

BOOK REVIEW

## Taiwan's Presidents: Profiles of the Majestic Six

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On 20 May 2024, Lai Ching-te was sworn in as President of the Republic of China (Taiwan). The recency of Lai's victory precludes him featuring in this book, and the jury is still out on how Lai might score on the metrics John F. Copper applies to his assessment of the "Majestic Six": Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-Kuo, Lee Teng-hui, Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ing-wen. The evaluative framework includes substantive achievements in crisis management, advancing democratization, stewarding the economy and overseeing foreign affairs, plus actor-centred criteria like character and charisma. As a heuristic to simplify and categorize periods of political history, presidential terms are appealing. The conditions that structure and constrain presidential achievements tend not to be as neatly self-contained, but as the Tsai era transitions into the Lai era, it is an opportune moment for a holistic look at Taiwan's "key presidents" (Yen Chia-kan, the elder Chiang's VP when he died in office served out a three-year term per the constitution, but was a "nominal president" (p. 12) and does not feature). The author is well qualified for the task – a visitor to Taiwan since the 1960s, he has met all the book's protagonists (ix) and published several dozen academic books on Taiwan, including the classic *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?* (Routledge, 1990), now available in an astonishing seventh edition.

*Taiwan's Presidents* is a book about Taiwan told largely from an American perspective. The author is explicit about this and there are understandable reasons for doing so. American influence on Taiwan, past and present, is undeniable, and any device that encourages Americans to learn about Taiwan is worthwhile. The discussion of presidentialism in the first chapter sets out the evolving role of the ROC president in the context of the Constitution and Taiwan's gradual embrace of a presidential political system pioneered by the US. The American role as Taiwan's defender and security guarantor is noted and ROC Presidents are evaluated for their handling of bilateral relations and American views of them. Explaining the selection of secondary sources on which the book is based, the author explains that "the literature concerning Taiwan, other than that written in Chinese or Japanese, was and still is mainly in English, wherein US scholars dominated" (p. 189). The American lens is not always unobtrusive. For instance, the author argues, in the context of Taiwan, that "to regard an opposing political party as an enemy is incompatible with a healthy political culture" (p. 212). No argument there, but it is more applicable to the US than Taiwan, despite the intensity of Taiwanese political competition.

The distinctive Copper style – declaratory statements and staccato prose – efficiently covers the long sweep of Taiwanese political development told through six main characters. Broad brushstrokes and economical storytelling produce a dynamic narrative. But on occasion the drive for succinctness amid complexity sacrifices nuance and clarity. For instance, politicization and voter cynicism are said to be "Taiwan's misfortune" leading to the "regular rotation of ruling parties" (p. 212). After decades of one-party rule, rotation is a valued facility of the democratic system. Furthermore, every elected president served two full terms, and by 2028 the DPP will have held

the presidency for 12 years straight. Notwithstanding purported voter cynicism, turnout in Taiwanese elections and other indicators of political engagement are robust. Another example: Tsai Ing-wen is lauded for being “the first DPP president to enjoy a good relationship with the US,” which “helped her career” and “aided her in winning two presidential elections” (p. 162). But her party was punished in “mid-term elections” (i.e. the slate of local elections that come at the midpoint of the presidential term) because Tsai “align[ed] too closely with the Joe Biden administration” (p. 195). And yet her “popularity” (i.e. approval rating) on foreign relations remained “high for her handling of relations with the US” (p. 195). The author’s assessment of Tsai’s performance on this issue is thus unclear.

As for ranking the Majestic Six (I wonder if ranking presidents is itself an American penchant?), Copper argues that given Chiang Kai-shek’s achievements in securing and modernizing Taiwan he “would have to be deemed Taiwan’s top president” (p. 196). Chiang fails to take the crown, however, because “[his] positives were offset by redoubtable negative views espoused by a significant portion of Taiwan’s population stemming from bad governance in the late 1940s that remained extant in the minds of Taiwanese later” (p. 197). As the saying goes, there’s a lot to unpack in this (atypically convoluted) understatement. For continuing Taiwan’s economic miracle, fostering democratization and managing the shock of derecognition by the US, the GOAT title thus goes to Chiang Ching-kuo. Lee Teng-hui gets an honourable mention as “Mr Democracy” and “Mr Taiwan,” but not for his post-presidential career as polarizing Taiwan nationalist.

There are kind words for Ma Ying-jeou, “Taiwan’s rescuer” (p. 198) after the corruption, polarization and dire cross-Strait and US relations that dogged Chen Shui-bian. Amid a long list of admirable character traits, Ma’s bearing is described as “like royalty” (p. 200). Not so much the “low born” Chen (p. 200), whose “ethnic race-baiting” (p. 194) is among a raft of negatives. Indeed, Chen was so bad that Lee Teng-hui’s “abetting” of his win in 2000 is described as unequivocally the blackest mark against Lee’s legacy (p. 99). We are told not just that Tsai was a “progressive” (a contemporary American label that makes less sense in Taiwan and is a questionable appellation for Tsai despite movement on indigenous policy and same-sex marriage), but that her progressivism “was natural for her, being a woman” (p. 162). Tsai’s marital status and preference for feline company warrant mention, alongside the judgement that her “physical appearance was not a big asset” (p. 201). However, Copper does capture the significance of Taiwanese voters twice electing a woman president, something the US has notably not yet achieved.