

Report on Hugo Tierny's research activities in Taiwan as a 2022 MOFA Fellow: China's access-denial strategies: the cases of Taiwan and Central Asia from the Qing dynasty to the present day.

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A report related to my research tasks in Taiwan, as a 2022 MOFA research fellow.

Introduction

The year 2020 was tumultuous. Tensions in the Taiwan strait rose as a result of renewed sino-American competition and the growing political opposition between Taipei and Beijing. Dozens of Indian and Chinese soldiers lost their lives in bloody fistfights on the frigid Tibetan border zone, while at the same time Beijing's repression in Xinjiang was making headlines worldwide. For its part, Europe, which was harshly hit by the coronavirus, designated China as a systemic rival. The Americans elected Joe Biden as President, and he was just as ready as his predecessor Donald Trump to confront China on all grounds.

After more than a year of mostly reading from France and observing events from afar, it was time to leave for my fieldwork. China's borders were closed to foreigners and there was little hope of an overture. I thus chose Taiwan and arrived there in 2021 as a recipient of a government fellowship. It was not my first time on the island, as I already spent a few years in Taiwan from 2016 to 2019, pursuing a Master's degree at the National Chengchi University (NCCU) and learning Chinese at the Normal University (NTNU).

During these first years in Taiwan, there was often a question lingering in my head: Why is Taiwan so strategically important to China? Answers and concepts for answering this question are numerous: unfinished civil war, regime legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), etc. But the factors that attracted my attention the most were military and geographic. The fascinating essay of Alan Wachman *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity* was an eye-opener. The question for me, then, is perhaps less

about whether China is politically and culturally whole with or without Taiwan, but rather about the place the island has long occupied in China's military geography and history. I thought the subject deserved to be developed further.

In this article, based on my field trip to Taiwan and the first results of my research, I will briefly discuss these issues. In the first part, I will develop the main argument of my dissertation, which I will place in its historical and intellectual contexts. In the second part, I will discuss my sources as well as the content of my fieldwork in greater detail.



My research

My dissertation compares the place of Taiwan and Central Asia in China's geostrategy and military history. Drawing on international relations theory, geopolitics, and history, I argue that a powerful connection exists between east and west, ocean and continent in China's geostrategy since the Qing dynasty. Such a persistent parallel can be highlighted by what I term "access-denial" strategies, or China's long-standing practice of seeking security through space and extending its strategic depth by expelling its adversaries from its peripheries. To dominate both islands and deserts indeed constituted a persistent priority shaped by China's similar geographic framework since the conquests of the Qing dynasty and its enduring concern that such spaces could be used against it by hostile powers. However, its capacity to do so depended on a constant balance of power, if not brutal confrontation with its rivals, resulting in cycles of Chinese territorial expansion and contraction. Thus, while scholars often make a distinction between the strategic objectives pursued by the Qing and the People's Republic of China (PRC) towards Taiwan in the east and Central Asia in the west, I demonstrate instead their similarity and their continuity. Both the timeframe and the geographical framework of my study are large, but my goal is precisely to move from the particular to the general and to place Beijing's present continental and maritime moves in their *longue durée* military context. This way, my work will expose the profound geostrategic grounds and connections between Beijing's current repression in Xinjiang, power projection in Central Asia, and armed threats toward Taiwan.

Accordingly, my research question is: From the Qing dynasty to the present times, how has China attempted to assert control of Taiwan and Central Asia to secure its maritime and continental gateways and guard against foreign threats?

Conceptual Basis and Selection of Case Studies

Controlling its maritime and continental peripheries always made sound geopolitical sense for China because it is concerned with the security threats that would arise if it let its rivals occupy such territories. Conversely, its leaders believed that denying its adversaries access to these spaces and occupying them, would provide the necessary strategic depth for China's defense. I use the term "access-denial" to name this persistent posture towards Taiwan and Xinjiang.

The recent notion of A2/AD (for anti-access/area denial)¹, by mainly emphasizing the contemporary PLA's tactics in the China seas, offers few new insights. However, the idea of "access-denial" is geo-historically fascinating and can be further revisited, because it seems to correspond to the enduring perceptions and means China has deployed to expel its adversaries from such "lands of passages" (borrowing Owen Lattimore's formulation) as islands and deserts, Taiwan and Xinjiang, and to retain exclusive access to them.

In the broadest terms, I define this dynamic of access-denial as China's *longue durée* quest for strategic depth over its maritime and continental peripheries. In the Taiwan Strait and Central Asia, I find this phenomenon is the direct product of a historical power struggle between different Chinese political powers seeking security through space and their foreign rivals. Access-denial thus opens up a dialectic of "exclusive access for China" against "exclusion of its adversary" that aptly characterizes the Chinese long quest for control of its continental and maritime frontiers in general, Taiwan and Xinjiang in particular.

While never formulated in this way, "access-denial" likely already applied to Taiwan when the Qing Admiral Shi Lang persuaded the Kangxi Emperor to occupy the island after having defeated the Zheng family in 1683, to monitor China's maritime gateways and control this potential staging ground for China's rivals. In the west, "access-denial" was also certainly at play in Zuo Zongtang's 1874 argument to recover Xinjiang from the forces of the Muslim Kokandian leader Yakub Beg. According to Zuo, controlling Xinjiang was key for neutralizing western China's access routes and frustrating foreign designs there. It should also be noted that the establishment of the provinces of Taiwan and Xinjiang happened quasi-simultaneously and stemmed from similar geostrategic rationales, as apparent in the works of Wei Yuan.²

But towards the end of the Qing dynasty, China nonetheless lost control of Taiwan to Japan, and Xinjiang went under Russian influence. Both territories were then used as strategic springboards against China. For example, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese war in 1903, then Beiyang Army commander Yuan Shi-kai worried that China was vulnerable to both maritime and continental attacks by Russia from Inner Asia and by Japan from the southeast. Later, Stalin supported independence-minded forces in Xinjiang, whereas Tokyo used Taiwan as a base for

¹ *Joint Operational Access Concept*, US Department of Defense, 2012, page 6.

² Cornet, Christine, « Wei Yuan et la conception chinoise du monde maritime », *Institut de stratégie comparée*, 2005.

blockading China. These historical lessons, which are now very carefully studied by Chinese strategists, show the importance for China to control both its maritime and continental gateways.

It is because of these parallels between east and west, ocean and continent, in the Chinese geostrategy since the Qing dynasty, that I have chosen Taiwan and Central Asia as my case studies. Both located on China's doorstep, they were among the first lands affected by their large neighbor's territorial expansion and contraction cycles. When powerful, China has extended over these spaces. But when weak, it has withdrawn, leaving them under the control or direct influence of other major foreign powers (notably the United States, Japan, and Russia). This cyclical, back-and-forth movement, which is also, in the long run, that of China's own frontiers, is a direct product of an evolving balance of force between the Chinese and their rivals.

Now, powerful again, China has embarked once more on a pro-active drive for access and dominance towards these two spaces. If history is any guide, it is no surprise that China seeks to restore its control over what it sees as strategic buffer zones and expel its rivals from them, thereby maximizing its energy security and eliminating what it perceives as potential threats to its territorial integrity. "Access-denial", as understood in this geo-historical manner, thus fully continues to underpin Beijing's irredentist claim on Taiwan and the use of the island as a strategic launchpad to realize its maritime ambitions.³ In the west, this priority also drives Beijing's crackdown on ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, and the use of the province as a springboard for the projection of its political-economic influence towards Central Asia.⁴

In hindsight, with China still being surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors (United States, Japan, India...), this "pan-peripheral strategy", (borrowing Wang Jisi's formulation) going east and west simultaneously, is also designed to offer China more room to maneuver in times of both peace and war.⁵ For example, an objective of China's extension of new energy supply lines to Central Asia is to neutralize its dependence on sea-borne energy imports which could be cut off in the event of a cross-strait conflict. In turn, geostrategy, as well as energy security, partially explain Beijing's harsh repression of the slightest autonomist revendication in Xinjiang. Thus, the role of deserts and islands within the Chinese geostrategic framework is

³ Andrew J. Nathan, « China's goals in the Taiwan Strait », *The China Journal*, No. 36, July 1996, pp. 87-93.

⁴ Wang Jisi, "Advance Westward, China's Geo-Strategic Rebalance", *Huanqiu Shibao*, 2012.

⁵ Qi Huaigao, Shi Yuanhua, *Zhongguo De Zhoubian Anquan Tiaozhan Yu Dazhoubian Waijiao Zhanlue* [China's Peripheral Security Challenges and its Pan-Peripheral Diplomatic Strategy], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] No. 6, 2013, pp: 25-46.

comparable, and what has happened in one space has long furnished relevant lessons for the other.

As such, Beijing's thirst for defensive depth over its western and eastern gateways, and the resulting frictions arising with neighboring rivals, all express a continuity forged in a quasi-intangible geographic framework since the Qing dynasty. As Chiang Kai-shek stated in *China's Destiny* (1942): “Taiwan (...) and Sinkiang represent each a fortress essential for the nation's defense and security”.⁶ In the end, although the exact means China used towards Taiwan and Central Asia may have differed, a similar dynamic of ‘access’ and ‘denial’ seems to be at play, in both a cross-regional and cross-temporal fashion. It highlights various connections between seas and deserts, Taiwan and Central Asia, in China’s geostrategy. My goal is to explore them.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The need to explore such interconnections between China’s eastern and western strategies was readily acknowledged in 1978 by the Harvard sinologist Joseph Fletcher.⁷ However, to my knowledge, no scholar, as yet, has tried to study them comparatively. While attempting to bridge this gap makes my work challenging, given the breadth of the time frame, its novelty and the abundance of sources make it achievable; and, although China’s geostrategy is a trending topic in both Taiwan and the United States, there are very few French scholars focusing on this issue.

Both the time frame and the geographical framework of my study are large. They must be, since otherwise my central argument would lose its analytical and explanatory value. My objective is precisely to move from the particular to the general and to place Beijing’s current continental and maritime moves in their *longue durée*⁸ military context. Indeed, my dissertation is about highlighting a quasi-intangible posture: it is important for China to control both islands and deserts, lest they be taken by foes and become threats to its national security.

Demonstrating this continuity requires me to go beyond the scope of the numerous studies already published about the strategic importance at any given time of either Taiwan or Central Asia to China, and to build a bridge between its different political regimes’ strategies. This is

⁶ Chiang Kai-shek, *China's Destiny & Chinese Economic Theory*, Roy Publishers, New York, 1947, page 36.

⁷ Joseph Fletcher, “The heyday of the Ch'ing order in Mongolia, Sinkiang”, *The Cambridge History of China* Vol 10, Cambridge University Press, pp: 351-408.

⁸ See footnote n°1.

necessary to expose the profound geostrategic grounds and the various connections between both Beijing's current repression in Xinjiang and increasing threats toward Taiwan.

One might ask--why stop at the Qing and not go even further? Because it is only at this time that maritime defense has become an important strategic priority, and because the PRC roughly inherited the geographical setting of the Qing Empire. Thus, my central argument cannot apply to the previous Chinese dynasties, which faced vastly different geostrategic environments.

I rely on qualitative methods, and my theoretical framework integrates history with geopolitics and international relations (IR). As stressed by the realist paradigm in IR theory, material factors and power politics guide my analysis of China's military strategy towards Central Asia and Taiwan. However, as suggested by constructivists, I also take into account the impact of such intangible factors as perceptions and historical memory on China's strategic behavior. Such a constructivist input can be of great help in shedding light on various Chinese policies that cannot be explained solely by relying on realist reasoning, such as why the Qing decided in 1874 to prioritize the recovery of Xinjiang over navy modernization. There, old habits have weighted in favor of supporting continental defense over maritime security. This decision, twenty years later, resulted in the "loss" of Taiwan to Japan.

By combining tangible and intangible factors in this manner, my methodological approach is also highly influenced by the French geopolitical school. As defined by Yves Lacoste, geopolitics designates "*all of the power and influence struggles over territories, large and small, which involve actors with contradictory representations*".⁹ Accordingly, I find that realism remains most relevant when complemented by a discussion of such intangible factors as perceptions, or "representations". Indeed, one cannot understand China's goals towards Taiwan and Central Asia without due reference to its memory of past foreign encroachment and invasions. Finally, the study of China's ventures towards the Rimland and the Heartland allows me to revisit the most classic works of geopoliticians from Mackinder and Mahan to Spykman.

As a final note, and drawing on the existing literature, my study of China's strategic ventures towards Taiwan and Central Asia will provide another solid case for challenging Beijing's claim that Chinese foreign policy takes root in pacifism and defensiveness, and, to the contrary, emphasize its enduring realist nature.¹⁰ It is evident, judging from the Chinese strategic writings

⁹ Yves Lacoste, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*, Maspero, Paris, 1976.

¹⁰ Victoria Hui, Confucian pacifism or Confucian confusion?, in GofasI, Hamati-Ataya & N. Onuf, *The sage handbook of the history, philosophy and sociology of international relations*, Sage Publications LTD, London, 2018, pp. 148-161.

regarding Taiwan and Central Asia, that China's pacifist discourse has long obscured a foreign policy that is often bellicose, always sensitive to the international balance of power, and consistently aimed at maximizing China's power and serving its strategic ambitions.

Thesis structure

In my first historical, *longue durée* section, I explore¹¹ the almost simultaneous Qing conquest and colonization of Xinjiang and Taiwan, in the context of a powerful China-based political power wishing to extend over then-foreign lands and reinforce both its continental and maritime frontiers against foreign threats. I then discuss the lessons learned by Chinese strategists from the loss of Taiwan and foreign predations on Xinjiang at the turn of the 20th century, to the subsequent use of both ocean and deserts as forward bases or launchpads against a militarily weak China by its adversaries. Highlighting these geo-historical precedents allows me to demonstrate the continuity of both Taiwan and Xinjiang's geostrategic importance to China's most illustrious leaders, as an expression of strategic opportunities or liabilities, depending on who controls them--China or an adversary. Toward this end, I have already completed the first two chapters devoted to the Qing conquest and strategic interests in Xinjiang and Taiwan.

As I move toward more contemporary issues, and specifically Taiwan, I first explore in greater detail what the Chinese hope to gain strategically by taking it, and conversely, what they must not lose. I then explore the state of the current balance of force in the Taiwan Strait and discuss the implications of the ongoing military power shift between China and Taiwan, by contrasting the PLA's rapid modernization efforts with the impact of the evolving American factor, combined with the challenges faced by Taipei in its efforts to strengthen its now relatively weaker armed forces. All relevant data (interviews, primary and secondary sources – see the sections below) were collected in Taipei in 2022, as I was a visiting scholar at both TCSS (NCCU) and CEFC (Academia Sinica).

Regarding Central Asia, I first clarify Beijing's crucial geostrategic intents and energy interests standing behind its harsh repression in Xinjiang. Then, looking further west, I observe China's quiet displacement of Russia from its former Central Asian *pré-carré*¹² in the economic and security field, a long process further accelerated since the invasion of Ukraine. This account of

¹¹ For the sources, see the sections below.

¹² *Pré-carré* is a French geostrategic term used by researchers in geopolitics. It can be translated by “stronghold” in English.

Chinese inroads in Central Asia will be useful to assess the share of tangible Sino-Russian alignment and competition. Finally, I analyze the dilemma presented to Central Asians, torn between their desire for an equidistant relationship with the West, Russia, China, and their increased political and economic links with the latter, coupled with their growing estrangement from Moscow. I will be hosted at a French MOFA research center in Bishkek (IFEAC, Kirghizstan) during the first half of 2023 to collect more data and primary sources on this matter.



My Field Trip to Taiwan, and Notes on Sources

Academic life was at a standstill during 2020, which gave me time to refamiliarize myself with Chinese military history. Libraries were closed but many resources could be found online, especially the many high-quality security studies about China that are often not available in France. This helped me to sort out what fits into my research and what does not. It was like opening a map of China and trying to tie historical facts with topography, distances, climates...

My Research Environment in Taiwan

I traveled to Taipei in 2021, where I first obtained a research grant from the CEFC (Academia Sinica) and then another from the MOFA. I stayed in Taiwan for more than one year and a half, where I conducted many interviews and gathered substantial documentation.

The CEFC was once mostly directed by French geopoliticians, such as Jean Pierre Cabestan and Stéphane Corcuff, who, among other things, gathered many fascinating documents about cross-strait geopolitics. Recently, the CEFC has been headed by sociologists and anthropologists, whose work is perhaps less related to mine, but our discussions also opened up my curiosity for other subjects. I also had the good fortune to have an office where I could read. In Nangang, I was also able to meet with a high-profile professor who wrote extensively about China's economic and political influence in Taiwan. We talked about the impact of the 'China factor' on Taiwanese local politics, and the links between Taiwan's small but influential actors such as temples or farmers' associations and organizations associated with the CCP's united front work (UFW). This was useful to understand the non-military means Beijing uses to influence Taiwan's society. I also met with researchers from other institutions, who gave me valuable advice about the political science and geo-historic side of my study. I was also fortunate to be able to meet with several researchers from a Ministry of National Defense (MND)-funded think tank, with whom I could discuss other aspects of my work.¹³

I transferred to the second center a few months later and met with its director. I was introduced to him by a former M.A. thesis director, with whom I have kept close contact. We continued to meet regularly and he always shared with me his profound knowledge of international relations theory and cross-strait politics. I valued these discussions tremendously because they allowed

¹³ For the INDSR: <https://indsr.org.tw/en/index>.

me to see things in a different light. I had fascinating discussions with the director, who, after work, was always keen on inviting foreign scholars for tea on the hills surrounding Taipei. His views and mine sometimes differed, but I had a lot to learn from him. Our exchanges called my attention to the full range of opinions about Taiwan's politics and the arguments which support them. My time there, which coincided with the onset of the war between Russia and Ukraine in late February as well as the PLA drills of August, also reminded me that given the state of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding all geopolitical issues, no precise science is available for predicting what will happen next. Factors are too numerous to be calculated mathematically, and scholars are inevitably surprised by unexpected events. But, usually, the more one remains curious and cool-headed when studying, and does not let preferences or pre-established beliefs shape the outcome of his/her reasoning, the better one's analysis.

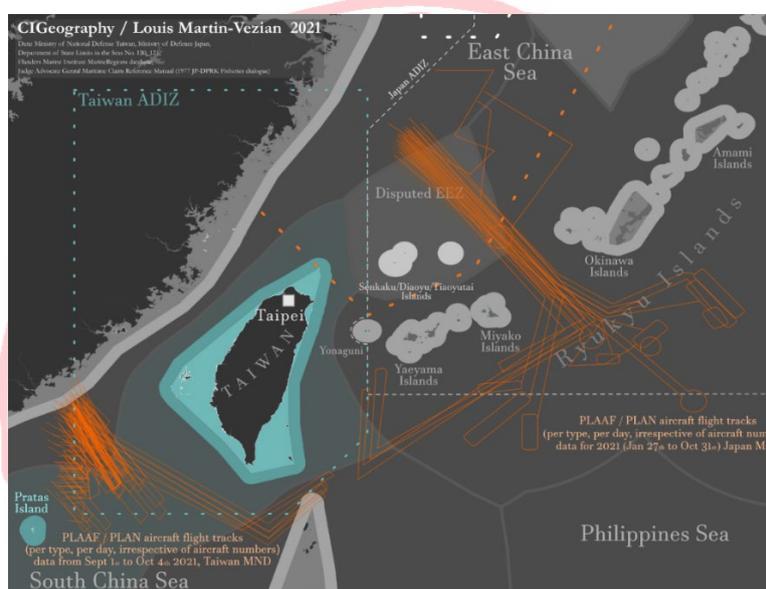
Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent shockwaves throughout Taiwan. War (re-)invited itself into daily discussions and the Taiwanese felt a lot of sympathy for the Ukrainians. There were many donations and marches in Taipei, to protest against the war. Putin reminded everyone that wars of aggression remain a real possibility nowadays, and this signal was heard in Taiwan. Also, the invasion redirected the world media's attention back to the island: was it going to be next? This sense of urgency contrasted with the calmness of Taiwan's streets. There, life went on unbothered.

Then, in August, the PLA's "joint blockade" exercises in the Taiwan Strait took place in response to U.S. Congress Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei. The news of her sudden arrival surprised everyone, and out of curiosity, I rushed to the plaza facing the Grand Hyatt hotel, where Pelosi was expected to spend the night. A crowd was there already and seemed to expect a short speech, but her highly guarded convoy went directly to the hotel's underground parking lot and she herself kept a rather low profile during the entire visit. The people waiting on the plaza were divided in two groups: the first one cheered the arrival of the Speaker; the second (largely composed of senior citizens), waved protest signs written in broken English as well as PRC flags, while blaming the United States for the rising tensions between Taiwan and China. Apparently affiliated with the CUPP¹⁴, they came and left together.

The following day, at least four Chinese ballistic missiles flew over the island in reaction to Pelosi's visit, a first in history. In Taipei however, where the government messaging was reassuring, the prevailing sentiment was that things would eventually cool down. This calmness

¹⁴ For Chinese Unification Promotion Party. A small pro-Beijing political party.

may have had to do with the perception that “a barking dog never bites” within Taiwan’s society, among a population accustomed to inflamed but relatively inconsequential Beijing rhetoric. While true to some extent, the PLA exercises still demonstrated how the balance of force in the Taiwan Strait has continued to shift in China’s favor, making its military threat more potent as time goes by. For the exercises, the PLA tried to demonstrate it had the capability to lock up the skies and waters around Taiwan, as shown below. The Chinese also said they would normalize their presence, which they did by continuing to send boats and airplanes closer to Taiwan over the following months.¹⁵



The PLA’s pincer movement. Source: CIGeography Louis Martin-Vézian, 2021.

After several weeks of actions and reactions, several lines moved. U.S. President Joe Biden declared the United States military would intervene if there was an “unprecedented attack” by the PLA, which was a departure from the American longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity. Instead, ambiguity moved from the strategic to the tactical level, as Washington remained vague on what a U.S. military intervention in the Taiwan Strait would entail and aim to achieve.

¹⁵ "解放军历次台海演习中力度最大一次 专家：逼近合围台岛 前所未有", 人民网, 6 August 2022, URL: <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0806/c1011-32496137.html>.

Access to Chinese Sources

Given the breadth of the timeframe and the geographical scope of my study, as well as the quasi-impossibility to travel to China, it was decided from the start to mostly base my study on secondary sources written in Chinese, English and French. The abundance of sources published on China's military history, and geostrategy in general, greatly facilitated my search for data. While I was worried at the beginning that a closed China would be an obstacle to my research, I soon realized that there was ample information already available in open source.

Chinese sources, however, remained the hardest to reach. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) closed 90% of its archives as early as 2013 and the remaining 10% were gradually taken out during the last decade.¹⁶ Since 2019, travel to China has also been made very difficult because of the strict measures against the Covid-19 pandemic, which, among other things, prevented many foreign scholars from accessing their research field. Since the repression in Hong Kong, Sinologists have also come in greater numbers to Taipei. China's closure, which might only be temporary, still facilitates the regime's effort to frame events the way it prefers and complicate the possibility of a counterpoint. In this context, means of investigation are dwindling, especially when it comes to research about political and historical aspects. Analyzing Chinese politics seems to come back to the laborious aspects well described by Simon Leys in *The Chairman's New Clothes*, with its difficult guesswork based on fragmentary evidence from the Chinese state media.¹⁷ Lacking the means to confirm their findings with empirical observation in the field, scholars try to make sense of disparate information, and search in the PRC state media for redundant expressions, or missing elements...

CCP documents (press, speeches) are also often written in a parlance of repetitive slogans that are not always easy to understand, which puts the researcher's deductive abilities to the test. Often this 'Beijingology' leads to the formulation of hypotheses that are hard to verify, forcing scholars to be perceptive while also wary of over-interpreting things. Xi Jinping's slogan "to tell China's story well" (講好中國故事) therefore can be seen as a euphemism for this closure

¹⁶ Richard McGregor, "Xi Jinping's Radical Secrecy", *The Atlantic*, August 21st, 2022.

¹⁷ Leys Simon, *Les habits neufs du président Mao*, Champ libre, 1971.

of the PRC's information environment.¹⁸ Indeed, for Nadège Rolland "*what the CCP is trying to achieve with influence operations in the realm of ideas is similar to what it aims to accomplish in the military domain*".¹⁹ French researchers Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jangène Vilmer, in their landmark volume about China's political influence operations, also identified this link between Beijing's quest for "*access to the right to speak*" and the neutralization of that of its opponents.²⁰ Here then, "*access-denial*" extends to discourse power.

But there are still ways for researchers to access fascinating Chinese sources. For example, one can use Chinese academic databases such as CNKI, which contains quantities of high-quality Chinese security studies and historical commentaries about continental and naval warfare, especially from defense universities and departments tasked with borderland studies. This allowed me to refer to famous Qing, ROC and PRC military texts, such as the memoirs of military and political commanders (Zuo Zongtang, Mao Zedong, Chiang Kai-shek...), noting various links between them and about China's strategy towards Central Asia and Taiwan. For example, the 1874 strategic debate seen in the previous section was replicated at the turn of the 21st century between high-profile Chinese strategists (Liu Yazhou, Ni Lexiong, Ye Zicheng, Zhang Wenmu...). While the first debate was won by the advocates of continental defense, the second was *de facto* settled through a parallel Chinese expansion in both the maritime and continental domains, a compromise highlighted in the works of Wang Jisi.²¹ Even if Chinese sources are harder to access today, it remains possible to identify the strategic debates taking place in the PRC. Finally, I also gathered many state media and PLA press reports, which provide details on what the Chinese do and how they perceive their strategic environment. All this information comes from open sources and can be found online by students and researchers.

Sources in Taiwan

In Taiwan, I familiarized myself with the local universities' large database of security studies published not only about cross-strait relations but also Chinese geopolitics in general.²² I also spent time exploring the research database of the institutions more closely linked to the military,

¹⁸ Pour une étude de ce phénomène au sens large, le lecteur peut se reporter vers l'étude récente d'Alexander Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, Oxford Academic Press, 2021. Voir en particulier le chapitre 6 « *Promoting and Controlling the China Dream: China's External Propaganda and Répression* ».

¹⁹ Rolland, N., "China's counteroffensive in the war of ideas", *The Interpreter*, February 24th, 2020.

²⁰ See Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Les opérations d'influence chinoises – Un moment machiavélien*, Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM), page 32.

²¹ See Wang Jisi, "China in the Middle", *The American Interest*, vol. 10, n° 4, 2015, pages: 55-59.

²² The website of the NCCU Library: <https://www.lib.nccu.edu.tw/>.



where one can find fascinating studies written by Taiwanese officers on varied topics: strategy, history...²³ For example, I found many Chinese and Taiwanese commentaries on the geostrategic vision of Admiral Shi Lang as well as on the Qing strategic perceptions of Taiwan. I was also able to access several primary sources in Taiwan, such as authoritative documents of historical interest representing particular Taiwanese and Chinese discourses relevant to the central argument of my dissertation. *China's Destiny*, written by Chiang Kai-shek, for example, lays out the 20th century Chinese nationalist leader's view of China's geopolitics and national security.²⁴ The content, and Chiang's main vision, are actually surprisingly similar to current PRC conceptions of China's military defense, and even Xi Jinping's own thoughts.

I became an avid reader of the Taiwanese press. Foreign reports have often described a tense media environment in Taiwan, from overworked journalists to T.V. channels mainly reporting on traffic accidents. But that is only a side of the story. Taiwan's mediascape is also vibrant and Taiwanese journalists are present at most important political events and meetings. This means that, in order to obtain a better understanding of Taiwan, one should read its newspapers. *Liberty Times* and *China Times* publish small but factual reports on just about everything. This is how I found some details about factional politics going on inside the MND. In addition, online magazines such as *The Reporter* or *The New Lens* provide in-depth analysis. Sometimes discarded as a pro-Beijing medium by some, *United Daily News* actually offers excellent coverage of defense issues, with experienced columnists like Chieh Chung and James Huang.

For those who can not read Chinese but still take an interest in the subject, *Twitter* and several English-language newsletters (*China Talk*, *China Research Group*, *China in Arms*...) remain excellent platforms to follow the latest news and commentaries. When it comes to foreign sources about strategic issues in the Taiwan Strait, and as a general rule, American or Japanese analyses are among the best. Many American sinologists and experts on cross-strait relations are very experienced and their works are well documented. Universities and think-tanks there often have enough resources to enable researchers to collaborate on very specialized topics such as the PLA's "informatization", feeding debates between experts. In France, the comparative shortage of both organizations and resources²⁵ for studying strategic and military developments in East Asia sometimes compels researchers to become generalists, rather than specialists, in

²³ For the Chinese language research publications of the MND, which one can find easily both online and at the NDU, can be found online at this address:

<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/PublishMPBook.aspx?title=%E8%BB%8D%E4%BA%8B%E5%88%8A%E7%89%A9&SelectStyle=%E8%BB%8D%E4%BA%8B%E6%9C%9F%E5%88%8A>.

²⁴ Chiang Kai-Shek, *China's Destiny*, trans. Philip Jaffe, Roy Publishers, 1947.

²⁵ Henriot, Christian, « L'université française reste hermétique à la Chine », *Le Monde*, 27 janvier 2023.

order to meet the diverse needs of their jobs. The adverse effect is that it can make it harder for one to keep up with the full range of events happening in a very large field of expertise.

While in Taiwan, I also conducted interviews with professionals at universities, think tanks, and other government agencies. From contact to contact, it became possible to talk with individuals working at higher echelons or to delve deeper into topics. One of the upsides of interacting with Taiwanese professionals was that it allowed me to better understand how they personally reflected upon the issues at hand. Also, on certain subjects, I understood that some interviewees felt more at ease off-the-record, because it allowed them to speak more openly. Some interlocutors were concerned about being misunderstood, especially those in a government position. As a result, I often only took notes after completion of my interviews.

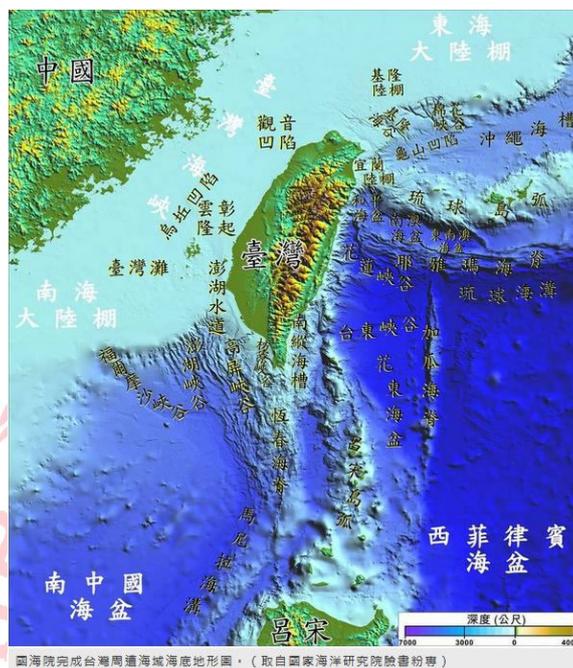
Some interviewees were critical of Taiwan's military institutions' inner functioning and relative closeness to the outside world. They depicted the military as a world unto itself, with its own particular culture. Some high-ranking officers were said to be conservative, deeply attached to the prestige of the ROC and its mainland roots. Interestingly, one of my interviewees told me that many do not really speak foreign languages very well, which might in turn impede their ability to interact with foreigners. I was also told that civilian insight is not always sought by them. As a matter of fact, relations between the military and the present ruling party were long tainted by mutual suspicion. The army was the main instrument used by the KMT authoritarian regime to repress the Taiwan-centric political forces which are now in power. The current government's high-profile foreign policy was also resented by some soldiers, who were worried that it might provoke Beijing into taking more military actions.

One episode was representative of the military's inner factional struggles. The August 2022 PLA "drills" came right as Taiwan was in a midst of a debate regarding what kind of weapons to procure and which defense posture to adopt. Positions were divided between the proponents of a full asymmetric approach and those more reluctant to give away Taiwan's conventional assets.²⁶ From 2017 to 2019, the leader of the 'asymmetric school', then-Chief of Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, advocated a wide-ranging reform of Taiwan's military strategy: the Overall Defense Concept (ODC).²⁷ Its logic was simple: given the impossibility for Taiwan to win an arms race against the PLA, and in a constrained budgetary context, the primary mission of the military should be to adapt its posture in a way that persuades Beijing of its inability to take the

²⁶ 楊安, "中國軍演模擬"環台封鎖" 台灣不對稱武器恐無用武之地? "VOA news, 8 August 2022.

²⁷ Lee Hsi-ming, Eric Lee, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained", *The Diplomat*, November 3rd, 2020.

island. The ODC, therefore, prioritized a transformed force structure with small, mobile but numerous and survivable armaments, as opposed to mostly relying on jetfighters, heavy tanks, and large surface vessels, which could easily be destroyed at the onset of an armed conflict.



This map captures what China wants: to open the first island chain by its center and access the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean. Source: National Academy of Marine Research.

But after Lee stepped down, little was heard again from the reform. It took some time for foreign analysts to find out what had happened inside Taiwan's MND. The ODC had been taken off the table, even if Lee's proposal was supported by many specialists both in Taiwan and in the United States, and also, at first, by President Tsai herself.²⁸ Apparently, the concept was never endorsed by conservative high-ranking officers at the top of the MND, in which reformers like Lee represented a minority possibly embroiled in complex factional rivalries.²⁹ However, few seem to know precisely today why the proposal was turned down, and what has replaced it.

Lee, whom I met with a colleague writing a piece for a French newspaper, never made a secret of his criticisms about the state of Taiwan's defense. He had retired two years before from his

²⁸ Hunzeker, Michael, "Taiwan's Defense Plans are Going Off the Rail", *Warontherocks*, November 18th 2021.

²⁹ 蘇仲泓, « 不再「濱海決勝、灘岸殲敵」? 外傳整體戰略將大改 國防部回應了 », *The Storm Media*, January 1st 2021.

position as the head of Taiwan's military and he witnessed with alarm the spirit of the ODC being cast away by its successors. He took to the media to encourage an acceleration of the reform of the armed forces, and this advocacy would also make him famous later. Of course, the ODC and his propositions for Taiwan's defense also faced criticism, but some arguments were less convincing than others. For example, the charge that asymmetric warfare is hard to define, lacks conceptual rigor and therefore perhaps shouldn't apply to Taiwan, is often heard. "Asymmetry" has indeed meant different things over the course of military history, but, as a highly context-dependent concept, it chiefly requires the weakest party to find ways to adapt to the challenge posed by a strong opponent and win. From force structure to the defense budget, this is the essence of Lee's proposal, with "asymmetry" being adapted to the Taiwanese context. Lee later published a book, *Taiwan de Shengsuan*, outlining his plan in greater detail.

Visits in Taiwan

I also visited sites of historical interest during my stay. In the north, I started with the Hobe Fort near Tamsui, at the mouth of the river of the same name. These fortifications were built under the administration of Liu Ming-Chuan, the Qing reform-minded governor of Taiwan, to protect the northwestern accesses to Taipei after the Sino-French war of 1884-5, when France attempted to use the island to blockade China. It never saw military action, and Taiwan soon fell prey to Japanese colonial designs in 1895. But the fort still gives us an idea of the strategic importance Taiwan gained in the eyes of the Qing military at the end of the 19th century with its then-modern, British-made, breech-loading Armstrong guns. I saw other forts in Keelung (on the hills surrounding the city), Tainan (Golden Gate fort), Kaohsiung (at the north entrance of the harbor), and Penghu (guarding Magong's harbor). Unfortunately for the Qing, these efforts to modernize Taiwan's defenses were short-lived and decided upon too late.



Golden Gate Fort, Tainan (Anping), November 2022. Armstrong guns sit in the background.

I also visited the islands controlled by Taipei in the Taiwan Strait. I first went to Matsu, close to Fuzhou on the Chinese mainland. Together with Kinmen, Matsu is among the very few lands the ROC military managed to defend against the PLA at the end of the Chinese civil war. In the meantime, it has been highly fortified by the nationalists and remains heavily garrisoned today, despite its somewhat declining geopolitical value. The population still intermingles with soldiers throughout the archipelago. Military installations also occupy a good share of the land, together with museums devoted to the memory of the crisis and the shelling the people of Matsu went through during the decades following the exile of the KMT to Taiwan. Matsu, Dongyin and Kinmen, constituted in the 1950s were the last lands that symbolically “linked” the ROC to the mainland, and they were strategically situated near China’s coast. They were thus extremely important to Chiang Kai-shek and the military, in which many believed they could one day take the mainland back from the communists. History is plainly visible on the island, with its many KMT slogans, statues, and even painted artillery shells on roundabouts. Sometimes I was not sure whether these were kept for touristic purposes or if they still had some bearing on the perceptions of the KMT-oriented local government. Still today, in formal terms, you are there in the Fukien Province, Republic of China.

During the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016), direct links to China were created and for several years, Matsu (and Kinmen) welcomed numerous Chinese tourists. At the end of 2021 however, these links were already closed for almost two years because of the pandemic, and

probably political reasons too. Of course, many businesses followed. Stepping off the turboprop from Taipei, and right after witnessing from above the ongoing ballet of PRC sand dredgers around the island, I noticed Nangan was much colder than Taiwan. The topography is tormented, and the overall atmosphere also felt different. At this time of year, it was not difficult to find a hotel at a very reasonable price. There I met with an officer of a local government agency from south Taiwan, who showed me around Nangan and talked to me about his homesickness and the difficulty for him to connect with locals, with whom he often politically disagreed: “People here are different, they feel closer to China than us Taiwanese” he said.



The illegal PRC sand dredgers around Matsu. Besides keeping the ROC Coast Guard busy, they also harm marine life, making life harder for Matsu fishermen. Fall 2022.

Kinmen followed in February 2022, where I also visited the many memorials dedicated to the military history of the island. The weather was clear this time, and I could easily see Xiamen and its skyscrapers. The contrast with Kinmen, which is still quite rural and where history can be found everywhere in the landscape, was very visible. Even if the Taiwan military is also very present there, the strategic significance of the islands has evolved since the 1950s from being a potential bridgehead for the army of Chiang Kai-shek to becoming an important monitoring station for Taiwan’s defense. For their part, the Chinese have now mainly set their eyes on Taiwan itself, and Kinmen’s overall strategic importance decreased in the process. A few

months later, the archipelago would still make the media's headlines when Chinese drones, mostly civilian, flew in numbers from Xiamen and provoked the defenders by taking pictures of Taiwanese soldiers awkwardly throwing stones to drive them away. It did not make the military look good, so the MND sent drone jammers to Kinmen, and also shot some down. A Taiwanese YouTuber attempted to counterattack by sending his own drone carrying an ROC flag to Xiamen, but to his obvious disappointment, it fell in the waves shortly after departure. Later, the Xiamen city government forbade drone use and the overflights stopped. Considering all the other challenges faced by Taiwan's military, this "PLA grey zone operation," as some put it, still attracted considerable international media attention.

The trip to Penghu was a different experience. In military history, the control of the archipelago was key to a successful invasion of Taiwan and control of the Strait, given its relative ease of access to deeper waters southward and the possibility to harbor a fleet there. History-wise, no military commander could hope to successfully take Taiwan without first holding Penghu, but neither one could hope to hold a position on Penghu without controlling Taiwan. In other words, both locations interact in strategic terms. The military presence was surprisingly less obvious to visitors, a sign that it may be better concealed. The airport runway is shared by the air force, with constant rotations of FCK-1 jetfighters patrolling the skies. The harbor of Magong also represents a top strategic spot between China and Taiwan, only a few dozen kilometers from potential landing beaches. It was there that French Admiral Courbet died of disease in 1885, after his mildly-successful blockade campaign against Qing China. An unassuming stele in central Magong reminds the tourists. On the southeast side of Taiwan, I finally visited Green Island. The island has no particular geostrategic significance but hosted one of the KMT's most infamous labor camps for political prisoners, most notably Taiwanese elites and independence-minded personalities (as well as many other highly educated detainees). It is now a very well-maintained museum dedicated to the defense of human rights, which reminds visitors of the recent authoritarian past of Taiwan, and celebrates its current democratic institutions. Green Island is now a tourist spot, but staying on the island for more than a week because of an unexpected typhoon gave me a small glimpse of the weather conditions the prisoners had to face daily. Countless accounts and the recent movie *Untold Herstory* (2022) narrate their plight.

Conclusion

I had an excellent experience in Taiwan and I hope I can go back there soon. Research-wise, it was also a coming of age adventure, with repeated meetings with professionals and officials. A difference with previous trips to Taiwan was the progress of my Chinese language skills: this time I could read and converse at will. If I had to give advices to my fellow young researchers, it would be to dare to leave one's books more often, to engage with professionals, and to travel to more places. History books and language training matter of course, but human interactions mostly take place outside of libraries and it is these encounters which, in the end, will teach one the most.

I cannot thank enough Taiwan's MOFA for its support throughout my stay in Taiwan. Without the Taiwan Fellowship, none of the tasks described above could have been achieved. I would also like to extend my deepest thank to the NCCU IIR team, in particular Pr. Liu Fu-kuo for his great advice for my work and also for our many conversations. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Olly Chang as well for all her help in organizing this amazing stay in Taiwan.

