

Making Our Best Move with Audrey Tang and Taiwan's Digital Democracy

Anita Wen-Shin Chang

As I look outside my window to examine the smoky morning sky, a twenty-foot van slowly rolls by. Painted on its side is a silhouette of a horse-drawn covered wagon driven by a man in a cowboy hat in the front and another man loading the wagon from behind. Next to the image is the company name, "Make Your Best Move." The exodus of residents from the San Francisco Bay Area began with the coronavirus pandemic and continues with the fires raging across the entire US Pacific Coast, the worst ever in recorded history. Amid these trying times, my friend in Taiwan texted me, "Taiwan is safer than anyplace in the world." This feeling of safety, unlike in the US, speaks volumes to Taiwan's governing capabilities. This essay reflects on Taiwan as a critical method for the US and American studies by serving as a model and a mnemonic of democracy, a hard-won core value of the US. Through the figure and civil service of Taiwan's digital minister, Audrey Tang, this essay shows how this mnemonic works to understand that democracy is not guaranteed but must be fought for, and practiced with trust, flexibility, and adaptability.

As pressing examples, the climate crisis and global pandemic call for strong, swift, and compassionate leadership. Solving the intensifying climate crisis requires global cooperation and genuine political will. That is, the wreckage left behind cannot be used as fodder for continued unfettered globalized capitalistic gains that studies show, and our lived experiences confirm, are antithetical to maintaining the long-term health of planet Earth.¹ Furthermore, though several factors have led to catastrophic deaths surpassing 590,000 people in the US, the one factor that stands out is weak leadership. Interestingly, reports found that countries led by women were doing much better to mitigate and contain the spread of Covid-19.² One of these leaders is President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan.

With the 2016 election of Tsai, Taiwan's first woman president, I began my research on female presidents and prime ministers for my new film *Her Excellency*. When she was elected, I thought to myself: Why can't the US, a 220-year-old democracy, elect a woman president, especially since Taiwan,

a 20-year-old democracy, has done so? Electing a woman is no easy feat for most countries in the world. Despite the increase of democratically elected women heads of state since 1980, in the past ten years, the percentage of women presidents and prime ministers has hovered between 6 and 7 percent of the world's leaders. This means that global affairs that affect our daily lives are run mostly by men.

In 2016 the US came close to electing its first woman president, Hillary Clinton, who won the popular vote by almost 2.9 million votes. Many believe US electoral reform is badly needed, including eliminating the electoral college voting system. This is only one of many aspects contributing to the US's "low-functioning democracy," an assessment politely made to me by Torild Skard, former president of the upper Norwegian Parliament. Other major aspects involve election security issues, voting eligibility, voter suppression, low voter turnout, an entrenched two-party system, corporate campaign financing, a corporate-dominated media landscape, and, in my field of communication, the glaring lack of comprehensive media literacy education in the US's K–12 schools. While the US serves less as a role model for good democratic practices, its economic and military-industrial complexes continue to have formidable global influence.³

In the meantime, Taiwan's relatively young democracy is recognized as robust and dynamic, earning it a score of 93 for "Global Freedom" in Freedom House's 2019 annual "Freedom in the World" report, compared with the US's 86 and China's 10. I myself have experienced Taiwan's democratic practices and spirit of experimentation as an artist-in-residence and teacher from 2004 to 2010. I saw the creation of Taiwan's Indigenous Television in 2005, the first in Asia. I also had the fortune to experience state-of-the-art universal health care. Within a few months of President Barack Obama taking office, my doctor remarked, "Your president sent me a survey about our healthcare system."

Indeed, "Taiwan Can Help"—this is the phrase below the circular rainbow design on a T-shirt worn by Audrey Tang during an interview for *Her Excellency*. Tang is digital minister without portfolio, the youngest to serve in the cabinet, and the first openly transgender minister. Part of my film involves interviews with women who are in political careers, and I read about Tang in the *Irish Times*, after interviewing Mary McAleese, Ireland's second female president. The article described how both "innovation islands" could learn from each other, particularly since they are "small island states that have what might be diplomatically described as 'difficult' relationships with their overbearing neighbours."⁴

I met with Tang in Taipei on July 24, 2019. Ahead of this interview, heavy thoughts weighed on my mind, including the Hong Kong protests that were heading into their fourth month. As a US citizen, a Taiwanese American, and social justice activist, I live with the question: What do we do with the legacies we inherit, like the legacies of Empire we experience today? For this film, the added question is, for whom does politics serve? The moment Tang started to speak, this heaviness was lifted and transformed. Tang jumped right into answering my question about government transparency, which they see as a “lack of mutual listening, and that’s indeed the main thing that we’re working toward, rather than just a mere rating.” A genius by all accounts, having programmed their first software at age eight, Tang continues to contribute to the open-source software community. After spending some years in California’s Silicon Valley, they returned to Taiwan. Tang explains that joining this “fabulous community of the Internet Society” was their first encounter with political culture that “centers around radical transparency, around civic participation, around the idea of rough consensus, or ‘people can live with it.’”

Tang reminds me that Taiwan’s democracy and the internet emerged together. As a result, democracy is seen as a “social technology,” where participatory, deliberative, and direct democracy are equally practiced. After the thirty-eight-year martial law was lifted in 1987 and before the first presidential election in 1996, Taiwan’s social sector, community-building, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) activities grew. Tang remarks, “So we’re in a very unique place where the social sector has higher legitimacy in many public service issues as compared to the central government, which is why people always just roll up their sleeves to contribute to democracy because to us it’s very new.” And this social technology is “very malleable.” “I’m an optimist when it comes to democracy, and also the flexibility of bureaucracy,” Tang says.

Tang’s job is improving the democratic process in Taiwan through “digital democracy,” which Tang defines as “making the State transparent to the people; not making the people transparent to the State.” With public policy web platforms like Join and vTaiwan, both built using the open-source software Pol.is, Tang brings people and the government together in dialogue to build a “rough consensus.” Tang explains, “Given different positions, are there some common values after all? And given common values, can we deliver innovations that solve those issues without leaving anyone worse off?” On Join, the public can petition, even under a pseudonym. Tang recalls the petitioner named “I love elephants and elephants love me,” who proposed the gradual banning of plastic straws. After five thousand signatures, policymakers met the

fifteen-year-old petitioner. Two years later, Taiwan sees boba tea straws made with recycled material.

Digital democracy only works, however, if access is not an issue. Tang explains that in Taiwan, President Tsai made broadband a human right. “Anywhere in Taiwan, even the rural indigenous or remote islands, you’re guaranteed to have 10 megabits per second, enabling high bandwidth, bilateral video communication.” For computer hardware, Tang reassures that tablets are easily available to those who cannot afford them. Access to electricity is also guaranteed, and renewable energy co-ops can even sell energy back to the state-owned Taipower electricity company. And in 2019, curricula on media literacy and critical creative thinking are imbued in all classes from K–12.

At the Social Innovation Lab (SIL) where we met, the public can visit Tang every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., in forty-to-sixty-minute blocks. A transcript and/or video of the meeting is published on the SIL website for asynchronous participation. For those who cannot be in Taipei, Tang travels biweekly around the island to meet with the “local co-ops, social entrepreneurs, and people working on regional revitalization.” When they meet to talk with multistakeholder panels, the twelve ministries are also participating virtually, decreasing the layers of bureaucratic communication. For Tang, digital democracy is less about representation than about people “*re*-presenting their positions.”

In speaking with Tang, I realized that they do not take their position as digital minister or take Taiwan’s democracy for granted. Tang’s foray into politics began with the Sunflower Movement’s response to the unconstitutionally passed Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA) between Taiwan and China on March 17, 2014. In an unprecedented act of civil disobedience, hundreds of students and activists occupied the Legislative Yuan from March 18 to April 10, 2014. During this occupation period and after a series of violent police crackdowns, over 350,000 protestors participated in the largest pro-democracy rally in the history of Taiwan. Tang was responsible for internet support and connectivity in the Legislative Yuan, in conjunction with the “neutral” civic hacker collective g0v (“gov zero”), in order to facilitate communication between the occupiers and the public. The occupied Legislative Yuan was livestreamed, and people on the streets joined over twenty NGOs to deliberate on the CSSTA, cross-pollinating their ideas into a set of consensus items that the head of Parliament accepted.

One of the legacies of the Sunflower Movement is the “reverse mentorship” program whereby each minister was required to maintain someone from the “occupy movement, from the facilitators, from the communications team, as

a kind of consultant, on engaging the public.” Tang was the reverse mentor to the minister for cyberspace law, Jaclyn Tsai. After a year, President Tsai appointed Tang as digital minister without portfolio.

Tang expresses her indebtedness to the feminists, like former vice president Annette Lu (2000–2008), who came before, enabling Tang’s current position and the LGBTIQ+ movement. They serve as role models, showing how they can “integrate and embed themselves into the government establishment and design the right regulatory structure so that it is slightly more NGO than GO.”⁵ These feminists’ advocacy work created the Gender Impact Assessment, a report required of different ministries when they are rolling out policies lasting over a year. Reports are reviewed for unintended repercussions like increasing the gender gap and hurting gender mainstreaming, or better using terminologies. Taiwan is also proud that women make up 40 percent of the Legislative Yuan, the highest in Asia. These achievements, Tang believes, laid the groundwork for legalizing same-sex marriage in May 2019, another first in Asia for Taiwan. “Marriage equality, now that’s a big deal . . . they won’t ever confuse Taiwan with Thailand now. Because we have marriage equality; they don’t yet. We’re very much willing to help them,” Tang says smiling.

Tang embraces the in-betweenness of being nonbinary and “postgender,” and with no party affiliation—a position that they believe is helpful, given Taiwan’s strong two-party system. Tang remembers Taiwan during martial law and understands that democracy was hard-won: lives were lost, sacrifices made, and families violently uprooted and separated. Farther back, Tang’s and my parents’ and grandparents’ generation remember life during Japan’s authoritarian colonial rule. “Not going back to the martial law days is a core value, another instrumental value here in Taiwan. So we’re kind of forced to innovate, to find out ways to effectively counter disinformation without resorting to censorship.” For a digital minister, countering disinformation is a formidable task, given China’s increasing efforts to exert soft power through online and broadcast media since the Kuomintang has gotten cozier with the Chinese government in 2008.⁶ Tang discusses countering disinformation as “lines of defense”—partnership with the International Fact Checking Network and Co-Facts, run by volunteers without government funding; disinformation clarification pop-ups on social media and phone apps; and campaign financing reform on social media platforms to prevent nonvoting citizens from donating to influence election outcomes.

If maintaining those lines of defense does not keep Tang busy enough, she must counter the Chinese pressure on the international scene to marginalize and

make invisible Taiwan as a democratic sovereign nation. The United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are among the international organizations that Taiwan cannot join due to China's refusal to consider Taiwan a nation-state, a requirement for membership and participation. Absence has its own presence, of course. In Audrey style, Tang had been legally attending the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) held in the UN building, as a robot without a passport. The discussion centered on sustainable development goals, something Taiwan is eager to share. Tang describes the event: "I just in Taipei, along with some five other people just navigated the robot into a UN building. And because the robot doesn't need a passport, so it's very easy for us to get the head of that particular meeting to say, 'Of course.'" Because this meeting was livestreamed, the press exposure angered the Chinese government. The IGF moderator responded, "We're talking about policies. We're not talking about politics," Tang recounts.

Conversely, the WHO has been criticized for placing politics above public health as evidenced by its recent refusal in May 2020 to include Taiwan in discussions related to Taiwan's rapid containment and effective mitigation of Covid-19. As of December 2020, Taiwan has seen 793 coronavirus cases and 7 deaths, among the lowest in the world. With a medical mask shortage in the US, I wear Made in Taiwan masks sent to me by my Taiwanese relatives to protect myself from Covid-19 and the smoke. The "frontier" before all of us is not only habitable Earth itself but the in-between spaces beyond ego and prejudice, to find our common grounds for our mutual survival. So how do we make our best move?

Taiwan as method and mnemonic of democracy offers an opportunity for American studies to critically assess the conditions of implementability toward higher-functioning democratic practices in the US, such as shared core values, a trustworthy public-service sector, community building, a flexible bureaucracy, and broadband access as a human right. Taiwan's digital democracy, moreover, prides itself on what Tang calls the "wisdom of the crowd" to raise Taiwan's visibility and voice in the world, not from the top down, but from the demos.

It means that we're solving not only our own problems, but sharing our experience that become indispensable to partners everywhere around the world. And once we have that, then Taiwan is safe, because nobody would want Taiwan to fall back into a nondemocracy or into authoritarian hands.⁷

The world's safety, therefore, is dependent on still-thriving democracies, like Taiwan, that if lost, would be too devastating to ignore.

Notes

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1. See Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
2. Amanda Taub, "Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better with Covid-19?," *New York Times*, May 15, 2020 (updated August 13, 2020), www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage.
3. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Empire, Twenty Years On," *New Left Review* 120 (November 1, 2019), newleftreview.org/issues/II120/articles/empire-twenty-years-on.
4. Charlie Taylor, "Innovation Islands: What Ireland and Taiwan Can Learn from Each Other," October 5, 2017, www.irishtimes.com/business/technology/innovation-islands-what-ireland-and-taiwan-can-learn-from-each-other-1.3244330.
5. See Doris T. Chang, *Women's Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
6. Chien-Jung Hsu, "China's Influence on Taiwan's Media," *Asian Survey* 54.3 (2014): 515–39.
7. Taiwan Can Help, taiwancanhelp.us/.