

Lu Hsiu-Lien and Ashley Esarey. My Fight for a New Taiwan: One Woman's Journey from Prison to Power. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2014, 314 pp. ISBN: 9780295993645 (hardcover).

This book is an insightful autobiography of a Taiwanese activist and feminist leader who played a significant role not only in Taiwan's transition to a modern democratic country but also in the process of turning the island into a more gender equal society. Lu Hsiu-lien, also known as Annette Lu, traces the gradual process of her personal evolution from an ordinary woman to a high-ranking politician. The youngest of four children, she came from a relatively humble family of Hoklo origin (native Taiwanese). If, in a society controlled by mainland Chinese and dominated by Confucian patriarchal ideology, Lu Hsiu-lien's gender and ethnic group put her at a disadvantage, her perseverance, combined with the support of some family members (she often mentions the guiding role of her father and elder brother), allowed her to become an influential political figure both domestically and internationally.

The book is divided into ten main chapters, an introduction and an epilogue. The first chapters are about the growth of Lu Hsiu-lien's political awareness. They outline the significance of a Taiwan independence movement abroad intersecting with the democratic movement at home. Kept in the dark with regard to Taiwan's history and indoctrinated by the Nationalist education system, Lu Hsiu-lien only developed a critical understanding of what her people had experienced when she went abroad on vacations and for study. Thus, exposed to these unknown facts and new perspectives and committed to change the status quo in Taiwan, she decided to return to her country and stand for election to the national assembly. However, as a consequence of her involvement in a pro-democracy mass rally, where protesters clashed with police, she was jailed. Here the pace of the book slows down. In the stillness of her life in prison, exposed to intimidation and coercion, Lu Hsiu-lien lived with the fear of possible execution. Eventually, six years later, thanks to international pressure, she was released. The narrative regains speed with Lu Hsiu-lien's rehabilitation as a political figure. The political arena had changed extensively in Taiwan while she was in jail: the supremacy of the island's mainland Chinese was drawing to a close, enabling a transition to a more legitimate and inclusive political system. In such a vibrant environment, Lu Hsiu-lien strengthened her position as an international activist and, simultaneously, as an actor in national politics. Internationally, she campaigned for women's rights and the recognition of

Taiwan's right to exist. In Taiwan, she held office in the Legislative Yuan (1993-97), acted as a policy advisor to the first Taiwan-born president, Lee Teng-hui, was elected as Taoyuan County magistrate (1997-2000), and eventually became vice-chairman during Chen Shui-bian's administration (2000-2008).

Lu Hsiu-lien's autobiography contains a number of keys to understanding recent trends in Taiwanese politics. For instance, Taiwan has high levels of female participation in politics. As in other Asian countries, efforts to bring more women into the political system began with the introduction of quotas and the 1946 Constitution stating that in each legislative body a number of seats should be reserved for women. Yet, a peculiarity of the Taiwanese case is that many female politicians do not belong to politically active or influential families. Lu Hsiu-lien comes from a humble family background and rose up the ranks in government over years, thereby becoming a role model and promoter of this ideal.

However this book should not be regarded simply as an account of a female politician's path to power and her influential role in the democratic transition of her country. It is also an important ethnographic work, contributing to our knowledge about traditional and religious customs, expectations surrounding gender roles as well as popular beliefs and practices in a nation that has gone through significant changes in the last half century. In fact, Lu Hsiu-lien's life experiences and her constant struggles, being torn between modern and traditional values, public and private spheres, reality and the ideal, introduce readers to the many contradictions which have characterised Taiwanese society in the last few decades. In this regard, Lu Hsiu-lien's life could be interpreted as the product of the mixing of two crucial factors: a chauvinistic society that considered women as inferior to men and a repressive rule that denied Taiwanese people control of their own territory and culture as well as the right to speak their mother-tongue and to decide the destiny of their land. Lu Hsiu-lien, as a woman and a Taiwanese, struggled to challenge this unequal order and to act as a voice for both these groups. Although these issues seem to be resolved in modern-day Taiwan, an analysis of everyday social practices and relations still uncovers legacies of the clashes produced by the island's ethnic and gender divides.

Lu Hsiu-lien's compelling and insightful analysis loses its depth particularly in the last chapters as she offers only limited details about more recent events of her life, such as her time as vice president under Chen Shui-bian and the reasons behind her failure to win the nomination as presidential candidate. As these points are omitted, it is difficult to understand

the possible paths and alliances endorsed by the opposition party (Democratic Progressive Party) more recently. Despite its hasty ending, this autobiography remains an important contribution to our understanding of Taiwan's unique social and political development created by the external dictates of its international status and rivalry with the People's Republic of China, and the internal dictate of negotiations between civil society and the state.

(Lara Momesso, University of Portsmouth)