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Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella

A large, intricate mandala design on the right side of the page. It features a complex, symmetrical pattern with multiple layers of geometric and organic shapes, including circles, triangles, and scalloped edges. The design is rendered in a dark brown color against the lighter background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX Foreword

MICHEL GUGLIELMO TORRI, *Asia Maior in 2024: Under the sign of a declining democracy*

Articles

- 1 FLORA SAPIO, *China 2024: Preparing for future challenges through self-reliance*
27 STEFANO PELAGGI, *China's Foreign Policy 2024: Strategic assertiveness and diplomatic adaptation*
53 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2024: A year of political and social upheaval*
83 RAYMOND YAMAMOTO & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2024: Striving for security amidst political turmoil*
125 THAN KIÜ, *Hong Kong 2024: Adjusting to the National Security Law*
143 RIWANTO TIRTOSUDARMO & PETER B.R. CAREY, *Indonesia 2023-24: Jokowi's endgame and the politics of dynasty*
191 CHRISTINE CABASSET, *Timor-Leste 2024: In a changing geopolitical environment, reconciliation as a central pillar*
207 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI & MARSHELAYANTI MOHAMAD RAZALI, *Malaysia 2024: Trials and trajectory of Anwar Ibrahim's political leadership*
223 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2024: Continued economic growth, change in leadership, and «Bamboo Diplomacy»*
235 EDOARDO SIANI, *Thailand 2023-2024: A general election and its contested aftermath*
251 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2024: Whose tide has turned?*
267 SILVIA TIERI & RAIAN HOSSAIN, *Bangladesh 2023-2024: From democratic backsliding to the Monsoon Revolution, towards democratic transition*
291 JAMES MANOR, *India 2024: Authoritarianism checked, then reasserted*
315 IAN HALL, *India 2024: Challenges and contention in foreign policy*
335 CHULANEE ATTANAYAKE & RAJNI GAMAGE, *Sri Lanka 2024: Political, economic, and geopolitical transformations*
355 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2024: Political turmoil and economic instability*
377 SARA BERLOTO & NICOLÒ FASOLA, *Kyrgyzstan 2021-2024: Japarov's seizure of power amidst structural challenges*
399 CARLO FRAPPI, *Armenia 2024: Quo Vadis Yerevan? The difficult path out of the Russian trap*

Special articles

- 421 CLAUDIO CECCHI, *China and India: Cooperation and rivalry in the global landscape and within the BRICS*
441 DAVID SCOTT, *Maritime Asia: A «theatre of consequence»*
459 LORENZO KAMEL, *Gaza and the Demographic Question*

477 Reviews

509 Appendix

AN ISLAND IN BETWEEN: HISTORY AND GEOPOLITICS OF TAIWAN

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Stefano Pelaggi, *Lisola sospesa: Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo*, Rome: LUISS University Press, 2022, 231 pp. (ISBN: 9788861058453)

Stefano Pelaggi's book offers a thorough yet concise geopolitical and historical analysis of Taiwan's position in the contemporary international system, exploring both political and social dimensions. Pelaggi covers a wide historical spectrum, tracing Taiwan's indigenous origins and its socio-political transformations through a few key historical phases: the Japanese Occupation, the return of the Kuomintang, the party's retreat to the island after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the White Terror years, and Taiwan's democratization process, which has led it to become one of the most efficient and stable democracies in the world. Beyond this, the author addresses Taiwan's ongoing diplomatic, economic and political challenges. Its clarity and accessibility make the book suitable for a broader audience, extending beyond purely academic circles. Moreover, its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates geopolitical, historical, and political perspectives, provides a rich and multifaceted analysis of Taiwan's evolving role in the world.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. The author has adopted a chronological and thematic structure that spans from the 16th century to contemporary times in just 230 pages. The narrative begins with Taiwan's early encounters with European colonization (Dutch and Spanish) and concludes with an exploration of the most recent grassroots movements opposing rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, as promoted by the Kuomintang (KMT) leadership in the past decade. Each chapter focuses on a specific phase of Taiwan's history or a critical aspect of its cultural, social, or political environment, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the island's complex evolution. In the introduction and the first chapter, Pelaggi situates Taiwan within the current international system, analysing its geopolitical significance in the Taiwan Strait dispute, and exploring the island's role in US-PRC relations. This section provides a comprehensive background for understanding Taiwan's precarious position in global geopolitics, highlighting its strategic importance in the East Asian region. The second chapter delves into Taiwan's history prior to the Japanese occupation, with a focus on the island's indigenous heritage and its interactions with the early European colonial powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish. The chapter also explores the influence of the Chinese Qing Dynasty, which shaped Taiwan's early socio-political structures. This discus-

sion is crucial to understanding the heritages of Taiwan's shifting identity, which continues to influence its internal development and its responses to external affairs. The discussion then moves into the third chapter, that analyses the fifty years of Japanese rule (1895-1945), highlighting its transformative impact on Taiwan's infrastructure, economy, and society. This chapter focuses on how this period laid the background for Taiwan's earlier modernization, including developments in agriculture and infrastructures.

The return of the Kuomintang and its retreat to Taiwan following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War are examined across thematic chapters – from the fourth to the ninth – which explore the political and sociological trajectories undertaken by Taiwan's civil society during this transformative period, particularly after the establishment of the martial law. These in-depth thematical analyses are seamlessly integrated into the book's overarching historical narrative, adding interdisciplinary dimensions that deepen the reader's understanding. The political and historical legacy of Chiang Kai-shek is explored through the issue of his monumental political statues, alongside the White Terror era and the tensions between the authoritarian governance and civil society (chapter 4). Additionally, Taiwan's transformation into the industrial and entrepreneurial hub we recognize today is explored through the role of family-led small and medium enterprises in driving the island's growth during that period (chapter 6). Furthermore, the diplomatic role of Song Meiling – Chiang Kai-shek's wife – and the political legacy of his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, in shaping Taiwan's subsequent democratization and reforms are discussed in chapters 5 and 9, respectively, contributing to a more in-depth description.

The subsequent section, covering chapters 10 to 14, addresses the events of the last thirty years, characterized by Taiwan's gradual democratization and its evolving role within the global political landscape. These chapters provide a dual focus. On the one hand, they analyse Lee Teng-hui's presidencies and his pivotal role in steering Taiwan's democratisation process (chapters 9 to 12). On the other, they delve into economic and geopolitical issues, including Taiwan's critical role in the global semiconductor industry (chapter 10) and the dynamics of cross-Straits relations following the deaths of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo (chapters 12 to 14). As for the economic perspective, the author emphasizes the island's pivotal role in the global technology supply chain, particularly as a critical player in the US-PRC competition over technological dominance. Furthermore, this analysis is framed within a broader discourse on national identity and civil society, approaching them both from an historical and geopolitical perspective. He examines the role of Hakka and Hokkien indigenous minorities in shaping the identity of native Taiwanese people, particularly in the context of the predominance of Han people in public office following the Kuomintang's retreat in 1949. From a political and geopolitical standpoint, Pelaggi explores the contrast between the island's democratic stance

and the authoritarian governance of the Communist party in the mainland. Chapter 14 focuses on the most recent grassroots civil movements, analysing their implications within the context of the Taiwan Strait dispute. These events, such as the 2014 «Sunflower Movement», underscore the growing importance of Taiwan's evolving political and social identity. The author provides a detailed account of the «Sunflower Movement» and its reception by Taiwanese civil society, illustrating how ideological concerns, particularly among younger generations, play a critical role in shaping Taiwan's domestic and international policies. This analysis aims at highlighting how Taiwan's identity and values are increasingly becoming decisive factors in discussions about potential rapprochement between the two sides of the Strait.

Pelaggi's research methodology is synthetic, as his goal seems looking to analyze the major events that have shaped Taiwan's history. His approach integrates geopolitical perspectives with historical accuracy. While relying primarily on existing academic literature rather than archival research, Pelaggi successfully constructs a comprehensive and cohesive narrative. He offers a broad overview of the pivotal phases in Taiwan's history and its evolving role within the contemporary international system – an issue of critical importance in today's international dynamics.

The book stands out for its comprehensive scope and its ability to merge historical, geopolitical and cultural dimension of Taiwan into a single, concise narrative, despite being no longer than 230 pages. Indeed, one of the book's key strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, which enables the author to connect Taiwan's internal developments with its external relations in the context of cross-Strait relations with the People's Republic of China and, more broadly, with the United States and Europe. The book examines the evolution of Taiwan's civil society, offering a multidimensional perspective on the island's journey from the «White Terror» era to democratization. A noteworthy example is the thematic exploration of Taiwan's business sector, which was driven by civil society actors who were excluded from the bureaucracy during Chiang Kai-shek's presidency. Furthermore, the chapter dedicated to Taiwan's semiconductor industry is seamlessly integrated into the historical narrative, emphasizing its vital role in the contemporary economic and political international system. Finally, the thematic chapters that delve into political and cultural elements, such as the monumental political statues of Chiang Kai-shek (chapter 4), the diplomatic of Madame Chiang (chapter 5), and the days of the Yuan occupation during the 2014 Sunflower Movement (chapter 14) – to name just a few – skilfully intertwine historical events with the personal stories of key historical figures.

On the other hand, a few weak points can be detected. Firstly, the historical narrative ends with the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and his consequences both nationally and internationally but does not delve into the developments of Tsai Ing-wen's first and second administrations. The author only mentions about recent events in the introductory chapter, where

he had briefly summarized the island's latest history, focusing primarily on its international relations disregarding its internal dynamics. Secondly, the sources Pelaggi relies on are predominately from Italian and Anglo-American scholars. While these provide a valuable basis, incorporating Chinese-language sources would have significantly enriched the work, offering a more nuanced perspective on Taiwan's history and its complex identity. Finally, the author's informative approach broadens the book's appeal beyond the Italian academic sector; but the absence of original source research represents a missed opportunity. Taiwan's history, its geopolitical significance in the current international system, and the emergence of a new political and social identity – particularly across the younger generation – are critical areas that need deeper investigations. A more detailed exploration of these elements would provide a better understanding of Taiwan's role as a pivotal actor in contemporary global affairs, especially in the context of its complex relationships with key players such as the People's Republic of China, the United States and, by extension, the European Union.

Nevertheless, *L'isola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* is an appreciable contribution to the Italian field literature. While it does not rely on original archive research and instead draws on pre-existing works – primarily from Western scholars – the book's structure and the themes it explores make it a valuable starting point for engaging with Taiwan's history. *L'isola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* serves as a well-crafted foundation for further developing a debate on Taiwan's history, culture and politics.