

# Book Review

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**Martin, Jeffrey T. *Sentiment, Reason, and Law: Policing in the Republic of China on Taiwan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, 175 pages.**

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Police violence emerged into global headlines in May 2020 after African-American George Floyd died under the knees of a white police officer in Minneapolis. Protestors against police brutality and racism took to the streets, even as far away as Taipei. I grew up in an African-American neighbourhood, so my formative years taught me to fear the police and associate them with violence. When I went to Taiwan as an anthropologist, I was struck by the lack of police patrols, and I was surprised by the relaxed way civilians socialized with officers in police stations over tea. Mystified, I thought such civility merited ethnographic inquiry, and Jeffrey T. Martin took on that job, over eight years of meticulous research in Taipei.

Martin opens with Egon Bittner's definition of police as "a mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force" (1). Martin, while acknowledging that police violence happens, argues that Taiwan's police do not ground their authority in claims to sovereign, law-giving violence. Indeed, they openly and systematically yield to other, sometimes more violent, players. The police task becomes one of mediating between the unruly solidarity of the population and the centralized state, through idioms of sentiment, reason, and law (6). Martin succeeds in depicting the life-worlds of police in Taiwan, without succumbing to the Orientalist fallacies that haunt many ethnographies of Taiwan. Indeed, his theoretical insights resonate well beyond Taiwan. Martin invested over a decade in this book, and it shows. Each word is carefully chosen, beginning with the title. There are solid reasons for saying "Republic of China *on* Taiwan" rather than "Republic of China (Taiwan)" or simply "in Taiwan."

Martin crafts his argument through an introduction and six chapters. Chapter One describes his passage into the world of police work, from a banquet

at the police station's front door, to an erotically tinged foray into a hostess bar, and back to daily rituals of sharing tea. This forms the basis for an innovative reading of politics through a Chinese idiom of sovereignty as *zhuquan*, literally "host power" (31). Chapter Two traces the history of Taiwanese policing to the period of Japanese administration (1895–1945), when Japan adapted European policing practices to local situations across its Empire. After the Republic of China came to Taiwan in 1945, the new overlords inherited the system, which evolved through martial law and democratization. Chapter Three looks at police patrols as politics of care when officers mediate conflicts in the community. Chapter Four examines the bureaucratic work of case processing. Chapter Five, based on a description of police going through formalities of temporarily clearing an illegal street market, shows the challenges of balancing sentiment, reason and law in a democratic society where citizens increasingly see law as a legitimate expression of popular will that should be equally enforced. Chapter Six, arguing that democracy weakens the police, compares Taiwan's Sunflower Movement (when students occupied the Legislature for three weeks in 2014) to Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (which was brutally crushed by police). Only briefly does Martin indulge in metaphysics, to speculate that Taiwan's model of diffused popular sovereignty is consistent with its polytheistic folk religion (145). Yet, consistency is not causation, and Martin notes judiciously that the study of religion lies beyond the scope of his book.

Indeed, Martin avoids the ideological bias of many Taiwan ethnographies, which often construct Taiwan as an avatar to a more traditional China. Four decades ago, Gates and Ahern warned of the pitfalls of such a culturalist approach, to argue that continuity needs to be explained as much as change, and that the key for Taiwan ethnographers is understanding the Japanese period. They noted that this will require mastery of Japanese, Mandarin, and the local language (Gates and Ahern 1981, 9). Martin rises to the challenge.

Martin's theoretical framework is a Weberian historical sociology, a "path-dependent dialectic of cultural values and historical structures" (87). Epistemologically, his work meets the rigorous standards of a sociocultural anthropology which eschews looking for emic meaning at the level of a society or culture, more appropriately exploring the semiotics of a particular profession (Olivier de Sardan 2014, 120). When police use phrases with origins in Chinese philosophy, their idiom expresses nostalgia (82) rather than cultural continuity.

Martin notes that Taiwanese police quote Laozi as infrequently as American police cite Plato (145). Colonial history is important for understanding the cultural trope of sentiment, and the specific circumstances that nurtured it.

As a reader, I wish North America could learn from Taiwan's mix of sentiment, reason, and law as a model for a less violent form of policing, but we cannot overlook how Taiwan's system emerged from a unique set of historical and sociological circumstances. Already, in the subtitle, with the preposition "on," Martin shows that Taiwanese policing is based on a particular historical relationship between the Republic of China and Taiwan, which are *not* synonymous. The emphasis on sentiment happened as Taiwanese police officers in consecutive externally imposed regimes were tasked with mediating relations between ordinary people and the state. Crucially, the system was grafted onto an already existing society that has long protected its own sovereignty, even in informality.

Martin's understanding of diffuse sovereignty, exemplified by one officer's metaphor of law as a blade that risks cutting the holder (125), is relevant to understanding Taiwan's predicament, especially in relation to escalating Chinese threats. Martin cites Judith Butler, who characterized modern sovereignty as a "control fetish" with unintended consequences for states that unilaterally try to create or control complex social worlds (146–147). As China attempts to justify an annexation of Taiwan through domestic legislation and Taiwan tries to elevate its status with international law, either side could suffer painful consequences by pushing the knife of the law too far. Martin's analysis demonstrates the utility of anthropology to understanding contemporary international relations.

This book is an important contribution to political and legal anthropology. The anecdotes that structure the analysis can be appreciated for literary style as much as for theoretical insight. I would adopt it as a textbook in methods courses, as it comes as close as possible to being a model of the perfect ethnography. The main flaw is its lack of a glossary for Mandarin and Japanese terms, preferably with characters. But it is hard to imagine a more relevant ethnography for our times, as societies stare down state violence from the streets of Minneapolis to the Strait of Taiwan.

## References

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Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. *La rigueur du qualitatif: Les contraintes empiriques de l'interprétation socio-anthropologique*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia, 2008.