

## **Is Taiwan a democracy like the others?**

*Female Power in Taiwanese Politics*

Pauline Geyer

May the 27th 2024

## About Asia Centre

Founded in 2005, Asia Centre is an independent research institute that holds debates and issues publications on matters relating to international, strategic, economic relations, as well as the political and social transformations underway in the Asia-Pacific region. At the crossroads of university research as well as public and private decision-making, Asia Centre researchers identify critical regional issues and analyse them in-depth, taking into consideration both local and global dimensions. Asia Centre's programs are developed with a vast network of partners, companies and major specialist centers in Europe, North America and Asia. The Centre carries out joint operations with these groups, for a better interpretation of ideas and issues. The conclusions of these meetings, such as the results of the work carried out using original sources by our researchers, are widely distributed through the Centre's publications as well as through international journals, books and medias.

## About Asia Sparks ⚡

Asia Centre has developed a new program: Asia Sparks, a coaching program for the new generation of researchers. It brings together seniors, called coaches, and Sparkers, young researchers wanting to produce intellectual work on Asia. Each research project is referred to as a "Spark." This project is coordinated by Arnaud Leveau, Associate Professor at Paris Dauphine University, and the coaches consist of various experts from Asia Centre. Ultimately, the work produced may be published in Asia Trend issues.

## About the author

Pauline Geyer is an intern at Asia Centre. She is studying International Relations and Social Sciences at the University of Erfurt, Germany with a particular focus on security issues regarding Asia.

In 2019, she spent her gap year in Malaysia, which aroused her interest in Southeast Asian history and politics. To brighten her understanding of Asian cultures and political relations, she studied as an exchange student at the Department of Political Science at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan.

In the next academic year, she will pursue her master's studies in the dual degree program between SciencesPo Paris and Peking University in the field of International Security.

## Female Power in Taiwanese Politics

Pauline Geyer

May 27th, 2024

In 2024, Taiwan elected its second female vice president, following the election and re-election of President Tsai Ing-Wen as the first female president in 2016 and 2020. The legislative elections held in 2024 set an impressive record for women's representation, with 47 women elected out of 113 members of the legislature, accounting for 41.59 per cent of the seats.<sup>1</sup> This achievement continues to position Taiwan as a global leader in women's political participation. The global average for women's representation in legislative bodies is 26.7 per cent, therefore Taiwan's performance exceeds both the global and the Asian average.<sup>2</sup>

But this development has not come out of nowhere: Taiwan's remarkable progress in women's political participation is the result of sustained efforts and structural changes in its political landscape. These include legal reforms, advocacy by civil society organisations and the growing influence of women in various sectors of society. The journey towards gender equality in Taiwan's political sphere reflects broader global trends but is also deeply rooted in the island's unique historical, cultural and social context. By examining the factors that have contributed to this progress, we can gain valuable insights into how other nations might increase women's representation in politics and create more inclusive governance structures.

To understand this development, we first need to explain the leading figures of female participation in Taiwanese politics. In the twentieth century, Taiwanese feminists selectively appropriated various strands of Western feminism to improve women's status and address women's needs. The lifting of the martial law in 1987 created a political climate that allowed Taiwanese feminists to end their self-censorship and contribute to the diversification of feminist discourses and the growth of NGOs in Taiwanese civil society.

Annette Lu is a pivotal figure in this transformation. Known as post-war Taiwan's pioneer feminist, Lu authored *New Feminism* (新女性主義) in the 1970s, calling for the revision of gender-biased family laws and critiquing Confucian patriarchy. Despite joining the Democracy Movement relatively late, Lu's impact was profound. After Taiwan transitioned

---

<sup>1</sup> Lee Young-Im (2024): Female representation significant, Taipei Times, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2024/01/24/2003812531>

<sup>2</sup> Wan Ying Yang (2018): Beyond Number – Women's Representation in Taiwan's Post-reform Legislative Elections, Taiwan Journal of Democracy Volume 14 No.2, p.51-72

into a nascent democracy in the early 1990s, she was elected to represent Taoyuan in the Legislative Yuan and became Taiwan's first female vice president in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

Another key figure is Chen Chu, the first woman to join the inner circle of Taiwan's Democracy Movement (Dangwai) during the martial law era (1949–1987). Known for her exceptional communication skills and organizational prowess, Chen recruited college students to support dissident political candidates and acted as a courier of confidential messages within the dissident community. During the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979, she and Annette Lu were the only two women among the eight Formosa staffers court-martialed and sentenced to long prison terms. After her release, Chen co-founded the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986, Taiwan's first opposition party since World War II. Elected to represent Kaohsiung in the National Assembly in the early 1990s, she later served as Minister of Labour and then three terms as Mayor of Kaohsiung, demonstrating her enduring influence in Taiwanese politics. The mid-1990s marked another watershed in the transformation of Taiwanese feminist discourses and women's movement strategies, with autonomous women's movements emerging with the objective of promoting women's rights.<sup>4</sup>

As Taiwan transitioned toward a post-industrial society, Taiwanese feminist discourses and movement strategies began to mirror those of their democratic counterparts in the West. In the 1990s, lawyers affiliated with Taipei's feminist NGOs contributed to the authorship of several pro-women legislations, held press conferences, gathered signatures for petitions, and lobbied in the Legislative Yuan for the passage of various bills. In 1995, the newly elected mayor of Taipei, Chen Shui-bian from the opposition DPP, established the Commission for the Promotion of Women's Rights (CPWR, fuquanhui), marking the beginning of a partnership between NGOs and the government in policymaking. This partnership on Taipei's municipal level served as a model for creating a new welfare state, and after the DPP became the ruling party in 2000, some of the women-friendly policies that required NGO participation in resource allocation and implementation were made applicable nationwide.<sup>5</sup>

The pioneering leadership of figures like Chen Chu and Annette Lu within the DPP paved the way for Tsai Ing-wen. Rising through the party ranks to become DPP chairperson, Tsai was elected president of Taiwan in a landslide victory in 2016 and re-elected in 2020. Her presidency marked a significant milestone in Taiwan's political history, emphasizing the continued influence and presence of women in the highest political positions. In 2024, Hsiao

---

<sup>3</sup> Doris T. Chang (2018): Studies of Taiwan's Feminist Discourses and Women's Movements, *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, Volume 1, p.90-114

<sup>4</sup> Cindy Sui (2016): Taiwan, the place to be a woman in politics, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36309137>

<sup>5</sup> Cal Clark, Janet Clark (2002): The Social and Political bases for women's growing political power in Taiwan, Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies Number 3

Bi-khim was elected vice president, adding to the list of influential female leaders in Taiwan. Prior to her vice-presidency, Hsiao headed Taiwan's economic and cultural representative office in Washington in 2020, underscoring her diplomatic and political expertise. Hsiao's rise to vice president continues the legacy of trailblazing women in Taiwanese politics.<sup>6</sup>

Many of Taiwan's female politicians, achieved powerful positions without coming from political families, illustrating the progressive and inclusive nature of Taiwan's political environment. A significant factor contributing to the high percentage of women in Taiwanese politics is the implementation of gender quotas. These quotas mandate that women must occupy half the "at-large" seats in the legislature and one out of every four seats in local council elections. Historically, Taiwan used the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) and Multiple-Member District (MMD) electoral systems, reserving approximately 10 percent of the seats at all levels of its representative bodies for women. This system facilitated women's entry into politics but did not fully address gender parity. In 2005, constitutional reforms introduced a more robust gender quota system, mandating that half of the Proportional Representation (PR) party list must be women. This change coincided with Taiwan's shift to the Mixed Member Majoritarian (MMM) system. Under this system, 70 percent of the Legislative Yuan seats are elected through a Single Member District (SMD) system, while 30 percent are elected through PR. This reform significantly increased the representation of women in the Legislative Yuan, resulting in women holding more seats. The quota system ensures that women have a substantial and growing presence in Taiwanese politics, addressing historical imbalances and promoting gender equality. It requires political parties to include a significant number of women in their candidate lists, thereby enhancing women's electability and political influence. The system's success is reflected in the substantial and sustained increase in female political representation, contributing to Taiwan's position as a leader in gender equality in politics.<sup>7</sup>

The quota system, combined with the pioneering efforts of early female leaders and the structural reforms of the post-martial law era, has created a political environment in Taiwan that supports and encourages the participation of women at all levels of government. This progressive framework not only advances women's rights but also enriches Taiwan's democratic processes and governance. Over the years, the number of women legislators has far exceeded these quotas, leading some to argue that they may no longer be necessary. Nonetheless, these structural supports have played a crucial role in ensuring substantial and growing participation of women in Taiwanese politics.

---

<sup>6</sup> Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan) (2024): Vice President Bi-khim Hsiao, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/649>

<sup>7</sup> Wan Ying Yang (2018): Beyond Number – Women's Representation in Taiwan's Post-reform Legislative Elections, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* Volume 14 No.2, p.51-72

However, while the quota system has increased the number of women in legislative positions, the highest executive positions in Taiwan remain predominantly occupied by men. Despite the progress, men still hold the majority of ministerial positions in the Cabinet, reflecting ongoing gender disparities in political power.<sup>8</sup> It shows that the quota system might give more women better chances to gain a seat in the parliament, nevertheless the president itself decides who is going to be in their cabinet. Despite the expectation that Tsai Ing-wen, as the first female president, would perhaps set a good example, she opted almost exclusively for male ministers. Therefore, it needs to be emphasized that women play an important role in Taiwanese policy but are still not fully equal in their chances. Furthermore, women are often relegated to roles considered "soft" or traditionally feminine, such as those related to social and health issues, rather than positions associated with "greater" influence and decision-making power. This highlights that while quotas can enhance female participation, they do not fully address structural inequalities and societal perceptions of gender roles.

The quota system serves as a useful mechanism for increasing women's representation and normalizing their presence in politics. For other countries, Taiwan's experience with gender quotas could provide a model for enabling more women to gain seats in parliament. However, it is crucial to recognize that quotas alone cannot resolve all issues inherent in unequal systems. A society must be ready to embrace gender parity for quotas to be truly effective. Female participation is vital for the strength of democracy, and Taiwan's ongoing efforts towards gender equality in politics offer a valuable example, even as challenges remain.

In conclusion, Taiwan's progress in women's political participation is the result of a complex interplay of historical developments, legislative reforms, and the tireless efforts of pioneering women. While significant developments have been made, the journey towards full gender equality in politics continues.

---

<sup>8</sup> Irene Lei (2020): Tsai Ing-wen's new cabinet, the most "male" in history: What does the female participation rate mean?, Womany, <https://en.womany.net/read/article/24324>