Historicizing Taiwan’s Democracy: Recovering the Identity Politics Behind the New Civic Nation in Taiwan

Kelvin Chi-Kin Cheung
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Historicizing Taiwan’s Democracy: Recovering the Identity Politics
Behind the New Civic Nation in Taiwan

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Introduction

The new era of Cross-Strait relations was marked by the signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Following this new economic agreement, speculation now focuses on the possibility of closer integration in terms of politics. To achieve political integration across the Taiwan Strait, ruling regimes on both sides not only need to resolve the legal status and international recognition of the two polities, they also need to deal with the politics of identity that underlies the subtle differences between the societies in these two places. The issue of identity has been an important part of Cross-Strait relations. On one hand, the post-socialist transition and the rise of new nationalism in the PRC have changed the Cold War ideological divide between Mainland China and Taiwan into the issue of national identity. On the other hand, the issue of identity has dominated Taiwan’s domestic politics in recent decades, as manifested in the provincial (shengji) conflicts. In Taiwan, the study of national identity is a recurring theme.\(^1\) There is a general understanding that the dominant political sentiment in postwar Taiwan has changed from Chinese nationalism, or more specifically the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist ideology, to Taiwanese nationalism.\(^2\) This transformation is in line with the democratization of Taiwan in the early 1990s, and the difference in identity between Mainland China and Taiwan as a result of latter’s democratization is becoming a barrier to closer political integration between the two places.

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\(^2\) Hughes, *Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism*. 
The situation of Taiwan, where a distinctive political identity is formed on the basis of democratic institutions, is understood as a form of a modern civic nation. A civic nation is the product of a common institutional setting in an industrial society. Although democracy is not a prerequisite for the formation of a civic nation, it does provide a common institutional setting for the formation of the “high culture” of a civic nation. As Gellner points out, what is important for the imagination of a civic nation is the common “medium” of understanding in which the populations are socialized, while the content of the communication is less important. This is contrary to the perspective held by nationalist ideologues, who emphasize that the essential quality shared by a nation should be deliberately communicated through education. This civic nation interpretation implies that the democratic institution in Taiwan provides a shared medium of understanding among the population, and contributes to the formation of a distinctive identity that sets them apart from the authoritarian regime on the Mainland.

This civic nation perspective, however, is not an accurate description of Taiwan’s identity. The idea of a civic nation is closely associated with the Western liberal tradition, which cherishes individual liberty and diversity rather than enforcing homogeneity within the political community. Thus, a civic nation is inclusive in nature, and the common medium of understanding on which the civic nation is formed should transcend any perceived primordial differences that would have otherwise segregated it. The situation in Taiwan, however, does not conform to this characteristic of a civic nation. Rather than promoting tolerance, the division between the so-called Waishengren (people from outside the province) and Benshengren (people of this province) has been a dividing line in Taiwanese society, which has gone beyond the merely partisan politics that exist in a democracy. In other words, Taiwan’s democracy is not founded on the value of liberalism, but a “populist identity strategy” that is characterized by social exclusion. The misperception that Taiwan’s democracy is based on the liberal tradition arises from the similarity between the institutional settings in Taiwan and other Western democratic societies. Such perspective overlooks the historical context upon which Taiwan’s democracy developed. As such,

6 For analytical purposes, this paper will distinguish between different groups of people with the following terms. The term “Waishengren” refers immigrants from Mainland China since 1945, including their younger generations who were born in Taiwan. The term “Benshengren” refers to the early migrants from Mainland who have arrived Taiwan before 1945. The term “Mainlander” refers to the people currently residing in Mainland China. The term “Taiwanese” refers to the people residing in Taiwan in general; however, the term should also allow a flexible interpretation in different context, as the definition of the term is the subject of contest in the identity politics of Taiwan.
7 Shih Chih-yu, Democracy (made in Taiwan): the success state as a political theory (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 3.
instead of following an institutional perspective, this paper will look at Taiwan’s
democratization from a historical perspective and examine how the process was influenced
by the cultural development since the Kuomingtang (KMT) regime relocated to Taiwan in
1949.

Through recovering the much neglected liberal tradition, this paper shows that the quest for
democracy is not the province of Taiwanese nationalism, but has a long tradition that dates
back to the May Fourth intellectuals in early postwar Taiwan. This May Fourth nationalist
influence diminished after the international setback in the 1970s when Taiwan lost the
international representation of China, both in terms of the political influence of the Chinese
state and the cultural representative of its civilization. Since then, the cultural consciousness
of the Taiwanese population began to shift from a broader reference to China to the
domestic concerns with social injustice. This local consciousness has undermined the
modernist theme advocated by the May Fourth Chinese nationalists in their challenge to the
KMT’s authoritarianism, and replaced it with the postmodernist theme of identity and
difference, which is advocated by the Taiwanese nationalists. In particular, the
socio-economic inequity along the line of provincial differences and the history of the state
brutality during the early KMT rule have crystallized into the discourse of “Sadness”
(Beiqing) in the late 1980s, which captured the sentiment of helplessness under foreign
 domination as experienced by the Taiwanese people. Through this discourse of “Sadness,”
Waishengren in Taiwan and the Mainlanders from the PRC have been successively
constructed as the “Other,” to define the shifting boundary of the Taiwanese identity.

From this perspective, the quest for democracy in Taiwan has changed from one of an
internal struggle for civil liberties within an existing territorial border to a national
movement for liberation against the domination of a “foreign” regime by constructing the
border that separates “us” and “them.” As such, rather than seeing democracy as producing
a new civic identity in Taiwan, I argue that the construction of Taiwanese identity and its
continued reproduction and negotiation actually paved the way for Taiwan’s
democratization. This new interpretation of the Taiwanese identity would have important
implications to the current strategy of Beijing regarding the political integration across the
Taiwan Strait.

1. The Liberal Tradition of Taiwan’s Democratization

Following the KMT regime’s relocation to Taiwan, the nationalist government implemented
a set of cultural policies to eliminate the Japanese colonial legacy and renationalize the
population in Taiwan. Mandarin replaced Japanese as the official language. The education
curriculum was reformed to reaffirm the status of Chinese history and culture, and educate
the young generation about the KMT’s nationalist ideology, particularly Sun Yat-sen’s Three
People’s Principles.\(^8\) Enforced under the KMT’s authoritarian rule, this renationalizing policy aimed to undo the damage done by the Nipponization policy of the Japanese colonial administration, which, according to the KMT administration, enslaved the Taiwanese people (\textit{nu hua}). More importantly, however, it was intended to consolidate the KMT’s rule on the island, reaffirm its rightful status to represent the whole of China, and legitimize its ultimate ambition to re-conquer the Mainland.\(^9\) Although the KMT’s nationalist ideology had institutional backing, it was never the sole manifestation of Chinese nationalism on the island. The revival of the May Fourth liberal tradition was another important intellectual influence on the national identity in postwar Taiwan.

The May Fourth Movement was a milestone in the formation of Chinese nationalism in the early 20\(^{th}\) century. Originating from the student protests against the decision of the Allied Powers to hand over the German enclave in Shandong to Japan under the Versailles Treaty in 1919, the movement encompassed the intellectual and cultural development which emphasized the liberation of individuals from traditional bonds, the vernacularization of literature, and the importance of democracy and science in saving the Chinese nation during the 1920s and 1930s in Mainland China.\(^10\) With Japan’s growing ambition in China, the secret deals between Japan and the Allied Powers at that time were alarming, particularly when the memory of defeat during the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) remained fresh. Taiwan was an intriguing part of this national humiliation, but the impact of the May Fourth Movement in Taiwan during the colonial period was limited to a literary movement.\(^11\) It was only after the relocation of the KMT regime in Taiwan that the revival of the May Fourth spirit gained a significant impetus through the publication of the journal \textit{Free China} (\textit{Ziyou Zhongguo}).

Personally endorsed by Chiang Kai-shek, \textit{Free China} was part of the Free China Movement to counter the communist authoritarian regime on the cultural front.\(^12\) With Hu Shih as publisher, the principle of the journal was to promote democracy and freedom, with the ultimate goal of liberating the whole of China from the communist dictatorship.\(^13\) The


\(^12\) Ma Zhisu, \textit{Lei Zhen yu Chiang Kai-shek} [Lei Zhen and Chiang Kai-shek] (Taipei: Zhi wanbaoshe wenhua chubanbu, 1993), pp. 74-164.

\(^13\) The principles of the journal were drafted by Hu Shih, and appeared in every issue of the journal.
journal quickly established itself as one of the most influential publications in the 1950s. In the early years, the editorial line of the journal was inclined to act in an advisory role to the state, while maintaining hopes of the government’s ability for self-rectification. Nevertheless, its advocacy of democracy and liberty, while serving as a useful instrument for the KMT’s anti-communist propaganda, was increasingly at odds with the persistent authoritarian rule on the island, particularly when Chiang Kai-shek regained the backing of the US as the global front against communism following the outbreak of the Korean War.

The major fault line between the journal and the Nationalist government began to emerge in the mid-1950s. In 1956, as part of the celebration of his 70th birthday, Chiang Kai-shek invited the public to express their opinions and suggestions about ways to improve the state of affairs in Taiwan; a rather extraordinary gesture at the time after the public had been silenced by the White Terror. In response to Chiang’s appeal, *Free China* published a special issue to outline the suggestions. The opinions ranged from advising Chiang Kai-shek personally, to commenting on the general problems of the government, to requesting more freedom of speech and political rights. The special issue was well received by the public, as several reprints were produced to satisfy the demand; but it had a completely different reception from the government. The opinions expressed in response to Chiang’s appeal were denounced as a willful attack on the regime. After that, *Free China* began to experience harassment from the state and have difficulties finding publishers to print the journal.

Despite the growing pressure from the state, *Free China* increased the intensity of its criticism. Since late 1957, *Free China* serialized its editorials under the heading “Today’s Problem” (*jinri de wenti*), and listed seventeen issues that were considered the major problems facing Taiwan or, more specifically, the KMT itself. Among the listed problems, those concerning militarily recovering the Mainland and the question of the opposition party directly questioned the legitimacy of the KMT to continue its monopoly of the political power in Taiwan. In the editorial entitled “The Question of Attacking the Mainland” (*fan...
gong dalu wenti), Yin Hai-guang points out that, despite the fact that the international circumstances were not conducive to a military attack on the Mainland, the government had nevertheless created the illusion of the immediacy of attacking the Mainland. Under such an illusion, people were forced to tolerate and accommodate the unwelcome, and sometimes even irrational, policies of the state, as they were made to believe that such policies were necessary under exceptional circumstances. Such an illusion also created a mentality in the state to adopt short-term maneuvers instead of long-term planning, which hampered social development in postwar Taiwan.

While the issue of militarily recovering the Mainland questioned the validity of military mobilization in Taiwan, the question regarding the need for an opposition party explicitly challenged KMT rule on the island. In the editorial entitled “The Question of Opposition Parties” (fanduidang wenti), Lei Zhen argues that having a strong opposition party that is “capable of acquiring ruling political power” is “the key to solving all the problems” in Taiwan. Given the unique political situation in Taiwan, Lei was cautious in stating that such an opposition party should not displace the KMT immediately, but he pointed out that having the ability to replace KMT was the only way to provide a credible check and balance to the ruling party, something that was vital in improving the quality of the KMT’s rule.

The question of the opposition party was not new. In the early issues of Free China, Lei Zhen had already questioned the KMT’s abuse of Sun Yat-sen’s idea of political tutelage to continue one-party rule, and also demanded the protection of the rights of opposition parties. But when the same issue was raised again in the late 1950s, the circumstances were different. In 1957, shortly before the appearance of the “Today’s Problem” editorials, Free China had begun to publish a series of articles on the opposition party issue, which not only argued conceptually concerning the need for an opposition party but also laid down specific actions for achieving it. Moreover, following the success of the special issue on Chiang Kai-shek’s birthday, Free China had amassed substantial popular support; political activists from different factions, including many Benshengren, began to gravitate towards Free China and Lei Zhen himself. When Lei began to coordinate the formation of a new

20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 See the series of article by Zhu Banyun in Free China since 1957.
25 Zhang Zhongdong, “Lei Zhen yu Fan Dui Dang” [Lei Zhen and Opposition Party] in Cheng She, ed., Taiwan minzhu ziyou de quzhe licheng: jinian Lei Zhen an san shi zhounian xueshu yantaohui lunwen ji [The winding route of Taiwan’s liberal democracy: collected essays commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the
party in the late 1950s, particularly given the strong local involvement, it became a credible political threat to the ruling regime. The result of this was the arrest of Lei Zhen and the banning of *Free China.*

Apart from advocating democracy, *Free China* was also a base from which liberal intellectuals attacked the cultural configuration imposed by the nationalist government. Yin Haiguang was a leading figure in questioning the efficacy of traditional Chinese cultural values in the modernization of China, particularly when traditional Chinese culture acquired a sacred status in KMT’s ruling ideology and became an obstacle to the promotion of modern thoughts. Yin questioned:

*If it is deemed patriotic to be retrogressive, how come it is regarded as unpatriotic when one promotes science and democracy to enable the country’s rejuvenation and progress? ... If the so-called “historical culture” is merely the aggregate effort and success of our ancestors ... then, why does it become disrespectful when we criticize our historical culture and past success when it is no longer suitable for the modern way of life?*  

Citing the May Fourth intellectual tradition, Yin stated that being scientific does not simply mean acquiring the products of science through technological advancement, but also adopting scientific values. When making judgments, one should base them on facts and reason rather than authority. And with respect to traditional values, one should use this scientific view to assess their contemporary relevance instead of accepting them uncritically simply because of their long history.  

Nevertheless, following the banning of *Free China* and the changing international and domestic circumstances, the influence of this May Fourth tradition and the aspiration to modernize China began to give way to local Taiwanese consciousness during the 1970s.

2. **Rediscovering the Native Soil: Changing Cultural Consciousness in the 1970s**

With the chain of events that occurred in the international arena in the 1970s, the KMT regime was transformed from being one of the Permanent Members (P-5) of the Security Council of the United Nations to suffering international isolation. Since the visit of President Nixon to Mainland China in 1971, the diplomatic ties with Taiwan began to fall like dominos; with the loss of major allies, like Japan, Britain, and the US, Taiwan lost its  

Lei Zhen case], (Taipei: Zi li wan bao she, 1992), pp. 55-72.  
26 “Cong zheng wu xi jing shen” [Reestablish the spirit of May Fourth], Editorial, *Free China,* vol. 16, issue 9, 1957, p. 4.  
27 “Wuxi’ shi wo men de deng ta” [“May Fourth” is our lighthouse], Editorial, *Free China,* vol. 22, issue 9, 1960, pp. 3-5.
representation of China by the end of the 1970s. With the change in the international environment, the proposed military attack on the Mainland, captured in the popular slogan “preparation in one year, counterattack in two years, sweeping in three years and victory in five years” (yī nián zhǔnbeì, liàn nián fānggōng, sān nián suǒdāng, wù nián chénggōng), became increasingly untenable. After that, people’s attention switched back to the situation in everyday society, where social development had been sacrificed under the contingency of military mobilization. This newfound social awareness began on the university campuses, where the student activism that had developed during the Diaoyutai incident in the early 1970s began to spill over to local concern for social injustice in Taiwan.28

At the time when people’s attention began to turn to the society, the intellectual traditions of local resistances also began to reemerge. Since the early 1970s, selected works of Taiwanese literature produced during the colonial era were reintroduced in journals such as Wen Ji, Zhong Wai Wen Xue, Xia Chao, and Da Xue Za Zhi. These works were about the suffering of the local Taiwanese and their resistances under Japanese colonial rule.29 While these works were themselves important parts of Taiwanese literary history, what is more relevant here is how they were being reinterpreted in the 1970s. For example, in an article that sought to decipher the spirit of Taiwanese literature, the work of Yang Kui was being used to highlight the role of intellectuals in social resistance.30 Instead of analyzing the social situation dispassionately from a distance, intellectuals in Yang’s work are embedded in the society, and could feel at first hand the suffering of the people.31 Yang Kui’s native aspiration and vision of socially engaged intellectuals was echoed in the “xiāngtù” literature that came a few years later when Chen Yingzhen called for Taiwanese literature to serve the society.32 Xiangtu literature was a literary trend that reflected the awakening of the new generation writers who grew up under the Western cultural and literary influence. After years of romanticizing their literary works on the modernist theme borrowed from Western cultures they had never experienced, these writers began to reconnect their literature with

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28 Zheng Hongsheng, Qingchun zhi ge: zhuìyì 1970 niandai Taiwan zuoyi qingnian de yi duan ruhuo nianhua [Song of the Youth: remembering the flaming years of the leftist youth in Taiwan during 1970s] (Taipei, Lianjing: 2001), pp. 75-124. See also the proceeding of the seminar commemorating the 30th anniversary of the student movement in Haisia Pinglun [Straits Review], vol. 145, no. 1, 2003 and vol. 147, no. 3, 2003.
31 Lin, “The two spirits of Taiwan’s literature”, pp. 8-14.
the society in which they were embedded. Many of their works reviewed the situation of Taiwan’s rural villages and exposed the difficulties people experienced amid the rapid economic development.

Despite its local concern, *xiangtu* literature began as a nationalistic movement that sought to reestablish the status of local Chinese experiences. The notion of “*xiangtu*” was still understood as lying within the broader understanding of China. As pointed out in the leading journal on the debate, Xia Chao, “it is not the case that the artistic value of the *xiangtu* literature cannot be criticized, however, the nationalistic spirit it contained should never be insulted.” The Chinese nationalistic references in *xiangtu* literature were, in part, influenced by Fei Xiaotong’s famous book, *Xiangtu Zhongguo.* The resulting tension between the contending ideas of “native-as-nation (China)” versus “native-as-local” became one of the focuses of the so-called “*Xiangtu* Literature Debate.” This balance between the abstract idea of the Chinese motherland and the concern of local society was tilted towards the latter when the realist aspect of the *xiangtu* literature was stressed. “Native-as-local” then became the basis of the Taiwanese consciousness in the 1970s, a sentiment without any explicit claim to political sovereignty or any aspiration to independent statehood. Nevertheless, this realist aspect of *xiangtu* literature was caught in the crossfire between the KMT and the separatists. The literary trend was labeled by the KMT as “proletariat literature.” At the same time, the original anti-imperialistic drive of *xiangtu* literature was transformed into urban/rural and *Waishengren/Benshengren* binary oppositions, where the issue of “internal colonialism” by the *Waishengren* began to be exploited politically. It was this separatist interpretation of *xiangtu* literature that captured the sensitivity of the deep-seated grievance in society since the retrocession of Taiwan to the Republic of China.

The radicalization of this newfound Taiwanese consciousness and the *Waishengren/Benshengren* binary opposition has its historical roots. In the early 1950s, the land reform instigated by the KMT reshuffled the local political and social landscape. On one hand, the land reform undermined the political power of the local elites which, unlike the landlord class on the Mainland, had no connection with the KMT regime; it also minimized the possible influence of communism in Taiwan by soliciting support from the local peasantry through farmland redistribution. On the other hand, the reform has made the state the

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34 Quoted in Wei, *Collected Essay*, p. 2.
35 For an English translation of this work, see Fei Xiaotong, *From the soil, the foundations of Chinese society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
37 Wang Tuo, “She xianshizhuyi wenxue, bushi xiangtu wenxue” [It is realist literature, not native literature], in Wei, *Collected essays*, pp. 100-119.
biggest landowner in Taiwan and, through the manipulation of the agricultural tax, resources are being channeled to the state to support the military preparation and the vast number of new migrants who have been uprooted from the Mainland.39

The underlying tension between the new migrants and local Taiwanese was further enhanced by the segregation and differential resource allocation among the two groups. For instance, with the surge of the migrant population, particularly the military personnel and their families, the government constructed a number of settlements, known as Military Dependent Villages (juan cun), to accommodate them. Apart from the issue of equity in land use, which had been an issue during elections, these settlements also formed a sub-culture of their own, which hindered the integration of the new migrants with the local population.40 This segregation was also reinforced by their different roles in society, with the public sector, including the military, civil service, and education (jun gong jiao) being dominated by the Waishengren, while the industrial growth were mainly supported by cheap labour sourced from the rural Taiwanese population, who departed to the cities in search of higher earnings.41 This socio-economic disparity underlining the provincial difference between the Waishengren and Benshengren provides the basis for the radicalization of the Taiwanese consciousness into a narrowed sense of Taiwanese nationalism, which the exclusion of Waishengren became an important manifestation of identity politics in Taiwan.

3. The Discourse of “Sadness” and The New Taiwanese Identity

Following the rise of Taiwanese consciousness in the 1970s, Chinese culture once again became the target for attack but, unlike the earlier criticism of Chinese culture, the new round of attacks abandoned the modernist theme advocated by Free China. The attack on Chinese culture in the 1980s was driven by the desire to empower the indigenous perspective, which received attention since the emergence of xiangtu literature. This new phase of cultural indigenization was embodied in the journal, The New Culture (Taiwan Xinwenhua), which first appeared in 1986. The Taiwanese culture the new journal espoused was that people residing in Taiwan shared a common fate, and this common fate should be the basis for Taiwan’s new culture. As the journal publisher, Hsieh Chang-ting, noted:

40 Xia Chuanyu, Taibeishi junjuan juancun chongjian zhi yanjiu [A study of the redevelopment of the Military Dependent Village in Taipei], Master Thesis, National Taiwan University, 1980, pp. 21-23; see also “Dapo luowu de juanqu yishi” [Break down the backward settlement mentality]. In Chen Fangming, Lee Tenghui qingjie [Lee Tenghui sentiment] (Taipei: Qianwei chubanshe, 1991). The sub-culture of this Military Dependant Village is reflected in a specific literary genre (juancun wenxue) which depicts the life in the settlements. Important authors on this literary genre include Chu Tienwen, Chu Tienxin, Zhang Qijiang and Zhang Dachun.
41 Yang, “Why was there Xiangtu Literature debate.”
From the perspective of Taiwan’s new culture, there is no culture without the association of land. The prerequisite of creating Taiwan’s culture is to identify with Taiwan’s native soil (xiangtu). If the people living in Taiwan did not see themselves as the masters of the place, did not treat Taiwan as their ancestral homeland (gu xiang), did not want to plant their roots in Taiwan, then we would have suspicion about whether they are truly concerned about the long-term well-being of Taiwan. Even if they create any culture in Taiwan, it would be an instrumental, myopic and rootless culture. The most important thing in enabling Taiwan to have a new life, a new face for its culture, is to identify with the land where we live, establish a new compassion for Taiwan and a new Taiwanese consciousness.  

Although the new culture pledged by Hsieh Chang-ting was intended to transcend the provincial divide between the Waishengren and Benshengren, the journal gradually turned itself into a platform that emphasized the ethnic antagonism by continuing the theme of foreign oppression that has developed since the Xiangtu Literature Debate. In The New Culture, this antagonism is reflected in its portrayal of Chinese culture as oppressing Taiwanese culture, and the demise of the Taiwanese language as a result of the dominance of Mandarin under the KMT’s language policy. The oppressive nature that defines the relationship between Chinese culture, represented by the KMT and the Waishengren in general, and Taiwanese culture has made them mutually exclusive. Such a theme of foreign domination continued to be fermented by Taiwan’s new culture advocates, given the political objective behind their cultural agenda.

Apart from the separatists’ effort to promote Taiwan’s new culture, the development of Taiwanese perspective at that time also came from an unlikely source. With the international isolation since the early 1970s, the KMT regime saw a need to reinvent its international image. Given the fact that the KMT has already lost its representation of China internationally, it has to draw on local resources in Taiwan to rebuild its international image; film production then became an important way of to export its cultural image. Taiwan’s film industry used to be dominated by the Nationalist-backed film production house, the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), for propaganda purposes and to promote the use of

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44 See Hong Jinsheng, “Taiwan minzu de dansheng” [The birth of the Taiwan nation], The New Culture, vol. 12, 1987, p. 21-29; Wang Shixun, “Wenhua yundong shi zhengzhi yundong de jichu” [Cultural movement is the foundation of political movement], The New Culture, vol. 15, 1987, pp. 114-117; see also “Zai wenhua shang, wo men ying shi geming zhengdang – minjindang wenhua gangling jiantao zuotanhui” [On the issue of culture, we should be a revolutionary party – Democratic Progressive Party’s cultural program evaluation seminar], The New Culture, vol. 7, 1986, pp. 33-45. Under the Martial Law, journal publication is an important way to circumvent the ban on political party in Taiwan to allow political activists to organize themselves.
Mandarin as part of the KMT’s cultural policy. It gradually retreated into escapist productions, forming a stark contrast with the social compassion exhibited in the literary scene at the time. On the other hand, Taiwanese language films, although much loved by the local population, were generally limited to low budget productions and gradually displaced by the KMT-backed studios. With the political need during the 1970s, the CMPC was reformed to revitalize the Taiwanese film industry to serve the role of global image building during the period of diplomatic isolation.45

Under this peculiar circumstance, more Taiwanese films were produced. Many of them were under the direct influence of the xiangtu literature, particularly the work of Hwang Chun-ming, and turned away from imitating Western melodramas and focused on local experiences in postwar Taiwan society, a trend that developed into the “Taiwanese New Cinema.”46 Through this newfound local consciousness in the sphere of film production, directors and screenwriters initially drew on their personal experiences and examined Taiwanese society through their own self-reflection.47 This consciousness was later developed into the broader historical realm as the screenwriters began to reexamine the historical epochs in postwar Taiwan, and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s A City of Sadness is a definitive work in this new era of Taiwanese film production. A City forms the first part of Hou’s “Taiwan Trilogy,” accompanied by The Puppetmaster (Ximeng rensheng, 1993), and Good Men, Good Women (Haonan haonü, 1995), which investigated the three historical epochs of Taiwan: the Japanese occupation; the transition years between 1945 and 1949; and the “White Terror” during the 1950s that has long been excluded from the official historiography.48

Produced after Martial Law ended in 1987, Hou’s A City was the first cultural production to reexamine the early KMT’s rule in Taiwan. It covered the transitional period between the Japanese surrender in 1945 and the relocation of the Republic of China to Taiwan in 1949. The film tells the story of Lin’s family and uses it to portray the lives of Taiwanese society during this transitional period. The opening of the film shows the mistress of Lin Huanxiong, the eldest son of Lin’s family, giving birth to their son, who was given the name “Guangming” (brightness) as the electricity supply was restored when he was born. The background was a radio broadcast of Emperor Hirohito’s announcement of Japan’s unconditional surrender at the end of the Pacific War. The second scene shows the opening

46 Ibid., p. 22; see also Chen Kuan-Hsing, “Taiwanese New Cinema.” In John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds., World cinema: critical approaches (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) for the discussion that locates the trend in Taiwan within the development of global cinema.
ceremony of Lin’s family business, “Little Shanghai,” with Lin’s family busy preparing the celebration. The opening of the film portrays the transition to a new era, for both Lin’s family and Taiwan, in a very positive light. The juxtaposition of the new-born son, the opening of the family business and the retrocession of Taiwan shows the hopefulness of the people and their high expectations of the new era of Chinese rule. But the initial enthusiasm of the Taiwanese people about the retrocession soon turns to cynicism as the story unfolds.

The film uses the fate of the two younger sons, Lin Huanliang and Lin Huanqing, to unite the whole story. Lin Huanliang worked as an interpreter for the Japanese army in Mainland China. When he returned to Taiwan after the war, he was traumatized by the hunt of the Nationalist government, and his role in the Japanese army eventually led to his imprisonment, accused of being a traitor (hanjian). He went insane on his final release from jail. Lin Huanqing, who lost his capacity for speech and hearing in an accident when he was eight years old, was an unlikely figure to challenge the authority. Nevertheless, his experience in jail following the February 28 Incident where he witnessed the summary executions of many of his cellmates turned him into an active supporter of the opposition movement. Towards the end of the film, Lin Huanxiong was shot in a gang fight and his youngest brother Huanqing was arrested and disappeared. Lin’s family was completely shattered, which formed a stark contrast to the hopefulness portrayed at the beginning of the film.

The story of Lin’s family was marked by the unforgiving history of Taiwan, and its development has mirrored the broader situation in the society, where many individuals and families were destroyed in the course of successive transitions. Japan’s colonialism and imperialistic war drew a generation of Taiwanese into the Japanese war effort. At the end of the Pacific War, many of these Taiwanese people, including those who had served in the Japanese army or worked for the Manchukuo government and other Japanese establishments in Mainland China, were accused of being traitors and prosecuted by the Nationalist government. During the transitional period, the people in Taiwan generally suffered from the misgovernment and corruption of the new regime. The deteriorating social situation caused widespread dissatisfaction among the Benshengren with the new administration, which resulted in an all-out confrontation between them during the February 28 Incident. Because of the ongoing civil war in Mainland China, the

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49 The Oral History Series of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, has documented the life of many of these returning Benshengren. See Koushu lishi [Oral History], 5th Issue: Special Issue 1 on the Experience of Taiwanese on Mainland during the Period of Japanese Rule. (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1994).

50 The February 28 incident refers to the military crackdown on the Taiwanese people following their protest against the provincial administration of the nationalist government over the prosecution of a street vendor of contraband cigarettes on the evening of 27 February, 1947. See Xingzhengyuan yanjiu ererba shijian xiaozu [Executive Council February 28 Incident Investigation Group], Ererba Shijian Yanjiu Baogao [Investigation Report of the 228 Incident] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua, 1994).
dissatisfaction of the Taiwanese population with their local government was treated as a communist-inspired attack on the Nationalist regime. As the KMT lost ground to the CCP on the battlefields on the Mainland, the insecurities of the KMT spilled over into Taiwan and turned the social conflict with the local population into a communist witch-hunt during the period of White Terror. In this way, the fate of the Taiwanese people was determined by the fortunes of the successive regimes, and the identity of the people changed, from Japanese subjects to traitors against China and the spies of the communist regime, corresponding to China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, the surrender of Japan in the Pacific War and the defeat of the KMT in Mainland China.

*A City* generated widespread discussion in Taiwan when it was first released in 1989. Public discussions of the film focused on its portrayal of this incident.\(^{51}\) In addition to arousing memories of past state brutality, the reason for focusing on the February 28 incident was that the film reminded the Taiwanese people of yet another possible transition in the future – reunification with Mainland China. When *A City* was released in 1989, its portrayal of the February 28 incident found a strong contemporary reference to similar state violence in Mainland China, the crackdown on the student democratic movement in Tiananmen Square which had taken place a few months before the film was released. Both the February 28 and Tiananmen incidents were provoked by the social dissatisfaction with the one party rule and, in both cases, peaceful demonstrations were met with military suppression and prosecution. When *A City* was shown in Taiwan, parallels between the February 28 and the Tiananmen incidents soon became the focus of attention.\(^{52}\) The connection implied by the February 28 and the Tiananmen incidents shows that *A City* bridged the bitter memories of the Taiwanese under the one party rule of the KMT and their fear of the possible transition to another authoritarian regime from the Mainland. The brutality of the communist regime depicted in the Tiananmen crackdown might befall Taiwan upon its future reunification with the PRC, following which the Taiwanese might once again find themselves in a state of helplessness.

This sense of helplessness under the successive transitions of foreign domination has redefined Taiwan’s historiography. It carried forward the sentiment that has been building up since the recovery of the colonial literature and the rise of *xiangtu* literature in the 1970s, and precipitated into the discourse of “sadness” (*beiqing*) that has dominated the identity politics in Taiwan since the 1980s. Under this sadness discourse, history writings in Taiwan has changed their portraits of Taiwan from a Chinese province, with links for thousands of years to Chinese civilization, to an island state with 400 years history of successive foreign rules. The list of foreign rulers is not limited to the Japanese and Mainland Chinese, but

\(^{51}\) See for example, “*Beiqing chenshi ererba* [A City of Sadness and the February 28 Incident: A symposium], *Dangdai* [Contemporary] 43 (November 1, 1989), pp. 111-130.

\(^{52}\) See Yip, “Constructing a Nation,” note 8, p. 162.
extends to include the Dutch, the Zhen Chenggong regime of the Ming dynasty and the Qing Court. Books adopting this new historiography began to appear in the early 1990s. As an author of this new Taiwanese history summarized:

In the past 400 years, the suffering people of Taiwan, under the rule of aliens, became serfs or second class subjects. The people of Taiwan, repeatedly manipulated and insulted by the foreign regimes, have long been living like prostitutes, first under the Dutch, then Zheng Chenggong, then the Qing Emperor, then the Japanese warlords, and finally the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang government forbade the people from singing the song ‘ku jiu man bei’ (a full glass of bitter wine), but could not stop the bitterness in people’s hearts. The poor people of Taiwan, forced to put on a smiling face to endure the Kuomintang’s insults, have a gloomy future. When can we see the light, to really become our own master?

The discontent expressed in this new history writing echoed Lee Teng-hui’s view of Taiwan, when he discussed at length the “Sadness of being Taiwanese” (shengwei Taiwanren de beiai) during an interview with the Japanese writer, Ryotaro Shiba, in 1994. According to Lee, the sadness of the Taiwanese arose from their sense of helplessness at being unable to determine their own fate, which is a result of Taiwan’s long history of foreign occupation. He used the Bible story from Exodus to compare the task of his presidency, which is to lead the Taiwan people out of the dark shadows of their past and allow them to determine their own future. This sense of helplessness shaped Lee’s view of Taiwan’s political reform. On one hand, Lee stressed the importance of popular sovereignty (zhu quan zai min), which was reflected in the process of democratization, beginning with the constitutional amendment in 1991. On the other hand, he emphasized the need for an indigenous regime (ben tu zheng quan) in Taiwan which resulted in the Taiwanization of the KMT in the 1990s.

The Taiwanization in the 1990s was not merely about increasing the percentage of Benshengren in the government and political institutions, but also about removing the sense

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53 Examples of this new Taiwan history writing includes, Zeng Yichang, Beiqing Dao guo sibainian [The 400 years of Sadness of the Island State] (Taipei: Zeng Yichang, 1997); Shi Ming, Taiwan bushi Zhong guo de yi bufen: Taiwan shehui fazhan sibainian shi [Taiwan is not part of China: the 400 years history of the development of Taiwan society] (Taipei: Qianwei chubanshe, 1992); and Wang Yude, Taiwan – kumen de lishi [Taiwan – A sad history] (Taipei: Zili Wanbao, 1993) Both Shi’s and Wang’s works were originally written in Japanese and published in early 1960s in Japan as part of the overseas Taiwan Independent Movement, the Chinese translation of their works was only published in Taiwan in the early 1990s.

54 Zeng, The 400 years of Sadness, back cover.

55 Reproduced in Lee Teng-hui, Jingying da taiwan [Managing Greater Taiwan], pp. 469-483. In fact, the preface of Zeng’s The 400 years refers to Lee’s remark.

56 Lee, Managing Greater Taiwan, pp. 472, 482-3.

57 See Lee, Managing Greater Taiwan, pp. 447-468 for his view on popular sovereignty; and Lee, Taiwan de zhuzhang [The view of Taiwan] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1999), p. 262-264, for his view on Taiwanization.
of foreignness that many have attributed to the KMT regime. For instance, more and more Waishengren politicians began to speak Taiwanese in their speeches, especially when campaigning in the south. Furthermore, the construction of a “New Taiwanese” (Xin Taiwanren) identity is also part of the process of blurring the distinction between the Waishengren and the Benshengren. An often quoted example of this “New Taiwanese” identity was Ma Ying-jeou’s proclamation during his campaign for the Taipei mayoral election in 1999. During the campaign, Lee Tenghui joined Ma on stage and asked him in Hoklo (Hoklo is also called ‘Taiwanese’ and spoken by the majority of the population in Taiwan), “Ma Ying-jeou, where do you come from?” Ma responded in Hoklo, “Here’s my report to President Lee: I am a new Taiwanese who grew up drinking Taiwanese water and eating Taiwanese rice, a true citizen of Taipei, born in Wanhua.” Lee then elaborated that this New Taiwanese identity included anyone who identified with Taiwan and fought for its democracy and prosperity, regardless of their ethnic origin or when they arrived in Taiwan.58

This “New Taiwanese” identity formulation aimed to transcend the internal divide and create a body of common destiny in Taiwan. Nevertheless, it quickly became another point of conflict between those who wanted to connect China to this new identity and those who insisted that its only reference was Taiwan. In April 1996, the Central Daily, the official newspaper of the KMT, organized a “My view on the New Taiwanese-ism” (Xin Taiwanren zhuyi zhi wo jian) essay competition; of the two hundred or so entries, thirty were later published by the provincial government.59 Although these essays all highlight the importance of identifying with Taiwan, many of them expressed a much broader reference to China, and some even consider that this “New Taiwanese’ identity is another kind of Chinese identity, and that the value of democracy and liberty that it implies should be an example for China’s future development, of which Taiwan will be part.60 It is unclear what the unselected essays say about this new identity, but it would be fair to say that the views reflected in the collected volume are not necessarily the most representative works, as the publisher has claimed. Instead, they represent the interpretation of the publisher, which is best summed up by the following paragraph:

_The fact is this, regardless of whether one is Hakka, Hoklo, Aboriginal, or Waishengren; regardless of whether one supports the New Party, the Democratic Progressive Party, the Kuomintang, or those without any party affiliation; regardless of one’s ethnic affiliation in terms of politics, economy and society, only if_

58 See Lee, _The View of Taiwan_, pp. 262-264. The translation used here is from Stephane Corcuff, “Taiwan’s ‘Mainlanders,’ New Taiwanese?” In Corcuff, ed., _Memories of the Future_, p. 187. This example in fact speaks volumes about the importance of identity in Taiwan’s democracy.
60 _Ibid._. See, for example, the essays in pages 20-24, 35-39, 51-53, 74-79, 90-99, 126-130.
one identifies with Taiwan, lives in Taiwan, that person will have the right to vote for our president this March. Since today’s Taiwan society, constructed on liberty and democracy, is already using the concept of democracy in politics and liberty in the economy. Inherent in this “New Taiwanese-ism” is to dissolve the narrow ethnic conflict and create citizens who identify with democratic institutions, and build up a model of successful Chinese modernization, which points out a clear direction for the future reunification of China.61

Countering this pro-unification interpretation of the “New Taiwanese,” Lee Teng-hui published a small book in 2005, reiterating the idea behind his “New Taiwanese” formulation and renaming it “New Era Taiwanese,” in order to distinguish it from the old formulation, which he suggested had been hijacked by unification advocates.62 According to Lee:

‘New Era Taiwanese’ need to clearly distinguish that Taiwan is Taiwan, China is China. It is an indisputable fact that Taiwan is not part of China, so there is no need to talk about unification with China. What we need is to rely on the principle of popular sovereignty and democratic self-determination, and use the strength of identification with Taiwan to empower name rectification and constitutional development, to bravely create the new age for Taiwan.63

Like the old “New Taiwanese” idea, this new formulation was intended to unite different groups in Taiwan to form a civic nation, only with a clearer cut-off from Mainland China. For many, this New Taiwanese identity facilitates the assimilation of Waishengren in the new civic nation of Taiwan, but this also means a severance from their ethnic past and ancestral connection with the Mainland.64 This is another kind of oppression for the Waishengren, especially during the eight years of Chen Shui-bien’s rule, when the fissure of the provincial difference was fully exploited to defend against criticism of the misgovernment of the indigenous regime. From this perspective, democratization in Taiwan is not so much an internal struggle against an autocratic regime within a fixed boundary than a case of nation building by eliminating the domination of the “foreign.” Only in this case, the “foreign” was not physically excluded, but transformed through the application of identity politics, and, in the process, the construction of Taiwanese identity became a tool for securing Taiwan’s popular sovereignty.

61 Wu Jianzhang, “Xin Taiwanren shi Zhongguo xiandaihua chenggong de dianxing” [New Taiwanese is the model of success of Chinese modernization]. In ibid, pp. 129-130.
64 I would like to thanks Prof. Shih Chih-yu for pointing this out.
Conclusion

In recent decades, Chinese authority has been reviving traditional Chinese culture, particularly Confucianism, in Mainland China. An important reason for turning to traditionalism is that the moral degradation in Mainland China demands an ethical code to be rebuilt for the society under rapid transformation. Another reason is that traditional Chinese culture is useful to serve as a primordial tie and to foster a common cultural identity to bridge the identity difference across the Taiwan Strait. This instrumental value of traditional Chinese culture in cross-strait relations is receiving greater attention in recent years. The latest example being the joint exhibition of Huang Gongwang’s “Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains” at the National Palace Museum in Taipei in mid-2011. This famous painting has been damaged by fire and the broken pieces are kept separately in Mainland China and Taiwan. It was the first time for more than three centuries that this ancient scroll were displayed together to show the original appearance of this masterpiece. Apart from the symbolic message of unification, the joint exhibition of this Chinese cultural artifact was to remind the Taiwanese people of a shared Chinese heritage.

The efficacy of this cultural strategy, however, is not as self-evident as it appeared. Part of the reason is that Taiwan has already undergone different stages of de-sinicization since Lee Tenghui’s administration.65 But more importantly, rejecting Chinese traditional culture has a long tradition in the cultural movements that constituted Taiwan’s democratization, whether it was from the May Fourth liberalist point of view or from the Taiwanese nationalist movement that saw the indigenous culture of Taiwan being displaced by Chinese culture. As discussed in this paper, the identity politics of constructing differences is an essential part of securing popular sovereignty in Taiwan’s democratization. Taiwan’s identity should not be seen as a civic identity that rooted in liberalism, its exclusive nature that borne of past socio-political development in modern Taiwan should also be acknowledged. As such, instead of assuming that the broad notion of Chineseness could gloss over the cross-strait differences, Beijing’s approach to Taiwan needs to respect the identity of Taiwan that has developed according to its unique historical trajectory. Imposing the primordial identity of a Chinese nation through traditional culture will not erase the identity differences; instead, it will further alienate the Taiwanese people.

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65 Hao Zhidong, Whither Taiwan and Mainland China: national Identity, the state, and intellectuals (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), pp. 49-74.
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