

RETURN TO NTU: REMINISCING

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It has been exactly 40 years since I first came to Taiwan, in the fall of 1969, under a Fulbright fellowship to do a doctoral dissertation on the sugar industry. In the intervening years, I have made numerous trips to Taiwan, including several stints as a Visiting Professor at NTU. This time will be my last, as I am now retired from Michigan. In those days it was impossible, of course, to do field work of any kind in China. So geographers, wanting to do field work in Chinese studies, often came to Taiwan, as did I. Unlike most of my American colleagues, however, when the PRC opened up to relations with the outside world, starting in the late 1970s, rather than jump ship to the mainland, I decided to stick with Taiwan as my main venue for field research. I thought Taiwan had tremendous potential as a research laboratory, and still do. I have never regretted the decision. Over the past 40 years, thus, I have been fortunate in being able to watch Taiwan come of age, so to speak, and to be eyewitness to the dramatic changes, both good and bad, that have occurred.



First American delegation of geographers to visit China since before 1949, at the Yangtze Bridge in Nanjing, 1977. Prof. Williams is third from the right.

Taiwan in the late 1960s/early 1970s

Taiwan in the late 1960s/early 1970s was quite different from what it is now. The population was a third the size, the economy was mainly agricultural (mostly rice and sugar cane), Taipei was still a modest city of a few hundred thousand, with rice paddies right next to the campus of NTU. I could bicycle (at least until my bike was stolen) all over Taipei with ease, as motor traffic was not heavy in those days. Motorcycles were just beginning to gain popularity, as Taiwan started its economic takeoff. Many people rode bicycles, or rode the somewhat dilapidated bus system. I remember there were even still a few old buses from the Japanese era, with open sides and seats running the length of the bus. The city was low rise, unsophisticated, rather shabby and grimy, definitely not very modern. It was not easy to find a coffee shop outside of a few modest hotels that catered to Western visitors. The U.S. still had an embassy here, and sizeable military presence, but that was to disappear ten years later, after the U.S. switched recognition to the Beijing government under President Carter in 1978-79. But in my first two years here, 1969-71, it was a comfortable place to be an American. For one thing, the American dollar went far in those days, so Taipei was very affordable on a modest fellowship. My dissertation research took me all over the island, so I got to know Taiwan quite well. Especially once one got out of Taipei, the subtropical greenery and mountainous terrain fully lived up to the meaning of “Formosa,” beautiful island. In 1969 one could almost describe the place as akin to “Far Formosa”, to borrow the title from George Mackay’s famous

memoir of 1897 (but definitely not today).

In the 1970s there were no computers, no internet, no cell phones, no faxes. An overseas phone call was expensive and saved only for special occasions and emergencies. Airmail letters took a full week at least each way. Cables were used for important overseas communication. As an academic, I well remember the dearth of good bookstores back then. Cave Bookstore on Chung-shan North Road was about the best place to find English-language books, and even then their collection was very limited. Today there are myriad bookstores of all kinds, topped perhaps by the flagship Eslite store in the downtown Hsinyi district with its vast emporium of books and materials from all over the world. A feast for academic eyes! There is even a branch of Eslite right next to the NTU campus. Such convenience.

In those frugal graduate student days, I lived with a couple of Taiwanese graduate students at NTU, in a walk-up apartment without air conditioning. Air conditioning was still something of a novelty and definitely a luxury to be used sparingly. Electric fans provided the cooling. Somehow we never really missed A.C., but then one can tolerate discomfort more easily when young. Moreover, Taipei was not yet the extreme “heat island” that it is today with all the high rises and concrete. In the mega-city of Taipei today, with mass air conditioning everywhere, one wonders if all these people could have survived conditions in the “good old days”. Anyway, living with Taiwanese friends was a great way to learn about Taiwanese culture, practice Chinese, and enjoy the warm hospitality of the people of Taiwan. My former roommates and others I knew at NTU have remained dear life-long friends.

On the darker side, Taiwan of course was under martial law in those days, and bad things happened in the political arena that foreigners, even resident students, seldom had much contact with or know much about. During those days, few people were brave enough to voice their true feelings or political

thoughts to foreigners, even if good friends. It could be dangerous to be too candid. My education about Taiwan history and politics really began in earnest after returning to the States and having to teach about Taiwan in courses at the university, participating in conferences, and reading lots of books about Taiwan.

Taiwan Today

In the four decades since that first time here, I have come back frequently, for various activities. I have been eye-witness to the many changes in Taiwan, Taipei, and NTU. The population is of course three times larger, but now stabilizing and aging. The government and academics worry about the impact of a stabilizing or even declining population in the coming decades on the economy, environment, and society. Taiwan has indeed come of age, joining other “mature” societies, such as Japan and some of the European states. The economy is now heavily industrialized and most people live in cities, including some 7 million in the Taipei metro region. Traffic is intense, albeit much better managed today than was true in the 1970s and 1980s when motorcycles and cars started to really compete with buses and all the other traffic. There is a fine MRT system, which makes getting around so much easier. Motorcycles are even more numerous today and loudly buzz around like hordes of annoying insects. Far too many people own cars purely as status symbols and then struggle with parking and the high upkeep. But, the bicycle is making a strong comeback in the face of rising fuel prices and the environmental movement. Yet, I would not dare to ride a bicycle in Taipei, except on campus. Far too dangerous, in my opinion.

The city skyline is increasingly high-rise. *Taipei 101* seems like an unnecessary oddball in the skyline, to my eyes, but the Hsinyi district with its new CBD for Taipei is a handsome area of distinctive architecture, smart shops and restaurants of incredible variety, and an attractive mecca for

recreation. The place is alive with crowds on the weekend. Overall, people are much more materially well-off today, of course, with ample disposable income and opportunities for foreign travel. Taipei, especially, is much more sophisticated, cosmopolitan, plugged into the global economy and system. From a purely material viewpoint, life in Taipei today is easier, more comfortable, less “isolated” (especially with ready access to the internet, cable TV, and CNN). Nonetheless, one could get into a debate as to whether people in general are “happier” today than in the 1970s. Happiness is an elusive and subjective commodity.

One big plus has been the democratization of Taiwan since the 1980s, and the flowering of human rights, freedom of the press, and the opportunity for people to express themselves in so many ways. From that perspective, life today definitely is much richer than the 1970s. Yet, like so many countries around the world (including the U.S.), society in Taiwan is so highly polarized politically that solutions to pressing social and economic problems become nearly impossible. This is a sad trend in the contemporary world, and one can only hope for some moderation in the future.

NTU Today

NTU also has changed greatly in 40 years. The school is bigger physically and in student enrollment (now around 33,000). There are many new buildings and physical improvements. One of my favorites is the superb main library, housed now in a stately building at the end of Palm Tree Boulevard, the grand palm-tree lined road originally laid out by the Japanese when they opened then Taihoku Imperial University in 1928, and that has long served as the main entranceway and central spine of the campus. The library’s new home, opened in the 1990s, is superbly organized and has an excellent collection, including a massive serial (periodical) section.

Moreover, the library is well in step with the computer age, with excellent on-line catalog and services. The library is easy to use, even for foreigners who may not know any Chinese. The catalog is in both Chinese and English, and the staff extremely helpful. I find the library as good as any university library I have encountered back in the States. The library of course is the “heart” of any university, and this one serves



Prof. Williams meeting with students in his office in the Department of Geography.

NTU very well indeed.

The Japanese built for permanence and to give a grand impression, in a pseudo-European style filtered through Japanese eyes. The buildings of that era had high ceilings, thick walls, wide verandas and covered walkways, large overhangs, and other features designed to provide maximum possible coolness before the age of air conditioning. The central Administration Building is one of the best examples, lovingly maintained in its colonial-era dignity. The buildings of the early post-war era, like those on most U.S. campuses, are fairly nondescript, built for getting maximum use of space for minimum money, with little left over for frills or decoration. However, more recently constructed buildings, such as the library, and the newer science buildings, are of a higher quality, reflecting the increased wealth of Taiwan. The Geography Department also is in a much better building today. I remember the old Geography building that was shared with the Psychology

Department over near the tennis courts and swimming pool in the 1970s, with its lack of air conditioning and outmoded facilities. Geography moved to its new building in 2003, formerly occupied by the Atomic Energy Council, and convenient to dining services, the Administration Building, Library, Medical Center, and Roosevelt Road. All air conditioned, with a lovely atrium in the building center, the department now has more room and a physical setting more conducive to the many activities and functions of the department.

Much fuss has been made on campus and in the media recently over international rankings of leading universities around the world. One put out annually by U.S. News & World Report put NTU in 124th place out of the top 400 schools in the world. (Three other Taiwan universities made the rankings: Tsing Hua, Yang Ming, and Cheng Kung.) It was a quite respectable showing for NTU, but still a fair distance behind the University of Hong Kong, in 26th place (five Hong Kong universities made the rankings). Ironically, even some of the mainland schools fared better, with Beijing (Peking) University achieving 50th place. My personal feeling about these rankings is that they are inherently highly subjective, should not be regarded as anything but approximations, and unfairly boost the rankings of schools in the PRC, while under-ranking schools in Taiwan, especially NTU. A critical difference between universities in Taiwan and those in the PRC is the fact that higher education in China is not based on complete academic freedom. There are still taboo topics, the Communist Party cadres still have important powers within the universities, and the shackles and restrictions that plagued higher education during the Maoist years have still not been completely removed. By contrast, faculty at NTU (and elsewhere in Taiwan) can teach and do research on any topic whatsoever that interests them without fear of penalty. The only hurdle they must pass is the judgment of students and peers about the quality of their teaching and research.



Prof. Williams (left) with colleagues during 1994 Asian Urbanization Conference (r to l: Prof. Laurence Ma, Prof. Ch'ang-yi Chang, Prof. Kenneth Corey and Mrs. Corey).

While NTU officials must be happy to see their school move up in the ranks, there still seems to be a pervasive sense of inferiority on campus, when one talks with faculty or other personnel. While every university constantly strives to improve itself, and should, nonetheless officials sometimes get overstressed about these matters, to the point of putting too much emphasis on what they see as key indicators of a university's quality, specifically, number of journal articles and books published, and number of citations in the SCI and SSCI systems. This is derived from American academia, and while such things certainly matter, they should be weighed with many other factors in assessing the quality of individual faculty, departments, colleges, and universities as a whole. Journal citations and numbers of publications are excessively relied upon, of course, because they can be quantified, do not require any real knowledge of what goes on in specific disciplines, and make it easier to compare "apples" and "oranges". I am happy to see that many American universities are now moving away from over-reliance on citations and numbers of publications in making critically important judgments on quality. I believe NTU's (and Taiwan's) system reflects a certain degree of immaturity in development of higher education in Taiwan. As it is, a report issued in May, 2009 by

the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan, found that Taiwan was actually doing quite good in the Essential Science Indicators (ESI) rankings, which measure science citations of articles produced by university faculty in Taiwan. The report covered an 11 year period (1998-2008), and 24 universities in Taiwan were included in the ranks of the top 1 percent of all universities worldwide. NTU ranked 65th worldwide. Not bad at all, if one wants to give that much credence to citation data.

Students, likewise, have changed in some ways over the 40 years, although maybe not as much as some critics seem to suggest. In the 1970s students were not wealthy, few if any had their own cars, and those in the university, especially at NTU, knew they were a privileged minority. Hence, they had a “hunger” about education, and a determination to work very hard to succeed in their studies, obtain a good job, and bring honor to their families, who probably sacrificed much to make it possible for them to attend NTU. The students were extremely respectful of faculty and older people, and had a


sweet innocence to them that was very appealing to an American professor used to the often rebellious and highly individualistic students of U.S. campuses.

Recent reports in the media have presented a not very flattering image of today’s students at NTU and other higher education institutions. They tell of students skipping class, arriving late to class, eating and drinking in class, working with their computers, sleeping or reading newspapers during class, all the flaws one commonly sees in American students, unfortunately. Maybe I have just been lucky, in encountering only the best of NTU students (who, in turn, are supposedly the best to be found in Taiwan), but this time around I have not observed these flaws in my students to any significant degree. I find the students still quite respectful, attentive, hard working, friendly, and still eager to get ahead, recognizing how fortunate they are in being able to attend NTU. Moreover, also in contrast to many complaints I hear and read about, I find the students’ English abilities remarkably good on the whole. Of course they are not at native-speaker levels, but I would never expect that



Prof. Williams with Prof. Nora Chiang and students from her class on “Geographical Thought and Methodology”, in which Williams lectured about “China Regional Geography”. Williams is third from the left.

degree of competency anyway. Even at the University of Hong Kong, which is a strictly English-language university, I found most students did not have native-speaker abilities. I sometimes think local critics expect too much in the way of English competency. I find most students, but especially graduate students, trying very hard to improve their English and so appreciative of any help a foreign native speaker can give them. Most students have limited opportunities to hear and speak English every day, although reading opportunities are more readily available, since classes often assign English-language materials. Likewise, the students do not get enough opportunities to practice their writing, and even more important to have those writings carefully critiqued so the students can learn from their mistakes. Until the faculty at NTU are more fully competent in all aspects of English, and willing to use English more fully in their teaching, it is unreasonable to expect the students to excel in that difficult foreign language.

To be sure, students today have much more money, many (most?) have their own cars or at least motorcycles, they are much more worldly and sophisticated, and like young people around the world are vastly more competent in high technology than people of my generation. But we must not forget that these students also face unparalleled challenges and stresses -- severe job competition in tough economic times, job insecurity, much more permissive social behavior, alarming international problems such as global warming. The list is long. One has to admire students who can stay cheerful, determined, and optimistic in the face of such challenges. I find my faith in Taiwan's young people renewed by my return to NTU. If these are the best that Taiwan has, then Taiwan will be in good hands when they assume leadership positions in the future. I wish them well and appreciate having the opportunity to share this past semester with them. (本期本欄策畫/地理環境資源學系姜蘭虹教授) 



Prof. Williams making remarks at the opening ceremony of the 1994 Asian Urbanization Conference, hosted by Geography and NTU.

CURRICULUM VITAE:

JACK F. WILLIAMS is a Visiting Professor at NTU this Fall Semester, 2009, and Professor Emeritus of Geography at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. He did his B.A. and M.A. in geography at the University of Washington (Seattle) and received his Ph.D. in geography and Chinese studies at the University of Hawaii (Manoa-Honolulu). A China/East Asia specialist, he has done much of his research and field work in Taiwan, focusing on urban and regional development, land use, and environmental issues. He first came here as a doctoral student in 1969 to do his dissertation on the sugar industry under the Japanese and ROC. He has published widely, especially in books, as well as articles. His most recent publication is: *Taiwan's Environmental Struggle: Toward a Green Silicon Island*, co-authored with Prof. Chang Ch'ang-yi (Routledge Publishers, London, 2008). Semi-retired, he remains active in teaching and other academic activities, having taught at the University of Hong Kong in 2006 and 2008.

Courses taught at NTU, Fall 2009:

- 1) Environmental Resource Conservation & Management (環境資源保育經理及實習、與張長義教授合開)
- 2) Graduate Seminar: Philosophical Issues in Geography (當代地理思想專論)