

Writing Hannah Arendt in Taiwan: An Arendtian Account of Intellectual Responsibility

Tu Kun-Feng

Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, National Sun-yat Sen University, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan

Prologue: The intellectuals' vocation

On very few occasions did Hannah Arendt explicitly discuss the meaning of being an intellectual. However, in a draft held by the Library of Congress titled “Intellectuals and Responsibility”, she asserted that:

To say the truth—that is the only responsibility the intellectuals, insofar as they are intellectuals. The moment they stray away from this path they are citizens, they are in politics and defend their opinions. That is their right and we all do it and have to do it. But we have no right to claim that because we are intellectuals we are the “conscience of the nation”.¹

Arendt embodied this intellectual spirit not only by defending the truth during her reporting on the Eichmann trial but also by fulfilling her role as a citizen. She persisted in engaging with the public, refusing to retreat from the fierce criticism she received until her death from readers, Jewish groups, and friends. In this sense, being an intellectual entails two distinct commitments: speaking the truth and engaging with the citizens.

If we accept that researchers and teaching fellows in universities and institutes are intellectuals, we must expect them to fulfill these responsibilities. This is particularly true for those employed by public universities, whose salaries and research fundings are supported by taxpayers of the political community. To a certain extent, *as public servants*, they possess a duty to contribute to their field not merely out of personal interest, but for the public good. Furthermore, *as intellectuals*, they have a duty to speak the truth and respond to the public, ensuring their research genuinely benefits society.

As an Arendtian scholar and research fellow at a public university, I accept these responsibilities and strive to contribute to the Taiwanese people. I am not alone in this endeavor. My colleagues and I founded the Hannah Arendt Society of Taiwan. We write book reviews and online articles, translate her works into Mandarin, and organize workshops, reading groups, public speeches, and academic conferences to ensure her thought is widely understood within Taiwanese society. While Arendt’s definition of intellectual responsibility may seem self-evident, it is regrettable that in Taiwan, many intellectuals—particularly those in public institutions—lack this self-consciousness.

¹ Hannah Arendt, “Intellectuals and Responsibility” in *Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress. Essays and Lectures* (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, mss11056, box 74), 1967, Image 2 from the link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105601226> [Search date: Dec. 18, 2025]

Authoritarian legacies in the academies of Taiwan

Although Taiwan has undergone democratization for nearly three decades since 1996, the process of transitional justice remains incomplete. Consequently, authoritarian legacies linger on this small island, including within its academies. A primary obstacle to transitional justice is that the former authoritarian party, the Kuomintang (KMT), remains a dominant political force in Taiwanese politics. While the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has attempted to normalize the country's democracy during DPP's government, the KMT frequently characterizes these attempts as "political persecution".

One might consider a hypothetical analogy: imagine if the Nazi party had remained a major party in the German parliament, accusing the government of persecution whenever it attempted to consolidate democracy. This analogy reflects the political reality of Taiwan today. Many KMT supporters harbor nostalgia for the authoritarian regime—the "good old days" of stable governance (absent street protests) and economic booms (achieved through exploitation and the banning of labor strikes). Accordingly, this demographic often criticizes transitional justice as political oppression. Recently, some have even turned to supporting unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC), believing that PRC rule might realize their nostalgia. This attitude mirrors the mindset Arendt criticized in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*: following an authoritarian leader without question and viewing politics as inherently "dirty" businesses. Consequently, they believe it is safer to avoid political discourse and obey the government, viewing politics as the exclusive enterprise of elites. I call this the "KMT mentality", a proclivity that persists among KMT supporters in the academy and stands in direct opposition to Arendt's conception of intellectual responsibility.

Personal story

When I completed a paper analyzing Taiwan's transitional justice issues and their connection to epistemic injustice, I encountered unimaginable difficulties during the peer-review process. These obstacles often constituted flagrant infringements of research ethics. My manuscript was rejected by major political science journals in Taiwan; in some cases, rejections were issued without a substantial review, accompanied only by a brief note stating that the paper did not "fit the objective of the journal". Anonymous reviewers frequently displayed hostility toward the topic itself, deeming it unworthy of research despite my comprehensive literature review. Some reviewers suggested I analyze the topic more "scientifically" to avoid echoing the "DPP political rhetorics", while others refused to

admit that transitional justice could lead to epistemic injustice at all.² Although the paper was eventually published, I was shocked to discover that, even after 30 years of democratization, many scholars still possess this “KMT mentality”, viewing transitional justice not as a normalizing democratic process but as a source of political disturbance. It is profoundly unsettling that these individuals are *scholars* who, as Arendt argued, are supposed to speak the truth.

This mentality is not limited to ardent KMT supporters. During my time as an assistant professor, I observed that even scholars who genuinely value democracy—typically those over the age of 50—possess an implicit “KMT mentality” of which they are unaware. These scholars do not dismiss transitional justice as mere rhetoric; rather, they exhibit passivity toward political affairs and the general public. They tend to remain in their ivory towers, avoiding contact with “dirty” daily politics. Furthermore, they often disparage civil engagement—such as public speaking or writing editorials—as a “waste of time” or “meaningless” for a scholar. They view the “responsibility” of a scholar solely as research, labeling those who engage with the public as “slackers”. However, if faculty at public universities are public servants, are not those who hide in ivory towers the true slackers?. By deeming public engagement meaningless, they neglect Arendt’s call for intellectuals to participate in public debate, thereby disrespecting the taxpayers who support them.

Hannah Arendt and the Sun Flower Student Movement

My story is merely the tip of the iceberg. The lingering “KMT mentality”—whether implicit or explicit—may be viewed as an authoritarian legacy that dies hard, or perhaps as a collective trauma resulting in a desire to distance oneself from political conflict. However, the hostility toward Hannah Arendt in Taiwan’s political science academy appears to be less a trauma and more an intentional stance, particularly following the Sunflower Student Movement in 2014.

Hannah Arendt’s political thought was introduced into Taiwan as early as 1990, which was just 3 years after the martial law was lifted. Gradually, Mandarin translation of her work was also available in Taiwanese book stores. Arendt’s thought was studied in the academy. Around 2000, there were two former researchers from Taiwan’s highest research institute Academia Sinica who wrote journal articles and book chapter on Arendt’s thought: Ying-wen Tsai (a male scholars of western political thought, not the former president of Taiwan) studies Arendt, read her text against the background of history of western political thought, and interpreted her thought into a theory of democratic way of life, while Yi-huah Jiang compared Arendt with other liberal thinkers

² My argument was that under the authoritarian regime, almost all of the distribution of research resources, such as job position and fundings, are crony distribution. That is, the authoritarian party funds those who favour and supports the party, which leads to an unjust distribution of the resources. As a result, the scholars under the authoritarian regime can only produce knowledge that favours the regime and the society can only spread such knowledge. This brings in epistemic injustice and “fake” knowledge to thereaders and the students. Those scholars who did not support or even try to criticise the regime were either unemployed by the universities for good or put into jail.

such as John Locke to draw implication for the newly establishment liberal democracy of Taiwan. Yi-huah Jiang has friendships with many renowned and senior scholars in the political science field of Taiwan, on the one hand, and has good relationship with the KMT party, on the other hand. Jiang was appointed as the premier of the former president Ying-jeou Ma (who belonged to the KMT party) and thus sworn in as the President of the Executive Yuan in 2013, serving as the chief of the administration sector of the government. However, the Sun Flower Student Movement in 2014 was a watershed event not only for his career but also academy's attitude toward Arendt.

The 2014 Sunflower Student Movement became a watershed moment for both Jiang's career and the academy's attitude toward Arendt. The movement arose in opposition to the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), which protesters viewed as a form of "economic unification" with the PRC. Following failed negotiations, protesters occupied the Legislative Yuan and later attempted to occupy the Executive Yuan. The latter occupation was met with excessive force; riot police employed water cannons and batons, injuring over 150 people. This eviction was widely believed to have been ordered by Premier Jiang. After the movement, he step down and leave the Executive Yuan.

I was a protestor in that movement (though not at the Executive Yuan), and I was shocked that a scholar of Arendt could order the violent suppression of a nonviolent civil movement. To me, this act was a blatant betrayal of Arendt's spirit of political action. Significantly, Jiang's actions shifted the academic reception of Arendt. Because Jiang—a friend to many senior political scientists—was forced to step down following a movement associated with civil disobedience, his academic allies began to view Arendt not as a theorist of freedom, but as a theorist of political disturbance. Today, while she was and is still popular in the civil society, she was unpopular among many political scientists and historians of political thought in the academy of Taiwan.

Epilogue

Writing about Hannah Arendt in Taiwan is not an easy task. Many senior scholars continue to view such work as worthless or a waste of academic resources. I frequently receive anonymous reviews claiming her thought is either unimportant or unworthy of research, often ignoring existing literature to justify rejection. These experiences force me to question how the "KMT mentality" persists in the Taiwanese academy and why scholars so easily abandon their intellectual responsibilities. Every time when I received such anonymous reviews with their clear decision of "rejection" of publication, I always feel painful trying "to love the world" of the Taiwanese academy. Under the shadow of the past authoritarian legacy, being, living, and surviving as an Arendtin scholar in Taiwan is and will never be easy.