

THE SUNFLOWER MOVEMENT, TAIWAN AND STUDENT PROTEST



Taiwan has a complex political and cultural history. While it has effectively been independent since 1950, China has claimed sovereignty over the country; at the same time, Taiwan is protected by the US. Despite this turbulent position, the country is successful economically and has relatively strong democratic norms and processes. One recent political crisis, however, was the result of a trade agreement between China and Taiwan. While the agreement would provide a boost to Taiwan's economy, there were sizeable concerns that it would undermine Taiwan's national security and identity—with fears that it would lead to reunification with China in the future.

As we discuss in Chapter 9, political protests are one way in which societies change and political organization is a vital component of this. It was in the context of the trade agreement between Taiwan and China that a group of Taiwanese university students occupied parliament for 24 days in the spring of 2014. This was followed by a protest rally of up to 500,000 people in the region (Ho 2015a). It became known as the 'Sunflower Movement' because the protestors held sunflowers as a symbol of hope to effect change.

The protests received considerable support in Taiwan, including from sociologists. Ho (2015b) reports that sociology departments in major cities suspended teaching activities during the protest, and the Taiwanese Sociological Association made a statement in support of it.

A particularly unusual feature of the Sunflower Movement was its wide popular support and level of success, given that such movements tend to fail. Rowen (2015) highlights that there was a high level of organisation during the occupation and its nonviolent approach were instrumental to its popularity. He also discusses the role of earlier, smaller political protests where student protestors gained experience and refined their tactics, and suggested a broader public discontent with some of the Taiwanese government's political engagement with China may have made Taiwanese society particularly receptive to the concerns raised by the Sunflower protestors.

Similarly, as with the Occupy movement that we discuss in Chapter 9, these protests should be considered as part of a broader international political movement. In 2014, The ‘Umbrella Movement’ in Hong Kong saw tens of thousands of people protest against proposed changes to the Hong Kong electoral system that were seen as anti-democratic. Umbrellas became a symbol of this non-violent protest because they were used by protestors to protect themselves from the tear gas used by police.

Demonstrating the importance of cultural context, Lin (2015) highlights that while the protestors used similar tactics in both protests, the governments responded very differently. The Taiwanese government listened to students’ demands and made some changes to the legislative process, while the Hong Kong government used punitive measures against the protestors and their supporters—including the use of tear gas at the time of the protests, and arresting and prosecuting the student leaders. Political protests and social movements, then, are an essential part of changing societies but their effectiveness are dependent on a wide array of cultural issues and social structures.

References

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