12 The political ambiguity of middle class activism in Taiwan

The case of urban conservationists in Kaohsiung city

Ming-Sho Ho

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the intensity of social movements led by the middle class in Taiwan appeared to be weak. Beginning with the democratic opening in the mid-1980s, urban, highly educated middle class professionals assumed a position in the vanguard of a number of reform projects (Hsiao and Koo 1997). The political opposition that rebounded after the crushing defeat of the Formosa Incident in 1979 was led for the most part by a group of lawyers, journalists and writers. Thanks to their participation, issues such as consumer protection, human rights, gender equity, environmental protection and education reform gained both momentum and social visibility. A confident middle class, not shy about proclaiming its rights, and those of the lower class — whether out of altruism or ideological commitment — frequently took part in the social protests of under-privileged members: Presbyterian church workers in the aboriginal movement, intellectuals in the labour movement, and college student activists, both on and off campus, testify to the breadth of middle class social commitments at this time.

More recently, there has been a decline in social activism among the middle class in Taiwan. The 'M-shape' society theory, popularized by Kenji Ohmae and expounded by mainstream media, presents a highly questionable picture of growing social polarization, but the fact that this became a household idiom shows that it was, nonetheless, reflective of the shifting sociocultural (Hsiao 2007). A massive wave of 'status anxiety' surged over the 'vanishing middle sector', and, as the middle class turned inward worrying over economic insecurity, social and political participation have been shelved indefinitely.

Perhaps contributing to middle class inquietude, the social movements best exemplifying the middle class values of rationality, progress and humanism — education reform and the anti-nuclear movement — suffered significant defeats. Calls for more liberal and humanistic (renben) education came to the fore in the late-1980s (Hsüeh 1995), and throughout the 1990s pertinent reforms were incorporated, stepwise, into governmental policies on higher education expansion, the integration of school curriculum and multiple-track admission. But following the regime change in 2000, education reform advocates found themselves rather unexpectedly on the defensive as the emerging issues of declining competence among college students, the vexing complexities of a new admission system, and
even the higher cost of textbooks gained prominence in the media. Popular angst over competitiveness began to eclipse the attempt to humanize education, such that in 2003 the old guard in the education establishment could begin to harness the concerns of a disenchanted public and launch a concerted effort to roll back reform measures (Ho 2005a: 415). Educational reform, once the very symbol of middle class forward-looking commitment, became an anathema and widely blamed for a host of current malaises.

Opposition to nuclear energy increased in the mid-1980s, as a group of US-educated academics began to voice concern in the wake of the Three Mile Island Incident (1979) and the Chernobyl disaster (1986). The lifting of martial law in 1987 invigorated the grassroots of this nascent movement when rural residents in the vicinity of nuclear facilities became free to begin organizing their own collective actions. For nearly a decade, politicking over the controversial budget of the fourth nuclear power plant was an annual ritual in the Legislature, with the numerically superior Kuomintang (KMT) railroad the project in the face of the opposition from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (Ho 2003). The inauguration of the DPP government raised the prospect of a nuclear-free Taiwan, but the regular frustration of attempts to abolish the fourth nuclear power plant project quickly curbed the energy of activists (Ho 2005b: 343–4). With the retraction of the DPP’s promised nuclear reforms, anti-nuclear supporters found themselves politically weakened and isolated. And, more recently, the growing prominence of global warming issues and embracing of nuclear power as a possible solution within the environmental moment, have persuaded some opponents of nuclear power to change their stance. As nuclear energy has been proclaimed to be the only viable means to meet growing demands while curbing greenhouse gas emissions, those opposed to nuclear power have been forced to fight an uphill battle in an increasingly hostile political climate.

In the cases outlined above, arguably, the decline of middle class movements was related to activities in the political arena as the KMT was able to fan and harness public discontent (in the case of education reform) or frustrate the opposition (in the case of anti-nuclear reform). And yet, aside from partisan political entanglements, shifting middle class attitudes were obviously at the play. The sizeable crowds of parents and children that catapulted education reform into the national spotlight with the famous demonstration on 10 April 1994 were long ago relegated to the political past, and the spectacle of annual anti-nuclear demonstrations came to an abrupt halt in 2001, in the wake of the DPP’s reform debacle. More recently, large-scale street actions have occurred in Taipei City, such as the protest against Chen Shui-bian in October 2006; however, such phenomena are best described as political movements, not pure and simple social movements. Even though there were substantial numbers of middle class participants in the demonstration, they failed to bridge the partisan divide and articulate politically independent class-based demands. The commitment of Taiwan’s middle class to reform has been exhausted; today, if some issue sparks a popular passion, it will most likely be channeled through partisan channels.
middle class tends to be a fickle friend of progressive politics. Another neo-Marxian analyst, Neilson (2007), criticizes Wright's implicit assumption that skills and organizational positions are workers' "property" in the same way that the means of production belongs to the capitalists. Neilson (2007: 113) argues that we should analyse the middle class not in terms of what it possesses, but how it is placed in the current labour process. The middle class simultaneously faces proletarianizing and bourgeoisifying tendencies in work situations, and consequently, it is difficult to expect consistency in middle class politics.

In analysing middle class political behaviour, there are reasons why the production-centred view should be abandoned. First, the revolutionary technological breakthroughs achieved under capitalism have liberated the majority of people from dire material scarcity. Work no longer dictates a person's identity, as more and more attention is devoted to the seemingly free realm of consumption where people autonomously construct their own identities. Thus, people tend to define who they are by what they purchase and use, not by how they make a living. Speaking of the American middle class in the 1950s, C. Wright Mills (1951: 237) writes that work has been denoted to 'an unsatisfactory means to ulterior ends lying somewhere in the sphere of leisure'. In fact, the phenomenal rise of post-1950s consumerism and the concomitant decline of interest in production confirm this trend.

Second, regardless of whether we adopt Wright's three-fold classification of ownership, skill and organization, or Neilson's analysis of labour process, it is fairly obvious that members of the middle class constitute a heterogeneous group with diverse interests based upon one's location in the production system. While social workers employed by government would like to see more public funding for social welfare programmes, the interests of white collar workers in private financial institutions lies in downsizing public spending. In other words, the potential for economic collective action on the part of the middle class is very limited. More likely, their social movement stems from the common ground in the consumption sphere.

Whether or not consumption issues are capable of triggering a middle class movement? Obviously not every item on the shopping list carries equal political weight. Daily necessities as such food, housing and transportation are mostly regarded as private choices, but consumption of public goods — for example, education, environment, urban amenities and public safety — is of special importance for middle class members. With their better economic position, they do not have to concentrate effort and attention upon daily necessities in the same way as members of the working class do. On the other hand, most are not so well off that they can satisfy all their demands through markets. Most members of the middle class cannot afford elite private schools, well-guarded mansions and a membership at the country club. As a result, this social group not only cares about the quality of public goods but also heavily depends upon the state for their provision. To put it bluntly, members of the middle class are in an awkward situation because they crave goods that they cannot possess by their own effort.

The Chaishan conservation movement

Kaohsiung is the second largest metropolitan area in Taiwan. This industrial town has a dense concentration of basic industries, including steel, cement and petrochemicals. Industrial pollution has been a major, persistent problem, and the late 1980s saw the rise of violent anti-pollution protests staged by poorer communities living in the vicinity of industrial facilities (Ho 2005c). In the early 1990s, this style of grassroots environmentalism continued, but more importantly, middle class professionals began to pay attention to ecological issues, thus giving rise to a new stream of urban conservationism.

The initial focus of their attention was Chaishan (Firewood Mountain), a hilly area guarded by a navy port in the north and a commercial harbour in the south. Due to its strategic location, Chaishan and its seaside Taoyuan village were placed under military control in the mid-1930s by the Japanese colonial government. The post-war KMT government continued to restrict entry to this area and banned many economic activities up until the late 1980s, when Taiwan began to undergo the democratization process. The protracted presence of the military had an unexpected effect in that Chaishan was largely well preserved in terms of ecological resources.

A group of Kaohsiung residents — journalists, writers, medical doctors, lawyers and architects — came to know Chaishan with the gradual relaxation of military control in the late 1980s. At first they were simply a group of friends who enjoyed exploring the uncharted mountainous area during their holidays. Mesmerized by its pristine beauty, they were convinced of the need to do something more than merely trekking. They held a photography exhibition in a local gallery to disseminate their
message of the importance of the area to the general public. They then organized the Chaishan Nature Park Promotion Society (CNPPS) in 1992 in order to coordinate their efforts. The idea of establishing a nature park came after an inspirational vacation in Tokyo, where a bird sanctuary remained, well preserved, in the densely inhabited old town of Ueno. The peaceful coexistence of metropolis and nature became their objective, and meant concerted efforts to protect Chaishan from everyone from careless mountain climbers to greedy realty developers. These friends saw that Kaoshiung had been an unsightly industrial city, long overdue for an injection of humanism and spirituality. Living with nature was seen as wholesome and remedial, and Chaishan viewed as a last resort for the urban residents. To promote this goal, the group drew on its professional capacities and financial assets. The CNPPS wrote and published a brochure to publicize the natural beauty of Chaishan and the urgent need of conservation—a brochure financed by voluntary donations and distributed free of charge. Another 1993 publication, titled simply The Doctrine of Chaishan, collected various writings by CNPPS members. These publications helped to bring the future of Chaishan to national attention.

The CNPPS was never short of literary talent, which facilitated the translation of their demands into the most accessible language. At the same time, some CNPPS members were employed by two Kaoshiung-based newspapers, the Commons Daily and the Taiwan Times, and consequently could effortlessly transmit their message to the broader public. Soon the CNPPS became the most authoritative source of news regarding Chaishan. In the mid-1990s, the CNPPS also began a programme of environmental education, training volunteers to work as ‘ecology interpreters’ (shengtai jeshyhuooyan) who could serve as tour guides. This programme helped the CNPPS to recruit beyond the narrow circle of the founding professionals. Among the new recruits, schoolteachers predominated and played a vital role in further relaying the gospel of conservation to their students.

In the early years of the CNPPS, there were few contacts between conservation professionals and the local villagers of Taoyuan, as the former concentrated their attention on the area above settlement and reclamation. In the mid-1990s, the CNPPS staged a campaign against a real estate development planned for a disused cement quarry site in the east side of Chaishan, which had never before been a concern for Taoyuan villagers. Inevitably the advocacy for a nature park came into conflict with development-minded villagers. In 1993, the CNPPS contracted a well-known ecological activist to draft a proposal for future conservation and used this document to lobby the city government into more aggressive action. The idea was that Chaishan would be divided into several regions with varying degrees of accessibility and permitted activities. Taoyuan village was designated as a tourist region, while development bans would be placed on other areas of Chaishan. The report suggested the development of mass transportation and entrance fees in order to control the number of privately owned vehicles in the area. It called attention to the looming problems of wastewater pollution, land speculation, illegal construction and possible landslide. A stricter regulation of village housing was also broached (Taiwan Ecological Research Center 1993).

At first, city officials were sceptical of the proposal for a nature park, which, they claimed, did not constitute a legal entity such as a ‘national park’ or ‘urban park’. Frustrated conservationists suspected secret collusion between politicians and land speculators. In 1997, the tireless efforts of the CNPPS to educate and lobby were rewarded when the Kaohsiung City Government finally declared the establishment of Chaishan Nature Park, including all land over ten metres above sea level. The area encompassed around 1,200 hectares, though more than five-sixths of the land remained under military control. The CNPPS’s zoning proposal was adopted and written into law (Kaohsiung City Government 2003).

To present date, the evolution of Chaishan conservation appears to be a success story for Taiwan’s middle class. They became conscious of their rights and willing to take action when government initiatives were not forthcoming. Making use of the newly available democratic channels, they were able to lead public opinion and pressure officials. More importantly, when campaigning for a nature park, Kaohsiung conservationists fashioned a world-view that clearly articulated their aspirations for Taiwan’s middle class as a whole.

Citizen movement as the attempt to articulate middle class hegemony

In many ways, the CNPPS fitted neatly into the profile of the ‘wilderness crusades’ identified in Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997). Upper middle class participation, post-materialistic values and idealistic protection of ‘pristine nature’ were the conspicuous elements that placed the CNPPS at the polar opposite to residents, whose first concern was not the environment but their struggles to earn a livelihood. Simply put, middle class environmentalism strived for better life quality, while lower class residents strove for economic survival. However, it would be a gross misreading if we interpreted the CNPPS merely as a vehicle to promote the group interest of middle class professionals. As Eckersley (1989: 210–11) points out, such arguments are often guilty of crude reductionism and falsely homogenizing the middle class. Still, it is noteworthy that these Kaohsiung conservationists sought to articulate a common vision on behalf of the all middle class citizens (shimin). Their ‘doctrine of citizens’ as well as its practice was nothing short of a collective attempt to provide moral and intellectual leadership for the middle class—cultural hegemony, in the Gramscian sense.

In the context of early 1990s Taiwan, the appellation of ‘shimin’ was anything but usual. Before its reinvention by Kaohsiung conservationists, it was no more than a descriptive term that denoted an urban resident—not a positive identity implying progress, enlightenment and participation. During the late 1980s, the discourse of “popular society” (minjian shehui) came into fashion as many sectors rose in revolt against the ageing authoritarian rule (He 1995). At that time,
‘minjian’ stood for many nascent forces, including the angry, often violent, anti-pollution protests that erupted in many places. As early as 1987, one noted commentator used that term to describe the birth of grassroots environmentalism (Yang 1987). For conservationists, violence, no matter how justified, did not appeal to their middle class taste. This was the first reason why they sought to come up with an alternative for minjian.

Second, the term minjian was faulted for its imprecision; it could encompass almost everything that was not directly controlled by the government. A private enterprise, an NGO, a temple, equally qualified as minjian, even though the three had little in common. What was particularly vexing was the fact that minjian held differing attitudes towards the state (Chang 1989: 24). Kaohsiung conservationists knew this only too well. Chaishan’s landscape was not only devastated by negligent law-enforcing agencies, it was also encroached upon by commercial interests that enjoyed special political connections. In fact, the glamorous outcry to open Chaishan for development was couched exactly in terms of minjian. Thus, the term shimin came in handy as a rhetorical contrivance that carried participatory overtones of minjian while at the same time screening out the latter’s association with violence and commercialism.

From minjian to shimin, the question remained: why not call a spade a spade? If shimin was synonymous with urban middle class, why did Kaohsiung conservationists not adopt a more straightforward name? Here Kocka’s (1980: 152) observation concerning American and German middle class formation is pertinent: ‘while coalitio complaints were probably not usually expressed as the discontent, resentment, complaint or protest of a particular occupation or class, since they could hardly hope for a sympathetic reception from a public opposed in principle to special privileges’. As a result, middle class politics tended to speak from less conspicuous labels, such as the consumer, the taxpayer, the ordinary man and so forth. To be sure, this style of ventriloquist politics was useful in concealing their narrow class base. In addition, it served the purpose of persuading and mobilizing other class members who might possess different, if not contradictory, material interests. With the invocation of ‘citizens’, a new collectivity burst into the arena of public life and middle class conservationists were suddenly able to speak on the behalf of their compatriots.

In an article, one of the CNPPS members argued that ‘citizen consciousness’ (shimin yishi) has played a liberating role throughout the Western history. In feudalism, it was a sworn enemy against despotism; in modern times, it resulted in many forms of urban reform. Consequently, citizens as a group stood for rationality and progress (Cheng 1992). For the CNPPS, citizens now fought the conservative city government who obviously failed to meet the growing demand for a higher quality environment.

From the very beginning, they understood the need to broadcast their message through different channels in order to educate the public. As a conscious minority, they shouldeered the responsibility to enlighten their fellow citizens through educational events. Activities mentioned above, such as brochure distribution, photo exhibitions and environmental education, were all aimed at this purpose.

The political ambiguity of middle class activism in Taiwan

Only when this preliminary task was completed could ‘the general populace be gradually and spontaneously awakened, and their consciousness consolidated, and consensus formed’ (Wang 1992).

In their view, this style of peaceful and disinterested citizen movement was a more advanced form of environmentalism. Aggressive protests by pollution victims for monetary compensation, such as resulted from the Linyuan Incident (1988), or violent tactics to blockade a factory to stop pollution in Houchin (1987–90) were but the primitive stage. Both the Linyuan and Houchin protests took place in Kaohsiung metropolitan area, but the CNPPS activists did not give much attention to them. For them, monetary claims were nothing less than a betrayal of the sacrosanct environmental value, and violence should be always frowned upon. One CNPPS writer emphatically told me that the fundamental contradiction between capitalism and stewardship for the environment was located right in the ‘human mind’. If we could get rid of the ‘unnecessary tension’, we would not blindly follow the economistic way of thinking into exploiting nature ruthlessly. In other words, spiritual redemption can be deemed more important than institutional reform.

The CNPPS activists made it a rule to stress the idealistic dimension of their activism. In the initial years, the CNPPS decided not to be officially registered because they wanted to rely on purely private initiatives by renouncing the seduction of government subsidies. At first, the office and routine outlays were voluntarily taken care of by a supporting member who ran a local art gallery. The production of a colour brochure cost 600,000 NTD, but the bill was paid by a wealthy member. Furthermore, the CNPPS made it a rule to donate at least half of the profit when its members were invited to speak to outsiders. To use a Weberian expression, these middle class conservationists aimed to ‘live for the movement’, rather than ‘live in the movement’.

These altruistic gestures were critical for the success of their hegemony project. As stressed by Gramsci, renouncing one’s own shallow and selfish ‘economic-corporate interest’ helped to obtain moral leadership. Judging from the result, their efforts were extraordinarily successful. The Chaishan Nature Park was formed in 1997 when the KMT still held sway over Kaohsiung City. After the DPP assumed the local executive position, the CNPPS was further incorporated into urban governance through the then newly established Commission of Environment and Green Policy in 1999. The bi-partisan endorsement was demonstrative of the fact that conservationists succeeded in assuming the mantle of universally accredited spokesperson for Kaohsiung citizens as a whole.

An anatomy of conservationists’ hegemony

On a day-to-day level, the Gramscian notion of hegemony functions as a habituated perspective that has the power to alter societal values. Through the leadership of hegemony, everything appears intelligible and even commonsensical, so that it often guides our action without further reflection. The fact that the theory of hegemony is more or less comprehended worldwide means that it cannot be disaggregated
into components. To understand the politics of Kaohsiung conservationists, we can analyse the constituent themes that make up their ‘doctrine of citizens’. Middle class movements are usually prolific in their use of words, and their discourse provides us ample textual evidence to locate the sources of ambiguity. The following analysis of quotations of the conservationist discourse of Kaohsiung presents salient binary oppositions that appear frequently in such writings.

Knowledge versus ignorance

Many people plant their favourite trees in the mountain. By doing that they not only intrude upon the public domain, but also bring about the opposite of their intended result. Since many species are garden plants, their viability is questionable, while at the same time the original ecology is destroyed. It often happens that our ignorance in trying to save a plant results in the stigmatising or eradicating of more precious plants, even though we have good intentions.

(Newsletter for Environment Education Center of Kaohsiung Teachers’ Association 10 (2002/10): 17)

I cannot stand the sight of tea drinkers. I asked them how they disposed of their used tea leaves. Did they simply throw them on the ground? They directed me to a person called A-Chuan who was always in charge of tea brewing. ‘Who do you represent? Which school? Which governmental agent?’ Mr A-Chuan replied hostilely. I said, ‘I am not a representative of any organization.’ He said, ‘Don’t come to me if you do not stand for any organization, school or governmental agent.’ Patiently, I explained that tea leaf litter harmed the environment. Biodegradability did not mean we could throw away as much as we like. There was a limit for the microbes’ capacity to absorb our waste.

(CNPPS Newsletter (2004/12): 14)

As conservationists see it, only correct knowledge leads to good environmental practice. What they are particularly concerned about are half-truths and hearsay that could make even the best intentions an unwitting accomplice in environment harm. With this understanding, conservationists work hard to propagate ecological knowledge in the hope that Chaishan will not be harmed by popular ignorance. Thus, ‘Chaishan as a classroom’ is a recurrent metaphor in their writings. This analogy implies that CNPPS activists play the role of teachers who assume the moral authority over other less informed citizens. Clearly, the hierarchy between knowledge and ignorance was taken for granted among conservationists.

Taste versus vulgarity

The voice from the loudspeaker interrupted our conversation and scared away monkeys and birds. All of a sudden, the natural sounds in the mountain vanished, and what came after was the noise from the loudspeaker. A group of herb collectors arrived, led by a healer. No one stopped them so that a meadow was mercilessly cleared by thirty-plus persons and nothing left. (Takao Green Association 1996: 153)

Taiwanese are fond of adding crude amusement areas to the mountainside to enjoy karaoke and barbecue. Vulgar artificial entertainment facilities and the cement culture are unworthy of any true test of the human spirit.

(Takao Green Association 1996: 58)

Just as ignorance suffers from want of enlightenment, vulgarity suffers from a lack of aesthetic judgement. Unintentionally, both vices lead to the devastation of the environment. Conservationists firmly believe that there should be a quasi-religious attitude when approaching nature. Everyday leisure activities should be barred from entering this holy sanctuary. Bringing uncouth entertainment into the wilderness constitutes nothing less than sacrilege. For conservationists, observing nature unobtrusively is a joy in itself. As long as we leave noisy urban entertainments behind, we should be able to appreciate the wonder of the flora and fauna.

Spiritualism versus materialism

Some hill climbers chatter about the stock market and making money all the way. Some even bring a noisy radio with them. In this manner, Chaishan becomes an extension of their own living rooms or kitchens. There’s no more special feeling left here.

(Tu 1993: 185)

Let the abundant and vibrant life reappear in this grey and silent city. Let good air, gentle breeze and fresh water return to the urban alleys. Let the chirping of birds and insects come back to the memory of our life. Let city kids taste the fragrance of earth and tree leaves. May we have a glistening trail to walk along at misty dawn and dusk.

(Takao Green Association 1996: 55)

For conservationists, the environment offers us a chance to develop our spirituality that has long laid dormant in mundane everyday life. Our sensibilities and experiences are enriched through constant contact with nature’s abundance. To this end, we need to put aside our utilitarian concerns and purify our minds for a healthful injection of nature’s blessing. It is the injection of seedy materialism that brings about ecological disasters in Chaishan. Squatters, land speculators and restaurant owners (see below) repeat the same old mistakes by polluting this spiritual realm with mercenary considerations.

The three binary oppositions above constitute a hierarchy of values. The conservationists’ world-view is elitist in so far that it presents the cultivated minority as paradigmatic while denigrating many popular practices as morally
questionable and fundamentally wrong. With this mind-set, conservationists seek to use persuasion, coercion, or both to guide the unenlightened majority to correct environmental practices. Obviously, there is a thinly disguised strain of authoritarianism in this perspective.

On the other hand, democratic values are clearly at play in the evident sense that these environmentalists believe people should be empowered to make decisions and take action for themselves. By mobilizing from below, conservationists seek to challenge deep-seated values and entrenched interests, public or private, to make natural environment more accessible to city residents.

**Public welfare versus special interests**

Many good villagers in Taoyuan contacted us. They were angry at what Lin Chong-hong (a former Legislator) had done there and the illegal reclamation by vested interests. But if they dare to report it to the authority concerned, they might face a more miserable fate.

*(Newsletter for Environment Education Centre of Kaohsiung Teachers’ Association 2, November 2000: 24)*

The accommodation centre for the Yuan-hen Temple was built upon a wooded tract. But the land use was changed right before the scoping procedure of Nature Park in 1998. When the government was ready to invest a dubious matter, the temple quickened its construction ... It was difficult to understand why an eight-storey building would rise upon a slope where private houses were located merely two metres away. In case of an earthquake or other incidents, the casualties would be hard to imagine.

*(Takao Green Association Newsletter 5, 2002: 17)*

Politicians and religious institutions are culpable in such cases because not only do their business interests negatively impact the environment, they also endanger the safety of others. These protests highlight how public welfare is impaired when the environment is threatened by a powerful minority. In this case, conservationists made the clear choice to stand up against deprivations and seek to redress the wrongdoings.

**Bureaucratic inertia versus public participation**

Collecting signatures is the stupidest method in terms of efficiency, but nevertheless the most effective and steady way. Since we are advocating on behalf of a citizens' movement, we should get involved with Chaishan tourists persistently and thoroughly.

*(Takao Green Association 1996: 56)*

Our officials’ thinking is always simplistic. They claim that since people are already feeding monkeys, protection is unnecessary in Chaishan and that developing tourism is the only necessary task. It never occurs to them that protecting Chaishan is the best way to protect monkeys, the tourist market, and finally the green rights and health of Kaohsiung citizens.

*(Tu 1993: 276)*

Conservationists are confident and optimistic that more public attention will make better environmental regulation possible. At a minimum, the public can exert collective pressure upon officials so that corruption will not easily occur. Positively speaking, when people volunteer to care for their environment, useful ideas arise. At the same time, officials are often shown to be incompetent, especially when it comes to a novel issue such as environmental protection. Here the Kaohsiung conservation movement helps to instil a new democratic value that is instrumental to demystify the ‘Great and Capable Government’ idea propagated during the era of martial law under the KMT.

Chaishan conservationists are often divided between democratic and authoritarian values in their diagnoses and prescriptions for Kaohsiung’s environmental problems. This potential conflict in world-views created a series of confrontations, as seen during the realization of the CNPPS Nature Park in the late 1990s.

**Middle class versus villagers**

While Kaohsiung conservationists were able to consolidate their leadership among urban citizens, they came into an unexpected conflict with Taoyuan villagers who had been living in Chaishan for many generations. For Taoyuan villagers, military control had always been unbearable. In the past, the repressive political atmosphere made it impossible for them to speak out. With gradual liberalization in the early-1980s and subsequent democratization, the balance began to tilt in the villagers’ favour.

The late 1980s and early 1990s was a boom period in land and stock speculation in Taiwan. Demand for tourism surged as the many ‘new rich’ were willing to pay a premium for novel experiences. Taoyuan restaurants specialized in cuisine that included wild free range chicken (taiji) and seafood, both of which were locally produced. According to locals, there was a time when guests had to wait for tables to become available. At that time, many villagers gave up farming and devoted themselves to the more profitable restaurant business. At its height, there were more than a dozen restaurants and cafes in this small village of no more than 800 registered residents.

As more and more tourists came to Taoyuan village, its isolation from the city was reduced. As a consequence, the land speculation wave that surged in Taiwan’s major cities spread to this once isolated area. Locals sold their land to the newly rich, who built stately holiday mansions in place of the modest decaying houses. To be sure, the amount of private land ready for sale in Chaishan was quite limited. Most land transactions involved common land that was privately occupied and reclaimed for farming purposes. Purchasers obtained only the usage rights, not bona-fide ownership; however, they were still willing to invest in
Chaishan because it was rumoured that the government would soon privatize the occupied land at a very low price.

Local business interests and those of outside speculators were united in a common effort to remove the remaining military control. With the involvement of moneyed outsiders, the military came to face greater pressure. The early 1990s saw more elected representatives arguing for the early opening of Chaishan,⁰ and it was widely believed that these politicians' arguments were related to speculation interests. Emboldened, villagers grew more impatient with military control. Taoyuan villagers' once hidden resistance now bloomed into open public protests. In 1993, villagers staged a demonstration at the City Hall to demand privatization of the occupied land.¹¹ In 1996, they blocked a military base by pitching a pavilion tent in the main entrance in order to prevent their buildings from being listed as illegal structures.¹²

In November 1996, the military post that had regulated the entry to Taoyuan village for 46 years was removed without any formal announcement. From that point, the entire village settlement was open to anyone at any time, and a new post was set up only to guard the illegally reclaimed area. While villagers were celebrating their liberation, Kaoshing conservationists were the only group to be unhappy about this move. For them, it amounted to no less than an abnegation of responsibility on the part of the military.¹³ The CNPPS held a press conference to protest against the hasty decision to lift military control without regard for the environmental consequences.¹⁴ A new politics of conservation and development came into being in the wake of these developments.

Environmental imperialism?

For many Taoyuan locals, the nature park replaced military control as public enemy number one. Much to villagers' chagrin, the city government proved more willing to respond to the conservationists' demands and kept a watchful eye on their legally questionable businesses in farming, restaurants and land transfers. In other words, they felt victimized by middle class 'environmental imperialism' as their personal well-being was seen as secondary to that of the non-human species living in Chaishan.

Land use concerns regarding restaurants and holiday mansions was the most controversial issue. From the perspective of conservationists, they occupied public land, cleared forest and even privatized some beach enclaves. Their businesses were often ecologically harmful as well as illegal. A conservationist emphatically told me, "Taoyuan people should be ashamed of themselves in mistreating their homeland in this manner."¹⁵ But for the locals, it was a belated compensation for the injustice they had suffered for over two generations. Taoyuan villagers had made sacrifices for the sake of national defence, and consequently been robbed of opportunities to pursue a more prosperous way of life. "They claimed that Chaishan belonged to them because their ancestors had settled here much earlier, compared to the majority of Han immigrants in Taiwan and the KMT army."

The political ambiguity of middle class activism in Taiwan

Chaishan's monkeys were another bone of contention. Nineteenth-century Western explorers used to call Chaishan 'Ape Hill' for its abundant monkey population. During the military control era, villagers used to make extra income by catching monkeys and selling them. In traditional folk medicine, monkeys were precious as they were used in a special tonic meal with 'magical' healing effects. The 1989 Wildlife Protection Act in Taiwan listed native monkeys as an endangered species and ruled out any commercial killing, putting an end to this market. In addition, the gradual integration of Chaishan into civilian governance extended legal enforcement to this once secluded area and this made this form of hunting unsustainable.

For Chaishan farmers, monkeys had always been a pest. They fed upon their fruit orchards and raised their production costs. A local goat's milk producing farmer complained that a monkey caused him damage by milking his goat.¹⁶ It was frequently reported that monkeys robbed inattentive tourists of their possessions. My interviewees vividly described the way these smart creatures could open water taps and refrigerators, but they never learnt how to close them afterwards. Even worse, monkeys were said to 'sexually harass' local nuns by grabbing their thighs.¹⁷ A city councillor framed this issue in a criminal perspective: monkeys were thieves, robbers and rapists, and he demanded the city government to provide solution to this threat to public safety.¹⁸

Locals threatened to take the matter in their own hands if they weren't provided with monetary compensation for losses resulting from monkey preservation. From the perspective of conservationists, Chaishan monkeys symbolized the issue of approaching nature in a respectful manner. In the CNPPS brochures, a seemingly domesticated monkey was depicted as the tour guide to introduce Chaishan's ecology. The CNPPS later put a lot of energy into educating the public not to feed the monkeys in order to not alter their natural habits. On many occasions, CNPPS workers dressed schoolchildren in adorable monkey costumes and performed educational dramas to emphasize the need to protect Chaishan from human encroachment. Not surprisingly, one conservation activist ridiculed Taoyuan villagers' alleged victimization by monkeys and claimed that some of their stories were "beyond common sense."¹⁹ In many ways, Chaishan's monkey controversy followed the same fashion of animal politics that pitted southern California suburbanites against animal lovers (Davis 1998: 237-49).

In 2000, the CNPPS staged a city-wide campaign, collecting signatures to pressure city officials to demolish an illegal mansion owned by a former Legislator. The campaign 'Tens of Thousands to Rescue Chaishan' antagonized local residents who vowed to defend their subsistence rights.²⁰ When the city government sent a special taskforce to dismantle the mansion in question, a violent clash ensued. A local restaurant owner attacked two bystanding conservationists physically, resulting in a lawsuit.²¹ In the aftermath, Taoyuan villagers claimed they were being tyrannized by 'environmental protection bullies'.²²

In the controversy over illegal buildings, the CNPPS clearly had the upper hand, since they had established a good working relationship with city officials. By simply making a personal phone call to the officials in charge, they could
pressure the city government into action. On the other hand, villagers had become habituated to the fear of seeing their homes destroyed by the army during the military control era. Consequently, when conservationists stood shoulder to shoulder with the government demolition team, villagers immediately interpreted this as a threat to their homes even though most of the government’s actions only targeted illegally squatting restaurants and cafes.

The CNPPS activists appeared to find the villagers' animosity incomprehensible. Conservationists thought that their actions were well intended and thus they should not have suffered violence at the hands of the villagers. Thus, conservationists simply called the villagers 'barbarians' or 'bullies'. What conservationists neglected to see was the fact that their idea of a nature park was not based on the consent of residents.

In the 1993 CNPPS proposal, the Taoyuan village was designated the area of 'maritime culture and recreation'. Many sweeping changes regarding villagers' livelihoods were introduced: encouraging villagers to give up farming on squatted lands, the development of public transportation, the introduction of a daily quota for outside visitors, a unification of building styles, stricter regulations of building sites, and control of land speculation (Taiwan Ecology Research Center 1993: 54, 75-7, 100–1). Basically, middle class advocates prioritized ecological principles and held a negative view of the village economy. However, these measures, if duly implemented, would impose a heavy burden on Taoyuan residents, one even more onerous than that of the military control era. What was even more surprising was the fact that the residents were not consulted.

In the end, the city government adopted the idea of maritime culture and creation zoning, but refrained from implementing the details of the plan. Feasibility was most likely the main reason that the conservationists' grand vision failed to materialize. Still, it is startling that middle class conservationists never questioned their own credentials in trying to impose their vision upon the lives of others. It is little wonder that they encountered so much hostility from lower class villagers.

Conclusion

The politics of Chaishan, in a way, represent a conflict between liveability and livelihood that is common in many temporary urban areas across the globe. Key to this story is a scenario that Peter Evans (2002) describes: parochial communities are willing to abandon ecological goals in favour of livelihood, while middle class NGOs' idealist sponsoring of environmental cause is based upon their privileged status.

Its implications for environmental politics aside, the story of Chaishan reveals the enigmatic nature of middle class activism. While inspired by the noble principle of nature conservation, but admittedly somewhat disinterested in local affairs, a minority of self-conscious professionals were able to bring about a strong local movement that succeeded in changing public opinion and winning political support. By using the appellation of 'citizen', they made possible a citywide hegemony that united most of the urban residents in a common front.

But here we also see the structural limit of middle class activism. Without taking account of their privileged status, the conservationists unconsciously adopted a paternalist outlook towards lower class communities. They were naive in not realizing that their environmental vision was nothing less than shifting the environmental cost to the socially disadvantaged groups for the enjoyment of the better endowed; in short, they advocated a redistribution of resources to the better off. When the situation demanded it of them, conservationists adopted the humble posture of a citizens' movement working from below to petition officials, but when facing popular resistance from marginal communities, they quickly turned into law and order conservatives who demanded the full enforcement of the law by public authorities. In other words, they were democrats in opposition, and authoritarian once in political power.

To conclude, the source of political ambiguity is present in the social position of 'being in-between'. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the middle classes need the public provision of welfare in education, environmental protection and cultural activities to improve their quality of life. The fact that they are not able to secure these benefits through private market avenues implies that social movement demanding governmental action is the only solution. However, compared to members of the lower class, they possess enough resources to win the attention of both the public and the officials. Therefore, it is not surprising that conservation movements turn illiberal when facing opposition from below.

That said, the recent waning of middle class activism in Taiwan does not involve a value shift among its members. The story of Kaohsiung conservationism suggests that the middle class's ambiguity originates from its squeezer position. During the 1980s and 1990s, the middle class launched a collective campaign to enlarge its share of social resources in a time of declining authoritarian political order. At that time, its opponents were privileged bourgeoisie and as a result it had to play the role of progressive, populist and protestor. Once democracy was consolidated, a larger share of social resources was secured by the middle class. Now it had to worry about encroachment from the lower class, which harboured the same aspiration for bourgeoisie ideals. To protect its newly obtained share, the middle class abandoned its commitment for social reforms and became apolitical, or simply pro-status quo.

Needless to say, what we offer here is but conjecture, based upon a case study of one local conservation movement. Further empirical research is needed to test the validity of this hypothesis.

Notes

1 Hirschman (1970) also suggested if group members could easily leave their troubled situation behind (the so-called 'exit'), the less likely they would solve their problems by their own effort (the 'voice'). Tseng's Chapter 9 and Zheng et al.'s Chapter 10 highlight the cross-border mobility of middle class as China emerged as a magnet for talents. Does this China factor somehow reduce the propensity of taking part in reform movements? Previously, the disgruntled middle class could only rely on itself; now it was offered a more convenient option of 'exit'. Further researches are needed to assess the impact of middle class migration upon their domestic politics.


The political ambiguity of middle class activism in Taiwan


References