

Panda Lecture: Tamkang University Department of History Hosts Panda Lecture as Dame Linda Colley Explores the Global Evolution of Constitutionalism

Campus focus

The Department of History under the College of Liberal Arts at Tamkang University held its second Panda Lecture of the day at 2:00 p.m. on May 28 in the Chang Yeo Lan Hall of the Hsu Shou–Chlien International Conference Center. The lecture featured the distinguished British historian Professor Dame Linda Colley, who was honored with a damehood by the British Crown. Her presentation, titled “World History, War, and the Spread of Written Constitutions,” attracted nearly 200 faculty members, students, and researchers from both inside and outside the university, including scholars from Academia Sinica.

Making her first visit to Taiwan, Dame Linda Colley opened her lecture by noting that she had reviewed the latest report published by Freedom House, an advocacy organization in the United States, before her trip. According to the report, Taiwan received a high score of 93 in measures of democratic freedom, while the United States had declined to 81. While praising Taiwan’s democratic achievements, she also expressed concern that democratic institutions worldwide have faced significant challenges over the past two decades. Colley pointed out that although levels of freedom have declined in many places, 188 of the 193 member states of the United Nations now possess written constitutions. This coexistence of expanding constitutionalism and retreating democratic freedoms forms the central theme of her long-term research.

Dame Linda Colley introduced her influential book *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World*, explaining that the origins and spread of written constitutions have often been closely tied to major wars and national crises. Beginning in the mid-18th century, advances in military technology significantly increased the costs of warfare. Governments responded by raising taxes to finance

military expenditures, often provoking social resistance. To legitimize their authority and mobilize public support, rulers increasingly turned to written constitutions as instruments of governance.

Colley emphasized that constitutions are fundamentally neutral tools. They are not used exclusively by democratic governments—monarchies, authoritarian regimes, and single-party states have also employed constitutions to consolidate power. At the same time, constitutions can serve as “international advertisements” and “sovereignty shields,” signaling legitimacy and independence to the outside world.

To illustrate the diverse roles constitutions have played throughout history, Colley presented several case studies. She explained that the 19th-century Kingdom of Hawaii proactively adopted a modern constitution in an effort to demonstrate its capacity for self-government and resist colonization by Western powers. She also discussed the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, noting that because literacy rates were relatively low at the time, the document incorporated numerous illustrations inspired by local folklore and mythology. As a result, the constitution became not only a legal text but also an important symbol of national history and cultural memory.

Addressing the challenges posed by rapid technological change, Colley warned that constitutions historically benefited from the stability and permanence provided by print technology. In today’s digital media environment, however, information can be altered and manipulated with increasing ease. She noted that Tamkang University possesses strong expertise in futures studies and technology-related research and encourages scholars to consider the potential threats that artificial intelligence may pose to constitutional order. She suggested that the university’s academic strengths could contribute to identifying ways to protect written constitutions from erosion in the digital age.

The Q&A session was jointly moderated by Dame Linda Colley, Dr. Kuo-Tung Chen, adjunct research fellow from the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica, Chair Chi-Lin Lee, and Assistant Professor Tsai Yu-Lu of the Department of History. Faculty members and students engaged in

lively discussions on topics including the German legal influences on the Constitution of the Republic of China and the distinctive characteristics of the Meiji Constitution.

Among the attendees, Dr. Wan-Chin Tai, a member of the Board of Trustees of Tamkang University, commented that the lecture offered substantial academic depth. He was particularly impressed by Colley's analysis of the constitutions of Hawaii and India, perspectives that are rarely encountered by the general public. He also recommended Colley's publications to those interested in the subject and noted that the Chueh Sheng Memorial Library of Tamkang University is currently hosting a related exhibition.

Associate Professor Tsung-Yuan Chen of the History Department remarked that, as a leading authority in global history and gender history, Colley's research offers valuable insights that resonate strongly with Taiwan's contemporary situation. He stated that he plans to incorporate her works into future courses to broaden students' international perspectives. Chen also shared that he found Colley to be approachable and candid during private conversations and presented her with an English-language edited volume on Taiwan's political and economic development in hopes of deepening her understanding of Taiwan.





Professor Dame Linda Colley

Fellow of the British Academy, FBA
Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, DBE





