TUG OF WAR
The Story of Taiwan

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY JUDITH VECCHIONE
DISTRIBUTED BY WGBH EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION AND WGBH
BOSTON VIDEO
VHS, 87 MINUTES, COLOR, 1998
IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Reviewed by Vincent K. Pollard

In 1978, US President Jimmy Carter and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping did not anticipate an unintended consequence of politically isolating Taiwan: Instead of forcing closer political relations with the People’s Republic of China, isolation intensified Taiwanese identity.

The geographic separation imposed by the Taiwan Strait is also political. Judith Vecchione’s Tug of War: The Story of Taiwan helps students understand that the question “Who should rule Taiwan?” is not settled. Sequences from this video have enhanced student learning in three of my introductory political science courses and two upper-division Asian studies classes. Short excerpts or even the entirety of this movie will enhance high school classes in geography, world history, and Asian studies. Since teachers at any level want their students to view with appreciation, discuss with intelligence, and write with focus, I recommend they enhance screenings with appreciation, discuss with intelligence, and write with focus.

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For example, they could be asked to identify which parts of the video illustrate imperialism, colonialism, authoritarianism, militarization, national identity, legitimacy, and society-foreign policy linkages. While well-read undergraduate students may have heard of Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon, Beijing, and Washington, DC, this video will give them a few surprises.

In an early sequence, Tug of War notes the routine character of Taiwanese rebelliousness in the face of an expanding Chinese empire. By gracefully blending interviews, archival film, and black-and-white photographs, the tenuousness of Taiwan’s links with previous governments in China is emphasized. Noting Taiwan’s role as a prize for the winner of international conflicts, Tug of War shows how Japanese colonialism, the suppression of political opposition by Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (Nationalist Party), and the Cold War shaped Taiwanese self-identification as Taiwanese rather than exclusively as Chinese.

Together with pertinent readings, Tug of War suggests that the question of who should rule Taiwan cannot be answered in the context of a single political entity, but must be answered in terms of how political entities interact with each other. By the early 1990s, three waves of feminist movements had affected Taiwanese politics. Similarly, Tug of War barely hints at the indigenous peoples. While KMT presidential candidates failed in the elections of 2000 and 2004 (before winning in 2008), teachers should point out that the positions of government officials and other KMT officials interviewed during the final years of President Lee Teng-hui’s tenure (1988–2000) were accurate at the time of the interviews.

Teachers with differing objectives may complement themes in Tug of War with a viewing guide for students. Themes from the video illustrate imperialism, colonialism, authoritarianism, militarization, national identity, legitimacy, and society-foreign policy linkages. While well-read undergraduate students may have heard of Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon, Beijing, and Washington, DC, this video will give them a few surprises.

Also, women in Taiwan and indigenous Taiwanese deserve more attention. Although courageous Taiwanese women leaders in the dangwai movement are depicted and interviewed in Tug of War, teachers might point out that by the early 1990s, three waves of feminist movements had affected Taiwanese politics. Similarly, Tug of War barely hints at the indigenous peoples. While KMT presidential candidates failed in the elections of 2000 and 2004 (before winning in 2008), teachers should point out that the positions of government officials and other KMT officials interviewed during the final years of President Lee Teng-hui’s tenure (1988–2000) were accurate at the time of the interviews. Teachers with differing objectives may complement themes in Tug of War with and handouts or material from other videos.

VINCENT K. POLLARD is the author of Globalization, Democratization and Asian Leadership: Power Sharing, Foreign Policy and Society in the Philippines and Japan (Ashgate 2004; reprinted 2007). He teaches in the University of Hawai’i System. Pollard edits the online Taiwan Cross-Strait Directory and the Chinese Cultures Abroad WWW Virtual Library.