislator, had proposed legalization of same-sex marriage in 2006. Though Tsai was not elected president in the 2012 election, DPP legislators-at-large such as Hsiao, Yu Mei-nu, and Cheng Li-chiun became strong advocates of same-sex marriage during that legislative session, and civic groups were also energized on the issue, so there was support for legislating for marriage equality both within the legislature and among the public.

The louder these voices became, the stronger the opposition. With the proliferation of petitions in support of marriage equality, forces opposed to the idea were starting to gather. In September of 2013, the Alliance of Religious Groups for the Love of Families Taiwan was formed, which launched its own petition and organized a rally on Ketagalan Boulevard. This alliance was to become the most influential representative of the anti-same-sex marriage movement for the next few years.

With the same-sex marriage issue came all kinds of discriminatory and barbed rhetoric.

The writer Chu Hsin-yi recalls how one day, when she was working in the media, she saw her colleague Huang Li-chun, also a writer, arrive at the office so angry that he was physically shaking. Apparently, Huang had taken a cab over, and the driver had spent the entire journey talking about how he was opposed to same-sex marriage. Seeing Huang's obvious anger gave Chu a sense of relief. She says that during that period homosexuals would hear all kinds of accusations, from the farcical to the frightening, but because the prejudice was so blatant, "we also began to see our heterosexual friends around us unable to accept their homosexual friends being talked about in that way."

Yu Mei-nu first proposed relatively straightforward amendments to the Family Act of the Civil Code in 2012, and in the following year, Cheng Li-chiun championed a Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights version of the amendment. Unfortunately, neither of these were able to make it over the legislative threshold, and were ultimately unsuccessful.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

On Oct. 16, 2015, Tsai Ing-wen's presidential election campaign team launched a rainbow-colored EasyCard design, with the 18,000 print run selling out within 15 minutes.

On Oct. 31 of that same year, on the morning of the Taiwan LGBT Pride parade in Taipei, Tsai released a video in which she said that, "Everyone is equal before love. I am Tsai Ing-wen, and I support marriage equality and allowing each individual to have the freedom to love and to pursue happiness." She was the first presidential candidate to publicly announce support for same-sex marriage. The colors of the rainbow were projected on the outside of her campaign headquarters in LED lights, responding to the calls of those marching in the parade.

The projection of the colors of the rainbow and the messages of love and happiness brought an element of color rarely seen in ordinarily uninspiring presidential campaigns. However, behind the scenes, Tsai Ing-wen started to receive telephone calls expressing serious concerns from voices within the pan-green camp opposed to same-sex marriage. Church groups in particular began revealing their dissatisfaction. Tsai was being put under considerable pressure outside the public eye.

In January of the following year, Tsai won the presidential election by a large margin, and the DPP also gained an absolute majority in the legislature.

Lee Tuo-tzu, who had led the presidential campaign speech-writing team, recalls how a young man named Fan Kang-hao excitedly asked him now that Tsai Ing-wen has been elected, would same-sex marriage become a reality? Lee replied that he did not imagine anything would happen very quickly, that it might take 10 years. In response, Fan "looked at me as if I were just a stubborn old man." Lee's belief that the change might take 10 years was based on his understanding that the issue of same-sex marriage would require a consensus within the DPP, and that there was still a way to go before this could be achieved.

Yu Mei-nu began preparation on legislative amendments and visited LGBT groups to seek their views. The LGBT groups also put together the Marriage Equality Coalition Taiwan platform to allow them to control the political agenda. One of the organizers of this platform, Jennifer Lu, had a bit more political experience, having stood for a legislative seat representing the Social Democratic Party. She believed that it was inappropriate to place all of the hopes and stress on the shoulders of one or two legislators. “Right from the outset, we established a very clear objective, which was that we did not want this to become a partisan issue between the green and blue camps. If it did become a partisan issue, it would be impossible to bring over large sections of the electorate to the cause. The team therefore spent a lot of energy talking to legislators from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the New Power Party, establishing lines of communication with the parties and their legislative caucuses.”

Young political aides and advisors to DPP figures were also keen to promote same-sex marriage. Jason Liu, who at the time was Presidential Office deputy secretary-general, recalls, “It was maybe around October, 2016 (perhaps it was the day before the LGBT pride parade), during the regular weekly advisors’ lunchtime meeting, everyone’s attention was on an opinion survey on same-sex marriage. As I remember, the survey showed that support for same-sex marriage was at about 40%, higher than the 30% opposing it, with the remainder not expressing an opinion. This statistic made the young aides feel like there was a possibility that this could actually happen.”

Liu recalled that at the time, the aides’ interpretation of the data was at odds with how things would transpire: “At the time, the way the opinion poll was interpreted was that the younger a person was, the more supportive they were [of same-sex marriage], and so this indicated a future trend. However, what we had not considered was that this survey had been done when there had been little public debate about the issue. As things turned out, when the debate got started, we were caught without any real strategy or organization in place, and the undecideds mostly went over to the side of those opposed to the issue, so that the dynamic was reversed. Also, another thing that we failed to appreciate about the survey results was that, among those opposed to same-sex marriage, the number of people ‘strongly opposed’ was higher than those who were ‘somewhat opposed’; among those supporting the proposition, the number of those ‘strongly in favor’ was lower than those somewhat in favor. In other words, there was formidable opposition to the idea. This was reflected in the strength of the subsequent backlash from religious groups and in the exaggerated messaging that we would see.”

Jennifer Lu agreed with this analysis, that it was a case of hindsight being 20-20. Tsai Ing-wen had not got involved in the petition or publicly announced her support of same-sex marriage during the election campaign due to any lobbying on the part of LGBT groups, she had acted entirely of her own accord. Even though it was a good thing that they had won the support of the presidential candidate, Lu pointed out the downside to this: “They did not understand the voices opposed to same-sex marriage. They weren’t aware of the strength of this opposition, nor did they appreciate that if they were not sufficiently prepared, they would be beaten down.”

In fact, at this time, thoughts about how to handle same-sex marriage within the DPP could be divided into three basic schools: the Civil Code school, the special legislation school, and the anti-same-sex marriage school. The Civil Code school believed that LGBT couples should be accorded the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples, that creating dedicated legislation to address it would be tantamount to prejudice. Yu Mei-nu was one of the main advocates of amending the Civil Code. The DPP legislative caucus convener Ker Chien-ming held that, from a purely pragmatic perspective, devising special legislation was the only option that stood any real chance of getting through. However, there were many differing voices even among those who supported (or could accept) the special legislation option: some felt that homosexuals should be allowed equal rights and use the word “marriage” to describe their union; others preferred homosexuals to use the word “partnership” or “same-sex union” instead of “marriage.” There were also many within the DPP who were opposed to same-sex marriage at all, conservative voices not only from within the church but also from temples. Even though legislators of constituencies in southern Taiwan were not necessarily opposed, they were worried that supporting same-sex marriage would give their rivals an opening to attack them. The more conservative side of the DPP grass roots was especially evident in the same-sex marriage issue. The ruling party found itself unable to come to a decision on how to approach same-sex marriage, and it was in fact only now that it realized that it had neglected to open up a process of dialogue on the issue. Just as in Taiwanese society as a whole, there was a huge gap between how the younger generation viewed the issue and how the grass roots, more conservative figures saw it.

On the night before that year’s LGBT pride parade, a French national named Jacques Picoux, a long-term Taiwan resident, fell from his 10th floor apartment in what was later determined to be a suicide. Picoux had lived with his gay partner for 35 years, but as they were not married, after his partner passed away, Picoux was unable to claim rights to their shared property, placing him in the position of having to deal with the loss of his partner as well as difficult financial circumstances. Before his retirement, Picoux had been a university lecturer teaching French language and literature in National Taiwan University’s Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and had translated the subtitles for many Taiwanese movies, playing an important role in introducing Taiwanese movies to Europe. His passing was a reminder to the LGBT community in Taiwan of the impediment to their long-term life plans caused by the lack of legal recognition of marriage, and that same-sex marriage rights had to be made law.

The LGBT figures who had already been waging this legislative battle for four years now, ever since the beginning of the previous session, were beginning to look at Tsai’s inaction on the issue over the past seven months since her election, and voices started emerging online of “bounced checks” and broken campaign promises. Lo Jung had heard this being said many times. She is very open about the fact that, at the time, she herself thought that the DPP should have been more forceful in pushing same-sex marriage, although she didn’t think that Tsai had broken any promises, and often found herself defending Tsai in her own mind. Nonetheless, her frustration with the situation made her decide to leave the presidential team.

On Oct. 24, Yu Mei-nu proposed marriage equality draft amendments to the Civil Code, co-

signed by more than 30 legislators across party and factional lines. The New Power Party legislative caucus and KMT Legislator Jason Hsu separately proposed their own versions of the draft amendments. On Oct. 29, the day of the LGBT Pride Parade, 80,000 people took to the streets. Within the DPP, Presidential Office Deputy Secretary-General Yao Jen-to, convinced that the president should show support for the cause, strongly advised her to make an announcement to this effect. Tsai posted a photograph of a rainbow that Hsiao Bi-khim had taken in the hills in Hualien County, saying that although she had changed her status that year, having been elected president, this did not mean that her values had changed. That day, the Taiwanese online media outlet The Reporter wrote that “Many people believe that at this moment, Taiwan is the closest it has ever come to achieving marriage equality.”

Two weeks later, however, on Nov. 17, a crowd of 20,000 people mobilized by anti-same-sex marriage figures surrounded the Legislative Yuan while the Judiciary and Organic Laws and Statutes Committee was in session reviewing the marriage equality draft amendments. Standing at the speaker’s podium in the legislative committee, Yu Mei-nu was approached by KMT legislators demanding that the government first call 30 public hearings before it proceeded with the review. Neither party would back down and communication had stalled, and it wasn’t until later in the afternoon, with the intervention of LGBT groups, that an agreement was reached: the two parties would each arrange a public hearing and would commit to completing a review of the draft amendments within that legislative session and sending it out to the next stage. At this moment, however, protesters stormed into the Legislative Yuan and police rushed over to inform Yu Mei-nu that her safety would be compromised if she did not leave immediately. Yu was hurriedly escorted out of the room by police, but they encountered the protesters in the corridor. That day, the Ministry of Justice had announced that it had already begun devising a special law on same-sex partnerships, but Yu Mei-nu and the LGBT groups were opposed to this idea.

At the end of the year, pro- and anti-same-sex marriage camps organized mass protests on Ketagalan Boulevard. On Dec. 3, the Alliance for the Happiness of Future Generations held the “One million families stand up! The whole nation should have a say in marriage and family” event, with the organizers saying that 100,000 people had taken to the streets. A week later, on Dec. 10, a concert themed “Stop the loss of life, stand up for marriage equality” was held, with organizers of this event estimating crowds of 250,000 people in attendance. On Dec. 26, following the additional two public hearings, the Legislative Yuan’s Judiciary and Organic Laws and Statutes Committee passed the draft amendments to the Civil Code. Anti-same-sex marriage groups first surrounded the Legislative Yuan and later went to the area outside the Presidential Office, entering the square in front of the building and demanding to see the president.

Fissures in society had been exposed. The tensions were not only about the same-sex marriage issue – the government was also pursuing controversial pension reform. Tsai’s first term, from its very inception, had been eventful. Aides recall that Tsai’s attitude was, “Even as we push for same-sex marriage, we cannot allow the issue to tear society apart or to increase levels of enmity.” Church representatives frequently asked to see the president, but the president could not be seen meeting with only one side. Tsai told her aides to arrange a day on which she could

meet with both sides at the same time, so that she could directly deal with those for and against the issue.