

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SCOTT SIMON, *Tanners of Taiwan: Life Strategies and National Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2005, xviii + 172 p., index.

Tanners of Taiwan is an ethnography and social history of people working in the leather tanning industry in southern Taiwan. As an anthropologist, Simon was interested in identifying and exploring the social construction of identity, particularly that of ethno-national identity. This is a focus of increasing importance internationally as a result of the conflict between Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and the U.S.A. over the political status and identity of Taiwan.

Simon (145) provides a critique of the tendency of anthropologists to reduce identity formation to "culture," ignoring the importance of power dynamics and political economy in creating the categories of identity in the culture. Furthermore, Simon demonstrates that there is resistance to and conflict over these categories. Simon (7) asserts that "[t]he goal of the anthropologist, therefore, is to render visible the struggles and contests of power that lie beyond power and are so often masked by it." By developing a relationship with many Taiwanese families in the tanning industry, Simon (8) could "...explore how ordinary Taiwanese...create, reproduce, and enact identities in their everyday lives."

Simon spent five years teaching and conducting research in Taiwan. He speaks Mandarin, and is well versed on the history of Taiwan. Thus, the book is not only an ethnography, but provides enough historical background to explain the context of the study as well as to inform the average reader about the competing ideologies and identities in Taiwan historically and the dynamics behind them. This is necessary given the target readership, which Simon states is undergraduate university students, most of whom may know little, if anything, about Taiwan.

Taiwan is a small island, only 36,000 square miles. It is easy to travel from one end to the other in a day; however, its history is complex, having been colonized successively by various groups of Austronesian "indigenous" people, Dutch, various Chinese groups primarily from Fujian, Manchu, Japanese, and KMT-loyalist Chinese. Except for the last group of invaders, there has been a lot of intermarriage. Each group, however, has its own origin myth, ethno-cultural identity, and language, vestiges of which remain throughout the island's population.

Simon focuses primarily on the conflict between the so-called “Mainlanders” and the Holo-speaking Chinese who had arrived in Taiwan much earlier and refer to themselves as “Taiwanese.” The KMT-loyalists were those who had arrived in Taiwan after 1948 with Chiang Kai-shek and their descendents. They were primarily soldiers who had opposed the Communists, and they spoke Mandarin. The Holo-speaking Chinese are really a mixture of all the groups that had come before the Mainlanders, but they did not speak Mandarin. The separation between these two groups is still visible today, with little intermarriage. Many people in Taiwan still consider that “Taiwanese” and “Mainlanders” are two very different blood lines and those who do intermarry are often disowned by their families. The Holo-speaking Chinese, or “Taiwanese,” constitute the majority of the population, but until recently had no political power. Thus, through military dictatorship and terror, the Mainlanders were able to impose Mandarin as the official language and a Chinese cultural identity. The complexity of the imposition of Chinese identity and the equally complex resistance by the “Taiwanese” is untangled and explored by Simon’s use of personal experiences in Taiwan, remarks by people he interviewed, references to academic literature, and his own meta-analysis which makes fascinating reading.

The influence and importance of Japanese culture and language in Taiwan is a secondary focus of the book. Simon relates aspects of Japanese colonization as historical background to explain some of the current influences on Taiwanese identity and the resistance to Chinese identity by many Taiwanese. Having lived in Taiwan, I am aware of the importance of Japan to many Taiwanese today. Now that political power is in the hands of Taiwanese, Japan has become even more important as a source of support and protection against Chinese identity and perceived aggression. Simon did not develop this, probably because he completed his field work before the KMT lost the election for the first time to a Taiwanese nationalist, Chen Shui-bian. This, however, dates the book and is a major weakness.

Another aspect of Taiwanese history and identity which is particularly relevant today is that of its relationship with the U.S.A. While Simon acknowledges that some Taiwanese respondents looked to the U.S.A. as Taiwan’s protector from China, Scott did not discuss the influence of American culture on Taiwan since World War II, even though it is widespread and immense. In fact, many young Taiwanese know little about local customs and traditions and care even less. Rather, they want to assume an American pop culture identity. American culture, *albeit* in a vulgarized hybrid form, permeates Taiwan today. By ignoring or overlooking this phenomenon, Simon’s study is significantly weakened.

Nevertheless, Simon presents a sophisticated analysis of competing cultures and identities in Taiwan, using many academic theories familiar to Western academics about power and culture (such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx), nationalism and culture (such as Eric Hobsbawm, Homi Bhabha, Fredrik Barth, and Benedict Anderson), and

about identity (such as Charles Taylor and E.P. Thompson). This makes the book useful and interesting for academics interested in identity construction.

In addition, Simon draws on multiple empirical studies, ethnographies, and theoretical works about China and Taiwan by scholars specializing in those societies and less well-known to those outside East Asian studies. This also makes the book useful for academics unfamiliar with East Asia or Taiwan in particular as well as providing a lot of information that would otherwise be too overwhelming for the average undergraduate student or general reader. This information is relayed in an interesting and very easy to understand manner.

Besides providing a historical sketch of the development of the tanning industry in Taiwan, Simon provides a fascinating account of the dynamics between husband and wife operators, owners and workers, small and big business, and people's political allegiances. In doing so, Simon provides an analysis of class, gender, ethno-nationality and the importance of language and spiritual beliefs. Thus, *Tanners of Taiwan* goes beyond the usual ethnography to comprise a more holistic analysis using all of the social sciences. Simon has demonstrated his ability to be an anthropologist who is also a social scientist. The book sets an example of holistic social science and can be inspiring for undergraduate students.

Although Simon's analysis is complex and comprehensive, it is presented so clearly and simply that anyone interested in social science can understand it. *Tanners of Taiwan* is well written, interesting, and easy to understand, even for someone who knows nothing about Taiwan. Thus, it is useful not only for undergraduate university students, but for anyone in the public at large who wants to know more about Taiwan.

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