The power of contexts: Taiwanese feminists’ making space in gender equity education

Abstract

This paper has focused on two issues—first, the importance of the socio-political contexts in which gender reform in education was proposed, and second, feminists' actions in making best use of the opportunities thrown up by a confluence of social factors. The social, economic and political transformations of the 1980s saw the rise of a 'new' state both supposedly and in fact more responsive to the needs of NPOs, legislators, local representatives, parents, opposition politicians and private companies. In effect, this opportunity was carved out by the deliberate strategies of a coalition of feminist activists, who took the lead in making gender part of a wider programme of educational reform. The gender reforms that eventually passed entailed the participation of educational reformers in broad terms, as well as the women’s movement and professors from academic women’s or gender studies. This paper, then, seeks to place changes in educational policy within a broader societal context of the evolution of new forms of state-society relations, describing, variously, the interplay between political, economic and social forces; the challenges faced by the women’s movement; the role of the state; and the impact of globalisation and international discourses on education. In conclusion, despite the conscription of many civil society feminist activists to state processes of policy-making, there is still value in perceiving education as a state sector in the Taiwanese context. The inclusion of gender in state educational programmes certainly owes to the campaigning of feminists, who were initially positioned outside both educational and para-state establishments. Any victory won by feminists, though, has been partial: on the one hand, the conventional state is always ready to assert its pre-eminence in education, and on the other, many tensions and contradictions remain in the directives concerning gender that activists have secured.
Taiwan enjoys a long history of authoritarian control dating back to the Chinese Qin Dynasty (221 BC.- 206 B.C.). Even though the Kuomintang regime (KMT) was evicted from the Chinese mainland, taking refuge in Taiwan in 1949, far from slackening, state control became (if anything) more repressive with the imposition of martial law. The past twenty years, however, have witnessed significant political, economic and social transformations in Taiwan. Taiwan's economic structure, in particular, has undergone a dramatic reconfiguration. In the political sphere, martial law was lifted in 1987, with a broad array of social movements urging Taiwan to become a more liberal society. In his work on the social, political, and economic contexts of 1980s social movements, Hsiao (1992) distinguishes three periods in the island's transformation. In the first, from 1947 to 1962, state forces in the form of the KMT held absolute sway over Taiwan's social and economic direction. In the second, from 1963 to 1978, Hsiao (ibid.) identified economic forces as being in relative command. The KMT's prioritisation of economic growth allowed the emergence of some non-state (or private) economic actors in a context, nonetheless, of KMT economic dominance. The third stage, from the 1980s onwards, saw ‘social forces in mobilization’ (ibid.), with a plurality of private interests coming together in Taiwan's economic boom. These economic ructions necessarily heralded decisive social and political change.

This paper, then, seeks to place changes in educational policy within a broader societal context of the evolution of new forms of state-society relations, describing, variously, the interplay between political, economic and social forces; the challenges

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1 The KMT (Kuomintang), founded by Dr. Sun Yet-Sen, overthrew the Chi Dynasty in 1911 to establish the Republic of China. Since 1949 the Communist Party have assumed oversight of the country, establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) thereby ousting the KMT.
faced by the women’s movement; the role of the state; and the impact of globalisation and international discourses on education. Just as historians of Taiwan describe three phases in the island's liberalisation, the history of Taiwan’s educational reforms with respect to gender divides reasonably neatly into three distinct periods. Before the 1970s, education remained very much the province of the state, with women's movements existing, if at all, in embryonic form subject to state control. The launch of the *Awakening* magazine in 1982 marks the beginning of a second wave, in which the women’s movement increasingly gained autonomy. In 1996, inaugurating a third period, women activists took up executive and consultancy roles in state apparatuses for the first time, entering into partnership with the state in order to effect top-down change. Using the documentary evidence and interview with policy-makers and activists, I revisit this history of social changes and explore the ways Taiwanese feminists took advantage of these changes and initiated gender reform in education in each of these periods. In other words, this paper focuses on the policy contexts of gender education in Taiwan-- the intersection of politics, gender, and education within related policy development on gender education. In addition, it sets the stage for an analytical description of how feminist activists struggled for space in education.

**STRONG STATE CONTROL**

The inception of the women’s movement in Taiwan can be traced to the period of the Japanese occupation in the 1920s (Yang, 1994). The rise of the contemporary

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2 In general, four stages are identified in the evolution of the contemporary women’s movement in Taiwan: first, the ‘new feminism’ put forward by Lu Hsiu-Lien in the 1970s; second, the establishment of *Awakening* magazine under the leadership of Lee Yuan-Jhen in 1982; third, the rise of a diverse range of women’s organisations after the lifting of martial law in 1987; and last, the multiplication and splitting of women’s organisations in the 1990s under different banners and programmes e.g. religious, lesbian, professional etc. (Jhou & Jiang, 1990; Wang, 1999; You, 2000). Significant historical events mark watersheds for these distinct periods. I do not adopt this quadripartite periodisation as it tends not to bear on state-society relations (the necessarily context for a discussion of education), rather envisaging the independent development of a Taiwanese feminism.
women’s movement in Taiwan was influenced by the second wave of feminism in America (Jhou & Jiang, 1990; Hsieh, 1994). Commonly regarded as a pioneer of the Taiwanese feminist movement (Liang & Ku, 1995; Rubinstein, 2004), Hsiu-lien Lu came into contact with Western feminist theories as a student at Harvard University (Rubinstein, 2004). Her first Chinese-language article on higher education for women raised a firestorm of controversy in Taiwan in 1971. But even while Lu's political activities were strictly monitored in the 1970s, the prevailing social ambience was one of increasing relaxation. During this period, young scholars professed great enthusiasm about the possibility of institutionalising reform, with equality between the sexes becoming a fashionable mantra among well-educated women in Taiwanese cities (Ku, 1995a). Naturally, Lu’s book, *The New Feminism*, published in 1974, caused a sensation. The three basic notions in this book, expressed in injunctions, were: 'be a human being first, then be a man or a woman', 'look like who you are' and 'make the most of your potential'. Ironically, since Lu emphasized the potentially equal abilities of men and women, her liberalism and her faith in reform also led to her being criticised for being a tacit supporter of the patriarchal framework within which opportunities are unequally distributed (Ku, 1996). However questionable Lu's identity as a feminist, though, her political activities were enough to get her imprisoned in 1979, effectively putting an end to the first wave of the Taiwanese women’s movement. The impetus of her work nevertheless continued, inspiring a group of women to take up the gender cause. The second wave of Taiwanese feminist activism between 1982 and 1996 is now seen as a ‘golden age’ for the Taiwanese women’s movement (Wang, 1999).

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3 The event of ‘Kaohsiung Riot’, also termed ‘Formosa Incident’, took place on Dec. 10, 1979. A large number of political activists gathered in Kaohsiung City, fighting for political liberation with the ruling party, the KMT. Many activists were arrested in that event.
THE GROWTH OF AUTONOMY

When *Awakening* magazine first came out in 1982, state-society relations in terms of the women’s movement entered their second wave. I characterise this period in terms of ‘autonomy’ partly to draw attention to the aim of activists aim to stay clear of state influences by adopting a party-neutral strategy (Fan, 2003), and partly because the political climate of the time still tended to ignore or stigmatize the women’s movement (Su, interview 2). The initial position of activists to achieve autonomy worked well in providing feminists with a position of leverage from which finally to influence legislative change. Like the American women’s movement between 1975 and 1985 (Connell, 1990), feminist activists in Taiwan adopted legislation as their main strategy for carrying through reform (Fan, 2003). While many American feminists were inspired by a liberal feminist philosophy that envisaged the accession of women generally to positions of economic opportunity and political power (Connell, 1990), Taiwanese feminists rather chose a legislative route on the basis of their background and experience. This choice tended to commit them to the formation of alliances with political elites, rather than to the education or mobilisation of an affiliated mass movement. In one respect at least, the strategy of Taiwanese activists was highly successful, since from the 1980s women’s groups have had a hand in at least eight pieces of legislation, four of which they conceived and nursed through the legislative process themselves. Undoubtedly, prior to 1993, the *Awakening* Foundation had a strong leadership role in the women's movement. In addition to the publication of books, magazines and newsletters, and the running of activities promoting women’s consciousness, the Foundation organised other women’s groups, human rights groups and religious groups pressuring the government to implement reform (Wang, 1999; Liang & Ku, 1995).
PARTNERSHIP WITH THE STATE

Feminist activism only gradually gained a toehold in government, with both sides at times expressing reluctance about the alliance. What was intended partly as a cosmetic exercise by the state resulted in changes in the state's internal systems, as various social groups gained genuine leverage over state policy. The gender reforms of the Taiwanese education system represent here a case in point, though the processes of getting these reforms through were especially complicated, requiring the coordination of a diverse body of social actors. Apart from the non-profit organisations, the moving spirit behind the reforms included, every variety of party and interest group, including legislators, local representatives and parents, from 1994 onwards signed up to the movement for educational reform.\(^4\) Whatever their political affiliations, these parties all tended to see education as the tool that would make a future Taiwan competitive and prosperous in a global economy. The 410 Educational Reform Parade, gathering over 30,000 people on 10\(^{th}\) April 1994 (Central Agency, 11/04/94)\(^5\), finally broke the ruling party's opposition to change. The government was forced to cede its absolute control over education in two ways, first, by agreeing to the enactment of legislation modifying school and other institutional governance;\(^6\) and

\(^4\) Although martial law was lifted in 1987, the central government retained strong control over education until the early 1990s when the calls for a sweeping reform of education from the grass-roots became louder and louder. Activists initially wanted to change the rigidity of the educational system, especially the single channel of admission to senior high schools and colleges and universities (CER, 1996). Both these levels of education were taken to over-emphasise rote learning, forcing students to memorize huge amounts of pedantic trivia.

\(^5\) Dozens of NPOs, including the Humanistic Education Foundation (est. 1988), the Association for Teachers’ Rights (est. 1987), the Jhen-Duo Teacher’s Association (est. 1989), the Homemaker’s Union and Foundation (est.1988), and the Educational Reform for Universities Association (est. 1989), banded themselves into the ‘410 Educational Reform Alliance’, pressing for educational reform. It is important to note that the NPOs had a host of different ideas concerning directions for change. The four objectives around which members of the alliance were able to crystallise, however, were downsizing class and school sizes, establishing more senior high schools and universities, modernizing education, and enacting a Education Basic Law.

\(^6\) Three important laws were passed in 1994: the Teachers Training Act, deregulating teacher-training and throwing training open to the general universities after it had previously been restricted to the ‘Normal’ universities or teachers’ colleges; the Teachers Act, which allowed schools a free choice of job candidates and set up a basis for teachers’ association in schools, and finally the modification of University Law, which granted university autonomy and guaranteed academic freedom. Additionally,
second, in establishing a Commission for Educational Reform in the Executive Yuan (CER) (Hsieh, 2003). Headed by the president of Academia Sinica, Yuan-Tseh Lee, CER was exclusively responsible for analysing problems in the island's educational provision, then passing suggestions for reform up to the Yuan. No clear demarcation of responsibility between the quasi-independent Commission and the government ministry, however, was marked. Bo-Cheng, the Executive Secretary of the CER, recalls:

…The atmosphere then was for change, all people desired change. The parade in April 1994 was a significant event…the public thought there were too many problems in education…I remember that, when the Ministry of Education held a nation-wide educational conference in 1994, people protested outside with white posters…from the 410 movement to summer, then the nation-wide conference, and then the sitting of the CER in September…the entire atmosphere in the society was like that.

Far from ending the state's crisis of legitimacy, the association of the women’s movement (and other progressive forces) with the government plunged these movements into an identity crisis of its own, one in which however much they argued they own corner in fact, led them increasingly to be seen in wider society as the mouthpiece of the 'new' State. All the while, in assuming a posture of partnership with the more progressive elements of the state apparatus, reformers came up against what I term the ‘conventional’ state elements, who resisted any power-sharing arrangements altogether. In some ways then, feminism found itself in a difficult situation, neither fully possessing the power of the state, nor properly separated from it. In a phrase translated from the Chinese, I call this feminist activism's identity crisis.

further legislation was passed on parental involvement of school affairs, the deregulation of textbooks, etc.

7 The Executive Yuan is the highest administrative organ of the State, consisting of a president (often referred to as the premier), a vice president (the deputy premier), a number of ministers, heads of commissions, and ministers without portfolio. Since CER was set up under the aegis of the Executive Yuan, it stood at the same rank of state as the MOE despite being an ad hoc institution called between 1994-1996.
of position at this period. One consequence of feminism's ambiguous situation was that it was seen as a voice of civil society by the central government (the MOE), but treated as the representative of this government by local as well as by school authorities.

Equally, a comparable identity crisis befell the Equality Commission for Both Sexes Education as convened by the MOE. After the parade of ‘1221 Fires for Women’s Rights Lighting up the Night Road’ in 1996, a number of women-led NPOs requested immediate action from the Education Minister, resulting in the establishment of a Commission in March 1997 (Su, 2004). This march protested against the death of the feminist activist Peng Wau-Ru, who was found raped and murdered on 30th November 1996. Peng Wau-Ru had served as the Secretary General and as a board member of the Awakening Foundation, and was working as Director of the Women’s Department of the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party, the current ruling party) when her death occurred. Women's organisations island-wide came together to mourn her loss in a demonstration agitating for women's rights in the face of government recalcitrance.

The make-up of the Commission again provided evidence of the uneasy cohabitation of gender activism with authority. The Commission's organisational regulations demanded that women should comprise at least half of the body's representatives (17-25 members in total). In an attempt to boost the Commission's standing,

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8 A row between MOE and CER in the newspapers demonstrated this ‘identity crisis of position’. A journalist asked the educational minister, Wei-Fan Kuo, about the relationship between the MOE and CER. Kuo replied, ‘A chef is responsible for cooking and a customer can ask for the dishes that he or she wants to eat. But if the chef hasn't got the right ingredients, he won't be able to cook it.’ (Min-Sheng News 01/09/1994). Kuo's somewhat cryptic remark suggests that as the chef, the Ministry retained the upper hand over the Commission, which would have to make do with whatever the MOE deigned to serve up. Lee, President of the CER, replied a few days later that it was the Ministry's job to follow the Commission's lead (United News 11/09/1994). Both MOE and CER, however, later came in for criticism ‘from the bottom’ for their failing to heed the voices of frontline teachers (United Evening News 29/04/1995).
high-level officials were deliberately recruited as members, including the Minister for Education (as Commission Director) and the Deputy Minister (as a required board member). The remaining members were drawn from the ranks of professionals, non-governmental groups and practitioners in the fields of education, law, counselling, sociology, social work, and culture (MOE, 1997). As the Commission brought together a variety of many ‘conventional’ officials and proponents of reform, different educational entities tended to interpret its position and mandate in different ways. Whereas Commission members themselves and the central administrative unit (the MOE) saw the body as an offshoot of the grassroots, educational practitioners and local administrative authorities tended unfortunately to see the Commission as imposing diktats from above.

It is important to note that Taiwanese feminists took a growing interest in the Scandinavian model from the 1990s onwards, despite the long-standing American influence on Taiwan. The Taipei Municipal Commission on the Promotion of Women’s Rights, for example, was set up under the theoretical auspices of ‘corporatism’ and ‘participant democracy’ according to a Scandinavian model. Convened by the city mayor, this Commission had to include all of the chiefs or chairs of all the departments or bureaus, with participants from related NGOs tasked with overseeing implementation of municipal action plans. Since 2002, women activists have been calling for the mainstreaming of gender concerns, lobbying for a highest-level official institution exclusively responsible for gender equality affairs in Taiwan. As Yang (2004) claims, the form of interaction between the women’s movement and central government has shifted from cooperation in the context of specific policy projects to the institutionalisation of feminist perspectives.
One possible consequence of the straddling of state and civil society functions was a competition between representatives of the 'conventional' state and feminists to prove themselves the ‘authentic’ voice of the Commission. This strife can be found in a number of policy texts, noticeably marked by conceptual confusion-- the document laying out the basis for the Equality Commission for Both Sexes in Education in the MOE offers a prime example of the conflict. Despite the fact that the 1996 Report on Suggestions for Educational Reform (1996, CER) required government to set up the Equality Commission, the Ministry text was based on the narrower Article 8 of the 1997 Prevention Sexual Assault Law, rather than the Report. The Ministry may have oriented itself by the legislation because the Report was issued by its rival body, the CER. Further, while the Ministry claimed adequately to implement the Suggestions, less superficially (or, as some Taiwanese said, away from the 'yang' side) the Ministry exercised the power of selection in cherry-picking those aspects of the first Commission's work that they themselves deemed important. Even if many state Commission members felt that their contributions were somehow perverted or warped in the MOE's enactment of reform, the inclusion of experts and activists in state bodies did have the effect of changing the face of the state. It became difficult in this period to draw clear dividing lines between state and non-state forces, a situation brought about not only by the forced alliance of activists with the regime (provoking a crisis of identity as we have seen) but also by the entry of market forces into traditional state processes like education.

Educational reform in Taiwan in the 1990s was purportedly based on ideas of

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9 Article 8 required that 'courses in relation to the prevention of sexual assault shall be taught for at least four hours every school year in secondary and primary schools'.
10 For instance, an official document stated three reasons to implement the Grade 1-9 Curriculum, only one of which was fully in the Report from the CER. These reasons were: (1) to conform to society's demands to boost national competitiveness; (2) to respond to the Report; (3) to enact the further decision for a budgetary review made by the Legislative Yuan (MOE, 2003b).
flexibility, pluralism, liberalism, competitiveness, and de-regulation (CER, 1996). The idea of market mechanisms having some part in educational reform originated with NPOs, who saw huge potential in tapping the energy and vibrancy of this emerging sector, envisaging the crafting of newly just educational policies. Commercial interests correspondingly became a key force in steering the timetable and determining the content of the current curriculum in Taiwan. The Grade 1-9 Curriculum crucially set out the core abilities and basis of the school curriculum, integrating key skills and bodies of fact. Though the intentions behind this large-scale curriculum reform were laudable, reform proved to be a 'disaster' in fact for most educators, largely because of insufficient preparation (Lin, 2001). The market played a crucial part in unduly accelerating the implementation of reform. More specifically, though, what lay behind the marketisation and deregulation of education was the prospect of a huge profit for private interests, for example, for the publishers of textbooks approved for use in primary and secondary schools. Publishers began to lobby lawmakers in the name of market rationality for the hastening of reform and deregulation of the supply of educational materials. This pressure paid off when the Education Commission of the Legislative Yuan in 1998 attached to the passing of the annual Ministry budget, the conditions that first curricular outlines for primary and junior high schools should be announced no later than September 1998, and second that the MOE should accept private applicants to review junior high school textbooks by May 1999 (MOE, 2003).

The women’s movement in education in most Western countries was initiated by education practitioners themselves (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999; Blackmore, 1999; Marshall, 2000; Gaskell & Taylor, 2003; Stromquist, 2004), whereas in Taiwan it largely owed its inception to 'outsiders' in terms of the educational profession.
‘Outsiders’ in this sense refers to a group of feminist activists, rather than to ‘feminist teachers’ or ‘educational feminism’ in schools. Many teachers in Western countries had become radicalised as feminists because of the unequal pay and conditions between male and female teachers (ibid.) whilst Taiwanese male and female teachers were paid on a general basis, depending on length of service and seniority. Equally, the movement for educational reform was initiated by social elites other than the front-line teachers themselves. I would claim that activists' background experiences go some way towards explaining why they were so easily diverted in the course of arguments over reform—that is, activists lacked the classroom experience themselves to imagine the practical consequences of any specific policy wordings or exclusions. Whatever activists' impact on policy, though, it is undeniable that their involvement landed teachers with a sharply increased workload. Activists’ alliance with the state, which was patriarchal in essence (Connell, 1990), risked making them appear just another authority for practitioners.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Taiwan's policy on gender education emerged, as we have seen, from the interaction of state, education, academic and non-academic feminist positions in reforms. We can build up a clearer picture of the historical processes of educational reform by collating the events in tabular form (see Table 1 below):

Table 1 Significant events in the histories of the women’s movement, gender studies and education reform in Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Launch of <em>Awakening</em> magazine</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Establishment of the first women's studies institute in National Taiwan University</td>
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<td>1989-1993</td>
<td>Strengthening of NGOs pressuring government for educational reform</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Establishment of the Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Pressure for reform built up across society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Two events agitating for the prevention of sexual harassment and crime</td>
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1993 is a crucial date in marking the foundation of the Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association, a body intended to mediate between academic and non-academic feminists, as well as in a wider context seeing the mounting of societal pressure for educational reform, which eventually led to the setting-up of the Commission. In testing out relationships of partnership with the state, feminist activists saw the deregulation of education as an opportunity to get women's issues on the agenda. In another sense, the women's movement was one social force amongst others in a broad wave of anti-statist reform. These reforms were catalysed by a series of social events bringing together supporters in a mood of celebration, protest or mourning specifically in response to particular events.

Many feminists understood education as an essential bridgehead in beginning to work their desired changes on society at large. From 1997 onwards, some universities offered courses of gender education in the Centre for Initial Teacher Education. Traditionally, ‘normal universities’ managed the educational system in Taiwan. As the sole initial teacher training institutions, their alumni took up a variety of roles in every kind of educational function—as ministers, administrators, Headteachers, teachers, educational academics, etc. Educational reformers who tended not to have been educated in these schools typically saw the established educational institutions as
barriers to reform. Reformers initially excluded the university academics from their targets (United News 31/08/1994); later they were forced to bring on board as allies three professors from these schools in response to normal university pressure (Min-Sheng New 06/08/1995). Teachers' initial training was dominated by the ‘normal universities’ until 1994 when educational reformers established a diversity of routes into the profession. These reforms established a legal right on the part of the universities in general to set up a Programme or Centre for Initial Teacher Education if they acquired sufficient resources, faculty, equipment etc. The gateway qualification now provided is similar to a PGCE in the UK; of the universities currently offering initial teacher certification, the National Taiwan University, National Tsing Hua University, National Taipei University of Education, and the National Hualien University of Education offer gender courses in the context of their teacher training programmes.

By comparison, the ‘orthodox’ educational establishment neglected gender as an academic field up to the 1998 appearance of a special number concerning Gender Equality and Education in the Journal of Educational Research. Angry about the university’s indifference to gender issues, the feminist student society of the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) asked university authorities to set up a programme for gender education in 1999 (Feminist society, NTNU, 1999 quoted in Chang & Wu, 2002). Though this programme remains to be established, another Normal University at Kaoshiung founded a Graduate Institute of Gender Education in 2000. In their study of discursive conflicts around gender, Hsieh & Yang (1999) posit certain relationships between understandings of gender and the reforms carried out around gender:
Gender-blind educational discourses mainly come from normal universities or teacher’s colleges, the mainstream educational system. The way that the educational system is structured makes it natural that the normal universities would remain indifferent to the challenges posed by the movements for educational reform and the women’s movement (Hsieh & Yang, 1999: 13).

This paper demonstrates—first, the importance of the socio-political contexts in which reform was proposed, and second, the actions of feminists in making best use of the opportunities thrown up by a confluence of social factors. The social, economic and political transformations of the 1980s saw the rise of a 'new' state both supposedly and in reality more responsive to the needs of NPOs, legislators, local representatives, parents, opposition politicians and private companies. The gender reforms in education that eventually passed entailed the participation of educational reformers in broad terms, as well as the women’s movement and professors from academic women’s or gender studies. In assessing the impact of social forces on eventual reform, it is interesting to note that the overwhelming impetus for change derived from local Taiwanese influences, rather than the actual or perceived effect of international elements. To some degree, though, Taiwan's economic development on a global stage was taken to necessitate education reforms. In the next chapter, however, I examine the formation of gender policies, detailing the struggles, contentions, and negotiations that underlay the eventual approval of gender reform.

REFERENCES


Ministry of Education (2003) *Grade 1-9 Curriculum*, also available:


