



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TAIWAN STUDIES

5 (2022) 403–414



brill.com/ijts

## *Report*



# **‘Keywording Taiwan’: Report of the 26th North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA) Annual Conference, Online, 20–21 May 2021**

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### **Abstract**

This report details the origination, organisation, and reflections of the 26th North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA) 2020/2021 (2020 + 1) conference. The theme—‘Keywording Taiwan’—aims to identify core issues, historical turning points, critical populations, and fundamental theoretical arguments on Taiwan among transregional and interdisciplinary scholarship. We challenged scholars to synthesise decades of literature and, from there, offer cutting-edge and timely research to answer fundamental questions as well as effectively respond to the various injustices during this uncertain time. In this report, we discuss how a ‘keyword’ is not a fixed concept but a restless confrontation from within, as practices of deconstruction and recontextualisation that frame the recurring issues for Taiwan studies. We also discuss how we intentionally structured our conference to be more accessible, inclusive, and interactive. Lastly, we walk through our major reflections, concluding with unfinished

conversations that foreshadow the theme of the next NATSA conference—‘Taiwan Studies in Application’.

## Keywords

Taiwan studies – North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA) – East Asian studies – keywords in Taiwan studies

### 1 Conference Snapshot

Against the backdrop of COVID-19 and its ensuing uncertainties and difficulties, the NATSA 2020 + 1 team showed great creativity and tenacity in putting together NATSA’s first online conference in May 2021. Our online conference produced remarkable results, some only possible due to its virtual nature: we welcomed 1,317 counts of attendances from around the world, including Taiwan, the United States, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia. The online format reduced barriers to participation for some, particularly graduate students and junior scholars, due to hefty travel costs and schedule constraints associated with in-person conferences.

The theme of the conference, ‘Keywording Taiwan’, aimed to identify critical concepts, issues, turning points, peoples, and theoretical lenses that shape and guide Taiwan studies. Building on the 2019 conference theme ‘Destabilising Empires from the Margin’ (Hsu & Hsiao, 2020), the 2020 + 1 conference’s dialogue centred on Taiwan—Taiwan as a keyword—while remaining critical of power and positionality in our knowledge production process. Identifying and interacting with the keywords is in itself an act of recognising boundaries of our current knowledge, and more importantly, what has been excluded, understudied, made invisible, and marginalised. By doing so, we hoped to become more cognisant of our personal and collective knowledge hegemony and find ways to break these limitations.

The programme comprised a total of 30 events, three roundtable discussions/forums, 24 concurrent panels, two networking workshops, and one art performance, all reaching a level of excellence that lived up to NATSA’s reputation as one of the biggest scholarly communities of Taiwan studies. We saw research from literature, sociology, environmental studies, anthropology, women and gender studies, history, communication studies, Indigenous studies, theatre and drama, political science, community research, and rhetoric. Participants dialogued with one another to find transdisciplinary commonality

in subjects and critique and push disciplinary, epistemological, and methodological boundaries.

The undertaking to expand and reflect on keywords was made possible not only by those who contributed to the debates and discussions but also by the NATSA 2020+1 team itself. This team was composed of talented, caring, and resourceful graduate students and junior scholars (who started as graduate students but became junior scholars during the two years of prolonged commitment) across a diversity of intellectual positions and geographical locations.<sup>1</sup> It is the people that make things possible and worthwhile—the team members, the participants, the scholars and practitioners that we cite and learn from, the people around us that inspire and lead us, the ancestors who once nourished the land before us, and the future generations for whom we work so hard now to make sure they can thrive.

We borrow from their wisdom, endeavours, and insights to find ways forward in this chaotic and trying time amid the threats of pandemic, severe weather and climate emergency, information warfare, and rising authoritarianism, neoliberalism, anti-intellectualism. It is in times like these that we see the true potential for people and things never imagined before.

In this report we will describe our major discoveries on the quest to 'Keyword' Taiwan, provide critical reflections on the theme, share our observations of some emerging dialogues, and finally, invite readers to join the unfinished conversation started at the 2020+ conference.

## 2 Reflective Statements

As the co-programme directors of the 2020+ conference, we are honoured to be engaged with NATSA's organisational and intellectual community. The motivation behind the main theme of the conference derives from our shared interest and care for this precious community that values not only scholarly exchange but human connection. We are humans first, scholars second, and this is the central belief we held when designing the conference programme. It was and will continue to be our goal to expand the impact and network of this community and value every opportunity that allows us to learn, relearn, and unlearn what Taiwan and Taiwan studies are and what they do.

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<sup>1</sup> For the list of team members, see <https://www.na-tsa.org/2021planning-committee>.

### 3 Keywording Taiwan

The way scholars frame research usually involves creating or selecting keywords. The 26th NATSA conference perceived 'keywording' as a scholarly practice and adopted it as the main framework for the proceedings. We accentuated two points: (1) a keyword indexes a world of knowledge and experience while leading to a different methodology and praxis—all of which shape and transform the development of Taiwan studies; and (2) a keyword is embedded in a broader world of relations. Its generalisability might allow the scholarship of Taiwan studies to engage in conversations with other cultural, geopolitical, and disciplinary terrains. We aimed to identify core issues, historical turning points, critical populations, and fundamental theoretical arguments on Taiwan among transregional and interdisciplinary scholarship. As both a geographical margin of imperial orders and a political-economic hub between leading powers, Taiwan has witnessed diverse dynamism and key transitions at various levels. During the past quarter-century, Taiwan studies has demonstrated its vitality by foregrounding competing heterogeneous historical experiences and attempting to bridge a diversity of disciplines for current issues.

We emphasised the flexible meaning of 'keyword' to inclusively and expansively include words, phrases, symbols, and events not typically found in standard dictionaries. Conference participants were invited and encouraged to define the keywords of their choice. By incorporating personal lived experiences, the conference illustrated critical reflections on the conceptual presuppositions, historical premises, and theoretical grounds of Taiwan studies to which self-created keywords can meaningfully contribute and be celebrated.

The conference theme partly took its inspiration from the book *Keywords of Taiwan Theory* (2019). One of its editors, Dr Shu-mei Shih, shared the journey of cultivating a society dedicated to engaging and creating theories of Taiwan in her remarks at the opening roundtable. Dr Shih addressed the issue of 'epistemic in/justice', calling attention to the role of Taiwan not just as a receiver of imported theories but as an active producer of theories. Theories emerging from Taiwan, as suggested, must take into account US neocolonialism in Taiwan, Taiwanese Han settler colonialism, and the interrelations between local and global discourses.

Pertaining to the interlocking complexity of Taiwan, it has been even more critical to use and understand a keyword rhetorically to unveil the messages beyond the word alone. One example can be noted in Dr Wen Liu's elaboration of the word 'war', which is often associated with the Taiwan independence project or Taiwan—China relations. As Dr Liu explained, while Taiwan's independence was perceived as a threat or a war-making project by the Beijing government, it was not the problem of identity but competing interests and

relations that produced wars. Rather than wars on the battlefield, Dr Liu brought attention to everyday war, such as battles against the global pandemic, economic recession, and social problems, to demonstrate how the rhetoric of war operated as a site of social and theoretical formations. The discussion of the keyword 'war' was further expanded in the conference's public event, which shed light on the diverse aspects and mechanisms of information warfare.

Additionally, the conference illuminated not only the possibilities but also the limitations of keywording as a method of studying Taiwan in the hope that this conversation would reveal the scholarly hierarchy manifested through keywords, recognise the marginalisation of certain fields of study, and call to action attempts to dismantle academic dominance and hegemony. Dr Wei-ting Yen presented keyword clouds generated from the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* at the opening roundtable which reflected Han Taiwanese centrism. Words like 'democracy' or 'diversity' did not properly reflect the perspective of Austronesian Indigenous peoples in Taiwan. The insight and discovery echoed Dr Ciwang Terya's illumination of the keyword 'Indigenous people'. Dr Terya emphasised the importance of focusing on the shared sense of oppression and resilience as well as connection, which matters as many Indigenous communities around the world continue to combat anti-Indigenous racism while working to heal historical traumas. The lack of visibility of 'indigenous' or 'indigeneity' as a keyword not only limits access to the field but reinforces settler colonial hegemony. The invisibility or lack of visibility of certain keywords further results in the marginalisation of certain fields of study. Recognising the invisibility of certain keywords urges scholars to identify and cultivate new forms of relationality beyond the current disciplinary inequality and disparity.

Lastly, it was our goal to offer a platform for discussions and responses to the emerging keywords that had not yet been well addressed in the scholarly realm at the time of the conference. For instance, the COVID-19 situation not only triggered a global health crisis but also worked to intensify multiple forms of injustice, including anti-Black and anti-Asian racism, police brutality in Hong Kong and elsewhere, and unequal access to healthcare. The conference also called attention to how Taiwan studies—as both a disciplinary formation and a political praxis—could respond to the injustice of various forms and scales during this uncertain time.

#### 4 Critical Reflections of the Theme

COVID-19 has profoundly challenged every aspect of life and disrupted networks and systems, demanding change socially, politically, economically, and

geographically since late 2019. It has also challenged us to reflect on what it means to engage in scholarly exchange. The 26th NATSA conference was scheduled to take place in May 2020 but was postponed due to the global outbreak of the pandemic in the hope that the event would resume as previously planned the next year. Unfortunately, the pandemic persisted longer than expected, and the post-COVID world was not yet in sight. To uphold NATSA's mission and responsibilities under such circumstances, the 26th conference was transferred to a virtual format.

Certainly, it was not an easy journey for the members of the conference programme committee to adjust not only the format but the entire programme and events to properly address the reality of the time. As the conference theme and call for papers were announced in late 2019, the postponement of the conference resulted in an unforeseeable situation in which many research topics or themes were no longer applicable to the current situation. The programme committee thus endeavoured to include additional keywords, such as pandemic and racism, and redesigned the conference programme to better reflect and respond to the changing environment and society. For instance, the keyword 'information warfare' was first selected as the theme of the public event for the 2020 conference as a 'timely keyword' for its connection to the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan. However, information wars evolved almost beyond recognition in the age of COVID-19. Therefore, we reframed the event to include discussions that addressed not only the events and issues that were prevalent in 2019 but also those that had taken on new significance across 2020 and 2021. For instance, the increase in fake news was partially attributed to the opacity of government information and policy regarding COVID-19 and its public health issues. Taiwan's international relations with other countries had also experienced changes due not only to the pandemic, but also to the information civil wars that had been taking place within the United States (concerning both the pandemic and the 2021 presidential election) and China (concerning the pandemic).

Another change that was made in response to the pandemic was the collective decision of the programme committee members to drop the role of discussant in each panel. COVID-19 has had a major impact on different aspects of life, including on scholarly practices. Recognising the difficulties of research during this unprecedented time, we first announced that full paper submissions were not required to encourage participation and mitigate the pressure of presentation. Second, the role of the discussant was substituted by a moderator to foster a space for more direct conversations among presenters and audiences. It was our pleasure to see vigorous discussions and exchange of

feedback on developing research topics. We encouraged presenters to continue developing their ideas and to perceive NATSA as their support system not only academically but personally. With the positive feedback we received from removing the discussant role, we encourage other academic associations to reflect what power dynamics are embedded in the often taken-for-granted structure of academic exchange.

NATSA, as an academic association, strives to be more inclusive pertaining to the themes and disciplines of the papers submitted and accepted. Unfortunately, while the number of paper submissions from some fields remains consistent each year, some continue to lack representation. One task of the programme team has been to create a platform for diverse research interests and topics, and to take the initiative to reach out to interested parties. We were excited to witness the increase in submissions from disciplines that had not previously been well addressed. For instance, the president of the 25th NATSA conference, Dr Eric Siu-kei Cheng, had encouraged and invited scholars in the science, technology, and society (STS) field to participate in the conference. After two years of efforts, we were able to hold a panel that contained four amazing and inspiring papers dedicated to STS at the 26th conference. We also experienced a bloom of quality submissions navigating gender and sexuality, a subject that, like STS, has been cultivated in recent years by the NATSA programme committees with targeted invitations to scholars to submit papers or join panels. These successes in spotlighting previously underrepresented disciplines echo back to the conference theme of recognising and actively pushing back against the limitation of keywording a body of knowledge.

## 5 Emerging Dialogue

In the closing forum, 'To Taiwan Studies', panellists Dr Brian Bernards, Dr Wendy Cheng, and Dr Eric Siu-kei Cheng highlighted the importance of 'rethinking boundaries' and 'building relations' as practices of keywording Taiwan. Such boundaries can be symbolic, relational, or embodied, and such relations could be created through multiple reimaginations and introspections.

Dr Eric Cheng chose 'more-than-human Taiwan' (Tsai et al., 2016) as the keyword to expand to, especially 'microorganism'. His own studies tell a story of the interconnection of microorganisms, algae, milkfish, water, probiotics, and milkfish farmers, wherein the farmers might be the narrators, and yet the main characters are the more-than-human. The microorganism is an invisible yet indispensable part of the ecology, without which human society

is infeasible. Indeed, the microorganism has already been an integral part of the folk knowledge of Taiwan milkfish farmers for decades; it has simply been rendered undetectable and imperceptible by existing epistemological boundaries within the scholarly community. Similarly, in the case where solar panels are installed on fishponds and fish farms, migrant birds, fish, and water plants adapt to create a new ecology, one in which the relations and dynamics alter in ways that call not just for governmental but also scholarly attention. He urged Taiwan studies scholars to view nature as non-human actors or actants that impacted the day-to-day existence and activities of humans. This rethinking and recalibrating of boundaries ushers us into a new imagination of building relations.

Extending the invitation to rethink boundaries and build relations, Dr Bernards accentuated 'indigeneity' as one keyword that should guide Taiwan studies. He began his remarks with land acknowledgement—an act honouring the native peoples whose land was taken from them hundreds of years ago by colonisers, on which they have suffered mistreatment, genocides, deprivation, rape, erasure, and other atrocities, even to this day. This acknowledgement led the way for his observations of 'epistemological injustice', raised also in the opening session by Dr Shu-mei Shih. Through a discursive framing not based in reality, this epistemological injustice has failed to recognise or outright denied certain lived experiences. In recent years, this injustice has been challenged and pushed back on through endeavours that centre local knowledge and community or foreground marginalised subjects such as Taiwanese hip-hop or TransAsia queer activism. These works, among others, show us how intercommunity referencing is a way to newly theorise overlooked reality on the ground, and how 'intersectional care work', formed with resilience, vitality, creativity, and presence, has been a resistance strategy used by Indigenous youth as well as immigrant workers.

Such care work led us to an important emerging dialogue about *the personal* and *the intimate* in the intellectual. Dr Wendy Cheng narrated the personal and the intimate through the story of her positionality as a relative outsider to Taiwan studies, and with humility, her discovery of the lack of knowledge on Taiwan and Taiwan's history as a Taiwanese American. Embracing her own 'ignorance', she embarked on a journey to question, unlearn, and relearn her identities and the politics implicated in them. This journey took her, and us, back to her parents' story of moving to the United States from Taiwan during the White Terror era and their prolonged journey and delayed return when her father was blacklisted by the Kuomintang government. Raised to be apolitical, she rediscovered the politically charged and fraught past of Taiwan later in

life and started her own questioning of Taiwan's irrelevance and relevance to global politics (Shih, 2011).

The position of vulnerability that Dr Cheng took in narrating her family's past and her own 'ignorance' inspired the sharing of the personal and the intimate by the panellists and participants. Laced in these stories were wounds and scars in our scholarly pursuits; such pursuits are tracking tolls on physical and mental health. Multiple studies have shown how our current academic institutions are putting increasingly excessive and pervasive pressure on people inside them, especially the young. Stacking on top of an already dire situation, COVID-19 and its devastating effects—lockdowns, social distancing, hiring freezes, budget cuts, funding suspensions, cancelled research plans, and so on—mean the least resourced and least powerful in academia suffer stress levels that are hard to imagine. The 'mental health crisis' in graduate education (Evans et al., 2018) demands our attention from all angles, and NATSA hopes to create a space for members of our community to start exploring their own mental health needs.

It is for this reason that in this year's conference we designed two networking sessions to bring peer support to the forefront of our scholarship. The first session was inward-facing, focusing on mental health. The workshop was structured with small groups encouraging participants to introspect and share mental health concerns and practices. We especially raised caution against the neoliberal discourse that mental health problems and the healing of them are merely personal responsibilities; rather, structural factors play a big part in the mental health crisis we find ourselves in now.

The second session was outward-facing. Young scholars from current and previous NATSA teams who have recently finished their PhDs shared their experiences of job hunting inside and outside academia, within or cross-disciplinary. Beyond discussing the know-how, techniques, and skills of searching and finding a job, speakers and audience participants also narrated the *intimate* and *personal* experience in being a 'commodity' in the job market; they talked about employer rejections, self-doubt, and the dwindling monetary resources with time passing and no job offers in sight; they recounted tales of perseverance, adjustment, and support networks. We invited all participants to turn on their webcams and 'be on stage' with the speakers to highlight our belief that, with or without a PhD, everyone is equal in their pursuit of knowledge and human decency.

What is emerging from the 2020 + 1 NATSA, we observe, is a shifting of focus back to the human beings behind the research, projects, proposals, reports, and statistics. This refocusing is desperately needed amid mounting disquiet.

## 6 Unfinished Conversations

Recognising *the human, the intimate, and the personal* brings us face to face with our inadequacy. We often ask ourselves: What are we, NATSA, as an organisation? Who are each of us inside this organisation and in the world? What contributions are we making? To whom and for what? Who are the haves and have-nots in this structure? And how do we manage our unlimited imaginations with limited sources? The questions are many, but the answers are few.

We move forward with realistic optimism that what we invested in at the 2020 + 1 conference will become keywords in the future. Power and privilege come with responsibilities, and the responsibilities of NATSA dictate that we reach out, create room, and make something new possible. One such new possibility is indigeneity, a theme that emerged at the conference in the opening session, throughout the programme, and in the closing forum. More action is needed.

When we started planning the conference in late 2019, the programme team made a conscious effort to include Indigenous scholars and to discuss Indigenous issues. This proved to be a challenging task. To begin with, we had limited knowledge of who to invite, and those we hoped to have the honour of inviting, despite their enthusiasm, had schedule conflicts. After several rounds of setbacks, we started to sense the excessive and yet invisible burden they might be shouldering. There are simply not enough Indigenous scholars from Taiwan, and those that exist are spread too thin. The long-standing structural inequity this state of affairs points to may be beyond our capacity to resolve. Still, we hope to raise awareness of such invisibility in the structure of academic labour in the field, and we aspire to become a platform where Indigenous studies, issues, and scholars can genuinely engage in meaningful conversation.

Another unfinished conversation is the disciplinary representativeness of the NATSA programme. There were submissions of high quality and of topical importance, but we did not have enough submissions on similar subjects to create a panel. We had to exclude these submissions, much to our regret. This situation is not novel, and we hope to test innovative panelling options in future to make sure underrepresented disciplines can be included as they should.

Finally, our conversations often end with the 'so what' question, loaded with angst to be more public-facing, and to connect with the community, to give back to the real world. To our great pride, many former NATSA staff are now core members of crucial public-facing scholarship outlets and services, including the Plain Law Movement, Guava Anthropology, Street Corner Sociology, Who Governs TW, and Philosophy Friday. Knowledge application and public

education are two of the many ways that members of the Taiwan studies academic community can bring academic insight into real-world practice. The NATSA 2022 aspires to continue this unfinished conversation and contemplate and devise new routes for the 27th conference on 'Taiwan Studies in Application'.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr Ta-yang Diane Hsieh for her feedback and suggestions for this report.

### Notes on Contributors

#### *JhuCin Rita Jhang*

is NATSA's president for 2021–2022. She has a PhD in communication studies from the University of Texas at Austin, and her research involves family communication, LGBTQ issues, gender and sexuality, and health communication. Aspiring to be an activist researcher, she currently studies the negative health impact of exclusionary policies and cultural practices.

#### *Chee-Hann Wu*

is a PhD candidate in the field of drama and theatre at the University of California, Irvine. She holds an MA in drama from the University of Alberta, Canada. Her research focuses on puppets' life, being, and their ability to embody and re-enact memories, experiences, and trauma that have previously been suppressed. Wu's dissertation research uses puppetry as a lens to look at Taiwan's cultural and sociopolitical environment, its colonial past, and its path to democracy. She is also drawn to the intersections between practice and theory, as well as performance and activism.

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