

Accidents and Safety in Mainland China and Taiwan, 1949–1989: A Comparative Social History

Report of Research Findings

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My stay in Taiwan in 2019 was life changing. My family, including my two young sons, began what we hope will be a lifetime of engagement with and study of Taiwan. I learned about accidents and safety in Taiwan, and I found useful resources about accidents and safety in mainland China. More crucially, I learned to examine Taiwan on its own terms instead of approaching it through the lens of my previous studies of the People’s Republic of China. Although my research topic did not change, the way that I thought about it evolved considerably every day that I was in Taiwan. I met and will continue to achieve my three original objectives, but my findings forced me to significantly alter my comparative thinking. In the coming months and years, I plan to write up to five journal articles about accidents and safety in Taiwan—five articles that could add up to a standalone Taiwan-focused book. I also plan to continue traveling to Taiwan for research as often as possible. In this report I will summarize my main findings so far, describe what I learned from different archives, libraries, and experts, and discuss my plans for future steps.

Finding Number 1: Informal Handling and “Catastrophism”

Many accidents in Taiwan (traffic and train crashes, workplace incidents, and fires) were handled informally by victims and participants and did not involve the state. The accident reports that I found in the archives should therefore be considered extreme examples in which disputes

or disagreements compelled victims to seek government intervention. This pattern can be traced to Taiwan's pre-1945 colonial political culture and also to the Kuomintang (KMT)'s relatively hands-off approach to safety issues after 1945. When I visited 中華民國工作傷害受害人協會 (TAVOI) in July 2019, organizer Ho Kwang-wan aptly labeled this approach “災難主義” (catastrophism), meaning ignoring safety until a big disaster happens, and only then responding too late with heavily publicized preventative measures or punishments. Ho argues that that this approach continues to characterize Taiwanese officials' handling of accidents today, and that it has been equally problematic under KMT or Democratic People's Party (DPP) administrations.

Finding Number 2: Chiang Kai-shek's Interest in and Experience with Accidents

Chiang Kai-shek took a personal interest in major accidents, especially those that involved the military or garnered prominent press coverage. For example, at the National Archives Administration of the National Development Council in Xinzhuang, I found handwritten orders by Chiang instructing officials about how to handle an explosion and fire in a military warehouse in 1950—he told them to determine responsibility and to report on losses within three days. Chiang also personally intervened in the aftermath of a terrible bus crash on Yangmingshan in March 1965 in which twenty-nine people died and more than seventy were injured (many of them were elementary school students on a field trip). The first example was kept secret, while in the case of the bus crash, Chiang was forced to respond publicly because of prominent press coverage and pressure from the grieving parents of the victims. When Chiang himself was gravely injured in a car crash in 1969, he kept it secret and protected his driver from punishment, even though his injuries affected him for the rest of his life (and may have shortened his life).

Chiang's handling of accidents shows a preference for informal remedies plus—when circumstances demanded it—loud and prominent catastrophism.

Finding Number 3: Progress and Scientific Expertise in Traffic Safety Journals

During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Taiwanese traffic safety officials and experts attempted to build a scientific system based on global knowledge to decrease accidents, injuries, and deaths. A remarkable monthly journal, first titled 道路與安全 (1964–1970) and later renamed 交通安全 (1971–1990), depicts an orderly process of modernization and progress in traffic safety. Charts, graphs, statistics, and essays by Taiwanese and foreign experts about accidents, traffic safety, and infrastructure development compete for space with special reports about mass casualty crashes, essays by schoolchildren, pictures of Chiang Kai-shek, and being on the lookout for Communist spies. Read carefully and considered together with more complicated archival and journalistic evidence about catastrophism, conflict, and informal handling of accidents, 道路與安全 and 交通安全 are a rich repository of how KMT authorities in the martial law period strove to increase safety and decrease traffic deaths and injuries. Germany, Japan, and the United States were models and sources of expertise for Taiwanese safety experts. On the one hand, the journals chart an effort to make accident prevention a mundane, daily, scientific task. On the other hand, the journal's reports about spies and spectacular accidents suggest that safety work was never successfully contained in routine bureaucratic structures or professionally produced newsletters.

Finding Number 4: Purported Sabotage Behind Enemy Lines

Kuomintang intelligence agencies took credit for actively causing accidents in mainland China, in attempts to subvert Communist control. But did KMT agents actually succeed in sabotaging

mainland infrastructure, and what impact did this project actually have? Reports about fires and explosions in mainland China show that KMT spies were keeping track of incidents in China, but do not prove that they actively caused them. According to internally circulated booklets authored by the KMT Central Committee's Number 2 Section held at the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Library at National Chengchi University Library, the KMT recruited agents who fled mainland China to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, intelligence agents purportedly trained these anti-Communists in sabotage techniques, then sent them back to China to set granaries on fire or destroy bridges. Other booklets about 敵後工作 (work behind enemy lines), including one authored by KMT intelligence chief Ye Xiangzhi, argue that sabotage aimed to demoralize local Communist officials and hoped to spark popular uprisings against the Communists. But many of the booklets are in fact biographies of "martyrs who died for the cause" (敵後黨務工作同志殉難事略), meaning that before or shortly after engaging in sabotage, the agents were captured and executed by mainland public security officers. In other words, we do not know whether KMT intelligence officials in Taiwan were claiming credit retroactively for local resistance that they had nothing to do with, but we do know that they were keeping track of explosions and fires in mainland China.

Finding Number 5: Civil Society and Activism after Martial Law

The lifting of martial law and democratization allowed for increased activism among workers and their family members who suffered injuries in workplace accidents. TAVOI has become an interest group that tries to pressure government authorities to enact legislation that improves worker safety. TAVOI's activism in the 1980s and 1990s, bolstered by media coverage as well as by books profiling accident victims, has made it an important part of Taiwan's civil

society, and has also provided a community that comes together to offer comfort and support to fellow victims. Like many non-governmental organizations worldwide, TAVOI organizers and leaders expressed frustration at the routinization of their work and the challenges of dealing with a rotating cast of distracted government officials every time that the KMT and DPP administrations change. When I met with TAVOI staff at their offices in Taipei, they were so frustrated that they mused about whether it might be better to have a powerful leader like Xi Jinping who could order companies to immediately pay adequate compensation to injured workers. I told them that Xi Jinping is no panacea and that accident victims who fight for their rights in China are suppressed and surveilled as political enemies, adding insult to injury.

Broader Implications

My first week in Taiwan, recovering from jet lag, I walked around Yucheng Park and the neighborhood I was temporarily staying in, spending days at the Archives at the Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica. My head was spinning. I had spent years in China learning Chinese and researching PRC history, but every step I took, every person I spoke to, and every document I read blew my mind. None of my previous research or preparation provided useful reference points for understanding Taiwan's history, society, and culture. I could speak Chinese and I could read the documents, but I felt like a newborn baby. This was an exceedingly useful and humbling experience—and in fact it was extremely invigorating to have this type of “study abroad” culture shock as a middle-aged mid-career scholar. With every passing day, I realized that I had to push my previous research out of my head and had to stop thinking about PRC history as a useful foundation. I had to accept that I was studying an entirely new field—Taiwan History.

This realization means that I had to rethink the comparative aspect of my project. When I sat down for my first meeting with my host, Chung Yen-lin of NCCU, he said, “So, Jeremy, your project title says ‘Accidents in Mainland China and Taiwan.’ Are you implying that Taiwan is a part of China or do you mean to say that it is separate from China?” Professor Chung was correct to push me on this question. In my original project proposal, I thought that it was worth asking how much of handling accidents during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s could be attributed to Chinese culture, Leninist one-party authoritarian rule, and whether different patterns in accidents and safety had to do with socialism in the PRC versus state-guided development in Taiwan. These are still valid questions, but it was naïve of me to propose a one-to-one comparison between two states. And I totally neglected that Taiwan’s own history and identity predated the arrival of the KMT in 1945 and has continued to deeply influence events ever since.

While I was in Taipei last summer, I spent my days at an archive or library, then added Taiwan Studies readings and podcasts to my evening to-do list. Since returning to Canada from Taiwan in September 2019, I have continued to build my Taiwan Studies knowledge. This has been the best way to make sense of the accident cases and safety regulations I was finding in the archives and at the National Central Library. As I write up my findings, I need to figure out how to handle the question that Professor Chung asked me. The most straightforward way to be true to my newfound commitment to treat Taiwan on its own terms and not constantly in reference to the behemoth that is threatening it would be to write five separate journal articles, one dedicated to each of my findings above. But in those articles I would need to deal with the mainland-Taiwan battle described in Finding Number 4, and to address the comment about Xi Jinping that my contacts at TAVOI made to me. In other words, China is a huge factor in Taiwanese history and cannot be ignored. Taiwan and China are not directly comparable, but neither can be

considered in isolation from the other. Julia Strauss's new book offers one potential path forward, but her regional approach, comparing Jiangsu with Taiwan, is not one I can replicate.¹ I will continue to think through this issue. To show how I end up attempting to resolve it, I will share my future publications with you after they come out.

Research Repositories, Learning from Experts, and Future Steps

My three-month stay in Taiwan was too short. I have much more to learn and would benefit from doubling or tripling the amount of time I spent at archives and libraries, as well as from adding more repositories and interviews to my study. I spent several weeks at the Archives at the Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica and several weeks at the National Archives Administration of the National Development Council. The Taiwan History archives include reports from the Taiwan Provincial Government and revealed that local legislators (議員) played a crucial role in mediating complaints related to accidents and in helping accident victims seek compensation and justice. I have found no comparable phenomenon in my study of the social history of accidents in the PRC. While the Taiwan archives at Academia Sinica are digitized, many can only be viewed and must be slowly transcribed on site, meaning that I only scratched the surface of the holdings there and would benefit from a return visit.

The National Archives Administration of the National Development Council in Xinzhuang was a treasure trove of material for my project. From looking at Chiang Kai-shek's actual handwriting to detailed case reports about workers getting electrocuted, I requested and received hundreds of images of archival files—a long process that required archive staff to read

¹ Julia C. Strauss, *State Formation in China and Taiwan: Bureaucracy, Campaign, and Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

through every document to redact private information, and that ended with me frantically stopping by the archive to pick up a disc of digitized files on my way to Taoyuan to leave Taiwan, just in time. If I have the opportunity to return to Xinzhuang, I could do up to three additional two-week research stints (each followed by two months of waiting for digitized documents). I would want to look at files I noticed in the catalogue related to intelligence work behind enemy lines in mainland China, and would also focus on disputes related to accidents—the archive holds many files related to disputes but I did not have time to request or read all of them.

My research days at the National Central Library and at NCCU were just as valuable as my time in the archives. In addition to digitizing thousands of pages of traffic safety journals, I found statistical reports, safety manuals, and victim-centered accounts in the libraries. I also found KMT intelligence manuals about work behind enemy lines in special collections at NCCU (at the Institute of International Relations library as well as the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Library). At the National Central Library, I began to use the incredibly valuable Taiwan News Smart Web database. I only had time to do targeted searches, looking for specific reports about such accidents as the Yangmingshan bus crash that so concerned Chiang Kai-shek. I need another month or two of work to systematically search the newspaper database for all reports about crashes, fires, and other accidents. This will give me a fuller picture of how news coverage of accidents and safety changed over time, and may also reveal the changing political limits of what papers were allowed to print about accidents.

If I have the chance to return to Taiwan for research, I will also want to expand my conversations with experts. In summer 2019 I learned a lot from meeting with Chung Yan-lin at NCCU, and with Wu Chi-na, Chen Yung-fa, and Yu Miin-ling of Academia Sinica. Meeting

with organizers and leaders at TAVOI was illuminating in a totally different but very rewarding way. To expand on my project, I would like to not only deepen these existing contacts, but want to make new connections with experts, including with other NGOs and with traffic safety professors and practitioners at the Central Police University, as well as with station-level police officers and safety investigators.

This report of research findings is short, but writing five journal articles based on the five research findings enumerated above will yield a much longer and more detailed result. Writing these articles is on my to-do list and I will send them to the Taiwan Fellowship staff as soon as I finish them. I can get started on the articles based on what I found in 2019, and my work on accidents and safety will be even better if I have the chance to make future research trips to Taiwan. Five journal articles almost add up to a book. The more I think about it, the more I realize that a standalone Taiwan-focused book makes more sense than adding Taiwan as a comparative angle to my book in the works on accidents in China after 1949. History books can take a long time to write—up to a decade from conception to publication in the case of my *City Versus Countryside* and *June Fourth*. I apologize for what will seem like a long delay in delivering published results, but I promise that it will be worth the wait. I am grateful for the MOFA Taiwan Fellowship and for support from the staff at CCS, without which I would not have been able to embark on such a new and rewarding field of study.