

The London School of Economics and Political Science  
University of London

*Inventing the Public Enemy:*  
*The Gangster in Taiwanese Society, 1991-2006*



Percival Santos

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
2007

## **Candidate's Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is the product of my own original research.

Percival Santos

## Abstract

Much of the literature has framed the study of Taiwanese politics in terms of the persistent existence of certain informal institutions like factional politics, patron-clientism, *heijin* (political corruption), and finally, *heidao* (gangsters). These institutions are perceived to be more characteristic of a third world country, and inappropriate to Taiwan, given its advanced economy and democratic system. This thesis looks at the contemporary phenomenon of *heidao*. *Heidao*, in the strict sense of the word, are a new class of wealthy and powerful people from the countryside who have accumulated their wealth through dubious means and then run for political office. The thesis relies primarily on ethnographic research and it focuses on the life histories of a few rural politicians who are reputed to be *heidao*, namely Legislator Yen Ching-piao of Shalu Town, and the Jen brothers from Dajia Town, Taichung County.

This thesis borrows the 'big man' or 'man of prowess' model from the traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. It compares the Taiwanese *heidao* with the Thai *chaopo* (godfather), rural politicians from Taiwan and Thailand. I argue two things. First, that contemporary anxiety in Taiwan about *heidao* represents a clash between two incompatible notions of politics and governance. The dominant notion involves contemporary western ideas of politics based on the ideal of good governance, transparency, integrity, and honesty, which predominate in the urban areas. The other involves traditional notions of power and politics based on the ideal of a benign and paternalistic patron which is prevalent in the rural areas. Second, scholarly literature portrays Taiwanese politics as anomalous. This is a result of using idealized categories of politics and governance that are characteristic of a western liberal democracy. The anomaly disappears when we look at the country within the broader context of the traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. *Heidao* are really Southeast Asian big men.

---

## *Table of Contents*

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Candidate's Declaration</b>                | <b>ii</b>  |
| <b>Abstract</b>                               | <b>iii</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>                       | <b>6</b>   |
| <b>List of Figures</b>                        | <b>7</b>   |
| <b>List of Photographs</b>                    | <b>8</b>   |
| <br>  |            |
| <b><i>Chapter One:</i></b>                    | <b>9</b>   |
| <b><i>Introduction</i></b>                    | <b>9</b>   |
| The literature on Taiwan studies              | 12         |
| The Taiwanese gangster state                  | 16         |
| The Thai gangster state                       | 23         |
| Contested legitimacy                          | 25         |
| Southeast Asian political culture             | 30         |
| A history of rural leadership                 | 37         |
| The biography of Yen Ching-piao               | 43         |
| Thesis outline                                | 51         |
| Methodology                                   | 53         |
| <b><i>Chapter Two:</i></b>                    | <b>56</b>  |
| <b><i>Temples and the New Rural Elite</i></b> | <b>56</b>  |
| The big men of Dajia                          | 70         |
| 'Gangsters' and temples                       | 77         |
| Jenlangong                                    | 77         |
| Purple Cloud Temple                           | 81         |
| Temples, 'face', and merit                    | 84         |
| Narratives of 'gangsters running temples'     | 93         |
| Conclusion                                    | 97         |
| <b><i>Chapter Three:</i></b>                  | <b>99</b>  |
| <b><i>Taiwan is not a Real Democracy</i></b>  | <b>99</b>  |
| Democracy is not mature                       | 105        |
| Politicians are not gentlemen                 | 106        |
| Voters lack political literacy                | 113        |
| Middle-class disappointment                   | 117        |
| The three types of politicians                | 120        |
| Conclusion                                    | 128        |

---

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter Four:</b>                             | <b>130</b> |
| <b><i>Narratives of Corruption in Taiwan</i></b> | <b>130</b> |
| The ‘gangster’ in the media                      | 137        |
| The ‘gangster’ in film                           | 146        |
| These narratives are new                         | 152        |
| Instilling new attitudes                         | 156        |
| The westernizing project                         | 162        |
| Conclusion                                       | 167        |
| <b>Chapter Five:</b>                             | <b>168</b> |
| <b><i>The Man of Prowess</i></b>                 | <b>168</b> |
| Complex, multi-faceted roles                     | 170        |
| Bandit and hero                                  | 172        |
| Informal broker and kingmaker                    | 173        |
| Mobilizer of masses and giver of feasts          | 175        |
| Fixer and mediator                               | 178        |
| The <i>jiaotou</i> was an informal leader        | 180        |
| The big man in Southeast Asia                    | 185        |
| Conclusion                                       | 188        |
| <b>Chapter Six:</b>                              | <b>190</b> |
| <b><i>The Rural Politician</i></b>               | <b>190</b> |
| Leaders act like patrons                         | 195        |
| Helping the car accident victim                  | 195        |
| Mediating neighbours’ and spousal disputes       | 196        |
| Dealing with the bureaucracy                     | 197        |
| Resorting to informal institutions               | 199        |
| Forgiving past mistakes                          | 201        |
| Official stories about corruption                | 204        |
| Grassroots appeal                                | 207        |
| Rural big man                                    | 216        |
| Conclusion                                       | 218        |
| <b>Chapter Seven:</b>                            | <b>219</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                                | <b>219</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                              | <b>228</b> |

---

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many people whose help and collaboration have been instrumental to the successful completion of this thesis. First of all, I wish to thank my friends in Taiwan who acted as my gracious hosts during the three years I spent there doing fieldwork. I have made many lasting friendships there and I look forward to thanking them in person when I next travel to Taiwan. I would especially like to thank Alex Pevzner, Lee Lin, Betty, Mark Findler, and Susan Huang.

I am grateful to the Center for Chinese Studies (*Hanxueyanjiuzhongxin*), National Central Library, Taipei, for their generous grant. I would also like to thank the Institute of Ethnology (*Minzusuo*), Academia Sinica, Taipei, for granting me affiliate student status which made getting and renewing visas so convenient, as well as giving me a dedicated desk in a shared office in which to work. I would also like to mention my colleagues at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at Tunghai University, Taichung, where I was a part-time faculty member. I give my deepest thanks to James Sims, Brendan Ryan, Nanyu Chen, Jung-han Chen, Olivia Chang, Betty Liao and Joyce Tsou.

I thank my supervisors Charles Stafford and Stefan Feuchtwang for their support and friendship. They have been very helpful in giving a high degree of academic rigour to my ideas. Lastly I would like to thank my mother for her support and patience through all these years.

---

## List of Figures

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Figure 1: Percentage of ‘gangsters’ among elected officials</b>                     | <b>11</b>  |
| <b>Figure 2: Typology of Taiwanese politicians</b>                                     | <b>125</b> |
| <b>Figure 3: Taiwan’s ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index</b>                  | <b>131</b> |
| <b>Figure 4: Criminalization of behaviours characteristic of informal institutions</b> | <b>158</b> |

---

## List of Photographs

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Photo 1: Yen Ching-piao's wife Hou Li-chuan                           | 48  |
| Photo 2: Yen Ching-piao with president Chen Shui-bian                 | 50  |
| Photo 3: An inside view of <i>Jenlangong</i> Temple                   | 58  |
| Photo 4: Yen Ching-piao holding a press conference                    | 64  |
| Photo 5: Jen Ming-kuen holding a Mazu statuette                       | 70  |
| Photo 6: Ma Ying-jiu  | 101 |
| Photo 7: Ma's editorial cartoon                                       | 103 |
| Photo 8: 'Gangsters' mobilizing for elections                         | 139 |
| Photo 9: 'Gangsters' in the stock market                              | 141 |
| Photo 10: Story of a Gangster   | 146 |
| Photo 11: Island of Greed   | 148 |
| Photo 12: Born to be King   | 150 |
| Photo 13: Blood is Thicker than Water                                 | 165 |
| Photo 14: Uncle Niaolai and Thirteen Aunts                            | 165 |
| Photo 15: Yen Ching-piao's son's record breaking wedding celebration  | 177 |
| Photo 16: Jen Ming-kuen describing his kidnapping ordeal to reporters | 179 |
| Photo 17: Wu Fu-gui's campaign flyer                                  | 211 |
| Photo 18: Yen Ching-piao's campaign flyer                             | 212 |



---

## **Chapter One:**

### ***Introduction***

I met PJ Huang (Huang Pong-ren) and his TV crew at the start of the annual eight day pilgrimage to Xingang Town in April 2003 organized by the famous *Jenlangong* Temple. PJ was a TV anchorman and he was in Dajia to cover the pilgrimage and had been doing it for the past several years. He agreed to let me travel with him and his crew for the whole duration of the journey so that I could learn more about the pilgrimage, popular religion, and unexpectedly, 'gangsters'. I had arrived in Dajia a few months before the pilgrimage with the intention of researching religious identity and the cult of Mazu. My sudden interest in 'gangsters' was unexpected. This was sparked by a realization not long after starting fieldwork, a few months prior to the start of the pilgrimage. Much to my surprise, I found out through my dealings with urban folk whenever I travelled to the big cities like Taipei and Taichung, that *Jenlangong* Temple's chairman (*dongshizhang*) Legislator Yen Ching-piao, was rumoured to be a *heidao* (gangster). My urban contacts would sadly remark that many temples in central and southern Taiwan were being taken over by 'gangsters' because they were a very lucrative source of revenue.<sup>1</sup>

Local Dajia residents, on the other hand, were quite indifferent to the temple chairman. They did not so much see the legislator as a 'gangster', rather, he was considered an 'outsider', as he is not a Dajia native, he hails from the nearby town of Shalu. The local professionals in Dajia Town, unlike ordinary folk, were every bit as critical of the temple chairman as their urban counterparts were. Many of the schoolteachers, librarians, and journalists, I spoke to in Dajia were scathing of the group of people who were in charge of the temple. They even said that many of the dozen or so members of *Jenlangong* Temple Committee<sup>2</sup> (*dongshihui*), a sort of board of directors, had criminal records, or were involved in various civil and criminal cases.

---

<sup>1</sup> That temples made a lot of money was apparent to anyone who spent any length of time in one, especially a popular one. Temples in Taiwan make enormous profits from the 'services' that they provide to worshippers. The range of services on offer is quite vast, covering many of the spheres of human activity, which include an element of uncertainty and unpredictability. These services claim to ensure that, for a modicum sum, someone's child got good marks for their school exams, to ensuring a pregnant woman gave birth to a healthy baby son, to protecting oneself from harm or misfortune should they happen to have been born in a year that is considered inauspicious (the Chinese lunar calendar makes sure that every year has lucky and unlucky years to have been born in).

<sup>2</sup> I was a guest of the famous popular religion temple *Jenlangong* from Dajia Town, Taichung County, on whose behalf the pilgrimage is dedicated. I arrived in Dajia in late January of that year and came, initially, with the purpose of studying Taiwanese popular religion. I had heard of the temple in Dajia while in the capital, and had used my Taipei connections to get an official introduction to the *Jenlangong* Temple Committee. Mr. Jen Ming-kuen, temple vice-chairman, welcomed me as a scholar of the goddess Mazu and graciously provided me with free board and lodging at the temple-managed hotel. From the time of my arrival I started to immerse myself in the day-to-day activities at the temple and to meet as many people as possible in Dajia, so as to learn about local people's religious behaviour.

---

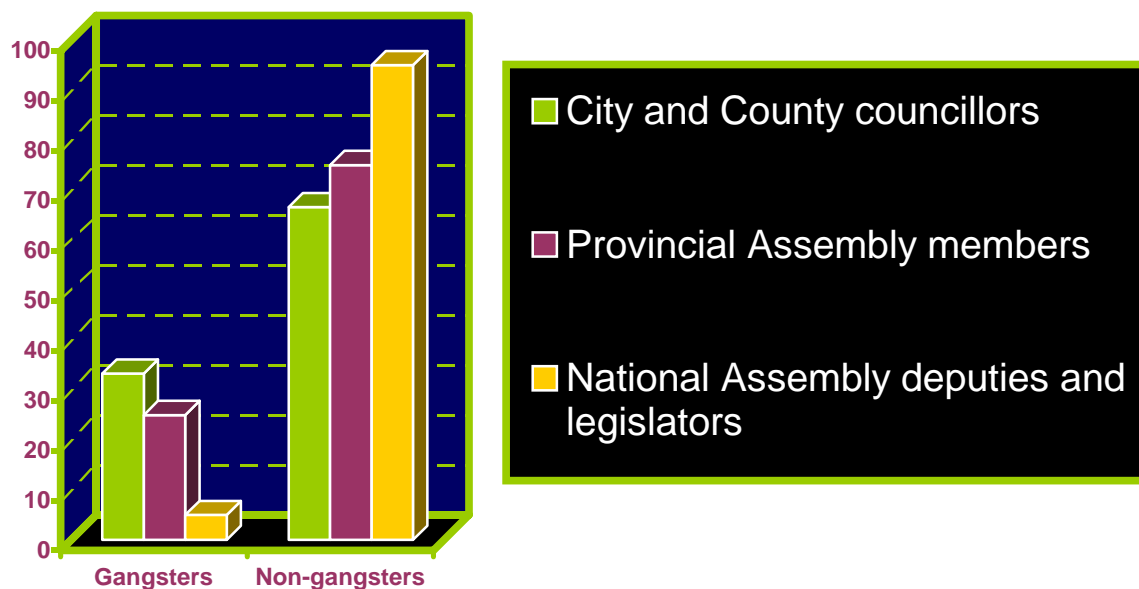
These remarks that I repeatedly heard over the first two months of my fieldwork in Dajia Town began to arouse my interest. I started asking myself ‘what are “gangsters” doing in a popular religion temple?’

This thesis will rigorously study the phenomenon of *heidao* and what it tells us about contemporary Taiwanese society. I will explore the following questions: ‘under what conditions of looking and in whose eyes do *heidao* appear’, ‘how is the *heidao* issue seen from the city and from the country’, and ‘can the phenomenon of *heidao* reveal something significant about Taiwanese political life at a deeper level?’ I have imposed a strict analytical framework on the concept, eliminating extraneous features, boiling it down to its bare essentials. In doing so I have come to discover that the term *heidao* actually tells us more about those people who use it, than it tell us about the class of people it supposedly refers to.

For analytical clarity, I have narrowed the term to mean only those who are engaged in politics, and who are widely believed to use ‘coercion’, ‘illegal force’ or ‘illicit and informal influence’ in order to achieve their means. People, who most aptly fit this description, are a certain breed of rural politicians, who have come to power in the countryside since the mid 1980s. I will focus on the biography of Legislator Yen Ching-piao, a rural politician with national repercussions. I use his life and work to exemplify the phenomenon of the rise of the rural politician in Taiwan. Although his life story is exceptional in some ways, he is also very typical of this new breed of politicians in many other ways.

In summary, *heidao* is not really an objective category, or a kind of person, or occupation, or character type. The term *heidao* is a morally charged accusation levelled by people who have certain beliefs, values and attitudes. These beliefs principally pertain to the way society should be run. Specifically, these beliefs have to do with how political life should be conducted in a democracy, how relationships between people should be governed, and about how disputes should be settled. In other words, when a person calls another *heidao*, he is merely indicating his disapproval that the *heidao* in question does not act according to his normative vision of society.

Those who call rural politicians *heidao* have an ideal. That ideal is about a country where the rule of law is supreme, where formal institutions are paramount, and where politicians are gentle, mild-mannered, scholarly, incorruptible, and behave in ways that are totally transparent. Those who accuse rural politicians of being *heidao* have high standards of the political class- they expect honesty and integrity, and the refusal to derive private gain from public office. These rural politicians stand accused of various forms of corruption and other illicit deeds. Many of these rural politicians are, or have been defendants in various civil or criminal lawsuits filed against them by the state or private citizens (see Figure 1). Just to cite an official statistic, the Taiwanese Ministry of Justice stated in 1999 that 205 elected representatives present in the National Assembly, Legislative Yuan, City and County Councils, as well as Township Councils, had pending criminal charges against them.<sup>3</sup> Often they run for office while hiding from the law, or while in prison, and they often win elections this way. If they cannot personally run, their wives or daughters run in their place and win. And sometimes they flee the country to escape prosecution. This book explores the motivations and values of the people who attempt to portray rural politicians like Legislator Yen Ching-piao, as ‘public enemy number one’.



**Figure 1: Percentage of ‘gangsters’ among elected officials. It is 33.3% of City and County councillors, 25% of Provincial Assembly members, and 5% of National Assembly deputies and legislators. Source: *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan*. 2003.**

<sup>3</sup> See “Judicial Yuan sheds light on the darker side of politicians”. *Taipei Times*. October 30, 1999. p. 1.

---

## The literature on Taiwan studies

Recent academic literature relevant to this present thesis has looked at many of the themes I wish to address primarily from the discipline of mainstream political science, and also anthropology, to a lesser extent. I shall proceed to describe these studies. I will show what contributions they have made to the current received wisdom about the issues and problems I seek to address. At this point I shall first set the first part of these studies within the broader socio-historical context in which social and political research regarding post-war Taiwan, a field sometimes known as called 'Taiwan Studies', has been generated.

Taiwan studies at the start of the twenty first century has gained a loyal following and acceptance as a legitimate area of social science research. However, this was not the case for the discipline in the immediate post-war period. Social science research conducted in Taiwan for its own sake in the first three decades after World War II was minimal, with much of it done by American anthropologists interested in studying Chinese culture. This insistence in viewing Taiwan as a laboratory for the elaboration of social science theories pertaining to China has led some academics, like Hong and Murray,<sup>4</sup> to accuse these anthropologists of looking through Taiwan in order to see 'traditional' China. These two academics give four partial explanations as to why American social scientists have clung to the 'ideologically' shaky assumption that 'Taiwan is the most traditional part of China'.

Firstly, American China experts were 'traumatized' by the communist triumph on the mainland (2005: 57). Secondly, the Maoist state made research inside China impossible (Ibid.). Thirdly, it was thought that Taiwan could act as a surrogate for studying rural pre-communist revolutionary China, 'in order to try to understand conditions leading to that revolution, and to look for possible ways to prevent other, similar revolutions' (2005: 63). Fourthly, some western scholars, in particular those interested in civilizations with long written traditions, were busy 'orientalising' China, intent on studying its glorious past through written texts, which allowed them to escape the messy realities of these 'civilizations' as they are in the present. Thus in the case of Taiwan, scholars, intent on positing a timeless entity such as 'Chinese society' substituted Japanese and KMT era household registration records for ancient literature and court records, in order 'to escape from complicated contemporary realities' (2005: 64).

---

<sup>4</sup> Hong, K. & Murray, S. 2005. *Looking Through Taiwan: American Anthropologists' Collusion with Ethnic Domination*. Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.

---

Taiwan during this period was used as a 'case study of a larger Chinese phenomenon' (Cheng & Marble 2004: 5).<sup>5</sup> Hence, several ethnographies produced during this period had titles such as Gallin's *Hsin Hsing, Taiwan; a Chinese village in change* in 1966, Wolf's *The House of Lim: a study of a Chinese farm family* in 1968, Pasternak's *Kinship and Community in Two Chinese Villages* in 1972, and Jacob's *Local Politics in a Rural Chinese Cultural Setting: A Field Study of Mazu Township, Taiwan* in 1980.<sup>6</sup>

This apparent obsession with China at the expense of Taiwan needs to be seen within the historical framework of priorities on the part of the American academics. They were highly influenced in the 1950s by the need to understand the massive decolonization movement of newly independent countries. These academics were heavily influenced by modernization theories of development, and thus promoted and coordinated research in various countries around the world, including the People's Republic of China, which itself was experiencing not only 'massive social change but also radically heightened ideology on its path to development' (Cheng & Marble 2004: 4). The sum effects of the influence of modernization studies and the field of China Studies, along with the view that the island was a minor issue, nothing more than an appendage to the United States, was to marginalize any interest in studying Taiwan for its own sake.

Notwithstanding the validity of the arguments those anthropologists had for studying Taiwan, their research is highly relevant for this thesis in that it can shed light on the topic of traditional forms of rural leadership in Taiwan. In an early study looking at the effects of land reform in post-war Taiwan, dating from this period of optimal productivity within 'Chinese' anthropology, Gallin described the village landlord as playing 'a major role in the leadership of his village and its immediate vicinity', as the elected village political leader. But his formal leadership role also overlapped with a more informal one:

---

<sup>5</sup> Cheng, T.J. & Marble, A. 2004. "Taiwan Studies and the Social Sciences". *Issues and Studies* 40 (3/4): 9-57.

<sup>6</sup> Ethnographies featuring the name Taiwan did appear in that period, such as Wolf's *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, and Jordan's *Gods Ghosts and Ancestors: the folk Religion of a Taiwanese village*, both published in 1972.

---

*He might often be an informal leader as well, a person who took an active part in most of the social and religious affairs of the village. He usually contributed money and time to help make these affairs a success. The efforts of the landlord helped to build up his reputation as a public-spirited citizen. Frequently, he assumed the role of mediator in discussions of village and intervillage problems and in disputes between his own villagers or even between members of other villages (Gallin 1966: 115-116).*

Pasternak<sup>7</sup> described the post of village headman (*cunzhang*), the township's official community representative, as 'demanding, but confers only limited prestige and authority', and did not constitute a 'stepping stone to personal profit or higher political office'. Hence elected office at the township level was not attractive to 'better educated, politically ambitious, or wealthier villagers' (1972: 96-97). Thompson's article on rural Taiwan, nearly a couple of decades after Gallin's work, observed how land reform dislodged the traditional rural gentry from positions of leadership. He mentioned a new type of leader who emerged to fill the 'leadership vacuum' at village level after the 1950s. The new type of leaders, though, 'eschew the opportunity to become district head...Often the real leaders or leader of a village work behind the scenes, maybe using a village temple as a basis for operations, and putting forward a nominee to act as district head' (1984: 562).<sup>8</sup>

Crissman described local and regional organization in Taiwan as being noncorporate- 'i.e., it is not formally organized at all, and to the extent that it is structured in any definable sense, it is governed by normative relations that do not involve legal obligations or formal sanctions' (1981: 90).<sup>9</sup> Candidates for elected office at township level tended to be members of the traditional landed gentry or 'self-made' men who accumulated wealth in a 'rags to riches' fashion. 'Their wealth, and their ability to use it to control other men, and not, at least primarily, because of the offices they may hold' make them the natural leaders of rural society. Crissman felt these rural leaders are comparable to Melanesian 'big men' who, absent corporate hierarchies, 'hold sway over others by virtue of the force of their personalities, their control of resources, and their ability to dispense favours':

---

<sup>7</sup> Pasternak, B. 1972. *Kinship and Community in Two Chinese Villages*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, S. 1984. "Taiwan: Rural Society". *The China Quarterly* 99: 553-568.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, although it is undeniable that the island possesses a highly corporate local administrative jural (relating to the law) structure, which divided up the country into counties (*xian*) and further subdivided into townships (*xiang*) and subdivided into districts (*cun*), Crissman is not sure the same applies to administrative structure below township level, which he characterizes as having an authority structure (1981: 103).

---

To be a success in local Taiwanese factional politics, an aspiring big man must first of all have money, and secondly must invest it in politically relevant ways, such as making generous contributions to temples and to charities...if leaders are to keep their followers they must provide them with certain services. Big men hold the equivalent of 'office hours' when they are freely available to their constituents and clients to hear and settle disputes, to give advice, and to respond to pleas for help in various manners (such as free medical equipment, getting a son into school or into a job, or securing or extending a loan). Big men must above all appear to be generous and to be eager to help people with their problems by using their superior connections (Crissman 1981: 107).<sup>10</sup>

These early studies about traditional rural leadership in post-war Taiwan indicate that there are socio-cultural dimensions to the realities of power in a rural context. In addition, the quality of effective leadership- the ability to lead men and to get things done, is embedded in wider social and cultural structures that transcend official institutions. More specifically, possession of formal leadership positions such as elected office, are often insufficient indicators of an individual's true status, power and influence in the local community. Though in any given locality, the most powerful individual may also be the place's highest elected political leader, it is not always the case that the two are one and the same. Often, powerful and influential individuals eschew public office, electing instead to work behind the scenes.

More often than not, local political leaders derive their power not from the authority that a government post confers. Rather they are powerful in their own right. They seldom ran for office, but when they did they secured it by harnessing various forms of informal influence in order to mobilize voters and win the popular vote. Their influence stems from their independent sources of wealth, their willingness to use their wealth and resources to build up a following, their generosity to fellow villagers, their ability to mediate in disputes, and finally their use of connections to benefit their followers. This thesis will build on the work of these early ethnographies on traditional forms of leadership in rural Taiwan. It explores the nature and legitimacy of the power and influence that rural leaders possess in contemporary Taiwan.

---

<sup>10</sup> Crissman, L. 1981. "The Structure of Local and Regional Systems". In Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (eds.) *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Pp.89-124. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

---

However, interest in the earlier research topics such as the ones undertaken by Gallin, and Pasternak, began to wane when China opened up and provided scholars with hitherto unavailable opportunities to go and study the mainland. The focus of social science research in Taiwan began to take a new direction towards the beginning of the 1980s. This new direction was due largely to the island's spectacular economic growth, which accelerated in the early 1980s, stimulating two new foci of research. The first body of research attempted to understand how the country transformed itself into a newly industrializing country (NIC), joining the ranks of Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore. This corpus of research is worth noting, in my opinion for two reasons; first, as Taiwan was seen as a 'catch up' economy, the innate value of its research was thought to be self evident and did not need explaining, second, the research on NICs strengthened the idea that governments can 'lead the market and put in place a stable system that implements good policy' (Cheng & Marble 2004: 10).<sup>11</sup>

## **The Taiwanese gangster state**

At the same time as the nation's economy underwent a dizzying transformation, it also experienced an equally significant process of democratic change. This spurred researchers to look at the island's democratic transition, which they considered to be a unique case. They were surprised that the ruling KMT party did not lose power during this political transition and this sentiment generated a considerable quantity of academic research on Taiwan since the 1980s, primarily among political scientists. This second corpus of research endeavoured to answer a second, and for our purposes, more significant question; namely, how did the ruling KMT party manage to hang on to power while the country was moving from dictatorship to democracy? The various hypotheses put forward attributed it to machine politics (Kuo Jeng-liang Julian 1995; Wu 1997), local factions (Chen 1996; Rigger 1994, 1999), patron-client theory (Wang 1996), and vote buying (Rigger 1994, 1999).

The literature from the 1980s to the mid 1990s that researched this issue concluded that the informal institution known as 'factionalism' or 'local factions', the fundamental organizing principle and driving force behind Taiwanese politics, was the key factor, though not the only one, in helping the ruling KMT party hang on to power despite wide-ranging democratic reforms. Local factions may be defined as local level clientelist networks held together not by a shared ideology, but by ties of blood, kinship, marriage and personal relationships, which compete for local economic power and resources. Factions can ally themselves with national

---

<sup>11</sup> Cheng, T.J. & Marble, A. 2004. "Taiwan Studies and the Social Sciences". *Issues & Studies* 40 ( ¾): 9-57.



---

and regional political parties such as the KMT, akin to a patron-client relationship, and use their local manpower, organizational structure, and resources to elect their chosen candidates to public office in exchange for a 'share of the spoils' of local and national resources.

The latter body of research also tried to answer two related questions: 'why has the informal institution of factionalism continued to exist under a democratic system', and 'what can be done to consolidate the power of formal institutions?' The literature from this period tried to analyze the 'problem' of factions through the use of the following mechanisms and analytical categories: *guanxi* or relationships (Jacobs 1975), vote buying (Rigger 1994, 1999), machine politics (Kuo Jeng-liang Julian 1995; Rigger 1994, 1999), patron-client relationships (Chen & Chu 1992; Wang 1996) and modernization theory (Tu 1984; Bosco 1992; Huang 1994).<sup>12</sup>

The literature from the mid 1990s to the year 2004 maintained the assumption that democracy on the island was incompatible with the continued existence of certain informal institutions. However, researchers during this period focused on new forms of informal institutions- 'mafias' and 'gangs', and practices such as 'corruption', as a way of understanding the reasons behind the KMT Party's continued survival in contemporary Taiwanese politics. Thus, traditional ways of talking about politics typical of the earlier phase have been supplemented, although not replaced, by new narratives of criminality and corruption. Hitherto unused words such as 'gangster', 'mafia', and 'corruption', have complemented, and now coexist with the older analytical categories of 'patron-client', 'vote buying', 'factions', etc. Kuo Jeng-liang Julian (1995), for example, tries to explain the genesis of 'gangsters' and how they came to penetrate politics in Taiwan:

---

<sup>12</sup> Another kind of early research viewed democracy in Taiwan as being in a 'transitional' phase of development. Thus certain transitional features such as factions (Bosco 1992; Huang 1994; Tu 1984) are at present inevitable, but will eventually disappear due to the forces of modernization, education, democratization and urbanization.

---

The entrance of gangsters into local elections occurred well before... Even so, however, gangsters were weak since they were neither organized nor corporatized. They remained primarily individual and well connected with local gentry. In many cases, they acted like Robin Hood and served in keeping social order during emergency... It was only after 1980 that gangsters changed their social and political character. Together with the rise of machine politics and plutocracy, new gangsters became more business-oriented and organized... Gangsters were activated to enter politics in the wake of November 1984, when the KMT launched a nationwide campaign of 'liquidating criminals' (*yiqing zhuanan*). In this campaign, almost all gang leaders were detained for ambiguous "security" reasons rather than for their illicit behaviour. However, this political folly led to three unintended consequences: (1) All cornered up in jails, gang leaders from different areas were given unprecedented opportunities to cooperate or combine with one another, thus producing even bigger gangs after they were released. (2) With most gang leaders suddenly removed, the underground order collapsed and lower-ranked gangsters entered fierce struggle for leadership, leading to bloodier fights beyond control. (3) Most importantly, gang leaders concluded they needed some official status to protect themselves in the future. To 'bleach' themselves, they struggled to become elective officers and obtained wherewithals against the law-enforcing agencies (Kuo Jeng-liang Julian 1995: 177-179).<sup>13</sup>

Chao (1997)<sup>14</sup> explains the genesis of Taiwan's 'gangsters' in very similar terms to Kuo Jeng-liang Julian (1995). Moreover, Chao supplements the genesis story with a typology which illustrates the three-stage developmental process that organized crime underwent: The first type is the 'social type of mafia' (*shehuixing heidao*) who predate the KMT's rule in Taiwan, this group is largely made up of uneducated youth who engage in petty crime. The second type is the 'economic type of mafia' (*jingjixing heidao*) who arose alongside the country's socioeconomic transformation in the 1960s. This group runs illegal or semi-legal business operations such as massage parlours, karaoke bars, etc. The third type is the 'political type of mafia' (*zhengzhixing heidao*) who came into existence after the seminal moment of the 1984 national crackdown on crime, which resulted in many mobsters being sent to jail. Apparently, 'gangsters' realized that the best way to protect themselves from the police was to enter politics.

---

<sup>13</sup> Kuo, Jeng-liang Julian. 1995. *The Reach of the Party-State: Organizing Local Politics in Taiwan*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, Yale University.

<sup>14</sup> Chao Yung-mao. 1997. *Taiwan Difang Zhengzhi de Bianqian yu Tezhi* (Change and Characteristics of Taiwan's Local Politics). Taipei: Hanlu.

---

Chu Yun-han (1998) is pessimistic regarding Taiwan's democratic prospects. Democracy, 'still faces a series of difficult challenges that it must overcome if it is to be considered consolidated' (1998: 138), the most pressing of which is money politics and corruption:

Prospects for democratic consolidation in Taiwan are clouded...also by so-called money politics and mafia politics and their troubling implications for the legitimacy of the new democracy...During the 1980s, as opposition candidates mounted more formidable challenges and the effectiveness of vote buying declined, many local factions recruited gangsters and members of secret societies to safeguard their electoral strongholds. The local KMT officials did little to stop this trend, which seemed to offer a sure way of curbing the electoral prospects of opposition candidates...In recent years, the general public has been appalled by frequent stories about acts of extortion and other crimes committed by politicians with gangster backgrounds (Chu Yun-han 1998: 140-142).<sup>15</sup>

The KMT, the entrenched ruling party since the post-war period, won the first direct presidential elections ever held in Taiwan in 1996, but subsequently lost to the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000 and again in 2004. In what seems to be an example of permanent dissatisfaction on the part of political scientists since the first democratic transfer of power in 2000, Myers, Chao & Kuo (2002) agonize over the state of country's democratic institutions. These scholars seem to have taken the view that Taiwanese politics is 'backward', 'defective and 'unconsolidated' because, among other reasons, 'informal institutions' such as patronage, local factions, vote buying, the mafia, etc. have survived and even flourished under democracy:

The March 18, 2000, elections showed that elections mattered and that the people of Taiwan had generally complied with the election rules...But in Taiwan's local elections, local factions influenced election outcomes and the behaviour of elected politicians...Once elected, local leaders dispensed political and economic favours to their constituents...As elections broadened after 1990, the scale of vote buying increased...As political corruption increased, so did the incidence of violent crimes such as rape, murder, and kidnapping. Criminal elements were able to organize their activities in Taiwan's densely populated cities. The new Mafia-type organizations were called *heidao* (those engaging in illegal and deviant behaviour), and they used their illegal income to bribe politicians, thus giving rise to the term *heijin*, or 'black gold' (Myers, Chao & Kuo 2002: 80-81).<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Chu, Yun-han. 1998. "Taiwan's Unique Challenges". In Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) *Democracy in East Asia*. Pp.133-146. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Myers, R., Chao, L. & Kuo T. 2002. "Consolidating Democracy in the ROC on Taiwan, 1996-2000". In Bruce J. Dickson & Chien-min Chao (eds.) *Assessing the Lee Teng-hui Legacy in Taiwan's Politics: Democratic Consolidation and External Relations*. Pp. 73-90. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe.

---

Chin (2003)<sup>17</sup> continues the corruption narrative with his exhaustive study of *heijin* (black gold), a term which had already become commonly used in the popular media. Chin attributes 'black gold' politics to the convergence of gangsters, businessmen and corrupt politicians in Taiwan. He believes that whereas this triangular relationship can be found elsewhere, Taiwan is unique in that there, the realms of the 'upper world' and 'underworld' are so vague as to be sometimes indistinguishable. What is really interesting and paradoxical is that although the corruption narratives are a very recent phenomenon in the academic literature on Taiwanese politics, Chin blames 'black-gold' politics for causing virtually all of Taiwan's social and political ills. Thus, for example, 'corruption' causes vote buying, a practice that has existed long before 'corruption' became fashionable in academic circles:

In Taiwan, 'black' (*hei*) means the underworld, 'gold' (*jin*) means money or business. 'Black-gold politics' was the penetration into politics of violent underworld figures and greedy business tycoons and the inevitable subsequent social ills such as vote buying, political violence, insider trading, bid rigging, and official (and unofficial) corruption. This book is an analysis of how 'black-gold politics' developed into a major problem during the past fifteen years and how it might have ended the KMT rule in Taiwan during the 2000 presidential election after the KMT had been the pre-eminent political party in Taiwan for more than fifty years (Chin 2003: 5).

Finally, Göbel (2004)<sup>18</sup> argues that as a result of democratization, the long established patron-client relationships with local factions turned into one of mutual dependence, leading to the emergence of *heijin* (black gold) and to collusion between big business, organized crime and politicians. However, while most scholars took the view that 'black gold' political corruption has undermined democracy, Göbel goes against this aspect of received wisdom about Taiwanese politics. He is actually the only one who believes that democratization indirectly contributed to the 'black gold' phenomenon.

What I have been trying to do here is to show is that academic scholarship has been very consistent in its view that Taiwanese politics is dominated by informal institutions and is therefore 'backward', 'defective' and 'unconsolidated'. Scholarship has not perceived the nation's democratization to be consolidated, or 'bedded down', and the reasons it has given to explain this state of affairs has experienced a considerable change from around 1995. Most of the literature before then blamed factionalism and local factions and various variations on the theme (relationships, patron-clientism, machine politics, etc.).

---

<sup>17</sup> Chin, Ko-lin. 2003. *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

<sup>18</sup> Göbel, C. 2004. "Beheading the Hydra: Combating Political Corruption and Organized Crime in the KMT and DPP Eras". *China Perspectives* 56: 14-25.

---

However, post-1995 research blames ‘black gold’ money politics, the ‘underworld’, the ‘mafia’ and ‘gangsters’ as well as the traditional factors. In other words, long established and accepted rural practices such as vote buying, locally influential individuals running for elected office in the countryside, or refusing to run for office personally, choosing and bankrolling a nominal candidate instead and ‘running the show’ behind the scenes, acting like a ‘big man’ or patron by distributing money and favours, etc., have now been ‘criminalized’. Traditional forms of influence, previously called ‘informal institutions’, have now taken on new connotations of ‘crime’ and ‘illegality’.

The assumption that democracy equals formal institutions and therefore by extension, that the former must be incompatible with any form of informal institutions, is unquestioned. However, is that really the case? Formal and informal institutions are not necessarily opposing forces and their relationship can be ‘complementary, substitutive, or conflicting’ (Lauth 2000: 25-26).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, there is an intimate relationship between democratic consolidation and institutions, be they formal or informal. Informal institutions can serve to stabilize and further democracy, when for example, informal bargaining structures within the legislature, and between representatives of the legislative and executive branches, take place. Informal institutions can also serve to undermine the democratic process, when corruption and political clientelism occurs (Valenzuela 1992: 62-70).<sup>20</sup> It is my belief that the obsession with formal institutions, or the lack of them, in the research on Taiwanese politics and government, is indicative of a normative and highly idealized approach that seeks to explain, not how politics in Taiwan actually functions, but rather how politics in Taiwan *should function*.

All the research on Taiwanese politics since the mid 1980s appears to share another implicit and unquestioned assumption- there is only one possible model of democratic system and governance that the country should emulate. That model is what is popularly known as ‘liberal democracy’, and carries with it, certain notions of accountability, transparency, checks and balances, rule of law, etc. It is precisely these notions which formal institutions are supposed to ensure. The various informal institutions at play in Taiwan ‘violate’ these democratic principles of accountability and transparency, and therefore must be eradicated. Doh & Chu below compare the political systems of Taiwan and South Korea and make an explicit

---

<sup>19</sup> Lauth, H. 2000. “Informal Institutions and Democracy”. *Democratization* 7(4): 21-50.

<sup>20</sup> Valenzuela, J.S. 1992. “Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions”. In Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O’Donnell and J. Samuel Valenzuela (eds.) *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*. Pp. 57-104. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

---

assessment of 'how well these two regimes perform as electoral democracies and how much progress they have made in becoming well-functioning liberal democracies' (2004: 2):

South Korea (Korea hereafter) and Taiwan are widely recognized as the two most successful third-wave democracies in Asia...Nonetheless, little is known about how well their current regimes meet other important principles of liberal democracy and uphold its basic values such as freedom, equality, and justice...How much progress have third-wave democracies made in their march toward liberal democracy? What particular properties or qualities of liberal democracy do they lack most...Universal adult suffrage, free and fair elections, multiparty competition, and inter-party alternation in power are the most fundamental characteristics of all democracies. The successful establishment of these democratic institutions alone, however, does not guarantee the creation of liberal democracy. It merely creates electoral democracy, a regime that allows the citizens to take part in free and competitive electoral contests...What constitutes liberal democracy? It refers to a political system that allows, substantively, for political freedom and equal rights and, procedurally, limits the arbitrary use of governmental authorities and powers primarily for the well-being of individual citizens. In brief, the fundamental norms of freedom, equality, limited government serve as the substantive and procedural marks of liberal democracy (Doh & Chu 2004: 2-7).<sup>21</sup>

However, democracy is not an unproblematic concept, which can admit no differences, either in form, or style of governance. There is no 'ideal' form of democratic governance. 'Democracy is one of the most contested and controversial concepts in political theory' and remains an 'ambiguous concept' (Abrahamsen 2000: 67).<sup>22</sup> It is my belief that we should not treat formal and informal institutions, along with democracy as a political system as 'separate and apart from the socio-economic structures of society' (Abrahamsen 2000: 75). We should try to understand these formal and informal structures of power and influence within an appropriate cultural and historical context. Also, we should strive to appreciate what these informal structures mean for the people to whom they matter most. This thesis will build on the early ethnographic research by Gallin, Pasternak and Crissman that had made substantial contributions with regard to traditional forms of rural leadership, and rural institutions, both formal and informal.

---

<sup>21</sup> Doh, C.H. & Chu, Y.H. 2004. "The Quality of Democracy in South Korea and Taiwan: Subjective Assessments from the Perspectives of Ordinary Citizens". In *Asia Barometer: A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development*. Working Paper Series: No. 25. Asian Barometer Project Office: National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica.

<sup>22</sup> Abrahamsen, R. 2000. *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*. London: Zed Books.

---

## The Thai gangster state

It is instructive to look at a similar corpus of academic literature on contemporary politics in Thailand. Taiwan and Thailand have both had long experience of authoritarian regimes and have also managed to implement democratic reforms in the last two decades. In both countries, participatory democracy has allowed provincial strongmen to consolidate their local power base and to seek a presence in the national political scene. The literature on Thai politics uncannily raises very similar issues to the Taiwanese case. Much contemporary research on Thai politics has focused on political corruption and patron-clientism as the major deficiency of the country's political system. Therefore cross-cultural comparison with nearby Thailand may provide a fresh perspective that can illuminate the current received wisdom on Taiwanese politics.

Corruption has existed for decades in Thailand and the literature concerning it is relatively extensive. Much of the early literature has tried to use cultural factors as a way of explaining the pervasiveness of corruption in the country. Riggs (1966)<sup>23</sup> looked at the ways in which the Chinese business community used a system of patronage in which each person paid an influential patron, often a high-ranking bureaucrat in exchange for protection for his business activities. Van Roy (1970)<sup>24</sup> attributed corruption to a traditional Thai practice of presenting gifts to high officials, who, once appointed to a high position, will treat the office as a private domain from which any way of generating revenue is legitimate. Neher (1977)<sup>25</sup> argued for the centrality of patron-client relationships in understanding the Thai political system. Within this type of relationship both the patron and client receive benefits and thus have a vested interest in its continued survival. Clients need a patron to whom they will offer respect, gifts and services in return for favours and security. Patrons try to build up their entourage in order to maximise the flow of gifts and favours.

Pasuk & Sungsidh (1996)<sup>26</sup> mark a new direction in contemporary studies of corruption in that country. Whereas past studies endeavoured to understand corruption in terms of patron-client relationships and Thai cultural values, Pasuk and Sungsidh explicitly link corruption with the country's democratic institutions, with the view that the two are incompatible. Their comprehensive study into the nature and history of corruption in Thailand, as well as possible

---

<sup>23</sup> Riggs, F. 1966. *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press.

<sup>24</sup> Van Roy, E. 1970. "On the Theory of Corruption". *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 19:1.

<sup>25</sup> Neher, C. 1977. "Political Corruption in a Thai Province". *Journal of Developing Areas* 7:4.

<sup>26</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit & Sungsidh Piriyangsan. 1996. *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

---

solutions for it, attributes a large part of the blame to the appearance of provincial businessmen popularly known as *chaopo* (godfather). 'They sit in positions of authority in local administration. They play a key role in parliamentary elections' (1996: 57). Although these individuals have been around for a long time, they started to play significantly different roles in the 1970s, securing 'election to parliament. Some have even risen to ministerial positions and one was nominated for premiership' (1996: 58). Pasuk & Sungsidh describe below how their presence in national politics undermines the nation's political system:

They compete with the 'old elites' such as the military and bureaucracy for a share in the 'corruption money'. They manipulate the institutions of parliamentary democracy. They aim to use the resulting power to maintain their status 'above the law' in order to further their business interests, both legal and illegal. The emergence of the *chaopo* to such a position of importance in national politics raises several questions. Is this a passing phase of Thailand's economic and democratic growth? Or is this the first stage in the emergence of a structure of political boss-ism or gang-ism on par with the Italian Mafia or the political structure of some Latin American countries (1994: 58)?

Trocki,<sup>27</sup> in keeping with this new approach that links corruption and democratic politics, describes Burma, the Philippines and Thailand as 'gangster democracies' in which locally powerful individuals have achieved power through the electoral process. These individuals would be, by most measures, considered politicians, but are all 'men of violence. Most of them are murderers... They have their hands in most forms of large scale crime... They are involved in drugs, prostitution, gambling and extortion. Political "corruption" is fundamental to their way of life' (1998: 10). Laird (2000)<sup>28</sup> states that the 'biggest hurdle impeding Thailand's political development, its sustainable economic development, and its attainment of a genuine quality of life, is the patronage system which permeates Thai society and politics'. For Laird, patronage is closely linked to corruption and is anti-democratic and 'distorts the development process' (2000: 241).

Thus one can observe a striking similarity in the way research on informal institutions such as patron-client relationships and corruption have undergone a significant transformation in both Taiwan and Thailand. Whereas up to the mid 1990s, in the case of Taiwan, informal institutions such as patron-client relationships, factionalism and vote buying were seen as the principal impediments to the country's democratic consolidation. From the mid-1990s onwards, *heijin* (corruption) and *heidao* (gangsters) appear and are blamed for democracy's precariousness. Likewise, up to the mid 1990s, in the case of Thailand, patron-client

---

<sup>27</sup> Trock, C. (ed.) 1998. *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Cornell, NY: SEAP.

<sup>28</sup> Laird, J. 2000. *Money Politics, Globalization, and Crisis: The Case of Thailand*. Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd.



---

relationships and Thai culture were viewed as the main factors behind the country's pervasive corruption, from the mid 1990s onwards, provincial politicians known as *chaopo* (godfathers) are now seen as the culprits behind the country's rampant corruption, and, if unchecked, can threaten the country's fledgling democracy. The way in which democracy is being talked about in Taiwan has changed. This thesis will explore the circumstances and conditions surrounding it. This thesis will make sense of the fact that 'gangsters' are now blamed for the nation's perceived rampant corruption and precarious state of democracy.

## Contested legitimacy

Sukatipan (1995)<sup>29</sup> argues that much of the perennial political instability that invariably results in numerous coups in Thailand can be attributed to contested ideas of political legitimacy between competing spheres of power. 'In contrast to the generally uncontested legitimacy of the Thai nation-state (except in southern Thailand), the legitimacy of regimes and governments has been the subject of periodic and at times violent contention among strategic groups competing for control of state power. Since 1932 Thailand has wavered seemingly endlessly between the two opposing poles of military authoritarianism and parliamentary democracy' (1995: 193).

For Weber, legitimacy is 'the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige' (Weber in Alagappa 1995: 11).<sup>30</sup> For Alagappa, political legitimacy is 'the belief by the governed in the ruler's moral right to issue commands and the people's corresponding obligation to obey such commands...legitimacy comprises four key elements: shared norms and values, conformity with established rules for acquiring power, proper and effective use of power, and consent of the governed' (Alagappa 1995: 11-15), and leaders may claim authority based on one or more of these four elements.

Alagappa notes, however, that the second element, conformity with established rules for acquiring power, by itself, cannot confer legitimacy (1995: 31). This is especially true for developing countries, whose 'political systems are still weak and contested and embryonic. Normative frameworks about how things ought to be- and the incorporation of relations of

---

<sup>29</sup> Sukatipan, S. 1995. "Thailand: The Evolution of Legitimacy". In Mutthiah Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 193-223. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Alagappa, M. (ed.) 1995. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

power into these frameworks- are still being worked out...the level of institutionalization is low and the preconditions for employing the procedural element as the basis of domination are absent or present only in rudimentary form' (Ibid.).

What is crucial for political legitimacy is the first element, shared norms and values, for when this happens, 'the formal provisions governing the acquisition of political power are unlikely to be contested except at the margins. A government that acquires power by conforming with such provisions will be viewed as legitimate' (Alagappa 1995: 20). Questions of legitimacy often arise, in many developing countries, 'traditional states in modern garb' (Ibid.), where conformity with the rules does not necessarily translate into a broad-based legitimacy. This is because power in such countries 'derives from official positions as well as intrinsic personal qualities, but is exercised in predominantly traditional ways without distinction between private and public property' (Ibid.).

Elected leaders' legitimacy is often disputed and contested, when norms and values are keenly contested. In the case of Thailand, many rural politicians rule on the basis of traditional sources of power such as the big man system and patron clientism, and they are quite popular in their rural constituencies. However, among the educated urbanites, 'most of whom belong to professional groups and the business community. These groups apply a different set of criteria to assess the performance and legitimacy of the elected government. For them, efficiency, integrity and honesty are additional elements essential for political legitimacy. Corrupt, inefficient, and self-seeking politicians will not be tolerated' (Sukatipan 1995: 221).

Indeed, this urban-rural divide can account for another surprising element of Thai participatory democracy- the fact that support for democracy is higher among rural residents than among their urban middle class counterparts. Even the Thai provincial middle classes are less enthusiastic about democracy. They feel it will be misused in the hands of rural people, who are often blamed for the continued pervasiveness of vote buying- they often sell their votes to rural patrons. What the middle classes want is 'good government, not democracy for its own sake' (McVey 2000: 20).<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> McVey R. (ed.) 2000. *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*. Singapore: Silkworm Books.

---

This preoccupation with good government, and a suspicion of democracy, is an attitude the Thai middle classes share with the military establishment. McVey (2000: 224) asserts that the middle classes have also historically been ambivalent towards democracy as they associate it with ineffective government and corruption.<sup>32</sup> The view held by the middle-class that the democratic government at the time was ineffective and corrupt helps to explain why they were initially supportive of the 1991 coup that overthrew the parliamentary government. Although they, at times supported democracy (in the 1973, 1977 and 1992 uprisings), and at other times welcomed rule by military junta (as in the 1976 and 1991 coups), they consistently ‘support “clean” politics, meaning a politics in which electoral outcomes and policy decisions are determined by the merits of competing choices rather than the amount of cash spent on buying votes and offering bribes’ (2000: 227). In other words, the Thai middle classes want good government, clean politics, a merit-based society and a level playing field. And it is this obsession with ‘clean politics’ that explains the middle class distaste for rural politicians who buy votes and distribute benefits, resources and government largesse to their supporters.

They also have ‘an image of the democratic ideal based on the political systems of advanced capitalist democracies’. This ideal is premised on four conditions: that politicians should win votes through a platform of clear policies rather than bribes, candidates should seek political office in order to implement their policies instead of personal enrichment, that parties should have distinct ideologies, and lastly, politicians should stay in one single party and not be political opportunists, switching party affiliations when politically expedient (2000: 230). This thesis will explore Taiwanese middle class democratic ideals in general, and attitudes towards corruption, electoral politics and rural voters, in particular. This thesis will also explore urban middle class feelings of disappointment over the state of democratic politics, particularly the big man, patron client variety practised in the Taiwanese countryside.

I will make the argument that, much like the case of Thailand, a lot of the current scholarship regarding the notion that informal institutions like ‘gangsters’, and political corruption are undermining democracy in contemporary Taiwan, is really about contested and disputed notions of political legitimacy between competing power groups. In a nutshell, in Taiwan, educated urbanites hold the belief that a sound democracy is not merely about procedural issues and institutions like elections and a free press, nor is it only about efficiency and good governance, rather, it is also about leaders’ integrity and honesty. They will not tolerate

---

<sup>32</sup> The middle classes can turn against both democratic and authoritarian regimes when these are thought to be ineffective or corrupt (McVey 2000: 224).

---

corrupt acts and will dispute the legitimacy of those elected politicians, both in urban and rural areas, who do not 'make the grade' in this respect. Rural people, on the other hand want leaders to act like benevolent patrons. The issue that their politicians may or may not be deriving private gain from office is not that important to them.

There exists, however, a counterargument against the notion that rural *chaopo* (godfathers), those who rule on the basis of big man and patron client-style politics, are detrimental to Thailand's democratic institutions. It can be argued that one reason for the perception that contemporary Thai politics is corrupt is that some of the perquisites of power have shifted away from the Bangkok elite to rural strongmen. Hence what was previously a 'gentlemanly flow of benefits among those fit to rule appeared less legitimate in the hands of crass outsiders. The new politics also directed attention to the way in which power was wielded in the provinces, and focused particularly on strongmen who flourished by manipulation and force' (McVey 2000: 14-15).

A few scholars see these strongmen as playing a useful role in electoral politics. In essence, they fill a yawning gap between national and local politics, something national politicians are unable to fill. For instance Ockey feels that much of Thailand's political peculiarities can be explained by accounting for the differences in attitudes and aspirations between the nation's urban and rural voters. Urban voters care about 'abstract' issues like policies or the public good while rural voters care about 'parochial' issues, 'leading to direct benefits such as roads or bridges' (Ockey 2004: 20).<sup>33</sup>

However, national parties have 'rarely designed policies to appeal to rural voters, leaving the way clear for rural MPs to seek votes as individual patrons' (Ibid.). Thus *chaopo* (godfathers) fill the void between local interests and national politics by acting as patrons and distributing benefits to their constituents (ibid.), something that has led to frustration with parliamentary democracy among the middle classes. This thesis will explore whether there also exists a similar gap in local and national politics and whether Taiwanese rural politicians fill that gap by appealing to rural voters, acting as patrons and distributing benefits.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ockey, J. 2004. *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

---

Likewise, the notion that corruption and 'gangsters' is undermining democracy in Thailand is not universally shared. For instance, if the current relation between 'gangsters', crime and government is seen in historical perspective, one can appreciate the fact that morally ambiguous but powerful rural individuals played an important part in the administrative functions of early Thai monarchies. Before the Thai imperial court established a strong and effective central bureaucracy in the nineteenth century, 'early Thai administrators were often forced to rely on dubious figures at the periphery to exert control and collect taxes, establishing a pattern of collaboration' (Ockey 1998: 40)<sup>34</sup> that was to continue under various military regimes in the twentieth century.

This collaboration continued under parliamentary governments when national parties, needing representatives in every locality right down to the village level during election time, 'turned to the local *nakleng*' (Ockey 1998: 44). Furthermore, 'gangsters', gang violence, and corruption may actually be viewed as a characteristic of 'democratic' political life as 'the practice of democracy calls forth individuals and groups who can mobilize and support and who ultimately vote at the local level'. Thus, we can see that powerful rural figures of dubious morals have long collaborated with the Thai state, and this pattern of collaboration antedates the country's democratic transition. So-called 'gangsters' and corruption are characteristic of democratic political life- they are indispensable. Political decentralization 'has created opportunities for individuals from outside the state apparatus to seek political power through the electoral process' (Trocki 1998: 12).<sup>35</sup> This thesis will apply the theory that 'gangsters' and corruption are characteristic of democratic political life in general, and political decentralization in particular, to the case of contemporary Taiwan.

Notwithstanding the political similarities between the two countries, each has its own particularity. The relationship between democracy and 'corruption', while obvious for scholars of Taiwanese politics, is less clear in the case of Thailand. 'The relationship is clearly complex' (Pasuk & Sungsidh 1996: 2). Unlike Taiwan, which experienced a gradual but irreversible process of democratization beginning in earnest in the 1980s, Thailand has had a succession of elected governments, which have been toppled by military coups. Indeed the 'military junta which carried out the 1991 coup just four months after provincial council elections justified their seizure of power and dismissal of parliament as a move to counter corruption in *order to save democracy*' (Ibid.). They argued that 'Thai democracy was impure because politicians

---

<sup>34</sup> Ockey, J. 1998. "Crime, Society and Politics in Thailand". In Carl Trocki (ed.) *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 39-53. Cornell, NY: SEAP.

<sup>35</sup> Trocki, C. (ed.) 1998. *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Cornell, NY: SEAP.

---

bought votes and were corrupt' (Arghiros 2001: 170).<sup>36</sup> This justification was self-serving as the military cannot claim to be untainted by corruption. Nevertheless, Thailand's military do not seem to be enthusiastic supporters of democracy as they feel it is not always congruent with good government.

## **Southeast Asian political culture**

In several countries in Southeast Asia, among the urban middle classes and the intelligentsia, certain political ideas like the rule of law, political accountability, emphasis on formal institutions, etc. have taken root (Mulder 1996: 217).<sup>37</sup> However, one must also take into account cultural values that are held by wider society, in order to better understand the complex ways in which these interact with political structures, and how these influence people's attitudes toward corruption, democracy and elections.

It would be useful to locate contemporary Thai politics within the broader context of the political history and traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia comprises a vast geographic region that contains myriad diversity of cultures and ethnicities with no dominant cultural tradition. Notwithstanding this diversity, 'there are certainly various social and cultural elements which serve to unite large parts of the region and distinguish them from China and India' (King & Wilder 2003: 14).<sup>38</sup>

Southeast Asian social organization is generally characterized by the principle of bilateral or cognatic reckoning of kinship, relative gender equality, folk religion based on spirit propitiation and ancestor and fertility cults, a focus on the sacred qualities of the human head, etc. Nevertheless, the most significant shared cultural element in Southeast Asia, for the purposes of this thesis, is the 'widespread occurrence of the politic-cultural institution of "big men"' (Ibid. 2003: 14). Hence, given this broader context, one is able to appreciate certain historical continuities between the contemporary Thai rural strongman or *chaopo* (godfather) and an older tradition of informal rural leadership known as the *phuyai* (big man).

---

<sup>36</sup> Arghiros, D. 2001. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.

<sup>37</sup> Mulder, N. 1996. *Inside Southeast Asia: religion, everyday life, cultural change*. Amsterdam: Pepin Press.

<sup>38</sup> King, V. & Wilder, W. 2003. *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

---

Southeast Asian political history has long been characterized by the 'shifting dynamics of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies', wherein successive monarchies and colonial administrations had all tried to 'assert the primacy of central state structures' in various states of the region. However, these imperial courts and colonial regimes have not succeeded in imposing continuous, unbroken and effective control over their territories for any length of time, only managing at the best of times to implement imperial state structures of a fragile nature.

The modern Thai polity, like most states, is a monolithic, centralized bureaucracy. However this state of affairs is quite recent. The Kingdom of Thailand underwent a profound bureaucratic transformation only in the late nineteenth century. Before that, Bangkok had related to its subjects not directly, but through intermediaries- local and regional chiefs, powerful and charismatic individuals who were to be found in the peripheral areas of the kingdom (Mcvey 2000: 5). Powerful and charismatic leaders developed who were independent of the state, but at the same time were co-opted by it for purposes of rule by proxy.

Wolters (1999: 11)<sup>39</sup> calls these political entrepreneurs who operate on the margins of, and sometimes in competition with, other times in collaboration with royal kingdoms or colonial states, 'men of prowess'. These locally influential leaders were skilled negotiators, diplomats, public orators and soldiers and religious leaders. Their type of leadership was characterized by flexibility, instability and achievement, and the personal qualities of a leader have to be demonstrated and continually renewed. Furthermore, political leadership is associated with certain cultural features such as patron clientship, personal entourages, factions and cliques, marriage alliances, etc.

Thus, these men of prowess- *phuyai* or big men achieved official recognition by being elected as *phuyaiban* or village head. It was these notables with whom district officials formally dealt (Mcvey 2000: 7). Law was distant. It was a matter for the state and not for the common people. 'It was distant, incomprehensible, and generally available only to those who had the right connections and price. Local leaders and personal relationships were the providers of protection and arbiters of justice, not the law nor her officials' (Mcvey 2000: 8).

---

<sup>39</sup> Wolters, O.W. 1999. *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Publications, Studies on Southeast Asia 26.

---

A *phuyai*, in Thai, means 'big man'- the 'commander of men who can attract followers whom he can dominate, direct their lives and activities, dispense or withhold rewards from them, and demand their subservience and loyalty', and Thais want nothing more than to be one (Potter 1976: 194).<sup>40</sup> *Phuyai* are not respected because of wealth, prestige, position, or criminal influence, the source of their respect comes from their power, their ability to dominate and build up an entourage. 'If one is powerful that is sufficient; the source of that power is relatively unimportant' (Ockey 1998: 41).

In rural Thailand, beneath the *phuyai* (big man), was the historical *nakleng* (village strongman). He often played the role of protector of the village, and was widely admired and respected. He was a local hero, who, although may have raided and stolen from other villages and have been involved in criminal offences, strove to protect and defend his own village from the predations of *naklengs* from other villages. He would help resolve the crime by playing the role of mediator and sometimes he and his followers would gain protection from officials in return for a share of the spoils. He was a Robin Hood-like figure, a social bandit. He would ensure the return of stolen goods and maintain order, and may one day aspire to be *phuyaiban* (village leader). '*Nakleng* had a code of bravery, of decisiveness, and of loyalty to their own' (Ockey 1998: 42). He wielded considerable power and commanded respect in the village through a combination of threats and rewards (Ockey 2004: 82).

It is in this socio-political history of the Southeast Asian region that the local political entrepreneur needs to be viewed (Trocki 1998: 7).<sup>41</sup> Modern-day equivalents of these pre-modern Southeast Asian political entrepreneurs, 'men of prowess', can be seen in several states of contemporary Southeast Asia. Thailand, The Philippines, and Burma, have, in the last two decades, seen the emergence of democracy movements, and have managed to overthrow authoritarian and military rule, replacing them with elected civilian governments. Two of these three countries are now recognizably democratic, with salient features such as 'elected legislative bodies and executives, regular elections, political parties, written constitutions, and formal guarantees of political and individual human liberties'.

---

<sup>40</sup> Potter, J.M. 1976. *Thai Peasant Social Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>41</sup> Trock, C. (ed.) 1998. *Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Cornell, NY: SEAP.



---

Yet within this new political framework, local and regional strongmen have survived, even thrived, parlaying their wealth, influence and connections to consolidate their regional power bases and to seek positions of power and influence on the national scene. They have grasped economic and political opportunities that beckoned by participating in electoral politics, acting as vehicles for the expression of local interests in national legislatures, further enriching themselves and their constituencies through the diversion of national resources and the manipulation for their own profit of the privileges of public office (Trocki 1998: 9). Sidel discusses below the various realms that ‘godfathers’ have come to occupy and dominate in Thai life since the mid 1980s:

These *chaopo* conducted interrelated activities in three realms: the economy, elections, and the state’s coercive apparatus. First the economic activities of *chaopo* are quite visible within loosely defined territorial bailiwicks, where they accumulate proprietary wealth (agricultural land, real estate, mills, processing centres, factories; shares in banks and industrial firms), acquire state-derived concessions, contracts, and franchises (e.g., logging, mining, public works, transport), and operate illegal rackets (e.g., in the drug trade, gambling, smuggling). Second *chaopo* have achieved great prominence and power through their successful service- or provision or- vote brokers (*hua khanen*) in elections, delivering parliamentary constituencies, or regional clusters of constituencies, to Bangkok-based patrons, local clients, or themselves on election day, through a combination or coercion, vote buying, and electoral fraud...(Sidel 1999: 150).<sup>42</sup>

A note of caution, however, rural Thai strongmen have existed for a long time, but have traditionally been reluctant to take on the responsibilities of public office, and ‘as recently as the 1960s the positions of *kamman* (sub district head) and village head were deeply unpopular’ (Arghiros 2001: 71) because local office held few rewards. This situation started to change in the mid-1970s when development budgets to the sub district council were decentralized, and suddenly influential individuals saw ‘predictable and significant economic gains’ from the post of *kamman* or village head (Ibid.). Therefore, entry of ‘gangsters’ into rural office was initially due to the availability of new sources of generating wealth, and not due to a desire to capture political office per se.

The image of the powerful, but benevolent and heroic *nakleng* is such, that, many powerful individuals in present day Thailand claim to be *nakleng*, but bristle when referred to as *chaopo*, a literal translation of the English word ‘godfather’, which sometimes has criminal connotations. The term connotes not only wealth and power, but also the ability to operate above the law (Pasuk & Sungsidh 1996: 57). The term has an older meaning, that of a type of

---

<sup>42</sup> Sidel, J. 1999. *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

guardian spirit. Even the term *chaopo* has divided into ‘good’ *chaopo* and ‘bad’ *chaopo*, with the former resembling the *nakleng*, and evoking the older meaning of *chaopo*, that of guardian spirit, and the latter, one is involved in disputes and killings. Nowadays the term *chaopo* has been so loosely used by the media that it now strongly connotes those involved in the vice trade; smuggling, prostitution, etc (Chartornvong 2000: 56).<sup>43</sup>

The Thai bureaucrat and the big man are both men of status who command respect. They both have power, but the nature of the power that a bureaucrat possesses differs from the big man’s. The Thai term *ammatt* means ‘legitimate power’, that being derived from official authority. The term *itthiphon*, on the other hand, means influence, an informal kind of power, something that connotes impropriety and illegality; something a charismatic leader traditionally outside of the state apparatus possesses. Officials possessed *ammatt*, the power of authority, while non-officials, especially *nakleng* (village strongman) and *phuyai* (big man) at best had *itthiphon*, which was illegitimate as the proper locus of power rested in the state alone. Indeed, very recently in contemporary Thailand, partly as a result of media coverage, the only adjective that ever occurs alongside, *itthiphon* is the term *muet*, which means ‘malign’ and ‘dark’ (Mcvey 2000: 5). This suggests that the modern, highly centralized and bureaucratic Thai polity seems to disapprove of and discourages rural leaders with alternative sources of power and legitimacy to the state. It calls these leaders ‘godfathers’ and insists that their ‘influence’ is necessarily bad.

Nevertheless, Thai *chaopo*, like their historical counterparts, play complex, multifaceted roles in contemporary Thai society. They are often on the wrong side of the law, yet collaborate with the authorities and are fundamental for political parties in capturing of political power in the countryside. The urban and provincial middle-classes despise their role in political corruption, yet they are popular among rural voters as they appeal to local interests by acting as patrons. This thesis will look at the nature of the ‘influence’ that rural politicians called *heidao* (gangsters) wield, and contrast it with the ‘authority’ of government officials. It will also explore the complex roles that they play in contemporary Taiwanese electoral politics.

Hanks (1962)<sup>44</sup> explored the relationship between cultural values and Thai political structures, specifically groups centred round a powerful individual. He saw merit and power to be the two fundamental principles behind social order and hierarchy. Thai society is vertically structured in a rigid, but also highly fluid hierarchy, in which each man occupies a station. One man’s

---

<sup>43</sup> Chartornvong, S. 2000. “Local Godfathers in Thai Politics”. In Ruth McVey (ed.) *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*. Pp. 53-73. Singapore: Silkworm Books.

<sup>44</sup> Hanks, L. 1962. “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order”. *American Anthropologist* 64 (6): 1247-1261.

---

place in the hierarchy depends on merit (*bhun*) or virtue, wherein the higher one's position, the more merit he possesses.

Merit is not a fixed virtue, but can be added to or subtracted from, and individuals rise and fall within the hierarchy according to the relative amount of merit they possess at a given time. Thus people 'make meritorious deeds' in order to increase their store of merit and rise to a higher station. There is, in addition, another way of ascending the hierarchy, which is for one person to tie his fortune with another one, higher up than he. The higher up one is, the more resources he can distribute to his 'inferiors', and the more one's status as *phuyai* (big man) is consolidated.

Hence, the appeal of a big man to ordinary people depends on his greater perceived store of merit and power. Followers yearn to belong to a *phuyai's* (big man) group or entourage. For to belong to a big man is to be in a position to benefit from greater resources than if one acted alone. Furthermore, power begets power, and power is a sign of goodness and virtue. Thus 'power itself is proof of goodness and virtue and attracts followers... The reverse is also true. If power begins to slide from the leader of a clique, it falls at an accelerating rate, since the initial slide is evidence of a decline in virtue which in turn results in less power to reward those opportunities those opportunistic followers who quickly leave a sinking leader' (Rosen 1975: 142-143).<sup>45</sup>

In order to further understand how people's cultural values influence attitudes towards democracy, we should also see how Thai culture perceives social life and how it perceives wider society. Thai culture views political life as belonging to either one of two spheres; the internal world of one's own family, community and village, and the external world. The inner world of family, community and village is one where values of hierarchy, moral inequality, moral obligation, shared well-being and mutual dependence predominate. Moral, consensual rules of the family and community operate to maintain harmony and stability in this inner world.

The external realm is also seen as hierarchical. But more importantly, especially for rural people, the external world is anonymous and businesslike, unruly and unlawful, morally neutral and beyond the moral, consensual rules that bind residents of the inner world (Mulder 1996: 221). This unruly, unlawful, anonymous and morally neutral zone that is the world beyond the village and community is both threatening and mysterious for rural denizens. They

---

<sup>45</sup> Rosen, G. 1975. *Peasant Society in a Changing Economy: Comparative Development in Southeast Asia and India*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

---

know they may not understand it, but want and need someone who can impose *their* will and enforce *their* order there. Thus for rural people politics is about having a local person, an insider, who is powerful. For them 'politics is about power, about laying claims to the external world. Power is an attribute of strong men, of 'men of prowess' who can impose their will on an unruly, unlawful external world. Such power is morally neutral. Power operates in an area that is beyond the moral, consensual rules of the inner world of family and community' (Mulder 1996: 221).

Keeping order in society is the task of government, particularly a 'personalized leader' a 'man of prowess' capable of dominating the external world. He enforces desirable order, and what is good for him, as a father, should be good for all. It is, therefore, loyalty to him and the collectivity he stands for, that is far more important than law as a means of maintaining good order (Mulder 1996: 217). And a politician, a 'man of prowess' is expected to use 'his power for his own purposes, his benefit and in the interest of those who depend on him'. The external world is 'like the forest, it is there to be exploited, it is a shared resource, not the public good' (Mulder 1996: 221). It is 'nobody's and everybody's land, a field of opportunity to be appropriated as the need arises...It is a shared resource, but not a common possession' (Mulder 1996: 216). Thus once one accepts these basic premises of rural political life, the idea of 'corruption' will then sit uneasily in the Southeast Asian rural context. This thesis will look at rural values and attitudes towards life in general, and towards corruption, politics and politicians in particular. It will also investigate how rural strongmen appeal to voters by accommodating and catering to voters' aspirations and expectations of their leaders.

---

## A history of rural leadership

Taiwan in 1600 was on the fringes of the Chinese empire and was peripheral to Chinese consciousness and activity. It was inhabited largely by aboriginal tribes of Malayo-Polynesian stock, and was only irregularly visited by Chinese fishermen, pirates and smugglers. Dutch and Spanish expeditions had established minor posts and forts on the island, but were unable to consolidate their presence, and had largely abandoned the island by the second half of the seventeenth century. Throughout its history, it had served as a base and refuge for rebel forces who used it as a staging ground for rebellion against China, and also those who sought to escape Chinese rule (Wills 1999).<sup>46</sup>

Taiwan came to be incorporated into the Chinese imperial state in 1684, when the island was made a prefecture of the southern Chinese province of Fukien. A military garrison and a civil administration were established to administer the island on behalf of Fukien Province. Large-scale immigration of Fukienese, mostly males, occurred during the period of Qing imperial rule of Taiwan (1684-1895), especially from the eighteenth century onwards. Life on the island during this period can best be described as a big frontier or pioneer town. The preponderance of unattached males, fond of gambling and brawling, villages composed of Chinese settlers who shared the same surname or the same hometown in China, which fostered inter-village mistrust and rivalry, combined with many outlaws, bandits, and other criminal elements, all contributed to create a situation of chronic unrest and sub-ethnic strife until about 1780 (Shepherd 1999).<sup>47</sup>

The presence of strong rural leaders first developed during the early days of Chinese immigration and settlement of Taiwan in the early Qing period. The Qing dynasty administrative rule over Taiwan has been characterized as largely 'weak' and 'ineffective', thereby precluding any chance of establishing a strong government there. Bureaucrats were sent to administer Taiwan until the end of Qing rule in the late nineteenth century. However, they could not cope with the amount of responsibilities, given the meagre resources at their disposal, and their lack of familiarity with local conditions.

---

<sup>46</sup> Wills, J. 1999. "The Seventeenth-Century Transformation: Taiwan under the Dutch and the Cheng Regime". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 84-106. London: M.E. Sharpe.

<sup>47</sup> Shepherd, J. 1999. "The Island Frontier of the Ch'ing, 1684-1780". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 107-132. London: M.E. Sharpe.

---

Qing officials and troops stationed on the island were poorly trained and were assigned to the island on three-year intervals. Imperial officials appointed to serve in Taiwan were offered such a very low rate of remuneration that 'officials had to resort to all kinds of corruption to make enough money to live' (Goddard 1966: 99).<sup>48</sup> Mandarins and yamen were corrupt and local people were provoked by the restrictive regulations the Taiwan officials had to enforce, especially during the last two decades of Qing rule (Lamley 1981: 291).<sup>49</sup> 'The high cost of collecting revenue, the difficulty of constraining abuse by tax collectors, and the resistance heavy taxation created' compelled the late imperial state to minimize expenditures, keep taxes low, and finally to rely on local elites to provide governmental services (Shepherd 1995: 5).<sup>50</sup>

Toward the end of the early period of Qing rule when Taiwan was still characterized as a 'frontier' region (1684-1780), local elites became increasingly involved in assisting state officials assert control over their communities (Wilkerson 2004: 147).<sup>51</sup> Prominent locals were deputized as assistants (*tiexie*), to directly administer each village's day-to-day affairs. At the time all able-bodied villagers had to devote a certain number of days each year in compulsory service (*kugong*) to the Qing government, but *tiexie* were exempt. They did not receive a salary for their services but were allowed to collect a fee from the people they helped. They were virtually 'agents' working on behalf of the state with semi-official status.

Few important things got done in village life without their involvement. These *tiexie* wielded a lot of *quanshi* (power and influence) and these posts were extremely coveted (*hen qiangshou*), only the most influential and charismatic personalities in each locality were appointed to the post. These posts provided an opportunity to make money as there was no standard fee for each service, thus the *tiexie* would maximize their income by varying the fees sought depending on the circumstances. The Qing officials who governed in the formal sense knew of and often tolerated their lucrative activities as the *tiexie* combined intimate knowledge of local conditions with sufficient charisma and power to be effective leaders (Wang 2004: 64-65).<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Goddard, W.G. 1966. *Formosa: A Study in Chinese History*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>49</sup> Lamley, H. 1981. "Subethnic Rivalry in the Ch'ing Period". In Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (eds.) *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Pp.282-318. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Shepherd, J. 1995. *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier 1600-1800*. SMC Publishing: Taipei.

<sup>51</sup> Wilkerson, J. 2004. "Late Imperial Education and Control: Rural Villages in the Penghu Islands". *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 2 (1): 141-170.

<sup>52</sup> Wang Tai-sheng. 2004. *Taiwan Falü Shi Gai Lun* (An Historical Introduction to Taiwanese Law). [2<sup>nd</sup> Ed]. Taipei: Yuan Zhao Chu Ban Gong Si.

---

A new class of landed gentry began to develop in the 'intermediate' period of Qing rule (1780-1860), before Taiwan opened its ports to foreign trade. This intermediate period was also characterized by greatly expanded immigration to Taiwan from Fukien Province, as well as from other parts of China. Life during the early and intermediate period of Qing rule can be described as chaotic and lawless, punctuated by 159 incidents of civil disturbances, ranging from armed clashes, uprisings to peasant revolts and rebellions (Chen 1999: 136). This state of affairs was provoked by the widespread corruption and incompetence of the bureaucracy, conflicts between ethnic clans and villages who came from different regions in China and spoke different languages, and the large numbers of single, unemployed young men wandering the countryside making a living out of banditry.

Although the rural elite was often not a formal part of the bureaucracy with imperial title, the harsh conditions during that era forced local folk to cultivate strong personal ties to them as well as turn to each other for the provision of basic needs and services. Villages, usually comprising either Hakka or Hoklo ethnic groups, formed *shenminghui* (religious societies), *zongci* (ancestral halls) and community temples which served as 'local political centres and served as symbols of unity, centres of self-government, and (in times of strife) headquarters for local militia' (Lamley 1981: 295). 'The involvement of lineages and temples in at least the yamen sub-bureaucracy was widespread across large areas of the empire' (Wilkerson 2004: 147).

The landlords of the intermediate period in Qing Taiwan used their resources and influence to mobilize local citizens militias, partly to help the bureaucracy put down rebellions in their areas, partly to mediate and resolve local disputes, partly to defend the village against marauding bandits, and also partly to protect their own property rights and living standards from 'bureaucratic parasitism'. By 1860 these landlords had accumulated enough wealth and social status as leaders of their rural communities, assuming 'the characteristics associated with a local strongman in response to the general failure of the Ch'ing bureaucracy to provide for local security and protection' (Chen 1999: 137).<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Chen, Chiukun. 1999. "From Landlords to Local Strongmen: The Transformation of Local Elites in Mid-Ch'ing Taiwan, 1780-1862". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 133-162. London: M.E. Sharpe.

---

The status of the village landlords as community leaders and strongmen survived well into the twentieth century, and was greatly reinforced during the Japanese period (1895-1945). The Japanese colonial officials 'preferred to handle village problems through the wealthy landlord class rather than by dealing directly with the peasants', and 'if the villagers were to get along successfully with the Japanese, they had to work through their landlords'. Thus the landlord continued as a formal and informal leader during this period, taking an active part in most of the village's social and political affairs, mediating in village and inter-village disputes (Gallin 1966: 114-115).

In 1949 after its loss to the Communists in China's protracted civil war, the KMT retreated to Taiwan. Mindful not to repeat the economic collapse that happened in China, the KMT was intent on shoring up the island's economy. In the agrarian sector, this meant the implementation a series of economic reforms- rent reduction, the sale of public land, and a Land to Tiller program that redistributed most of the land from the island's relatively few landlords to the tenant farmers. These economic reforms had tremendous results for the countryside. Former tenant farmers were able to finally own their own land and their increased incentives to work the land led to an increased yield, resulting in greatly increased incomes (Wang 1999: 324-325).<sup>54</sup>

Then KMT leader General Chiang Kai-shek instituted elections at the county, municipal, and provincial, although not national levels in the early 1950s to create and maintain a façade of legitimacy for what was essentially an occupying power. The KMT, faced with regular elections in the countryside, sought to maintain control over local politics by using two methods by which it was able to manipulate local politicians; it granted government-dominated economic privileges to cooperative politicians, and it created at least two mutually opposed coalitions, now known as 'factions', in every area. This ensured that a permanent opposition did not surface as it played the factions off against each other, permitting the factions to alternate in power at the local level (Wang 1999: 327).

---

<sup>54</sup> Wang, Peter Chen-main. 1999. "A Bastion Created, A Regime Reformed, An Economy Reengineered, 1949-1970". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 320-338. London: M.E. Sharpe.



---

It was in the 1950s that the characteristics of contemporary local politics began to take shape. The landed class, the traditional rural strongmen were gradually joined, but not completely replaced,<sup>55</sup> by a small group of new informal leaders who 'have more time and money than their fellows and who may aspire to improve their status' (Gallin 1966: 116). This new class of local leaders took advantage of new opportunities of enrichment in agriculture through greater access to land, credit, fertilizer, and machinery. These local leaders however, were reluctant to occupy political office, as the economic rewards were small, preferring to exert influence behind the scenes.

The KMT also laid the foundations for the country's economic miracle in the 1950s and 1960s. The success of land reform resulted in farmland being divided into small parcels, removing the economic incentive in putting more labour and investment into agriculture and thereby making investment in labour-intensive, light industrial manufacturing a more attractive investment. The government also consciously promoted an export-oriented strategy through the creation of export processing zones, soft loans, and foreign exchange liberalization, which made Taiwan an attractive site for domestic and foreign owned industries (Wang 1999: 331-333).

New opportunities for enrichment in the countryside came with the central government's decision to invest heavily in the nation's infrastructure in the 1970s and 1980s. By the early 1980s, the KMT regime had given up its dream to 'liberate the mainland', and vast amounts of money were earmarked for thousands of construction projects for roads, bridges, and buildings to be built in the countryside. The substantial sums for construction projects went into local coffers whose disbursement was largely under the discretion of locally elected officials. This constituted a strong financial incentive for well-connected and locally influential individuals to run for political office. Locally influential businessmen, entrepreneurs, local politicians parlayed their connections at the local level, bribing officials, rigging public tenders, setting up construction companies, erecting structures with substandard materials, ensuring projects went to favoured friends and business associates, all in order to profit from the massively lucrative construction projects (Chin 2003: 144).

---

<sup>55</sup> The traditional landlords were given incentives to shift their investments into industry (Wang 1999: 325).

---

In the 1980s the country had a thriving economy and an ever-rising standard of living. A lot of capital was going idle, though, as the cost of labour was making low value-added industries uneconomic, but at the same time existing capital controls prevented entrepreneurs from setting up factories abroad.<sup>56</sup> Ambitious individuals from the city and countryside realized there existed an opportunity to profit from a vast hitherto untapped market in leisure by catering to consumers who were capital rich. These individuals created a vast semi-legal leisure and entertainment industry- gambling joints, video arcades, karaoke bars, brothels, and even popular religion temples. Entrepreneurs ran underground lotteries and gambling places, operated illegal video arcades, managed karaoke bars and brothels, and even took over popular religion temples where resident mediums promised to divine the winning lottery number in exchange for a fee or donation. These individuals who profited from the new industry were often either, well-connected and locally influential businessmen who operated in a legal and commercial context that happened to be murky, if not illegal, or were local officials with ties to these businessmen.

By the 1980s Taiwan's economic transformation was largely complete, and in this period the country's political system also underwent a similar change. General Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, and was succeeded by his son Chiang Ching-kuo, who ruled until his death in 1988. President Chiang presided over a period of political liberalization, lifting Martial Law in 1987 and allowing the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to form and to openly participate in electoral politics. Lee Teng-hui succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988 and proceeded to liberalize the political process further and contributed to the effective end of one-party rule. The country's first direct presidential elections were held in 1996 and the KMT, led by President Lee, won the popular vote. However, Chen Shui-bian of the DPP won the 2000 presidential election and again in 2004, in the first ever democratic transfer of power in Taiwan's history.

---

<sup>56</sup> The barriers to overseas investment were lifted in the 1990s.

---

## The biography of Yen Ching-piao

This thesis will examine the life of an individual, Legislator Yen Ching-piao, who best exemplifies the complexities and contradictions of the *heidao* phenomenon in Taiwan. This man is a rural politician turned national legislator who the press and middle-classes vilify as representing all that is wrong with contemporary Taiwanese politics. Yet he, and other rural politicians like him, consistently win elections for public office in the countryside, and, at least in the case of Yen Ching-piao, broadly enjoy popular support among his constituency. 45 years old in 2005, Mr. Yen is the eldest of four surviving sons of Mr. Yen senior, Yen Huai, who is 72 and presently retired and since 2004, a widower. His mother, Chen-cai, was 68 when she passed away in 2004. His siblings are Yen Ching-tong, 44, Yen Ching-jin, 42, and finally Yen Ching-san, 41. The youngest, Yen Liang-she is deceased, having died over 10 years ago.

Yen Ching-piao was nicknamed 'piao the stone pumpkin' (*dongguabiao*) by his grandfather owing to his short and stout build. Although he never liked it, that label has stuck with him for the past forty years. Married at 17, and a grandfather at 36, he came from a very humble background and his origins still have an effect on him to this day. 'When I saw my parents struggle, I felt sad for them working so hard to raise four children' he recalls in an interview. He would go to market at five in the morning to buy fish and other provisions even before he started school. Studying was a luxury poor people could not afford in those days. He skipped much of school in the early days as he had to work to support his parents and eventually dropped out of primary school. He learnt to drive a truck at seven and was already an important source of income for his family by the time he was thirteen. He took over his father's rice selling business not long after that. His neighbours felt sorry for the boy. His father was a kind but strict man, as he thought children needed a firm but loving upbringing.

Not much is known about his adolescent years. However, his adult years are well known and documented. Mr. Yen was a major *jiaotou* (big man) figure in central Taiwan's coastal area, operating illegal gambling dens. In a bid to expand his gambling operations, he recruited a number of violent chronic offenders and also got along well with local government officials. He had a reputation as a highly influential *heidao* in central Taiwan in the early part of the 1980s,

---

partly through his ability to lavish his underlings with money and privileges, and his knack for entertaining other influential individuals.<sup>57</sup>

He was caught in Operation Cleansweep (*yiqingzhuanan*), the crackdown on so-called gang activity, and subsequently spent three and a half years in Green Island's maximum-security prison in the wake of the then KMT martial law government's crackdown on organized crime in 1986. He was sent to prison at twenty-six. At that time all four Yen brothers were in prison. 'I'll never forget those days I spent inside. I felt bad for having let my parents down. My friends encouraged me to enter politics. All I want is to do good and make it up to my parents. I am ashamed of what I did in the past'.<sup>58</sup>

He promptly stopped leading a 'life of crime' and entered local politics. He became a borough warden (*lizhang*) and a member of the KMT's Black Faction (*Heipai*) in Taichung upon his release. Three years later he became a Taichung county councillor (*xianyiyuan*) in the 1994 election. He was the candidate who garnered the most votes, and won all the elections he stood in and, by 35, was the youngest ever member of the Taiwan Provincial Assembly. He was preparing to campaign for the council speakership when he was accused of trying to bribe fellow councillor Yeh Shih-tou with NT\$ 2 million to win his support.

Both Mr. Yen and Mr. Yeh were found guilty and each was sentenced to one year in prison at the close of the first trial at the Taichung district court in 1994. Both men appealed the verdict at Taiwan High Court's Taichung Branch, which overturned the district court's verdict and found them both innocent. The Taichung prosecutors however made two appeals to the Supreme Court but the high court's verdict was upheld twice, absolving him. On the third retrial, however, the High Court decided to uphold the district court's original guilty verdict- a one-year sentence for each defendant. He appealed for a fourth time.

He is widely believed to have strong, but indirect links with 'gangsters' and holds sway among local factions and has various business interests spanning cable TV, gravel plants, cement factories and restaurants.<sup>59</sup> 'Both my father and grandfather have been a big influence on me. My grandfather wanted me to have a lot of friends, both good and bad ones, but my father

---

<sup>57</sup> See "The fiercest man in the Shalu battleground". *China Times Weekly* n. 422. March 30, 1986. Pp. 39-43.

<sup>58</sup> Extract from an interview with Mr. Yen, conducted by my research assistant Vivian Chen at the Legislative Yuan in July 2004.

<sup>59</sup> See "The history of the man they call 'stone pumpkin'". *Taipei Times*. June 15, 2000. p. 3.

---

wanted me to stay away from bad people and be a good boy'.<sup>60</sup> There was an incident involving a car-chase and shoot-out between Taichung police and Mr. Yen and some of his lieutenants (*xiaodi*) in 1995. Two journalists who reported the story were subsequently attacked by a group of thugs with baseball bats. The local police chief even apologized to Mr. Yen after the incident. When a group of reporters mentioned Mr. Yen's alleged *heidao* background to his office manager, he quickly answered back, saying: 'Mr. Yen is a member of the Black Faction (*Heipai*) he is not a gangster (*heidao*)'.<sup>61</sup>

The following year saw another violent and highly publicized incident at the shareholders' meeting at San Teh Enterprise. Apparently, Mr. Yen, with a group of 'brothers', appeared alongside another controversial assemblyman called Chen Ming-wen. He was caught on camera yelling and participating in a group brawl, and had this to say when asked about his poor public image: 'Chewing betel nuts and cursing are not necessarily bad. As far as I am concerned, this behaviour indicates that the person is close to ordinary people. In the local political arena, this is the best way to win the constituents' trust'.<sup>62</sup>

The next year, Mr. Yen's brother and fellow assemblyman Yen Ching-jin, another alleged *heidao*, who had earlier escaped to the Philippines in order to avoid arrest by the Taiwanese authorities, publicly announced that he would kill Yang Tien-sen, his brother's political rival. 'I have no idea what my brother is up to. He is crazy and this is really a headache for me because I already have my hands full. People say that I might be a target of the *Chih-ping* antigang program, that I am the main operator of the underground professional baseball gambling racket in central Taiwan, and that I am the main reason for the crackdown on mob involvement in the stock market. People are blaming me for all the bad things. Now, even my own brother is creating a problem for me'.<sup>63</sup>

In 1998 Mr. Yen was nominated county council speaker (*xianyizhang*) after an easy re-election in that year's contest for the Taichung County Council. He became chairman (*dongshizhang*) of *Jenlangong* Temple in Dajia, in 1999. The temple had a total savings of NT\$ 1.2 billion in 1999, and many suspect Mr. Yen and his followers want to get their hands on the money. 'If you wanted to make a lot of money, controlling rich temples is a much easier way than, for example, a public corporation where public oversight ensures there are very

---

<sup>60</sup> Extract from the same interview with Mr. Yen done by my research assistant Vivian Chen in July 2004.

<sup>61</sup> See "Black terror engulfed the soul of reporters". *Taiwan Weekly* n. 97. August 13, 1995. Pp. 12-26.

<sup>62</sup> See "Chen Ming-wen and Yen Ching-piao: Two bulls in politics and business". *Scoop Weekly* n. 428. October 20, 1996. Pp. 144-146.

<sup>63</sup> See "A powerful force behind the threat from overseas". *China Times Weekly* n. 996. March 30, 1997. Pp. 128-130.

---

strict accounting and auditing procedures, temple affairs are not subject to strict supervision' says a local Dajia informant. However, Ms. Liu, Mr. Yen's secretary is quick to deny accusations of financial impropriety 'It's impossible. As a follower of Mazu, how can it be possible for Mr. Yen to seek profit from Mazu followers' donations?'<sup>64</sup>

Politicians have been courting *Jenlangong* Temple for a long time. They sought the temple's favours as it is a famous religious temple, and organizer of one of Taiwan's most famous annual pilgrimages. Presidential candidates routinely stage high-profile visits to the temple in an attempt to win the sympathy of the masses. As one of the most powerful county council speakers and chairman of one of Taiwan's richest and largest religious organizations, Mr. Yen's influence could not be underestimated. His support was courted by all four presidential candidates, particularly, Lien Chan of the KMT, and James Soong, formerly of the KMT, but who broke away to form a new party, the PFP, to contest the 2000 presidential elections.

The annual pilgrimage *Jenlangong* Temple made to Xingang, Chiayi County in 1999 was proof of his mass appeal, as all four presidential candidates showed up to woo him and his followers at a time when the campaign for the 2000 race was at its height. Mr. Yen was a good friend of James Soong because the latter had visited his constituency several times and provided ample funds for local infrastructure projects for his hometown during Soong's tenure as Taiwan Provincial Governor. After declaring that he 'needs to ask Mazu for magic', he subsequently openly expressed support for the independent candidate barely three days before the presidential election in March 2000. 'Mazu spoke to me and told me to support him' Mr. Yen said. He was expelled from the KMT soon after, in April 2000.

The ensuing events took an unfavourable turn for Mr. Yen, as his chosen candidate eventually lost the race, partly as a result of his explicit backing. The DPP published a huge campaign advertisement in the daily papers denouncing the 'underworld' connections that James Soong had with Mr. Yen, and those that Lien Chan had with Lo Fu-chu, another notorious 'gangster-legislator'. The DPP's advert highlighted their candidate Chen Shui-bian's ties with Nobel laureate and President of Academia Sinica Lee Yuan-Tse, as a contrast. Lee Yuan-tse announced his support for Chen Shui-bian at the last moment and, according to him, this move was a reaction to Mr. Yen's support for James Soong. The DPP narrowly won that election in mid-March, due, in part, to the divided opposition, and in part due to the public's reaction to both Mr. Yen and Mr. Lee's interventions. Even though James Soong won handily

---

<sup>64</sup> See "Legislative aides- uncontrolled, unsupervised and on the make". *Taipei Times*. August 21, 2000. p. 3.

---

in Taichung County, Mr. Yen's stronghold, his associations with controversial figures lost him votes elsewhere in the country.

The DPP wasted no time in trying to eliminate 'black gold' soon after its 2000 election victory. President Chen Shui-bian set up a timetable, starting in August that year. This followed the end of the legislative session in late July, and the president wanted to act quickly in order to avoid any possible interference from lawmakers. Prosecutors from the Black Gold Investigation Centre raided the offices of *Jenlangong* Temple on August 3, 2000, as part of its investigation into suspected financial crimes. Over twenty investigators searched all the offices of the temple and the homes of its accountants from 7am to noon. The temple's accounting books were seized, and temple officials, including General Affairs Director Wan Fan-xiong and Treasurer Zhuang Mei-jing were questioned.

Mr. Yen says he was not personally responsible for the day-to-day operations of the temple, but he denied the temple was involved in any illicit activities or dealings. 'I'll definitely clarify all these matters for the public.'<sup>65</sup> This was in response to the statement by then Minister of Justice Chen Ding-nan, who said there was no selectivity in the handling of 'black gold' criminal cases and stressed that the judiciary would use whatever evidence it had to *punish tigers (da laohu)*, or organized crime bosses and not only *punish houseflies (da cangying)*, or small-time crooks. Mr. Yen subsequently came back to Taiwan on August 9, 2000, six days after fleeing abroad following the raid on the temple. 'I am not a tiger. I am a human being' he said.<sup>66</sup>

Legislators from James Soong's PFP party accused the government of 'handling cases selectively' and singling him out because he supported James Soong's presidential bid. The raid seems to have been aimed at checking the temple's account books and the rentals it collects from vendors, but the fact the raid was carried out by the Black Gold Investigation Centre seems to indicate that he himself was the prime target.<sup>67</sup> However, ruling DPP lawmaker Jiu Tai-san maintains that the new government had decided to cut off criminal organizations' illicit funds at their source and that the *Jenlangong* Temple case was just the beginning of the government's efforts to fight black gold by such methods. '*Jenlangong*

---

<sup>65</sup> See "Chenlan temple head denies being on the run". *Taipei Times*. August 5, 2000. p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> See "Chenlan temple's Yen Ching-piao returns from China". *Taipei Times*. August 10, 2000. p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> See "Turning 'black gold' into fool's gold". *Taipei Times*. August 4, 2000. p. 8.

---

Temple's assets are worth over NT\$ 1 billion and almost all leading public figures in Taichung County know that members of criminal organizations control this temple's board,' he stated.<sup>68</sup>

The change of administration made Mr. Yen realize that the days he could count on the protection of the ruling KMT were over. The bribing and vote buying case originally brought against him in 1994 was for trying to win the Taichung County Council speakership. The district courts initially found him guilty, but the verdict was reversed by a higher court on appeal, and was upheld by the Supreme Court a further two times. However, the third retrial decided to uphold the original guilty verdict of the district court and sentenced Mr. Yen to a year in prison. Taichung prosecutors asked the district court for permission to detain Yen Ching-piao on several criminal charges, including corruption, attempted murder, and banditry.



**Photo 1: Yen Ching-piao's wife Hou Li-chuan and KMT Legislator Tseng Chen-nung outside the detention centre where Yen Ching-piao was being held. Source: [www.taipeitimes.com/.../2001/04/25/83079](http://www.taipeitimes.com/.../2001/04/25/83079)**

He is alleged to have inflated his 'public relations' expenditures in order to take money from the council's budget while he was a county councillor. Prosecutors were tight-lipped about the other two charges, but the media have speculated that the attempted murder charge stems from a 1996 shooting case when people from Mr. Yen's office fired shots on a vehicle outside it in his township of Shalu. He is suspected of ordering the shooting. The local media also

---

<sup>68</sup> See "Police storm Chenlan Temple". *Taipei Times*. August 4, 2000. p. 1.



---

believe the prosecutors are looking into a 1996 incident in which Mr. Yen allegedly used violence to blackmail a stock market-listed company.

'I feel easy. I did no wrong,' he said as he was being escorted by police from the Taichung County Office of the Ministry of Justice's Investigation Bureau to the district prosecutors' office.<sup>69</sup> Yen Ching-piao went to prison in late 2000 (see Photo 1), appealing the verdict of the 1994 bribery and vote buying case a fourth time. Prosecutors also investigated a financial scandal involving *Jenlangong* Temple, although he was not personally charged with any crime. However Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen, his brother Jen Ming-zong, chairman of Dajia Township Council, and Liu Yu-lin, a temple official, were charged with forgery and breach of trust and were released on bail of NT\$ 1 million, NT\$ 200,000 and NT\$ 500,000 respectively (Ibid.).<sup>70</sup>

While under detention for the vote buying case, he decided to enter the 2001 legislative elections as an independent candidate in Taichung County. His wife actively campaigned for him and he mobilized the full resources of *Jenlangong* Temple and won with 34,000 votes. He was released on a NT\$ 5 million bail on January 5, 2002, after spending around 300 days inside. The same day of his release he was convicted to 11 years and six months in jail for corruption, attempted murder, possession of illegal firearms and attempting to pervert the course of justice. The verdict was again appealed.<sup>71</sup>

Mr. Yen's political rehabilitation slowly got underway after his release. 'Killer put down your knife, and become a Buddha' was a Chinese proverb used by a high-ranking Dajia official. 'Mr. Yen has changed a bit. If he changes his ways, people will recognize that and he will keep getting their votes. He was touched by Mazu and has changed. If you are involved in the rituals and ceremonies at *Jenlangong* Temple maybe you will be a better person. If someone is near red, he will become red. If he is near black he'll become black. In the people's minds, to be elected town council representative (*zhenmindaibiao*) or county councillor (*xianyiyuan*) or even national legislator (*liwe*) means you achieve a new status and people will have to respect that new status. Is that a case of "whitening" (*piaobai*),<sup>72</sup> the official added.

---

<sup>69</sup> See "Prosecutor ask court to detain Taichung officials". *Taipei Times*. February 28, 2001. p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> On January 4, 2002, Jen Ming-zhong, Dajia Town Council Chairman and brother of *Jenlangong* Temple Vice Chairman Jen Ming-kuen, was charged of bribery by giving voters tea sets for presents, and for inappropriate use of public funds. He was found guilty by the district court on January 25, 2002.

<sup>71</sup> See "Yen Ching-piao found innocent of vote-buying". *Taipei Times*. October 18, 2003. p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Excerpts from interviews with informants from Dajia.

The most evident public manifestation of his political comeback and semi-transformation into a respectable politician occurred during the annual *Jenlangong* pilgrimage to Xingang, in Chiayi County, held in April 2003 (see Photo 2). There, at the pilgrimages climax, on April 9, 2003, President Chen Shui-bian and Vice-President Annette Lu made an unprecedented appearance, sharing the stage with Mr. Yen at the prayer ceremony. Chen Shui-bian offered his prayers and shook hands with him, triggering speculation that the president sought to court support from the controversial lawmaker and temple president for the upcoming 2004 presidential elections.



**Photo 2: Legislator Yen Ching-piao with President Chen Shui-bian and Vice-President Annette Lu at the closing ceremony of the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage at Xingang, Chiayi County, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003**

It is not unusual for presidential candidates to call on *Jenlangong* Temple, along with other major temples, and seek an audience with the temple chairman. Indeed PFP Chairman James Soong and KMT Vice-Chairman Wang Jin-pyng showed up at the starting ceremony in Dajia only a few days earlier, interacting warmly with the legislator. The event in Xingang was unprecedented in that the president had hitherto avoided any contact with Mr. Yen in an effort to fulfil his vow to sever ties with ‘black gold’ politics. President Chen had even said that Mr.

---

Yen could not be free from trouble even if he ‘prayed for help from Mazu’, when campaigning for DPP lawmakers in the legislative elections of 2001.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, the Supreme Court ruled on October 17, 2003, that he was innocent of vote buying, finally putting an end to the nine-year old case first brought against him in 1994, having appealed five times. ‘It is finally over. Ever since the beginning, the first trial, I have been found innocent four times. I cannot remember how many times I have attended hearings at a court but finally I don’t have to do that anymore,’ he sighed with relief.<sup>74</sup>

The 2004 presidential elections were full of speculation. People and the media wondered aloud which one Legislator Yen would throw his lot in with this time. ‘Which way will the divining blocks go this time around?’ was a question frequently asked in Dajia. Even Chen Shui-bian visited *Jenlangong* Temple during the campaign period. He seemed to ignore his own pronouncements on ‘black gold’ by seeking Mr. Yen’s support. Mr. Yen, unsurprisingly, declined to declare his support for anyone that year. His mother had died shortly before Election Day, so he used the 40-day mourning period to ask for privacy and kept quiet over his favoured candidate. The DPP eventually won a narrow and very contested victory, which the KMT has, to this moment refused to recognize. Yen Ching-piao campaigned for re-election in the December 2004 legislative elections and won again by a comfortable margin.

## Thesis outline

Chapter two explores the perception that ‘gangsters’ have taken over folk religion temples in rural Taiwan. It describes political infighting and intense factional rivalry that took place among the temple committee directors at two folk religion temples in Dajia, Taichung County. I describe the life story of the Jen brothers, the big men of Dajia, and how they, with the help of Legislator Yen Ching-piao, got to control *Jenlangong*, arguably Taiwan’s most famous temple. I will argue that the power struggles and infighting that occur in many temples in rural Taiwan are actually an extension of the factional struggles and infighting that are characteristic of local politics in the country. Religious politics and local politics are inseparable in rural Taiwan. Locally powerful individuals have a long history of political and temple leadership. The rise to prominence of the Jen brothers and Legislator Yen Ching-piao are unexceptional in this respect.

---

<sup>73</sup> See “President attends Matsu festival, prays for peace”. *Taipei Times*. April 10, 2003. p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> See “Yen Ching-piao found innocent of vote-buying”. *Taipei Times*. October 18, 2003. p. 2.

---

In Chapter three I describe and interpret middle-class values regarding politics and politicians. I argue that their ideal kind of politician is a soft-spoken, mild-mannered, highly educated and scholarly ‘gentleman’ who does not engage in the ‘hardball tactics’ and the ‘rough and tumble’ politics that is typical of many politicians. I will show that the middle-classes have broadly western democratic ideals and they are disappointed with political life and democracy in the country because a lot of the behaviour of many voters and politicians do not conform to their expectations of what democratic political life should be like.

Chapter four examines English and Chinese language newspaper and magazine articles that appeared during my fieldwork, as well as two recent films about Taiwanese gangsters. I contrast these sources with equivalent sources dating from before 1991 and I will show that there has been significant change in the way the press and the culture industry spoke about corruption. Before 1991, corruption was not a central issue in the local press, and gangsters were depicted in films as ‘flawed heroes’. From the mid 1990s to the time I did fieldwork from September 2002 to August 2005, the local press was full of corruption stories and about gangsters undermining the country’s political and economic structures. Similarly, the two films about gangsters dating from 1997 and 2000 now portray them as clandestinely infiltrating the political process and subverting the island’s democratic achievements. I will argue that these new narratives of corruption and gangsters as ‘public enemy’ are a way of instilling new attitudes and behaviours among the Taiwanese electorate. They are a way of forming new notions of what it means to be a ‘citizen’ of a modern, western-leaning, democratic country.

In Chapter five I examine significant episodes in the life history of Legislator Yen Ching-piao, and his demonisation as a *heidao*. I argue that the accusation is simplistic. He is not just a ‘gangster’. He plays complex and multi-faceted roles in Taiwanese society. I further argue that people like him have existed in Taiwan for a long time, and these sorts of individuals are best seen as Southeast Asian ‘big men’.

In chapter six I describe and analyze rural residents’ values regarding politics and politicians. In brief, I will show that rural folk are not very interested in politicians’ ideologies and political philosophies. What they want and expect is a patron and benefactor who will provide them with material benefits and who will improve their welfare. Rural politicians attempt to establish close emotional and personal ties with their constituents based on ideas of loyalty, shared

---

kinship and blood ties. I will argue that rural politicians like Legislator Yen Ching-piao fill a gap between local interests and national politics that inevitably appears with electoral democracy. Rural politicians appeal to voters by portraying themselves as avengers, heroes and protectors.

## Methodology

My fieldwork in Taiwan lasted three years, from September 2002, to August 2005, mostly spent in Taichung City, and the towns of Shalu and Dajia, half an hour's ride by scooter from Taichung City. My main sources of data for the thesis come from participant observation, chatting informally, hanging out, and finally culminating in formal interviews with two groups of informants. The first group were around two-dozen highly educated middle class professionals who lived in the cities of Taichung, and Taipei, to a lesser extent, as well as the provincial towns of Dajia and Shalu, Taichung County. Most were university lecturers, schoolteachers, owners of private cram schools, pharmacists, doctors, etc. The lecturers were colleagues of mine at the department of Foreign Languages and Literature, and the department of Sociology, Tunghai University, Taichung, where I taught English and Spanish part-time for a couple of years. I lived in Dajia for six months prior to that and had made friends with a few local primary school teachers there. I also taught English part-time in three cram schools in Taichung and Dajia for two years and established an excellent relationship with the owners, as well as with several students, who I frequently socialized with outside work. The rest were neighbours of mine; one owned a pharmacy, and a few others were restaurant owners.

The other group of informants were several rural residents of Shalu and Dajia. I had several contacts in Dajia where I lived for six months. They either had menial jobs in shops, and restaurants, or were employees of the famous *Jenlangong* Temple. I also had a lot of acquaintances in Shalu; home town of Legislator Yen Ching-piao. I spent several months 'hanging out' in the legislator's voters' surgery, chatting to his brothers and any voters who called in. I observed many incidents of voters arriving at the surgery requesting younger brother Ching-san's help on a range of issues. I was careful to talk to a wider range of Shalu residents, than those who came to the surgery. I was concerned that my informants at the surgery would constitute a self-selecting group of people who were predisposed to the legislator. Thus I also made an effort to get my contacts at the cram schools, neighbours, colleagues at university, to introduce me to as many Shalu residents as possible, who did not have a vested interest in supporting the legislator.

---

My research makes use of diverse materials, from historical sources to popular media, particularly magazine and newspaper articles and films, which complement other data gained through traditional ethnographic fieldwork such as life stories, interviews, poems, proverbs, editorial cartoons, campaign flyers, etc. Newspaper stories of corruption form an important part of my data. Gupta (1995)<sup>75</sup> advocates combining participant observation with the analysis of mass media- newspapers, etc. given that traditional face-to-face methods of acquiring ethnographic data are insufficient to capture, for example, how the state is discursively constituted. In the same vein, how corruption is talked about at national level can only be grasped by accessing newspaper and magazine reports and articles. It is my firm belief that one cannot fully understand the contemporary *heidao* phenomenon without a sense of familiarity that comes from constant exposure to media stories about political corruption and corrupt politicians that has been a hallmark of Taiwanese journalism in recent years. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) state that:

Participant observation continues to be a major part of positioned anthropological methodologies, but it is ceasing to be fetishized; talking to and living with the members of a community are increasingly taking their place alongside reading newspapers, analyzing government documents, observing the activities of governing elites, and tracking the internal logic of transnational development agencies and corporations. Instead of a royal road to holistic knowledge of “another society”, ethnography is beginning to become recognizable as a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making more complex our understandings of various places, people, and predicaments through an attentiveness to the different forms of knowledge available from different social and political locations (1997: 37).<sup>76</sup>

However, access to data regarding corruption through traditional participant observation can prove to be slightly problematic, analytically and methodologically speaking. Firstly, as an analytical category, the phenomenon known as corruption is not without problems. The World Bank asserts that corruption is ‘the abuse of public office for private gain’. However, most definitions of corruption somehow ‘rest on the separation between the state or its agents and the rest of society’, but Haller and Shore (2005: 5)<sup>77</sup> insist that this ‘public-private dichotomy is often an arbitrary and inherently ambiguous cultural category’. Moreover, the boundaries

---

<sup>75</sup> Gupta, A. 1995. “Blurred Boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state”. *American Ethnologist* 22 (3): 375-402.

<sup>76</sup> Gupta, A. & Ferguson, J. (eds.) 1997. *Anthropological locations: Boundaries and grounds of a field science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>77</sup> Haller, D. & Shore, C. (eds.) 2005. *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.

---

between the public and private spheres, as well as public office and private gain, are culturally specific to the west and certainly do not conform to people's expectations in the countryside in Taiwan, as well as large pockets of her cities.

Secondly, from a methodological standpoint, how can instances of corruption be meaningfully quantified, if by very definition, it occurs only in 'hidden, occult and unofficial settings, clandestinely, and with the knowledge of the immediate exchange partners only' (Haller & Shore 2005: 11)? These misgivings aside, I argue that it is nevertheless pertinent to study the phenomenon because it was almost universally perceived as being pervasive during the time of my fieldwork. Most of my informants were convinced that many sectors of Taiwanese society were riddled with corrupt practices. How prevalent is it? What epistemological status do we accord it? How do we measure it? These considerations aside, the undeniable fact is that it is widely perceived to exist and the mass media were instrumental in shaping people's perceptions. It is perhaps prudent, given all these problems, to study not cases of corruption per se, but what stories are being told about them. Haller & Shore state:

Anthropology is perhaps better placed to deal not so much with corruption per se as with allegations of corruption and their effects. There are important parallels here with the anthropological study of witchcraft. Like witchcraft allegations, accusations of corruption also mirror structural cleavages and tensions in society and are often used by politicians to undermine the credibility of opponents in the competitive game of political reputation management (Haller & Shore 2005: 14).

I also came across three films that I found relevant to my topic of narratives of corruption through watching Chinese language films on cable TV. After they were broadcast I quickly went to video shops and bought copies. Legislator Yen is a minor media celebrity in Taiwan whose face is instantly recognizable and has made regular appearances in magazine and newspaper articles, as well as TV news broadcasts. His celebrity and notoriety precede my fieldwork by several years so I have made liberal use of the substantial corpus of news and magazine articles and stories about him, some dating from as early as 1985, in order to fill in the details regarding his life.

---

## **Chapter Two:**

### ***Temples and the New Rural Elite***

Pilgrimage (*jinxiang*)

I marked it on my calendar for March, to follow Mazu's pilgrimage.

I watched March on TV, transformed into a very long and colourful caterpillar.

The caterpillar went through the food chain, passing another village, and yet another.

The grandmother from Meizhou says: 'you're a school of fish, there are no Taiwan Straits.'

Mazu's pilgrimage ends, the caterpillar is metamorphosing into a butterfly.

It flew back to the wall, and went back to March on the calendar.

There appear tattoos for titles in March.

They represent temple chairman, government officials and gangster bosses.<sup>78</sup>

(poem written by Huang Chun-ming)

The above poem written by the renowned Taiwanese writer of the 'nativist' school of literature (*xiangtuwenxue*) Huang Chun-ming is a narrative in the first person about a Mazu pilgrimage.<sup>79</sup> Huang Chun-ming was born in the countryside and spent his childhood there before moving to Taipei to pursue his professional career. His narrative style is characterized as that of a 'sojourner narrator' wherein the author documents rural life in constant change, 'caused by the encroaching urban spread, and the effect that these had on rural lifestyle' (Haddon 1990: 14). The changes are often disruptive, and Huang Chun-ming's literary style suggests nostalgia over 'Taiwan's vanishing rural virtues' as traditional practices and attitudes are continually eroded (Haddon 1990: 15).<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> 三月在月曆上留了字, 跟媽祖進香了,  
我在電視上看到三月, 她化成一條長長而多彩的毛蟲。  
毛蟲從這個城鎮, 依著食物鏈, 穿過另一個村子, 再一個....  
湄州的娘家說: 你們是魚群, 你們哪裡有海峽。  
媽祖結束了進香, 毛蟲羽化。  
三月飛回牆, 上月曆上的三月,  
多了主席、大官和角頭老大行事的刺青。

The English translation of the poem was done with the collaboration of several Taiwanese informants.

<sup>79</sup> I came across the above poem shortly after attending the annual pilgrimage to Xingang in April 2003 organized by *Jenlangong*, Taiwan's most famous popular religion temple. Although the writer does not specify the exact identity of the Mazu temple he is describing, there is a strong case to be made that the temple in question is *Jenlangong* in Dajia Town, if only because it's annual pilgrimage is one of the country's most famous and most televised events, and its chairman is 'gangster' cum-legislator Yen Ching-piao.

<sup>80</sup> Haddon, R. 1990. "Taiwan *xiangtu wenxue*: the sojourner-narrator". *B. C. Asian Review* 3-4: 1-82.



---

This chapter will make sense of an apparent paradox present in contemporary Taiwanese society, especially in the countryside. This paradox is the perception of ‘gangsters’ being involved in popular religion temples. It is a popular perception among many of my rural informants, mainly the local schoolteachers and other highly educated professionals in Dajia Town, home of the famous *Jenlangong* Temple (see Photo 3). The existence of the poem by renowned Taiwanese writer Huang Chun-ming is consistent with my own findings, which reveal a picture of highly educated professionals from the countryside, who, like Huang Chun-ming, are convinced that ‘gangsters’ have taken over several village and town temples.

My enquiries have led me to the conclusion that leadership of local and regional popular, or folk religion temples in rural Taiwan has relatively little to do with one’s inherent moral qualities. Indeed, it has little to do with religion or belief at all. Instead, it is testimony to a salient fact- that temples and local politics are inseparable in southern Taiwan. Elected office and leadership of a popular religion temple are simultaneous positions that reinforce each other. Often, the struggle for control of a temple is an extension of the same factional politics that characterizes local politics. Also, many of the actors in these two spheres are one and the same.

The stories of the Jen brothers and that of Legislator Yen Ching-piao, this chapter’s main characters, suggests two things, first that political and religious leadership often do not inhabit separate, mutually exclusive spheres- they are more often than not closely intertwined. What this means is that locally powerful individuals will often hold elective posts. Many of these prominent rural individuals will also occupy high positions in temples and other religious organizations. Those individuals who get to lead a local temple and those who get to occupy high-level local office are powerful people. Often they are one and the same. Second, the class of powerful rural businessmen and industrialists who used to dominate local politics and temples, now has to compete with a new class of powerful political entrepreneur- the self made man, or ‘big man’ (*jiaotou*) for rural political and religious leadership.

The fact that this new breed of powerful political entrepreneurs who get involved in temple affairs in the countryside are now being accused of being ‘gangsters’ is testament to the new type of dominant narrative regarding politics and morality that has emerged in Taiwan since the 1990s. Indeed, back in 2000 DPP lawmaker Jiu Tai-san remarked that ‘almost all leading public figures in Taichung County know that members of criminal organizations control this

temple's board.'<sup>81</sup> In summary, powerful people have had a long history of political leadership and of involvement in folk religion temples in rural Taiwan. The life stories of the Jen brothers and Legislator Yen Ching-piao demonstrate that in contemporary rural Taiwan, nothing has changed in this respect. What has changed is the way these people are being talked about and portrayed by the media and by the rural middle classes.



Photo 3: An inside-view of Jenlangong Temple

Source: [www.jiawen.net/mazumiao0001.jpg](http://www.jiawen.net/mazumiao0001.jpg)

The notion of 'gangsters' and temples is not a totally new phenomenon. Indeed Boretz (1996),<sup>82</sup> studied the issue of temples, violence and young working class males in rural Beinan, Taidong Eastern Taiwan. He focused on groups of young men who, either worked, volunteered or performed in many of the temple performance troupes such as the military retainers (*bajiajiang*) in Taiwan. What is interesting is his assertion that many of these youths belonged to sworn brotherhoods, and tended to be classified by the general public as 'gangsters' and 'local hoodlums' (*liumang*). These local toughs are more formally referred to as 'braves' (*yong*), generally these were:

<sup>81</sup> See "Police storm Chenlan Temple". *Taipei Times*. August 4, 2000. p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Boretz, A. 1996. *Martial Gods and Magic Swords: The Ritual Production of Manhood in Taiwanese Popular Religion*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Anthropology, Cornell University.

---

...working-class boys and young men who band together in defence of the village when territory and honour are at stake. On the other hand, these 'braves' are also the 'gangsters' (*liumang*) who...extort protection money from local businesses, run gambling, prostitution, and smuggling rackets, and control local politics, enforcing control through intimidation and violence (Boretz 1996: 124).

I shall argue, however, that Boretz' research, although nominally about 'gangsters' and temples, differs from the phenomena in this chapter in significant ways. Firstly, that the 'gangsters' he encountered during his fieldwork have little in common with the 'gangsters' I came across. Although Boretz's youths and the Jen brothers I study are both referred to as 'gangsters', Boretz's 'gangsters' are, when seen in the context of the late 1980s, were really youthful rebels, deviants and misfits. The 'gangsters' I encountered, are 'public enemies'. Their identities are constructed in the borrowed language, metaphors and tropes inspired by contemporary narratives of corruption, public accountability, separation of public and private spheres, etc.

It is instructive to refer to the original Chinese terms to get a clearer idea of the connotations attached to them. The former are *liumang* while the latter are *heidao*. Shaw (1991) originally described *liumang* as a 'deviant subculture', a 'black society' (*heishehui*) that eschews traditional Confucian values such as hierarchy, family, and authority, preferring instead to find freedom by joining gangs, committing petty crimes and relying on friends as equals. *Heidao*, as I mention in chapter four on the other hand, are much more insidious than a deviant subculture. *Heidao* are criminals who pervert and undermine the country's democratic and economic foundation. The negative usage here is not really about being social deviants. Rather, it is about being a 'public enemy'.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> To better understand the qualitative difference between these two terms, we must see them as products of the zeitgeist of the times in which they first appear. Boretz did his fieldwork between 1988 and 1991, on the eve of the country's political reform and media liberalization. The idea of 'corruption' and various types of 'informal institutions' had yet to be made 'thinkable as crimes' and the figure of the 'gangster-politician' had yet to be invented. My fieldwork took place at a time when some sectors of Taiwanese society had become extremely sensitized to the ideas of corruption and informal institutions. The notions of 'separation of public and private spheres', and the 'abuse of public office for private gain', without which corruption cannot be conceptualized as a crime, had long been a staple of public culture before I started fieldwork.

---

I believe that the literature that is directly relevant to my case studies lies in the research on temple politics as a direct extension of factional politics in rural Taiwan. Seaman (1978),<sup>84</sup> for example, documents stories of behind the scenes and sometimes not so behind the scenes power struggles in a Taiwanese spirit-writing temple in a mountain village called Pearl Mountain in the same administrative town of Houli, home of the Purple Cloud Temple, beside Dajia, one of the two temples that I study in this thesis. He interprets the events of the spirit-writing sect as a subset of the larger political struggle that engulfed the town:

The events of the late 1940s and early 1950s created a political situation in Taiwanese rural society that sparked intense factional rivalry. As a result of the suppression of secret societies and local bullies by the central government and the subsequent land reform, villagers were left without a dominant political elite. At the same time, the system of local elections permitted nearly total autonomy as far as the selection of local leadership was concerned. Political activists and faction leaders sought to use all kinds of social relationships and institutions to mobilize support for themselves. In the spirit-writing cult of Pearl Mountain Village, one such faction found the organizational potency, which eventually led to its domination of the village (1978: 156).

In addition, Feuchtwang and Wang (2001)<sup>85</sup> essentially make the same argument that I am making here, namely, that one cannot divorce temple affairs from the broader context of local politics in Taiwan and China. They studied the foundations of rural leadership and the relationship between religious and political authority in villages in Fujian, China and Taiwan, and the authority attained by locally prominent residents who effectively organize activities such as temple building and religious festivals. They show two kinds of leadership that coexisted at the village level- that exercised by government officials, and that enjoyed by prominent individuals who do not occupy official positions, but who nevertheless inspire loyalty and respect for their demonstrated ability to get things done. These two forms of leadership coexist in the countryside.

Chau's (2006)<sup>86</sup> book on popular religion, as well as local power and the state in China is particularly relevant to my argument regarding the symbiotic nature of temple politics and the broader arena of local politics. He describes the story of one of the richest non-government run popular religion temples called the Black Dragon King (*Heilongdawang*) in the village of Hongliutan, within Longwanggou Valley, in northern Shaanxi Province. The author describes temple affairs at Longwanggou Valley as 'neither completely embedded in village politics nor

---

<sup>84</sup> Seaman, G. 1978. *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*. The Orient Cultural Service: Taipei.

<sup>85</sup> Feuchtwang, S. & Wang, Ming-ming. 2001. *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China*. London: Routledge.

<sup>86</sup> Chau, A. 2006. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

completely dissociated from it' (2006: 197-198). He uses the phrase 'temple/village political nexus' to describe the state of affairs by which 'Old Wang' occupied the most crucial point in the nexus because he was simultaneously temple and village head. Hongliutan village, the site of the temple, is home to two opposed factions who vie for leadership of the locality. These factions 'coalesced along lines of personal grudges, multigenerational conflicts between households, and perceived political and economic stakes in the power field. Gradually village factionalism in Hongliutan solidified and turned into a protracted fight between two main blocs: one under Lao Wang and the other under a certain Zhang Xuezhi. These factions did not have definite political platforms. The main goal of the fight was to prevent the other faction from achieving their goals' (Ibid.).

In addition to arguing that powerful rural individuals get involved in temples because the religious politics and local politics are closely intertwined, I will also argue that these political entrepreneurs are motivated, at least partly, by a desire to gain merit as well as public acceptance. That is, these men are partly driven by the desire to be perceived as people who are not only powerful but also moral and decent. Seaman's (1978) research on the spirit-writing cult in Houli town speculated that village politicians participated in temple affairs, as they provided 'an alternative source of legitimacy for politicians who wish to divorce themselves from the prevailing political ideologies of the modern world' (1978: 162). Thus, one factional group, Boss Ng's faction, 'could avoid to some extent the accusations of selfish motives commonly levelled against village politicians' (1978: 161). I will argue that Legislator Yen Ching-piao and the Jen brothers got involved in the running of the two Dajia temples partly because they also wanted to gain merit. In short they wanted to remake their public personas into that of respectable, decent citizens- pillars of the community.

We can further explore the cultural logic of temples and merit making as a plausible explanation regarding *heidao* involvement of folk religion temples by making a comparison with the traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. Hanks (1962) views merit and power in Thailand as very closely interrelated, and the Thai cosmos as being arranged in a vertical hierarchy that reflects its members' differential stores of merit and power. Buddhist beliefs regarding *karma* stipulate that a man's station in life is the consequence of his acts in a past life. Thus a man who occupies a high social position will have relatively more merit (*bhun*) and goodness/virtue (*kwaamdii*) than someone lower down the 'pecking order'. Thus Thais see wealth and power as directly correlated with merit, and that an increase in the former

---

translates into a corresponding increase in the latter. This means, simply, that a man who becomes wealthy and powerful is also assumed to have become 'meritorious' and 'good'.

A person's station in the hierarchy is sufficient to afford him the treatment and respect that station confers:

A man rises because of merit and is accepted without regard for his humble origin. Indeed, a humble origin implies a considerable store of merit and might increase his prestige. What we designate as the individual or person is more restricted in Thai than in Western society. A Thai is a minister or a farmer only as long as he holds the station. When a farmer, he acts as a farmer, but when he receives his insignia of office, he discards his rustic ways...Thus one emphasizes the station of the moment...To a greater extent than in the West, the insignia transform the person. To a lesser degree do people speak slightly of the 'newly arrived' or seek flaws in the clothing that intends to make a gentleman...(Hanks 1962: 1252).

Furthermore, Thais regard merit not as a fixed characteristic in the western sense, wherein, depending on one's relative merits, one is either 'blessed' or 'damned'. Rather it is fluid, depending on one's actions in life, 'there are no fallen angels in the Thai cosmos'. Thus the Thais see a person as 'always gaining or losing merit' (Hanks 1962: 1247). Moreover, Thais believe that because *karma* is cumulative, 'with the most recent actions weighted proportionately heavier' (Ockey 1998: 41), one's actions in the latter part of life are more important than those one has done in one's youth. Thus a man, who in his early years has committed a lot of 'bad' deeds in his quest for wealth and success, can make up for it in later life with good deeds. These actions will suffice to make him a 'meritorious' individual. A case in point is the example of the Thai rural politicians called *chaopo* (godfather). 'Leading *chaopo* and corrupt politicians are frequent donors to religion and charity in Thailand; in return, they gain merit and legitimacy' (Ibid.). I will make the case that Taiwanese *heidao*, like Thai *chaopo* get involved in temple affairs in order to burnish their reputations as 'meritorious' characters.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in the town of Dajia, Taichung County, Taiwan. It focuses on the lives of a few ambitious working-class brothers, known as the Jen brothers (*Jenjia*). This chapter is a partial 'behind the scenes' account of the life and times of a family of so called 'gangsters' who, in collaboration with Legislator Yen, managed to secure the top two posts at *Jenlangong*, Taiwan's foremost popular religion temple dedicated to the goddess Mazu, as well as the Purple Cloud Temple, a much lesser known local temple, located in Houli Town, beside Dajia Town, Taichung County.

---

I shall now formulate a few questions pertaining to my arguments, which I will answer in the course of this chapter:

- What type of person is inclined to lead a temple?
- What methods do these people employ to control a temple?
- What is their motivation for getting involved in folk religion temples?
- What are the dominant narratives regarding 'gangsters' running temples?

As previously mentioned in the introduction, political life in rural Taiwan is characterized by extreme factional infighting. Most villages and towns are home to two or more rival factions- opposing power coalitions whose members are united not by a shared ideology or philosophy, but by a desire to accumulate as much political power as possible, and deny it to the other coalition. The fact that a faction is dominant in a locality reflects the current balance of power relations there.

In addition, the makeup of the current political leadership of some villages in rural Taiwan is also a reflection of the country's changing social and economic structures. Before land reform in the 1950s, the landowning class dominated rural politics- many appointed village chiefs were the locality's most powerful landlords. The introduction of local elections, land reform and other wide ranging economic reforms since the 1950s by the KMT gave rise to a new, powerful class- the industrialists. These individuals, were, however reluctant to occupy political office. However, this situation changed in the 1980s, when the KMT decided to pour vast amounts of money in rural construction projects whose disbursement fell under the discretion of local officials. This prompted many rural businessmen and entrepreneurs to run for local office themselves, or alternatively, they threw their support behind friends and associates who were interested in the post.

The 1980s also witnessed the rise of a new class of politically powerful rural individuals. These people saw, and took advantage of the then burgeoning and highly lucrative market in the leisure and entertainment industry- gambling joints, illegal video arcades, karaoke bars, brothels, etc. Many of these 'self-made men' became immensely wealthy, and several decided to run for local office and get involved in running folk religion temples. This chapter explores the story of such men. Concretely, it is about the political rise of the Jen brothers.

---

These brothers are popularly known as the local *jiaotou* (big men) of Dajia Town and they have achieved success in business and local politics, often through illegal or semi-legal means. The Jen brothers achieved success largely by identifying commercial opportunities in the leisure and gambling industry that opened up since the 1980s. This was a time in which Taiwanese society witnessed rapid economic growth accompanied later by social and political liberalization.

These individuals have leveraged their wealth and influence in two ways. Firstly, they have entered local politics. Second, they have, with Legislator Yen's assistance and collaboration, also managed to penetrate the management committee of two local popular religion temples. The first is the famous *Jenlangong* Temple dedicated to the goddess Mazu, and the second is the recently built and much lesser known Chinese Purple Cloud Temple.

### The temple directors<sup>87</sup>



Photo 4: Yen Ching-piao, centre, with Jen Ming-kuen seated to his right, is holding a press conference at *Jenlangong* Temple

Source: [www.taipeitimes.com/.../06/23/story/0000041113](http://www.taipeitimes.com/.../06/23/story/0000041113)

---

<sup>87</sup> Being a director (*dongshi*) at *Jenlangong* was like being the founding family members and public face of a large, complex, highly lucrative but professionally run family business. Like the professionally managed family business, the temple employed dozens of people, from cleaners and receptionists to accountants, who essentially ensure the temple runs itself. Like the family members who own sit on the board of many professionally run family owned firms, most of the directors, with the exception of the vice-chairman, were quite removed from the day-to-day management of the temple. Their main role seemed to be the public face of the temple to the outside world, and to other temples. Thus the directors were constantly in the reception room, meeting visitors, VIPS, directors from other temples, reporters and journalists, etc.



---

Arguably Taiwan's most famous and prestigious popular religion temple, Dajia Town's *Jenlangong* whose main deity is the goddess Mazu, is also a major pilgrimage site. An impressive and highly ornate temple that is located downtown, just minutes from the train station, it organizes the annual eight-day pilgrimage to *Fengtiangong* Temple in Xingang Town, Chiayi County, south Taiwan. The temple's in-house brochures claim that it was first established in the early eighteenth century. However, regional gazetteers from Danshui and Hsinchu provide contradictory accounts of the temple's founding (Rubinstein 2003: 190).<sup>88</sup>

Founded by Wu Feng-kai in 1984, the Chinese Purple Cloud Temple is a massive complex built on three levels on a terraced hilltop in Waipu village, just outside Dajia Town. The imposing temple structure is readily visible as it quite near the main road and railroad tracks that lead to the Dajia train station. Originally established to commemorate the birthday of the Daoist god *Taishanglaojun*, it is now a popular religion temple, which houses several Daoist gods such as *Jigong*, *Jiutianxuannu* and *Lifudawang*, as well as the Buddhist goddess *Guanyin*. The temple also houses a charity organization dedicated to the god *Jigong* and raises funds for causes deemed worthy by the temple committee.

*Jenlangong* temple's busiest months<sup>89</sup> run from around February, the start of Lunar New Year celebrations, to around April, which is around the time that the temple organizes, in cooperation with the Taichung County Government, the month long Mazu International Culture Festival (*Mazu guoji wenhuajie*)<sup>90</sup> which culminates in the televised eight-day pilgrimage to Xingang, Chiayi County in the south.

---

<sup>88</sup> Rubinstein, M. 2003. "Medium/Message in Taiwan's Mazu-Cult Centres: Using 'Time, Space, and Word' to Foster Island-Wide Spiritual Consciousness and Local Regional, and National Forms of Institutional Identity". In Paul R. Katz & Murray A. Rubinstein (eds.) *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities*. Pp. 181-218. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>89</sup> That four-month period is one of non-stop, intense activity for *Jenlangong*. The temple, apart from being a well-visited tourist attraction that draws visitors from all over the country, is also an important destination for groups of pilgrims on journeys organized by hundreds of temples around the island. The organized pilgrimages typically travel by coach and stop by the temple for an hour or so, before the pilgrims get back on the coaches and continue their journey heading south and visiting more temples along the way.

<sup>90</sup> I got to appreciate the extent to which *Jenlangong* Temple was a focus of media interest in the country through my observation of the pilgrimage. Media crew were often present to broadcast special event and occasions during the temple's busiest season, which started from late January, around the time of my arrival, and May, the end of the annual pilgrimage to Xingang.

---

*Jenlangong* Vice-Chairman Mr. Jen Ming-kuen was present at the temple during most of the days during the temple's busy period. He and the other temple directors (*dongshi*) received visitors and paid visits to other temples, organized and supervised temple events, etc. Arguably, (see Photo 4) even more so than Legislator Yen, Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen was the spokesman for the temple. *Jenlangong* Temple was a beehive of activity during those four months and is a focus of media interest. Media crew from various national and cable TV stations were on site, broadcasting live the temple's most memorable and significant events.

As Legislator Yen was either in Shalu or in Taipei most of the time, Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen was the temple spokesman. He was interviewed on national and on cable TV newscasts several times during my fieldwork, and, according to journalists and anchormen I spoke to, he had been playing the role of *Jenlangong* spokesman for some years now. Speaking in Taiwanese, he smiled into the camera on the occasion of the annual pilgrimage in April 2004 and said 'Along with being the Goddess of the Sea, Mazu is also the Goddess of virtue and righteousness. Although Taiwan's people may worship many different gods and follow many different paths, Mazu unites them and is revered by all'. On TV he always seemed keen to project the image of a smiling, benevolent and tireless devotee working hard in the service of the goddess Mazu.

I was often present when the directors entertained visitors at the temple. Sometimes, when I wasn't in the temple I would be summoned from my room, or they would call me on my cell phone and ask me to come to the temple in order to be introduced to visitors. I understood this was to be part of the 'duties' the directors, especially the vice-chairman, expected me to perform in exchange for their hospitality. The most important one was to be part of the temple's unrelenting efforts to court the media. The other was to give the directors 'face' (*mianzi*). I suspect they wanted me to burnish and enhance their credentials as respectable, model citizens, pillars of the community, and thus deserving of their current status as directors of Taiwan's most famous temple. The directors seemed to be hinting to visitors every time I made an 'appearance', that since a foreign scholar from a prestigious British university is over here studying their temple, they, by extension, must also be decent, respectable people.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> After a few months interacting with the management, I suspected that the main reason the vice-chairman agreed to host me at the temple was in order to enhance its fame and prestige in Taiwanese society, and by extension, his own personal status as temple vice-chairman. The temple directors were delighted that a foreigner from a prestigious western university was studying their temple and exploited every opportunity to show me off to visitors and the media, as they did with every other foreigner, scholar or tourist who happened to be present at the time. During the height of the pilgrimage season I was often summoned from my room, asked to report to the temple reception room, in order to be interviewed by reporters and cameramen. During the 2003 season stories and articles about me appeared in regional papers and I even appeared on cable TV a few times, being filmed walking around the temple and taking notes and discussing the significance of Dajia Mazu.

---

It was interesting to watch the directors as they played host at the temple, and when they were guests during courtesy visits to other temples. Many of them were no more than low ranking local officials in their hometowns. None of them seemed particularly well educated, and with a few exceptions, none were particularly rich, or had a successful business they could be proud of. The one thing, the one commodity they could bank on that could give them 'face' (*mianzi*) and prestige vis-à-vis the outside world was their connection with the temple. During those moments of socializing at the temple, the directors would welcome guests, offer them cigarettes, serve them tea, and most importantly, introduce themselves by exchanging business cards with visitors. The business cards were a vital part of the ceremony of hosting at the many temples where I 'tagged along' with the *Jenlangong* directors on their courtesy calls. On these cards would be insignia and the full name of the temple as well as the bearer's name and his position- temple director, executive secretary, supervisor, etc. It indicated that the bearer was someone important because he was connected with *Jenlangong*.

Over the next few months I observed and learned about the minutiae of temple rituals and interacted with employees and devotees alike. At the same time, nevertheless, as the months passed, I could not help noticing a few things about the temple that did not feel quite right, from my point of view at least. The first was to do with the two-dozen odd temple management committee, composed of the chairman, vice-chairman, directors, supervisors, etc. When I interacted with them they sometimes spoke a heavily accented Mandarin, and spoke in Taiwanese most of the time. The fact that they spoke Taiwanese nearly all the time is not surprising, as hearing Mandarin becomes less frequent the further away from Taipei one goes.

Thus my suspicions did not arise from the choice of language they spoke, rather, it was more to do with their behaviour and what they talked about and didn't talk about. In the time that I spent in their presence I never heard them talk about issues of belief, faith, morality, or self-improvement, for that matter. They hardly ever discussed temple rituals and symbolism among themselves, and when I pressed them to explain certain things to do with the temple, they struggled to make sense beyond the basics. My initial surprise notwithstanding, this lack of concern with doctrine, symbolism, morality or self-improvement is actually quite

---

There seemed to be a tacit understanding wherein the temple would provide me with food and lodging and access to the temple in exchange for my agreeing to be part of *Jenlangong's* publicity machine.

---

unremarkable in the context of Chinese popular religion. Ordinary believers, share the same lack of interest in these matters as the temple committee members.<sup>92</sup>

There was another aspect about the temple directors that didn't seem quite right. By this I mean that they didn't seem to be among Dajia Town's traditional elite- they weren't 'old money' families. Before setting foot in Dajia Town, I had the expectation that the people who got to manage a temple as famous and prestigious as *Jenlangong* had to belong to Dajia Town's landed gentry, or at least were local captains of industry.<sup>93</sup> An informant confirmed my suspicions by stating that the organizational structure that is the current temple board is a recent phenomenon, and that 'back in early times the head of the temple used to be the Head of the Censer (*luzhu*), a mostly ceremonial post which rotated among Dajia's most respected businessmen'.

Thus, I discovered that although a few of them were successful businessmen, mostly in property development and construction, most of the two dozen-odd temple directors were low-ranking local officials. What I found odd was that the vice-chairman, a native of Dajia, had never held public office, and that the chairman, Legislator Yen, is not a even a native son of Dajia, but someone from nearby Shalu Town. Who is Jen Ming-kuen and how did he get to manage one of Taiwan's most famous and lucrative temples? Was he a prominent local industrialist or businessman? How did Legislator Yen become involved in the temple? What can their involvement in a temple of folk religion tell us about significant aspects of contemporary rural society in Taiwan?<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> For example, I once asked a temple director at *Jenlangong* 'why does the temple have five doors?', and 'who are the characters that are painted on the doors?' He paused for a while, and sheepishly told me to ask the tour guide group, an informal association of Dajia natives, composed mainly of teachers and librarians, who volunteer to give guided tours of the temple. I tried asking several temple directors similar questions and I received similar responses. I worked out from these instances, that the management committee at *Jenlangong* were not ritual experts, nor do they have any specialist knowledge or training in Buddhist or Taoist rites or doctrine. In fact, their knowledge about popular religious history, architecture, or symbolism was not much better than that of the average layman.

<sup>93</sup> Taiwan's industrialization started out in the 1960s with light industry- clothes, shoes, bicycles, toys, fans, etc. and Taichung County is the nucleus of light manufacturing in Taiwan, so I was expecting many of the temple directors to at least have been involved in light industry or have made their fortunes that way.

<sup>94</sup> The focus of my initial interest, studying Chinese popular religion at *Jenlangong*, gradually broadened to include another, more unpredictable and potentially tricky one. I had decided to find out as much as possible about the temple board, especially the two men who occupy the top positions, and who wield the most power and influence in it. At the same time, I also knew the directors would never voluntarily reveal anything of real substance to me. All of them were personable and affable men who I could chat to, but I knew they would never reveal anything that would make them out to be anything other than respectable, honest, hardworking devotees of the goddess Mazu. This, at least is the impression that they wanted to give me, to the residents of Dajia and to the media. I tried several times over the course of fieldwork, to gain their confidence, to get several of them to let their guard down, to stop 'performing', and to tell me what was really going on behind the scenes. However, my attempts were unsuccessful. I was meant to be researching the temple, its history, its art and architecture, and write articles and books about it afterwards. That was the purpose for which they agreed to host me in the first place. They didn't want me to investigate the temple's 'dark side', or their own unsavoury pasts.

---

I realized early on that my fieldwork regarding this issue was not going to be straightforward. It would be tortuous and fraught with difficulties. I knew I couldn't conduct this other line of investigation in a straightforward fashion. I had to pursue these questions without alerting them to the fact that I was aware of these rumours. I simply couldn't tell the vice-chairman, or anyone else at the temple, 'I heard you're a gangster'. I knew I couldn't ask 'there are rumours that you are stealing money from the temple, what are your views on this?' Also, I knew I could not approach many people who were in a position to shed light on the issue but who were too closely identified with the main protagonists, out of fear that the chairman and vice-chairman would find out. To make matter worse, many people who had been connected with the temple in the past, either as employees or as directors, were not willing to talk to me. I tried to get a close friend of the immediate past chairman of *Jenlangong*, industrialist Wang Jin-lu, who was abroad at the time, to give me some details, or at least introduce me to people who could, to no avail. Many promising informants stayed silent and refused to talk to me about the matter.

The bulk of information I have about the life history of the Jen brothers, the alleged *jiaotou* (big men) of Dajia, originates from a few extremely valuable informants. The next section is my attempt to weave a seamless narrative out of my own conversations with Jen Ming-Zong, along with a series of discrete conversations that Jen Ming-hui, the third brother, had with my confidential sources before the former started serving a brief prison sentence. My attempt at a seamless narrative of the lives of the Jen brothers is largely the result of long conversations with these informants wherein they recalled their conversations with Jen Ming-hui, which I wrote down. None of their conversations with Jen Ming-hui were tape-recorded and a period of several months separate their meetings with Jen Ming-hui and those they had with me. What follows thus, is a partial account from a few sources whose identities must stay confidential. I have not been able to independently corroborate the veracity of the great bulk of my informants' stories, either with Legislator Yen, Vice-Chairman Jen (see Photo 5) and his brothers, or with other informants. In some cases I have been able to get hold of newspaper and magazine articles that corroborate some aspects of my informants' accounts of the brothers, and I will cite them when these are relevant. However, the great bulk of it belongs literally to the realm of 'hearsay' and 'rumour'.<sup>95</sup> Thus, what follows should not be taken as a factual, verifiable description of reality.

---

<sup>95</sup> Of the four Jen brothers I have only personally met Vice-chairman Jen Ming-kuen and Jen Ming-zong, an elected town representative. I have asked the vice-chairman virtually nothing about his past as I know this would have made him

---

## The big men of Dajia

The 'Jen family' or 'Jen brothers' (*Jenjia*) are four siblings, all owners of various karaoke bars, brothels, motels, video game and gambling parlours and other 'vice' businesses. Not everyone in Dajia, a town of around seventy thousand people, has heard of them or knows who they are or what they do, but my sources say they are the local big men (*jiaotou*) and thus are to be respected. They should never be openly challenged or criticized. The four older siblings constitute the quintessence of the 'self-made man' from the countryside. Ming-zong, Ming-fu, Ming-hui, and Ming-kuen, have lived lives that have followed broadly similar paths. Having grown up in the same paternal household, and having had nearly identical childhood experiences, the four brothers have lived nearly all their lives in or near their hometown.



**Photo 5: Jen Ming-kuen holding a Mazu statuette**  
**Source: *Times Weekly*. 2005.6.23. p. 38.**

---

uncomfortable. I once asked his wife what he did for a living and she replied that he owned a pastry factory in Dajia. I soon found out this was a lie so I never bothered to ask them again. I spoke to eldest brother Jen Ming-zong a few times in his office at the Dajia Town Hall before he was forced to give up his official post in order to serve a prison sentence for bribery and corruption.

---

What they have in common are their early adulthoods spent doing various unskilled odd jobs, and then getting involved in the vice business, spending time in jail and having been charged with various criminal offences, running for and holding various political posts, and lastly getting involved in the management of two of Dajia's popular religion temples. Although not all of them have done the aforementioned activities in the exact linear sequence describe above, observers will detect common elements in the brothers' life histories; a burning sense of ambition to rise above their station in life, and a will to succeed.

The patriarch, Mr. Jen Senior, a farmer, ran a rice store when they were young. He was also, depending on who you spoke to, an arms and opium smuggler who plied his fishing boat in the Taiwan Strait. Ming-zong the eldest brother, recalls that they were prosperous in the old days. He says his father ran a small business, processing taro into the ingredient used in the cakes and pastries Dajia is famous for. My informant tells a different story. His conversations with Ming-hui depict a difficult life for the Jen household, so difficult that the father had to do illegal things to feed a growing family. Mr. Jen senior would allegedly encourage his sons to follow his footsteps in the smuggling trade that brought contraband goods and illegal immigrants into Taiwan from the mainland, an activity typical of some fishermen on this side of the strait. 'You need to do whatever it takes to make money and become rich', the father is reported to have taught them early on.

Ming-zong is the eldest child of the Jen family. He is described as being the most normal of the lot- meaning he is not nearly as bad as the others. He had been in jail for smuggling, and reportedly, his father had paid a lot to get him out. He decided to run for elected deputy (*zhenmindaibiao*) in Dajia after his predecessor at the post, and younger brother, Ming-fu had vacated his seat at the town hall. When I met Ming-zong in 2004, he was the Dajia Township Council Representative Head (*Dajia zhendaihui zhuxi*). He ran unsuccessfully for the post of mayor of Dajia Town in 2001. However, he was charged and found guilty of bribing voters in the run up to the mayoral election with cash, tea sets (*paochazhu*) and luggage (*dengjixiang*) and for forging documents (*weizhaociliao*) and claiming expenses (*fubaozhifudefeiyong*) for private gain, which he is fighting.<sup>96</sup> I discovered, towards the end of my fieldwork in the summer of 2005, that his appeal had finally run out and he had gone to prison. However, I did manage to speak to him a few times during my stay in Dajia.

---

<sup>96</sup> See "Dajia Township Council Head Candidate Jen Ming-zong is accused". *China Times*. January 24, 2002.

---

I found him to be quite affable and approachable during the few times I chatted to him. What I found intriguing was that Ming-zong, like his brother Ming-fu, who was his predecessor at the post, held the elected post of Township Council Representative. I found it difficult to reconcile the fact that he was a town official with the fact that so many of my informants remarked that the whole Jen family were *heidao/jiaotou*. So at one point I worked up the courage to ask him point blank, at his office on the fifth floor of Dajia's town hall, 'don't get angry, but I heard you're a gangster'. He denied it instantly, 'I don't have any "brothers" (*xiaodi*) surrounding me, so I can't be a gangster'. He remarked that the notion of 'gangster' was an invention of the media in order to discredit people like him, hailing from the country, from humble backgrounds and little education, but who nevertheless achieved success later in life. He was simply, 'a servant of the people of Dajia, who elected him', he said.

One informant tells me that the brothers were very young when their mother died. And after a few years, his father remarried, this time to his sister-in-law, the children's young aunt. Apparently it was the maternal grandmother's idea, as she thought Mr. Jen Senior was wealthy, and besides, the deceased wife had left behind four children. 'Who better to take care of them than their own aunt', Ming-hui recalls the old woman telling the father. Their father's decision to marry their aunt had so angered the brothers Ming-hui, the third and Ming-kuen, the fourth son, that they also decided to get married the same year as the father's wedding, so as to get out of their father's house as soon as possible. None of the brothers had finished junior high, and so life had been difficult in those early years, especially since they left the paternal household to be independent. They had received very little by way of inheritance from their own father.

Ming-hui was, according to another informant, his father's least favoured son, and had received the smallest share of inheritance from the father's meagre estate. Ming-hui said he kept his resentment to himself, as he knew it was partly out of spite for the two brothers' explicit disapproval of the father's choice of a second wife. Ming-kuen, allegedly had it especially tough, and he spent the initial years carrying bricks and doing odd jobs working on construction sites. Like his brothers, Ming-kuen spent a few months in jail for smuggling. He is alleged to have made a lot of money from kickbacks and billing millions in non-existent services to the temple, but so far nothing has been proven and no convictions made.



---

Ming-hui and Ming-kuen, who was to become vice-chairman of *Jenlangong* Temple, were very close. They bonded at a very young age. They used to skip school and get into fights with other gangs of youths. They are not known to have any religious or spiritual inclination. Unlike many male working class youths, they did not join nor participate, in any Military Retainer (*bajiajiang*) troupes, nor procession (*zhentou*) troupes. Ming-hui described himself as a self-made man of the masses. One of my sources told me Ming-hui described himself as gentle, humorous, and generous to a fault, ordering and paying for a sumptuous meal for others while he himself only ordered coffee. He rose from obscurity and poverty to be what he is today, a member of Dajia's most powerful and wealthy *jiaotou* families.

'If you want something done, or you need someone big to back you up in a dispute, Ming-hui can help you' (*diya suyao bangmang Minhui e kadi bangmang*), that is what Ming-hui says people say of him. However, some informants beg to differ. 'The brothers are all criminals, each one has spent time inside for the same offences, and even the second generation is bad'. With these words one informant was making a veiled reference to the fact that one of Ming-hui's son's also spent two years in jail for drug dealing. 'They're just like their father, greedy and unscrupulous'.

Ming-hui was aware of his family's reputation, but he disavowed any notion that they ruled through fear. Indeed, according to him many common folk saw in him a kind benefactor. This was a social role slightly at odds with the image of 'gangsters' as ruthless and savage, conveyed in many popular films belonging to the genre. He says he visited city hall once a week to help people. He said he had even donated coffins to the needy in Dajia.

Ming-hui did not complain much during those early years when he and his wife did various manual jobs in order to survive. His wife did various things to get by, peel asparagus, and do piecework at home to sell to Dajia's various cottage industries. 'Once', Ming-hui told my confidant, 'I went to a fortune-teller and she said my destiny was to be a bar owner and get rich. That fortune telling session changed my life as it became clear to me how I was to live life from now on.' Thus it seemed that, although the Jen brothers were born in, and spent their childhood and early adulthood at the bottom rungs of society, their ambition to succeed ensured they moved up fairly quickly.

---

His first foray in business was in the leisure industry. Ming-hui's venture in the 'underground' economy started when he opened a video game shop. Taiwanese society had been experiencing rapid economic growth in the 1980s and as a result, consumers had a lot of disposable income. However, that was the martial law period, and at the time the leisure and entertainment industry was relatively undeveloped and many activities were technically illegal, or had an ambiguous legal status. Ming-hui, like his brothers saw the business opportunity beckoning to them and they made a lot of money, initially in the video arcade business in the 1980's. It was not easy then, as they had frequent brushes with the law as well as other competing 'criminal' elements. Of the two, Ming-hui had no doubts that the former constituted much more of a nuisance than the latter. The nature of the former disturbance had little to do with upholding the law though.

'There was one time', he informed one of my sources, 'a government inspector came to my arcade and threatened to issue a massive fine unless I agreed to give him a big cut of my profits. I had no choice but to pay him off, or he would have shut me down. The inspector even hired an accountant to keep tabs on my operations, noting down the daily takings and the expenses, so that he knew exactly how much money was made and how much his share was. We got into the illegal activities like karaoke bars, brothels, massage parlours, video game arcades and the like because we are not highly educated and it's a quick way of making money. We often had to live by our wits in order to outsmart the police. The police were so corrupt in those days, whenever they confiscated illegal video games in Kaohsiung, they would somehow end up in Taichung, some in my establishments. I remember the police once asking us to dismantle all our "one-armed bandit" slot machines and return them to the warehouse in Kaohsiung. We were tipped off that there was going to be an inspection, so the impounded goods had to be there. We fooled them by making a lot of cardboard likenesses of our video games, taking them to Kaohsiung and we took photos to show to the police as evidence we got rid of them after that it was business as usual.'

Gradually, he expanded the range of business activities he was involved in. Along the way he also ran various karaoke bars and massage parlours, which also secretly operated as brothels. He also engaged in gun and drug smuggling, running boats that transported the goods to Taiwan from the mainland, and he had served a jail sentence for these offences. He once went to Vietnam to procure young elementary and high school girls for his businesses. The girls were pretty and cheap, and in Vietnam, everyone, even police can be bought. Informants said the girls ended up working in Dajia but eventually wound up in jail. Ming-hui

---

has nearly always got away with his illegal activities and has mostly avoided prison in his myriad brushes with the law. 'I shot a guy in the stomach once, but I didn't go to prison because I paid a "little brother", one of my lieutenants, to take the rap for me.'

His luck finally ran out in 2003 when Ming-hui was finally found guilty of illegally smuggling mainland women to work as prostitutes in his massage parlours in a notorious case ten years earlier. The criminal case dragged on for ten years as his lawyers lodged many appeals, and it went all the way to the Supreme Court, until he finally received the summons to start serving a ten-month prison sentence in October 2003. He was determined to be as low-key and attract as little attention as possible, on the day he reported to prison.

'When I get out I'm going to run for the office of Taichung County Counsellor, that way I'll be safe from the police' (*dangua chutga guabelai daidiong yihue ane guade anzhuana*). I also need votes when I run for office next year, so being part of the Purple Cloud Temple helps as I get even more exposure to the common folk. I hope James Soong wins the 2004 elections and becomes president of Taiwan next year, that way I'll get pardoned and get out early', Ming-hui mused.

Ming-fu is the second eldest brother, easily the most violence-prone and troublesome of the lot. He sold drugs and stole containers loaded on trucks and resold them later. These containers were on their way to Kaohsiung Port to be exported abroad as part of Taiwan's economic miracle. He is rumoured to have killed two people. He has been less fortunate than Ming-hui in that he has been jailed several times. Persuaded by Yen Ching-piao, he gradually decided to enter politics, becoming an elected people's representative (*mindai*) in Dajia, and he was Ming-zong's immediate predecessor in the post. He held the post for years, until he was forced to flee to Mainland China when he was charged with attempted murder of a county counsellor and was certain he was going to be arrested unless he fled first.

The reason he shot a counsellor and had to escape are to do with the last temple committee elections at *Jenlangong* Temple and the newly established Byzantine voting system designed in 1999 to install outsider Yen Ching-piao, then Taichung County Assembly Speaker, as temple chairman. Ming-fu had a feud with then sitting President Wang Jin-lu, who he wanted to unseat. The Jen brothers, who engineered Yen Ching-piao's takeover, reportedly spent over NT\$ 50,000,000 in bribes to all the borough wardens (*lizhang*), who had voting rights and thus were in a position to elect the chairman of the temple committee.

---

He reportedly fled to China by boat and does not intend to come back for 25 years until the legal time limit of the charges against him expires. Apparently remarried and with a young family, he is also, ironically, in a Chinese jail, not for having killed a Chinese policeman over a disagreement regarding bribes, which he did, but for being found guilty of hoarding certain food staples, buying them cheaply and later on selling them at a vast profit. It seems he was caught up in China's most recent anti-corruption drive.

'My father didn't want us to get involved in the temple', Ming-hui reflected back on the 'counsellor shooting' episode. He then described an incident wherein his father angrily entered his house one evening, when they were busy manipulating the temple elections. His father banged his cane on the dining table and shouted 'if we are rich people will suspect we took money from Mazu, and if we lose our money and become poor, they'll see it as the goddess punishing us for stealing her money, either way, we lose' (*lanna si uzhihang de e kong lan si uy mazo hia taute, lanna pembo jilan de ekong hesi lan taute mazo ji e boying 'm kuan an tzua lan long su*), Ming-hui recounted to one informant.

I argue that the 'gangster' phenomenon of Dajia's two temples may be interpreted as a local success story. That story is one of four brothers of humble origin who were nevertheless very ambitious and who wanted to improve their status in life by any means available to them. They were fortunate enough to have reached adulthood in the 1980s, a time of rising prosperity and disposable real incomes as well as one of increasing political liberalization. They tried their hands in different criminal pursuits- smuggling, peddling manufactured goods for export markets that they had stolen while these were sitting in container boxes at Taichung port, motels, karaoke bars, arcades with coin-operated machines, etc. These brothers lived near a seaport through which many of the country's light manufactured products passed on their way to the developed markets in the West. They made money from stealing these container vans at the port and selling the goods onwards. They also spotted a gap in the emerging leisure and entertainment market between consumers' increased wealth and willingness to spend their disposable incomes on leisure and entertainment, and the then underdeveloped and still illegal businesses that catered for these consumers.

---

These brothers saw an opportunity to ‘make a killing’ in smuggling and theft, illegal motel, karaoke bar, and gambling arcade businesses and understood the risks involved should they be caught. Indeed, all of them have been convicted of many of these crimes and have spent various periods ‘inside’. They were highly motivated and ambitious and were willing to pay the price for success. They had little education and social capital and thus knew that their opportunities for advancement, like for many other uneducated working class men, lay in a life of crime. Thus illegal and semi-legal pursuits have ensured the means for upward social mobility for these ambitious, but underprivileged and undereducated young brothers. I suspect that they yearned to be *jiaotou* – ‘big men’, and to be a ‘big man’ you need to have money. Aspiring *jiaotou* had a route out of poverty in the 1980s through smuggling and theft, and also through catering to the needs of the new consuming middle class, running illegal gambling dens, brothels, and underground video arcades. These were illegal, but all highly lucrative activities.

## **‘Gangsters’ and temples**

### ***Jenlangong***

Temples are loci of prestige and status, apart from being the locus of symbolic power. Membership of a famous temple brings considerable kudos to ambitious individuals in the countryside. Also, temples in Taiwan, especially the more popular ones, generate vast amounts of income from donations and fees for various services. It is rumoured, but so far not proven, that many individuals do their best to gain control of these temples, motivated by a desire to gain access to the vast sums it holds. In addition, there are other reasons why they would want to get involved. Below is a quote from an informant:

Dajia Town’s *Jenlangong* Temple, like Xingang Town’s *Fengtiengong* Temple and Beigang Town’s *Chaotiengong* Temple, are rich and famous and attract a lot of interested parties. There will often be opposing factions vying for leadership in the temples and often the disputes are long and drawn out. No one single faction is strong enough to gain power and see off potential challengers. Nevertheless, they are in a position to prevent other groups from doing the same thing. So very often you have a stalemate between two equally matched factions.

---

The above quote implies that the activities and manoeuvrings behind the scenes of the management committee of *Jenlangong* Temple, like several prestigious temples in southern Taiwan, needs to be viewed as a logical extension of rural factional politics,<sup>97</sup> which is characterized by a struggle between two powerful groups over political power and access to money and resources.

The directors were not keen to discuss with me the details of temple management. Nevertheless, I gathered that *Jenlangong* became a management committee (*weiyuanhui*), which did away with the post of Head of the Censer, and in 1988 it became a Consortium of Judicial Persons (*caituanfaren*) which would be composed of around two dozen officials who would be in charge of running it. *Jenlangong*'s 'footprint', the area whose residents considered themselves to be under the goddess Mazu's care and protection comprised the neighbouring towns of Dajia, Waipu, Houli, and Da' an. Under the new regulations, these four townships' elected officials, ranging from, *lizhang* (district head), *mindai biao* (people's representative), *xianzhang* (village mayor), and *zhenzhang* (town mayor), around sixty all in all, would decide the composition of the twenty-odd temple committee members (*dongshi*) among themselves, and these members would vote among themselves and choose the temple chairman and vice chairman. A committee member would normally need to be a resident of one of the four towns and hold locally elected office.

'Now' my informant tells me, 'all the elected officials in Dajia are either Red or Black, but regardless of which side they're on, they all want to be part of *Jenlangong*. They all want a piece of the action.' The 'action' he was talking about was the 'grease money' each vote-wielding elected official would get in return for voting for aspiring presidential candidates. Apparently, the chairmanship of the temple was such a valued commodity that committee directors were willing to buy the votes of many of the sixty local officials who had voting rights in the temple. Informants often quote the sum NT\$ 1,200,000 (US\$ 36,000) as the going rate for each vote.

---

<sup>97</sup> Factions (*paixi*) have long existed in Taiwan, but their modern form took shape after the KMT took over the island in the early 1950s. The Nationalists had complete control over all the central government, but found that it needed 'vassals' to control the countryside outside the main cities of Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung. That is why they cultivated factions in most localities in outlying areas- to help them keep control and to deliver the votes at local elections. The KMT had created two factions in Taichung County, the Red (*Hongpai*) and Black (*Heipai*), and made sure that they were antagonistic to each other. This ensured that any alternative to the KMT would stay divided and never constitute a threat to the ruling power. 'Normally', says an informant, 'faction members are dormant, so you wouldn't know which one someone belonged to unless you were a local person. But things change right before election time, and that's when everyone activates their followers to deliver the votes.'

---

The informant went on to say, 'in *Jenlangong* Temple, before Legislator Yen assumed the chairmanship in 1999, his predecessor as chairman was Wang Jin-lu, prominent local industrialist, who served for three terms, and before him was Zeng Fu-hui, another wealthy businessman and unelected head under the old system, who served two terms. It is not known precisely how Jen Ming-kuen got to occupy a directorship at the temple. Nevertheless, Jen Ming-kuen became a director (*dongshi*) under Wang Jin-lu and had initially held that post and was not yet vice-chairman. Both men belonged to opposing factions, and the former wanted to unseat the latter in order to become chairman. Yan Rong-can and Huang De-chi were two fellow directors who were both experiencing financial difficulties and wanted to profit from the temple. However, Wang Jin-lu was not cooperative enough, and so they wanted to replace him with a chairman who was more accommodating. The details are not clear and it is not known exactly which candidate for chairman that each director cast his vote for. Nevertheless Wang Jin-lu narrowly won re-election as chairman for a third term as the first attempt to unseat him failed.'

However, the seeds of his downfall had already been sown. Jen Ming-kuen and his two brothers Jen Ming-zong and Jen Ming-fu had begun to penetrate the temple. He had become the first 'gangster' director (*dongshi*). The other committee members allegedly knew about his background, but they wanted to believe he was sincere and gave him the benefit of the doubt. After all, as local people like to say, 'anyone who wants to serve Mazu is welcome, whoever he is.'

My informant described at least two dubious incidents in which large sums of money possibly changed hands or were misappropriated for private gain. He said that when the Mazu Culture Building (*wenhuadalou*), a massive museum, exhibition and conference centre, was finished in Dajia under the auspices of *Jenlangong* in 2000, Jen Ming-kuen took charge of the tendering process for the paint work, but after he had awarded the project, he presented then Chairman Wang Jin-lu with a bill which was NT\$ 8,000,000, more than the chairman thought was reasonable for a project of that size and scope. The other incident allegedly involved Jen Ming-kuen telling the chairman that he could win re-election and hold on to his post if he paid him NT\$ 30,000,000, as his brother, Ming-fu who was living in China at the time, needed it. The chairman allegedly replied, 'whether I run for chairman again or not, you won't get the money'.

---

Jen Ming-kuen was determined to defeat Wang Jin-lu and so he twice asked that a meeting be convened so that the board could vote and install a temporary leader (*linshizhuxi*). However, his request was denied. He decided to convene an emergency meeting, which was illegal according to the committee's own rules, but he convinced Yen Ching-piao to intervene. At the time Yen Ching-piao still hadn't won the legislative seat, and was still Taichung County Assembly Speaker (*xianyizhang*). 'Chairman Yen Ching-piao became chairman because the rules weren't well thought out', my informant continues. 'The residency rules stated that the temple chairman had to be a resident of Dajia, but did not state a minimum period of residence. So once Yen Ching-piao changed his residency (*hukou*) to Dajia he was able to run'.

Yen Ching-piao also forced the Taichung county governor (*xianzhang*) to rewrite the rules on how to become temple president. Normally when the *Jenlangong* committee held meetings, these should be attended only by committee members/directors (*dongshi*) along with an official observer appointed by the county governor. Yen Ching-piao pressured the governor into not sending the observer to the meeting. Thus, that way the rules were flouted and non-members got to attend. Apparently, the voting body of around sixty people who had the right to choose the temple committee had mysteriously increased to around a hundred at the time of Yen Ching-piao's election. Somehow he had managed to stuff the committee with his 'minions', all heads of the pilgrimage's various performing troupes like the heads of the Scholar Troupe (*shentongtuan*), Santai Troupe (*Taizizuan*), etc., into the Believers' Representatives Association (*Xintudaibiaohui*) and given them voting rights, presumably to consolidate his position and to fend off likely challenges.

During that emergency meeting, directors Yan Rong-can and Huang De-chi decided to abandon the incumbent president and sided with Jen Ming-kuen. The betrayal of Wang Jin-lu by Huang De-chi was especially bitter, as they were sworn brothers (*jiebai xiongdi*). My informant continues, 'the committee was evenly split between Black and Red. Jen Ming-kuen, who was black and already a senior committee member in Wang Jin-lu's era, wanted to be chairman. As the two sides were evenly matched and there was a stalemate Jen Ming-kuen and his supporters decided to bring in Yen Ching-piao to unseat Wang Jin-lu and replace him as chairman. The outcome of the emergency voting session of a hundred people convened by Jen Ming-kuen was unequivocal- Yen Ching-piao suddenly emerged as the new chairman of *Jenlangong* in 1999. He was able to break the stalemate as he was the one personality with sufficient power and clout (*shili*) who everyone could agree on.'



---

## Purple Cloud Temple

I have visited the temple only a few times, and have not done fieldwork there, as my focus was on *Jenlangong*, so I rely exclusively on my sources, which had strong connections with it, to supply me with the data. Apparently, the Purple Cloud Temple is a complicated and unwieldy organization, which has a directors committee (*weiyuanhui*) as well as a much bigger association of believers' representatives (*xintudaibiaohui*) who frequently argue with and among each other. Apparently, businessman and current Temple Committee Chairman of the Board Huang Zhen-xiong presided over a deeply divided organization.

The temple had been built some thirty years earlier and the committee and other members had succeeded in raising a lot of money for its recent facelift, a fundraising effort that has lasted over 10 years now and has raised over NT\$ 300,000,000 so far. The few times I was at the temple grounds I saw several coach loads of pilgrims who, similar to what happens at *Jenlangong*, stop off at the temple and pay a brief visit, spending money on donations, souvenirs and certain fees for services typical of most Chinese temples. The temple's activities, of which a major part is making money from donations from pilgrim groups and other visitors, has proved enormously lucrative. This is evident in the 'theme park' like structure, which comprises several large buildings and occupies three levels on the hill terrace. This commercial success had also created a division and has led to infighting among the board members, mainly businessmen, who now formed two distinct factions.

Former Temple President Yan Pei-yun, leader of one faction, had been accused of stealing NT\$20,000,000 from the temple, as well as benefiting from all sorts of kickbacks and commissions, so he was deposed in a power struggle, losing to Huang Zhen-xiong. Hence Yan Pei-yun's faction, composed among others, of Huang De-chi (also *Jenlangong* temple director), and Ji Jin-lian, called in some 'gangsters' in order to intimidate the other group, Huang Zhen-xiong's faction, composed mainly of Director Zhou and Zhang Hua. Details are not very clear at this point, but it appeared that Director Zhou summoned his son, a known gang member, to show up, gun visible, at a temple meeting to intimidate the other group. Now Huang Zhen-xiong was unsure where Director Zhou's loyalty lay, and suspected that he may have switched factions.

---

Huang Zhen-xiong responded by soliciting the help of his good friend, Yen Ching-piao, so then the latter sent Jen Ming-hui to 'cancel out' the other group of *heidao*. It was a variation on a theme, of the practice of using *heidao* to mediate between opposing groups in Taiwanese society. In this case, a *heidao* had intervened on behalf of one of the parties, thus tipping the balance of power, forcing the weaker group to call in rival *heidao* to level the playing field. In the month of July of 2003, shortly before starting his jail sentence Jen Ming-hui was called on to act as 'supervisor' (*zongganshi*) at the Purple Cloud Temple on the hillside of Waipu, just outside Dajia. 'I'm not a believer and I'm not religious. The reason I'm in the temple is that my "brother" Yen Ching-piao asked me to do it as a personal favour', he told my informant.

Ming-hui told him, 'I was summoned to the temple in July and have worked hard the three months that I was there, till I entered prison in October 2003. There were times at meetings involving both factions, when discussions became so acrimonious, that I nearly came to blows with the other group's *heidao* members. I pushed and grabbed some of them by their shirts, screaming, and I've even had to call my armed bodyguard to come and help me. I prefer to be doing charitable works for local folks but Yen Ching-piao called because *heidao* had become involved in the temple, and the best way to counter the black is to be black yourself (*yuhei zhihei*), but when you're with respectable folks you act accordingly (*yubai zhibai*)' Ming-hui added.

The above data on political rivalry and infighting at *Jenlangong* and the Purple Cloud Temple is not unprecedented in the history of Taiwanese temple affairs. Seaman's (1978) book about the power struggles in a Taiwanese spirit-writing temple in the same town as the Purple Cloud Temple had portrayed a situation of intense factional rivalry and infighting between opposed power groupings. As with Seaman's findings, my data show that temple committee members in both temples I studied are also members of the town's two rival political factions- Red and Black. The fact that Yen Ching-piao and Jen Ming-kuen succeeded in becoming chairman and vice-chairman, respectively, of *Jenlangong*, as well as the fact that Ming-hui was able to play a decisive role in temple politics at the Purple Cloud Temple suggests two powerful interpretations- one, that temple politics is an extension of the wider phenomenon of intense factional politics that pervades rural Taiwan, and two, that a new class of self made men, or *jiaotou* (big man), have arrived in the rural scene and are ready to compete with the businessmen and industrialists for both political and sacred leadership, in rural Taiwan.

---

Chau's (2006) notion of the 'temple/village political nexus' and of the factionalism in Hongliutan Village, also applies to the situation I witnessed at *Jenlangong* Temple in Dajia Town. The *Jenlangong* temple committee, like local politics in Dajia Town, is likewise home to two opposed factions who vie for leadership. The fact that Yen Ching-piao and Jen Ming-kuen, who belong to the Black Faction, occupy the top positions at the temple is indicative of the current balance of power in Dajia. Past temple chairman and industrialist Wang Jin-lu, who belonged to the Red Faction, was deposed in a showdown between Red and Black. In short one can say that these two men occupy the top positions in *Jenlangong* temple because the Black Faction is currently the stronger of the two. In southern Taiwan it's not possible to separate temple affairs from local politics.

One can readily detect some similarities between the 'gangsters' in my fieldwork in Dajia and those that Boretz (1996) encountered in Beinan a decade earlier, in particular, mainstream society's disapproval of them, and their involvement in crime, especially the 'vice' business. However, I argue that Boretz's 'gangsters' are somewhat different to the ones I encountered on account of the following: first, to my knowledge, none of the Jen brothers nor Yen Ching-piao, were ever involved in temple performance troupes in their youth. Second, Boretz does not clarify whether any the youthful subjects studied ever became wealthy as a result of their illegal pursuits, or whether any of them ever participated in elected political office. Last, we cannot know whether any of these youths eventually achieved the status and prestige in the community sufficient to manage a prestigious temple.

True, Boretz mentions the story of 'Wang', a local landowner. 'Wang' was the 'richest and most powerful patriarch in the cluster of villages north of Fugang. He was at one time one of the largest landowners in Shanyuan village, north of Taidong, and had close personal and business connections- on both "black and white paths"- in Taidong' (Boretz 1996: 140). 'Wang' was a prominent member of the local village steering committee, who also sponsored a temple performance troupe, the Song Jiang Battalion. Comparisons between 'Wang' and the Jen brothers are inevitable. In both cases, these locally prominent people have managed to gain control over the local temples. However, I shall argue that these similarities conceal an important difference- 'Wang' represents the old rural landowning elite. The Jen brothers represent a new breed of elite that came into prominence relatively recently. We must interpret the life histories of the Jen brothers- Dajia's big men known locally as Dajia's 'gangsters', within the broader context of the island's economic and social transformation, particularly since the 1980s, as well within the peculiarities of rural factional politics in Taiwan.

---

## Temples, 'face', and merit

I often asked ordinary folk what they thought about Legislator Yen and the temple committee and most would refuse to condemn or issue strongly critical opinions of the man. Their replies would range from 'I heard Legislator Yen was a gangster, but I met him once at the temple and he was very humble, and seemed quite modest, so I'm not too sure', to 'I think he used to do bad things in the past, but he has changed a lot since he became temple chairman and later legislator.' The above quotes seem to indicate that very few of Dajia and Shalu's working classes and even small business owners seemed to mind or care very much who ran the temple.

Opinions towards the Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen are somewhat harder to gauge, partly because, apart from his official position at the temple, not much is known about his personal life, or what he does for a living. Most Dajia residents only know of him through his connection with the temple, and so they assume that he must be a successful local businessman. Some are vaguely familiar with his reputation as a 'gangster' but are not sure exactly what type of 'gangster' he is. Very few actually know of his family's criminal past and their involvement in Dajia's entertainment and leisure industry. It is instructive that during my fieldwork, perhaps only three local informants (all schoolteachers) were actually capable of pointing out which motels and karaoke bars (which apparently also functioned as brothels) he and his brothers actually owned. Still less is known about the rest of the temple committee members, perhaps, apart from the fact that most of them hold low-ranking local office.

Nonetheless, the attitude most people have toward him and the other directors is that of being outwardly deferential and respectful. People who recognize him from television and magazine coverage as temple director will greet him with courtesy at the temple grounds and he, pretty much like a benevolent uncle, will smile and greet them back. The few, who know of his 'dark' past, such as the local schoolteachers and volunteer temple tourist guides, will still be outwardly courteous and give him 'face' (*mianzi*). These schoolteachers and volunteer temple guides are the same ones who were scathing about him in private. However, I have never heard anyone, openly and publicly criticize his involvement with the temple. When I prod those few people other than the schoolteachers and other highly educated professionals who do know about his past what they think of his involvement in the temple, they would reply 'perhaps he's trying to make amends for his past mistakes', or 'he can't be doing anything

---

wrong or improper as long as he's involved with the temple', and finally 'even *heidao* can serve Mazu'. What can account for rural folk's pragmatism regarding supposedly 'insalubrious' elements in local temples?

Perhaps this reluctance to condemn *heidao* involvement in temples has to do with historical factors. In particular, it may have something to do with Taiwan's origin as a lawless frontier town in the Qing period, and the importance of temples in the early days as a provider of basic services, especially, the protection and defence of the village from marauding thieves and hostile people from other villages. Informants said that in the early days, in the absence of a strong central government, village temples were the sole organization that was capable of absorbing and agglutinating all elements of rural society. 'Farmers, traders, even local toughs, anybody who was in a position to make a contribution to temple affairs was welcome. They didn't prohibit anyone from participating because of their background.' Certainly, these opinions from an informant about the history of temple participation being all embracing and non-discriminatory are consistent with my findings about the pragmatic stance people have about recent *heidao* involvement in temples.

Belief and doctrine are ambiguous concepts for practitioners of Chinese popular religion and this is confirmed when one talks to them about their religious behaviour. *Pingan* (peace and security) is what most people say they are looking for when they come to worship at the temple. Ritual worship and religious activity at the temple can be described as one of periodical visits to *Jenlangong*, going to the temple-run kiosks, buying 'paper money' for the deity and burning it in the special incinerator, buying incense sticks and 'worshipping' (*bai-bai*) the various gods within the grounds, bringing 'offerings' of food and laying them atop the tables for the duration of their visit and taking them home afterwards. I take the view that a lot of what happens in *Jenlangong*, as in other popular religion temples, is an activity characterized by exchange. Worshippers come in to 'pray' and burn incense, make offerings of food, and make donations, in exchange for *pingan* (peace and security).

DeBernardi (2006: 95),<sup>98</sup> to give an example, discusses the fundamental importance of respect and correct ritual in religious and community settings, whether one is dealing with a deity, or with elder family relations and others of high social rank, if one desires an efficacious response. Thus what matters is the provision of a service and the pleasing of and respect of a

---

<sup>98</sup> DeBernardi, J. 2006. *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

god by the temple as the god's lodging, and by the offerings 'exchanged' in reciprocity for the god's beneficence.<sup>99</sup>

Why have Jen Ming-kuen and later, Legislator Yen gotten involved in *Jenlangong*? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the long tradition of strong rural political leadership by prominent and powerful individuals in Taiwanese history I had talked about in the introductory chapter. Throughout periods in Taiwanese history when state power was weak or ineffectual they often took on roles such as educators of local folk and defenders of the town from outside attack, and dispensed medical, cultural and military services, competencies now thought to belong to the state (Chen 1999).

In the introductory chapter I also discussed how in the post-war era, village chiefs and headmen's formal leadership roles overlapped with a more informal one. They would take active, leadership roles in community and especially temple affairs (Gallin 1966; Crissman 1981; Thompson 1984). As in Qing era Taiwan, prominent individuals were traditionally involved through the temple in the provision of these services, partly as a way to act as local benefactors, and partly in a bid to increase their prestige (Lamley 1981; Wilkerson 2004). In the absence of a strong central government, temples became the de facto locus of local village organization. The phenomenon of temples as a locus of prestige and power continued in the 1960s and 1970s. This was an era marked by strong central government, and coincided with the period in which a lot of ethnographic fieldwork that resulted in many influential ethnographies in Chinese anthropology.

The salient point here is that temples have always been important indicators of local prestige and power. Temples have always been a place where prominent people have jostled behind the scenes in order to occupy roles that can either confer prestige or reflect the fact that the temple official is 'influential'. Without doubt, Yen Ching-piao's position as chairman of the temple has enhanced his status and influence nationally. But, more importantly, this fact reflects what is common knowledge; that Legislator Yen becoming temple chairman in 1999 is evidence of his considerable power, as well as his status as 'first among equals' among the 'big men' in Dajia and Shalu. Thus he plays multifaceted roles in that he is a prominent local

---

<sup>99</sup> In Chinese religion, some argue, it is not important what you think or feel inside or what kind of person you are, what matters is that you perform the rituals correctly. This does not mean, however, that questions of morality are not important in Chinese popular religion. Chinese are very interested in correct practice (orthopraxy) rather than correct belief (orthodoxy). What matters is that one performs the ritual correctly in order to ensure that the ancestors do not go hungry. Thus seen this way correct ritual observance is an extremely moral act.

---

politician with nationwide name recognition, and is also head of the country's most prestigious temples.

The story of the Jen brothers, like that of the four rural leaders studied by Feuchtwang and Wang (2001), involves issues of rural leadership and kinds of authority, especially that which is associated with the successful running and management of a local temple. More to the point, their story likewise suggests that by demonstrating the ability to organize activities, mobilize people, and get things done, particularly with regard to communal endeavours like managing a local temple, one can have alternative sources of authority to public office. These two authors argue that having served in public office and shown in that role the capacity to be loyal to the locality and get things done for it was a pre-requisite for their leadership in the other authority of temple building and management. The saga of the Jen brothers is somewhat similar in that it shows that, at least in rural Taiwan, official posts in government and having a formal leadership post in temple management, are not incompatible. Indeed, the Jen brothers' story indicates that they are complementary—that is, many locally powerful people will want to occupy public office as well as enjoy positions, such as temple director.

Feuchtwang and Wang's recent research on the two locally powerful Chinese men, seems to suggest that, at least in China, due to the particular contingency of the country's communist past, the authority conferred by official positions and that conferred by alternative methods such as leadership in a local temple, are mutually distinct realms that rarely ever mingle. The story of the Jen brothers illustrates on the one hand the ease by which locally prominent individuals in rural Taiwan are able to leverage their wealth and influence into occupying public office, in the cases of Jen Ming-zong and Jen Ming-fu, and getting involved in running a temple, in the cases of Jen Ming-kuen and Jen Ming-hui. On the other hand, their story also indicates that the two kinds of authority are sometimes inseparable and intertwined.

Indeed, the Jen brothers' experiences may be more akin to that of Chau's (2006) case study on 'Old Wang'. 'Old Wang' (*laowang*), is one of the village's richest and most influential members, and runs a wholesale business. 'Old Wang' did not occupy public office, nor was he a scholar, thus he could not avail himself of two traditional sources of public 'face' in Chinese society. He was a rich businessman who yearned for respect, and so he got involved with the Black Dragon King Temple because he wanted to gain 'face', or public recognition as a powerful individual.

---

'Old Wang' originally was classified as a lower-middle peasant household (*xiazhongnong*) during the Maoist era and he eventually trained as a primary schoolteacher. He did various jobs during the Cultural Revolution and went into business in the early 1980s, when China began to institute market reforms. He decided, along with other elderly villagers, to revive the famous Black Dragon King Temple in 1981, which had been razed completely during the Cultural Revolution. He was elected leader of the reconstruction of the temple because of his organizational and technical experience, which he put to good use by organizing and contracting out different phases of the work. Using his expertise as an artisan, he designed the new temple buildings, and even put in RMB 100,000 of his own money to finance the project. The new temple was completed in 1984 and 'Old Wang' was elected chair (*dahuizhang*) of the temple association.

Because he is the prosperous and prominent leader of the Longwanggou Valley local elite, and especially because he is the head of a famous popular religion temple, 'Old Wang' has been able to accumulate eight formal titles, such as chair (*dahuizhang*) of the temple, chief (*suozhang*) of the Longwanggou Cultural Treasure Management Office, chief (*yuanzhang*) of the Longwanggou Hilly Land Arboretum, village head (*cunzhang*), he was selected as one of the few Chinese members of Inter-Asia, a Japanese NGO, etc. These titles appear prominently on name cards. Because he is leader of Longwanggou, he has attended various conferences in China and was even invited to go to Japan, to attend a conference as well as a study tour in 1996. He was able to welcome Chau, then a doctoral student of anthropology from Stanford, to do research at the temple, and even allowed him to use Longwanggou as a base camp for his research in Shaanxi.

I will argue that Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen got involved in running *Jenlangong* Temple because he yearned for a measure of public recognition commensurate with his power and wealth. Because 'Old Wang's' numerous titles, just like Jen Ming-kuen's sole title as temple vice-chairman, are outside the government bureaucracy, they are not government officials, and receive no salary for any of them. However, 'these titles imply positions, which in turn imply power' (Chau 2006: 185). All of his eight positions hinge on the fact that he is the temple boss, and all these titles mean one thing- he is the boss in Longwanggou. Similarly, Jen Ming-kuen's position as temple vice-chairman signifies he is the boss, or to put it another way, he is the *jiaotou* (big man) of Dajia.



---

Being boss of a famous temple gave these two men social 'face' (*mianzi*) with which they can present themselves to the outside world. It is as temple bosses that these two men receive visitors to their hometowns. It is as temple boss that Jen Ming-kuen appears on cable TV to give interviews during the pilgrimage season. It is as temple boss, especially a famous one, which allowed 'Old Wang' to act as host to Dr. Chau, a foreign scholar from a prestigious American university, just as Jen Ming-kuen had done with me.

These two men differ, in that 'Old Wang' is very candid about why he spends so much time and energy at the temple. When interviewed by Chau, he replied, 'because I want to leave a name. You see, one comes to live in this world only once, so one has to leave a name. It doesn't matter whether it's a good name or bad name; one has to leave a name' (Ibid.). 'Old Wang' wants to be remembered as *the* architect of the revival of the temple. He wants fame and influence. Jen Ming-kuen, on the other hand, has never shifted on his declared motive for spending time at the temple. 'I work for the goddess Mazu and my intention is to get the whole world to know her', is what I repeatedly heard him say in public and in private.

I shall now return to the idea of merit in the traditional political culture of Southeast Asia as a motive for 'gangster' involvement in Taiwanese temples. Thais see a person as 'always gaining or losing merit' (Hanks 1962: 1247). Moreover, they believe that because *karma* is cumulative, 'with the most recent actions weighted proportionately heavier' (Ockey 1998: 41), one's actions in the latter part of life are more important than those one has done in one's youth. For both Yen Ching-piao and Jen Ming-Kuen, as with the Thai *chaopo*, their connection with the temple as directors reflects the fact that they are powerful individuals. It may also, if we follow the Thai logic of merit and power, mean that they are 'good' people since 'power itself is proof of goodness and virtue and attracts followers' (Rosen 1975: 142).<sup>100</sup> Temple Chairman Yen Ching-piao and Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen, to varying degrees, rely on *Jenlangong* in order to gain public acceptance as individuals who are both powerful and meritorious. Yen Ching-piao briefly 'lived a life of crime' in his youth, but since then he has had an illustrious political career, which has culminated in his directorship *Jenlangong* and shortly after, his elevation to national legislator. Thai logic of merit and power would dictate that he is, by definition, a 'good man'.

---

<sup>100</sup> Rosen, G. 1975. *Peasant Society in a Changing Economy: Comparative Development in Southeast Asia and India*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

---

To be fair, his claims to legitimacy are very much contested and negotiated. Highly educated urban and rural residents are still suspicious and distrustful of him despite his recent achievements. However, among the rural folk his legitimacy derives from various sources. To a large extent he bases his legitimacy on his status as two-term legislator for Shalu and on his well-deserved reputation as a ‘tireless servant of his constituents’. Also he has recently cultivated a reputation as a benefactor for various causes- earthquake and typhoon victims, blood donation, etc. These factors alone should suffice to make him a ‘meritorious’ individual in the Thai worldview. Indeed, in chapter six I talk about how Legislator Yen’s constituents in Shalu view him. Many of those who support and vote for the two-term legislator, see him as a good man who works to defend local interests. The fact that he is also head of the island’s foremost temple buttresses his standing as a powerful and virtuous individual in the eyes of rural folk.

Jen Ming-kuen, on the other hand, relies almost entirely on his post as *Jenlangong* vice-chairman to claim respectability as well as acceptance. He is not a learned man. I even suspect he may be functionally illiterate as I have never seen him reading anything and I noticed temple employees used to scan the daily papers and give him a summary of any article that made mention of the temple. His only position of social worth *is* as temple vice-chairman. He receives visitors in Dajia as temple vice-chairman. He gives interviews on cable TV as temple vice-chairman. He has the potential, should he so desire in future, to make political connections and alliances with people outside Dajia as temple vice chairman. Thai cosmology and beliefs would predict that his current high status as *Jenlangong* vice-chairman should confer a commensurate amount of merit and virtue. It could certainly account for why ordinary folk are outwardly respectful and why they give him ‘face’ (*mianzi*). Perhaps they focus on the office, not on the person, and they assume that he can’t be all that bad because he is connected with the goddess Mazu. It may be another way of saying that he must be virtuous because in Southeast Asian traditional political culture, power begets virtue.

I have been arguing in this section that prominent rural individuals get involved in folk religion temples as a way of gaining merit and legitimacy. I will now make the case that one may analyze certain aspects of local politics in Taiwan by taking folk religion as an ideal or model. Ahern (1981) and Feuchtwang (2001) have suggested that the relationship of the gods with each other within the pantheon of Chinese religion, and their relationship with mortals, may be seen as a model for the relationship of the state bureaucracy and other high officials with

---

ordinary humans. I intend to use this model as a template for coming to terms with this thesis' main themes- the legitimacy of the local politician and the nature of his power.

Ahern identifies two ways in which Chinese gods' power and authority may be viewed. One is the view from the top, or the official version of the source of their power. 'In the government's view, the god's authority was delegated from above as they were admitted into the official lists and given honours and titles' (1981: 95). Thus a god's authority is likened to that of a bureaucrat or high government official. The other view is the one from below, emanating from ordinary worshippers. According to this view, gods are powerful to the extent that they have the 'power to respond to requests and make things happen (being *lieng*) was the ultimate criterion of a spirit's becoming a god...They say a god is *lieng* when many people say he is, *lieng* is a result of popularity and allegiance from the people...temples could decline in popularity and even be abandoned if the god were no longer thought *lieng*' (Ahern 1981: 94-95).<sup>101</sup> Lastly, she believes that Chinese religion has a mystifying function in that 'leaders can use religion and ritual to enhance their power because religion and ritual hide the true source of power from those over whom it is exercised' (1981: 77).

Chinese gods are, Feuchtwang (2001: 3-4)<sup>102</sup> argues, 'actual historical persons', who 'can be traced to and identified with historically documentable biographies'. He states that Chinese gods like Guan Yin and Mazu are intercessors. He also believes that these beings are comparable to Christian saints, among other things, because 'like saints, Chinese gods are credited with a present effectiveness. It is not the effectiveness of faith or of intercession with a redeemer. But it is intercession in a hierarchy of gods and their underlings, having power to control malign and disorderly influences which are themselves also in principle historically identifiable individuals' (ibid.).

Viewing local politics in Taiwan through the prism of folk religion as outlined above is helpful in three significant ways. First, ideal gods, seen from the perspective of ordinary mortals, are 'effective' and 'responsive'. In the same manner, I argue in chapter six that the ideal quality of a politician, from the perspective of local folk, is his ability to act as a generous patron, providing for his constituents and to 'get things done'. Should he fail in this task his popularity will decline and he will probably not get re-elected next time.

---

<sup>101</sup> Ahern, E. M. 1981. *Chinese ritual and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>102</sup> Feuchtwang, S. 2001. *Popular Religion in China: The imperial metaphor*. Richmond: Curzon.

---

Second, intermediate or lesser gods perform the role of ‘intercessor’ or ‘intermediary’, wherein they not only control ‘malign and disorderly influences’ but also intercede on behalf of ordinary mortals who wish to petition higher, more powerful but distant gods. Similarly, in chapter six I make the point that rural voters are intimidated by the bureaucracy, as well as the police and the justice system and they want their local politician to intercede with these institutions as well as with other politicians even more powerful and distant than himself, on their behalf.

Last, Chinese religion hides the true source of power from those over whom it is exercised. In chapter five I talk about the complex multifaceted nature of the Taiwanese local politician. He is seen as a ‘hero’ and ‘avenger’ in his hometown. But he also has strong links, sometimes of the unofficial sort, to the agents and organs of the state. Moreover, he is also aware that his long-term survival involves forging some sort of relationship or understanding and accommodation and cooperation with the nation’s elite. In chapter six I describe how Legislator Yen Ching-piao’s voters’ surgery emphasizes how hard they work at obtaining benefits for their voters through constituency service (*xuanmin fuwu*). He is humble and says that he is powerful only because he ‘works for the people’. Modesty aside, Legislator Yen is a truly powerful man in his own right whose primary legitimacy lies outside the state apparatus. Nevertheless, in an equally important sense, a significant part of his ability to deliver benefits to his constituents lies in his office, which gives him access to institutions and resources of the state. Thus, the nature of his power is at least partly derivative.

These three facts reflect common themes in the political culture of Southeast Asia. The *chaopo*, or Thai local politician ‘draws attention to certain persistent facts of Thai life: that patronage is important; that justice and protection are to be found more in personal relationships than in the law’ (McVey 2000: 14). In addition, in mystifying the source of his power, ‘the local politician affirms his privileged access to the spiritual world of *kapangyarihan*<sup>103</sup> through identification with the institutions of organized religion...the local politician poses as the source of material welfare too. In assuming the role of the grand patron, the local politician frequently passes off public resources, funds and prerogatives as flowing from his personal powers and magnanimity’ (Sidel 1995: 159).<sup>104</sup> Also, ‘legitimation along these lines also obscures the derivative nature of power...power is equated with

---

<sup>103</sup> Intrinsic power

<sup>104</sup> Sidel, J. 1995. “The Philippines: The Languages of Legitimation”. In Muthia Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 136-169. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

personal benevolence even as its source in the state apparatus and the cash economy remains hidden' (Sidel 1995: 167).

## **Narratives of 'gangsters running temples'**

One particularly good way of illustrating how some sectors of society have become extremely sensitized to notions of corruption and informal institutions is by looking at data I gathered from talking to Dajia's schoolteachers and other highly educated professionals. As I mentioned previously in the chapter, most ordinary rural folk are quite accepting of Temple Chairman Yen Ching-piao and Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen. Indeed I have never heard them call these two men *heidao* although many acknowledge that these men do have such a reputation. In stark contrast to the acceptance and tolerance that most ordinary working class people show towards these two men, are the feelings of the rural schoolteachers:

*Heidao* have taken over *Jenlangong* Temple because it's rich and famous. They operate all the KTVs, video arcades, 'barber shops', billiard halls in Dajia's *Guangming* Road and have allied themselves with Yen Ching-piao so that the police will leave them alone, as he's a legislator.

The above quote was from a Dajia primary schoolteacher. Her views on 'gangsters' and temples were typical of most of the professional classes from Dajia and Shalu I have spoken to regarding the issue. They have the perception that the temple has been taken over by 'gangsters' just like several other famous popular religion temples in the country. They largely agree that it is due to certain social forces, foremost of which is the cost-benefit scenario of temple management.

Chinese folk religion is very much concerned with worldly affairs and Chinese folk religion temples offer a dizzying array of services to people that, for a set fee, ensure academic success for one's children (*wenchangsui*), avoid bad luck and misfortune (*pingansui*), change the luck of those born in inauspicious years (*antaisui*), etc. These fees range between NT\$ 500-800 (US\$1=NT\$32) and are valid for the whole year. These informants believe 'gangsters' take over temples because they make a lot of money. Running a highly successful folk religion temple in Taiwan can be highly lucrative. In addition it can also constitute a low-risk, high reward activity if we consider that very few people are convicted for fraud involving temple funds. Below is a quote from a source:

---

Temples were initially a burden on whoever managed them as they had to give out of their own pockets to maintain many of the activities, as the government subsidies clearly weren't enough. Initially many of the temple managers were either businessmen or scholarly gentlemen types who could nevertheless raise money through their standing in the community. This situation changed in the 80s as a lot of money began pouring into temples in Taiwan. As people got richer they had more money to give in the form of donations to temples. Donations to the temple have always been substantial. But in recent years temples began to be run on different lines, like they were businesses. They would use *guangmingdeng*,<sup>105</sup> *antaisui*, etc. Previously, donations weren't a big amount, if you wanted to give money, fine but now they print big posters advertising their 'services'. *Antaisui* used to cost NT\$ 200, now its NT\$ 600.

Rising prosperity in Taiwan has been accompanied by rising expectations of wealth and comfort, and skyrocketing temple revenues are a reflection of this. Nonetheless, my fieldwork took place at a time of economic recession, rising unemployment and pessimistic economic statistics for the country, but this did not seem have reduced people's spending in temples. My informants speculate that people have spent more money in temples in recent years precisely because they see it as an insurance against uncertain times. Many people have lost their jobs and companies are losing money, young men go to do national service, children face competitive entrance exams to enter the best senior high schools and universities, or they simply don't feel well- all these pressures contribute to people going to worship in the temple and giving even more donations.

Dajia Town's *Jenlangong* Temple is one of the country's most famous and profitable temples. I estimated its gross revenues for three of these 'services' for 2003 and they are as follows:<sup>106</sup> *antaisui* = NT\$ 25,000,000 (NT\$ 500 x 50,000), *guangmingdeng* = NT\$ 36,000,000 (NT\$ 600 x 60,000), and finally, *wenchangdeng* = NT\$ 2,400,000 (NT\$ 600 x 4000). These three services alone add to a total of NT\$ 63,400,000. This total figure is a highly conservative estimate, and it does not include revenue from all the other services the temple offers, and does not include other income such as donations of gold, value of the temple real estate, etc. Another informant is quoted explaining to me why temples increasingly became an attractive target for so called 'gangsters':

---

<sup>105</sup> A candle or electric bulb kept in the temple with the donor's name written on it.

<sup>106</sup> The figures consist of the price of the service times the number of receipts.

---

Taiwanese people still aren't sure what a religion is. Now *Jenlangong* Temple worship can't be considered a religion, it's a folk belief. A lot of people who come to worship Mazu don't care who the temple committee and chairman are. They only care about Mazu. So they allow these people to control *Jenlangong* Temple through omission. If people decided that it was unacceptable, they would stop going and stop giving donations and the temple would run out of money. Then *heidao* would lose interest in it. Whoever heard of *heidao* taking over Dajia's *Wenchangci* (Confucius Temple)? It's because there isn't any money over there! Although most major temples in Taiwan are *caituanfaren* (Consortium of Judicial Persons) and thus all financial deals must be made accountable and be open to the public, this apparent transparency doesn't stop them from skimming money off the top. They can 'borrow' money from the temple and return it at a later date without paying interest. Alternatively they can lend the money to their friends and charge them interest, pocketing the interest while returning the principal to the temple. We don't know all the details, but there are a lot of ways to make money off temples if you put your mind to it. This problem isn't unique to Dajia. *Fengtiengong* Temple in Xingang Town, *Chaotiangong* Temple in Beigang Town, and *Nanyaogong* Temple in Changhua City all suffer the same fate. Previously temple officials were scholarly, gentlemen types, but they don't want to get involved now that these people are here. No one wants to be coerced or threatened with physical violence just because they happen to have an argument over temple affairs.

It was evident to me that my informants who were professionals felt strongly about the temple/money nexus, which they felt has given rise to the current predicament. The truth is, their explanations are, at first glance, appealing for they appeal to a very strong human motive- greed. 'Gangsters' have taken over temples because they are greedy. People's theories about why 'gangsters' have taken over temples notwithstanding, it must be made clear that to date no past or sitting temple official at *Jenlangong* has ever been convicted of any form of financial impropriety. Although rumours and conspiracy theories abound, there is no hard evidence of fraud involving temple funds.<sup>107</sup>

I have highlighted the profit motive as the primary explanatory force given by professionals regarding 'gangster' involvement in temples. What was not so clear to me was why ordinary people had allowed such a thing to happen in the first place. 'Why don't ordinary people protest', I would ask the local schoolteachers. Certain recurring elements in their answers, some of which are reflected in the above quotes, ranged from public apathy- 'many people

---

<sup>107</sup> After coming to power in 2000, the DPP, suspicious that Yen Ching-piao and his 'ilk' had assumed control of *Jenlangong* the year before, and perhaps they were in a vengeful mood because Yen Ching-piao threw his weight behind James Soong of the PFP against aspirant Chen Shui-bian of the DPP in the 2000 elections, ordered a series of 'raids' of the temple and inspections of its financial accounts. These acts were in order to find proof Yen Ching-piao was up to no good. However, no evidence of wrongdoing was found and the government has left the temple management alone ever since.

---

don't care who runs the temple here', or 'many of today's youth aren't bothered at all about the temple and temple-related affairs', to ignorance- 'Taiwanese don't know what religion is', or 'many are old and not very well-educated, they only want to worship Mazu'.

What the above comments regarding popular apathy and ignorance, seem to indicate is a discernible 'middle-class educated' bias against folk religion as well as other rural values. The suggestion by Dajia and Shalu's intellectuals that ordinary people don't care what goes on in the temple as long as they can worship Mazu, or that they don't know what religion is, indicates a veiled criticism of popular religion and other folk values. The above quotes suggest that informants appear to be in favour of a religion in which moral rectitude on the part of worshippers and of those in charge of the temple were paramount. It may also be the case that they yearn for a form of religious practice in which doctrine and belief had a more prominent role. Indeed the repeated observations of many schoolteachers that previous temple directors were 'scholarly, gentlemen types', or at least 'prominent local businessmen' seems to support the idea that the intelligentsia have a clear bias towards the alternative kind of religion I have just mentioned.



---

## Conclusion

The Jen brothers are popularly known as the local *jiaotou* (big man) of Dajia Town and they have achieved success in business and local politics, often through illegal or semi-legal means. The Jen brothers achieved success largely by identifying the commercial opportunities in the leisure and gambling industry that opened up since the 1980s. This was a time in which Taiwanese society witnessed rapid economic growth accompanied later by social and political liberalization. These individuals have leveraged their wealth and influence in two ways. Firstly, they have entered local politics. Second, they have, with Legislator Yen's assistance and collaboration, also managed to penetrate the management committee of two local popular religion temples.

The story of the Jen brothers illustrates on the one hand the ease by which locally prominent individuals in rural Taiwan are able to leverage their wealth and influence into occupying public office, in the cases of Jen Ming-zong and Jen Ming-fu, and getting involved in running a temple, in the cases of Jen Ming-kuen and Jen Ming-hui. On the other hand, their story also indicates that the two kinds of authority- that which flows from public office, and that which flows from being wealthy, influential, and having a reputation for leadership and organizational skills, are sometimes inseparable and intertwined. The 'gangsters' and temples phenomenon exemplifies the 'temple/village political nexus in rural Taiwan, on the one hand, and rural factional politics, on the other. In southern Taiwan it's not possible to separate temple affairs from local politics.

Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen got involved in running *Jenlangong* Temple because he yearned for a measure of public recognition commensurate with his power and wealth. Jen Ming-kuen's position as temple vice-chairman signifies he is the boss, or to put it another way, he is the *jiaotou* (big man) of Dajia. Being boss of a famous temple gave him social 'face' (*mianzi*) with which he can present himself to the outside world. It is as temple bosses that he receives visitors to his hometowns. It is as temple boss that Jen Ming-kuen appears on cable TV to give interviews during the pilgrimage season. It is as temple boss (especially a famous one) that Jen Ming-kuen acted as host to a foreign scholar from a prestigious foreign university. For both Yen Ching-piao and Jen Ming-Kuen, as with the Thai *chaopo*, their connection with the temple as directors reflects the fact that they are powerful individuals. It may also, if we follow the Thai logic of merit and power, mean that they are 'good' people. There is a divide in the manner in which the 'gangster' and temples phenomenon is viewed in

---

rural Taiwan. Ordinary, working class people are quite tolerant and forgiving of these 'big men' while highly educated professionals condemn them.

This chapter also talked about rural professionals' disapproval of *heidao* involvement in temples. In the next chapter, I will describe and examine middle class values and attitudes regarding politics and political life. In summary, my middle class informants have broadly westernized democratic ideals and they are quite disappointed with the state of democracy in Taiwan. They share the view propagated by academic scholarship and the press that it is backward and unconsolidated. They yearn for leaders who are genteel, well educated, mild-mannered, scholarly, and most of all, incorruptible. They are quite disappointed that most of the politicians fall well short of their ideals and expectations.

---

## **Chapter Three:**

### ***Taiwan is not a Real Democracy***

He is very honest and incorruptible. He would make an ideal president one day.

I was interviewing Taipei and Taichung city residents some months after the March 2004 presidential elections were held in Taiwan. I was gathering data on urban residents' views on politics and democracy and so asked them numerous questions on the topic. My conversations with them ranged from highly abstract political principles to their views on several current politicians. A consistent theme in these interviews was a feeling of disappointment and frustration about the state of the country's democracy in general, and about several politicians, in particular. It occurred to me to ask them, 'who is your ideal politician and why?' The majority of my interviewees nominated Taipei Mayor<sup>108</sup> Ma Ying-Jiu. The above quote is one such comment I heard about him.

The year 2004 was very significant for Taiwan if only because two important elections were held that year; the presidential elections on March 20 and the legislative ones on December 11. I was doing fieldwork precisely during this period when the issue of elections dominated news stories and was a very common topic of conversation among my informants. Urban dwellers I spoke to have very clear notions of what a 'true' democracy needs to have and what kind of political class and citizens are necessary to make it happen. It is interesting that their views are an amalgam of contemporary notions of politics and recognizably Chinese moral categories and concepts. The former include the impartiality of the civil service, elections as a 'rational' and 'civil' activity, elected officials acting as 'monitors' of the actions of bureaucrats, etc. The latter refer to ideas such as *suyang* (literacy) and *fengdu* (demeanour), both essential virtues of the Confucian *junzi* or gentleman. Here is a summary of their political beliefs and values:

---

<sup>108</sup> Ma Ying-jiu did not run for re-election in the Taipei mayoral elections held in December 2006. His successor is KMT candidate Hau Lung-bin. However, as Ma Ying-jiu held the position during my fieldwork I shall continue to refer to him as Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jiu.

- 
- Politics and especially elections should be a civil and orderly contest of ideas and platforms between parties where personal animosity between politicians is absent.
  - Opposition politicians should graciously concede the result and work with the ruling party after Election Day.
  - After the elections the whole country should put partisan interests behind them and unite and heal its divisions for the sake of the country.
  - The civil service and bureaucracy are impartial and objective arbiters of the law.
  - Politicians should be upright citizens with no previous or pending criminal conviction.
  - Politicians and voters should have *fengdu* (demeanour), as well as *suyang* (literacy).

This chapter will highlight a puzzle related to the political values of educated middle class voters who tend to live in the nation's big cities and provincial towns. The paradox is, as I see it: why do they prefer politicians like Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jiu who are perceived to be ineffectual and indecisive? I believe the solution to the puzzle lies in understanding the political values and attitudes of these very same urban middle class voters. These voters are disappointed about the democratic development in Taiwan. They complained about the low quality of voters and politicians that the country has. They also complained that the political system is defective, allowing certain 'crooked' politicians to take advantage of the country's democratic reforms for their own benefit. I argue that what people want is an honest and upright gentleman who is also daring and resolute (*you poli de*). People yearn for a politician like Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jiu, who can fix the rot in the system and rid it of crooked people. However, the paradox still remains because the very qualities that make for an upright, genteel, well-mannered and well-educated politician often militate against resolute and decisive action. These latter qualities are characteristic of the same 'corrupt' rural politicians the urban voters despise.

Taipei Mayor and opposition KMT Party Leader Ma Ying-jiu (see Photo 6) embodies the traits of the ideal traditional Chinese political leader. He is handsome and likeable and holds an S.J.D. degree from Harvard and is tipped to lead his party, the KMT, to victory in the 2008 presidential elections. His popularity transcends party lines and he is seen as a uniter, a sort of consensus politician unlike President Chen Shui-bian or the ex-KMT head Lien Chan, who are too divisive and polarizing. He is perceived as honest, decent, and possessing integrity. However he is thought too honest. Some people might say he is too gentlemanly. Given Taiwan's rough and tumble politics, these traits might work against him. He also cannot shake off perceptions that he is indecisive and ineffectual.



Photo 6: Ma Ying-jiu

Source: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12441464/site/newsweek/>

It was precisely his perceived qualities of being indecisive and ineffectual that had been dogging him in the weeks that followed the presidential elections in March 20, 2004 and the ‘shooting incident’ that preceded it a day earlier. It was March 19<sup>th</sup> 2004. Incumbents President Chen Shui-bian and Vice-President Annette Lu of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were travelling in an open convertible jeep in the presidential motorcade on the last day of their campaign in the southern city of Tainan. The motorcade was slowly inching along a street teeming with supporters when one bullet grazed Chen’s stomach. Another grazed Annette Lu’s knee. They didn’t hear or notice anything unusual at the time, but shortly after, both would complain of stomach and knee pains. Once blood was found on their clothes, they were taken to hospital in Tainan, a statement was made to the press and shortly after both ruling DPP and opposition Kuomintang (KMT) parties decided to halt campaigning activities. At the time it looked like an assassination attempt. Fortunately both Chen and Lu did not suffer serious injury and were discharged from hospital that same day. But this incident would unleash a chain of events that will significantly influence the political scene for the next several months.

---

The scheduled poll went on as planned on March 20<sup>th</sup>. The DPP/TSU Coalition won 50.11% of the vote, while the KMT/PFP Coalition managed 49.89%. It was the narrowest of victories. The incumbent had only 30,000 more votes than the challenger, a razor-thin margin of 0.22% of the votes. A total of 13,251,719 voted, representing an 80.28% voter turnout, but a high number of them, 337,297, were deemed invalid by the electoral commission. After the provisional results had been announced then KMT presidential aspirant Lien Chan refused to honour the result and wasted no time in demanding a recount. He also demanded a full investigation into what is now famously known as the 'shooting incident' (*qiangjian*), implying that it had been engineered by the DPP to garner sympathy votes for their side.

The KMT filed several lawsuits in several cities contesting the result and Lien Chan led 20,000 of his supporters in a march in front of the presidential palace, this march eventually became an all-night sit-in. The boulevard outside the presidential office was continuously occupied by thousands of irate supporters for a week afterwards. The official results awarding a narrow victory to the DPP were announced on March 26<sup>th</sup>. This prompted more demonstrations as 100,000 people massed in front of the presidential office on March 27<sup>th</sup> demanding a recount.<sup>109</sup>

As mayor of Taipei, the capital and scene of the majority of the opposition-led protests, Ma Ying-jiu granted the protestors permission to hold their rallies but cautioned them to respect law and order. However he took a lenient attitude towards the protestors, and was accused by people of being unable or unwilling to prevent incidents of violence from happening. He finally appealed to the central government to take over responsibility for handling the protest by pan-blue (KMT/PFP) supporters in front of the Presidential Office building, saying the Taipei City Government was incapable of handling such a highly political controversy as he faced accusations that he acquiesced to the pan-blue camp's protests and failed to clamp down on the illegal rallies in the centre of the nation's capital. He tried very hard to maintain the appearance of neutrality regarding the controversy, but only succeeded in appearing indecisive and ineffectual in times of crisis.

---

<sup>109</sup> A judicial recount under the jurisdiction of the High Court was held from May 10<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup>, composed of 460 teams in 21 courthouses across Taiwan. The recount confirmed the initial result- DPP won, but with a smaller margin. Lien and Soong have to this day refused to concede that they had lost.

He was caught in the middle, trying to appear neutral and wanting to be seen to be competently doing his job of mayor. However, his actions satisfied no one (see Photo 7). Those supporting President Chen Shui-bian berated him for not being more decisive and not acting sooner in quelling the riots in Taipei, while those supporting Lien Chan criticized him for calling on protestors to stop, or at least continue their demonstration peacefully. In an earlier, unrelated incident, Mayor Ma also was also the target of similar accusations of lack of leadership and indecisiveness as a result of the SARS epidemic that hit Taiwan in early 2003. He was criticized for not mobilizing the Taipei City Government quickly enough to effectively contain the outbreak of the virus. Likewise, flooding in metropolitan Taipei in 2004 also led to public questioning of his leadership and caused a slide in his popularity.

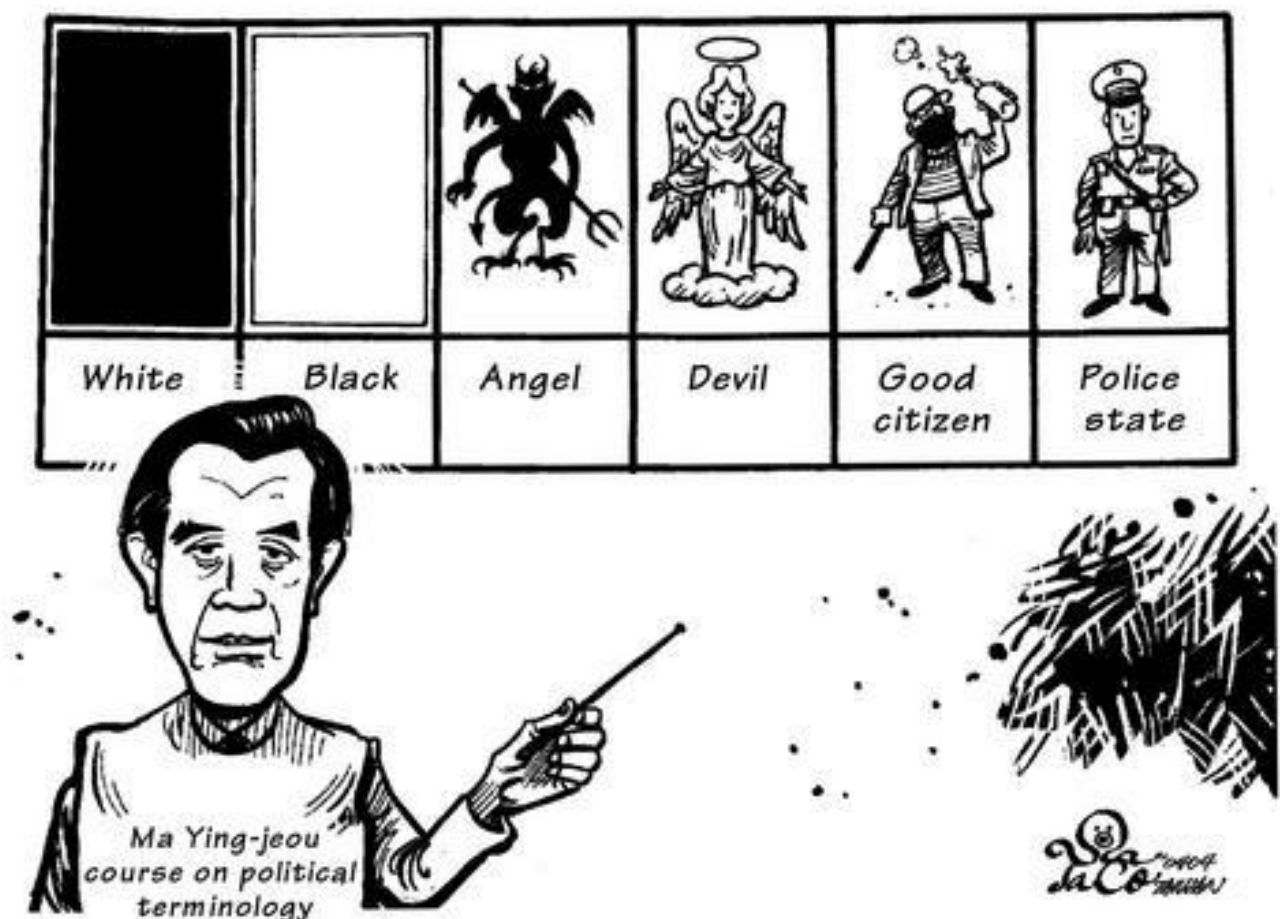


Photo 7: Ma editorial cartoon

Source: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/photo/2004/04/16/2003125083>

---

The informants who provided the data for this chapter consisted almost exclusively of highly educated professionals- doctors, pharmacists, university academics, schoolteachers, and owners of private cram schools, reporters and journalists. They were among the large urban professional class of Taipei and Taichung, and also, to a lesser extent, the provincial towns of Dajia, Qingshui and Shalu, Taichung County. My informants do not constitute a representative cross-section of urban society and my findings here are not representative of the views of the average urban voter. Had I chosen my informants to include a much wider section of urban society- urban working class, owners of small eateries and scooter repair shops, urban poor, rural migrants, etc. my findings will undoubtedly have turned out differently.

I chose to focus on the urban and rural highly educated middle class professionals because I firmly believe that this group wields a disproportionate influence in shaping the debates and narratives regarding the country's moral and political values. Highly educated urban politicians exert an influence out of all proportion to their numbers in setting the agenda of the country's governance and politics. These politicians occupy the moral high ground in the debates regarding the country's political corruption. Highly educated urban professionals occupy key positions in the country's media and information industry- newspaper and magazine editors, journalists, commentators, etc. These people initiate and shape the media narratives and stories regarding politics, especially, political corruption. Highly educated university academics and elementary and secondary schoolteachers still command high status in society and their views are held in high-esteem. These people set the tone of the country's moral and political education within the nation's system of mass elementary, secondary and tertiary education. I wanted to be familiar with the dominant ideologies and values of the country. That is the reason why I decided to pay close attention to what the highly educated urban middle classes say and think.



---

## Democracy is not mature

Democracy is often about abstract ideas like equality before the law, the sanctity of the vote, respect for human rights, etc. However, it is through procedures and mechanisms such as electoral law, the civil code, etc., that people experience the aforementioned concepts in a tangible way. Without them, these concepts ring hollow. Elections are the most visible, spectacular manifestation of the practice of democracy. Indeed, when hitherto undemocratic countries undergo political reform, either voluntarily, as in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, or involuntarily, as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, there tend to be immediate calls to hold elections as soon as it is feasible.<sup>110</sup>

Urban informants I spoke to tended to view democracy in Taiwan in one of two ways. An optimistic minority felt that it has improved a lot over the years although it faces a lot of challenges (*you henduo tiaozhan*), and is very much a 'work in progress'. A substantial majority, on the other hand, were very critical of it. I often heard the phrase 'Taiwan is a democracy in form but not in substance', or 'it is quite shallow'. Most of my urban informants felt that democracy and political life in Taiwan lacked essential characteristics a 'true' democracy needed to have.

They complained about the chaos and seeming disorder that come to mind when one thinks about politics. Indeed, at one level this is readily apparent when one watches scenes of fistfights between legislators at the Legislative Yuan. Informants complained it has made the country a sort of international laughingstock and people were worried their political class was harming their reputation abroad. The chaos and disorder can also be experienced at election campaigns. Indeed, elections share common characteristics with popular religious festivals in the sense that they are '*renao*' (loud and noisy). A typical motorcade that precedes a politician's entourage on its way to a rally would not be complete without a fleet of cars and three wheeler motorcycles normally driven by people with physical disabilities enthusiastically honking their horns. The candidate would normally be on top of a motorized float festooned with his picture while a pre-recorded message complete with the candidate's theme song blares out from its powerful loudspeakers. The actual rally is even louder as supporters are all supplied with trumpet-like devices; aerosol-cans attached to a hollow cone that emits a powerful piercing wail once the button is pressed. Thus I have witnessed a few rallies wherein

---

<sup>110</sup> It does seem to be the case that for many people, democracy means elections. I wish to make clear that this chapter is about urban residents' *emic* views about politics, elections and democracy and not mine. Although I fully sympathise with my informants' sentiments and find them quite reasonable, I do not share them.

---

the candidates' speeches are often punctuated by these noisy contraptions. Whatever one may think of political rallies in Taiwan, they are certainly not quiet and orderly.

## Politicians are not gentlemen

Another reason informants held this pessimistic view of politics and democracy is the palpable personal animosity and bitter hatred between politicians that become manifestly apparent during elections. Voters are accustomed to seeing political parties engage in verbal attacks (*yuyan shang de gongji*) as a default form of dialogue. This is heightened during election time but they are not uncommon during other times. In many countries people tend to have an ambivalent attitude towards politicians in the best of times. Yet the Taiwanese politician, in my impression, is regarded with especial distaste and cynicism. In the words of one informant:

Politicians pretend to act in the name of democracy (*jiayi minzhu zhimin*) but create social chaos (*zhizao shehui hunluan*) and opposition between parties (*zhengdang de duli*). We have a formal democracy (*xingshi shang minzu*). The Pan-Green and Pan-Blues don't cooperate (*xuyao hezuo*) to work toward improving social welfare (*wei renmin de fuli zhuoxiang*), but instead have a battle of words.

'Taiwanese democracy is very shallow', informants often liked to comment. When pressed to elaborate further, they stated that voting is only a small part of the democratic process and that a viable political system needs to have in place certain institutions and appropriate habits on the part of citizens and their representatives. One crucial institution which they felt was missing is the willingness to abide by the rule of law. The aftermath of the election in Taiwan not only highlighted the bitterly divided nature of the population. It also seemed to indicate to my informants that the Pan-Blues were willing to respect the results only when it suited them. Firstly, they refused to accept the provisional results issued after all 13,749 polling places had reported. Lien Chan demanded a recount, a full inquiry into the apparent assassination attempt, at the same time as his party filed lawsuits in several cities contesting the election result.

My informants' negative comments regarding the chaos and disorder, the personal animosity and bitter hatred between politicians, and the widespread perception of the failure to respect the rule of law seem to suggest that they were actually expressing certain deeply held expectations of political behaviour that transcend the immediate context of the election results issue. People often used the term *hen luan* (chaos and chaotic) as what would ensue without

---

the rule of law. But they also used the term *hen luan* when talking about the violent fistfights in the legislature and the numerous incidents of verbal attacks politicians hurled at each other in the election campaign. It is likely that the notion that politicians refused to abide by or respect the law when it did not suit them is about something more than just strict adherence to written laws. I suspect what people may be trying to do is to articulate the qualities of grace, honour and sportsmanlike behaviour that they expect in an ideal politician. It could be that they were indirectly referring to the rowdy, non-genteel behaviour of politicians when they talked of anarchy and chaos. It is possible that what people want is a gentleman-politician, not the rowdy, aggressive and often violent breed they presently are stuck with.

Pan-Blue protestors hurled eggs at the CEC headquarters in angry response, when Chen Shui-bian was officially declared the winner on March 26, 2004. A judicial recount administered by the Taiwan High Court between May 10-18 that confirmed Chen Shui-bian's win by a smaller margin than initially supposed was again rebuffed by the Pan-Blues. Finally the lawsuit the opposition had filed on April 5 seeking to annul the election results was finally rejected by the High Court on November 4, 2004. Again Lien Chan and James Soong refused to accept the verdict and promised to appeal, repeating their mantra 'no truth no president'. Pro-DPP informants were appalled that KMT supporters put in doubt the impartiality, professionalism and integrity of the civil service through their actions and protests. Several pro-DPP informants stated their disgust, saying:

I trust the election result, because civil servants were involved, why would they falsify anything? I think we should trust their professionalism and impartiality. They tallied the votes accurately! Why on earth would they lean towards any particular party?

Another related factor is the perception that the country is unable to heal its divisions after the elections and work together for the national good. Informants who supported the ruling DPP felt frustrated that the opposition stymied their party's policies at every turn. As the DPP has never had a majority in the legislature since it won power in 2000, it finds it cannot enact bills on its own. Informants complained that 'the KMT always has to oppose and oppose, blocking the ruling DPP party's initiatives and preventing the country from uniting and progressing'.

---

President Chen of the DPP is not without fault either. A consummate politician, he is perceived to be constantly on campaign mode when what he really needs to do is govern and get things done. Others say he also makes foreign policy gaffes, as he tends to interpret even international affairs from the point of view of domestic politics. 'He needs to take a higher level of analysis (*zhi gaodian de jiaodu*) to solve the question, and not provoke antagonism (*tiaoqi duili*), and mud-slinging (*mohei*) for political benefit', was the comment of another supporter. The above comments by my informants indicate a strong desire that that both ruling and opposition parties should respect the impartiality of the civil servants, as well as rise above partisan politics and work for the common good. Also, the comments appear to indicate voters' frustration that they either cannot or do not want to do so. It may be that voters feel their politicians lack certain moral virtues and qualities such as 'respect' for the rules of the game, a sense of 'fair play', and knowing how to be a 'good loser'.

This feeling was further articulated as a result of a comparison with the American presidential elections held in November 2004, in the midst of the political impasse that resulted from the opposition KMT party's refusal to accept the election result. Many Taiwanese consider the United States to be a point of reference. They like to hold up their country's performance in certain areas, be it in per capita income, average life expectancy, etc., and compare it to the American counterpart as an indication of how far they have come and how much further they need to get until they are a truly advanced and developed country.

What was significant wasn't so much a case of informants reacting to the events in the U.S., rather, they reacted to *their* interpretation of the unfolding of events in the U.S. They interpreted events in America in the context of what had been happening in their own country in the past months. The fact that the opposition was still disputing the results of the Taiwanese presidential election by at the time the U.S. presidential election happened, afforded to many a lesson in what a 'true' democracy really is. Democracy in America is 'mature and consolidated' while Taiwan is still backward or still has a long way to go till it becomes a 'true' democracy like the U.S. An informant had this comment:

---

*The U.S. is a country with a long history of implementing a democratic system, so basically it doesn't matter who becomes president, politically there won't be too much of a massive change, probably some things like tax policy will change substantially, but it won't be a mess or a disaster. The system still emphasizes peoples' wants and needs. Politicians put the citizens interests ahead of partisan politics. U.S. elections are a gentlemen's duel (junzi zhi zheng) while Taiwanese elections are dirty slugfests. Taiwan uses lowly political tricks (beiwei shouduan), even gun attacks, just to win. John Kerry of the Democrats quickly conceded the elections while Lien Chan's KMT did not concede defeat. Lien Chan has no honour. That's not 'true' democracy. The U.S. was, like Taiwan, deeply divided into two camps who had very different ideas of what kind of country the U.S. should be. Nevertheless, after the elections, the whole country put its differences behind it and strove for national unity.<sup>111</sup>*

The above comparison by my informant seems to reinforce the ideas mentioned earlier. Firstly, Taiwan is a 'shallow' democracy because politicians engage in partisan politics. Second, Taiwanese politicians are not 'gentlemen', in various ways- they engage in dirty slugfests, use lowly political tricks and even gun attacks to win. Thirdly, they do not treat politics, especially elections, as a sort of 'gentlemen's duel'- they do not abide by the rules when it does not suit them. They do not concede defeat and are not willing to put their differences aside and work together afterwards. Lastly, by saying that in the U.S. it 'doesn't really matter who becomes president', informants seem to be yearning for a robust system, which does not depend on a few 'good' individuals to function properly.

The outcome of the 2004 presidential election and the way events played out in the subsequent months provided the context in which my informants gave their opinions on the nation's political class. They accused them, among other things, of lacking *fengdu* or *fengfan*. These terms denote demeanour, bearing, grace, and honour. It is the way a person behaves toward other people. Thus proper demeanour for a politician, for my informants, consists of being able to graciously concede defeat, being sportsmanlike (*you yundongjia jingcai*) and being a good loser. 'Lien Chan has no *fengdu*', is a phrase I often heard, 'the loser should concede defeat graciously and engage in self-criticism, to find out why he lost and strive harder (*zaijie zaili*). Once in opposition, he should assist and give appropriate and constructive criticism of the ruling party'. The proper demeanour for a voter is likewise, to calmly and serenely accept the electoral result regardless whether your preferred candidate has lost.

---

<sup>111</sup> I got the impression that many people here hold a much idealized notion of America and democracy 'American' style. Taiwanese democracy, in stark contrast, is perceived in terms of a 'lack' or 'deficiency' in something. These gaps become noticeable in comparison to the American model.

---

I shall now turn to the 2004 legislative elections. I will describe and examine a couple of candidates from rural constituencies and what urban people say about them. They are Yen Ching-piao from Taichung County, central Taiwan and Chang Rong-wei from Yunlin County, south Taiwan. Both won their respective seats in the December 2004 legislative election. These two rural politicians are alleged 'kingpins' of central and south Taiwan, respectively. Their histories, as well as my informants' reactions to their election victories will serve to further illustrate urban middle class political views and attitudes.

Heavyweight politician Yen Ching-piao is from Taichung County, central Taiwan, whose biography I mentioned in the introductory chapter. Briefly summarizing, he ran under the banner of the Non-Partisan Solidarity Union (*Wudanglianmeng*), a new party he co-founded with nine other veteran politicians and independent lawmakers in June of 2003. Mr. Yen won by a large margin and was re-elected for a second consecutive term in his district. What is unusual about this man is his past. He is a major political figure who is rumoured to have been a gangster. Jailed for three years in Operation Cleansweep, a government crackdown in 1984 on gangsters during the martial law period, he was sent to a high-security prison on Green Island.

He entered politics upon his release and has won every election he has participated in ever since from borough warden to legislator. He was convicted and was sent to prison in March 2001 for a decade-old bribery case as well as an attempted murder charge. He and his family have consistently protested their innocence, with his wife speculating that he is being punished for having openly supported James Soong of the PFP in the 2000 presidential election. He ran for legislator and won for the first time in December 2001. As he was behind bars at the time, his wife campaigned tirelessly on his behalf in their hometown of Shalu, Taichung County. He won the election with a comfortable margin and was released shortly after.

---

The second one is Chang Rong-wei, a very powerful former commissioner, 'kingpin' of Yunlin County, south Taiwan. He, like Yen Ching-piao, was also caught and jailed for three years in Operation Cleansweep in 1984. He went to work as an aide for a KMT politician and was, by 1989, elected county councilman and months later became county council speaker. He then won the Yunlin County Commissioner elections in 1999 amid allegations of massive vote rigging. He was convicted on August 26<sup>th</sup> 2004 for bribery in the 1994 Yunlin County Council speakership election and faced a 12-month jail term. He is also suspected of taking kickbacks in a racket involving the construction of an incinerator in Linnei Township in his native Yunlin. He disappeared and was declared a fugitive on August 13<sup>th</sup> and managed to give two exclusive interviews while his whereabouts were unknown.

During the interviews he denied the charges against him and claimed he was the victim of political persecution by the ruling administration as he openly supported the Pan-Blue Camp during the presidential election. He had been on the run for 107 days when the police caught him on December 9<sup>th</sup> 2004. This was exactly two days before the legislative elections took place. What is interesting about his case is that his younger sister Chang Li-shan, ran in the legislative elections as an independent and won a seat with 14.7% of all votes in the county. In addition, the cases of politicians like Yen Ching-piao and Chang Rong-wei's sister being elected by comfortable margins despite their backgrounds represent the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Informants reeled off a long list of similar past cases to further highlight the point that Taiwanese democracy is shallow. The other cases I have learned about are Wu Tze-yuan<sup>112</sup> and Zhu An-xiong.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Wu Tze-yuan (伍澤元), KMT member and former director of the Taiwan Provincial Government's Planning and Development Department was convicted of corruption and fraud in 1996 over a kickback scandal over the 1992 Sipiantou (四汴頭) waster-pumping station project in Taipei County. While he was released on bail for medical reasons and banned from leaving the country he ran and won a legislative seat as an independent for Pingtung County in December 1998 and was re-elected in December 2001. He managed to leave the country on a trip to Japan as a leader of a legislative delegation and failed to return with the group. The High Court has declared him a fugitive on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

<sup>113</sup> Zhu An-xiong (朱安雄) former speaker of Kaohsiung City Assembly was, on April 7 2004, along with 34 other Kaohsiung city councillors, indicted on charges of giving and taking bribes in the December 2003 Kaohsiung City Council speaker and vice speaker elections. Chu is alleged to have had a fund of NT\$300 million to buy up votes at up to NT\$6 million each for the speakership election and NT\$2 million for the deputy speakership. Chu was supposed to begin his jail term on October 16<sup>th</sup> 2004 but managed to escape and is believed to be hiding in China. This vote buying scandal resulted in enough council members being thrown out of office to require a by-election to fill those seats. Nine of the candidates who stood and won in the city councillor by-election were either spouses or relatives standing in for the expelled council members including Zhu An-xiong's daughter Chu Ting-shan (朱挺珊).

---

Yen Ching-piao and Chang Rong-wei's sister's electoral victories, as well as the cases of Wu Tze-yuan and Zhu An-xiong prompted an urban dweller to share his thoughts on the matter:

*Criminals and those with criminal convictions or pending cases run for elected office in order to escape prosecution! Elected deputies with pending legal cases use their parliamentary immunity (huomianquan) to escape prosecution. It doesn't matter who breaks the law, everybody should be punished equally before the law, and you can't be exempt or immune just because you're a legislator. I think there is a logical fallacy at work here. If a guy has broken the law, then you shouldn't allow them to become legislators or councillors, but on the contrary, you use the immunity clause to protect them. I don't think that's democratic at all. Parliamentary privilege should be curtailed so that elected deputies with cases will not be allowed to leave the country.*

These views seem to show that my urban informants do not feel that these types of people are fit for office. I would like to remind you of the earlier comments that my urban informants made about the ideal politician. They expected politicians to exhibit grace, honour, and sportsmanship- in short, qualities characteristic of a 'gentleman'. From this we may infer that my urban informants see a previous criminal conviction as incompatible with public office because politicians should be 'gentlemen', and 'gentlemen' do not have criminal records.

The above quote regarding the two controversial rural politicians' election victory also conveys the idea that politicians with past or pending criminal records should be prevented from running in elections. In addition there is the impression that the political system does not have built in features, which would ideally, prevent 'crooked' politicians from acceding to office in the first place. Failing that, the system should at least ensure that a crooked politician, once in office, does no harm. This sentiment is similar to the earlier quote about the American presidential elections as not involving too much of a massive change because the system is robust enough not to be too dependent on a few 'good' people. The implication here is that informants want there to be a strong system of laws, checks and balances, in order to prevent too much corruption or mismanagement of the country.



---

## Voters lack political literacy

The urban voters with whom I spoke reiterated that Taiwanese is a ‘formal’ but shallow democracy as one essential ingredient is missing, and that is a certain quality that voters should possess. This quality is *suyang*. The term has no exact counterpart in English. Probably the closest approximation to its meaning would be a ‘general capacity and disposition as a result of long and regular self-discipline’. Informants likened it to literacy or being literate.

The word ‘literate’ is commonly known to refer to the ability to read and write. However, for most of its long history in English, *literate* has meant not only ‘familiar with literature’, or more generally, ‘well-educated, learned’, but also the condition or quality of being knowledgeable in a particular subject or field; *cultural literacy*, *biblical literacy*. Thus *suyang*, apart from denoting a capacity and disposition as a result of self-discipline, also implies a sort of political literacy; about people being politically aware and effective, able to read issues and events politically. Moreover, a politically literate citizenry must be able to effectively deal with political issues such as rights and responsibilities, public accountability and good governance.

My informants were very clear about what they understood a citizen’s duties and responsibilities were to be, and those were, above all, to rationally, cool-headedly, and critically choose and elect politicians who were honest, competent and upright. They should not let personal feelings and sympathies, nor regional or ethnic loyalties impede their good judgment. They should vote with their conscience. They should examine candidates’ platforms and ideological stance and must vote only for those whose principles and ideologies of they fully approve. Voters had the duty to evaluate their elected representatives’ performance and hold them accountable come election time. Competent politicians, those who have had a sterling record of good governance, are to be rewarded. Voters’ should reaffirm their confidence in them by re-electing them. Incompetent politicians should be thrown out. All these are fine words in theory, but as one voter added, ‘in democracy, the minority serve the majority (*shaoshu fuchong duoshu*), but you need to look at the quality of the majority’ (*yao kan duoshu pinzhi*).

---

Below is a quote from an informant who explained how the 2004 presidential election demonstrated that Taiwanese people's political literacy is not adequate:

*Taiwanese people, during election time, let emotional reactions take over, while issues such as whether a candidate is really suited for the job, take second place. Voters vote out of regional loyalties and sympathy and do not rationally choose the best candidates. It is all about 'I sympathise with you, I like you' (wo tongqing, ni wo xihuan ni), and not about the principles they stand for. Many KMT supporters say Chen Shui-bian used two bullets to influence the result and the shooting attempt (qiangjian) influenced the integrity (gongpingxing) of the election result. I think it is true because the hard core voters in either camp still voted for their preferred candidate but it was the undecided, the ones in the middle who were swayed and voted for Chen Shui-bian. I believe the Taiwanese opposition and ruling parties can learn from the U.S example. The Americans demonstrated suyang and fengfan. The U.S. presidential elections were highly disputed due to the nature and design of the electoral system. Although both countries were bitterly divided during the elections the Americans did not take to the streets to riot and protest and politicians did not actively whip up their supporters (jiji shandong qunzhong). They demonstrated a high level of democratic demeanour (minzu fengfan), and that is as a result of their general capacity for self discipline (suyang).*

People have speculated over what might have happened had the shooting incident not taken place on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2004. Many believe that Lien Chan would have won based on his and his running mates' combined share of the vote in the previous election. Others surmised that in the event Lien Chan still lost the election he would have graciously conceded, as it would have been a fair fight. Although the result of such a hypothetical scenario is unknowable, this exercise in imagination serves to highlight what most see as the ideal scenario- that of a peaceful, uneventful election that was not marred by any irregularity or anomaly that might call the result into question.

Because the fact is that the assassination attempt has poisoned the atmosphere and has deepened the level of mistrust between both sides. Many KMT supporters are of the opinion that Chen Shui-bian masterminded the attack to win last-minute sympathy votes from undecided voters while many in the Pan-Green Coalition are indignant that they are suspected of foul play, as well as the fact that the other camp has questioned and compromised the civil servants' role as impartial, independent arbiters of the political system. For our purposes, the most salient and interesting aspect of the gun attack is that it is significant for another reason, hitherto unknown. That reason is that the attack is perceived to have divested voters of their cool, detached, cool-headed rationality with which they were supposed to have deliberated and voted. The gun attack is unforgivable, just like President Chen cannot be forgiven,

---

because it made undecided voters *emotional and sympathetic*. In short, they were deprived of their mature, cool-headed political literacy.

This was the comment of another urban informant who described why he thought rural politicians Yen Ching-piao and Chang Rong-wei's sister won in the 2004 legislative elections:

*Sometimes voters follow blindly or are blind, perhaps some voters think that these crooked politicians aren't really guilty, or they don't know the facts about the case, or the case hasn't been proved, so they believe the candidates have been judged and treated unfairly, or they believe that post-election, after a change of government, some candidates will be punished for going against their party, or that some candidates are really honest but have got on their parties bad side so they have been persecuted and sent to prison, so a lot of voters are sympathetic and vote for these candidates. Take President Chen Shui-bian for example. During martial law he was working as a lawyer in Meili Island but was sent to prison over an incident there. His wife campaigned as legislator on his behalf and she won. A lot of male DPP politicians were in the same situation, so their sisters and wives campaigned on their behalf and won. Voters should 'open their eyes'.*

The above quotes on why people voted for President Chen Shui-bian after the assassination attempt, and for people like Yen Ching-piao and Chang Rong-wei, through his sister, appear to indicate some salient points. Taiwanese voters, in my informants' view are too sympathetic and emotional. Taiwanese people vote for the 'underdog', either when he is the victim of an attempted assassination, in the case of President Chen Shui-bian, or when people think he is being persecuted by the government, as in the cases of Yen Ching-piao and Chang Rong-wei. From this we might make the deduction that urban informants assume that a 'real' and 'mature' democracy necessitates the existence of a mature, rational and cool-headed electorate, in short, an electorate who possess *suyang* (literacy). This may explain the cliché that the country's democracy is not mature.

My contacts simply do not understand how on earth voters can elect such 'unsuitable' people to represent them in office. They view elections as a venue not unlike a marketplace of ideas wherein different candidates compete for people's vote on the basis of their vision of government and their personal integrity. The act of voting, for my contacts, implies a process wherein one enters this marketplace of competing ideas and visions of governance. One goes in and patiently listens to the 'vendors' try to sell us their 'wares'. We listen, compare, take notes and exercise a principled judgment and vote for the ones we believe have the best vision and competence. To vote for a candidate is really a vote of confidence in him or her. We don't just vote for people, we also vote for the ideologies and principles they stand for. It is

---

in this light that other voters' behaviour is incomprehensible. In addition, the prime duty of elected deputies is to monitor the actions of the government- they are the voters' eyes and ears in the corridors of power, so, all the more reason why people should choose wisely.

Informants have another theory why voters elect such characters. It is because they are intimidated or bribed by politicians. Vote buying is prevalent and has a long history in Taiwan and people's fears about its influence are entirely justified in the case of the two politicians we are examining here. Yen Ching-piao's criminal conviction in 2001 was partly due to vote buying and Chang Rong-wei's first election victory in 1999 happened amidst a lot of intimidation and bribery. Although people say it has improved a lot these past years compared to the past, it's still a significant problem. It varies from place to place, depending on people's different educational levels. People say that it was blatantly practiced, with vote captains for candidates going to people's homes and paying the going rate multiplied by the number of registered voters in the household. It has virtually disappeared in large cities but it is rumoured to happen in a much more subtle form in rural areas where people are comparatively less educated.

It is wrong and must be eliminated, according to my sources, because candidates without good moral character or whose *suyang* (literacy) isn't good enough can, if he has enough money, manage to get elected. Thus vote buying perverts the election process, so crucial to a 'real' democracy, as it obviates the need for people to use their faculties of discernment of candidates, judging them on their merits and philosophies and platforms. Moreover, vote buying reduces the election process to a simple financial transaction, devoid of moral content. It also confirms the notion that voters' *suyang* isn't high enough because they sell their votes without considering the candidates' qualifications or don't consider the influence all this will have on the broader post election political environment.

---

## Middle-class disappointment

It is instructive to look cross-culturally and compare urban and provincial Taiwanese middle-class values and attitudes with that of their Thai counterparts as certain uncanny similarities come to light. I referred to literature in the introductory chapter, which stated that middle-class Thai voters are obsessed with a 'clean' politics', 'good government', a merit-based society and a level playing field. Thai middle-class democratic ideals are modelled after those of advanced capitalist democracies that is premised on the following; that politicians should win votes through a platform of clear policies rather than bribes, candidates should seek political office in order to implement their policies instead of personal enrichment, that parties should have distinct ideologies, and lastly, politicians should stay in one single party and not be political opportunists, switching party affiliations when politically expedient (McVey 2000: 230).

In comparison, Taiwanese middle-class voters are obsessed with the idea that politicians should be gentlemen, and everyone should have both *fengdu* (demeanour) as well as *suyang* (literacy). Taiwanese middle-class democratic ideals are loosely based on an idealized American model. My informants considered democracy in the United States as mature and consolidated, with a robust and stable system of laws and checks and balances. They pointed to the recent presidential elections in November 2004 and marvelled at how the Democrat John Kerry was gracious enough to concede defeat shortly after polling booths closed. My middle-class Taiwanese informants' democratic ideals are patterned after recognizably 'western' ones and have the following premises; politics and especially elections should be a civil and orderly contest of ideas and platforms between parties where personal animosity between politicians is absent, opposition politicians should graciously concede the result and work with the ruling party after election day, the whole country should put partisan interests behind then and unite and heal its divisions for the sake of the country, the role of the civil service and bureaucracy as impartial and objective arbiters of the law should not be questioned.

The Thai urban middle-classes are ambivalent towards democracy, as they perceive it to be incompatible with their democratic ideals, and furthermore, associate it with ineffective government and corruption. The Thai provincial middle classes are also less enthusiastic about democracy. They feel it will be misused in the hands of rural people, who are often blamed for the continued pervasiveness of vote buying- they often sell their votes to rural

---

patrons. What the middle classes want is 'good government, not democracy for its own sake' (McVey 2000: 20).<sup>114</sup> In comparison, my Taiwanese middle-class informants felt ambivalent, even mistrustful of democracy, saying it is 'not mature', or 'faces a lot of challenges', and is 'quite shallow'. They are disappointed that most politicians are not 'gentlemen' and do not have demeanour and literacy. They also felt that many voters are too emotional and sympathetic and do not have political literacy. They are disappointed that rural politicians with criminal backgrounds who are unfit for office take advantage of the system for personal gain.

Thailand makes an interesting point of comparison with Taiwan because it too, is grappling with myriad cases of corruption, and of politicians with criminal backgrounds who have successfully participated in democratic politics. I am specifically interested here in talking about the Thai middle classes' attitudes to democracy and reform and show how they may share certain similarities to the Taiwanese middle classes. To begin with, the Thai media has constructed a narrative connecting the country's middle classes with the 1973 and 1992 uprisings, which overthrew the then military governments that came to power in separate coups. The idea is that the uprising of 1992 was a middle class event. This ignores the role of the urban poor in that uprising, and who constituted most of the deaths in that incident. Moreover, the Thai press regularly put the blame on the poor and rural folk for the phenomenon of vote buying and other forms of corruption.

The 1997 constitution was drafted in an attempt to improve all aspects of Thai politics. The drafters wanted to 'reform Thai politics', and to end 'the domination of parliament by provincial businessmen', and several paragraphs focused on 'measures to stamp out illegal canvassing practices and vote buying' (Arghiros 2001: 235).<sup>115</sup> The constitutional assembly, created for the purpose of amending the constitution of 1997, was composed entirely of people who had to have at least a B.A. degree, and of experts nominated by the universities. The assembly enacted reforms that expressly targeted vote buying and corruption. One reform required the government to set a national education policy that would teach democratic principles. This suggests that the problem of vote buying and corruption is essentially one of education. In other words the poor sold their votes because they lacked the middle class education needed to understand democracy. Another reform stipulated that constituency-based MPs cannot join the cabinet. This measure had the effect of undermining the power of provincial politicians. Another reform stipulated that all candidates for parliament should have at least a university

---

<sup>114</sup> McVey R. (ed.) 2000. *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*. Singapore: Silkworm Books.

<sup>115</sup> Arghiros, D. 2001. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.

---

undergraduate degree, ruling out the uneducated masses and rural countryside. The assumption here is that if politicians had a middle class university education, they would not be corrupt (Ockey 2004: 164-170).

In the case of Taiwan, many highly educated urban legislators were behind moves to amend the constitution in August 2004 to adopt a single-member district, two-vote system, effectively replacing the current multi-member district system. This new system will take effect in the legislative elections of 2007 and it will halve the numbers of legislative seats from 225 to 113. Currently legislative candidates can get elected, by winning the support of a small proportion of voters in their district under the present multi-member district electoral system. Under the system to take effect in 2007 candidates will have to win the support of a majority of votes in their district to gain a seat. The electoral changes resulting in the reduced number of seats are meant to make it more difficult for candidates to win a legislative seat. In addition, the new electoral system favours relatively developed counties over less developed ones. For instance, Taoyuan County in the north will have six legislators, each representing 290,000 voters, while less-developed Ilan County will only have one legislator representing 460,000 voters. President Chen Shui-bian also proposed in June 2005 holding a referendum on whether township mayoral elections should be abolished on the grounds that they breed vote buying and local cronyism.<sup>116</sup>

The ostensive motive behind these political reforms is to 'improve the quality' of the country's legislators by making it harder for politicians to get elected in the countryside, and to 'eradicate vote buying and local cronyism' in the countryside. However, a practical consequence of these reforms is that they will undermine the sort of 'grassroots democracy' under which rural politicians thrive. In my view these constitutional reforms, alongside Chen Shui-bian's proposal, will have the effect of diverting political power away from the rural areas toward the cities. In effect they are measures that will dilute the power of rural voters in favour of urban ones.

Thus we can see that in both countries, the middle classes, especially the intelligentsia, are behaving in ways that indicate that they are suspicious of rural voters. The press, sometimes subtly in the case of Taiwan, and sometimes not so subtly in the case of Thailand, blame the poor and rural voters for vote buying and other forms of corruption. The largely urban politicians are intent to enact laws, decrees and constitutional amendments whose purpose is

---

<sup>116</sup> See "Township polls need to be gutted". *Taiwan News*. June 27, 2005. p. 7.

---

to restrict rural voters' political participation. The middle classes seem to believe they occupy a privileged position from which they alone can understand the essence of democracy because they have the necessary education. They give the impression of being protective of democracy.

Although they do not say so explicitly, one can take the view that the middle-classes do not trust the rural masses, as well as the urban poor because they lack the necessary education in order to properly understand the essence and workings of a 'democracy'. In short they are possessive of democracy. The intelligentsia, who write these stories about political corruption and who 'invent' the gangster politician- someone who is very attractive to the countryside because he acts like a benevolent patron, belongs to the ranks of these same middle-classes. Rural voters expect their politician to be generous and the successful rural politician responds in the form of vote buying, charitable donations, and bringing government resources to his town or village. The intelligentsia 'criminalize' his behaviour by calling it corruption, bribery, etc. In doing so they are also indirectly accusing those who vote for the rural politician of impropriety.

### **The three types of politicians**

From my conversations with urban people I can deduce two broad types of politicians and political styles. There is the *zhengzhijia* (good, upright politician), and then there is the *zhengke* (crooked politician). The first one possesses *suyang* (literacy and a high level education), as well as possessing all the attributes of *fengdu* (well mannered, virtuous, honest, sportsmanlike, noble and competent). This kind of politician works tirelessly for the welfare of constituents and will never put his own self-interest before the public good. The second type has negative connotations and is the exact opposite of the former. He can embody some, or all the negative traits that I have described so far. At least as far as people I have spoken to are concerned, some national politicians and most of the current crop of local politicians fit this second description.

The term *zhengke* (crooked politician) is a very broad category, however, which includes not only those who are the polar opposite of the ideal politician, but also those who possess only some, but not all of the attributes of the ideal politician. Lying, cheating, taking bribes and kickbacks, buying votes, promising everything in order to get elected then doing the opposite of what he promised, being violent, aggressive, foul-mouthed, having little education and



---

being of a low social extraction- possessing or exhibiting any one of these characteristics, or any combination of them, will lay a politician open to accusations of being a *zhengke*. Nevertheless, the urban sophisticate shares one thing in common with his rural counterpart- both desire a politician who is 'decisive' and who 'gets things done'. It is perhaps the great paradox of urban Taiwanese political values that 'decisiveness' is something that the country's few 'real life' ideal politicians like Ma Ying-jiu seem to lack, whereas it is something rural politicians have 'in spades'.

Urban voters feel that the country does not have the kind of politician that it deserves. They don't have enough good politicians; people with *suyang* (education and literacy) and *fengdu* (grace and honour), meaning individuals who are clean, genteel, gracious, mild-mannered, well educated and competent. What they do seem to have in abundance are *zhengke*, or crooked politicians who I feel can further be subdivided into two subgroups. The first kind of *zhengke* has *suyang* but no *fengdu*. It means he is well educated, but is not noble or gracious. The second group has neither *suyang* nor *fengdu*. These are uneducated and vulgar local politicians who have 'gangster' backgrounds (*you heidao de beijing*) and criminal records (*fanzui de jilu*) and who abuse the system.

Informants complained of lack of a robust system of checks and balances, that would minimize the damage incompetent administrations and crooked politicians could do to the country. To counteract this lack, they used the word 'bold' and 'resolute' (*you poli de*) in at least two ways. They said 'we need daring and resolute (*you poli de*) politicians, and not the crooked ones', and 'corruption must be thoroughly eradicated, and that requires boldness (*xuyao poli*)'. I interpret these two quotes to mean that what people really want is an honest and upright gentleman who is also daring and resolute (*you poli de*). People yearn for a politician who can fix the rot in the system and rid it of crooked people.

It is interesting that informants could classify many existing politicians as *zhengke* (crooked politician), but they are hard pressed to name one who they consider a *zhengzhijia* (good, upright politician). *Zhengke* has become a cover term for any and all politicians they disapprove of in one way or another. President Chen Shui-bian is a *zhengke* because he is not good at governing and is too divisive. Lien Chan is a *zhengke* because although he hails from a wealthy and privileged background and has a Ph.D. from Chicago, his reputation is dogged by rumours that his father accumulated ill-gotten wealth as a civil servant during the dictatorship. Moreover, he has no honour as he refused to concede defeat in the election.

---

Some grudgingly nominate Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jiu as a *zhengzhijia* as he is perceived to be honest and decent as well as well educated and genteel.

They waxed nostalgic about an earlier age, a Taiwan lost in time, populated by honest, upright and noble politicians. For them the *zhengzhijia* has disappeared from the political scene out of disgust. 'The noble politician is put off by his crooked counterpart so he decided to renounce active political life,' as one resident put it. If that earlier age some informants are nostalgic about happened within living memory, that would refer to the fifty years of KMT authoritarian rule from 1950 to 2000 and the preceding fifty years of Japanese colonial rule from 1898 to the end of the Second World War. This is an age that preceded the country's democratic transition. If the golden age of honest, upright and noble politicians referred to the twentieth century this would mean that people are nostalgic about Japanese colonial rule and KMT dictatorship.

This is improbable, given that the principles of democracy and self-determination have become mainstream only after the democratization movement began in the 1980s. What urban people yearn for is a better, 'purer' democracy, not a return to dictatorial, much less colonial rule. It is interesting to note that the *zhengzhijia*, or noble and upright politician many people yearn for and are nostalgic about, appears to share certain similarities with the *junzi* (gentleman) of Confucian thought and the scholar officials of the imperial Chinese bureaucracy.

One ideal of traditional Chinese political leadership is the *junzi*. Guo Xuezhi<sup>117</sup> sees the *junzi*, corresponding closely to the nobleman or gentleman of western culture, as a special class of individual that combines the most important Confucian virtues. The *junzi* personality refers to the inner virtue attained by cultivation and development of the self and demonstrates, among others, a strong sense of honour, a capacity for self-restraint, a sense of self-respect a sense of dignity and integrity. He further states that Confucian thought urges political leaders to follow the standard of the nobleman and gradually cultivate themselves into *shengwang* (sage-kings).

---

<sup>117</sup> Guo, Xuezhi. 2002. *The Ideal Chinese Political Leader: A Historical and Cultural Perspective*. London: Praeger.

---

Another traditional Chinese political model is the bureaucrat,<sup>118</sup> the ‘scholar official’ who belonged to the age of imperial China in the service of the *shengwang* (sage-king). From the 3rd century BC to 1911, China was governed by a civil bureaucracy of scholar officials, who were recruited by a system of examinations under the Emperor. The scholar officials were educated in the moral teachings of the Confucian classics and thus supposedly endowed with inner virtue and outward refinement. The Chinese scholar-official occupied a position at the top of the traditional hierarchical society, for he possessed prestige, wealth, and authority.

Ancient Chinese culture revered the scholar and teacher and despised the merchant. Consequently, the government bureaucracy was composed of rigorously trained scholar-artists; conversely, poets and painters held official positions as powerful politicians. These ancient ‘scholar officials’ would certainly pass the *suyang* test with flying colours. My data lead me to believe that what people want is a sort of bold and daring scholar-official-type, or *junzi* (gentleman) who can neutralize the crooked gangsters.

However, as we have seen, the reality on the ground is the opposite of what for urban people constitutes a ‘real’ democracy. Urban voters are disappointed about the democratic development in Taiwan. They complained about the low quality of voters and politicians that the country has. They also complained that the political system is defective, lacking a robust system of checks and balances. This has allowed certain crooked politicians to take advantage of the country’s democratic reforms for their own benefit. Interestingly, the crooked politician that urban voters referred to is, in the majority of cases, the very same democratically elected rural or local politician who enjoys huge support in the countryside

I will tease out a paradox that emanates from an urban-centric perspective regarding the ‘true’ nature of democracy. The paradox is that people yearn for a daring and resolute hero who can check the power of the crooked politician- an upright, noble, mild mannered, well-educated politician versus the corrupt violent, aggressive, foul-mouthed and low educated rural politician. However, resolute and decisive action is not the scholar-politicians’ strong point. He is by nature, contemplative, averse to confrontation, and not given to impulse. It is possible that people may have made the wrong choice of ‘hero’.

---

<sup>118</sup> Clever and ambitious young men would pursue an arduous course of study in the Chinese classics in preparation for the civil service examination, which required thorough knowledge of the Confucian canon, plus the ability to write essays on moral issues and current affairs and poems in a variety of formal styles. The candidate thus had to develop talent and worldly sophistication, as well as his erudition, to become a successful well-rounded literatus. Upon passing the examination, there was virtually only one career open to him, and that was to enter government service.

---

The imperial bureaucrat has, historically been powerless and ineffectual while the ‘villain’<sup>119</sup> has been powerful and efficacious. I talked about the history of political leadership in Taiwan in the introductory chapter. Briefly summarizing, until the end of Qing rule in Taiwan in the late nineteenth century, bureaucrats were sent from China to administer Taiwan but they could not cope with the amount of responsibilities, given the meagre resources at their disposal, and their lack of familiarity with the local affairs. ‘The high cost of collecting revenue, the difficulty of constraining abuse by tax collectors, and the resistance heavy taxation created’ compelled the late imperial state to minimize expenditures, keep taxes low, and finally to rely on local elites to provide governmental services (Shepherd 1995: 5).

My point is that gentlemen/bureaucrats in the past, just like the current Taipei mayor, the noble, well-meaning scholarly politician Ma Ying-jiu, are well meaning but, to the disappointment of many people, are often not daring and resolute. Ma Ying-jiu cannot escape perceptions that he is ineffectual and indecisive. His scholarly style and genteel manner seem to preclude the bold type of actions needed in the context of political stalemate that the country found itself in after the 2004 presidential elections. These gentleman-types can be ineffective for many other reasons; they are too polite and timid to roll up their sleeves and ‘muck in’ and fight tooth and nail for their constituents’ interests, they are too bookish and cannot relate to ordinary people, they often do not see serving their constituents as their main role, they are unfamiliar with realities on the ground, etc.

In stark comparison to the Taipei mayor, on the other hand, is Legislator Yen Ching-piao - the archetype of the rural politician – he is always seen as the leader who gets things done, though with costs in terms of principle and justice. I believe the solution to this paradox will consist of viewing contemporary Taiwanese politics through the prism of the traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. This will be dealt with in chapter five.

The scholar-official had moral and legal authority, but little real power, while the rural elite who really ran the show in Qing era Taiwan, much like the current rural politicians, wielded effective power and influence, but little authority and legitimacy (from the point of view of urban voters). The gentleman/scholar-official is principle without action, while the rural politician is action without principle (except honour and loyalty). What I mean is that the former is well-meaning but powerless, ineffective in effecting change, in getting things done, while the

---

<sup>119</sup> ‘Villain’ in this context not only refers to a vile, wicked person, but also harks back to a much older use of the term; he who lives in a village. It is interesting to note that the vilification of rural people has ancient roots.

latter is very effective in getting things done (at least for the benefit of his constituents). Figure 2 below is an *etic* table detailing a typology of Taiwanese politicians and their respective attributes:

|                                      | <b>Ideal Politician</b> | <b>Intermediate Politician</b>               | <b>Local Politician</b>           |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Type</b>                          | gentleman               | partisan/not noble                           | gangster/ <i>heidao</i>           |
| <b>Literacy and self-discipline?</b> | Yes                     | Yes  | No                                |
| <b>Grace and honour?</b>             | Yes                     | No   | No                                |
| <b>Real life example</b>             | Ma Ying-jiu             | Chen Shui-bian,<br>Lien Chan,<br>James Soong | Yen Ching-piao,<br>Chang Rong-wei |

**Figure 2: Typology of Taiwanese politicians**

I will argue that Taiwan has three broad types of political leaders. There is the *junzi* (gentleman) style leader, the *jiaotou* (big man) or *heidao* (gangster) type and an intermediate type who is an amalgam of the first two. Originally a term used to denote a gentleman or nobleman of the Confucian tradition, the *junzi*-type leader is above all incorruptible. He is also genteel, gracious, mild-mannered, well educated and competent. His political style revolves around compromise and mediation. He seeks consensus with political opponents and is averse to confrontation. His legitimacy comes from occupying an official post, which confers *quanli* (legitimate power and authority). However his mild mannered and scholarly ways also open him up to accusations of being ineffectual and indecisive. Educated, middle-class voters that I spoke to in the cities and in the provincial towns have indicated a strong preference for this type of leader but in reality the *junzi* leader is more often than not the exception that proves the rule that politicians are generally sleazy and untrustworthy.

The *jiaotou* (big man) or *heidao* (gangster) type has little formal education, is vulgar and often has a criminal record. His legitimacy stems from *shili* (influence) a kind of power that is independent of the state apparatus and is exercised along extra-official or non-official channels and informal institutions. He is ruthless with his opponents but is benevolent and kind to his constituents. He is *ahsali*, meaning he will quickly respond positively when someone has a request or a favour to ask. He is not the contemplative type, and is expected to be decisive and effective when faced with a problem. He is also expected to be a generous

---

patron and benefactor and is in reality very popular in rural areas precisely because he is very good at securing benefits for his constituents. Chapter six will describe the real-life story of the rural politician from Shalu, Taichung County, Legislator Yen Ching-piao who has all the above attributes of the *jiaotou* or *heidao* type politician.

The third type of politician combines the most salient characteristics of the two previous types. He is well educated, but is not mild mannered, noble or gracious. He has a partisan, confrontational style and is prone to accusations of corruption. He is not averse to the rough-and-tumble style in contemporary Taiwanese politics and proves that a well-educated man and a gentleman are not necessarily the same person. Most national politicians conform to this type. By saying this, I do not wish to say that most national politicians are corrupt or incompetent, but that the ideal of the gentleman-style leader is precisely that- an ideal to which very few politicians can measure up. Being labelled a gentleman-type politician implies living up to very exacting demands such that most politicians end up being classified as *zhengke*.

It may be helpful at this point to examine Thai classifications of leadership types, of which two broad types of traditional leadership can be identified. The first is the *phudi* (good person)-style leader, and the second is the *nakleng* (bandit leader)-style leader. Each type derives its legitimacy from different sources. The *phudi*-style leader sources his legitimacy from moral goodness (*khunna*) and is sometimes associated with femaleness, while the *nakleng*- (bandit leader) style leader gets his from power (*dech*), and is always associated with masculinity. It is important to emphasize that though, in theory, many contemporary politicians in Thailand are classified as being either one type or the other, in practice, most leaders are complex and contain elements of both.

Originally used to denote the aristocracy, *phudi* retains this meaning but also refers to 'well mannered' and 'good people' in general. The *phudi* leader must be seen to be incorruptible, uninterested in populist politics, calm and deliberative. Thai prime ministers thought to be *phudi* were consummate compromisers and mediators. However, this deliberative style also opens him up to accusations of aloofness and indecisiveness. It is this *phudi*-style politician who the middle classes in Thailand, tended to support during the 1980s and 1990s (Ockey 2004: 7-16).

---

The *nakleng* (bandit leader)-style politician has his roots in the village communities in the days when the power and reach of the Thai monarchy did not extend far beyond the capital. These *nakleng* were ‘young toughs’ responsible for village protection. Often on the wrong side of the law, the *nakleng*-style politician is tough, charismatic and above all loyal to friends. He is expected to exhibit manliness, decisiveness, and power. He is also expected to be generous with his constituents, be it in the form of ‘vote buying, charitable contributions, or privileged access to government resources’ (Ockey 2004: 15-17). He gives voters what they want, so it comes then as no surprise that this kind of politician is attractive to rural voters as he ‘delivers benefits that alternative forms of democratic participation, such as a public hearing or support for a political party, could not’ (Ibid.).

Thus comparatively speaking, Taiwan and Thailand both possess broadly similar typologies of political leadership. In both countries there is the gentleman-type leader, something I term *junzi* in Taiwan and known as *phudi* in Thailand, the gangster-type leader called *heidao* in Taiwan and *nakleng* in Thailand, and an intermediate type who is an amalgam of the first two. The gentleman-type leader is mild-mannered and genteel, well educated, incorruptible, calm and contemplative. The gangster-type politician is strong-willed, not highly educated, tough and ruthless with his enemies, generous to his supporters, unsophisticated, has a criminal record, and is generous. His most significant trait is his decisiveness. The gentleman-type politician derives the source of his legitimacy from authority (*quanli*) in Taiwan, and moral goodness (*khunna*) in Thailand. The gangster-type politician sources his legitimacy from force and power (*shili* in Chinese, *decha* in Thai). The gentleman-type politician finds his core support among the urban middle classes while the gangster-type politician finds his primarily in the countryside.

---

## Conclusion

Urban dwellers I spoke to have very clear notions of what a 'true' democracy needs to have and what kind of political class and citizens are necessary to make it happen. They believe that politics and especially elections should be a civil and orderly contest of ideas and platforms between parties where personal animosity between politicians is absent. Also, opposition politicians should graciously concede the result and work with the ruling party after Election Day. After the elections the whole country should put partisan interests behind then and unite and heal its divisions for the sake of the country. The civil service and bureaucracy are impartial and objective arbiters of the law. Politicians should be upright citizens. Politicians and voters should have *fengdu* (demeanour) as well as *suyang* (literacy).

Urban people want there to be a strong system of laws, checks and balances, in order to prevent too much corruption or mismanagement of the country. However, the urban voters with whom I spoke reiterated that Taiwanese is a 'formal' but shallow democracy. The reasons are principally, that the system is not robust and is too dependent on the competence of a few 'good' people. They also feel that voters do not possess political maturity or *suyang*, and too many politicians are crooked.

Taiwan has three broad types of political leaders. There is the *junzi* (gentleman) style leader, the *heidao* (gangster) type and an intermediate type who is an amalgam of the first two. The gentleman is popular among the middle classes. The gangster is very popular in the rural areas, and the intermediate type represents the vast majority of the country's national and urban politicians. What people really want is an honest and upright gentleman who is also daring and resolute. They yearn for a resolute and upright politician who can fix the rot in the system and who can rid the system of crooked politicians. The paradox is that the gentleman type politicians tend to be indecisive and ineffectual while the gangster type politician is bold and decisive.

Much as the middle classes loathe the existence of *heidao* in Taiwanese politics, it is undeniable that they enjoy broad popular support in the countryside. The term *heidao* only came into existence in the early 1990s, when the DPP took advantage of the country's media and political liberalization and used it to tarnish the KMT, and in particular the rural strongmen who supported the KMT to deliver the vote in the rural areas. However, locally powerful and



---

influential people, who enjoyed popular support, have existed in the countryside for hundreds of years. In the past they were informal leaders, whereas now they have decided to participate in the democratic process, running for and winning local office.

The next chapter will use newspaper and film sources to explore the changing meaning of the character of the Taiwanese 'gangster'. I will show that before 1991 'gangsters' (*liumang*) were at worst, social deviants, and at best, they were perceived as flawed heroes. However, by the time of my fieldwork in 2002, 'gangsters' (*heidao*) had taken on a new meaning, that of 'public enemy'. I will argue that this change in the meaning of the term, is largely due to how scholarly literature, print media and the film industry have run corruption stories that portrayed certain politicians as *heidao*. I will argue that these new narratives of corruption and gangsters as 'public enemy' are a way of instilling new attitudes and behaviours among the Taiwanese electorate. They are a way of forming new notions of what it means to be a 'citizen' of a modern, western-leaning, democratic country.

---

## **Chapter Four:**

### ***Narratives of Corruption in Taiwan***

This problem of 'black' political influence is truly one of the most serious weaknesses of Taiwan's young democracy...(newspaper editorial on March 17, 2005)<sup>120</sup>

The worst part of this 'black and gold' system is the fact that people with organized crime backgrounds often played the role of 'fat cat' in local politics...(newspaper editorial on June 27, 2005)<sup>121</sup>

The topic of corruption with special reference to political corruption was a recurrent theme in the news during my period of fieldwork in Taiwan from 2002 to 2005.<sup>122</sup> News stories and reports exposing corruption, corrupt politicians and businessmen, appeared with surprising regularity in the print and broadcast media. These stories gave the impression that Taiwan was a 'weak' state, struggling to preserve its civil and democratic institutions from malicious elements. Broadcast and print media took the view that crime, especially political corruption and the abuse by politicians of the nation's political process is somehow reflective of certain significant facets of Taiwanese society; the Taiwanese state is 'weak' and besieged by lawlessness and rampant crime, the state of democracy is precarious and constantly under threat, corruption is endemic, the rule of law is weak, unscrupulous politicians abuse their privileges to escape prosecution, criminals are subverting and on the verge of taking over the state.

This chapter will analyze the transformation of a fluid concept- political corruption. It will explore the context within which this anti-corruption and anti-gangster narrative has arisen at this specific moment in Taiwan. Gupta (2005: 175),<sup>123</sup> commenting on corruption stories in the Indian press, asserts 'I want to ask what such stories are good for; in other words, what is the work that such narratives of corruption accomplish?' Regarding corruption stories in the Taiwanese press, I wish to ask the questions: in whose eyes and under what conditions of looking do 'black gold crimes' and 'gangsters' appear? Also, what are the circumstances and

---

<sup>120</sup> See "Black gangsters still influence Taiwan politics". *Taiwan News*. March 17, 2005. p. 7.

<sup>121</sup> See "Township polls need to be gutted". *Taiwan News*. June 27, 2005. p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> This phenomenon is partly to do with the fact that two highly important elections (one presidential and one legislative) were held on the island in 2004 and magazine and newspaper articles regarding the subject of corruption tends to appear most pronouncedly during election time. This is, in my view, because elections are the most spectacular visual and experiential manifestation of the democratic process, and incidents such as vote-buying and candidates running for political office with past or pending civil and criminal cases are deemed incompatible with the spirit and practice of democracy. These acts then tend to be classified as 'corrupt' and criminalized.

<sup>123</sup> Gupta, A. 2005. "Narrating the State of Corruption". In Chris Shore & Dieter Haller (eds.) *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-193. London: Pluto Press.

conditions under which distinctively modern notions of political corruption as crime become thinkable? In addition, I will explain what they try to accomplish.

This chapter will explore the different ways in which crime, especially political corruption and the abuse of the political process by politicians, is being talked about in Taiwan. This chapter is not about cases of corruption per se, nor is it about the objective existence of political corruption in Taiwan. Rather, as Gupta (2005: 174)<sup>124</sup> argues, ‘if we recognize that the phenomenon of corruption cannot be grasped apart from narratives of corruption’, then a good analysis of it needs to take into account the stories that are being told about it. In addition, following Gupta, I wish to use the narratives of corruption that appear in the media in order to ‘draw attention to the powerful cultural practices by which the state is symbolically represented’ (1995: 377). Thus, an examination and analysis of specific narratives of corruption in scholarship, media and the culture industry can help us pinpoint the significant ways in which the state is represented to its citizens.

The Taiwanese media regularly disseminates and creates, with an alarmist tone, the perception of crisis and deep rot in the political system. Is Taiwan’s political system really that corrupt? Figure 3 below features data about Taiwan taken from the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) compiled annually by Transparency International, an international NGO devoted to combating corruption. The CPI in 2005 ranked more than 150 countries ‘in terms of perceived levels of corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys’ and gives each country an overall score ranging from a maximum 10 points (highly clean) to 0 points (highly corrupt). In addition, each country is given a numerical ranking according to its CPI score out of the total number of countries that are assessed in a given year.

| Taiwan |        |        |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Year   | 2005   | 2004   | 2003   | 2002   | 2001  | 2000  | 1999  | 1998  | 1997  | 1996  | 1995  |
| Score  | 5.9    | 5.6    | 5.7    | 5.6    | 5.9   | 5.5   | 5.6   | 5.3   | 5.02  | 4.98  | 5.08  |
| Rank   | 32/158 | 35/145 | 30/133 | 29/102 | 27/91 | 28/90 | 28/99 | 29/85 | 31/52 | 29/54 | 25/41 |

**Figure 3: Taiwan’s ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index**

<sup>124</sup> Gupta, A. 2005. “Narrating the State of Corruption”. In Chris Shore & Dieter Haller (eds.) *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-193. London: Pluto Press.

---

Taiwan's performance in the Corruption Perceptions Index for 2005, in terms of its overall score, was the best score it has ever achieved since Transparency International began conducting its annual survey in 1995. In 2005 it was ranked 32 out of 158 countries, lower than Singapore (5), the United Kingdom (11) and Japan (21), but higher than Malaysia (39), Italy (40) and South Korea (40). Indeed, over the past decade, its ranking has experienced some fluctuation within a narrow band, but has consistently remained within the upper middling group of countries and not too far below the advanced industrial ones. This chapter is not really about objective cases of corruption and 'gangsters' per se. Its object of inquiry is not whether society has become more lawless, nor whether cases of corruption have actually increased. The point I'm making here is that according to this CPI index, Taiwan is not particularly corrupt, and has not gotten worse since records began to be kept in 1995. Indeed, the CPI data suggest that it has gotten less corrupt with time.

If we take this index to be an objective representation of the 'real' state of corruption in the country, then we are faced with a paradox. Why do media stories such as the two extracts at the beginning of the chapter, paint such a depressing picture of corruption? In other words, why is there such a glaring difference between 'perception' and 'reality' regarding corruption in Taiwan? Could it be the case that ubiquitous stories about corruption in the media, help create the appropriate conditions in which certain practices become 'tainted', 'criminalized', and more importantly, 'thinkable as crimes' in a country that had replaced authoritarian ways with democratic institutions since the early 1990s? May these representations of corruption and of the 'gangster' in Taiwan result in a reading public that is aware of certain values and behaviours appropriate in a democracy? I argue that corruption stories characterize behaviours typical of informal institutions as 'criminal' and 'illegal'. They deem certain behaviours to be inappropriate in the new political context and instead emphasize laws and 'formal institutions'. Specifically, these corruption stories expressly condemn vote buying, 'gangsters' who enter politics to further their own selfish ends, factionalism and patron-clientism.

I will argue that these stories of corruption can also be interpreted as another manifestation of an ongoing process that I talked about in the introduction, wherein the political legitimacy of certain elected politicians are being contested and disputed. They may be viewed in broad terms as representing an urban-rural divide, wherein the educated urbanites have a radically different measure of a sound democratic system to that of rural voters. Going back to the ideas of legitimacy I mentioned in the introduction, the former insist on much more than

---

conformity with established rules for acquiring power as a precondition for recognizing a politician as legitimate. In addition, efficiency, integrity and honesty are additional elements essential for political legitimacy. 'Corrupt, inefficient, and self-seeking politicians will not be tolerated' (Sukatipan 1995: 221). Media stories of corruption prove that some controversial politicians are not fit to govern.

An interesting case in point is the 1991 coup, which deposed Chatichai Choonhavan, Thailand's first elected prime minister in twelve years. When Chatichai first assumed office, his government initially enjoyed considerable legitimacy, having derived its legitimacy from the fact that it acquired power in conformity with established rules. The middle classes and the media initially were also quite supportive of his government. However, this state of affairs was short lived as stories of corruption in the media gradually undermined the administration's support among the middle classes, who even responded quite favourably to the military coup in February 1991. A crucial factor in Chatichai's loss of legitimacy and support was precisely the stories of corruption that were published in the country's papers:

Commentary in major newspapers and by leading academics encouraged and reflected the public's resentment of the rampant corruption, cronyism, and unprincipled behaviour of politicians, especially the cabinet members. The government's claim that it had a popular mandate was largely rejected on the ground of the alleged vote buying practices in the previous election. Thus while the middle class supported a democratic regime in theory, it was unhappy with the incumbent government. For the middle class, Chatichai's claim to legitimacy based on democratic principles could not be sustained because his government was using state power for private gain (Sukatipan 1995: 219).

My interest in stories of corruption in the press was aroused early on in my fieldwork, when I discovered that the majority of my informants were convinced that 'gangsters' were everywhere, and that corruption was pervasive in Taiwan. This was evident in chapter two, where practically all the schoolteachers and other professionals I spoke to in Dajia Town thought that 'gangsters' had taken over *Jenlangong*. From my conversations with people, I got the impression that they sometimes lurked in the shadows, but they would often openly operate with people around them fully aware of their presence. It seemed that nearly every one of my informants had an opinion on the subject. Below is a poem I heard on more than one occasion:

Gangsters are afraid of police (*Heidao pa jingcha*)  
Police are afraid of elected deputies (*Jingcha pa mindai*)  
Elected deputies are afraid of journalists (*Mindai pa jizhe*)

---

This was a poem I was going to hear over and over during the course of my fieldwork in Taiwan. It represents a sort of 'pecking order', or 'food chain', if you will, that purports to describe the constitution and composition of certain powerful institutions in the country, and how they related to each other. Thus, first, gangsters are 'checked' by the police. This means the police tolerate the existence of gangsters and regulate their activities, but will from time to time impose a crackdown and throw them in jail when they get out of hand.

Second, police are 'checked' by elected deputies.<sup>125</sup> These elected deputies are supposed to represent the interests of their voters in the halls of city and town government. However, they can also represent 'gangsters' or any hoodlum or gang boss they owe a favour to. So for example, if a 'gangster' is arrested for extorting protection money from shops, the elected deputy can turn up at the police precinct and demand that he be released. High-ranking elected deputies usually have leverage over local police as they have a say in deciding the annual police budget. So should they so decide, they can cut the police budget for the next year. This means police are wary of them and are careful not to get on their bad side.

Elected deputies are in turn 'checked' by journalists. This means that the members of the print and broadcast media can investigate cases of corrupt acts by deputies and publicize them, or at least threaten to do so. So deputies are wary of acting too brazenly lest they attract the ire of journalists. In this sense, journalists and reporters are perceived to act as a kind of 'third estate', a counterweight to the abuse of political power by deputies.

'How do you become a gangster', and 'how do you spot one?' are questions I asked my confidants. Regarding the first, one replied:

Although there is no cut and dried method or route, children of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are predisposed to be drawn into the world of *heidao*. The main route for upward social mobility for these children are: If they are clever, a few can go to college and later on get a professional job, or they can join the police force, and lastly they can become *heidao*. Community influences and socioeconomic factors are determining factors. At elementary school you hang out with your older brothers' friends. In junior high you become a rascal (*xiaohunhun*) and you don't do well at school or you drop out. One starts early, you start out by working for the boss of a karaoke bar (KTV) or a barbershop, as an assistant of a doorman. Then you can work your way up the ranks. If you have potential you can be the boss' right-hand man.

---

<sup>125</sup> The latter are any type of individual who holds elected office, from village representative (*xiangmindaibiao*), to town representative (*zhenmindaibiao*), all the way up to national legislator (*liwei*).

---

To the second question another respondent replied: ‘you can usually spot a *heidao* (gangster) by his crew cut, tattoo-laden limbs, necklace, chain smoking, betel-nut chewing, and a plain dark-coloured shirt.’ Below he started to describe what it is that *heidao* do:

*Heidao* may be understood as a group that uses illegal means to manipulate the activities of the state. For example, in local government they bypass the state and official mechanisms and institutions. Citizens and voters who have a grievance or dispute will call on them to mediate rather than use official channels. During elections they will act as vassals of a political overlord like the KMT by using their coercive power to buy votes, intimidate or sway voters. Finally, they will manipulate the tendering process in construction projects to ensure their friends and associates get the contracts for civil works projects, getting kickbacks in the process. The counties with the highest concentration of *heidao* are Changhua, Chiayi and Yunlin Counties in South Taiwan, among the country’s poorest counties. People from these counties often go to work in the cities, usually in construction and other manual jobs. They are less educated, vulgar and somewhat naïve. They drink Wispy (a mix of Chinese ‘Gaoliang’ liquor and coffee) and seek their own kind in the cities. There was a big surge in the 1970s of people going to Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung cities. The fact that they exist means that Taiwan is not yet a place where the rule of law applies 100%.

Political corruption is known in Chinese as black gold (*heijin*). The word ‘black’ refers to organized crime groups entering the political arena by violent and/or unlawful means, while the word ‘gold’ points to subsequent abuses of political power in pursuit of financial interests. The term commonly refers to ‘gangster’ involvement in politics, bribery and vote buying. *Heidao* (literally, the ‘dark path’) are, according to informants:

Gangsters are people involved in organized crime. These are the denizens of the underworld, the archenemies of the *baidao* (the white path) who inhabit the upper world of the police, the law, and other instruments of state power.

Loosely translated as ‘gangster’, the English term for *heidao* is, however, misleading, as this conjures images of a Sicilian-type mafia, or Al Capone in prohibition era Chicago. The Taiwanese *heidao* foot soldier, whenever I saw him portrayed on television and the in the print media, is a stern-looking man in a crew cut, sometimes smoking a cigarette and chewing betel nut, wearing dark sunglasses and a plain black collar shirt. The Taiwanese ‘gangster’ boss is portrayed as the powerful local politician with presumed links to the underworld. Arguably, the most notorious one is Legislator Yen Ching-piao, a controversial local politician from central Taiwan who enjoys national prominence, and who is the subject of this thesis.

---

I gradually came to realize that the term ‘gangster’, like the phenomenon of corruption, was a highly problematic analytical category. It was a very loose overall term that could apply to several kinds of ‘bad’ elements in society. I found the usage of the word so broad in scope that it became virtually meaningless. Apart from referring to elected deputies (*mindai*) who collude in bidding for engineering and constructions projects (*baopiaogongcheng*), as well as make money from kickbacks and commissions on these projects, the term can also refer to those involved in illegal activities (*badahangye*), such as loan sharking (*dixiaqianzhuan*), video arcades (*diandongyouxichang*), KTV restaurants, brothels and bars. Not only did the term *heidao* refer to mafia bosses, and corrupt politicians, they also came to refer to those who occupied the bottom rungs of organized crime such as gang foot soldiers. Lastly the term can also apply to all forms of lowlife (*liumang*) such as punks, rascals, hoodlums, rogues and ruffians.

I was faced with a dilemma. ‘Gangsters’, much like the phenomenon of corruption I mentioned in the introduction, are not a straightforward subject of study, from a theoretical and methodological standpoint. Do I study ‘punks’, hoodlums and rascals as well as corrupt politicians? How do I compare data on these different kinds of ‘gangsters’ in an analytically meaningful way? Notwithstanding the vagueness that surrounds the term, my descriptions in the preceding paragraphs are vivid proof that my informants are convinced ‘gangsters’ are ‘for real’ and are not an ambiguous category. I thus have to take the matter seriously as an object of investigation. I have decided to study not cases of ‘gangsters’ and corruption per se, but what stories are being told about them.



---

## The ‘gangster’ in the media

I will now deal with stories of ‘gangsters’ and political corruption in newspapers and magazines in Taiwan. I wish to show here that the media, initially, silent about these issues, underwent a process of transformation whereby by the time of the first direct presidential elections in 1996, it was full of stories, articles and reports of ‘gangsters’ and corruption cases. In the early 1990s, Shaw (1991: 173)<sup>126</sup> says that *liumang*, a loose term referring to a social deviant, similar to the English terms rogue, hoodlum, hooligan and gangster, ‘are depicted in the media in Taipei as destroyers of common social and moral values, as enemies of the people and of public morality’. Note that in 1991 Shaw did not refer to ‘gangsters’ as *heidao*, nor did he refer to any aspect of ‘gangster’ involvement in politics and corruption.

This seems to indicate that the concept *heidao*, particularly the notion of *heijin* (black gold) that is to gain notoriety in later years, was inexistent at the time. Likewise, referring to political corruption in the media in Taiwan, Fell (2005: 881) states that ‘as late as 1991 corruption was not a central issue’. Fell (2005),<sup>127</sup> in charting the fluid and ever expanding nature of how corruption is seen and defined in Taiwan from the start of the country’s experiment with multi-party democracy in the 1980s to the present, asserts that Taiwan’s ruling and opposition parties had ‘contrasting definitions of what constituted political corruption in the early 1990s’ (Fell 2005: 882). However, the then opposition DPP party rapidly took advantage of the newly liberalized political and media environment to ‘expose government corruption and challenge corrupt governance norms’. By exposing corruption in the media, Taiwanese opposition parties created a heightened awareness and greater intolerance of corruption and also managed to unseat the ruling power by portraying it as a corrupt party.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> Shaw, T. 1991. “Taiwan: Gangsters or Good Guys”. In M. Freilich, D. Raybeck, J. Savishinsky (eds.) *Deviance: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-190. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

<sup>127</sup> Fell, D. 2005. “Political and Media Liberalization and Political Corruption”. *China Quarterly* 184: 875-893.

<sup>128</sup> The DPP endeavoured to portray the KMT as a corrupt party in the mind of the public by taking out anti-corruption ads in newspapers and television, televised debates between mayoral and presidential candidates, live broadcasts of campaign rallies and speeches, and finally TV talk shows. The DPP’s anti-corruption campaigns consistently targeted vote-buying practices, gradually succeeding in widening ‘the scope of what is seen as vote-buying, reduced the efficiency of vote-buying, promoted anti-vote buying measures, and contributed to making this formally tolerated practice into “black corruption”’ (Fell 2005: 891). The opposition party also succeeded in broadening the scope of practices that are seen as ‘corrupt’ by targeting the KMT party assets as well as links between the KMT and ‘gangsters’. To a lesser extent, the DPP has sensitized the public to the phenomenon of local and central government corruption, and as a result, since 2000 ‘all three leading parties have attempted to keep their distance from local politicians with corrupt reputations’ (Fell 2005: 892).

---

The initial efforts by the opposition parties to raise corruption as an electoral issue by sponsoring TV and newspaper ads had gathered momentum and the issue largely became self-sustaining by 1996, the year of the first direct presidential election. By the time of my fieldwork between 2002 and 2005, stories about crime and law and order cases involving theft, murder and bank robberies have become fodder for the island's popular print and broadcast media. Likewise, stories about different forms of corruption, such as embezzlement, opaque business deals, government tenders for public works projects, especially construction, that involve kickbacks and commissions, all featured very prominently in the popular press. I will highlight those stories about crime and political corruption that focus on the local politician because I wish to argue that the local politician is the locus of many of the political, even social and economic ills that form the backdrop of many media stories.

I will use sources from the country's English and Chinese language broadsheets as well as various Chinese language tabloids and rumour and gossip magazines to describe five major sub genres of political corruption stories in the print media. I am not trying to compile a comprehensive list of all possible kinds of stories and articles detailing corruption and crime in Taiwan as objects of analysis, as that would be too broad and unwieldy. Instead I have sampled a few representative stories from select genres about crime and corruption that are directly relevant to my arguments about the nature of crime and corruption stories in the island.



Photo 8: This particular magazine contains an article alleging 'gangsters' mobilizing to influence the March 2004 presidential elections. The image of the 'gangster' almost always shows him to be a sinister figure dressed in black, with a crew-cut and dark glasses, as you can see in the photo in the top right hand corner of the magazine cover. Source: *TVBS Weekly*. 2004.3.4-3.19.

The tabloids and gossip magazines, on the one hand, tend to feature lurid, sensationalist stories about the exploits of 'gangsters' or people suspected of having a 'gangster background'. These stories tend not to be based on factual and verifiable sources but on rumour and hearsay. The English and Chinese language broadsheets, on the other hand, mainly cater for an urban, educated and middle class readership, and this holds true especially for those readers of Taiwan's English language press. The English and Chinese language broadsheets, the 'serious' press, regularly publish factual stories and articles about cases of rampant crime, lawlessness, feelings of insecurity, and political corruption in the country. Moreover, the editorials on the same topic tend to dwell not so much on particular incidents of crime and political corruption. Rather, editorial pieces use particular incidents as a starting point from which they launch totalizing, moralistic, ultimately pessimistic narratives about what these incidents say about the nature and character of Taiwanese democracy.

---

The first sub-genre of crime and corruption story comes mainly from the country's tabloid and sensationalist press, which often feature lurid, violent, sensationalist and unsubstantiated stories. I will select three stories, which make particular reference to corrupt practices and involvement in politics. The first is (see Photo 8) 'Gang members get mobilized, their power could translate into half a million votes for their chosen candidate, swaying the election result in exchange for favourable treatment by the winner afterwards'.<sup>129</sup> The second story (see Photo 9) is 'Gangsters use their influence to manipulate the futures stock market in order to make a killing'.<sup>130</sup> The last one is 'Underworld is being smeared by the government with involvement in the March 20 assassination attempt, gang members will stage a nationwide march protesting their innocence'.<sup>131</sup>

All three are baseless conspiracy theories, but are appealing to readers inasmuch as they seek to give an explanation to many of the opaque and mysterious events in the country, which seem to defy rational explanation. The country's financial sector is quite underdeveloped and not subject to effective government regulation and oversight, which gives way to frequent financial scandals. The first story's suggestion that the underworld manipulates trading behind the scenes constituted a psychologically satisfactory explanation for an otherwise mystifying institution. Suggestions in the other two stories regarding underworld involvement in the 2004 presidential election results played on popular fears and anxieties regarding the propriety and fairness of the results.

---

<sup>129</sup> 黑道總動員，50萬票左右選盤 *TVBS Weekly* n. 322. March 13-19, 2004. Pp. 10-17.

<sup>130</sup> 黑道海創期指賭盤，壹週刊 *Next Weekly*. March 4, 2004. Pp. 34-40.

<sup>131</sup> 江湖串連反抹黑：全省大哥站出來 *TVBS Weekly* n. 338. April 24-30, 2004. Pp. 15-17.



Photo 9: Gangsters in the stock market. Note the shadowy figure in dark glasses talking behind the stock market trading monitor. The visual representation of the 'gangster' suggests his implicit rejection of democratic ideals such as honesty, transparency and rule of law.

Source: *Next Magazine*. 2004.3.4.

Stories about incidents of vote buying, the second sub-genre, invariably appear in the period immediately before and after elections, and 2000 and 2004 were years when numerous stories about vote buying appeared. The story 'Anti corruption drive renewed'<sup>132</sup> reported comments by then Justice Minister Yeh Chin-fong that although 9,000 people have been prosecuted for taking and giving bribes since 1993, the conviction rate is too low and few politicians have ever been convicted of bribery. The story 'Black gold rises sharply'<sup>133</sup> reported that the Ministry of Justice is actively investigating 800 cases of vote buying in the run up to the March 20 presidential election. What is interesting is that the stories give the impression that cases of vote buying appear to be on the increase and that they stress the fact that the act is 'criminal' and 'illegal'.

<sup>132</sup> *Taipei Times*. January 24, 2000. p. 4.

<sup>133</sup> *Taipei Times*. March 4, 2004. p. 3.

---

The third sub-genre, about stories linking politicians with crime, constitutes an important subgenre of the crime-reporting phenomenon. For instance, the story 'Judicial Yuan sheds light on the darker side of politicians'<sup>134</sup> publicised the names and photos of several elected politicians who had pending criminal charges against them. The story quoted the Ministry of Justice in saying that 205 elected representatives in the country's National Assembly, Legislative Yuan, City and County Councils, and Township representatives appeared on its criminal database. The news article 'Corrupt politicians, tycoons choose exile over jail time'<sup>135</sup> not only 'names and shames' several politicians with criminal cases who run for office, but it also detailed their use of parliamentary immunity and other privileges to flee the country rather than appear in court or serve time.

The story 'Lawbreakers can serve as lawmakers: CEC'<sup>136</sup> detailed how the Taichung County politician Yen Ching-piao won a legislative seat in the December 2001 elections despite being in jail for the whole campaign period. The article reports doubts by some as to whether he can actually carry out his role, as he is in jail. However, the Central Election Commission (CEC) ruled that as Mr. Yen was appealing the conviction, he and another incumbent lawmaker in a similar situation, were qualified to serve as lawmakers while their appeals were being considered. They were 'future legislators who were elected by voters', and 'their victories in the campaign are valid and have nothing to do with their criminal cases'. The story further detailed Mr. Yen's criminal history and made the comment that he was the first elected lawmaker to run a campaign from behind bars.

Another story, 'Former Yunlin County Commissioner Detained'<sup>137</sup> reported on the detention in December 2004 of Chang Rong-wei, ex-commissioner of Yunlin County, who had been on the run from the authorities since August of that year. He had been found guilty in that same month of bribery charges relating to the 1994 Yunlin County speakership election. Chang Rong-wei's detention was actually only of secondary importance in the news story though. It only formed the background of the more 'significant' story that his sister Chang Li-shan had won a seat in the December legislative election when she ran as an independent in their Yunlin stronghold. Chang's sister's victory happened just a few days after he was caught, and 'she arrived at the Yunlin District Prosecutors' Office around 8:30pm to inform her brother in

---

<sup>134</sup> *Taipei Times*. October 30, 1999. p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> *Taipei Times*. September 14, 2004. p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> *Taipei Times*. December 3, 2001. p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> *Taipei Times*. December 12, 2004. p. 6.



---

person of her victory'. The implication here is that Chang Rong-wei's detention generated sympathy for his sister, enabling her to win the elections despite being a political neophyte.

The fourth sub-genre is the story dedicated to factions, factionalism, and patron-clientism. 'Democracy remains precarious'<sup>138</sup> listed the obstacles and challenges that the island's democracy faces, among which are 'informal institutions and channels such as corruption, local factionalism, personal connections, political clientelism and organized crime'. The story 'Factional politics can't be eradicated: analysts'<sup>139</sup> reported two Taiwanese academics expressing doubts that the phenomenon of factions will ever disappear, given that they offer too valuable a service to political parties- winning votes. The first story's characterization of factions as one of many 'informal institutions and channels' implied the latter category is somehow not conducive to a democracy. The second story added that it's good for the DPP to 'seek to rid itself of the image of factionalism and make the party system more transparent and fair'. Again, the message is made clear that factions are incompatible with a transparent and fair system.

The fifth sub-genre is the newspaper editorial that goes beyond the simple reporting of 'facts' and attempts to contextualize them in a wider historical context. These editorials provide the 'genesis' story of 'gangs', 'gangsters' and the 'underworld'. For example, the editorial 'The KMT-Bamboo Union connection'<sup>140</sup> seized on two unrelated stories, one about the country's biggest 'organized crime group', the Bamboo Union, the other, a news story on comments by ex-President Lee Teng-hui that one of the greatest challenges facing the nation is what to do about the remnants of the Chiang family dynasty, two of whom ruled Taiwan during the country's long dictatorial period, to make a point that the two stories actually possessed a historical link. The connection lay in the fact that the Bamboo Union Gang prospered because the authoritarian government of the 1980s was more concerned with suppressing political dissidence than with law and order. Thus the KMT regime 'tapped' the gang, guaranteeing it a degree of impunity in return for use of its 'muscle against the democracy movement'. The editorial then proceeded to weave a narrative of how that initial complicity led to today's political dilemma of a 'gangster' dominated legislature:

---

<sup>138</sup> *Taipei Times*. June 8, 2004. p. 8.

<sup>139</sup> *Taipei Times*. June 10, 2004. p. 3

<sup>140</sup> *Taipei Times*. November 8, 2004.

---

As Taiwan started to democratize, gang connections became useful to the KMT in a different way. The KMT decided that as it actually had to fight elections, then it might as well load the dice in its favour. So it relied on its gang connections- indeed still does- to buy votes... gangsters soon learned that rather than simply enjoying the KMT's mercurial protection, they could enjoy more protection by entering politics themselves and availing themselves of the constitutional protection from arrest elected officials enjoyed. And so we end up with a legislature dominated by a party extensively connected to racketeers, many of whose legislators are racketeers themselves.

The editorial 'The deep wells of black gold'<sup>141</sup> reported on three corruption stories, the most noteworthy of which was the Supreme Court ruling that found Legislator Yen Ching-piao innocent of vote buying, an accusation he was first charged with when he ran for the Taichung County Council Speakership in 1994. The editorial then briefly described Yen Ching-piao's background and political career with the intention of making a 'distressing' point- that the culture of 'black gold' is firmly embedded in the country's political culture. The article also made a veiled criticism of the quality of the average voter. The story's implicit arguments seem to be that, ultimately, the success of the country's democracy hinges on a well informed, educated and vigilant electorate, and that the nation had the democratic system and politicians that it deserves:

Yen's success story begs the question: Are honesty and respect for the law actually virtues voters expect of their legislative representatives? In more mature democratic countries, someone like Yen—whose reputation is tainted by serious allegations of corruption—would never have been elected to a city council, never mind the legislature.

The editorial 'Black gangsters still influence Taiwan politics'<sup>142</sup> used the news about the conviction and sentencing to one year in prison of Yunlin County Magistrate Chang Rong-wei for fraud as a vehicle for denouncing the abuse of the nation's democratic system by 'gangsters' who run for office:

---

<sup>141</sup> *Taipei Times*. October 19, 2003.

<sup>142</sup> *Taiwan News*. March 17, 2005.



---

Chang and numerous other Taiwan politicians represent the unfortunate but still all too common phenomenon of office-holders with 'black gang' or 'organized crime' backgrounds. In other countries, there is no need for any restrictions on the electoral participation or office-holding or underworld figures for the simple reason that voters absolutely do not elect such candidates. However, the existence of such restrictions in Taiwan has been unable to prevent the election of numerous underworld or gang related politicians to the Legislative Yuan or county or city councils or city or council mayoralities. This problem of 'black' political influence is truly one of the most serious weaknesses of Taiwan's young democracy and requires serious consideration and re-examination on the part of our people.<sup>143</sup>

I have been showing fragments of different kinds of articles and stories from a variety of contemporary Taiwanese print media in order to show that as late as 1991 'gangsters' were seen merely as social deviants, minor irritants in Taiwanese society, and corruption was not a central electoral nor media issue. But by the late 1990s their image had undergone a rapid transformation. Gangsters and political corruption were by then the major social and political ill in the country.

---

<sup>143</sup> The same editorial goes on to mention that the country has 1,236 major gangster organizations as well as 'underworld' organizations that 'spread their influence all over Taiwan'. These 'underworld' organizations then 'expand their activities' outside Taiwan and form 'close linkages with underworld or organized crime organizations throughout the world in order to engage in 'human smuggling, drug trafficking, kidnapping and money laundering'. Even petty criminals are mentioned. The end result is that Taiwanese people live in fear for their safety because such 'underworld organizations are able to engage in criminal behaviour and violate the human rights and personal safety of many citizens'. The editorial attempts to construct a seamless narrative which links unrelated groups of people who may be committing some form or another of illicit or improper behaviour and it conflates all of them under the rubric of 'gangster'. Most importantly the editorial gives a simple overriding explanation for the country's various maladies- 'gangster involvement in politics'.

## The 'gangster' in film

I now wish to explore the theme of 'gangsters' in film. I wish to look at three films, *The Story of a Gangster* (Daowen), *Island of Greed* (Heijin), and *Born to be King* (Shengzhi wei wang). I wish to show that the portrayal of 'gangsters' on screen has changed from the early to the mid 1990s. 'Gangster' films in the early 1990s resembled a Greek tragedy, where the gangster was a 'flawed hero' who embodied many virtues like loyalty and a strong sense of justice, who fought against perceived injustices, but realizing only too late that he was ultimately fighting for a lost cause. By the late 1990s the theme of gangster films became overtly political, representing the gangster as immoral, scheming, and a threat to the country's political stability. In short, the 'gangster' became a 'public enemy'.

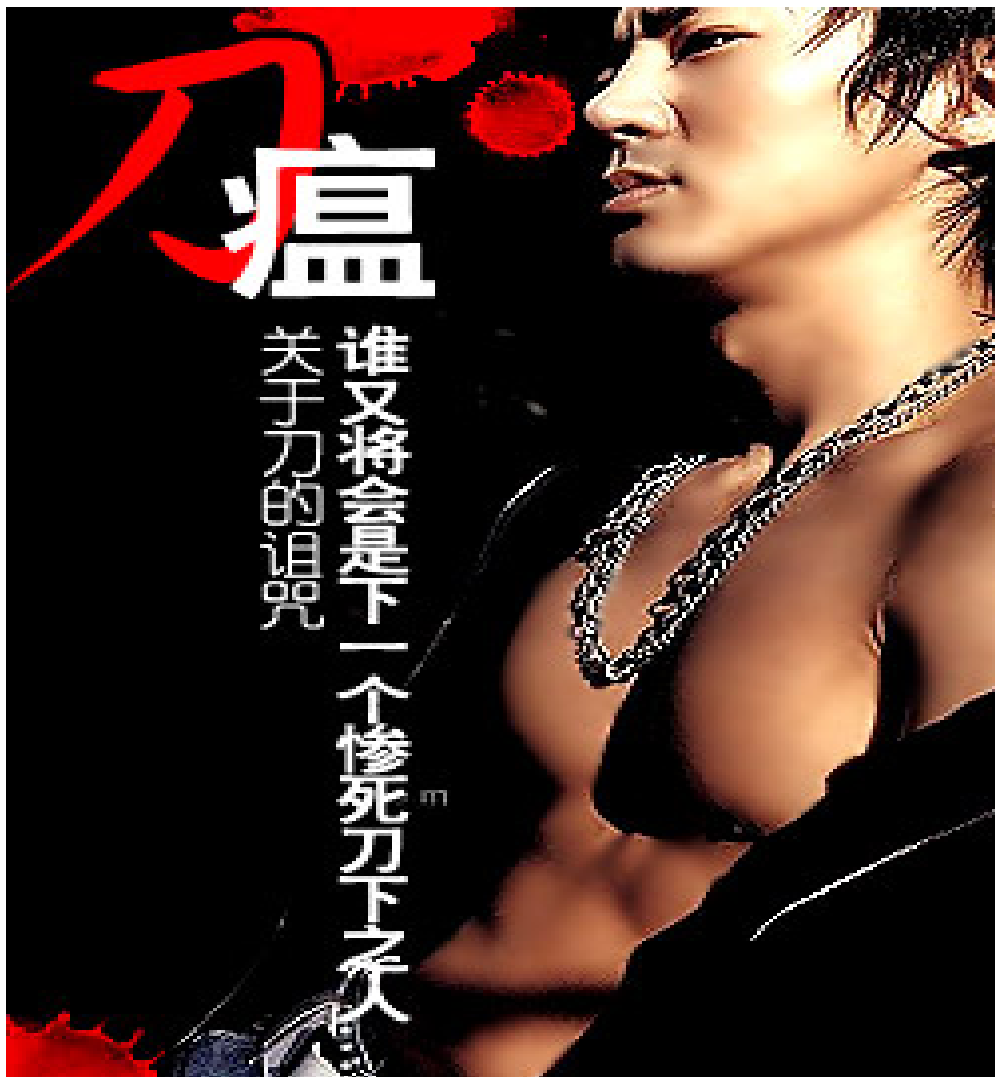


Photo 10: Story of a Gangster

---

Set in the 1970s, *Story of a Gangster*<sup>144</sup> (see Photo 10) tells the story of an aging small-time mobster called Old Wang who owns a teahouse, and enjoys boasting about his past exploits as a gangster. His son Hui has always been fascinated with his father's stories and dreams about a glamorous career as a gangster when he is older. Charismatic and active in high school extracurricular activities, Hui rises in stature within his own gang of youths and earns the ire of other gangs in school when he becomes involved in the intramural election of the president of his school's students' association. Hui falls in love with Chew Hung, the daughter of Chuen, his father's old partner and sworn brother, who later became wealthy and influential. Chuen tries to keep his daughter away from Hui and tries to consolidate his position by offering his daughter to the son of a prominent local politician. Hui finds out one day that Chew Hung was to be engaged to the politician's son. Furious, Hui tries to beat up the politician's son and elopes with the girl Chew Hung, but is pursued by killers sent by her father. Anxious to protect his son, Old Wang rushes after them and is killed. The girl is captured and forced to marry the politician's son but the evil former partner Chuen is assassinated in the wedding. More than a decade later, Hui, now a rising politician himself, after winning a campaign for political office, returns home to visit the graves of his father and grandfather.

*Story of a Gangster* (1989) is, at least overtly, a film about a tragic family history and a love story about a boy losing his father and girlfriend, a boy's struggle against feelings of inferiority to rich man's son, etc. The point here is that, apart from implied references<sup>145</sup> to the KMT's strategy of cooptation of the local elite, there was no direct mention of the KMT and 'gangsters' colluding to manipulate and undermine the country. As we shall see with two scenes from the next film, political references are very explicit to the point of being libellous.

---

<sup>144</sup> The film dwells on the effects of the localization of political power, as seen through the lives of a Taiwanese high school student and his family. The story unfolds in a time of political change in Taiwan. The authoritarian KMT regime realized, that it was viewed by local Taiwanese as a brutal, and foreign occupying force that was simply biding its time in its quest to retake the Chinese mainland as early as the 1970s. The KMT realized that in order to hang on to power it had to localize and bring in the local Taiwanese elite into government, thereby co-opting them and preventing them from agitating for reform or from revolting. Among those local elites it co-opted were local village and town strongmen, whose powers of organization and mobilization it needed to win in local elections.

<sup>145</sup> In two scenes about elections, *Story of a Gangster* makes implicit references to the patron-client relationship the KMT had established with local strongmen with a view to helping its candidates win elections. For example, the first scene is about the intramural election for president of the students' association. It made veiled references to the KMT's local clients. When Hui and his gang toured classrooms promoting his candidate, one of his complaints about the school was the fact that the school's in house convenience store was too expensive. The store was owned in fact by another candidate. He was the school authorities' favourite in the elections. The other scene features the politician's daughter, Chew Hung, complaining about the fact that her father was secretly collaborating with a KMT employee in order to win the local election that was being held in the locality.

*Island of Greed* (1997) is a depiction of underworld involvement in Taiwanese politics (see Photo 11).



Photo 11: *Island of Greed*

Underworld boss Chau is trying to consolidate his power and gain mainstream respectability by running for office, since the police can't touch politicians. Trying to stop him is Inspector Fong, a police inspector, who, because he can't abide corruption, doggedly tries to shut down Chau's gambling joints and find witnesses brave enough to go on the record and testify before Chau manages to manipulate his way into power. The film follows Chau's rise and fall, over the course of an election campaign in Taipei. In the first scene near the start of the film, Police Inspector Fong Kuo-fei is discussing the case of mafia boss Chau with his superior at the police station:

---

Fong: A nationwide raid against gangs, codenamed Operation Cleansweep was conducted in 1989. Chau Chiu-sen was put behind bars for five years. Now he's an entrepreneur with a net worth of over NT\$ 3 billion. Let's focus on his video arcades business. He has 38 video games shops, which are actually underground casinos with a daily turnover of NT\$ 50 million. He is bigger than McDonalds. Approximately half of his revenue goes into bribing government officials.

Fong's Superior: This big boss, being the head of the Sung-lin Gang, now wants to enter politics. He has become a candidate for the coming legislative elections.

Fong: There is a government practice that once a person becomes a legislator he then is above the law. Even his seedy past will be buried. It doesn't make sense!

In the second scene near the end of the film, the gang bosses celebrate their various candidates' victory in the legislative elections at an outdoor hot spa pool at Master Tao's opulent mansion. All thirteen victorious legislators, both new and serving, are gathered, all naked, tattoos resplendent:

Master Tao: May I propose a toast to the four new legislators. In the Legislative Yuan, there are 164 seats, we 13 legislators are gang members, we 13 must unite...we must not have a Judas...betraying each other. I heard the government is preparing a third crackdown. The code name is Chi Ping. That's why you're all here today. We need a solution. Mr. Chau is coming up very fast. It's just like sitting in a helicopter. That's because he bought a helicopter, ha ha!

Chau: We treat the government as our friend. We are most obliging to their needs...anything they want, we provide, money, manpower...But once they think you're useless or get in their way they'll get rid of you. The first and second crime sweeps, iron-fisted campaigns, no judiciary process, instant arrest and jail sentence. Quite a few of us here, including me were imprisoned. Tough life, uh! As our Master Tao Yu-sang said, the government treats you like a piss pot. When you're no longer useful, they think you stink. They will just throw you under the bed. During the first two crackdowns none of our buddies were legislators. Now among the 164 seats we occupy 10%, and over half of the rest are closely associated with us. They include elected deputies, city and town mayors and county governors. Many are gangsters. We have over two million gangsters in Taiwan. Let me ask you this. Can you tell me whether the 13 legislators here are gangsters or upright politicians?

Gang member: Gangsters and politicians have become one and the same.

Chau: When gangsters become politicians, after the process of whitening, from black to white, what exactly have we become? I say we are neither. We are a hybrid! So why don't we organize all our buddies all over the country. Dissolve all the gangs and form a new party! I guarantee that we will become the biggest party within 3 years! We can easily become the ruling party! We can have our meetings at the President's house. We won't need to act stealthily anymore. We can hold our heads up high! We can go to Green Island by helicopter and turn the place into a golf course. Let's go play golf

Master Tao: Yeah, play golf on Green Island! Brilliant speech!



Photo 12: Born to be King

The next film (see Photo 12), *Born to be King* (2000) is a 'gangster' movie involving the struggle for regional dominance among the underworld of four countries; Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and Japan. The main character, Chicken is a young Hong Kong mobster who is married to the daughter of the Japanese mafia boss Taka. Unfortunately, Chicken is dragged into the middle of a power struggle between Taka and three other gangs from Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan. Enlisting the help of a friend, Chicken's involvement in Taka's war deepens until he and his friend find themselves involved in a showdown between the four rival organizations. It



---

is set in Taiwan just after the 2000 presidential elections. With the victory of the Democratic Progressive Party in the election, the face of Taiwan was set to change. President Chen Shui-bian's pledge to eliminate corruption is a threat that all of the various gangs must deal with. The storyline revolves around a dilemma that the underworld has never before had to deal with in Taiwan; now that the KMT is out of power how will the new administration deal with the immense power and influence of the underworld in Taiwan? In one key scene the Taiwanese mafia bosses organize a meeting to discuss their future under the new DPP administration:

Brother Eagle: Long time no see...sit down...have some tea...make yourselves comfortable. I'm calling this meeting for us to get together. Since the March 18, 2000 Presidential Elections there have been lots of changes in society. I think we should get together and discuss how to manage the changes.

Boss Longda: I think we should wait and see. Whoever is the president of the ruling party only cares for money. Money can buy off God, political parties, and even the president. In the past, we dealt with the Nationalist Party (KMT), and now we can do the same with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Lieutenant 1: But the new president has declared that he will eliminate political corruption!

Brother Eagle: His first priority is to stabilize the cross-strait relationship. Then, he can deal with the triads. To make peace with the triads, he needs our help.

Boss Jinlao: Brother Eagle, what is your comment on the new government policies?

Brother Eagle: Political wisdom tells us that suppression and purges don't work. I believe the best way is to 'pacify'.

Boss Longda: 'Pacify!' What do you mean?

Brother Eagle: Like the ancient story about the 108 heroes. They revolted against the imperial court for years. In the end they complied with the emperor.

Boss Jinlao: You mean our government should transform all triad members into civil servants!

Lieutenant 2: What is his theory, damn I don't care! It doesn't apply to the triads!

Brother Eagle: The means maybe different, but the end spirit is the same. I guess they want us to cooperate and be under their control. Then it's business as usual. Anyway, let's just play by the rules. The world is constantly changing. We should go along with the trend.

*Island of Greed* explicitly weaves a narrative of gangsters entering politics because they got fed up with the government that, alternately, either utilized their manpower to repress the political opposition, or threw them in jail under various crackdowns when it suited the authorities. Thus, the story goes, gangsters learned while interned in Green Island Maximum Security Prison that the best way to protect their interests was to enter politics and get immunity from the police and the law. The 'gangsters' in *Born to be King* discuss how best to deal with the new DPP administration. Their options range from continuing the patron-client relationship they enjoyed under the KMT, to direct participation in electoral politics.

---

## These narratives are new

Nevertheless, as seductive and appealing as this ‘gangster’ narrative may be, the concept *heijin* (black gold) is vague and imprecise. Its use in conversation could evoke so many referents and connotations that it becomes, in effect meaningless. Below is a list of various definitions and meanings that I have encountered the term to mean:

- Organized crime groups entering the political arena by violent and/or unlawful means.
- Abuses of political power in pursuit of financial interests.
- ‘Gangster’ involvement in politics.
- Bribery, vote buying, political violence, insider trading, bid rigging, and official and unofficial corruption.
- Convergence and/or collusion of ‘gangsters’, businessmen and corrupt politicians in Taiwan, or even a blurring of boundaries, making it difficult to tell these three categories apart.
- Patron-client relationships with local factions turned into one of mutual dependence.

The World Bank asserts that corruption is ‘the abuse of public office for private gain’ and indeed, that is what these different definitions listed above have as a common denominator. However, most definitions of corruption somehow ‘rest on the separation between the state or its agents and the rest of society’, but Haller and Shore (2005: 5)<sup>146</sup> insist that this ‘public-private dichotomy is often an arbitrary and inherently ambiguous cultural category’. Moreover, the boundaries between the public and private spheres, as well as public office and private gain, are culturally specific to the west and certainly do not conform to people’s expectations in the countryside in Taiwan, as well as some pockets of her cities. *Heijin* (black gold) is an extremely imprecise and vague analytical category. The term *heidao* (gangster) is really not so much an accurate, unproblematic definition of an individual engaged in an objectively verifiable act, as it is a morally charged accusation. Why do they appear so frequently in scholarship, media and the culture industry? What impressions do these narratives give to those who read them?

Media stories and films about corruption and ‘gangsters’, seem to introduce and reinforce the idea that there is something deeply troubling and unsettling about the country’s present political system. This is also somehow detrimental to the country’s broad economic and political interests. The country’s democratic transformation and the political and social reforms

---

<sup>146</sup> Haller, D. & Shore, C. (eds.) 2005. *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.



---

that have accompanied it, have also allowed a small but powerful group of people to take advantage of the system for their own ends. The narrative goes like this:

Gangsters have always existed in politics but before Operation Cleansweep in 1984, they were content to serve under their KMT overlords, using their muscle to help them win local elections and getting protection and impunity from the law in exchange. But they got fed up and decided after Operation Cleansweep that their interests were best served not by continuing to work under their mercurial KMT overlords. Rather, they should actively enter politics and be 'untouchable', and 'above the law'.

Narratives regarding 'why gangsters penetrated politics' like the one above, at first glance, appear persuasive. It portrays 'gangsters' as rational agents who realized that their best interests are served by direct political participation, rather than by working as the KMT's 'hired guns and goons' during elections. It is undoubtedly true that prominent and powerful local individuals known as 'gangsters' used their resources and organization in order to mobilize rural votes for a designated candidate. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that in an electoral democracy, national parties need to have a presence in every locality, down to the village level, if they are to be successful. Locally influential and prominent individuals in the countryside provide this function for parties by mobilizing people, canvassing and buying votes, intimidating voters, etc.

Having said that, I find the narrative unconvincing by way of a causal explanation for direct 'gangster' involvement in politics. In the introductory chapter I mentioned that in rural Taiwan, influential people were initially loath to enter politics, preferring instead to exert influence from behind the scenes, as public office was not financially rewarding. However, this state of affairs changed by the early 1980s, as the KMT regime had given up its dream to 'liberate the mainland', and vast amounts of money were earmarked for thousands of construction projects for roads, bridges, and buildings to be built in the countryside. The substantial sums for construction projects went into local coffers whose disbursement was largely under the discretion of locally elected officials. This new development changed the costs and benefits of occupying public office, prompting locally influential businessmen, and entrepreneurs to run for local office. Interestingly, the KMT policy of disbursing vast amounts of funds for rural development reached its zenith from the mid 1980s onwards. This was the period immediately after the 'gangsters' were released en masse from Green Island Maximum Security Prison. Thus, it is easy to see why the narrative attributes a causal relationship between the release from Green Island and the subsequent 'gangster' involvement in politics.

---

If we look at Thailand, we also see a parallel development occurring much earlier. In the introductory chapter I mentioned that rural Thai strongmen have existed for a long time, but have traditionally been reluctant to take on the responsibilities of public office, and ‘as recently as the 1960s the positions of *kamman* (sub district head) and village head were deeply unpopular’ because local office held few rewards. Again the situation started to change in the mid-1970s when development budgets to the sub district council were decentralized, and suddenly influential individuals saw ‘predictable and significant economic gains’ from the post of *kamman* or village head (Arghiros 2001: 71).<sup>147</sup> From the two cases we have just viewed, we may make the proposal that the entry of ‘gangsters’ into rural office was initially due to the availability of new sources of generating wealth, and not to a desire to capture political office per se.

So-called ‘gangsters’ use their ‘dark’ power to influence events like the stock market, and even the presidential elections behind the scenes. By the liberal use of the cover-all term ‘gangster’ and ‘gang’ to refer to all types of criminal, deviant and antisocial acts, what these types of stories do is to create the impression of an intimate link between crime, deteriorating law and order, moral decadence, and ‘gangs’ and ‘gang members’. Sensationalist stories suggest that they are ‘everywhere’, lurking in every corner. Glossy magazine covers show photos of stern, black-clad foot soldiers with short hair, dark glasses up to no good. Editorials in the island’s broadsheets appear to be weaving a persuasive narrative that resonates with many of the nation’s urban residents. Urban residents are disappointed with the country’s politics and law and order situation. They are pessimistic about their economic prospects. What the editorials seem to be doing is to construct a persuasive narrative explaining how things in the country got to be that way. In short ‘gangsters’ are the root of many of Taiwan’s social and political ills and the state and its citizens must be vigilant against them.

However, one must point out that these narratives of ‘gangsters’ and ‘corruption’ are extremely recent and, in my view, this present and fluid conception of the two terms is largely the product, and consequence of the nation’s political transformation which only really started in earnest in the early 1990s. As late as 1991 Shaw<sup>148</sup> perceived ‘gangsters’ as young social deviants who band together while espousing values of ‘community, personal freedom,

---

<sup>147</sup> Arghiros, D. 2001. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

<sup>148</sup> Shaw, T. 1991 “Taiwan: Gangsters or Good Guys”. In M. Freilich, D. Raybeck, J. Savishinsky (eds.) *Deviance: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-190. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

---

autonomy, equality and universal responsibility'. Shaw attributes this deviance as a rejection by the youths of the dominant Confucian morality that emphasized family, acceptance of obligation and subordination according to one's social position, obedience and subordination to authority, especially elder kinfolk. 'For many young males, joining a gang means finding freedom from family authority, learning to rely on friends as equals, and using one's own judgment and intelligence and intelligence as guides to action' (Shaw 1991: 174). As regards corruption, on the other hand, Taiwan's ruling and opposition parties had 'contrasting definitions of what constituted political corruption in the early 1990s' (Fell 2005: 882), the era immediately prior to the country's first fully democratic elections. 'As late as 1991 corruption was not a central issue' (Fell 2005: 881).

In the introductory chapter I showed that academic literature on Taiwanese politics underwent a transformation sometime in the mid 1990s. Throughout the past two decades, the core belief that the country's democratic achievements were fragile and unconsolidated stayed the same. But the nature of the 'informal institutions' that were believed to cause the country's democratic precariousness have changed. Until the mid 1990s, scholarship took the view that factional politics and patron-clientism were the major informal institutions that undermined the nation's democratic consolidation. However, after the mid 1990s political corruption and 'gangsters' were now seen as the major informal institution impeding democratic progress.

What I am trying to do is to show that there has been a substantive and noticeable change in the way the media and films talked about corruption in the two periods immediately before and after the mid 1990s. This change has also been reflected in scholarly literature regarding the reason why Taiwan's democratic system is unconsolidated. What happened in the intervening years between 1991 and 2002, the year my fieldwork began? What factors contributed to the transformation from the idea of the gangster as minor social deviant, prevalent until 1991, to the idea of the gangster as 'public enemy'? What factors led to the phenomenon of corruption being perceived as *the* major social ill in Taiwan at the time of my fieldwork in 2002 when it was hardly an issue at all as late as 1991?

---

## Instilling new attitudes

It is undeniable that the reason why this transformation has taken place is at least partly due to the liberalization of the nation's press as well as opposition DPP party attacks on the KMT that occurred in the early 1990s. Media reports and stories of corruption simply were not possible in the days when the authoritarian KMT regime's power was at its height. The media were heavily censored at the time. Thus, press liberalization allowed corruption stories to appear. Also, the then opposition DPP party rapidly took advantage of the newly liberalized political and media environment in the 1990s to attack the ruling KMT, exposing government corruption and challenging corrupt governance norms. Thus the DPP's constant association of the KMT as the party of 'black gold' also played a part.

Nevertheless, I shall argue that other forces have played an equal, if not greater role in this transformation. The selected news stories and films about corruption we have just seen suggest that the Taiwanese 'gangster', portrayed in DPP presidential election rallies before the March 2000 elections, where supporters carried large placards with photos of men accompanied by phrases depicting them as Taiwan's ten 'most wanted fugitives' (*da tong qi yao fan*), or the one played by actor Tony Leung in films like *Island of Greed* (1997), or the ones depicted in the innumerable stories of corruption depicted in the media, suggest that there are now new values appropriate to a changed socio-political context. Narratives of corruption are a symbolic system, tropes with which people make use of the political system that they inhabit (Haller & Shore 2005: 21). And it is through these narratives that the legitimacy of certain traditional politicians is questioned. 'These politicians in question are corrupt, and seek private gain from public office. They are therefore unfit to govern!'

In order to make certain values 'normal' or 'mainstream', it is necessary to make other values which conflict with the former appear as 'abnormal' or 'deviant'. Representations of corruption and of the 'gangster' in Taiwan appear to emphasize to their readership certain values and behaviours appropriate in a democracy by highlighting what is *inappropriate*. They appear to criminalize behaviours characteristic of informal institutions, perhaps because they are inappropriate in the new political context, and instead emphasize laws and formal institutions. These representations of corruption make certain long-held and accepted practices *unacceptable*. They create the conditions so that they become 'thinkable as crimes'. Those in a position of influence in the media appear to be indirectly stating that notion that electoral

---

democracy does not only entail multi-party competition and free elections, but call for a new way of thinking and behaving. In other words, conformity with established rules for acquiring power, by itself, cannot confer legitimacy. What is crucial is the existence of shared norms and values (Alagappa 1995).

Electoral democracy may call for a whole new way of thinking about not only politics, but about one's own place in society as well. It may be helpful to consider narratives of corruption as serving to drive home the idea that democracy is not only about voting. It is about an individual's relationship with the state as a 'citizen'. It is about a whole set of rights and responsibilities that a 'citizen' possesses. Ideas of 'corruption' are intimately intertwined with 'modern' notions of 'good governance', 'efficiency', 'accountability' and 'transparency' (Haller & Shore 2005: 4).

The concept and practice of corruption is invariably perceived as something which is by nature hidden and occult, and the various definitions of the concept involve 'the abuse of public office for private gain', 'that which harms the public interest', acts that transgress the 'separation between the state or its agents and the rest of society' (Haller & Shore 2005: 2-12), 'violation of norms and standards of conduct' (Gupta 1995: 388). These corruption stories, give the impression of educating the readership about what is or is not considered 'corrupt', by criminalizing traditional practices and beliefs in Taiwan. By creating the conditions within which longstanding practices become 'thinkable as crimes', those in positions of influence appear to inculcate, through the media and the culture industries, idealized western views of democracy and citizenship.

Gupta (1995) believes that stories of corruption are useful because they allow the citizens to imagine the state and their relationship to it. Applying this reasoning to Taiwan, corruption stories may be viewed as a process of transforming oneself into a 'citizen', marking a new relationship between the rulers and the ruled in a modern democracy. Unlike the old patron-client relationship characterized by unequal, personalistic ties of obligation and gratitude, the new 'citizen' enters into an agreement between equals with his politician. In exchange for his vote, the politician promises to govern wisely and for the public interest. The voter will, watch and pass judgment, holding the elected representative accountable for his actions come election time. In short, narratives of corruption, and more importantly, the act of making acts and behaviours characteristic of informal institutions 'thinkable as crimes', could be viewed as part of the attempt at making people into 'citizens' fully aware of their rights and

---

responsibilities, what they can expect from their politicians, and lastly, the primacy of laws and formal institutions.

In other words, narratives of corruption, and more importantly, the ‘criminalization’ of acts and behaviours characteristic of informal institutions (see Figure 4 below), help to make the readership aware of new concepts and attitudes such as accountability, transparency, good governance, their rights and responsibilities, what they can expect from their politicians, and lastly, on the primacy of laws and formal institutions.

| <b>Act deemed ‘criminalizable’</b>           | <b>Democratic principle violated</b>   |
|--|--|
| Black gold politics                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Separation of public and private spheres</li><li>• Public office versus private gain</li></ul>   |
| Vote buying                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accountability</li><li>• Citizenship</li></ul>   |
| Factional politics/patron clientism          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transparency</li><li>• Individual integrity</li><li>• Elections as ‘open competition’</li><li>• Fair play</li><li>• Laws and formal institutions</li></ul> |
| Elected office being occupied by ‘gangsters’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Notion of right and wrong wherein the culprit is administered justice</li></ul>  |

**Figure 4: Criminalization of behaviours characteristic of informal institutions**

Stories about ‘black gold’ create the environment in which the various practices covered by the term become ‘thinkable as crimes’. ‘Black gold politics’ is inappropriate in a modern, western-leaning democracy because the latter entails the separation of the public and private spheres. Elected officials occupy public office and operate in the public realm. They must not use the prerogatives of office for private gain! They must not enrich themselves or their families and friends while in office! That constitutes ‘corruption’!

---

What constitutes vote buying in the legal sense? It is an integral part of the democratic process for candidates to make verbal promises to voters during the election campaign. What appears to be the case is that an agreement to exchange one's vote for money, gifts, or a promise to build a bridge, school or bring jobs to one's constituency is unacceptable. Thus it is frowned upon for a candidate to promise to somehow deliver a material benefit of some kind to voters. However, what is acceptable is an agreement to exchange one's vote for certain policy proposals, or philosophies, or platforms, which will benefit the whole community and not one group. Vote buying, although typified as a straightforward 'criminal offence', obscures the grey legal areas and ambiguity of the term, as well as the difficulty in proving these accusations in court.

Why is vote buying considered 'corrupt', and why should it be stamped out? Gupta (1995: 388) states that contemporary notions of 'accountability' surface in a postcolonial context wherein, in a newly independent nation-state, ex-colonial subjects are transformed into 'citizens', with a set of rights. Hence, actions once tolerated or considered legitimate now are classified 'corrupt' because an electoral democracy is deemed 'accountable to the people.' If we were to apply Gupta's ideas to the practice of vote buying, it should in theory be deemed unacceptable, according to the media, because it violates the idea that politicians are ultimately 'accountable to the people'. Being elected to office is, according to this theory, a covenant with the people, a promise that the politician is obligated to fulfil. The people have deposited their confidence in a candidate by electing him, so then he must fulfil his side of the bargain by implementing his campaign platform and electoral promises.

The theory of accountability as applied to elections would take the view that the popular vote is the ultimate arbiter of a politician's past behaviour and track record. A competent and hard working elected representative who has delivered on his electoral promises should in theory be rewarded by the electorate by a mandate to serve another term, and an incompetent and 'lazy' representative would face the ultimate sanction, at voting time, of being voted out of office. What effect do stories about vote buying have? Stories about vote buying seem to create the appropriate environment in which vote buying becomes 'thinkable as a crime'. These stories appear to create the association between criminality with the act of vote buying through the inclusion of the phrases 'black gold' or 'gangster', or 'mafia' within the text. The simple message is: 'votes cannot be bought!'

---

Unlike vote buying, factionalism or patron-clientism is not strictly an act; rather it is mode of political organization as well as a description of a symbiotic relationship between two unequal actors. What is it about patron-clientism that is 'corrupt'? It may be that personal ties between social superiors and inferiors, a crucial element of factionalism and patron-clientism inherently belong to the informal sphere, and 'stand in contrast to the Western focus on laws and formal organizations' (Neher 2000: 5).<sup>149</sup> Secondly, Haller and Shore (2005: 4) see ideas of corruption as being 'intertwined with "modern" notions of good governance, efficiency, accountability and transparency'. In short, for many, good governance is efficient, accountable and transparent. Thirdly, Sparkes (1998: 188)<sup>150</sup> believes that democratic elections, if held according to western multi-party ideals are characterized by 'individual integrity', 'fair play', and 'open competition'.

Candidates ideally should contest seats openly, putting their reputations, prestige, and background up for public scrutiny. Hence, elections and party nominations of their respective candidates should be an open, transparent process, wherein candidates should be nominated by their parties, and elected, on the basis of merit, competence and moral integrity. Any governance marked by exchanges and agreements that are hidden, occult, and clandestine must therefore be 'corrupt'. Contrast this to factional politics wherein the nomination process is opaque and connections, power and gratitude for past favours are the dominant factors in candidate selection. Moreover, as candidates put forward by the parties are, in the great majority of cases, the most influential and powerful individuals in the localities where they are running for office, the election ceases to be an open contest. The voting procedures merely confirm the obvious- that the winner is the most powerful person in the constituency. Stories about factionalism and patron-clientism create the environment in which these practices become 'thinkable as crimes'. The effect these stories may have is to create the impression that factions are incompatible with a 'democratic' system.

Finally, why is it objectionable that a man charged with an offence or someone with a pending civil or criminal case should seek political office? Sparkes (1998: 186) states that a central part of western jurisprudence is 'a sense of justice or a notion of "right and wrong" that is, identifying the victim and the culprit and administering justice, in the form of punishment or compensation.' Hence western notions of political participation, this notion of right and wrong,

---

<sup>149</sup> Neher, C. 2000. *Southeast Asia: Crossroads of the World*. Dekalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies Northern Illinois University.

<sup>150</sup> Sparkes, S. 1998. "Conflict, Hierarchy & Democracy in Thai Society". In Ing-Britt Trankell & Laura Summers (eds.) *Facets of Power and Its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 177-189. Uppsala: Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University.



---

the need to mete out punishment to people deemed to have committed a crime, effectively exclude 'criminals' from office. The outcome of stories linking politicians to crime may be the trope of the criminal, who runs for office and wins as soon as he is formally accused of a crime. He does so in order to avail himself of the immunity that the post confers and thus escapes punishment while in office. His victory indicates the ineffectiveness of the laws and institutions of the state, a confirmation of the state of lawlessness in society. Stories about 'gangsters' in office create the environment in which these practices become 'thinkable as crimes'.

These types of stories also point out a popular practice in Taiwan wherein some locally well-connected people charged with a crime run for elected office, or in case he happens to be in jail or on the run, his sister, wife or son. These candidates very often win in their bailiwicks and their electoral victories are touted as a powerful, yet undeclared statement of their innocence, at least in the eyes of their supporters. These types of stories also could have the consequence of an oblique criticism of voters who do vote for these candidates, saying in effect: Do not vote for criminals who run for office!

I am not saying that the objective practices and acts normally grouped under the umbrella term 'black gold' do not exist. Practices like the abuse of public office for private gain, vote buying, bribery and fraud, patron clientism and factional politics, individuals who run for office in order to escape prosecution, all exist. I mentioned early ethnographies by Gallin, Thompson, and Crissman in the introductory chapter wherein many of the above practices were commonplace and accepted in rural villages and towns. These practices have existed for a long time. These practices predate Taiwan's democratic transition. These practices have long been tolerated by the state. My point is that now the state has become much less tolerant of them and the media publish stories vilifying them. High-ranking government officials regularly denounce 'black gold' and the media very regularly publish stories about 'black gold', 'gangsters' and corruption. I argue that scholarship, media, film and pronouncements by high government officials question the legitimacy of certain 'traditional' politicians by highlighting practices that are now considered 'corrupt'. 'Efficiency, integrity and honesty are additional elements essential for political legitimacy. Corrupt, inefficient, and self-seeking politicians will not be tolerated' (Sukatipan 1995: 221). In doing so they create the conditions in which the above practices become 'thinkable as crimes'.

---

## The westernizing project

I have enumerated and expounded on the various theoretical underpinnings of an idealized system of governance and political participation, parts of the whole 'package' of 'shared norms and values' in an ideal democracy. I must admit though, all of the above concepts are totally alien to the great mass of people living in the rural areas in the central and southern parts of the island. There is a significant urban-rural divide in Taiwan and the precepts enumerated above enjoy only partial acceptance, even among many of the residents of Taipei. Indeed, one could take the above ideals as simply that, a 'mission statement' or a 'declaration of intentions' for where those in power want the whole country to be in future. Could the 'package' of new attitudes and behaviours be simply the latest instalment of the elite-led modernizing project for Taiwan, which began with the country's economic transformation and industrialization in the 1960s and continued with the political reforms in the 1980s?

It has been estimated that in the 1990s more than 100,000 Taiwanese went to pursue graduate studies in the United States. I am astounded at the amount of national politicians who have American Ph.D.s. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the nation's academic and intellectual elite is heavily Americanized. Taipei, and to a lesser extent the other provincial cities, embody the most developed and culturally sophisticated places on the island.

People I've met in Taipei and other cities although proud of their country's economic and political achievements, nonetheless manifest angst, and worry that they are not 'western' enough (*bu gou xifanghua*). People I know feel a certain cultural inferiority to westerners. Most Taiwanese are very deferential towards foreigners, especially white westerners. The latter find it quite easy to get jobs teaching English, make friends and to integrate in society. Every household desperately wants their children to speak English, hence the proliferation of extra-curricular cram schools. News articles continually harp on about the need for the country to be more 'internationalized' (*guojihua*) and 'globalized' (*quanqiuhua*), terms that for the average person really mean 'westernized'.

---

Could it be the case that the narratives of corruption are largely a product of a small section of the country's urban, highly educated, middle-class- the intelligentsia? These are the country's university academics, schoolteachers, urban politicians, newspaper editors, reporters, journalists, etc. They are the political and intellectual elite and they see it as their mission to modernize the country. They feel that their recent industrialization now has to be matched by a political and cultural transformation, as part of their race to 'catch up with the West'. And to modernize the country, they also need to modernize the countryside, where the majority of people live.

They may not necessarily consider their rural brethren backward, they simply consider them even less 'westernized' than they are. Informants envy the development, achievements and sophistication of the 'West' who they imagine to be more advanced, rational, efficient, prosperous, etc. Friends of mine tell me the cultural divide is not simply between urban and rural residents. 'Many of our top politicians and intellectuals don't even consider the ordinary Taipei resident as "western" enough', says one informant.

Electoral democracy in Taiwan, in the sense of political rights and responsibilities enunciated earlier, simply do not resonate with rural residents. These political ideals stem from various premises that do not hold true in the countryside- that individuals see themselves and everyone else as morally autonomous and equal, that they understand and wholly accept concepts of 'right' and 'wrong', 'legal' and 'illegal' as defined by the state, that public office alone invests the office holder with political legitimacy and authority, that individuals distinguish between public and private spheres, that people fully understand and have complete confidence in the laws and formal institutions of the land, that the number of votes a candidate for office gets reflects the degree of confidence voters place in him, that elections are 'open competitions', etc.

My experience of the Taiwanese countryside tells me that rural people do not operate along the premises enumerated above. They have a practical approach to politics and may not be too interested in political philosophies or platforms. Rather, when voting, they place importance on what material benefits a candidate for office can deliver. Often they expect their representatives to talk, look, and dress like them. Rural residents want and expect to cultivate personalistic relationships based on ideas of obligation, reciprocity and gratitude with their political leaders.

---

Country folk are deferential to those with power and influence and expect their elected representatives to be powerful and influential, in order to get things done. Rural folk expect to be able to treat their political representatives as a sort of 'one-stop shop'. They expect their politicians to mediate in marital and neighbourhood disputes. They look to them for help in getting their children into good schools. They ask them for loans and other financial help to get by. They go to them whenever they have a traffic violation or an accident, hoping they will use their influence to resolve the case in their favour. They are intimidated when dealing with organs of the state such as the courts, public hospitals, etc., and will ask for their elected official's help in dealing with them. In short, rural residents want a politician who acts like a patron. Chapter six will deal with this in more detail.

It is not an exaggeration to say that many urban residents in Taipei, and to a lesser extent the other cities, do not understand the countryside. Unsurprisingly, the Taipei-based elite understands rural realities even less. Many people who live and work in Taipei have no meaningful contact with people in the country. The country's terrestrial and cable TV networks, print media, culture industries, all base their headquarters in the capital and consequently, adopt and disseminate a Taipei-centric view on news and events.

For many, the rural south is a foreign country to which they go back to for a week or two during Chinese New Year and other holidays, assuming they have relatives there. Informants claim to glean what little they know of rural ways from popular afternoon Taiwanese language soap operas (see Photos 13 and 14) like *Blood is Thicker than Water* (*Qinqia mai gegao*),<sup>151</sup> or *Uncle Niaolai and thirteen Aunts* (*Jiaolaibe ga capsai yi*).<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> 親戚不計較.

<sup>152</sup> 鳥來伯與十三姨.



Photo 13: Blood is Thicker than Water

Source: <http://www.ftvet.com.tw/Drama/Relative/Relative.htm>



Photo 14: Uncle Niaolai and Thirteen Aunts

Source: <http://www.settv.com.tw/taiwan/twd010/download.htm>

---

One can make the argument that the list of typical qualities of the 'irresponsible' voter-irrational and emotional, easily swayed by personalities, unsophisticated and unaware of his rights and duties as a 'citizen', - these form part of a catalogue of stereotypes that urban, middle-class people have of people who live in the countryside. In a similar vein, the anti-'gangster' narrative could be viewed as a thinly disguised description of the local/rural politician. It is not a coincidence that so-called 'rural' politicians, for whom it is not unusual to have spent time in jail, who enjoy grassroots support, tend to be concentrated in the nation's rural areas. In this sense, narratives of corruption and the 'gangster' are really aimed at the rural south.

---

## Conclusion

This chapter talked about the print media and the film industry. It argued that the media was largely silent regarding the matter of corruption until 1991. However, by the time of my fieldwork in 2002, stories of corruption had become commonplace in the papers. In addition, 'gangster' films likewise reflected the recent developments experienced by the realms of the academe and media. The film *Story of a Gangster* released in 1989 portrayed the 'gangster' as a romantic, principled, but ultimately flawed character. The later films *Island of Greed* and *Born to be King*, released in 1997 and 2000, respectively, portrayed the 'gangster' as 'public enemy'. I have just presented material about political corruption and 'gangsters' from the media, and films in order show the changing nature of the narratives about them. I argue that these new stories create the conditions by which certain accepted beliefs and practices are 'criminalized' because they belong to a past age and are incompatible with a very particular notion of electoral democracy. Stories of political corruption seem to make certain practices 'thinkable as crimes'. In doing so, they help usher in new 'democratic' values such as citizenship, accountability, transparency, etc. They also serve as tools by which the political legitimacy of certain accused politicians are contested. The next chapter will describe one such individual, Legislator Yen Ching-piao, who is seen by many as a *heidao* par excellence. In the next chapter I will argue that far from being uni-dimensional villains, these rural 'gangsters' play complex, multifaceted roles in society.

---

## **Chapter Five:**

### ***The Man of Prowess***

Yen Ching-piao is a legislator who possesses a lot of power and influence (*shili*).

I heard the above statement several times within the first months of my stay in Taipei, the capital. I was going to do fieldwork in the neighbouring towns Shalu and Dajia, both in Taichung County. The towns Shalu and Dajia share a connection in the person of the politician Yen Ching-piao- the former place is his hometown and the latter is the site of *Jenlangong* Temple of which he is the chairman. I was curious what people in Taipei thought of the places where I was going to spend the next few years of my life. What struck me about the above statement was that the people saying it were describing a democratically elected politician using the phrase 'power and influence' (*shili*).

I gathered from people who uttered that statement that somehow the idea of an elected politician sat in an uneasy tension with the latter. 'Surely an elected politician will have "power and influence", because that is a consequence of public office', I remarked. Informants, however, were quick to make a distinction between legitimate power and informal influence. What they meant was that ideally politicians would derive their power from the 'authority' that comes with public office. However, certain politicians like Yen Ching-piao possessed power and influence of the illegitimate or illicit kind. And the fact that he now occupies public office does not necessarily legitimize his power, nor does it confer 'authority'.

Contemporary rural politics marks a considerable change from the past. Since Taiwan democratized in the 1980s, a certain class of powerful individuals who normally hail from the countryside, and who wield 'influence' in their places of origin, have gone on to participate in the political process and have captured political power- winning local, regional, even national legislative elections. These 'influential' individuals from the countryside play complex, multifaceted roles in the present, as they did in the past. From the start of nominal Qing rule in Taiwan, there has always been a class of rural elite whose power and legitimacy emanated from outside the state. The composition of this local elite varied and shifted according to the changing economic and political circumstances during any given period. However, unlike the present, the local elite more often than not chose not to occupy official government posts, although they often took on roles and dispensed services we now associate with the state.



---

This chapter argues that there exist two parallel forces- *quanli* (legitimate power) that originates from ‘authority’, and *shili* (informal power or influence). The tension between these two forces is really about contested notions regarding the legitimacy of power. *Quanli* and *shili* reflect an uneasy tension between contemporary notions of power derived from ‘authority’ and a much older tradition of power based on ‘influence’.

*Quanli* is that power that the office holder wields. It is legitimate and upright, as it originates from the *baidao* (upper world) or the authorities. *Quanli* necessarily derives from an association with the state and its institutions, making it by definition ‘legal’ and ‘legitimate’. It is the power that appears as a consequence of holding political office. The office holder derives his power from the state in whose name he acts. Consequently there is no question that his power is legitimate and that he has ‘authority’.

*Shili* is that power which originates outside of the state apparatus. The source of the power is independent of the state- it does not depend on having an association with the state and its institutions. The individual who wields it has status or position (*diwei*) and seeks to achieve ends outside of the usual channels of rules, laws and institutions that characterize the upper world. *Shili* is seen as illegitimate and illicit. It is thought by informants to manifest itself through coercive force and violence.

I argue that a paradox occurs when these two forces coexist and collide. Since the 1980s, a new class of individuals have used their power, resources and connections at the local level to initially gain local, and later on regional and even national political office. These individuals, popularly known as *heidao* (gangsters), possess *shili*. While in office individuals who have *shili* do not limit themselves to exercising power as ‘authority’, meaning they do not rely exclusively on the power that accrues from occupying an official position in order to govern. They also complement it with their ‘influence’, mobilizing informal channels and institutions whenever they deem fit. Thus, it is evident from this line of reasoning that the source of their power, *shili*, is illegitimate, as it originates outside the state apparatus.

I first suspected that *quanli* and *shili* were opposed forces when, while I was discussing the *heijin* (black gold) problem, an informant said ‘gangster influence in elections is a phenomenon wherein official authority is not exercised’ (*Zhege heidao shili jieru xuanju shi gongquanli bu zhang de xianxiang*). In this sentence *heidao* (gangster) functioned like an adjective which modified the noun *shili* (influence) and I figured it somehow is opposed to or

---

incompatible with *gongquanli* (official authority). I was able to work out this distinction between the two opposed forces in more detail, as a result of repeatedly hearing informants use the concept *shili* alongside the modifier *e* (evil) as in *eshili* (dark, evil influence). Also, I repeatedly heard urban informants refer to rich and powerful businessmen and people such as Legislator Yen of having money and power (*youqian youshi*), a phrase that suggests that the two are interrelated. I also often heard of politicians people regard as corrupt as having dark influence (*you eshili*). I have never encountered an occasion when *quanli* was used to describe rich businessmen or 'corrupt' politicians. I do not wish to say that *shili* can never be good or neutral. I am merely looking here at a particular instance of a distinction in Taiwanese society between formal power/authority and informal power.

### **Complex, multi-faceted roles**

I will now talk about hitherto unexplored aspects of the public person that is Legislator Yen Ching-piao. I believe that his story constitutes evidence for my assertion that there are individuals in the periphery with alternative sources of power and legitimacy to the state. Furthermore, the state shapes the dominant mores and discourses about what constitutes 'legitimate' forms of power, but it cannot completely suppress nor control influential people in the peripheries, nor can it prevent rural folk from admiring them, or voting for them. I will challenge dominant interpretations of these individuals that exist in the media. I will also suggest an alternative way of viewing this handful of powerful yet 'dangerous' men from the countryside that traditional media reports tend to vilify.

Legislator Yen is reputed to be the 'kingpin' of central Taiwan due to his resources, influence and connections in that part of the country, added to the fact that he is now chairman of the country's most famous popular religion temple. Indeed, he was someone who the country's presidential candidates in sought to make deals with 2000, as well as in 2004, as his influence in central Taiwan was thought to be crucial in winning. When I asked him about his reputation, he did not deny that he was influential, but sought to attribute this to his record of public service, his status as the 'loyal servant' of the goddess Mazu and his plans for the future. He did not admit to possessing any sort of power other than the public recognition of his public service. He also denied having made any 'backroom deals' with anybody. His response was as follows:

---

I have been helping people from all walks of life as legislator. I have helped people, notwithstanding their party affiliation, be it KMT or DPP. I am a man with a lot of ideals and aspirations (*hen lixiang, hen baofu de ren*). I can speak on behalf of everyone here as I am an Independent Solidarity Union Party member. The KMT and DPP cannot resolve the deadlock over the proposed arms purchase because they, unlike my party, do not have projects (*meiyou baofu*). The current monthly retirement pension is NT\$ 6,000, I want to raise it to NT\$ 7,500. Taichung County has a lot of different councillors and legislators. I, together with them, can work together to improve things in Taichung, like construction. In order to encourage tourism, I would like to set up a tourist information centre in the Taichung area and at the Taichung airport. That way Dajia and Shalu will prosper. I want to improve transportation facilities around the new Science Park and Taichung Harbour, that way, Houli, Dajia and Fengyuan will benefit economically. These are all Taichung County's most pressing construction projects. Under my leadership, a lot more temples have participated in the annual Xingang pilgrimage, they all want Mazu to visit their temples along the route. I am committed to serve Mazu 100%. Because Mazu has confidence in me, her believers also have confidence in me.

In the introductory chapter I included his biography, wherein he was convicted and went to prison for being a 'hoodlum' under the country's then martial law regime in 1984. He briefly went back into jail in 2001 for vote buying, bribery and other offences until he ran and won the legislative elections in that same year while *in prison*. I will argue that he belongs to the new class of locally influential individuals from the countryside whose source of 'influence' is partly independent of and outside the state. That his political career has culminated in the national legislature is a reflection of one fact- that he has 'influence'. And lastly, he plays complex multifaceted roles in contemporary politics.

Legislator Yen is without doubt a household name on the island with an instantly recognizable face and physique. His appearance is distinctive and unmistakable. For me it took on cartoon-like properties due to its ubiquity in the national media. 'Piao the Stone Pumpkin' (*dongguapiao*), that's how people affectionately call him, in obvious reference to his round chubby face set on a short, squat and obese body. In the course of my three years of field research I would stare at his 'pumpkin-like' visage several times on TV news broadcasts, and in various national newspaper and magazine articles.

His public persona notwithstanding, relatively few people outside the two towns of Shalu and Dajia, and perhaps the halls of the national legislature in Taipei have actually seen him in person. Legislator Yen is undeniably, a media phenomenon of considerable impact in Taiwan. Most Taiwanese have only ever experienced him through the print and broadcast media, their

---

opinions of him shaped by opinion makers and commentators who are almost always based in the capital, Taipei.

This point is important, especially as this chapter is about the multi-faceted nature of the Taiwanese strongman. The nation's print and broadcast media tend to reduce the complex roles these individuals play in public life, reducing them to being mere criminals who strive to occupy public office with the intention of 'bleaching' (*piaoba*) their unsavoury pasts. Several news articles about this sort of political entrepreneur that I have read explicitly disapprove of this contemporary phenomenon of political life. Several editorial pieces about them have lamented the 'fact' that democracy in the island is precarious. The fact that these characters continue to exist is a symptom of this precariousness. Rural politicians are really Southeast asian 'men of prowess'.

The following is a brief outline of the different facets and roles of the 'man of prowess':

- He is both bandit and hero
- He is an informal broker and kingmaker
- He is a mobilizer of masses and a giver of feasts
- He is a fixer and mediator

## **Bandit and hero**

The first time I heard his name mentioned was in a bohemian bar in downtown Taipei frequented by locals and foreign residents alike. Although I had arrived in the capital only a couple of months earlier I was already getting impatient with it. I was itching to get started on my research- the very reason I had come to Taiwan in the first place. I was looking forward to swapping life in the island's bustling metropolis for a small non-descript town in central Taiwan. That town was Dajia, a 20-minute ride from Taichung city, and whose major claim to fame was largely due to its being the birthplace of Dajia's renowned buttered cakes (*naiyoushubing*), taro cupcakes (*yutoushu*), and yes, the immensely wealthy, high profile Dajia *Jenlangong* Mazu Temple.

'So you're here to do research, what on?' two male Taipei urbanites I had just met in a hip bar started asking me over a game of pool. 'What, you're going to study the Dajia Mazu Temple!' the two exclaimed, 'It's full of gangsters!' Unsure whether I had misunderstood them, I pressed them for more details. 'The chairman of that temple is a legislator (*liwei*) and formerly

---

a *heidao*. He entered politics in order to get immunity from the law'. They quoted a saying that aptly describes this particular phenomenon: 'If you win the election you're fine, if you lose you go to jail' (*dangxuan meishi, luoxuan beiguan*) 'Hang on', I objected, 'there must be a mistake, what's his name?'

That was the first time I heard his name. Needless to say, in the three years I eventually ended up spending in Taiwan, I was to hear it again and again from several informants. Most urban informants would mention that name with disgust, and disapproval. It is thus important to point out at this stage, that dominant media representations of Legislator Yen have as their most receptive audience, highly educated, urbanite residents of the country's major cities. As I explained in chapter four, they largely agree with the views disseminated by the media about him and people like him because they share the same basic assumption as the journalists and editors who are responsible for them. That is, they largely subscribe to a concept of democracy and politics that I discussed in chapter four.

However, rural attitudes toward him are very different. In chapter six I show that people in the countryside want and expect their elected representatives to behave like patrons and benefactors. They do not care as much about a politician's values and political philosophy and do not expect them to be saints. They judge them chiefly on how 'effective' they are as patrons and expect to have personalistic ties with them. Furthermore, they want somebody who can relate to ordinary folk. In this respect, Legislator Yen Ching-piao plays the part of patron and benefactor extremely effectively and is seen by the majority of his constituents as something akin to a 'hero', 'protector' and 'avenger'. In short Legislator Yen plays a complex role in the nation's popular imagination. Whereas in Taipei people like him are considered to be bandits, in the country and especially in each of these 'influential' local leaders' hometowns, they are seen as heroes, protectors, and avengers.

### **Informal broker and kingmaker**

As the nation's pre-eminent popular religion temple, and organizer of one of Taiwan's most famous yearly pilgrimages, *Jenlangong* Temple, has long been courted by politicians who sought the temple's favours. Presidential candidates routinely stage high-profile visits to the temple in an attempt to win the sympathy of the masses. As one of the most powerful county council speakers and chairman of one of Taiwan's richest and largest religious organizations in 2000, then Taichung County Council Speaker Yen Ching-piao's influence could not be

---

underestimated. His support was courted by all four presidential candidates in the 2000 elections, particularly, Chen Shui-bian of the DPP, Lien Chan of the KMT, and James Soong, formerly of the KMT, but who broke away to form a new party, the PFP, to contest the 2000 presidential elections.

Yen was a good friend of James Soong because the latter had visited his constituency more than 200 times and provided ample funds for local infrastructure projects for Yen's hometown during Soong's tenure as Taiwan Provincial Governor. But he was unsure who he would support. He knew that if he threw his lot in with a losing candidate he could eventually be prosecuted and singled out by the winning party. He declared that he 'needs to ask Mazu for magic'. He subsequently openly expressed support for the independent candidate barely three days before the presidential election in March 2000. 'Mazu spoke to me and told me to support him' Yen said. He was expelled from the KMT soon after, in April 2000. Notwithstanding Yen Ching-piao's support of James Soong's PFP party, the DPP won the 2000 presidential election, ending fifty years of KMT rule on the island.

The DPP party had, while it was in the opposition during the waning days of the island's dictatorial regime, repeatedly denounced all sorts of political corruption (*heijin*). Its objective in the early 1990s was to associate the then ruling KMT party with corruption. This strategy worked and the DPP gradually increased its share of votes until it finally captured power in 2000. During the 2000 presidential election, the DPP tried to expose the *heijin* (black gold) connections of personalities such as Legislator Yen Ching-piao as well as Yunlin County heavyweight Chang Rong-wei while aspirant Chen Shui-bian indirectly courted the support of the former. Legislator Yen has long been accused by the DPP of political corruption (*heijin*) and it is not a coincidence that he was convicted and jailed for bribery and vote buying in early 2001. This happened barely a year after he 'bet on the wrong horse' in the 2000 elections and the DPP assumed power.

His political comeback came when he won a legislative seat while campaigning behind bars in 2001. The most evident public manifestation of his political comeback and transformation into a respectable politician occurred during the annual Dajia Mazu pilgrimage to Xingang, in Chiayi County, held in April 2003. There, at the pilgrimage's climax, on April 9, 2003, President Chen Shui-bian and Vice-President Annette Lu made an unprecedented appearance, sharing the stage with Mr. Yen at the prayer ceremony. Chen offered his prayers and shook hands with him, triggering speculation that the president sought to court support

---

from the controversial lawmaker and temple president for the upcoming 2004 presidential elections.

The 2004 presidential elections were full of speculation. My informants wondered aloud who Yen would throw his lot in with this time. 'Which way will the divining blocks go this time around?' was a question frequently asked in Dajia. Even Chen Shui-bian visited *Jenlangong* Temple during the campaign period. He seemed to ignore his own pronouncements on 'black gold' and his previous denunciation of the legislator by seeking Mr. Yen's support. Mr. Yen, unsurprisingly, declined to declare his support for anyone this year. His mother had died shortly before Election Day, so he used the 40-day mourning period to ask for privacy and kept quiet over his favoured candidate. The DPP eventually won in a narrow and very contested victory, which the KMT has, to this moment refused to recognize.

Despite Legislator Yen's denial that his 'influence' stems from sources other than his 'good works and public service', I think the important point here is that he is a broker and kingmaker in central Taiwan of such magnitude that all main political parties yearn for his endorsement in national elections. This undeniable fact has given way to the irony that the ruling DPP has solicited his support in two successive presidential elections, 2000 and 2004, at the same time as it denounced the phenomenon of 'black gold' politics in Taiwan of which Legislator Yen is accused of being one of its principal practitioners. This is another way of saying he plays complex and multifaceted roles in politics.

### **Mobilizer of masses and giver of feasts**

Yen Ching-piao's mother died shortly before the presidential elections in March 2004. She had suffered a debilitating stroke several years ago and she had been bedridden ever since. She was 68 and left four sons, of which Mr. Yen was the eldest. He is reputed to be a very filial (*xiaoxun*) son and visited his mother at hospital every day. The day of the funeral (*sangli*) on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004 was memorable, because a lot of Taiwan's most prominent personalities were in attendance. The press named it a 'gathering of black and white'.

Not only were a lot of Taiwan's most prominent politicians and businessmen in attendance, they were joined by a cross-section of Taiwanese society. More than 10,000 people filled the Shalu sports stadium where it was being held and over a hundred procession brigades (*zhentou*), manned by relatives and supporters of Mr. Yen, snaked more than ten kilometres

---

around the stadium. Legislative Speaker and KMT Vice-Chairman Wang Jing-pyng officiated, James Soong of the PFP, Minister of Transport Chang Lin-ling, as well as several legislators from all political parties, were present. President Chen Shui-bian did not go, but had an embroidered silk mourning banner bearing his name, sent to the funeral. Members of four international charitable organizations, as well as Taiwan's so-called four major gang organizations, including the United Bamboo Society (*Zhulianbang*) and the Four Seas (*Sihaibang*), had also sent several hundred representatives. Outside, there were estimated to be more than 130 black Mercedes cars.<sup>153</sup>

In another event, on Saturday January 21, 2006 Legislator Yen Ching-piao hosted a lavish feast for his son's wedding in Shalu (see Photo 15). His 17-year-old son was marrying his heavily pregnant girlfriend. The event broke two records; one for the total number of guests attending, the other for the total amount of 'gate' receipts, or cash gifts inside a red envelope given by the guests for the couple. While President Chen Shui-bian was busy with the Cabinet reshuffle over the weekend and did not attend, top politicians from the opposition pan-blue camp attended the wedding in the legislator's stronghold of Shalu, Taichung County.

Former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Chairman Lien Chan praised the extravagant wedding as setting a new Guinness World Record. The pan-blue camp's other leaders, KMT Chairman and Mayor of Taipei Ma Ying-jiu, People First Party (PFP) Chairman James Soong and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng as well as dozens of lawmakers representing all of Taiwan's political parties and other luminaries and VIPs were all sat at the VIP tables. The Yen family invited more than 19,000 guests, filling at least 1,900 banquet tables, with ten guests sat per table. They received more than NT\$30 million (US\$940,000) in cash gifts. The double record of biggest wedding party in Taiwan and highest amount of 'gate receipts' used to be held by a former DPP lawmaker Hsu Chih-ming, with guests occupying 1,688 tables and donating NT\$ 20 million.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> See "Gangsters and the authorities gather together at Yen Ching-piao mum's funeral". *United Daily News*. April 14, 2004. p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> See "Editorial: Still wedded to black gold". *Taipei Times*. January 24, 2006. p. 8.





**Photo 15: Yen Ching-piao's son's record breaking wedding celebration**

**Source:** [www.taipeitimes.com/.../2006/01/22/2005048702](http://www.taipeitimes.com/.../2006/01/22/2005048702)

Urban informants were very cynical regarding his ability to gather both the 'upper world' and the 'underworld' together for his mother's funeral. They made the following comment:

Both 'black' and 'white' want to curry favour with him (*heibai liang dao dou yao mai ta de zhang*). He is formidable (*hen lihai*) and nobody dares to displease (*dezui*) him.

Why did you go to Legislator Yen's funeral service for his mother, I asked my rural informants sometime after the event. Most people replied using the language of community solidarity with one of their own. They talked about Legislator Yen as the filial son, 'before his mother died, he would visit his mother every day and talk to her everyday.' They described him as a very likeable man, 'he is very good with people. He is very personable.' Whenever I brought up the issue of Legislator Yen's controversial background and murky past, people did not see it as important. They understand that people need to do what they have to do in order to succeed. When they are rich they can give something back to the community. An informant puts it this way:

---

People laugh at a poor man, but they don't laugh at a rich and immoral one (*xiaopin bu xiaozhang*). Whatever he may or may not have done in the past is water under the bridge now. What matters is that he is a powerful man who now does good things for the community.

I think the two quotes made by urban and rural informants, respectively, point out once more the duality or even multiplicity of roles that individuals like Legislator Yen plays. He is much liked and admired in his hometown, but that does not negate the fact that he can also be someone you do not 'mess with'. Legislator Yen's power to convoke and assemble people from opposite ends of the moral spectrum evokes complex and wildly divergent reactions. Urban people are cynical that so-called 'upright' politicians and other symbols of authority take a morally superior ground when they denounce 'gangster' involvement in politics yet see no problem in attending a gathering where the very elements they denounce are present. On the other hand rural informants do not see any contradiction in attending the funeral and refrain from taking a moralizing stance on the matter. For them, the gathering of 'black' and 'white' is simply further proof that Mr. Yen is powerful. He plays complex and contested roles in society.

## Fixer and mediator

I shall now talk about an episode that seems to suggest that Legislator Yen possesses *shili* (power/influence) of the kind that bypasses official channels and institutions. *Jenlangong* Temple Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen was kidnapped (see Photo 16) on the night of June 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 in Dajia. That night, he disappeared while on his way to see friends on his scooter. Apparently, three suspects were following Mr. Jen as he was riding his scooter around Dajia, and at around 10pm forced him to get into their car and drove off somewhere in Southern Taiwan. His wife, after receiving a phone call from the alleged kidnappers, hurriedly got in touch with Yen Ching-piao, who immediately used all his connections to help find his close friend. Mr. Jen was released eleven days later. His family was rumoured to have paid NT\$ 100,000,000 in ransom to secure his release.<sup>155</sup> In addition, Legislator Yen was rumoured to have mobilized resources at his disposal, both the upper world and underworld (*dongyuan heibaidao*), to negotiate his release and try to reduce the amount of ransom demanded by the kidnappers. In effect, he bypassed the police in his attempt to find the kidnappers on his own. I asked urban residents what they thought of the matter and they felt that the incident was scary (*hen kepa*) and lamented the fact that the 'authority of the police and the law was not

---

<sup>155</sup> See "Yen Ching-piao mobilizes upper world and underworld". *United Daily News*. June 12, 2005. p. A3.

exercised (*gongquanli bu zhang*), which makes us feel powerless (*wuli*).’ I elicited reactions from rural informants regarding Legislator Yen’s role in the kidnapping case. Rural people I spoke to saw Legislator Yen’s actions as righteous (*hen zhengyi*) and loyal (*man yiqi*). The data here have led me to a couple of observations. The first is that in times of crisis or emergency people look to influential and powerful individuals for help, and not necessarily to the authorities, who in this incident proved powerless to help. The second is that people saw nothing wrong with one man doing whatever he can to help his friend, even if that meant resorting to informal channels. What matters is efficacy. Thus Legislator Yen’s demonstrated ability to use his ‘influence’, bypassing official channels and institutions to achieve his desired ends evokes similarly complex and divergent opinions from people. For urban people his use of ‘influence’ is an indication of the inefficacy of official institutions to resolve problems. His influence coexists with and even counterbalances the power of the state- something highly undesirable. While for rural people it merely reinforces the fact that in times of emergency it is ultimately powerful patrons who people should look to for help, not governments or institutions. The former ‘get things done’, the latter are incompetent.



Photo 16: Jen Ming-kuen describing his eleven-day kidnapping ordeal to reporters outside his Dajia residence. Below are the photos of the kidnappers. Source: *Apple Daily*. 2005.6.20. p. A1.

---

## The *jiaotou* was an informal leader

The act of naming someone as having ‘influence’ can be construed as a language used by the state or its agents to stigmatize that person. Stating that the origin of their power came from outside officially approved channels has the effect of making it illegitimate. In short, to say certain people have ‘influence’ implies it is ‘dark influence’ (*eshili*) and that they are ‘corrupt’. It is my belief that the dominant narratives of corruption that conflate these ‘influential’ individuals with ‘criminals’ are simplistic and obscure the larger picture. I have shown that these ‘influential’ individuals play complex, multifaceted roles in the present, as they did in the past.

The tension between ‘influence’ and ‘authority’ really reflect a situation wherein dominant notions of power derived from ‘authority’ conflict with a much older tradition of power based on ‘influence’. This older tradition of power dates back hundreds of years to a time when the Qing dynasty administration exercised very little power to effectively govern the island and had to rely on locally powerful individuals for support. I discussed the historical evolution of local political organization and the *jiaotou* (big man) in Taiwan in the introductory chapter.

The point I am making here is that from the start of nominal Qing rule in Taiwan, there has always been a class of local elite whose power and legitimacy emanated from outside the state. The composition of this local elite varied and shifted according to the changing economic and political circumstances during any given period. Contemporary local politics, especially since the 1980s marks a slight change from the past. In the past the local elite often did not actively take on official roles in government. Recently, a new class of individuals have used their power, resources and connections at the local level to initially gain local, and later on regional and even national political office.

The term for a local leader in the informal sense is *jiaotou*. I came across the term when I asked people in Shalu and Dajia who the most powerful men in the two towns were, expecting them to reply that it was the local mayor or the legislator, or even a local industrialist or entrepreneur. The answer was that, for Shalu, it was Legislator Yen Ching-piao, and for Dajia, it was Jen Ming-kuen, vice-chairman of the famous *Jenlangong* Temple. The first reply was not surprising, but the second was unexpected. I quizzed my informants as to how a local Dajia resident who did not occupy public office and did not own a prominent factory or business could be the town’s most powerful individual.

---

People simply shrugged their shoulders and said that he was more powerful than even the mayor or the local legislator. Though he calls himself a businessman, informants remarked that he is extremely wealthy and owns and operates a string of local motels, karaoke bars, and video arcades in town. He is rumoured to wield a lot of power behind the scenes and is not someone you would want as an enemy. I discovered another thing. Although Legislator Yen is the most powerful man in Shalu, his power does not originate from his having a seat in the national Legislative Yuan. 'Yen Ching-piao has been the most powerful man here for a long time. He only won the legislative seat for the first time in 2001, and before that he held a variety of lesser elective posts. But for a long time, when you wanted to get things done around here, he was the man to talk to', one informant told me in confidence.

They were referred to as *jiaotou* (big man). Moreover, I learned that the term had slightly negative connotations. I worked this out when I discovered that although people would openly call these two individuals *jiaotou*, they would never dare to address them that way in person. When people spoke to them face-to-face they would address them by their formal titles 'Legislator Yen (*Yen liwei*) and 'Vice-Chairman Jen' (*Jen fudongshizhang*). A journalist describes it to me this way:

*Jiaotou* is the head of the most basic unit, but larger in scope than the head of the household (*jiazhang*) in each Taiwanese village, hamlet, district, etc. A *jiaotou* could be a rich businessman, or a guy with an extensive network of relationships whose resources he can mobilize. He is also one who can persuade wealthy people to give donations or contribute financially in community undertakings. They were traditionally very important in village life, where they were called upon to handle or deal with all manner of things. In modern society the term has acquired negative connotations. We have *liumang* (petty criminals) while *jiaotou* (T: *kaktau* /big man) and *heidao* are organized criminals. *Jiaotou* is now seen as virtually identical in meaning as *heidao*.

Prominent, locally influential individuals from the countryside have long wielded autonomous sources of power. They were sometimes independent of the state, and at other times even cooperated with the state and assumed state functions. These individuals have existed for centuries in Taiwan and continue to exist to this day, a time when the state's power is at its zenith, and does not, in theory, need to rely on powerfully individuals outside the state in order to govern. Since the country's political transition many of these individuals have entered the political arena. My data on Shalu and Dajia have led me to make two important observations. First, the most powerful man in the countryside is often, but not always, also the locality's highest elected official. Second, money, resources, influence and connections are crucial to

---

capturing public office. This leads to the following corollary; the fact that a man occupies one of the locality's highest elected posts is a reflection of the fact that he is powerful.

However, in the present the term for the traditional informal leader (*jiaotou*) is now normally conflated with the term *heidao* (gangster). There have been numerous instances when my informants, be they the urban or rural members of the local intelligentsia and traditional rural elite, said derogatory things about Legislator Yen and other rural politicians. It is my belief that this may represent an attempt by the nation's political elite located in the capital, as well as intellectuals in both the cities and rural areas, to denigrate and delegitimize the new class of politicians that have appeared in the countryside.

In chapter four I argued that the scholarly literature on Taiwanese politics from the mid 1990s, much like the corpus of earlier work on the same topic, saw it as 'unconsolidated' and 'backward'. However, whereas the earlier research attributed the island's 'unconsolidated' and 'backward' democracy to informal forces such as factionalism, the later research saw new informal institutions such as 'mafias', 'gangsters', and 'black gold (*heijin*) political corruption' as the prime culprit behind the country's underdeveloped political institutions. The received wisdom seems to be that 'gangsters' took advantage of Taiwan's nascent democratization by running for political office, especially in the countryside, and even in the national legislature. They did it to protect their ill-gotten gains and to secure for themselves immunity from prosecution. In the process they have undermined the nation's democratic institutions.

Interestingly, a corpus of research conducted recently in neighbouring Southeast Asia that I mentioned in the introductory chapter has examined the political evolution of countries such as the Philippines and Thailand since their respective transitions from dictatorship to democracy. This body of research has reached strikingly similar conclusions to the case of Taiwan. Trocki calls these states 'gangster democracies', wherein 'the emergence of gangsters, gang violence, and corruption' are characteristic of 'democratic political life' (Trocki 1998: 11). Thus, regional strongmen like the Philippine *boss* (Sidel 1999) and the Thai *chaopo*, or godfather (Ockey 1998), are said to dominate local politics in their respective countries. They have achieved power through the electoral process, and enjoy recognition from the central government, and would by most measures be considered politicians. They are not however, ordinary politicians. These local political leaders are 'not the most admirable of individuals'. They are men of violence, murderers, 'gangsters', etc. He considers their nature to be of the following:

---

They have their hands in most forms of large-scale crime, but these are gangsters of a special kind. They are involved in drugs, prostitution, gambling, and extortion. Political 'corruption' is fundamental to their way of life. They prosper with the collaboration of other public servants... They maintain active and intimate relations with the underworld. In short, they are gangsters, thugs, and members of what Americans would class as organized crime (Trocki 1998: 10).

However, these are no ordinary criminals. There is an element of truth in viewing them as a class of outlaws whom the 'lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice... men to be admired, helped and supported' (Hobsbawm 1981).<sup>156</sup> It may be a stretch to claim, as Hobsbawm does, that they are 'social bandits' and 'noble robbers'. However, the words and actions of these 'social bandits' indeed reflect the morality of that community. In many respects they do not contravene local values. This idea strongly implies an ideological conflict between the local community and wider community. In chapter six I describe local attitudes and values, particularly those to do with politics and politicians. In it I will talk about how voters in Shalu view Legislator Yen Ching-piao as a hero, a champion, and avenger. The Taiwanese state may call him a *heidao*, but in his hometown he is seen in a very different light.

Nevertheless, recent literature reconsidering the role of 'bandits' in countries such as China, the Mediterranean, and Latin America as well as Southeast Asia invites readers to see them as playing 'multifaceted roles in state formation, class conflict and popular culture' (Sidel 2000: 153).<sup>157</sup> We must not limit ourselves to studying only the peasants and the bandits in isolation. We must also take into account the relationship of the peasant community to higher levels of society around it. Bandits are 'social' in that they had strong ties to their local community, often, ties bound by loyalty and duty, resulting in mutual benefit. But these ties do not end here; they extend upwards, to include the agents and organs of the state. They are only too well aware that their long-term survival entails forging some sort of relationship or understanding and accommodation and cooperation with the nation's elite. These 'gangsters' play complex, multifaceted roles in class conflict and state formation as they have tried to maintain their control over local manpower and other resources and to mediate, to their own profit, new instruments of power emanating from the centre.

---

<sup>156</sup> Hobsbawm, E. 1981. *Bandits*. New York: Pantheon Books.

<sup>157</sup> Sidel, J. 2000. "Filipino Gangsters in Film, Legend, and History: Two Biographical Case Studies from Cebu". In Alfred M. McCoy (ed.) *Lives at the Margin: biography of Filipinos, obscure, ordinary and heroic*. Pp. 149-191. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.



---

Thus, following in this revisionist vein, I will argue that the Taiwanese ‘gangster’ turned politician also plays equally complex roles in society, and hence, is much more than simply a reformed criminal. I discussed Legislator Yen’s life in the introductory chapter, where I have mentioned his past, including his involvement in various illegal and semi-legal activities, his criminal convictions and his subsequent political career. I have also looked at other, equally important elements in his biography. I have done this in order to make my argument that he is much more than just a ‘gangster’ turned politician.

He is seen as a ‘hero’ and ‘avenger’ in his hometown. But he also has strong links, sometimes of the unofficial sort, to the agents and organs of the state. The latter have, on occasion, turned to him for help, relying on his extra-official ‘influence’, in order to achieve things and reach places that official channels are not capable of achieving or reaching. Nevertheless he is also aware that his long-term survival involves forging some sort of relationship or understanding and accommodation and cooperation with the nation’s elite although the latter frequently denounce him and his ‘ilk’ in the media. Finally *heidao* play complex, multifaceted roles in contemporary political life as they have tried to consolidate their control over their local strongholds and to mediate, to their own profit, opportunities emanating from the centre.

Thus ‘gangsters’, and stories about them, such as how they came to be, or what insidious things they do, are cultural inventions intended for the educational and didactic purpose of instructing the public on the mores and behaviours appropriate for citizens and politicians that belong to a modern ‘westernizing’ democracy. Media stories of Legislator Yen and people like him constitute the next logical step of cultural invention by personalizing the generic gangster, giving him a particular name, face, place of origin and professional career. People are fascinated by Legislator Yen. Notwithstanding that fascination, urban residents largely held the view disseminated by the country’s Taipei-centric broadcast and print media, that he was just another example of a ‘gangster’ turned politician. Legislator Yen, though a real-life ‘flesh and blood’ individual, existed for most people, only as a cultural invention, a uni-dimensional cardboard cut out character, interchangeable with other specimens of the same genus.



---

Crissman (1981: 107),<sup>158</sup> in a seminal study on local politics I mentioned in the introductory chapter, described the leaders of political factions in Taiwan as ‘Melanesian “big men” who, in the absence of corporate hierarchies, hold sway over others by virtue of the force of their personalities, their control of resources, and their ability to dispense favours’. An aspiring big man, to succeed in local factional politics in Taiwan, must have money and invest it in making generous contributions to temples and to charities, and in other politically relevant ways. I am trying to build on the early work done by Gallin, Crissman and Thompson, by making the point that whereas the phenomenon of the big man in Taiwan is very old. What is new is that democratic politics has allowed the big man to transform himself into a politician. In some cases, exceptionally powerful big men like Yen Ching-piao to even become national politicians.

## **The big man in Southeast Asia**

The introductory chapter talked about the utility of locating contemporary Thai politics within the broader context of the political history and traditional political culture of Southeast Asia. I shall now briefly summarize it and will juxtapose the figures of the Thai and Taiwanese rural strongman within their respective historical contexts. Southeast Asian political history has long been characterized by the shifting dynamics of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies wherein successive monarchies and colonial administrators have, with limited success attempted to assert the primacy of central state structures in the region.

In contemporary Thailand, provincial ‘criminals’ have become possible, even indispensable in government, due to the uneven pace of change between the centre and periphery with regards to the culture, economy and class structure. Though their rise to national prominence has begun with the advent of democratic rule in Thailand, throughout history, dubious figures have always existed, at the periphery of the Siamese kingdom in an established pattern of collaboration with administrators, exerting control and collecting taxes. Under military rule, especially at the height of the cold war, government counterinsurgency measures frequently tapped the power of these figures in its fight against communist rebels. While the authorities may view him as a criminal, local voters see in him a natural choice to represent their interests in Bangkok. Offers to buy their votes are not seen as corrupt; rather it is a sign that the individual is very generous (Ockey 2000: 81).

---

<sup>158</sup> Crissman, L. 1981. “The Structure of Local and Regional Systems”. In Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (eds.) *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Pp.89-124. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

---

An illustrative case would be the story of the infamous Thai ‘godfather’, Sia Yae (Somchai Rerkvararak) born in 1936 in the central paddy-growing area of Angthong, Thailand. An elementary-school dropout, he repaired bicycles for a living in his early days. He made his fortune by opening his gambling den in the mid 1950s. The income from vice enabled him to build a fortune and he was able to diversify into trading in construction materials, timber, and contracting civil works projects. He cultivated contacts and relationships with low and high-ranking government officials and police and even sponsored local politicians. He became the chief financial backer of candidates in Angthong and managed to become the secretary general of the Chart Thai Party.

He had created a lot of enemies on his way to the top and had survived at least two attempts on his life. However, his luck ran out in 1989 when he was killed on the front steps of a provincial court building by a modified claymore mine detonated by remote control. His funeral was a star-studded affair, and the mourners included prominent citizens, members of parliament, and cabinet ministers. Then Prime Minister, Chatchai Chunhawan, was also originally scheduled to preside, but had sent his brother-in-law, the Minister of the Interior to preside in his stead, alleging a previous engagement (Phongpaichit & Piriyaarangsarn 1996: 73).<sup>159</sup>

Cross-cultural comparisons between Taiwan and Thailand are instructive because the Thai case can help shed new light on the phenomenon of the ‘gangster’ politician on the island. In both countries, state structures and their power to govern and exercise control over the country have historically ebbed and flowed. There were periods in history when the state was strong and there were other periods when the state was weak. In both countries locally powerful and influential individuals, usually in the periphery, far from Beijing or Bangkok, have long enjoyed status in the community and commanded a local following due to their abilities to mobilize men and resources. In both countries whenever the state was weak it relied on these individuals’ cooperation in order to execute basic state functions and provide services. Sometimes these individuals, the Taiwanese *jiaotou* (big man) and the Thai *nakleng* (village strongman) and *phuyai* (big man) were deputized as semi-official state agents- effectively ruling by proxy.

---

<sup>159</sup> Compare this with the funeral service held for the mother of legislator Yen Ching-piao. It was also a star-studded affair wherein prominent government officials rubbed shoulders with ‘mafia’ characters.

---

Contemporary Taiwan and Thailand now boast strong, centralizing state structures that have both the willingness and the means to impose their presence far from the traditional centres of power. In the last two decades these two countries have embarked on a path of political and economic reform. However, in both countries, the local ‘man of prowess’ has not gone away. He continues to exist, even thrive in the periphery, using his power and resources to win, initially, local political office, and gradually, regional and national office. Recently he has parlayed his power, influence and connections at the local level in order to gain a presence at the regional and national level.

The terms *ammat* in Thai, and *quanli* in Chinese mean ‘legitimate power’- that being derived from official authority. The Thai *itthiphon*, and the Chinese *shili*, on the other hand, mean influence, an informal kind of power. This is something that is now associated with impropriety and illegality, something a charismatic leader traditionally outside of the state apparatus possesses. High officials and bureaucrats possess *ammat*, and *quanli*- the power of authority, while *nakleng* (village strongman), *phuyai* (big man), *jiaotou* (big man) and *heidao* (gangster) at best have ‘influence’. This is illegitimate because the proper locus of power resides in the state alone. Indeed, in recent times the only adjective that ever occurs alongside, *itthiphon* is the term *muet*, which means ‘malign’ and ‘dark’, whereas *shili* is often preceded by the adjective *e*, meaning ‘dark’ and ‘evil’. Note that the term *heidao* literally translated, means the ‘dark path or way’, another indication of the illicit and illegitimate nature of the power they possess.

In both countries, scholarship and the information industry decry the participation of the ‘man of prowess’ in the democratic political process. In Southeast Asia this trend is called ‘gangster democracy’ while in Taiwan it is *heijin* (black gold politics). The Thai terms *nakleng* (village strongman) and *phuyai* (big man), along with the Chinese term *jiaotou* (big man), formerly terms that denoted a certain celebration of power, have given way to *chaopo* (godfather) and *heidao* (gangster), terms that connote power derived from illicit and illegal sources and behaviours.

---

## Conclusion

The tension between power (*quanli*), which originates from ‘authority’, and power (*shili*) that emanates from ‘influence’ is really about contested notions regarding the legitimacy of power. It is about a conflict between contemporary notions of power derived from ‘authority’ and a much older tradition of power based on ‘influence’. Power emanating from ‘authority’ necessarily derives from an association with the state and its institutions, making it by definition ‘legal’ and ‘legitimate’. It is the power that appears as a consequence of holding political office. Certain individuals outside the state apparatus wield a much older tradition of power emanating from ‘influence’. The source of their power is independent of the state- it does not depend on having an association with the state and its institutions. These individuals did not traditionally occupy public office. They exercised their power along extra-official or non-official channels and informal institutions.

A contradiction arises when these two worlds collide. Since Taiwan democratized in the late 1980s, a certain class of individuals who normally hail from the countryside, and who wield ‘influence’ in their places of origin, have gone on to participate in the political process and have captured political power- winning local, regional, even national legislative elections. The act of naming someone as having ‘influence’ can be construed as a language used by the state or its agents to stigmatize that person, by saying that the origin of their power came from outside officially approved channels and is thus illegitimate. In short, to say a person has ‘influence’ implies it is ‘dark influence’ (*eshili*) and that he is ‘corrupt’.

But this obscures the larger picture. These ‘influential’ individuals play complex, multifaceted roles in the present, as they did in the past. From the start of nominal Qing rule in Taiwan, there has always been a class of local elite whose power and legitimacy emanated from outside the state. The composition of this local elite varied and shifted according to the changing economic and political circumstances during any given period. Contemporary local politics, especially since the 1980s marks a slight change from the past. In the past the local elite did not actively take on official roles in government. Recently, a new class of individuals have used their power, resources and connections at the local level to initially gain local, and later on regional and even national political office.

---

Prominent, locally influential individuals from the country have long wielded autonomous sources of power. They were sometimes independent of the state, and at other times even cooperated with the state and assumed state functions. These individuals have existed for centuries in Taiwan and continue to exist to this day, a time when the state's power is at its zenith, and does not, in theory, need to rely on powerful individuals outside the state in order to govern. Since the country's political transition many of these individuals have entered the political arena. However, in the present the term for the traditional informal leader *jiaotou* is now normally conflated with *heidao*. It is my belief that this represents an attempt by the nation's political elite located in the capital, as well as intellectuals in both the cities and rural areas, to monopolize all claims to political legitimacy by denigrating and delegitimizing the new class of politicians that have appeared in the countryside.

This chapter has explained the reasons behind the existence of rural strongmen from a historical perspective. It also explored their complex and multifaceted nature. The next chapter will explore the rural strongman's appeal from the standpoint of ordinary rural folk. I shall try to address why they are hugely successful and why rural voters vote for them in large numbers. What is it that rural people want in a politician? Briefly, rural voters want a patron and expect their politicians to act like one. These rural strongmen fill a gap between rural interests and national politics. They address rural needs that national politicians either cannot or will not address.

---

## **Chapter Six:**

### ***The Rural Politician***

Southerners are very emotional and sympathetic. They vote for politicians who have criminal ties because they are able to portray themselves as the 'underdog' persecuted by the government.

Southerners vote for politicians with criminal ties because they are intimidated and bullied by them.

The above quotes come from urban Taiwanese who try to explain a persistent characteristic of rural political life- the presence of individuals occupying elected public office who happen to have past or current legal problems. People I spoke to in the cities very often uttered the above comments, or something similar, in an attempt to account for what they saw was an anomaly in the Taiwanese countryside. Nevertheless, there is an uneasy tension between the two quotes. The first attributes rural solidarity and support for 'criminal' politicians to their 'emotional' and 'sympathetic' nature. There is a hint of condescension here on the part of urban people, who think their rural counterparts are confused and misled by these individuals. However, this observation sits uneasily with the second one, which clearly imputes violence, coercion and threats as the motive force behind rural support for local politicians. But how can they be supportive of and show solidarity with politicians, while at the same time be intimidated and bullied by them?

It is my belief that this particular 'anomaly' of rural politics is largely an urban perception, a view shaped by the media, scholarship and culture industries that are all based in the capital Taipei. These purveyors of 'public opinion' tend to possess a highly westernized and modernising attitude and outlook on matters of public life. Voices in the media and scholarship tend to transmit a Taipei-centric worldview, insisting on viewing the reality in the rural south through the western-leaning prism of the metropolis. In their insistence that Taiwan be a modern, westernized country in all aspects that matter- political, social, economic, etc., many urban residents struggle to come to terms with this one crucial element of rural political life. They misread and misunderstand reality on the ground in the south.

---

This chapter is about rural expectations, particularly, what rural people want and expect from an elected politician. I have brought together a corpus of ethnographic data that I have collected; urban informants' views on their rural counterparts, rural people's own views, comments by the local politician turned Legislator Yen Ching-piao and his brother about rural Taiwan, and my own analysis and insights regarding the Taiwanese countryside. It is my belief that that by sampling widely, and from many sources, both from inside and outside the countryside, from talking to people from different backgrounds, I shall be able to provide a fuller and richer description of rural reality than if I had relied exclusively on my data from rural informants.

I realize that this approach runs the risk of falsely essentializing the rural resident by taking urban people's descriptions of their rural brethren at face value. I am aware of that danger. However, I believe this concern can be addressed by taking into account the fact that my urban informants views of rural attitudes are largely consistent with my own observations of rural behaviour. Furthermore, scholarship on rural Taiwan corroborates the views uttered by my urban informants. Anyway, below is a summary of rural residents' political views and attitudes:

- People expect their elected leaders to serve as benevolent patrons and benefactors, and expect to have personalistic ties with them.
- They have a strong preference for seeking informal channels and institutions when seeking to resolve a problem or dispute.
- They are quite tolerant and forgiving of their politician's past.
- They do not necessarily accept official narratives about corruption on the part of their politicians or the media.

The first point- that people expect their leader to act like a patron and benefactor is the most important of the four characteristics mentioned and even contains and subsumes all the other points. The condition of patron is the be all and end all of a rural politician's existence in the minds of voters. The second, third and fourth points are, in my view, logical extensions of the rationale of a system of rural patronage. The patron and benefactor's sphere of influence is necessarily strongest within the realm of informal channels and institutions. Indeed, if formal institutions could adequately address peoples' needs, there would not be such pressing need for 'patrons', 'bosses', 'fixers', 'go-betweens' and other such roles typical of rural politicians. The third and fourth points indicates the utter primacy of the condition of politician as patron, that other factors such as a politician's past, the provenance of his wealth and influence, his

---

political philosophy, accusations of corruption against him, all do not matter as long as he performs his primary duty adequately.

I will show that the rural 'riddle' can be solved, once we begin to appreciate rural life as rural people see it. Once we try to comprehend the practical demands of living in the country we can begin to grasp the values and attitudes that people have, specifically, what do they want from politics? And once we have accomplished that we can begin to understand why is it that they do what they do, and specifically, what do they look for in a politician?

I would like to qualify a few essential terms here. This chapter started with quotes from urban informants who talk about 'southerners'. It is my view that the 'south' and 'southerners', rather than being terms that denote a bounded reality that is spatially and geographically separate from and distinct to the 'north', are really terms for the backward 'other' in Taiwanese society. Taipei residents who are 'northerners' often use these two terms to refer to the great mass of people living to the south of Taipei who hold different values and attitudes to them.

I believe that for Taiwanese, the concepts 'north' and 'south' overlap to a large extent with 'city' and 'countryside'. Thus, 'northerner' implies certain characteristics we usually attribute to city dwellers such as 'rational', 'impersonal', 'efficient', 'focused on rules and principles', whereas 'southerner' implies characteristics thought to apply to country folk such as 'emotional', 'personalistic', 'unsophisticated', 'relative lack of concern for efficiency' and 'emphasis on personal relationships and community'. Just as the 'south' is really a term for the backward 'other' and not a place, it follows that the 'south' can be found in the 'north', and vice-versa. By this I mean that in the cities one can find many people who by attitude and outlook can be termed 'southerners', and in the country, to a lesser extent, it is possible to find individuals who share in the beliefs and values of so-called 'urbanites'.

By the same token, 'local', although nominally the binary opposite of 'national', is not necessarily identical in meaning to 'rural'. Received wisdom states that local politics is distinguishable from national politics in that, in the former, at least in theory, personalities, not issues, and local concerns, not national ones, predominate. This is certainly true of the countryside in Shalu, where I did my fieldwork. I maintain the point that urban residents will, generally, care more about their leaders political philosophies, moral integrity, principled aversion to corruption, level of education, lack of criminal record, etc, than rural people regarding their own leaders. They will be less deferential to their elected leaders than country



---

folk. However, this is not to say that many of the same forces that operate in the countryside do not apply as well in the cities. Candidates run for all sorts of local office, from mayor to borough warden, in cities, towns and villages all throughout Taiwan. Local elections in cities and towns will sometimes operate along the same lines as their rural counterparts that I am describing in this chapter.

This chapter is largely about rural political attitudes and values, but a lot of the characteristics of rural politics may also be shared in local elections in the urban areas. Thus, when educated Taipei, Taichung or Kaohsiung residents elect a city councillor, they will often look for a patron and benefactor who will promise to sort out practical issues and problems. In addition, everyone in Taiwan values personal relationships. Likewise, having a personal relationship with their political representatives will also be important to many urban residents. Lastly, many urban residents will also favour informal to informal institutions of dispute settlement.

Observe the following quote from an urban informant:

Southerners value personal relationships (*hen zhongshi renji guanxi*). Thus they won't care that their elected politicians are involved in illegal things. They are mistrustful of outsiders. What they do want is a fellow villager who will protect their interests. Candidates in the south make a promise to the electorate that they will promote their welfare by bringing home construction projects, industry and jobs, and local people will vote for candidates who keep their promise.

Eric was an acquaintance of mine. He was a restaurant owner and urban informant from Taichung city. The above quote is his observation about country folk. Eric knew I had been spending a lot of time in Shalu, a small town with a rural feel to it, on the outskirts of Taichung city. Shalu is the stronghold of the famous and controversial local politician turned national legislator Yen Ching-piao, and I wanted to find out what is it that people in the constituency thought of him and why they re-elected him to the Legislative Yuan in December of 2004. I had commented to Eric while on break from fieldwork in Shalu that I was experiencing difficulty eliciting comments from informants about their political philosophies. Specifically, I found it quite difficult to get my informants to say things that would enable me to infer or induce their views on why they voted for the people they do. Ideally, I was hoping for a comprehensive description both on an abstract and concrete level, of rural people's views on politics and politicians, from 'the horses mouth'. I wanted people to tell me not only what they thought of their local politician and their reasons for supporting him, I also wanted them to tell

---

me something about rural voters and politicians in general. In short, I was hoping to get them to articulate their *emic* theory of politics.

What I got was a lot of opinions about Legislator Yen, specifically his personal qualities, what he has done for the community, and how local people feel about him. I was also able to elicit people's concerns about daily life, stories and episodes that capture the essence of their daily lives, their hopes for the future and their anxieties. In this sense I felt very privileged to have been allowed to take a peek into the lives of people who lived a different reality to that with which I was most familiar- the city. My interactions with them have afforded me an opportunity to appreciate some aspects of rural life that I had never been able to see in person. However, what I did not get was the *emic* theory of politics in their own voice that I really wanted to hear.

It is not easy to articulate rural attitudes to politics and democracy as abstract conversations about it rarely occurred during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, it would be safe to say that people are not preoccupied with it, at least in abstract terms, which is not to say that they do not hold any opinions, or care at all about politics. It would not be accurate say that my informants were not interested in politics, or that they did not have a political philosophy or theory of politics. My experience is that rural voters care a lot about politics, not so much in the abstract, but in its concrete, daily manifestations, especially in areas of direct concern to their lives and welfare.

I found them very interested in politics and political life. They all had opinions on the all the major politicians in the country, and talked about the main political parties, and said what they liked or did not like about them. When they talked about local political life, however, I discovered that they cared mostly about practical issues that had a direct impact on their lives. Thus they told me they voted for so and so because he would do this and that. And that so and so was voted for one term but did not get re-elected in the following election because he failed to do this and that.

---

## Leaders act like patrons

Independent Legislator Yen Ching-piao's voter's surgery (*fuwuchu*) is located in his hometown of Shalu. He rarely keeps office in Shalu, as he is often in Taipei serving in the Legislative Yuan. I have gotten to know his brothers quite well though, especially the second youngest, Ching-san. 41 years old, married with an 8-year old daughter, Ching-san was very approachable and talkative, and more importantly, he was available as he hung out at his brother's surgery all afternoon. I asked him what he does for a living and he said he 'serves people'. In course of my dealings with him I would frequently hear him utter the phrase 'constituency service' (*xuanmin fuwu*) as if it were his eldest brother's, and by extension, also his, sole raison d'être. Below are his thoughts on the matter:

Often times the gutter or sewer in the neighbourhood is blocked, and the constituents call us for help in fixing it. We immediately get in touch with the relevant local government services and they come and deal with it. It's quicker that way. If we don't intercede it will be ages before the local government does anything about it. We are on very good terms with the Shalu town mayor and that facilitates things.

I have spent many afternoons in the surgery observing scores of local folk call in with the express purpose of requesting the honourable Mr. Yen's assistance in a variety of cases. Below are some illustrative examples:

### Helping the car accident victim

One afternoon at Legislator Yen's surgery, a man walked in and spoke to Ching-san. The two men had a lengthy conversation in Taiwanese, and through Ching-san, I learned that the man's son had an accident while riding a scooter. Apparently, he was on a busy motorway when a fire truck in front suddenly braked. The son was not at a safe distance behind the fire truck, so when he also braked to avoid hitting the fire truck, he was struck from behind by a car. He went underneath the car and sustained serious injuries to his cheekbones. The driver did not make an effort to tend to the boy. He did not call for an ambulance. Instead he waited for the police so that he could make a statement. Although the son's health insurance would cover most of the bills, the father was angry over what he perceived as an injustice.

---

'Thank god the boy was insured', Ching-san related to me in Mandarin Chinese. 'Without any insurance the total hospital bill would have been over NT\$ 300,000. Luckily, the family only have to pay out NT\$ 10,000. This boy's father is angry because the driver of the car that ran his boy over refuses to pay anything. He is angry that he didn't lift a finger to help the boy. He says he just stood there waiting for the police. His excuse was that the son's injuries were not life threatening (*buzhiming de*). He says it's the boy's fault, as he didn't keep a safe distance behind the truck (*mei baochi juli*). Anyway, the driver says the health insurance should take care of everything. However, the health insurance will only cover most of the hospital bills, while the scooter's insurance will only cover the actual damages incurred to it (*qiche sunshi*)'.

'At present the driver is unwilling to pay any compensation. So I advised the father to go and sue him', Ching-san continued. 'When the driver sees the court summons and the civil charge he'll be intimidated and then might be amenable to settle out of court. He'll make the first move and contact the father and offer a settlement and when that happens I'll be there to mediate and make sure the family gets a fair deal. In the past, when you're involved in a car accident, or when a driver knocks you down or runs you over he would quickly apologize and offer money as compensation, as well as pay the hospital bill, and damages to your car or scooter. The police are useless, and the courts are slow and ineffective, so most cases are settled amicably between the two parties with the aggrieved receiving some compensation. Nowadays they won't want to pay you anything. Our job is to help our constituents who are car accident victims to get a fair compensation'.

### **Mediating neighbours' and spousal disputes**

Yen Ching-san also described how he mediated (*woxuan*) between neighbours' disputes. 'Once, there was a local resident who built a wall outside his house which cut off his neighbours' access to the passageway. The neighbours complained to us and asked us to persuade him to tear it down. How do you deal with that kind of problem? The man insisted he had sole access to the passageway and prohibited anyone else from using it.' I volunteered that they could seek redress with the police or through lawyers. However, Ching-san dismissed the notion that formal institutions were of any use in resolving these kinds of issues. 'Judges and the police would not have a clue! They won't be of any help.' Ching-san went on to say that he used his influence to persuade the man that he either tore down the wall, or allowed others right of access to it, or he would have to financially compensate his neighbours for the inconvenience he has caused.

---

There is one kind of dispute wherein he says he or his brothers are very reluctant to get involved, that is husband and wife quarrels. 'Getting involved in these issues is like a gamble and we'll end up getting in trouble (*hui daomei*). Once one guy was unfaithful and became involved with another man's wife, and her husband eventually found out. That is common occurrence in Taiwan. The husband threatened to accuse the adulterer of rape. The guilty party denied committing rape, but agreed to pay the husband some compensation instead. The adulterer offered NT\$ 160,000, but the husband wanted NT\$ 200,000. I advised him to pay NT\$ 100,000 up front and NT\$ 50,000 later on as a bargaining tactic. The husband rang our surgery and claimed that he knew a Taichung county counsellor (*Taizhong xianyiyuan*) who was a good friend of my eldest brother and he had taken an interest in the case. He said we had to give the counsellor "face" (*mianzi*) by increasing the offer by NT\$ 100,000, making it NT\$ 200,000 all in all.'

### **Dealing with the bureaucracy**

One afternoon in the surgery, a voter came in requesting help. He was fortunate that day, because Legislator Yen was there in person. This was one of the rare occasions when the Legislature was not in session and the honourable Mr. Yen was able to attend to his constituents in person. The voter had had a medical problem and had been to a state hospital for treatment. Like most salaried workers, he had national medical insurance that normally covers a large part of the medical bills one would normally incur if one were ill. He had had his illness seen to at hospital, but was now informed that he had to settle a substantial bill. The balance was about NT\$ 50,000, or about two months an average worker's salary. He disagreed with the amount as he thought it was excessive, so he had tried to speak to the relevant hospital staff, trying to get them to reduce, if not eliminate the bill altogether.

Apparently, the hospital staff detailed to him all the medical interventions that had been performed as well as all medicines that he had been prescribed. As the man was describing all this to Mr. Yen in Taiwanese, I have a hazy understanding of the exact reasons why the man thought the bill was unfair. He obviously thought he was right and tried his best to explain his side to the hospital staff. He was unsuccessful and it seemed to me he was frustrated as he did not fully understand the state hospital employees' logic and reasoning, and he looked to his representative, Mr. Yen, as his last resort.

---

Legislator Yen had one of his secretaries phone the relevant department at the hospital and got in touch with that same employee the man had spoken to. Mr. Yen identified himself, and said he was phoning on behalf of the man in the surgery. Mr. Yen explained that he thought the amount was unfair and he expected the hospital to substantially reduce it. Initially Mr. Yen was patient and polite with the employee, but as the conversation went on, he progressively got angrier and angrier, and he ended up shouting obscenities into the phone. Finally he slammed the phone down on the receiver. As I was only hearing one side of the telephone conversation, I don't know what the other party had said.

All I know was that Mr. Yen was visibly angry and he tried to use his stature as a legislator, and his well-known reputation as a former 'gangster' and a man capable of acts of violence to achieve his ends, by intimidating the poor employee into giving in. I didn't know it at the time, but he was issuing threats to the employee, he said would use his influence to cut funding from the hospital if he did not get his way. The matter remained unsolved and the man eventually left the surgery. He decided that he was to go back to hospital and try to negotiate with them one more time. But the fact that his elected representative did try hard to help him with his case seemed to have left a favourable impression on him.

In the case of the car accident victim, Ching-san acted as a legal advisor and held out the possibility of mediating an out of court settlement should it come to that. In the case of the neighbour's dispute regarding a wall, Ching-san used his influence to 'twist the arm' of the offending party and make him more amenable to a compromise solution. In the case of the disputed hospital bill, Legislator Yen intervened in person and used his influence to help the voter navigate the bureaucracy and even tried to intimidate the state hospital employee into agreeing to a lower bill.

What these three examples suggest is my first point about rural attitudes to politics- rural folk want a benevolent patron, a benefactor who will assist them with many of their problems. A rural politician is judged in terms of his efficaciousness in office. Specifically, people expect their elected leaders to help them meet their basic needs, improve their lot, navigate the bureaucracy, etc. In addition, they expect to have a strong affective bond, a personalistic type of relationship with their local leader. They are not overly concerned about their elected leaders' political views or philosophies. Rural politicians in Taiwan are similar to their Thai counterparts in that they both know that 'the qualities of personal loyalty and generosity are still highly valued by country folk. The offering of money to voters is not inconsistent with this,

---

for...it is taken as a sign of puissance and largesse appropriate to a man of power' (McVey 2000: 16).

## Resorting to informal institutions

Ordinary people believe that the police, and the justice system are bureaucratic, slow and ineffective, so they try to avoid them especially when they are involved in a financial or commercial dispute. Firstly, going to the courts makes one's dispute public and that makes one lose face in society. Secondly, the law courts are a very impersonal and intimidating place where judges and lawyers speak the language of the law, using a lot of legal jargon, and not everyday language (*baihuawen*). A lot of people have a negative image of the justice system. Below is a comment from a rural informant:

My mum once lost money in an economic activity run as a cooperative where private individuals pool their money called *biaohui*. I asked her why she didn't sue the guy responsible for it. She replied 'you won't not get your money back that way'. My mum is suspicious of these formal judicial institutions (*fazhijigou*). So she opted for an out of court settlement (*shixia hejie*).

'Let's settle this thing just between the two of us (*shixia jiejie*)!' This statement encapsulates the most common mode of dispute settlement- the immediate, on the spot, exchange of money. Diverse disputes that would normally be arbitrated or decided by the courts or police are often simply resolved in this manner. The occasion when this form of dispute settlement occurs most commonly is in car and scooter accidents. These are an extremely common occurrence in a country where it is estimated that there is over one scooter for every two inhabitants and where roads and parking spaces have not kept pace with the rapid increase in car ownership in the last two decades.

I have witnessed many accidents involving scooters crashing into each other, and of cars crashing into scooters at busy intersections. The police are rarely called unless someone is seriously injured. In the case there is an injury serious enough to warrant a visit to the casualty department at hospital but not so critical that anything less than immediate medical attention would be fatal, then the parties would usually call for and wait patiently for the police to arrive, take statements and issue a report. Otherwise they are best avoided. Both parties normally discuss and argue over whose fault it was and then they negotiate the sum of money that the offending party should have to pay. If it is a relatively small amount of a few thousand Taiwanese dollars, the money is usually paid on the spot. However, much bigger amounts

---

require time and the aggrieved party has the hassle of chasing up payments, which the offending party may be unable or unwilling to pay at a later date.

In addition, when resolving an issue, the foremost consideration is not the law or principles, rather, it is about personal relationships (*renqing*). When deciding on an issue a person will first evaluate the quality of his relationship with the other person (*women guanxi haobuhao*). It is only in the absence of relationships that the law or principles are invoked. Indeed people disapprove of those who put abstract principles above relationships when settling issues. They think these people are cold-blooded (*lengxue*).

Given such an absence of trust in institutions one must turn to powerful and influential individuals to help, mediate and intercede on their behalf. These powerful individuals may operate within the legal system, or sometimes outside it. What is important is the person's effectiveness, not his legitimacy. An informant had this comment to make about the role of powerful individuals in the countryside:

The bureaucracy is very slow in the countryside. Say your car gets stolen or your house gets burgled, if you go to the police they often can't help you and all they'll do is take your statement and say 'we'll make a record of this' (*women yao zuo yi ge jilu*). *Mindai* (elected officials, from borough warden to legislator), who often have criminal pasts, are much more efficient than government officials. They have a proven record of 'getting things done' for the neighbourhood. Ordinary people don't trust the authorities to help them.

It is in the context of helplessness and impotence when dealing with formal institutions that people resort in the first instance to the common practice of *guanshuo*. There is no English equivalent for this Chinese term, but I would call it a 'lobby' or 'back channel'. A common practice in both urban and country areas, it is a practice of which authorities disapprove, as it bypasses formal institutions. It manifested itself clearly during my description of one scene in Legislator Yen's surgery. Recall the hospital incident where the voter requested Legislator Yen to intercede on his behalf with the relevant department of the state hospital. An urban informant had this comment to make on that practice:



---

*Guanshuo* for me means a citizen who uses elected officials to use their influence in order to favourably settle a dispute that a citizen has with a government agency. For example, if your car has been towed away because you parked it in a restricted zone and you need to pay a large fine to redeem it, you may ask your councillor to tell the police to cancel the fine. It has a negative connotation in Taiwan, so elected officials are a bit defensive if you say that they actively do it. They justify their intervention by saying 'I was a bit concerned on his behalf' (*wo danxin*). But for me *guanshuo* only applies whenever a citizen has to deal with institutions of the state and its representatives. Whenever someone intercedes in a private dispute between two people that isn't *guanshuo*.

What the above examples suggest is my second point- that rural residents have a strong preference for seeking informal channels and institutions when seeking to resolve a problem or dispute. Such informal channels and institutions typically take the form of on-the-spot settlements involving exchanges of money, appealing to personal connections and relationships, or the intervention on their behalf of influential individuals. Many people are reluctant to resort to the police and the justice system. They often look to influential individuals to intercede on their behalf. Besides, as in rural Thai society where 'justice and protection are to be found more in personal relationships than in the law' (McVey 2000: 14), there is the popular idea that one cannot get justice or quick results through recourse to formal channels.

## **Forgiving past mistakes**

The gap in perceptions between town and country regarding rural politicians in Taiwan is huge. Urban informants are scathing about the type of politician who gets elected in the countryside. They cannot comprehend how it is that people with comparatively low educational levels and with prior criminal convictions can serve public office. Perceptions in the countryside are markedly different. Few country folk refer to their local elected representatives as *heidao*. The few exceptions when this term is evoked usually involves well-educated rural people who see themselves as rural community leaders, by virtue of education, moral stature, etc, yet who do not have access to money and resources to make a bid for public office, enabling them to enjoy the prestige, and to disburse patronage and largesse that access to local office provides. They are discontent with their relative lack of influence and are resentful of local politicians.

---

The comments of two informants, both rural elementary school teachers, are illustrative: The first said ‘Yen Ching-piao is a legal criminal (*hefa de liumang*) with a dark, powerful influence (*eshili*). You won’t need his help if you are law-abiding and upright. It’s only when you do illegal things that you’ll need him. He uses his power and influence to favour his friends (*buyuzhipin*). The police are afraid of him, so if you have problems with the law you can turn to him for help. With him at your side the police will “obey” (*qufu*) you’. The second said ‘he managed to get out and stay out of jail because of his behind the scenes (*beihou*) and under the table connections (*goujie shangceng*) with some government officials.’

Rural informants, on the contrary, are much less likely to see politicians like Mr. Yen as a cancer in the body politic. Moreover, they do not judge him harshly and are ready to overlook his turbulent past. Several informants do acknowledge he had made mistakes, but are quite forgiving. Many reply ‘some say he was a *heidao*, but that was in the past. Life is a process of growth and learning. He went to jail as other people wanted to bring him down. Many people do bad things when they’re young, it’s because they’re ignorant, but may gain wisdom when they are older’. What they do stress repeatedly is his virtues, such as his filial piety, amiability, and record of service to the community and loyalty to voters. Below is a quote from an informant:

Before his mother died, he would visit his mother every day and talk to her everyday. He is very good with people. He is very personable. Of course if he hasn’t met you he won’t talk to you, but if he knows you, he’ll greet you whenever you bump into him and ask about your family. He calls everyone ‘uncle’, or ‘aunt’ (*a-pe*, *a-ma*, *a-chim*) like you were family. When Taiwan was suffering from a wave of typhoons this summer and many villages high up in the mountains suffered from landslides, Mr. Yen hired a helicopter to bring food and necessities to those isolated towns in the mountains far from Shalu. A lot of the people who live in the mountains are poor aboriginals. You must have seen it reported in the news.

---

As the above quote indicates, many rural politicians express their relationship with their constituents using idioms of family and kinsfolk. People I spoke to in Shalu regard him with affection and gratitude, noting his humility and shyness, a rare feature in someone as powerful as he. As an outsider, I find his transformation from villain (at least according to official views) to saint quite stunning. People, however, do not see the contradiction between his violent criminal past and his present role as benefactor and champion of the community. When I pressed them about this seeming discrepancy between past and present, people would often sigh and quote the following proverb:

Killer put down your knife and become a Buddha!  
(*fangxia tudao, lidi chengfo*)

I believe that these are illustrative of my third point- that people are quite tolerant and forgiving of their leaders' past indiscretions and mistakes. They are not overly concerned about the origin of their leaders' power and influence. It is relatively unimportant. A man can and often does make mistakes in the past, but can make up for it with good deeds later on in life. I would like to take this point a bit further and speculate on the nature of the rural Taiwanese perception of virtue in relation to power. In the introductory chapter I talked about traditional Thai ideas regarding the social order, specifically, the explanatory power of merit and power in the success of a 'big man'. Merit is not a fixed virtue, but can be added to or subtracted from, and individuals rise and fall within the hierarchy according to the relative amount of merit they possess at a given time.

A Thai 'big man' is perceived to possess a greater store of merit and power. Furthermore, power begets power, and power is a sign of goodness and virtue. Thus 'power itself is proof of goodness and virtue and attracts followers. Could we extrapolate this correlation between merit and power to rural Taiwan? Yen Ching-piao's ability to effect changes in the community are intimately tied to his power and influence- he can 'do things for people' because of who he is, not what he believes in. I believe that rural folks' ideas regarding Yen Ching-piao's redemption through good works and service to the community are intimately related to his power and ability as a 'big man' to efficaciously 'get things done'. This power increases his virtue in their eyes. Hence, it would not be too preposterous to suggest that, as in the Thai case, in rural Taiwan, power is a sign of goodness and virtue, if only because a man needs to be powerful in order to do 'meritorious deeds' for the community.

---

## Official stories about corruption

Below is the comment of one rural informant during a focus group discussion wherein the topic was corruption stories and rumours regarding Legislator Yen:

We hear a lot of rumours about Yen Ching-piao, the government has accused him of many crimes but there is no evidence. The media says he's a corrupt 'big boss' (*laoda*) But real 'big bosses' are always surrounded by their personal bodyguards whenever they go out, but not Mr. Yen. He'll be dressed simply, in a shirt and shorts, whenever he goes strolling in the streets. Yes, he went to prison in the past, but that was a long time ago, long before he became a borough warden. This was during *Operation Cleansweep*. He was young and impulsive. And he never killed anybody. I'll tell you about the police. They were also 'dark' during the time of *Operation Cleansweep*. They will receive orders from their superiors to round up five criminals. Which five will they arrest? They'll pick on anyone who seems to be mischievous and trouble making. So a lot of people were arrested that way. A lot of small-time rascals went to prison, and came out as 'big bosses'. The media made a lot of fuss about this issue. They said a lot of 'big bosses' were locked up. But a lot of them were just ordinary rascals. But when they came out, suddenly they were all 'big bosses'. The media 'built them up' (*meiti hongtai*) this way. A lot of these small-time rascals came from around here in central Taiwan. Now because of the distorted images the public gets from news reporting, they think that this place is full of big bosses.

Similarly, it is widely known that locally influential businessmen, entrepreneurs, local politicians parlayed their connections at the local level- bribing officials, rigging public tenders, setting up construction companies, erecting structures with substandard materials, ensuring projects went to favoured friends and business associates, all in order to profit from the massively lucrative construction projects (Chin 2003: 144). Informants are reluctant to condemn locally elected leaders for exploiting their position in public office for self-enrichment, by availing themselves of the vast amounts of money earmarked for thousands of construction projects for roads, bridges, and buildings to be built in the countryside.

I have tried to elicit negative and disapproving comments from them on the matter. However, they tended to react either by replying that corruption was a long established practice in Taiwan, and that it did not matter as long as the person in question was 'good to the community', or by refusing to believe the veracity of the claims, saying there was no evidence to prove Legislator Yen engaged in corrupt acts. Regardless of whether my informants accepted or rejected the accusation of corruption, they would nearly always aver that Legislator Yen has done so much for the community. People reeled off a list of

---

accomplishments and contributions that the Honourable Mr. Yen has achieved since assuming office. An academic had this to say on the matter:

Generally, rural people don't care about their representatives' past lives or corrupt activities as long as they take care of the community. People accept that certain prominent individuals may have been troublesome in their youth, but they now have proven themselves to be pillars of society. Even if they sold drugs or other illegal things, many people won't think this is necessarily a bad thing. Some may even see it as evidence of that person's power (*hen youli*) and his ability to harness and divert legitimate government resources (*zhengfu zhengquan duo ziyuan*) to their locality for their benefit. Where these individuals do engage in corrupt and underhanded dealings is in the local and state assemblies where they have access to the state's resources in the form of budgets. That is where they can manipulate projects and award them to friends and associates, receiving a kickback or commission in the process. But their constituents don't see any of this. All they see are the good works their representative has done and will do for the community in the form of roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, etc.<sup>160</sup>

These examples are indicative of my fourth point- that rural residents do not necessarily accept official narratives about corruption on the part of politicians, or the boundary between legal and illegal activities. Moreover, people aren't overly concerned with incidences of corruption committed by politicians provided that the latter are 'effective' in providing benefits to the community. Rural informants I had access to resisted these officially sanctioned views relayed by the media. They disputed the assertion that most of their elected politicians were *heidao* and seldom used that term when referring to them.

Indeed, in the case of the rural Thai attitudes toward the *chaopo*, we see a parallel ambiguity regarding the boundary between legal and illegal activities. 'The reasons for the illegality or restriction of a particular activity such as gambling, liquor distribution, prostitution, or the exploitation of forest reserve land may be as opaque to ordinary folk as are most other official requirements. The idea of a civically recognized moral boundary between legal and illegal activity is a middle-class urban notion which still has little meaning in provincial Thailand, and hence a *chaopo*'s engagement in criminal activities does not normally prevent ordinary people from seeking his patronage' (McVey 2000: 14-15).

---

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Professor Wang Yeh-li (王業立), political science professor at Tunghai University (東海大學), Taichung City.

---

Legislator Yen's younger brother Yen Ching-san frequently complained to me about the way his family and especially his brother have been portrayed in the media. He isn't impressed with media reports of his family's role in the kidnapping of Temple Vice-Chairman Mr. Jen: 'Let me tell you about the media in Taiwan, they have very little else to report on so they are always looking for stories to print. Sure my brother used his connections (*touguo guanxi*) when he tried to do his bit to help find Vice-Chairman Jen Ming-kuen of *Jenlangong* Temple the day he found out he was kidnapped (*bei bangzou*) that's all. But the media reported my brother as mobilizing gangsters (*dong heidao*) in order to save him.'

'That's ridiculous! Just like when they accuse my brother and Vice-Chairman Jen of using the temple to launder money (*xiqian*). Why would we want to do that? We wouldn't dare lay our hands on the temple's money! How long have you been here, 3 years? Do you remember the time my brother was sent to jail accused of stealing the temple's money? Well they couldn't prove a thing! The money from the temple belongs to the temple and we would never touch it! About my brother being the temple chairman, well, he just wanted to help out, and they finally asked him to run for chairman otherwise things will get messy'. I asked him why Legislator Yen is called a mafia don (*dage*) and he was quite evasive, saying 'that's just the way it is, I mean, that's the way the environment (*shengtai huanjing*) works in Taiwan.'

A form of gossip that Legislator Yen has had to endure is the kind that results from unscrupulous individuals who take try to take advantage of his fearsome reputation as a 'former gangster' by creating some sort of imagined association with him. The people responsible for perpetuating the 'gangster' stereotype of Mr. Yen typically try to pass themselves off as one of his natural 'sons', or as his foot soldier or henchman. I have heard quite a few stories of this type and have marvelled at the perpetrators' utter boldness in thinking they can get away with it. These, rumours and other malicious stories about him only serve to highlight the point that Legislator Yen can never totally escape the consequences of his reputation as a 'big boss'.

In addition, what is fascinating is not only that these kinds of stories continue to be told, rather that these tales are taken quite seriously by their intended 'victims' is indicative of the enduring power of the 'gangster' myth among certain sections of the population. Legislator Yen complained that petty criminals continue to break the law in 'his name'. 'People make false stories and allegations about me all the time! It's irritating', he confessed to me once in his surgery. Below is a specimen of a story told to me by an urban informant in Taichung:

---

I was still a university student at Tunghai, and one rainy day, my boyfriend and I were riding my scooter to college. Halfway to college we were going past a parked truck on the side of the road, when suddenly, and without looking, the truck driver opened the door on the driver's side. We couldn't stop on time, so my head smashed into the truck door and we both fell onto the road, my boyfriend was unhurt but my head was bleeding. My boyfriend tried to stop several cars to see if they would drive me to casualty, but no one was willing. By this time a crowd had gathered around us. Some people suggested that the truck driver take me to casualty. He agreed to take me and I rang the relevant bureaucrat to meet me at hospital in order to help settle the incident. At the hospital the truck driver initially had promised to take full responsibility and pay for damages as well as the hospital bills. But several days later, at the police station, he changed his mind and refused to honour his promise. He even threatened me in front of several officers saying 'I am Yen Ching-piao's "little brother", what are you going to do? (*Woshi Yen Ching-piao dixia de xiaodi, kan ni nenggou zenmeyang?*) I know you're a Tunghai student so I know how to get to you, so beware!' The police officers heard it but couldn't do anything about it. All they could do was recommend that I make an official statement. In the end I didn't get any money.

## Grassroots appeal

I wish to point out here that, in some ways Legislator Yen's life story is exceptional for a typical rural politician. He has achieved unprecedented wealth, fame, power, things to which most rural politicians can never aspire. In addition, he has reached the rank of national legislator. In the countryside most politicians will not rise much higher than the rank of borough warden. Having said this, I wish to argue that in many other ways Legislator Yen is typical of many rural politicians, and what I say about him will also apply to hundreds of people who occupy public office in the countryside.

It is a fact that a large number of elected politicians in the country tend to have either past or pending legal or criminal cases. The government, media and academic literature of the past few years have unanimously denounced that unsavoury individuals, so-called *heidao* (gangsters) have succeeded in penetrating political life, especially at the local level. For instance, minister of Justice Liao Cheng-hao stated in 1996 that 'of the 858 city and county councillors across Taiwan, 286 had a *heidao* background'. In addition, the country's highest law enforcement official warned that 'one third of the locally elected deputies were either gangsters or criminals' and 'that 25 percent of the Provincial Assembly members and 5 percent of the legislators and National Assembly deputies had shady backgrounds' (Chin 2003: 14). Thus in this aspect, Legislator Yen finds himself in good company.

---

Furthermore, my enumeration and interpretation of the reasons why rural politicians, several of whom have criminal backgrounds, are popular with the electorate are also echoed in other scholarly work. Firstly, they have ‘influence’, which makes them very effective in mediating disputes. Secondly, they adhere to a philosophy of ‘service’ to their constituents, helping them with their personal problems. Thirdly, they are very generous with their money, especially when it comes to ‘helping local communities pave a road, rebuild a temple, or organize other community projects. They also faithfully attend funerals and weddings.’ Also, they are very good at obtaining construction funds from the central government. Lastly, they invoke sense of ‘social justice’ among rural folk wherein they get ‘elected because many people believe they are victims of an unfair system and that a vote for a *heidao* figure is a vote against the establishment’ (Chin 2003: 128-133). I am telling you this because I am trying to make the case that Legislator Yen is in many ways typical of the rural politician and that his appeal as a grassroots politician largely reflect the underlying values and attitudes of the countryside in general.

I have been describing rural residents’ political attitudes and values because I am trying to show why it is that a certain class of politician, often with a criminal background, tends to be elected in the countryside. I am arguing that these so-called ‘gangster’ politicians are ubiquitous in the countryside due to their grassroots appeal. It seems that what rural constituents look for in a *mindai* (elected deputy) is someone powerful and influential, and who also hails from the same socioeconomic strata as the rural electorate. They want someone who can truly understand and relate to their lives. In short, they want a local person, an insider who looks, talks, and acts like them, but who wields sufficient power and influence in order to ‘get things done’ for the community.

Nobody, in my view, better embodies these characteristics than the Yen brothers. From a working class person’s perspective, ‘they’ve been there, done that and bought the t-shirt’. They are of working-class extraction whose family has done a variety of odd jobs and trades. They didn’t do well at school- none of the brothers has even finished secondary school. All of them have been convicted of various crimes and have spent time ‘inside’. Nevertheless, they possess a curious combination of traits. On the one hand, in terms of outlook, values, and upbringing, they are as common and ordinary as they come. But on the other hand they are ambitious working-class men who have made their share of mistakes and risen above their station in life through hard work.



---

They smoke heavily and chew betel nut (*binlang*). Indeed, upon greeting a visitor their first gesture is to offer him a cigarette or betel nut. Although I was a non-smoker I found it difficult to decline their offers of a cigarette without appearing to be insensitive or disdainful of their ways- in the countryside nearly every working-class male smokes. So I would accept the offer, light up and puff away, but (like Clinton) I didn't inhale. I drew the line at chewing betel nut though. I tried it once and it made my throat very dry and tasted awful.

They were the salt of the earth. They were much more at home speaking Taiwanese. They spoke Mandarin with a strong accent. They didn't pepper their speech with social niceties. Their speech was not the elaborated code of the educated middle-classes. In fact, theirs was rather restricted. They said what they meant and meant what they said, and they can be quite curt, especially when addressing government officials on behalf of some constituent who requested their help. They were *ahsali*, which means they would quickly decide to do certain things and grant favours and requests without much thought or consideration beforehand. In practice this meant they will quickly agree to come to your aid when asked, and they will instinctively pay the restaurant bill when eating out with a group.

That they are very good at constituency service is not surprising. They are in their element, their hometown, and they deal with people they've grown up with. They are especially attuned to the wants and desires of the common folk and have genuinely obtained their trust and respect. The contrast with politicians in the big cities like Taipei and even Taichung are striking. City politicians, just like rural ones, tend to mirror the socioeconomic makeup of their inhabitants. Likewise voters tend to vote for individuals who share similar outlook and values to their own. In the big cities it is quite common for mayors, legislators, even borough councillors to be educated to masters and doctoral level.

---

To illustrate my point, Mayors Ma Ying-jiu and Jason Hu of Taipei and Taichung cities respectively, hold Harvard and Oxford Doctorates in law and international relations, respectively. PFP Party Chairman James Soong, who Mr. Yen supported during the 2000 presidential election, and KMT head and 2000 and 2004 presidential candidate Lien Chan both hold Ph.D.s in political science from Georgetown and Chicago, respectively. President Chen Shui-bian's immediate predecessor, Lee Teng-hui, holds a Ph.D. in agricultural economics from Cornell. In contrast, many politicians from the countryside, particularly in the south, tend to have no more than a school-leaving qualification, if that.

I examined various politicians' election campaign flyers during the December 2004 legislative elections and it was very instructive as I was able to note the differences in style and substance between the two types of politicians. One was an urban politician running in Taichung city. The other, Legislator Yen was running in rural Shalu in Taichung County. The legislative candidate running in Taichung City on the DPP slate was Wu fu-gui. I happened to be in the neighbourhood when he was holding a campaign rally near to where I lived in Taichung City.

His election flyer (see Photo 17) showed a photo of him standing beside President Chen Shui-bian and emblazoned on the front were the following slogans: 'A warrior for constitutional amendment!' (*Xiangai zhanjiang*), 'March on towards the national assembly!' (*Jinjun guohui*), 'For an upright Taiwan!' (*Ting Taiwan*), 'Strive to rectify our country's name!' (*Pin zhengming*). On the reverse side his flyer was a mini CV. At the top is a succinct description of his impressive academic qualifications (*xueli*), chiefly his Bachelor's and Master's degrees, substantial work experience (*jingli*), and political experience (*zhengzhicanyu*).



Photo 17: Wu Fu-gui's campaign flyer

To leaf through Mr. Yen's flyer (see Photo 18), in contrast, is an eye-opener. There is no mention of his educational attainments (grade-school dropout) or his previous work experience (petty thief, manager of illegal gambling joints). The inside cover very briefly mentions his political career to date (borough warden, county councillor, provincial councillor, Taichung county speaker, legislator). But the lion's share of space is devoted to text and pictures depicting him as a devoted son, concerned neighbour, devout follower of the Goddess Mazu, and above all, a defender of the weak. His most celebrated slogans, the ones he would utter in his campaign rallies, screamed out in large colour font amid the black typeface:

You must never forget your origins

(*Chia kue ji, bai chiu tau*).

If you give me ten dollars, I'll give you back 100

(*Chia lang ji kau, huan lang chit dau*).

When people do you a favour, it's a debt that you owe.

If you make a promise you need to fulfil it

(*Lang jing dua na ze, wen lang ka cham si*)

出生於台中縣沙鹿鎮大肚山麓埔子里，自幼急公好義，好打抱不平，外號『冬瓜標』。受鄉親支持，一路從里長、縣議員、省議員、縣議長到立委，有一句話他常掛在嘴邊：  
**吃果子拜樹頭。**

惜情重義是他做人處事的原則，尤以其母的教誨的  
**吃人一口 還人一斗**  
他更經常說  
**人情大那債 允人卡慘死**  
不就是他人生的寫照。

自少出外打拼，心中掛念的還是家人，回家時經常下廚，練就一身好廚藝。  
街坊戲稱 **新好男人**  
其事母至孝，母喪前，每天必至病榻前看望，現在最大的遺憾是  
**子欲養而親不待**

他是媽祖的信徒 契子  
大甲媽祖廟的董事長  
他常說  
**媽祖指示**  
可見其信仰的虔誠。

他效法媽祖  
尋聲救苦 悲天憫人  
的心懷  
從921到72水災  
遠從新竹尖石鄉到南投仁愛鄉  
到處都看得到他胖胖的身軀  
不畏風險自己租直昇機救災  
東海大學王業立教授說：...  
**顏清標**  
**就像是個活菩薩**

Photo 18: Yen Ching-piao's campaign flyer

It may be useful to compare the Taiwanese campaign flyers with similar election manifestos from two politicians with slightly contrasting backgrounds in the 1990 rural Ban Thung elections for sub district headship (*kamman*) in Ayuthaya province, Thailand (Arghiros 2001: 104-106). The two Thai candidates were both village headmen, a rung beneath the sub district head. The first candidate was Headman Tri, then 32 years old. He was the offspring of rural elite households in the 1980s. Headman Tri was, comparatively, highly educated as he had studied at a teacher training college. The second candidate was Headman Han, then 52 years old, a successful Sino-Thai brick manufacturer who was a self-made man with no formal qualifications.



---

Below are the messages from two posters carrying Headman Tri's election manifesto:

Kinsmen of Ban Thung, choose a person close to yourselves (*klay tua*).  
It's the same as choosing a member of your family.

Please choose Headman Tri, candidate No. 1 to be *kamman*.  
Level of Knowledge: Teacher Training Certificate from Ayuthaya Teacher's Training College.  
Bold enough to think. Bold enough to act. Bold enough to speak.  
He is his own man, and is a genuine son and grandson of Ban Thung people.

Headman Han's election manifesto was a poster, which had a letter on the reverse side. The poster read:

Please choose Headman Han, candidate No. 2 to be the *kamman* of Ban Thung.  
Set on development (*phathana*). Ventures to sacrifice his private interests.  
Has good work results.

In the letter on the reverse side of the poster, he apologized for not being able to campaign in person. It reads:

My dear kinsmen, people of Ban Thung sub district.

I apologize to you all that because of time constraints I cannot come and tell you what lies in my heart. I would like to point out the thoughts and feelings that have led me to be a candidate. I, myself, am a child of Ban Thung by birth. In a way I am able to say that my umbilical cord is buried in Ban Thung and every single thing that I now am and have originates entirely in Ban Thung. That is to say, Ban Thung has done me a great service, and now I see that I have the opportunity, and have reached the time, where I can repay this debt to the land of my mother. Therefore I have applied to be the *kamman* of Ban Thung sub district, and have been given polling No. 2. If, kinsfolk and people of Ban Thung, you put your trust in me and choose me to be *kamman*... (Arghiros 2001: 106).

Let us highlight some similarities between the two manifestos. Headman Tri mentions his educational achievements, which are very impressive considering the average level of attainment in rural Thailand in the early 1990s, and he mentions the word 'bold' three times. He has done this to differentiate him from Headman Han, as the latter had no formal qualifications and alluded to his perceived lack 'boldness'. However, both rural candidates are quite similar in other ways; both invoked ties of blood and kinship with rural voters and

---

both declined to talk about detailed policy platforms or philosophies. Headman Tri called himself a 'member of your own family' and was 'a genuine son and grandson of Ban Thung people'. Headman Han called himself a 'child of Ban Thung by birth' and went even further than Headman Tri by mentioning the fact that his umbilical cord was buried there.

This is where comparisons with Wu Fu-gui of Taichung City and Yen Ching-piao of Taichung County are revealing. Unlike Wu Fu-gui, both rural Thai politicians and Yen Ching-piao make use of metaphors of kinship and blood ties with voters, and are disinterested in detailed policy platforms or issues. Interestingly, Headman Han, in contrast to the son of rural gentry Headman Tri, used metaphors of 'humble origins' and 'repaying debt'. Thus Headman Han's pronouncement about 'repaying a debt to the land of my mother', are uncannily similar to Yen Ching-piao's phrase 'when people do you a favour, it's a debt that you owe'. In the same vein Headman Han's use of the phrase 'every single thing that I now am and have originates entirely in Ban Thung', is quite similar to Yen Ching-piao's motto 'You must never forget your origins'.

Thus, what matters to voters in the countryside in southern Taiwan is '*boa gam chim*', a Hoklo expression meaning establishing emotional and personal ties with constituents. Candidates are either from the area, or they have been serving the area well and know the constituents well. Unlike the northern cities, where the candidates can gain support by promoting their personal ideologies and appealing to voters with similar ideas, rural constituents do not care about the political disputes or issues presented by the media. They do not care about a candidate's political philosophy or platform. Nevertheless, they care very much about whether they know the candidate and what the candidate can contribute to the area. Familiarity with the constituents, or at least sharing the same origin, is of utmost importance to the candidates. A proverb, 'there is at least familiarity between two if they come from the same place even though they may not know each other well' (*ren buqin tuqin*), highlights how important it is for the candidates to share close ties with constituents.

We may actually view people like Yen Ching-piao as filling a gap between local interests and national politics. This gap is akin to a tension created by participatory democracy where rural voters' interests diverge from that of urban ones, and rural politicians fill the void. Ockey, makes this point with reference to rural Thai politics when he says that 'parties have rarely designed policies to appeal to rural voters, leaving the way from rural MPs to seek votes as individual patrons...Thus new *nakleng* (village bandit or strongman) quite frequently win

---

election to the parliament in the provinces by bridging the gap and bringing benefits to their constituents' (2004: 20).

Why is it that so many of these local politicians have been charged and often convicted of civil and criminal cases? The database of charges brought against elected representatives, not all of which are from the countryside, range from defamation and fraud to felonies such as murder and abduction, to misdemeanours such as slander and breach of assembly law, to charges related to corruption such as breach of electoral law, abuse of power, and vote buying. I am not saying that these officials are completely innocent of the charges filed against them, or that they are unreservedly guilty. I am not saying either that no local politician has ever tried to bully or intimidate people into voting for him, as alleged in the opening comments of my chapter.

The list of offences is vast and the case of Legislator Yen, my sole subject who is a rural politician, cannot be presumed to be representative of all rural politicians with criminal and civil charges. He was first caught in a 1984 martial law crackdown on hoodlums, on charges that would not have stood if due process of law were respected. He was later convicted of vote buying, for which he spent several months in jail. Vote buying has long been practiced and tolerated in the country and it is only since the mid 1990s that the authorities have begun to show much less tolerance of the practice. To be perfectly honest, I do not know the answer to this question, nor is it the focal point of this chapter, which was to show why people in the country vote for a certain kind of politician, and why they are, up to a point, tolerant, even forgiving, of past criminal behaviour and of allegations of corrupt acts.

In the next section I intend to talk about a necessary attribute the rural politician has to possess in order to perform his 'duties' adequately- that is he needs to have the wealth, resources and influence sufficient for the task. What is more, rural voters want and expect their leaders to be wealthy and influential. The rural politician is expected to have ample financial resources at his disposal in order to 'govern' in the sense of using his power, influence and connections in 'getting things done' for the community. Thus, poverty is often seen as a negative attribute in an office-holder, whereas wealth, although by itself not a sufficient qualification for office, is critical to governing 'effectively'.

---

## Rural big man

What is it that people yearn to be or have above all? I posed this question to my Shalu informants to better understand what drives the rural psyche. My findings indicate that generally, most want to get rich (*caifu*), have money (*jingqian*), material things (*wuzhi*), a settled life (*shenghuo anding*), and peace (*pingan*). However, male informants I asked wanted all of the above, and more. Men I spoke to yearned for status (*diwei*), power (*youquan*), and influence (*youshi*). Men aspired to have leverage or influence over others (*you yinxiangli*). They want to be respected, and don't want to be looked down on (*xiwang bei zunzhong, bu xihuan bei ren kanbian*). In other words, they wanted to be 'big men'.

These 'big men' were traditionally very important in village life, where they were called upon to handle or deal with all manner of things. Aspiring big men who wanted to gain social capital in the form of prestige needed two very important prerequisites, money and resources. All the above activities an ambitious man needed to undertake to raise his standing among his peers are predicated on one fact- that one already has money in the first place. Thus the local political arena is the logical extension of village life. It is a locus of activity wherein aspiring leaders test their mettle and prove themselves worthy of the cachet 'big man'. Note a traditional Taiwanese saying about the big man:

If you want to be a big man you need to spend a lot of money  
(*Chuttau sunkak*)

Thus, ambitious men from the countryside have had a long history of identifying and seizing opportunities to accumulate wealth and power, and raise their status in the community. Yen Ching-piao and many of his contemporaries saw their chance in the burgeoning leisure industry in the 1980s, which at the time had an ambiguous legal status. They spotted an unmet need in the market, where consumers wanted places like gambling dens, brothels, karaoke bars, video arcades where they could spend their newly disposable income. These illegal, but highly lucrative activities constituted the source of wealth of many newly rich individuals. The decision to participate in politics is a natural continuation in the trajectory of a man of means who wants to raise his profile in the community.



---

Legislator Yen is very modest about the amount of power and influence he wields. Although he doesn't deny the fact that he is an influential person, he insists that whatever influence he has within his community is the result of his good deeds, and of his constituency service (*xuanmin fuwu*). However he tries to play down and misrepresent the source and provenance of his power, it is obvious that he was not chosen by the electorate just because he had made a vow of service to them, or because he was considered particularly honest, or virtuous. In the words of one informant 'What good is an honest, decent man who is a nobody?'

The Shalu electorate voted for him because they wanted someone who was 'effective', meaning someone with sufficient wealth, resources, and influence in order to 'get things done', mediate disputes, intercede with the bureaucracy on their behalf, etc. The people wanted someone with enough clout and influence to effectively deal with outsiders and to represent their interests in the outside world, especially in the corridors of power in Taipei. For his part, the rural politician presents himself as the 'source of material welfare'. 'In assuming the role of the grand patron, the local politician frequently passes off public resources, funds and prerogatives as flowing from his personal powers and magnanimity' (Sidel 1995: 159).<sup>161</sup>

Legislator Yen Ching-piao is a 'man of prowess'- a kind of political entrepreneur who is prevalent in Southeast Asia. He is expected to use 'his power for his own purposes, his benefit and in the interest of those who depend on him'. His rural constituents view broader society beyond the confines of Shalu Town as the external world, 'like the forest, it is there to be exploited, it is a shared resource, not the public good' (Mulder 1996: 221). It is 'nobody's and everybody's land, a field of opportunity to be appropriated as the need arises...It is a shared resource, but not a common possession' (Mulder 1996: 216). Thus once one accepts these basic premises of rural political life, the idea of 'corruption' will then sit uneasily in the Southeast Asian rural context.

It is instructive to recapitulate on the significant similarities between the Thai and Taiwanese rural politicians in the light of Southeast Asian political culture. Thai and Taiwanese rural folk do not care about abstract issues and philosophies. They want access to material benefits, and expect their politicians to act like patrons. Rural people in Thailand and Taiwan expect their politicians be strong in order to defend their interests in external world. Thai and

---

<sup>161</sup> Sidel, J. 1995. "The Philippines: The Languages of Legitimation". In Muthia Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 136-169. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

---

Taiwanese rural politicians, likewise, avoid talking about detailed policy platforms and issues and are keen to demonstrate their ability to distribute resources to their constituents. They use powerful symbols of shared blood and kinship ties to appeal to their voters. Finally, rural Thai and Taiwanese folk do not easily agree with the abstract idea of corruption. Indeed, there is no indigenous word for 'corruption' in the languages of Southeast Asia.

## **Conclusion**

Urban-based politicians appeal to their highly educated urban constituents' own political philosophies and ideologies. Often these can be about highly abstract themes like 'restoring morality to politics', or things which, although they may be desirable in themselves, have no practical impact on peoples' lives like 'changing the country's name and asserting independence', or 'amending the constitution'. These politicians run on an ideological platform as well as one that advocates efficient and effective government. Urban voters vote for the candidate who most closely resembles their own philosophies and pet peeves. Rural politicians, in contrast, have no greater ideology than serving the people and bringing them justice that otherwise would be denied to them.

The local politician has an ideology and political philosophy of cultivating strong and close interpersonal and affective links with those whose individuals whose votes he seeks. He prides himself in his ability to use his personal charisma, local influence, and the clout that his office confers in order to right past injustices and grievances that his voters are suffering. He uses the power of office to fight to have national resources in the annual budget diverted to his hometown to build and construct roads, schools, intercity highways, hospitals, etc.

---

## **Chapter Seven:**

### ***Conclusion***

This thesis has examined a seemingly ‘peculiar’ aspect of Taiwan’s recent experience of democratization. Specifically, it looked at the phenomenon in which a certain group of powerful and ‘unscrupulous’ individuals have taken advantage of the island’s democratic transition by capturing political office, as well as running folk religion temples, particularly in the central and southern parts of the island.

Much research has been undertaken on the topic of politics, as well as local politics in Taiwan, particularly in the past twenty years. This study has as its main focus, the same topic of rural politics as the earlier research. However, it has managed to adopt a novel approach and has arrived at radically different findings regarding the same problem. It has achieved this, principally, by adopting two guiding principles. The first is that contemporary politics, particularly rural politics, should be analyzed within a broader socio-historical context that also emphasizes the views and opinions of the subjects covered in the study. The second is that rural Taiwanese politics was cross-culturally compared to its Thai counterpart in order to find out the extent of similarity that the Taiwanese case had with a country that is geographically close, and which has followed, within the same time period, a similar path of rapid economic growth followed by democratic transition.

Its main finding is that, as with the case of Thailand, electoral democracy since the late 1980s has created a gap between local interests and national politics, and locally powerful and influential individuals in the countryside have stepped in to fill this gap. This gap between local interests and national policies is best understood as an urban-rural one, wherein the political attitudes and values of the nation’s urban residents stand in sharp contrast with those of the rural folk. These rural politicians are not the most savoury of characters. These men are often on the wrong side of the law. Nevertheless, they are popular among rural voters because they promise to deliver resources and benefits to their constituents. This gap partly explains the existence of the narratives of corruption that are present in the island’s scholarly literature, as well as the media and culture industries.

---

Simply put, on the one hand, urban voters place a great emphasis on abstract ideas and policies regarding politics and governance. They are concerned with good governance and believe that a well-educated citizenry is crucial to democracy. They are also more concerned with their politicians' political philosophies and platforms and prefer their politicians to be well-educated, mild-mannered, and incorruptible 'gentlemen'. Narratives of corruption serve to reflect these same values and attitudes. On the other hand, the people in the country are not very concerned about politicians' abstract philosophies, ideas and policies, rather, they are more concerned with their leaders' ability to deliver resources and practical benefits to the constituents. They are pragmatic in their choice of political leaders and many will vote for powerful, influential and well connected people who have a proven record of 'getting things done' in the community.

Narratives of corruption in the scholarly literature, as well as the media and culture industries that started to appear in the early 1990s, have coincided with the country's political democratization and liberalization of the media. These narratives disseminate the notion that political corruption has greatly increased since the early 1990s at the same time as the country started along the path of political reform. Indeed, these narratives encourage the idea that there is something rather strange about the country's recent experience of democracy. They are saying, in effect, that Taiwanese democracy is 'unconsolidated' and 'precarious', mainly due to two factors, one, too many institutions of the 'informal' kind have survived and continue to exert influence, and second, that institutions of the 'formal' kind are too weak. Furthermore, these narratives lament the appearance of powerful individuals on the political scene, especially in the southern and central Taiwan. They call them *heidao* and accuse them of undermining the nation's democratic achievements.

These narratives of corruption demonize the activities of many local politicians in Taiwan's political process. In rural Taiwan, many politicians rule on the basis of traditional sources of power such as the big man system and patron clientism, and they are quite popular in their rural constituencies. Educated urbanites question some national politicians' and most rural politicians' political legitimacy. They suggest that they are unfit to govern as they believe that a sound democracy is not merely about procedural issues and institutions like elections and a free press, nor is it only about efficiency and good governance, rather, it is also about leaders' integrity and honesty. Elected leaders' legitimacy is often disputed and contested, because norms and values are keenly contested.

---

Narratives of corruption use the term ‘black gold’ to refer to a variety of activities such as machine-politics, factionalism, vote buying etc. But paradoxically, these narratives tend to obscure a significant fact; that just like in the Thai case, grassroots, local politicians play a crucial, yet complex and multi-faceted role in the country’s political and electoral system. They provide a platform or vehicle through which rural voices are heard and rural interests are represented in the national legislature. Furthermore, local politicians play an essential role during presidential elections- they are instrumental in delivering the vote for the main political parties who may not have an official and effective presence in all of the island’s small towns and villages.

These individuals are not saints. They are often on the wrong side of the law. They are capable of violence and coercion, and often exercise this ability in order to further their interests. Nevertheless, their presence in contemporary Taiwanese politics should not be seen merely as an indication of a ‘lack’ or weakness of formal institutions. Likewise, to accuse their existence of being somehow ‘incompatible’ with democracy misses the point.

As this thesis has demonstrated, much like their Thai counterparts, powerful local strongmen have existed in Taiwan for a long time. They predate democracy by centuries. These strongmen have historically wielded influence at the local level, sometimes assuming the functions of government, running folk religion temples, providing basic functions and services when the state was weak, other times working quietly, influencing events behind the scenes. What electoral democracy has done has been to provide them a platform with which they were able to consolidate their local interests, at the same time as it afforded a few of the most powerful of their group a presence on the national stage, particularly, in the national legislature. While the elite and the intelligentsia worry that these *heidao* are undermining democracy, there is also an element of truth in the notion that that democracy created the conditions that made their existence possible, even necessary.

‘The practice of democracy calls forth individuals and groups who can mobilize support, and who ultimately vote at the local level’ (Trocki 1998: 12). Political decentralization ‘has created opportunities for individuals from outside the state apparatus to seek political power through the electoral process’. This study has shown that for Taiwan *heijin* and *heidao* may actually be

---

characteristic of democratic political life, indispensable, as decentralization has created opportunities for individuals from outside the state apparatus to seek political power through it.

Academic scholarship has been very consistent in its view that Taiwanese politics is dominated by informal institutions and is therefore 'backward', 'defective and 'unconsolidated', or 'has not yet bedded down'. The assumption, however, is that democracy equals formal institutions. It also seems to be an unquestioned assumption that, by extension, the former must be incompatible with any form of informal institutions. This thesis has shown that formal and informal institutions are not necessarily opposing forces and their relationship can be 'complementary, substitutive, or conflicting' (Lauth 2000: 25-26).<sup>162</sup> This thesis has also shown that the obsession with formal institutions, or the lack of them, in the research on Taiwanese politics and government, is indicative of a normative and highly idealized approach that seeks to explain, not how politics in Taiwan actually functions, but rather how politics in Taiwan *should* function. In addition, this study, has demonstrated what can be achieved when the study of formal and informal institutions, as well as the practice of democracy are embedded within the wider socio-economic structures of society as well as the internal values and attitudes of its members. It acknowledges its debt to the early ethnographic research on traditional rural leadership by Gallin, Pasternak and Crissman. It has built on the seminal work of these authors by situating these formal and informal structures of power and influence within their appropriate cultural and historical context.

The scholarly literature's other major unquestioned assumption likewise needs rethinking. It is that there is only one possible model of democratic structure and governance that the country should emulate- 'liberal democracy'. The literature considers the various informal institutions at play in Taiwan to be 'in violation' of the democratic principles of accountability and transparency inherent in a 'liberal democracy'. However, democracy is not an unproblematic concept, which can admit no differences, either in form, or style of governance. There is no 'ideal' form of democratic governance. 'Democracy is one of the most contested and controversial concepts in political theory' and remains an 'ambiguous concept' (Abrahamsen 2000: 67).<sup>163</sup> This study has shown that, at least in the case of Taiwan, the practice of democracy is at least as important as the concept. These practices include things such as patron-clientism, vote buying, etc. They may run counter to the spirit of a 'liberal democracy' that emphasizes the rule of law, 'clean' government, and transparency, among other things.

---

<sup>162</sup> Lauth, H. 2000. "Informal Institutions and Democracy". *Democratization* 7(4): 21-50.

<sup>163</sup> Abrahamsen, R. 2000. *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*. London: Zed Books.

---

However, this study has shown that these practices are, an inevitable consequence of the practice of electoral democracy in a country with a substantial urban-rural divide with respect to cultural and political values, as well as having a strong tradition of informal rural leadership. It is therefore difficult to envisage how the ideal of a liberal democracy can be implemented in practical terms while such conditions persist in the country.

Taiwanese politics will appear anomalous and problematic to the extent that we insist that it behave like a western style liberal democracy. Some of its characteristics, like rural strongmen with previous or pending criminal convictions who run for political office, do indeed seem anomalous, even abhorrent, when seen from the perspective of mainstream political theory. These instances are not characteristic of the 'formal institutions' and 'liberal democracy' approach favoured by the overwhelming majority of scholars. However, it loses much of this peculiarity when we stop looking for instances of 'factionalism', 'machine politics', 'patron clientism' and *heidao*. When we instead choose to approach the study of Taiwanese politics through the two guiding principles adopted in this study, we begin to view it in a very different light. By applying the first guiding principle of seeing it within the broader context of the long history of informal rural leadership, and understanding the interconnectedness, the complementarity that coexists alongside the tension, between formal and informal structures, this study has made certain crucial aspects of Taiwanese politics appear rather less strange.

Taiwanese politics will also appear less of an aberration once we apply this study's other guiding principle; that of comparing it cross-culturally with a nearby country with a broadly similar experience of democratic transition and economic growth over the recent decades. Cross-cultural comparison with nearby Thailand has provided a fresh perspective that can illuminate the current received wisdom on Taiwanese politics. Trocki<sup>164</sup> has described Burma, the Philippines and Thailand as 'gangster democracies' in which locally powerful individuals have achieved power through the electoral process. Taiwan and Thailand have both had long experience of authoritarian regimes and have also managed to implement democratic reforms in the last two decades. In both countries, participatory democracy has allowed provincial strongmen, *chaopo* in Thailand, and *heidao* in Taiwan, to consolidate their local power base and to seek a presence in the national political scene. Urban voters care about 'abstract' issues like policies or the public good and are keen on good, clean government and a well-educated citizenry while rural voters care about 'parochial' issues, 'leading to direct benefits such as roads or bridges'. *Heidao* occupy a vacant space national politicians are unable to fill.

---

<sup>164</sup> Trocki, C. (ed.) 1998. *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Cornell, NY: SEAP.

---

Much contemporary research on Thai politics has focused on political corruption, patron-clientism and *chaopo* (godfathers) as the major deficiency of the country's political system. However, rural strongmen have long existed in Thailand. Before the Thai imperial court established a strong and effective central bureaucracy in the nineteenth century, 'early Thai administrators were often forced to rely on dubious figures at the periphery to exert control and collect taxes, establishing a pattern of collaboration' (Ockey 1998: 40)<sup>165</sup> that was to continue under various military regimes in the twentieth century. Thus, powerful rural figures of dubious morals have long collaborated with the Thai state, and this pattern of collaboration antedates the country's democratic transition. Sometimes, these men of prowess- *phuyai* or big men achieved official recognition by being elected as *phuyaiban* or village head.

A *phuyai*, in Thai, means 'big man'- *phuyai* are respected because of their power, their ability to dominate and build up an entourage. 'If one is powerful that is sufficient; the source of that power is relatively unimportant' (Ockey 1998: 41). In rural Thailand, beneath the *phuyai* (big man), was the historical *nakleng* (village strongman), widely admired and respected protector of the village. He was a Robin Hood-like figure, a social bandit. He would ensure the return of stolen goods and maintain order, and may one day aspire to be *phuyaiban* (village leader).

Nevertheless, contemporary Thai *chaopo*, like their historical counterparts, play complex, multifaceted roles in contemporary Thai society. Much like the Taiwanese *heidao*, the *chaopo* are often on the wrong side of the law, yet sometimes collaborate with the authorities and are fundamental for political parties in capturing political power in the countryside. The scorn and disapproval that is heaped on the political participation of *chaopo* and *heidao* in both countries by the academic research as well as the media indicates that the contemporary, highly centralized and bureaucratic Thai and Taiwanese nation-states disapprove of and discourage the existence of rural leaders with alternative sources of power and legitimacy to the state. These leaders are called *chaopo* and *heidao* and it is insisted that their 'influence' is necessarily dark and evil. Note the phrases in the vernacular '*muet itthipon*' (dark influence) in Thai, and 'e *shill*' (dark influence) in Chinese as evidence for this disapproval.

---

<sup>165</sup> Ockey, J. 1998. "Crime, Society and Politics in Thailand". In Carl Trocki (ed.) *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 39-53. Cornell, NY: SEAP.



---

The rural-urban divide that has allowed for the increased prominence of political entrepreneurs in the countryside is evident when we examine how rural people in Taiwan view politics and politicians. Mulder (1996) has shown how the cultural values of Southeast Asia in general, and Thailand, in particular, influence attitudes towards democracy. He asserts that Thai culture views political life as belonging to either one of two spheres; the internal world of one's own family, community and village, and the external world. The inner world of family, community and village is one where values of hierarchy, moral inequality, moral obligation, shared well-being and mutual dependence predominate. Moral, consensual rules of the family and community operate to maintain harmony and stability in this inner world.

He states that for rural people, the external world beyond the village and community is anonymous and businesslike, unruly and unlawful, morally neutral and beyond the moral, consensual rules that bind residents of the inner world (Mulder 1996: 221). Furthermore, this external world is both threatening and mysterious for rural denizens who know they may not understand it, but all the same, want and need someone who can impose *their* will and enforce *their* order there. Thus politics in the countryside is about having a local person, an insider, who is powerful. In the country, 'politics is about power, about laying claims to the external world. Power is an attribute of strong men, of "men of prowess" who can impose their will on an unruly, unlawful external world. Such power is morally neutral. Power operates in an area that is beyond the moral, consensual rules of the inner world of family and community' (Mulder 1996: 221).

'Personalized leaders' and 'men of prowess' capable of dominating the external world are what rural people want and look for in their politicians. A politician, a 'man of prowess' is expected to use 'his power for his own purposes, his benefit and in the interest of those who depend on him'. The external world is 'like the forest, it is there to be exploited, it is a shared resource, not the public good' (Mulder 1996: 221). It is 'nobody's and everybody's land, a field of opportunity to be appropriated as the need arises...It is a shared resource, but not a common possession' (Mulder 1996: 216).

The traditional cultural values of Southeast Asia I have just described are broadly consistent with the findings of this study regarding rural Taiwanese values and attitudes regarding political life. My rural informants have limited contact with and do not fully comprehend the outside world, and thus want and look for a 'champion', a 'defender', and 'protector'. They also want a 'patron' and 'benefactor' who will deliver benefits and distribute resources to the

---

community. In addition, they expect their elected leaders to fulfil these roles and will develop personal and emotional ties with them.

Rural Taiwanese politicians will appeal to people by evoking notions of shared ties with the community based on ideas of debt, gratitude, and even fictive kinship. Once one accepts the rationale of rural political life based around the idea of the 'man of prowess', the idea of 'corruption' then sits uneasily in the Southeast Asian rural context. This study has shown that this is also the case for rural people in Taiwan. They are quite forgiving and tolerant of past crimes and corrupt behaviour. For them, there is nothing immoral about a politician who wants to help and serve the community. Whatever else he does on the side is his business.

This study has shown several uncanny similarities, both past and present, between Taiwan and Thailand. These similarities include, a long tradition of informal rural leadership, a folk value system in the countryside at odds with the dominant mores held by the urban professional class and which is disseminated through scholarly work and the media, a recent experience of fast economic growth followed by political reform, and finally the recent existence of rural political entrepreneurs who have appeared to fill this rural-urban gap in terms of political values and attitudes.

There has been virtually no social science research that has systematically taken Taiwan and the countries of Southeast Asia as points of comparison. The one exception is Kuo Cheng-tian (1995)<sup>166</sup> who compares the differential paths of economic development that Taiwan and the Philippines have taken. All the research has hitherto involved comparisons between Taiwan and China (Dickson 1998), as well as with Japan and Korea (Chalmers 1982; Cheng, Haggard & Kang 1998; Chu 1987; Doh & Chu 2004; Evans 1995; Gereffi & Wyman 1990; Hamilton & Woolsey Biggart 1988; Lin, Jih-wen 1996; Wang, Vincent Wei-cheng 1995).

Could this be so because Taiwan is considered to belong to the 'East Asian' cultural and economic region and that like should only be compared with like? This study has shown that comparisons with the region of Southeast Asia can yield extremely fruitful and productive results. If this study is any guide, one can reasonably expect any future inquiries pursuing this line of investigation will also yield surprising but invaluable insights.

---

<sup>166</sup> Kuo, Cheng-tian. 1995. *Global Competitiveness and Industrial Growth in Taiwan and the Philippines*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

---

Southeast Asia possesses 'various social and cultural elements which serve to unite large parts of the region and distinguish them from China and India' (King & Wilder 2003: 14).<sup>167</sup> Southeast Asian social organization is generally characterized by the principle of bilateral or cognatic reckoning of kinship, relative gender equality, folk religion based on spirit propitiation and ancestor and fertility cults, a focus on the sacred qualities of the human head, and lastly, the widespread occurrence of the politico-cultural institution of big men. This thesis has shown that Taiwan shares with Southeast Asia the institution of the big man. Could Taiwan share other social and cultural elements with Southeast Asia? Would it be better to view her as belonging to the Southeast Asian sociocultural area?

This study would like to conclude by recommending that more cross culturally comparative research be conducted that will further explore any other parallels or similarities between aspects of political culture, or any other cultural aspect for that matter, between Taiwan and the countries of Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and the Philippines. It is a matter of pure speculation, at this early stage, as to where this line of research could ultimately lead. Nevertheless, could we envision one day redrawing the dividing line that separates the regions of East Asia and Southeast Asia? Could we even rethink the notion of these two regions as two distinct culture areas?

---

<sup>167</sup> King, V. & Wilder, W. 2003. *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

---

## Bibliography

- Abrahamsen, R. 2000. *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Ahern, E. M. 1981. *Chinese ritual and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alagappa, M. (ed.) 1995. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Arghiros, D. 2001. *Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Boretz, A. 1996. *Martial Gods and Magic Swords: The Ritual Production of Manhood in Taiwanese Popular Religion*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Anthropology, Cornell University.
- Bosco, J. 1992. "Taiwan's Factions: Guanxi, Patronage, and the State in Local Politics". *Ethnology* 31 (2): 157-183.
- Chalmers, J. 1982. *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925- 1975*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chao Yung-mao. 1997. *Taiwan Difang Zhengzhi de Bianqian yu Tezhi* (Change and Characteristics of Taiwan's Local Politics). Taipei: Hanlu.
- Chartornvong, S. 2000. "Local Godfathers in Thai Politics". In Ruth McVey (ed.) *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*. Pp. 53-73. Singapore: Silkworm Books.
- Chau, A. 2006. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Chen, Chiukun. 1999. "From Landlords to Local Strongmen: The Transformation of Local Elites in Mid-Ch'ing Taiwan, 1780-1862". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 133-162. London: M.E. Sharpe.
- Chen, Ming-tong & Chu Yuan-han. 1992. "Localized Economic Monopoly, Local Factions, and Provincial Legislature Elections: Background Analysis for Provincial Legislature Candidates". *National Scientific Committee Research Volume: Humanity and Social Science* 2 (1): 77-97.
- Cheng, T.J., Haggard, S. & Kang, D. 1998. "Institutions and Economic Growth in Korea and Taiwan: The Bureaucracy". *Journal of Development Studies* 34 (6): 87-111.
- Cheng, T.J. & Marble, A. 2004. "Taiwan Studies and the Social Sciences". *Issues and Studies* 40 (3/4): 9-57.
- Chin, Ko-lin. 2003. *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

---

Chu, Yun-han. 1987. *Authoritarian Regimes under Stress: The Political Economy of Adjustment in the East Asian Newly Industrializing Countries*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, University of Minnesota.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Taiwan's Unique Challenges". In Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) *Democracy in East Asia*. Pp.133-146. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Crissman, L. 1981. "The Structure of Local and Regional Systems". In Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (eds.) *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Pp.89-124. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

DeBernardi, J. 2006. *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Dickson, B. 1998. *Democratization in China and Taiwan: The Adaptability of Leninist Parties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Doh, C.H. & Chu, Y.H. 2004. "The Quality of Democracy in South Korea and Taiwan: Subjective Assessments from the Perspectives of Ordinary Citizens." In *Asia Barometer: A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development*. Working Paper Series: No. 25. Asian Barometer Project Office: National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica.

Evans, P. 1995. *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fell, D. 2005. "Political and Media Liberalization and Political Corruption". *China Quarterly* 184: 875-893.

Feuchtwang, S. 2001. *Popular Religion in China: The imperial metaphor*. Richmond: Curzon.

Feuchtwang, S. & Wang, Ming-ming. 2001. *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China*. London: Routledge.

Gallin, B. 1966. *Hsin Hsing, Taiwan; a Chinese village in change*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Gereffi, G. & Wyman, D. (eds.) 1990. *Manufacturing Miracles: Paths of Industrialization in Latin America and East Asia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Göbel, C. 2004. "Beheading the Hydra: Combating Political Corruption and Organized Crime in the KMT and DPP Eras". *China Perspectives* 56: 14-25.

Goddard, W.G. 1966. *Formosa: A Study in Chinese History*. London: Macmillan.

Guo, Xuezhi. 2002. *The Ideal Chinese Political Leader: A Historical and Cultural Perspective*. London: Praeger.

Gupta, A. 1995. "Blurred Boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state". *American Ethnologist* 22 (3): 375-402.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Narrating the State of Corruption". In Chris Shore & Dieter Haller (eds.) *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-193. London: Pluto Press.

- 
- Gupta, A. & Ferguson, J. (eds.) 1997. *Anthropological locations: Boundaries and grounds of a field science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haddon, R. 1990. "Taiwan *xiangtu wenxue*: the sojourner-narrator". *B. C. Asian Review* 3-4: 1-82.
- Haller, D. & Shore, C. (eds.) 2005. *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hamilton, G. & Woolsey Biggart, N. 1988. "Market, Culture and Authority: A Comparative Analysis of Management and Organization in the Far East". *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S52-94.
- Hanks, L. 1962. "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order". *American Anthropologist* 64 (6): 1247-1261.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1981. *Bandits*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hong, K. & Murray, S. 2005. *Looking Through Taiwan: American Anthropologists' Collusion with Ethnic Domination*. Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press.
- Huang, Teh-fu. 1994. "Modernization, Electoral Competition, and Local Factions: An Analysis of 1992 Legislative Elections". *Electoral Study* 1: 75-91.
- Jacobs, B. 1975. *Local Politics in Rural Taiwan: A Field Study of Kuan-His, Face and Faction in Matsu Township*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, Columbia University.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. *Local Politics in a Rural Chinese Cultural Setting: A Field Study of Mazu Township, Taiwan*. Canberra: Australia National University, Contemporary China Centre.
- Jordan, D. 1972. *Gods Ghosts and Ancestors: the folk Religion of a Taiwanese village*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- King, V. & Wilder, W. 2003. *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Kuo, Cheng-tian. 1995. *Global Competitiveness and Industrial Growth in Taiwan and the Philippines*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Kuo, Jeng-liang Julian. 1995. *The Reach of the Party-State: Organizing Local Politics in Taiwan*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, Yale University.
- Laird, J. 2000. *Money Politics, Globalization, and Crisis: The Case of Thailand*. Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd.
- Lamley, H. 1981. "Subethnic Rivalry in the Ch'ing Period". In Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates (eds.) *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*. Pp.282-318. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lauth, H. 2000. "Informal Institutions and Democracy". *Democratization* 7 (4): 21-50.

---

Lin, Jih-wen. 1996. *Consequences of the Single Nontransferable Voting Rule: Comparing the Japan and Taiwan Experiences*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, University of California at Los Angeles.

McVey R. (ed.) 2000. *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*. Singapore: Silkworm Books.

Mulder, N. 1996. *Inside Southeast Asia: religion, everyday life, cultural change*. Amsterdam: Pepin Press.

Myers, R., Chao, L. & Kuo T. 2002. "Consolidating Democracy in the ROC on Taiwan, 1996-2000". In Bruce J. Dickson & Chien-min Chao (eds.) *Assessing the Lee Teng-hui Legacy in Taiwan's Politics: Democratic Consolidation and External Relations*. Pp. 73-90. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe.

Neher, C. 1977. "Political Corruption in a Thai Province". *Journal of Developing Areas* 7:4.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Southeast Asia: Crossroads of the World*. Dekalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies Northern Illinois University.

Ockey, J. 1998. "Crime, Society and Politics in Thailand". In Carl Trocki (ed.) *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 39-53. Cornell, NY: SEAP.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2004. *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Pasternak, B. 1972. *Kinship and Community in Two Chinese Villages*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pasuk Phongpaichit & Sungsidh Piriyangsan. 1996. *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

Potter, J.M. 1976. *Thai Peasant Social Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rigger, S. 1994. *Machine Politics in the New Taiwan: Institutional Reform and Electoral Behavior in the Republic of China on Taiwan*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, Harvard University.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Politics in Taiwan: voting for democracy*. New York: Routledge.

Riggs, F. 1966. *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press.

Rosen, G. 1975. *Peasant Society in a Changing Economy: Comparative Development in Southeast Asia and India*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Rubinstein, M. 2003. "Medium/Message in Taiwan's Mazu-Cult Centres: Using 'Time, Space, and Word' to Foster Island-Wide Spiritual Consciousness and Local Regional, and National Forms of Institutional Identity". In Paul R. Katz & Murray A. Rubinstein (eds.) *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities*. Pp. 181-218. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seaman, G. 1978. *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*. The Orient Cultural Service: Taipei.

- 
- Shaw, T. 1991 "Taiwan: Gangsters or Good Guys?". In M. Freilich, D. Raybeck, J. Savishinsky (eds.) *Deviance: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pp. 173-190. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Shepherd, J. 1995. *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier 1600-1800*. SMC Publishing: Taipei.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. "The Island Frontier of the Ch'ing, 1684-1780". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 107-132. London: M.E. Sharpe.
- Sidel, J. 1995. "The Philippines: The Languages of Legitimation". In Muthia Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 136-169. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Filipino Gangsters in Film, Legend, and History: Two Biographical Case Studies from Cebu". In Alfred M. McCoy (ed.) *Lives at the Margin: biography of Filipinos, obscure, ordinary and heroic*. Pp. 149-191. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.
- Sparkes, S. 1998. "Conflict, Hierarchy & Democracy in Thai Society". In Ing-Britt Trankell & Laura Summers (eds.) *Facets of Power and Its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 177-189. Uppsala: Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University.
- Sukatipan, S. 1995. "Thailand: The Evolution of Legitimacy". In Mutthiah Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*. Pp. 193-223. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Thompson, S. 1984. "Taiwan: Rural Society". *The China Quarterly* 99: 553-568.
- Trocki, C. (ed.) 1998. *Gangsters, Democracy and the State in Southeast Asia*. Cornell, NY: SEAP.
- Tu, Yi-chin. 1984. *The Social Foundation of Taiwanese Local Factions: The Case of Chia Yi County*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, Tunghai University.
- Valenzuela, J.S. 1992. "Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions". In Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and J. Samuel Valenzuela (eds.) *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*. Pp. 57-104. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Van Roy, E. 1970. "On the Theory of Corruption". *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 19:1.
- Wang, Chen-shiuen. 1996. *Faction Politics in Taiwan: A Perspective on Patron-Client Theory*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Science, University of Kansas.
- Wang, Peter Chen-main. 1999. "A Bastion Created, A Regime Reformed, An Economy Reengineered, 1949-1970". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 320-338. London: M.E. Sharpe.
- Wang Tai-sheng. 2004. *Taiwan Falü Shi Gai Lun* (An Historical Introduction to Taiwanese Law). [2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.]. Taipei: Yuan Zhao Chu Ban Gong Si.



---

Wang, Vincent Wei-cheng. 1995. *High-Technology and Development Strategies in East Asia and Latin America: Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, Mexico*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Political Economy, University of Chicago.

Wilkerson, J. 2004. "Late Imperial Education and Control: Rural Villages in the Penghu Islands". *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 2 (1): 141-170.

Wills, J. 1999. "The Seventeenth-Century Transformation: Taiwan under the Dutch and the Cheng Regime". In Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.) *Taiwan: A New History*. Pp. 84-106. London: M.E. Sharpe.

Wolf, M. 1968. *The House of Lim: a study of a Chinese farm family*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1972. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wolters, O.W. 1999. *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Publications, Studies on Southeast Asia 26.