DIVIDED, WE STAND IN AGREEMENT

The Obstructive Role of National Identity in Contemporary Taiwanese Society

By Jalene Chok

In the international arena, "Taiwan" brings to mind the conflict between Chinese dominance and American hegemony. Discourse surrounding Taiwan itself centers on its independence or unification with China. In media and popular consciousness, Taiwan's preference for independence or unification is attributed to a difference in national identities—"Chinese" or "Taiwanese." This reductive view masks the unique ways in which individuals in Taiwan construct their national identities, particularly given the lack of agreed definitions for basic terminology such as "Taiwan" or "Taiwanese." Yet, qualitative data shows that national identity has little practical relevance in society, as the general consensus is that peacekeeping via maintenance of the status quo is the only current logical course of action. Despite proof of the population's pragmatic indifference towards national identity, Taiwan's primary political parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) persist in upholding the reductive symbolic national identity as the representative issue in Taiwanese politics, overshadowing even uncontroversial questions of economic reform. In contrast, the recently-formed Taiwan People's Party and their leader, Ke Wen-zhe, claim to offer a way out of this dichotomy, actively criticizing the KMT and DPP's political theater. Indeed, most acknowledge the unproductively divisive power of symbolic national identity, and perceive economic questions to be the most urgent to address. Then, the unprecedentedly high level of youth support for Ke Wen-zhe, a first-time third-party candidate, in the 2024 presidential elections may be one visible manifestation of societal frustration towards the roadblock of national identity to social, economic, and political progress.

I. Introduction

In recent years, Taiwan has become a mainstay of international news headlines. Labeled "the most dangerous place on Earth" by The Economist in 2021,[1] thrust under the spotlight during Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit,[2] and most recently allotted roughly $8 billion in the 2024 American Senate–approved $93.5 billion Foreign Aid package alongside other American heavyweight allies such as Ukraine and Israel,[3] Taiwan consistently receives what seems to be a disproportionate amount of attention for a country with political stability, economic

1 "The Most Dangerous Place on Earth," The Economist, May 1, 2021, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth.

2 Chen Yu-Jie, "Opinion | I'm Taiwanese, and I Want to Thank Nancy Pelosi," *New York Times*, August 5, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/opinion/taiwan-china-pelosi-democracy.html.

3 Lauren Gambino and Joan E. Greve, "US Senate Passes $95bn in Aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan," *The Guardian*, April 24, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/23/senate-aid-bill-ukraine-israel-taiwan.

prosperity, and a robust liberal democratic system. Though Taiwan has gained international praise for some of its domestic accomplishments—being the first Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage, its highly effective COVID-19 policies, and a high level of gender equality in politics—a majority of the attention is not necessarily directed towards Taiwan itself, but rather its position in the struggle for dominance between China and the United States. Consequently, despite the extensive news coverage, the international community's understanding of Taiwan and its internal dynamics remains low. Media discourse is understandably unable to adequately present a holistic portrayal of Taiwan's domestic and international politics, given its immeasurably complex histories whose many interpretations have not yet been reconciled, even by Taiwan itself. However, discussions often fail to consider that the island's inhabitants have voices, opinions, and agency of their own. As a result, mainstream perception of Taiwan and its position in geopolitics trends towards one-dimensionality, both internationally and domestically.

In geopolitics, Taiwan is often used as a proxy of China and the United States, with each superpower attempting to exert their own influence on the island. While China's desire for unification is clear, the United States' position is more ambiguous. Though the United States does not support *de jure* Taiwanese independence, their official policy of "strategic ambiguity" is sometimes contradicted by actions undertaken in accordance to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, including arms sales and promises of defense in the case of offensive attack.[4] These actions, along with the clear desire to keep Taiwan out of China's control, are often interpreted simply as adjacently supportive of Taiwanese independence. The Taiwan "problem," then, is often further reduced to independence versus unification. In order to lend credence to these positions, the question of national identity is always invoked, with independence corresponding to a "Taiwanese" identity, and unification to "Chinese." On one side, China continually touts Taiwan and China, both being of "Chinese descent," as sharing the inseverable roots of an ethnically Chinese nation.[5] In China's view, this consanguinity justifies and demands the maintenance of a Chinese nation-state. On the other side, Western media often focuses reporting on the polls that show a majority of Taiwanese identifying solely as Taiwanese, not Chinese,[6] but rarely mentions the preference for status quo maintenance held by the bulk of the population.

This perception that national identity in Taiwan maps cleanly onto preference for unification or independence is not only limited to the international community. Within Taiwan itself, this association goes further, with national identity, national goal preference, and politics knotting together. Politicians from Taiwan's two major political parties—the Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—often accuse each other of sabotaging Taiwan by pursuing unification or independence, respectively.[7] The result of this is a political landscape that hinges on single-issue voting. With the unprecedentedly fast rise of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) since its creation in 2019, this political landscape may soon be changing. Ke Wen-zhe, the founder and leader of the TPP, has promised to address long-standing issues in Taiwan's political system, directly denouncing the divisive conduct of the two major parties. While this governmental-level phenomenon is well-documented in previous research, its effects on Taiwanese citizens and their role in inciting this change has yet to be adequately studied. After the 2024 election yielded the most votes for any third-party candidate in Taiwan's history, Ke Wen-zhe's popularity, particularly among younger generations, may herald a youth-led turn in Taiwan's political environment away from the question of national identity. Therefore, this study seeks to clarify the following questions: How do individuals in Taiwan conceptualize their own national identities? What is the concept's relevance in contemporary Taiwan? Given the importance of the 2024 national election domestically and globally, how does the issue of national identity manifest in Taiwanese voting tendencies?

---

4 Steve Holland, Nandita Bose, and Trevor Hunnicutt, "U.S. Does Not Support Taiwan Independence, Biden Says," *Reuters*, January 13, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-us-does-not-support-taiwan-independence-2024-01-13/.

5 "Wang Yi: All People of Chinese Descent Should Jointly Oppose 'Taiwan Independence' and Support Peaceful Reunification," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, March 7, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202403/t20240308_11256422.html.

6 "Poll: Taiwanese Distance Themselves from Chinese Identity," Associated Press News, May 12, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-mao-zedong-international-news-asia-pacific-c8a1f7669442b2b86ddff1563c3bd0e9.

7 Ryan Woo, and James Pomfret, "China, Taiwan Opposition Warn of Threat to Peace from Ruling Party Candidate," *Reuters*, January 11, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-warns-taiwan-ruling-party-presidential-candidate-over-possible-2024-01-11/.

This study proceeds with an interdisciplinary approach. Sociology provides a strong basis of frameworks necessary to understand the construction and diversification of national identity. Political science is essential to understand the impacts of real-world dynamics on Taiwanese people and their national identities. Then, each phenomenon must be placed in its proper historical context in order to accurately assess origins, impacts, and potential futures. Following this interdisciplinary philosophy, this thesis will first explore the question of national identity construction in Taiwan, assessing the measurement, categorization, and tangible impacts of this phenomenon. It will then examine the relationship between national identity, independence or unification, and the two political parties, as well as the effect on, and perception of, this relationship on Taiwanese society. Finally, this study will conclude by analyzing the influence of voter perceptions of national identity in the 2024 elections, particularly given heightening tensions with China and the rise of Ke Wen-zhe as a third party candidate.

II. Literature review

A. Construction and operationalization of national identity

National identity in Taiwan—a subject that has captured the interest of scholars since the earliest stages of democratization—is impossible to understand without first reviewing both historical and contemporary scholarship. While the complexity of research and the phenomenon of national identity have both evolved with time, research has ultimately remained heavily based on survey data, capturing broad strokes of societal shift but overlooking micro-factors which drive change. A 1984 sociological survey conducted before the lifting of martial law in 1987 by Academia Sinica researchers Yang Kuo-shu and Chiu Hai-yuan included for the very first time a question pertaining to national identity. The question asked: "Unifying China is more important than building Taiwan. Agree or disagree?"[8] Unsurprisingly, given that the driving rhetoric of the then-authoritarian Kuomintang party was to "Liberate the Mainland" (*fǎngōng dàlù*)—to recapture China from the communists under the banner of the Republic of China—of the respondents 57% agreed with this statement in varying degrees, while only 14% disagreed, and 29% declined to respond. However, this question would be the first attempt of many by scholars over the years to measure the diversity and intensity of national identity in Taiwan. A review of prominent survey questions from 1984 to 1998 pertaining to national identity was provided by Shelley Rigger in 1999.[9] In these early surveys, the question of national identity is analyzed through a one-dimensional lens, equating an individual's preference for independence or unification with their national identity, a yet-vague concept roughly gathered around the ambiguous axes of "Taiwanese" or "Chinese." This form of operationalization, argues Rigger, is an oversimplification of national identity in Taiwan, and overlooks the large majority of respondents, who preferred the status quo to either independence or unification.[10] Similarly, in 1998, Jiang Yi-huah argued that the tendency of social scientists of the time to adhere to a nationalist view of national identity led to an analysis that fundamentally misunderstood Taiwanese society, as this view equated the ethnocultural nation to the political state. In contrast, he posited that most Taiwanese held a liberal view of national identity—one which separates the entities of nation and state, prioritizing the democratic nature of the state rather than its geographic boundaries.[11] Using this framework, Jiang is able to argue that the majority of Taiwanese who prefer the status quo to independence or unification are not devoid of a national identity, but are instead rational actors who recognize that ambiguous statehood is currently the most stable provider of a democratic state.[12] However, Jiang maintains that nationalist thinking still plays a formative role in an individual's construction of national identity. Thus, he calls for a theoretical framework of "pragmatic thinking with a liberal base."[13] This framework recognizes that the formation

8 Yang Kuo-shu, "1984 Taiwan Social Change Survey (Round 1): Leisure, Religion, Family, Mental Health," *Survey Research Data Archive, Academia Sinica* (1999), https://doi.org/10.6141/TW-SRDA-C00001_2-1.

9 Shelley Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity: A Critique," *Pacific Affairs* 72, no. 4 (1999): 537, https://doi.org/10.2307/2672396.

10 Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity," 545–548.

11 Jiang Yi-huah, "Reflection on the Current Discourse on Taiwan's National Identity." *Taiwan Social Research Quarterly*, no. 29 (1998): 163–229, https://doi.org/10.29816/TARQSS.199803.0007

12 Jiang, "Reflections on the Current Discourse," 187–99.

13 Jiang, "Reflections on the Current Discourse," 211–20.

and evolution of national identity in Taiwan is affected by both liberal values of democratic constitutionalism, and nationalist response to cross-straits tensions. Under this framework, it can be understood that the three choices of unification, status quo, and independence cannot be equated to one's national identity.

Over time, new dominant theories of national identity construction emerged. In more recent publications, Chen Rou-lan and Jiang Yi-huah agree that Modernism is the favored framework of contemporary Taiwanese scholars, with Primordialism taking a less prominent role in national identity discourse.[14,15] While primordialists take after Clifford Geertz, believing in a set of historical and unchanging "assumed givens" which bond a population together,[16] such as the purported ethnic and blood ties of a Chinese nation, modernists adhere to Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, proposing that nations are a recent and socially constructed phenomenon, and that the idea of a "Taiwanese" identity emerged as the mutual recognition of the processes of colonization and democratization experienced by a collective of diverse peoples.[17] Under the Modernist framework, Taiwanese nationalism and the independence movement are born from the creation of a Taiwanese identity based on shared life experiences. Those holding this Taiwanese identity are then an "imagined political community,"[18] or nation, with the goal of rendering the Taiwanese national unit congruent to its political unit—a mission which has not yet been achieved. Despite the popularity of these two theories in scholarship, they still face several critiques.

In his analysis of Modernism and Primordialism, Chen points out the unidimensionality of the two theories, raising the same charge that Rigger and Jiang noted more than a decade ago—that they still cannot explain why the majority prefer maintaining the status quo.[19] Instead, Chen proposes a multidimensional theory of national identity, which considers both the primordial ethnocultural and modern sociopolitical aspects of nationalism in a dual-identity model.[20] Interestingly, this "new" multidimensional model appears somewhat familiar. Recalling Jiang's 1998 call for new theoretical frameworks, both Chen and Jiang seek to address the lingering question surrounding the dominating preference for maintaining the status quo by invoking the effect of ethnocultural identities which, they hypothesize, pull or push the popular sentiment towards or away from the status quo.[21] However, in the fourteen years between the creation of these two frameworks, the dynamics of ethnocultural identity have dramatically shifted in Taiwan. On one hand, Jiang's 1998 paper was published when the Taiwanese-exclusive identity was beginning to gain traction. He attributes the dominating preference of the status quo to the population's attachment to human rights and democracy, positing that while the Taiwanese ethnocultural identity might pull some individuals towards independence, the threat of potentially disrupting the system of liberal democracy dissuaded the majority from this option.[22] On the other hand, Chen speaks from a 2012 social context in which a majority of the population identify themselves solely as Taiwanese.[23] Thus, she looks to lingering feelings of ethnocultural connection to China within the population in order to explain the persistence of the status quo as the dominating preference. Despite these differences, the Modernist theory that Chen in 2012, and Jiang himself in 2017, recognize as dominant in scholarship is simply a repackaging of the Nationalist framework that Jiang accused of blinding social scientists two decades ago in 1998. Similarly, Chen's 2012 dual ethnopolitical theory of national identity is reminiscent of Jiang's 1998 framework of "pragmatic thinking with a liberal base."[24,25] Both authors look to provide a more nuanced view of national identity through the combination of ethnocultural and political identifications, albeit through different contextual lenses. These

14 Chen Rou-Lan, "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan: A Multidimensional and Evolutionary Conceptualization," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 5 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.5.845.

15 Jiang Yi-huah. "Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations." In *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, ed. Lowell Dittmer (University Of California Press, 2017), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1w76wpm.5.

16 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973).

17 Jiang, "Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations," 21.

18 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

19 Chen, "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan," 849.

20 Chen, "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan," 850–56.

21 Jiang, "Reflections on the Current Discourse," 212.

22 Jiang, "Reflections on the Current Discourse," 211.

23 Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity," February 22, 2024, https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961.

24 Chen, "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan," 850–56.

25 Jiang, "Reflections on the Current Discourse," 212.

parallel "new" theories demonstrate how changing external contexts, namely the democratization process and cross-strait relations, reframe the idea of national identity over time, while simultaneously pointing to a deeper issue in national identity scholarship in Taiwan.

While valid critiques such as Rigger's, Jiang's, and Chen's are constantly raised, it seems that scholarship remains stuck in a loop, reinventing itself through redefinitions of core concepts each time Taiwanese society goes through changes in social consciousness, but inevitably arriving at the same conclusion each time—that new theories must be formulated in order to capture the complexity of national identity in Taiwan. In addition to the lack of truly new theories, the methodology used for analysis in the vast majority of existing literature has remained the same—interpreting survey data through looping theories of national identity. While survey data has contributed fascinating and valuable discussion to the study of national identity, it is most useful when gauging longitudinal collective attitude shifts. The largely quantitative nature of survey data analysis adds little to the understanding of causation and development of national identity on the individual level. For example, what factors contribute to a specific individual's development of a certain national identity, and why might their national identity change throughout their life? While the national effects of large events such as cross-strait tensions may emerge in longitudinal data, little is said about the micro-effects of personal life events such as education. Because the survey format is not intended for analysis on the individual scale, responses to survey questions hinge on respondent interpretation of concepts such as "Taiwanese" and "Chinese" that are highly contextual and differ between individuals, making it impossible to understand the impact of these volatile terms on responses. As such, researchers relying on survey data have pre-formed definitions of certain terms and categorizations of responses post-analysis which may not match respondent interpretation or intention. For example, the longest-running and most prominent longitudinal survey on national identity, conducted yearly since 1992 by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University, asks if a respondent identifies as Taiwanese, both Taiwanese and Chinese, or Chinese, with the option of non-response.[26] Seemingly straightforward, this question at once introduces too much space for differing interpretation, and too little choice for a full-spectrum analysis in order to paint a fully accurate picture of identity in Taiwan. The limitation of respondents to four narrow categories highly restricts the analytical capabilities of scholars working with the data, and obscures the intricacies of participants' thought processes. Thus, it would benefit scholarship on national identity to complement quantitative survey data with qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews. Interviews allow for a more in-depth cross-section exploration of micro-variables in the broader trends of national identity, exploring the origins of different attitudes and evolutions within an individual's lifetime. Additionally, this qualitative-based method would provide an intimate understanding of Taiwanese individuals as distinct people belonging to a specific moment in time rather than amorphous demographic groups—a conception that plagues both the Taiwanese themselves as well as foreign bodies.

B. Politics and national identity

Identity politics play a particularly salient role in Taiwanese politics. The multistep process of democratization, which was driven by a cycle of slow reforms in response to opposition demands,[27] transformed Taiwan from a one-party authoritarian regime into a multiparty democracy, while also cultivating a functionally two-party political system. Since its inception in 1986, this two-party system has diverged on the question of policy towards China.[28,29] Indeed, even as the leading parties of the pan-Blue and pan-Green camps (the Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Party, respectively) have responded to the majority public support for status quo maintenance by

26 "Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity," Election Study Center, National Chengchi University.

27 Chu Yun-han, "Taiwan's National Identity Politics and the Prospect of Cross-Strait Relations," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.4.484.

28 Lin Gang and Wu Weixu, "The Transition of Party System in Taiwan: Divergence or Convergence?" *The China Review* 17, no. 3 (2017).

29 Yu Ching-hsin, "Parties, Partisans, and Independents in Taiwan," in *The Taiwan Voter*, ed. Christopher H. Achen and T. Y. Wang (University of Michigan Press, 2017).

slowly converging their respective stances on cross-strait relations towards this median voter profile,[30,31,32,33] the central debate during national elections has remained Taiwan's relationship with China. Though other issues such as economic development, employment, and education are shown to be of concern to Taiwanese voters, the direct link between Taiwan's future as an autonomous democratic political entity and its dealings with China propel cross-strait relations to the forefront in national politics.[34,35,36,37] While the *tangwai*[38] movement and early stages of the DPP were not necessarily pro-independence,[39] many scholars and pan-Blue-leaning observers point to the policy platforms of the first two democratically elected presidents—Lee Teng-hui from 1996–2000 and Chen Shui-bian from 2000–2008—for the politicization of national identity that persists today. Therefore, many associate the DPP with pushing a pro-independence, Taiwanese-exclusive identity while failing to recognize the same actions by the KMT regarding the promotion of a Chinese-exclusive identity.[40,41]

The extent to which political parties affect national identity can be debated. In fact, the phenomenon of pan-Blue and pan-Green convergence around the median voter may instead suggest the opposite, that the political parties follow the popular consensus, lest an extreme stance towards either independence or unification lead to "political suicide."[42] Studying the habits of party affiliation and national identity ideology across four generations, Rigger finds that younger generations are more likely to have weaker party identification, be apolitical, and be more flexible with their national identities, simultaneously embracing a Chinese cultural identity with a Taiwanese political identity.[43] This is supported by the party identification theory articulated by Angus Campbell, in which it is argued, based on studies of American voters, that personal experience and preference influence party alignment and intensity, which then shape political attitudes, issue positions, and political actions.[44] To support this analysis, Rigger invokes the theory of generations proposed by Mannheim—the idea that generations are formed of individuals born around the same time and cultural context, who then participate in the same notable events and share defining experiences. According to this theory, the second generation—whose maturation coincided with the democratization process and rise of the DPP in opposition to the KMT—would be both extremely adamant and strongly divergent in their opinions. Indeed, the second generation was seen to have the most rigid and polarized national identity and party affiliations, while subsequent generations who matured after the height of democratic transition are mellow when it comes to party identification, national identity, and opinions on China.[45,46] More relaxed attitudes towards national identity and political affiliation of the recent generations reflect the comparatively relaxed sociopolitical environments of their upbringing. The 2014 student-led Sunflower Movement qualifies as a generation-defining event for Taiwan's younger generations under Mannheim's theory. This grassroots, youth-led movement, which was a direct protest against increasing economic ties with China, centered a Taiwanese identity

30 Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity," 550–51.
31 Wang T. Y. and Liu I-Chou, "Contending Identities in Taiwan: Implications for Cross-Strait Relations," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.4.568.
32 Lin and Wu, "The Transition of Party Systems in Taiwan," 159–62.
33 Lev Nachman, "Misalignment between Social Movements and Political Parties in Taiwan's 2016 Election," *Asian Survey* 58, no. 5 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2018.58.5.874.
34 Rigger, "Social Science and National Identity," 537–38.
35 Chu, "Taiwan's National Identity Politics," 484–87.
36 Wang and Liu, "Contending Identities in Taiwan," 570.
37 Nachman, "Misalignment," 893.
38 *Tangwai* translates to "outside of [the KMT] party" and refers to the political movements created before the lifting of martial law in 1987, when opposition parties to the KMT were illegal.
39 Yu, "Parties, Partisans, and Independents in Taiwan," 77.
40 Norman Ho, "Crafting the Taiwanese: The Ambivalence of Taiwan's National Identity," *Harvard International Review* 28, no. 1 (2006), http://www.jstor.org/stable/42763081.
41 Liu Hong, "An introduction to Taiwan's national identity issues and historical evolution," Songye Cultural Enterprise Co., 2019.
42 Jiang, "Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations," 28.
43 Shelley Rigger, *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and "Taiwanese Nationalism,"* (East-West Center, 2006), http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06533.
44 Angus Campbell et al., *The Voter Decides* (Row, Peterson and Co., 1954).
45 Rigger, *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism*, 20–31.
46 Wang and Liu, "Contending Identities in Taiwan," 577–78.

and birthed a new generation of progressive political leaders and activists. Many of these new political figures expressed disapproval with the DPP's move away from an explicitly pro-independence platform by creating their own parties and throwing support behind more radically pro-independence small parties.[47] Indeed, Ke Wen-zhe, the founder and spearhead of the Taiwan People's Party began to garner attention and popularity around this time, publicly supporting the movement and presenting himself as a breath of fresh air in the stagnant political climate centered around a Blue-Green dichotomy. Though his politics and that of his party have evolved away from their initial presentation to the public in 2014, it is still from this generation-defining event that Ke Wen-zhe and the TPP found their roots and established the beginnings of a supporter base.

The future of Taiwan is directly linked to citizens' changing sociopolitical and ethnocultural identification. Yet, as one can see in the literature above, the question of national identity is actually a multidimensional question, reaching into the past and future and drawing on individuals' relationships to political parties and the social status quo. In light of heightening cross-strait tensions, the DPP's presidential win for a historic third consecutive term, and the unprecedentedly strong presence of the TPP as a third-party option, the past patterns of national identity, political identity, and attitudes towards cross-strait relations are shifting with a new generation who has only ever experienced a democratic Taiwan. An updated comparative analysis of the younger generations' sociopolitical attitudes is therefore suitable. Additionally, while past literature explores the evolution of Taiwanese public opinion of China and the effect of changing cross-strait relations on national and political identity, there is far less literature that explores the relationship between Taiwanese society itself and the concept of national identity. In an attempt to address this gap in the literature, this study will engage with the concept itself—how individuals engage with national identity, and its roles and repercussions in contemporary Taiwanese society.

III. Methodology

This qualitative study will be primarily based on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Taiwanese individuals living in the Taiwanese cities of Taipei, New Taipei, and Taoyuan. All interviews were conducted between 19 December 2023 to 12 January 2024, directly ahead of the 2024 presidential election on 13 January. When looking for individuals to interview, factors taken into consideration were: age, familial history, ethnicity, and political stance. In order to study generational patterns, participants were grouped into three generational cohorts.

> Generation A: Individuals who reached maturation (twenty years of age) before the beginning of the democratic process, born before or soon after the arrival of the KMT government (born before 1960).
> Generation B: Individuals who grew up under KMT rule, but experienced the democratization process as older students or young adults (born between 1960 and 1985).
> Generation C: Individuals with no personal recollection of a pre-democratic Taiwan (born after 1986).

In this context, ethnicity refers to whether an individual is Hakka, Hoklo, Indigenous, or broadly Han, and familial history refers to their family's immigration history to Taiwan—whether they themselves, or their ancestors are *benshengren* (those who arrived in Taiwan before 1945 and their descendants) or *waishengren* (those who arrived after 1945 with the KMT army and their descendants). Though today the *waisheng-bensheng* split is less severe, and there are an increasing number of individuals of mixed heritage, it is still notable given the cultural, economic, and social differences that are associated with the different heritages. The consequences of the preferential treatment of waisheng families and individuals by the authoritarian KMT government are still felt by today's generations. Lastly, to ensure a variety of perspectives and to minimize bias, individuals from all over the political spectrum from deep-Green to deep-Blue were selected.

47 Nachman, "Misalignment," 886–93.

Ideally, a study on national identity, politics, and the societal landscape in Taiwan would incorporate other factors such as regionality (north versus south, urban versus rural), socioeconomic class, educational level, and gender, but due to time restraints, participants in this study consist mostly of middle and upper-middle class, highly educated individuals from urban Taipei. This is likely a result of snowball sampling, which was the main recruitment technique. While Generation A and B have much more varied regions of birth and educational levels than Generation C, all interview participants have spent substantial time living or working in Taipei. Additionally, there is a general lack of women in the interview study. Interestingly, though most first points of contact with interviewees were women, it proved difficult to find women who were willing to be interviewed, with most women that were approached declining, expressing either discomfort with the idea of an interview or a lack of opinions on the subject matter. Therefore, this sample of interviewees will not be a representative sample of all Taiwanese people, but instead serve to explore the thinking of this particular subset of Taiwanese individuals.

The semi-structured interview may be broken up into four sections. First, in order to contextualize each participant in society, interviewees were asked questions about their personal lives and experiences. Then, the conversation turned towards politics: the interviewees' levels of involvement in politics, political views, and opinions on the 2024 national elections. After politics, the interview transitioned to the topic of national identity. The final section of the interview included questions pertaining to events, trends, and concepts relevant to Taiwanese society (see Appendix B). All interviews were conducted primarily in Mandarin, with certain expressions or words in English or Taiwanese Hokkien scattered in by interviewees.

In order to ensure the interviewee's comfort, each interview took place in a location of the interviewee's choosing—mostly public cafes or homes. The duration of each interview ranged from one to two hours, with most taking roughly one and a half hours. Each interview was recorded with consent and later transcribed by the interviewer, with the exception of one recording which was lost due to a technological malfunction. In that case, detailed notes were taken directly after the interview. Interviewees were not offered any incentive or compensation for their participation beforehand, but each was gifted a small bundle of UC Berkeley merchandise consisting of a folder, pen, and postcard upon completion of the interview.

To protect the participants' privacy, pseudonyms will be used throughout this paper, and no identifying information will be revealed. Upon completion of this research project, all audio recordings, transcriptions, and records with identifying data will be disposed of by the researcher. In total, this research project consists of twenty-six interviewees. Nineteen are male, and seven are female. There are seven participants in Generation A, eleven in Generation B, and nine in Generation C (see Appendix A).

IV. Discussion

A. Individual conceptions of national identity

The primary issue with the question of national identity in Taiwan is how those partaking in these discussions—whether everyday citizens or scholars—struggle over the definitions of concepts fundamental to the conversation. The most well-known annual survey on national identity conducted by National Chengchi University, uses three metrics to approximate national identity—nominal identification of Chinese or Taiwanese, political party identification, and hope for Taiwan's future.[48] In these questions, there are a number of ambiguous terms that rely on respondent interpretation, but the nature of close-ended surveys does not allow for the exploration of this nuance. For example, the seemingly basic terms of "Taiwan" and "Taiwanese" are interpreted differently by different individuals. On one hand some, like TTD, a fifty-one-year-old graphic designer from Taoyuan, say,

> I think that Taiwan, after all, is a country on an island. . . . I think Taiwan has always been an independent country, even if the United Nations has turned a blind eye due to a certain evil force.[49]

48 "Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity," Election Study Center, National Chengchi University.
49 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.

From this perspective, Taiwan is clearly defined as an independently sovereign polity equivalent to its own regime, in addition to being a geographical term for the island. On the other hand, another interpretation of "Taiwan" is held by individuals such as CVD, a sixty-year-old retired military communications officer, who insists,

> Taiwan is this land's geographical name. . . . There's no country called Taiwan. . . . Taiwan is actually integrated into the Republic of China, except that your current power—political, economic, regimental power—is limited to the territories of Taiwan-Penghu-Kinmen-Mazu.[50]

This quotation defines Taiwan as the name of an island that falls under the sovereignty of the Republic of China regime, which claims rule over Taiwan, its surrounding islands, and the mainland. Both individuals call upon the independently functioning political systems present in Taiwan to justify their viewpoints. CVD proclaims,

> This time we're voting for presidents and legislators right? Let me ask you, which country's president? Not Taiwan, not the Philippines, not the mainland, and not the United States, right? It's the Republic of China![51]

Similarly, TTD posits,

> You hold its passport, its identity card, you vote, how can you say that it is not an independent country? Please, wake up! Your conduct is exactly that of Taiwanese independence.[52]

Both individuals hold radically different conceptions of what "country" and "Taiwan" entail. Extrapolating from these divergent definitions, the interpretation of being "Taiwanese" also differs. For TTD, being Taiwanese means being a full citizen of the country of Taiwan, much like someone would describe themselves as being American or German. For CVD, to be Taiwanese is to be a resident of Taiwan and a citizen of the Republic of China, like one might call themselves a Californian. Further, the complex nature of the terms "Taiwanese" and "Chinese" confound survey results. KYR, a twenty-two-year-old student and registered KMT party member muses,

> I would say that at the same time, I am a national of the Republic of China, but I am also Taiwanese, and I am also Chinese in a cultural sense.[53]

The lack of distinction between political and cultural dimensions in the survey questions makes it unclear what exactly is being measured. Additionally, while the Republic of China came up in many interviews, as seen in CVD's and KYR's quotes, it does not feature in any study regarding national identity thus far. This oversight means that while existing studies are useful for observing the broad strokes of national identity, the lack of a full lexicon of clearly defined terms leads to an incomplete understanding of the issue, overlooking nuances in individual interpretation.

Beyond defining terms, the unique connection each individual has with these concepts results in an unimaginably complex and large range of national identity constructions that eludes classification or precise definition, despite continuing efforts by scholars over time. Previous studies have used an array of categorizations to analyze national identity in Taiwan. Besides the NCCU survey mentioned above, which considers "Taiwanese" and "Chinese" as distinct from one another, there exist many other studies using various framework methodologies to operationalize national identity. One study defines Taiwanese national identity through the clarification of the terms "country," "countrymen," and "cultural orientation."[54] A different study attempts to categorize individuals into four different nominal national identities—Pragmatists, Taiwanese Nationalists, Chinese Nationalists,

50 Personal interview by author, January 10, 2024.
51 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
52 Personal interview by author, January 10, 2024.
53 Personal interview by author, December 30, 2023.
54 Wang and Liu, "Contending Identities in Taiwan," 574–76.

and Conservatives—based on their attitudes towards unification and independence if economic and political disparities between Taiwan and China and the possibility of war are disregarded.[55] Another still defines national identity as a result of the sliding spectrum interaction between one's primordial and constructivist affiliations on a dual primordial-political axis.[56] While further discussion on the specific merits and shortcomings of each different framework may be found in Jiang Yi-huah's 2017 "Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations," all aforementioned studies fail to capture the entire picture of national identity. In the hopes of gleaning further insight, this paper will attempt to elucidate the concept of national identity in Taiwan through qualitative analysis, an approach that had not been seen in the previous survey-based studies.

In a preliminary round of data analysis, a framework of categorization based on the interviewees' attitudes towards the Republic of China proved to complement existing research by adding a new dimension of regimental attitude. However, it still fell short in the holistic definition and categorization of national identity in Taiwan. Instead, this new attempt to conceptualize national identity—by studying whether interviewees believed the Republic of China is 1) an illegitimate regime, 2) a legitimate but changed regime, 3) the historical regime and heir of the Chinese legacy, or 4) one of two possible regimes to represent China—emphasized the arbitrary nature of categorization of respondents under each framework. By allowing interviewees to provide justification for their answers, this method demonstrated that there are an infinite number of ways to categorize the same sample of respondents. These multiple frameworks, which all prove to be imperfect yet complementary, attest to the truly complex and multidimensional nature of national identity.

For example, PT and DKF, two twenty-seven-year-old individuals working in Taipei, both recognize the ROC as a legitimate but fundamentally changed regime that functions independently and sovereignly on Taiwan. However, while PT admits,

> I would say that deep down, I would very much hope that Taiwan could become a name, a country's name,[57]

showing a preference for Taiwanese independence under ideal circumstances and rejecting any form of unification, DKF instead prefers what he perceives as the status quo, stating,

> If there is no danger of war, I would hope that the Republic of China continues to preserve and operate its political regime on this island.[58]

Unlike PT, who has one clear preference for independence, DKF is willing to accept unification under the ROC or PRC regime, or Taiwanese independence, as long as his conditions of democracy and a maintained standard of living are met. Under frameworks used by the aforementioned studies, these two individuals would each be grouped under different categories. Here, they are labeled the same. However, this is not the case for the following example of CVD and CQZ—a sixty-year-old retired military communications officer and a twenty-four-year-old M2 student of public administration, respectively—who both believe and identify with a Republic of China that they see as the historical successor to the Chinese empire. While both would prefer unification under the ROC as a best case scenario, their attitudes towards Taiwanese independence differ greatly. CVD places the most importance on the unification of "China," saying,

> There is a legacy of the Chinese nation. You have the same culture, are of the same cultivation, and share the same bloodline. There's no way I would let you be independent.[59]

---

55 Shen Shiau-Chi and Wu Nai-teh, "Ethnic and Civic Nationalisms: Two Roads to the Formation of a Taiwanese Nation," in *The "One China" Dilemma*, ed. Peter C. Y. Chow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

56 Chen, "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan," p.846.

57 Personal interview by author, December 26, 2023.

58 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.

59 Personal interview by author, January 10, 2024.

CQZ's main priority is the survival of the ROC. CQZ reasons,

> If the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are both the Republic of China, if Taiwan still wants to continue to advocate the independence of Taiwan . . . they can become an independent country of Chinese people, that is no problem.[60]

Though these two individuals would be categorized together in each previously mentioned framework, their priorities, interpretations, and conceptions of the same nominal identity are completely different. This highly individual nature of Taiwanese national identity makes it impossible to cohesively define, especially because the trends observed across different demographic groups are loose at best. Though with the potential to yield endless discussion, the differences between each individual's conception of national identity may not be the most pertinent aspect of this subject.

Despite these differences, the overwhelming majority of individuals across all demographics, identities, and intensities of identification make peace the highest priority, and therefore prefer the status quo. Of all twenty-six interviewees, twenty-five unpromptedly expressed the desire to maintain the status quo, along with active anti-war sentiments. Among the younger, draft-eligible Generation C, these sentiments were most often paired with a personal unwillingness to fight, as in the cases of KNK and KLT, twenty-five-year-old and twenty-one-year-old males respectively. KNK states,

> I still call myself Taiwanese, and I want Taiwan to be seen by the world, but if you ask me to sacrifice blood and sweat for this country, I wouldn't be willing to,[61]

and KLT explains,

> The only reason I don't support the Taiwanese independence faction is because I don't want to fight in war.[62]

Here, we can see that the threat of war actually exerts a substantial impact on the attitudes of Generation C towards national identity. Though they may otherwise identify strongly with Taiwan and even Taiwanese independence, their feelings are tempered by the real threat of war, as they prioritize peace over intangible feelings of nationalism. For those above the draft-eligible age, the main concerns are the well-being of their children, and of Taiwan as a whole. TJG, a seventy-two-year-old retiree confesses,

> I am afraid of war, really afraid of war. When I heard my son could still be drafted because he is a non-commissioned officer under the age of fifty-five, I began to worry again, not for my own safety, but that my son, and all of my brothers' and sisters' children will have to go to war.[63]

Similarly, AMF, a sixty-eight-year-old who throughout the course of his interview vehemently stressed his and Taiwan's lack of connection to China, declares,

> It does not matter if we have to be unified, as long as we do not become like Israel and Hamas. If your country is beaten to such an extent, how long would it take to recover? Taiwanese people still have to eat, and there is nothing to eat in war.[64]

60 Personal interview by author, December 27, 2023.
61 Personal interview by author, December 22, 2023.
62 Personal interview by author, December 30, 2023.
63 Personal interview by author, January 10, 2024.
64 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.

Like Generation C, Generations A and B must consider the real threat of war simultaneously with their identities. As seen in AMF's case, this fear of war is so strong that he is willing to go against his Taiwanese national identity and accept unification in order to maintain peace. Across all generations, we can see that while individuals may wish for independence or unification in conjunction with certain labels of national identity, their higher valuation of personal, familial, and national physical safety ultimately tempers any motivation to act towards these ends. The only individual who did not actively express anti-war sentiments was TTD, the self-described die-hard Taiwanese nationalist. Instead, he reasons,

> It has never been Taiwan's decision to decide between war and peace. The power has always been the other side's . . . so if we really have to fight, my position is that I'll brave it, really brave it out to the bitter end.[65]

Though he expresses his willingness to fight for Taiwan, he does not have an active desire for a war of independence, and cannot be called pro-war. Instead, he declines to give his opinion on war, seeing it as a matter out of his or Taiwan's hands, and therefore not worth speculating over. Though it may be argued that KNK, KLT, TJG, AMF, and the twenty-one other interviewees simply do not hold national identities strong enough to support war in the name of their country, TTD is an ardent, proud, and self-proclaimed Taiwanese nationalist who would die for his country, yet he still abstains from supporting war. The lack of any warmongering, even as a form of boasting, along with with the prolific amount of fear and anti-war sentiment expressed by interviewees across each demographic group suggests that no matter the strength, direction, or dimension of national identity construction, when faced with a concrete threat to safety, the pragmatic force of self-preservation largely wins out over the more emotional urges of nationalism in day-to-day life. Since it is popularly agreed that maintaining the status quo is currently the most logical move for Taiwan, one might assume that differences in national identity are ultimately insignificant. This is not the case, however, as the prevalence of identity politics in the Taiwanese political realm has served to exacerbate these differences, the effects of which reverberate throughout the political system and society as a whole.

B. Politicization of national identity

National identity has been a political project in Taiwan since the arrival of the KMT to Taiwan in 1949. Its politicization is evident through the experiences of Generations A and B, who grew up under martial law. For these individuals, the idea of "being Chinese" went hand in hand with the idea that the Republic of China, headed by the KMT party, was the rightful inheritor of all of China's lands and people. All individuals of these two generations recall their schooling under the KMT government as being laced with nationalist Republic of China propaganda. GPK, an eighty-seven-year-old retiree who was in his first year of elementary school when the KMT government arrived in Taiwan recalls,

> The song "Counterattack on the Mainland, Down with the Communists" was sung daily through elementary school, until almost high school. . . . At that time, nobody knew how to speak Mandarin, but speaking Taiwanese Hokkien would be punished.[66]

The strict education imposed by the KMT government had a main goal of assimilating bensheng children and indoctrinating waisheng children as proud citizens of the Republic of China in order to keep the dream of a unified China under the ROC alive. In fact, this national goal was so eminent in the ROC's agenda that many felt the mission and ideology of the party was prioritized over infrastructural and political development in Taiwan itself.

65 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
66 Personal interview by author, January 11, 2024.

SCU, a fifty-two-year-old from New Taipei City reflects,

> In the past, many waisheng families felt that they were only temporarily living in Taiwan and wanted to counterattack the mainland. Beyond what the Japanese government left behind, they felt that additional construction was useless, because they only wanted to go back to the mainland.[67]

AMF supplements this, reasoning,

> When [the KMT] fled here, it was only for temporary lodging. That's why back then, Taiwan was not made into a proper country, so now we have no country.[68]

The strict linguistic and ideological education children received all throughout their schooling from 1949 until democratization was so effective in instilling a Chinese identity in some students that YSS, a fifty-six-year-old bensheng male from Taipei who now hopes for Taiwanese independence recalls,

> When I was young, there was no such thing as being "Taiwanese." Under the education of the time, I completely agreed that there was only one identity—Chinese—and that we should counterattack the mainland. When I was in my teens, I thought that those talking about Taiwanese independence were treasonous, so I supported the KMT. It was only after the lifting of martial law that I discovered there was another way of thinking. . . . When I was in graduate school, I was able to read many philosophy books that were previously banned under martial law, and then I started to lean towards the other side. . . . I am Taiwanese.[69]

It is clear from these experiences that the project of national identity construction was one of the KMT's preeminent goals, and that they used the censorship of martial law as well as the full control of education to pursue it. From the beginning, the Chinese national identity in Taiwan has been inseparable from the KMT. The Chinese identity arrived in Taiwan with the KMT after their defeat in the Chinese Civil War, and the maintenance of such an identity has been, and remains to this day, an integral part of the party identity and platform. Thus, individuals such as YSS, who had no prior familial influence on his national identity, were taken by this all-encompassing propaganda before being exposed to other viewpoints after democratization. Others, such as XLA, a fifty-three-year-old bensheng woman from Taoyuan, grew up staunchly opposed to the KMT because of their nationalist project. After her maternal grandfather had been arrested and murdered by the KMT regime during the White Terror Period[70] for allegedly holding Communist sympathies, her family became strongly opposed to the Chinese nationalist project.[71] It was from these kinds of oppositional sentiments that *tangwai* parties began to form in opposition to the KMT—first illegally, and later coalescing into the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as the democratization process began. Though the DPP was formed in advocacy for political change rather than around the idea of Taiwanese independence or a Taiwanese identity, the association was present almost from the beginning. GPK remembers,

> When the DPP first emerged, I had a very good impression of them. . . . At the time, it seemed to me like the other side was very rotten, but this side, we could mutually support and advocate for each other.[72]

---

67 Personal interview by author, December 27, 2023.
68 Personal Interview, January 7, 2024.
69 Personal Interview, January 7, 2024.
70 The White Terror Period in Taiwan refers to the years spent under the martial law of the authoritarian KMT regime (1949–1987). During this time, more than 100,000 accused political dissidents were imprisoned and tortured. Estimates for the number killed range from 10,000 to 30,000.
71 Personal interview by author, January 8, 2024.
72 Personal interview by author, January 11, 2024.

Putting it more plainly, AML, a sixty-eight-year-old bensheng woman, states,

> I have supported the DPP since their inception. Since I was young, I have always felt like I was Taiwanese. We are *Tâi-uân gín-á* (tr. Taiwanese kids), so of course we will support the DPP; they are our local party.[73]

Because of the DPP's reputation as "homegrown," and their opposition to the "foreign" KMT, they were intrinsically seen as standing up for the Taiwanese, bensheng peoples' interests from the beginning. This association was formally cemented over the years through internal party politics, finally culminating in Chen Shui Bian, a known Taiwanese independence supporter, being elected in 2000 as Taiwan's first non-KMT-affiliated president. In this way, the origins of both the KMT and the DPP have saddled each party with mountains of historical baggage, chaining each to a specific and oppositional ideal of national identity, thus inherently politicizing the discussion of national identity.

This politicization of national identity has forced it to remain a polarizing issue that dominates politics and shapes society when played out through the KMT and DPP's political theatre, overshadowing other universally acknowledged issues. In Taiwanese politics, the debate over cross-strait relations is the manifestation of the politicization of national identity. Because of the popular assumption that deeper economic integration leads to closer cultural and political ties—though this idea remains unproven by literature—it is often assumed that those holding Chinese nationalist–adjacent views desire more cultural and economic integration with China, and those holding identities adjacent to Taiwanese independence, fearing economic dependency and eventual political integration, desire the opposite.[74] Indeed, SCU, a staunch supporter of Taiwanese independence, denounces the KMT and their supporters, accusing them of "selling Taiwan to China."[75] In contrast, TJP, a staunch Chinese nationalist, lambasts the DPP and their supporters for wanting to "completely cut off Taiwan from China."[76] Thus, sociopolitical consciousness in Taiwan has fallen into the same trap as pre-2000s national identity scholarship, equating an individual's national identity with their preference for independence or unification via a proxy of cross-strait relations. This preference is then equated to political party support due to the persisting symbolic association of the KMT with a unified Chinese identity and the DPP with an independent Taiwanese one. Unlike the nuanced and multidimensional constructions that are evident in interviewees' discussions of their own national identities and recognized in contemporary scholarship, this form of reductive "symbolic national identity" simply equates being "Taiwanese" with supporting independence, the reduction of cross-strait relations, and the DPP, while being "Chinese" is equated with the exact opposite. This illusory dichotomy occupies such a large portion of political discourse in Taiwan, that there is little space for other matters. Among Generation C, there is open and widespread acknowledgement that besides their positions towards cross-strait relations, not much else differentiates the platforms of the KMT and DPP. JTH, a twenty-two-year-old first year Masters of Law student who favors Taiwanese independence, observes,

> In fact, if we look at the internal affairs positions of KMT and DPP from the beginning of Taiwan's elections until now, they have both been very, very progressive, and their political opinions are also the same. That's because the most important issue is independence.[77]

73 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
74 Frank Muyard, "Taiwanese National Identity, Cross-Strait Economic Interaction, and the Integration Paradigm," in *National Identity and Economic Interest: Taiwan's Competing Options and Their Implications for Regional Stability*, ed. Peter C. Y. Chow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 153–186.
75 Personal interview by author, December 27, 2023.
76 Personal interview by author, January 10, 2024.
77 Personal interview by author, December 24, 2023.

KYR, a twenty-two-year-old fourth year undergraduate student, agrees with this sentiment. When asked what, besides the issue of independence, distinguishes the two political parties, he simply responds,

> Okay, apart from independence, what are the big differences? Well, energy issues. The biggest difference should be energy. One wants nuclear power, the other doesn't. I think that's all.[78]

Though KYR is a registered member of the KMT party, cites the DPP's refusal to acknowledge the Republic of China as the main factor driving him away from the party, and stands in full opposition to JTH's national identity and views on cross-strait relations, the two are in agreement about the two parties' similarities. Where the older generations have deeper personal connections to the KMT and DPP because they grew up and evolved alongside each party, the younger generation has only known Taiwan and its political parties under a democratic regime. Because of this, despite political affiliation largely aligning with symbolic national identity across all age groups, the younger generation is less rigidly attached to their political party of choice, more willing to objectively criticize the party they support, and seemingly more cognizant of the flaws of the political system. However, it appears that an emotional pull and lack of choice in other political subjects still leads all age groups to largely vote along lines drawn by the symbolic national identity. Ultimately, despite expressing extreme dissatisfaction with the current conduct of their preferred political parties, JTH and KYR both confessed that they would each begrudgingly vote for the DPP and KMT respectively in the 2024 election, if only to oppose their corresponding disfavored parties.

The two main critiques fielded by interviewees against the political system are succinctly summarised by AJM, a twenty-seven-year-old reporter who was at the time of the interview—days before the election—undecided on his vote,

> Our political spectrum has been divided by cross-strait issues. The DPP and the KMT, they respectively represent Taiwan's independence and—well, in fact, the Kuomintang have not been leaning towards so-called unification in recent years. They are not so-called pro-China, they just believe that we must peacefully coexist with China. But in order to get the corresponding votes, they need to play up their trademark values, which are these two. In the end, everyone's vote will still swing between these two balances. On all issues related to society, economy, transportation, and welfare, except for whether to use nuclear power or not, their policies are almost the same, there is no difference. I think their policies are all similar, and none of them make me feel that they really care about the disadvantaged in society.[79]

First, the lack of variety in policies other than cross-strait issues, and to a lesser extent, nuclear power, forces what is essentially single-issue voting in Taiwan. Second, the one distinguishing feature between the two parties is superficial—the piece of land that comprises the current sovereignty of the Republic of China, an entity that is often equated with the polity of Taiwan, already functions independently. A declaration of *de jure* independence would spell certain destruction, as would any attempt to unify the mainland under the Republic of China. Consequently, given current cross-strait relations, voting along lines drawn by symbolic national identity yields nothing in terms of actual change, no matter the election's results. Returning to the conclusion drawn from the previous section—that the overwhelming majority of the interviewees are pragmatists who support the maintenance of the status quo no matter their national identity—it is clear that the interviewees recognize the fruitlessness of this single-issue voting.

Indeed, when asked what issues they believed most urgently needed to be addressed in the upcoming election, only five of the interviewees declared cross-strait relations to be the most important political issue. However, the specific subjects of minimum wage and housing prices were universally raised, while the broader subject of economic development also proved popular. When discussing these subjects, interviewees widely

78 Personal interview by author, December 30, 2024.
79 Personal interview by author, December 28, 2023.

expressed frustration towards the wider political system for arguing over the empty issue of cross-strait relations rather than addressing these uncontroversial issues. CGZ, a forty-five-year-old stay-at-home mother sees cross-strait-based polarization as substanceless, musing,

> I think it's a bit like politics for politics' sake. That is to say, everyone actually wants to maintain the status quo, and there is no need to emphasize this subject so much. There's too much of a feeling of opposing just for the sake of opposing.[80]

In addition to negatively affecting cross-strait policies, this "opposing just for the sake of opposing" attitude held by the political parties extends to general issues. Regarding the state of Taiwan's political environment, CLZ, a 75-year-old neighborhood chief in Taipei, says with exasperation,

> I think the unhealthy factor in Taiwan now comes from the interactions of the political parties. . . . All they do is curse each other all day long without empathy! Nobody makes fair and impartial judgements.[81]

This feeling that Taiwan's main political parties are void of any real productive agenda besides standing in opposition to each other is echoed by many other interviewees. In one case, KYR brings up an example of the KMT and DPP completely swapping stances on the importation of American meat over the course of a few short years.

> When Ma Ying Jeou was in power, the United States demanded that Taiwan should open up the import of beef containing ractopamine for a free trade agreement. The DPP said, "Why would you do that? What will happen to the human body if you take that ractopamine?" It was a mess. The KMT said, "For the sake of the overall situation, I will sell it to the Taiwan market. The label says it is American beef, so if you don't want it, don't buy it." In the past few years, it was the same when Tsai Ing-wen was in power and she wanted to sign a free trade agreement with the US. The United States said, "you have to import this pig with ractopamine," so the DPP imported it. At that time, the ruling party changed with the opposition party, and the DPP said, "For the sake of the overall situation, we need to trade with the United States. These pigs will be labeled as American pork, so if you don't want it, don't buy it. The KMT then said, "Ah, what can I say, then you are sacrificing the health of the Taiwanese people."[82]

In this case, though the two instances are identical in motivation, chemical, and type of produce, the DPP first opposed the KMT's implementation of the policy regarding beef, and was later opposed by the KMT when implementing the same policy towards pork. The tale of these twin policies exemplifies the nonsensical "opposing just for the sake of opposing"[83] pattern of Taiwanese politics which the interviewees decry. In Taiwan's political theatre, when a party is in power, their role is to put forward policies. When a party is acting as the opposition, their role is to oppose anything put forth by the party in power, even if the two parties are fundamentally in agreement. Because the only distinction between the two parties that individuals hold strong feelings towards is their symbolic national identity, this subject has come to represent Taiwanese politics as a whole, acting as the lynchpin for division.

Through observing the ineffectual and perpetual conflict between the KMT and DPP, Taiwanese society adjusts their own discussions of politics accordingly, with most engaging in some form of self-censorship, acknowledging that political discussion is likely futile with opposition camps. While all interviewees agree that people can believe whatever they want—"After all, we all carry Taiwanese passports, so they can do whatever

80 Personal interview by author, December 28, 2023.
81 Personal interview by author, December 28, 2023.
82 Personal interview by author, December 30, 2023.
83 CGZ, interview by author, 2024.

they please . . . the constitution guarantees freedom of speech,"[84]—all but PT refrain from talking politics with those around them even, and sometimes especially with, friends and family. Two main reasons for this are 1) the possibility of serious interpersonal conflict, and 2) they see discussions as useless, due to what they perceive as irreconcilable ideological differences in political views—the roadblock of symbolic national identity. AKV, a fifty-year-old businessman, explains,

> Politics and religion are relatively sensitive. When we were growing up, there were colleagues, classmates, or couples who divorced or broke up because they supported different political parties.[85]

While breaking interpersonal bonds over a difference in political view may seem exaggerated, many of the interviewees express a complete inability to understand, empathize, or communicate with the "other side." Shaking his head, JTH vehemently declares,

> It's not just that I can't empathize with them, but that I can't even begin to fathom what they are thinking about . . . so I don't discuss politics with my family; their views are completely different from mine.[86]

Most of the interviewees, like JTH, hold the two viewpoints as completely irreconcilable, and opt to limit their discussions rather than argue, seeing attempts to convince the "other side" of their logic as futile. DKF details his own logic as follows:

> I am more inclined to the Republic of China, and he is more inclined to Taiwan independence. What is the intersection between them? There is no intersection at all, so the final result of the discussion is that he will tell his story and I will tell mine. Forget it. He will not suddenly be influenced by Chinese culture, and I don't think anyone can convince me to support Taiwan's local folk culture. Therefore, the final discussion is more about small talk or gossip.[87]

As discussion of serious politics results in unproductive debates, most Taiwanese opt for superficial gossip instead, even with friends and family. Although as proved by CQZ,[88] there is indeed an intersection between identifying with the Republic of China and agreeing with Taiwanese independence, it is the lack of open and serious discussion that prevents DKF and other individuals from realizing that certain identities they view as inconceivable certainly do exist. The perspective held by most interviewees aligns with DKF and JTH's experiences, though many, like AKV, also recognize the societal inability to productively discuss politics as a hindrance to social and political progress, saying:

> If you don't talk about it, you won't hear about other ideas. There will be no conflicts, but you won't have the best solutions. Even if you have some good ideas, it is not easy for people to hear about them. So actually, it's *not* good not to discuss things. However, this is also related to social culture. Because since people want to avoid conflict, they try to avoid talking about it.[89]

This rationale held by most interviewees further proves the individual as a rational actor who recognizes the circus around national identity in politics and tries to avoid that same trap in their day-to-day lives, despite admittedly

---

84 KNK, interview by author, 2024.
85 Personal interview by author, December 23, 2023.
86 Personal interview by author, December 24, 2023.
87 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
88 Refer to section IV.A Individual Conceptions of National Identity. CQZ identifies with the Republic of China, but would accept Taiwanese (along with Hong Kong and Shanghai, etc.) independence upon the reunification of the mainland and Taiwan under the ROC regime.
89 Personal interview by author, December 27, 2023.

holding strong, emotional connections to their own national identities. Though they remain trapped in the system which provokes division along national identity lines, individuals recognize the danger and impracticality of such an environment, actively choosing to remove themselves from it, by engaging in self-censorship. In spite of actions taken by individuals to mitigate societal conflict, the prevalence of national identity in politics still acts as a polarizing force in society, preventing the creation of a centripetal force behind which all Taiwanese can gather. So far, there has not been a reliable way to balance disagreement and discussion to create a suitable compromise on the idea of national identity on both the individual and governmental levels. As the distinctive features of the KMT and DPP, these symbolic and one-dimensional national identities have been touted in every election since the first in 1996. These interviews have shown that many of the Taiwanese population are tired of the debate, particularly as its unproductive nature also blocks government action on more pressing socioeconomic issues. While in previous elections voters have been forced to comply by the standards of symbolic national identity, the 2024 national elections may provide a way out of this historic pattern of voting.

C. The rise of Ke Wen-zhe in the 2024 elections

The 2024 presidential election in Taiwan was widely deemed pivotal for determining Taiwan's future direction; however, public opinion in Taiwan proves to be less than enthusiastic, even for those holding strong attitudes towards national identity and cross-strait relations. In early 2023, United States CIA director William Burns publicly stated that "We know as a matter of intelligence that [Xi Jinping] has instructed the People's Liberation Army to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion [of Taiwan]."[90] This knowledge is indicative of the mounting political and economic pressure exerted on Taiwan by China in recent years. Prior to Director Burns' statement, China had already been increasing daily incursions of the Chinese People's Liberation Army into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, increasing Chinese import bans on Taiwanese goods, and consistently poaching Taiwan's dwindling diplomatic allies throughout President Tsai Ing-wen's two terms.[91] This 2027 deadline is the most openly aggressive posture taken by the PRC since the 1992 Consensus. Despite not being an official declaration of aggressive intent, the lingering possibility of an invasion has stirred discomfort worldwide. Because the 2027 deadline falls within the next presidential term beginning in 2024 and ending in 2028, the election has been deemed a critical juncture in Taiwan's existence by the global community. China has also emphasized the importance of this election, with Zhang Zhijun, the head of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait, warning that votes in this election are "important choices between the prospects for peace and war, prosperity and decline."[92] Indeed, the KMT has openly embraced this rhetoric, reinforcing the relevance of symbolic national identity and leveraging China's open opposition to Lai Ching-te and the DPP in an attempt to garner support. KMT candidate Hou You-ih himself declared that "Hou You-ih opposes Taiwan independence, will allow cross-strait peace, restart dialogue and exchanges, strengthen national defence and let everyone live in peace in Taiwan,"[93] implying that a DPP victory would lead to war in the pursuit of independence despite the trend towards the median by both parties rendering this highly unlikely.

Despite these potentially high stakes, a large portion of the interviewees expressed ennui towards the election—with the exception of certain members of Generation A, who continue to vehemently support the parties they have historically backed.

---

90 Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "CIA Chief Warns against Underestimating XI's Ambitions toward Taiwan," *Reuters*, February 2, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-says-chinas-xi-little-sobered-by-ukraine-war-2023-02-02/.

91 Adrian Ang U-Jin and Olli Pekka Suorsa, "The 'New Normal' in PLA Incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ," *The Diplomat*, September 27, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/the-new-normal-in-pla-incursions-into-taiwans-adiz/.

92 Ben Blanchard, "Chinese Official Urges Taiwan's People to Make 'Correct Choice' on Election," *Reuters*, January 2, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-official-urges-taiwans-people-make-correct-choice-election-2024-01-03/.

93 Blanchard, "Chinese Official Urges Taiwan's People to Make 'Correct Choice' on Election."

For example, AML passionately declares,

> I have always supported the DPP, but I still consider the merits of each candidate. In this election, Lai Ching-te is the only option. He is the only one that will allow Taiwan to walk towards the independence route, and it is vital that people vote for him.[94]

With similar intensity and conviction, HMH, a seventy-four-year-old female retiree, states,

> Since the beginning, I have always voted for the KMT in local and national elections. They can keep this country stable, and the chance of danger is lower. As long as we can ensure the safety of the country.[95]

The correlation between generation, strength, and dimensionality of political support is a testament to the 2006 findings of Shelley Rigger.[96] Indeed, Generation A, which correlates to the second generation of her study, continues to hold the most rigid, strong, and divergent political affiliations of the three generations involved in this study. Other than these individuals who have long personal connections to certain political parties, the majority of the interviewees, particularly those in the two younger generations, report being unimpressed with their choices. This lack of enthusiasm stems from two related lines of logic. First, whatever choice Taiwanese voters make, the real outcomes of cross-strait relations, the economy, housing prices, and more will ultimately remain the same. Comparing the Taiwan-China relationship to that of Ukraine and Russia, JTH maintains that Taiwanese voters have no real power to decide their fate in terms of war or peace. He says,

> Look at Ukraine, they voted for Zelenskyy, who was more supportive of Russia [than Poroshenko]. Even so, Russia still went after him. Even though Zelenskyy was more supportive of Russia, later when Russia really invaded Ukraine, Zelenskyy still resisted them. It seems that whatever Taiwanese people choose is completely unimportant.[97]

Here, he shows his disbelief of KMT and Chinese rhetoric, which posits that a vote for the KMT is a vote for peace, whereas a vote for the DPP harbors war. For JTH and many other supporters of the DPP, this choice of war or peace wholly rests upon China's decision-making. This is also the same reasoning given by TTD for his willingness to fight in war.[98] JTH does not simply believe in Taiwan's lack of agency in preventing or inviting a potential invasion. He also doubts that in the case of invasion, Taiwan has a choice between war or peace. He uses the example of the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to support this. Although he was theorized to be relatively pro-Russia at the time of his election, President Zelenskyy became the face of the anti-Russian movement in Ukraine and worldwide upon Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Taiwanese parallel to Zelenskyy would be the KMT, who are considered the relatively pro-China party. Then, JTH does not believe that the KMT would capitulate to the PRC in the case of an invasion. He reasons,

> Both [parties] are anti-China or anti-communist. At the 2021 Olympics, Taiwan defeated China in badminton that year and won the golden medal. Everyone was happy then. Regardless of whether he supports the Kuomintang or the Democratic Progressive Party, everyone is very happy and feels that Taiwan has defeated China. I think this is a very important social consensus.[99]

---

94 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
95 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.
96 Rigger, *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism*, 20–31.
97 Personal interview by author, December 24, 2023.
98 See IV.A Individual Conceptions of National Identity
99 Personal interview by author, December 24, 2023.

Here, JTH recognizes that economic and social policy are not the only things the DPP and KMT agree on. They actually recognize the same enemy in the People's Republic of China, albeit from slightly different angles—the DPP from an anti-China perspective, and the KMT from an anti-communist one. Thus, he believes that neither party is likely to surrender to the PRC in the event of an invasion. Then, even the substance behind the irreconcilable symbolic national identities is fragile. Given the previously established congruency of the KMT's and DPP's platforms in all areas but the matter of cross-strait relations, voters such as JTH and TTD view the act of voting as having no real effect on any sector of Taiwan's fate. Thus, believing that voting one way or another will not prevent an invasion in 2027 or beyond if China wills it, JTH reluctantly decides to vote for the DPP, who at least symbolically align with his desire to move towards independence.

The second reason behind the lack of enthusiasm towards this election is the general dissatisfaction with all presented candidates. XLA explains her voting plans as follows,

> Now, I hope that I can look more at individual candidates, not just the political parties, but this time I really don't see any acceptable candidates. I don't really want to vote, but the presidential election is a very important election. . . . I really hate Jaw Shaw-kong,[100] so I will vote for Lai Ching-te.[101]

Despite not having a good impression of any candidate in the election, XLA decides to choose the candidate she sees as being the lesser of all evils, a tactic also reported by several other interviewees. This indicates that for many interviewees, none of the candidates adequately represent their interests as constituents of the state. Rather than active support, their voting plan hinges on selecting the candidate they believe will inflict the least damage. This general dissatisfaction with the existing political system has resulted in another significant feature of the 2024 elections—for the first time since democratic elections began in 1996, the 2024 ballot sees the presence of a competitive third-party candidate in Ke Wen-zhe of the Taiwan People's Party.

The rapid rise of Ke Wen-zhe's Taiwan People's Party in the last five years may be symptomatic of Taiwanese society's frustration towards the conduct of the KMT and DPP. Since its creation in 2019, the TPP—using Ke Wen-zhe's face, voice, and philosophy—has positioned itself as a pragmatic centrist party and an alternative to both pan-Blue (KMT-aligned) and pan-Green (DPP-aligned) camps. Indeed, the official TPP website declares, "we navigate with the compass of rationality, pragmatism, and science. . . . If you ask any political party about their ideology, whether they lobby for unification or independence, they ultimately want our people to live better lives."[102] This rational outlook touted by Ke and the TPP seems to address all of the interviewees' complaints in regards to the current political environment—logic over emotion, effective action over divisive rhetoric. Additionally, the nature of the TPP as a political party formed after democratization allows Ke Wen-zhe to claim that he has escaped the need to align himself with any symbolic national identity. As a result, for Generation C and some of Generation B who are not sustained in their support to the KMT and DPP by personal history, the draw of this new alternative—one that promises to jump past the hurdle of symbolic national identity and unite Taiwan under unbiased pragmatism—is evident. DKF expresses exactly this sentiment, saying,

> It seems like the two main parties are competing to see who can be worse. The KMT was replaced by the DPP, and the DPP was replaced by the KMT. In the end, it turns out that everyone is equally bad, and did not learn from experience to enact any particular changes. Therefore, unless their family has a strong pre-existing political party consciousness, this is the reason why everyone turns towards Ke Wen-zhe.[103]

Analyzing the voting plans of the nine interviewees in Generation C, DKF's assessment seems to be somewhat accurate. Of the nine, four favor Ke Wen-zhe, one favors the KMT, one favors the DPP, and three are undecided or abstaining. Supporting Rigger's 2006 conclusion that subsequent post-democratization generations would

100 Jaw Shaw-kong was the chosen running mate of KMT presidential candidate Hou You-ih.
101 Personal interview by author, January 8, 2024.
102 "Taiwan People's Party (TPP)," Taiwan People's Party, 2019, https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/about.php.
103 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.

mellow in the directionality and strength of national identity and political identification, Generation C is by far the least decisive in its voting and most tentative in its support towards any political candidate. In comparison, Generation A has four DPP supporters and three KMT supporters, each staunch in their position, while Generation B comprises six DPP supporters, three Ke Wen-zhe supporters, and one KMT supporter. Though this sample is only a small slice of Taiwanese society, all of the Ke supporters and opposers in the sample espouse very similar talking points. Universally, all of Generation A lambasts Ke Wen-zhe's performance as Taipei mayor, particularly his revoking of the Double Ninth Festival cash vouchers for the elderly and criticizing his lack of concrete policy implementation. Among Generations B and C, the very traits that endear Ke Wen-zhe to some turn others away. Those in opposition point to his habitual use of unpolished and unsophisticated language and his ambiguous policy platform as negatives, saying, "Ke Wen-zhe's personal characteristics, well, he seems to be very prone to gaffes . . . and regarding cross-strait relations, he actually doesn't have any specific policies, policy guidance, or any specific plans,"[104] and "I feel that Ke Wen-zhe's supporters don't have a rationale at all. I don't know if they know what they are supporting, to be honest."[105] These individuals harbor more criticisms towards Ke Wen-zhe than they do towards the other major oppositional parties. Notably, those in Generation C who oppose Ke Wen-zhe negatively spotlight his lack of commitment to a single stance on cross-strait relations, suggesting some young voters still place value on cross-strait relations and symbolic national identity as a political issue. On the other hand, Ke Wen-zhe's supporters claim that "even though Ke Wen-zhe has the tendency to say really stupid things, that is part of the reason why [supporters] like him. He is straight-talking and cannot shut up, so he lets [them] decide if the things he says are logical or not."[106] In contrast to the political inadequacy that Ke Wen-zhe's opposition sees in his political gaffes, his candid tendency to blurt out politically incorrect statements is regarded as a form of transparency by his supporters. Additionally, their support does not appear to arise from any of Ke's specific policies. AKV states,

> Though everyone knows things need to change, there are never changes. . . . I am more partial to Ke Wen-zhe, even though I know he cannot be elected, because my personal theory is that we should try a different political party.[107]

This desire for change is echoed by KMA, a forty-seven-year-old salarywoman, who declares,

> I believe Ke Wen-zhe is the one that is most likely to bring about change . . . but if you ask me what changes specifically, I cannot really say.[108]

More than believing in a new vision of Taiwan's future proposed by Ke Wen-zhe and the TPP, Ke supporters simply hope for change from the current political system dominated by the KMT and DPP. Even knowing that his election is highly improbable, the act of voting for a third party may signal to the dominant parties that change is necessary. Indeed, though the 2024 election results did not yield the presidency for Ke, he managed to take 26.43% of the vote in his first presidential campaign with the Taiwan People's Party—by far the highest percentage of any third-party candidate in history. Additionally, the TPP gained a critical eight seats in the legislature, ensuring that any party which wishes to hold the majority opinion must cooperate with the TPP.

Ke's claim to run a pragmatic, centrist platform as an alternative to the polarized Blue-Green camps clearly entices voters who are tired of identity politics despite mounting tensions with China, particularly in the younger generations. It will be imperative to continue following the trajectory of the TPP in future years in order to confirm whether the party will gain stable footing in Taiwan as a political contender with the ability to deliver on its promises. As the TPP is a very young party centered wholly around Ke Wen-zhe, there is no guarantee of the party's future success—even with high levels of public support—if they are unable to cultivate formidable

104 KYR, interview by author, 2024.
105 JTH, interview by author, 2024.
106 KNK, interview by author, 2024.
107 Personal interview by author, December 27, 2023.
108 Personal interview by author, January 9, 2024.

talent. Additionally, following the TPP's future actions, the extricability of symbolic national identity and identity politics from Taiwanese politics will finally be addressed. It is already evident that Ke Wen-zhe's own lack of a clear stance on national identity and cross-strait relations raises skepticism in some. Given that Taiwan's ultimate national goal of unification or independence is such an enormous and emotional matter tied to equally large topics such as national security and cross-strait relations, one may wonder if it is even possible to separate the matter from the wider political sphere. Among some interviewees, there is doubt. YSS theorizes, "only after a cohesive national identity is established can Taiwan's democracy be possible."[109] He believes that in order for Taiwan to finally escape the snare of symbolic national identity, the answer is not to forcefully suppress the question of national identity, but instead to find a solution, as impossible as that may seem. As a young democracy, Taiwan should still have time to grow and develop. However, the ever-looming threat of China threatens to stop that growth. No doubt this upcoming presidential term for Lai Ching-te will test not only his ability to balance international and cross-strait relations, but also his ability to shape the domestic and political landscape of Taiwan into a healthier and more robust democracy.

V. Conclusion

Despite numerous attempts to define and categorize national identity in Taiwan, the subjective and equivocal conceptualization of national identity by each individual eludes coherent classification, even among specific demographic groups. Further, in-depth interviews reveal that despite the continuing importance placed upon the idea of national identity in Taiwan, the concept has little pragmatic use in current Taiwanese society, as the vast majority of Taiwanese agree that in spite of differing national identities and preferences, peace prevails as the first priority. However, Taiwan's two main political parties, the KMT and DPP continually play to the public's emotions, politicizing the issue of national identity in relation to cross-strait relations and flattening the complex constructions of national identity into symbolic dichotomous stances. This reductive operationalization of national identity by political parties, which uses symbolic national identity as a proxy for political alignment, cross-strait relations, and the independence-unification debate, contributes to the polarization of Taiwanese society along symbolic identity lines while hindering political action on less divisive, more concrete issues such as worker's wages and housing costs. The rise of Ke Wen-zhe as a substantial third party candidate in the latest 2024 presidential election coupled with the general dissatisfaction towards the DPP and KMT reflects collective frustration towards the issue of politicized national identity as well as the political system as a whole, particularly in younger generations. The trends and results of the 2024 presidential election may signal a turning point in Taiwanese politics as voters look for a way out of a political system which forces single-issue voting. However, given the results of the 2024 election and the mounting political and economic pressure exerted by China, it is yet to be seen how Taiwan can balance the national identity debate, societal progress, and cross-strait relations.

Further research should be conducted to expand upon these conclusions, and to fill in knowledge gaps left by the limitations of this research. For example, it would be illuminating to expand the scope of interviews to encompass different socioeconomic classes and geographical locations. Results gathered from the south of Taiwan where the political climate differs quite drastically from Taipei in the north may yield markedly different results. The rural-urban divide is also highly likely to influence national identity attitudes and voting patterns. As hinted by the interviewing process, it is possible that there is a strong gendered aspect of perceptions on national identity. Additionally, these results raise further questions. Is it possible to reform the dichotomous political system without resolving the question of national identity? What are the processes by which a unified national identity may begin to form? Will younger generations continue to mellow in their national identities, or will increasing cross-strait tensions heighten these feelings once more?

The results of this research may imply a difficult path towards societal and political development for Taiwan, but one should look to Taiwan's future with optimism. As shown through their interviews, Taiwanese citizens are passionate about their opinions, yet remain logical when it comes to determining the best future for their country. Identifying the self-destructive nature of politicized national identity is the first step towards

109 Personal interview by author, January 7, 2024.

substantive progress for Taiwanese politics and society. In the last few decades, Taiwan has already undergone a drastically rapid and successful transition from authoritarianism into one of the most developed democracies worldwide. In the following decades, if given the chance, perhaps Taiwan can bring about another positive societal transition. This paper has then attempted to embark on the first steps in driving productive change by elucidating a small portion of the complex systems and forces that influence the construction, evolution, and relevance of national identity in contemporary Taiwan.

VI. Appendix A: interviewee profiles

(All interviews conducted between 22 December 2023 and 11 January 2024)

Name	Date	Nominal Nat. ID.	Age	Generation	Gender	2024 Vote	Family**
KLT	30 Dec, 2023	Undeclared	21	C	M	KE	BS
KYR	30 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese and Chinese	22	C	M	KMT	WS/BS
JTH	24 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	22	C	M	DPP	WS/BS
CQZ	27 Dec, 2023	Chinese	24	C	M	KMT	BS
KNK	22 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	25	C	M	KE	WS/BS
AJM	28 Dec, 2023	Undeclared	26	C	M	Undecided	WS/BS
DKF	7 Jan, 2024	Chinese	27	C	M	None/KE*	WS/BS
CVT	29 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese and Chinese	27	C	M	DPP	WS/BS
PT	26 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	27	C	M	Abstain	BS
CGZ	28 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	45	B	F	KE	WS/BS
KMA	9 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	47	B	F	None/KE*	WS/BS
AKV	27 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	50	B	M	KE	BS
TTD	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	51	B	M	DPP	BS
SCU	27 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	52	B	M	DPP	BS
LOT	8 Jan, 2024	Undeclared	52	B	F	DPP	BS
XLA	8 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	53	B	F	DPP	BS
TPT	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	53	B	M	DPP	BS
YSS	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	56	B	M	DPP	BS
CVD	10 Jan, 2024	Chinese	60	B	M	KMT	BS
AMF	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	68	A	M	DPP	BS
AML	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	68	A	F	DPP	BS
TJP	10 Jan, 2024	Chinese	71	A	F	KMT	WS
TJG	10 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	72	A	M	KMT	BS
HMH	7 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	74	A	F	KMT	BS
CLZ	28 Dec, 2023	Taiwanese	75	A	M	DPP	BS
GPK	11 Jan, 2024	Taiwanese	87	A	M	DPP	BS

* DKF and KMA are from the outlying island of Kinmen, and therefore have to physically fly back to Kinmen in order to vote. This year, they have both decided not to go through the trouble. However, they have both indicated that their preferred candidate is Ke Wen-zhe.

** Waisheng (WS); Bensheng (BS); Mixed waisheng and bensheng (WS/BS).

VII. Appendix B: interview guide

A: Personal Profile

- Please introduce yourself (age, occupation, where you are from, where you live).

B: Political Profile

- To what extent do you participate in or pay attention to politics?
- Do you often talk about politics with your family, friends?
- Which of the three candidates in this upcoming election do you think will best serve your interests? Why?
- How did you come to have this opinion?
- Do you vote based on party or candidate? In local elections? In national elections?
- What, in your opinion, are the most important political subjects?

C: National Identity

- What does the term national identity mean to you?
- What is your national identity?
- How did you come to develop this identity?
- What is the relationship between Taiwan and the Republic of China?
- How do you define "Taiwanese culture"?

D: Current Events

- What do you think of Taiwan's current social environment?
- What do you think of Taiwan's current political environment?
- What are your thoughts on the concept of transitional justice?
- Has your opinion of Taiwan changed over time?
- In addition to what has already been discussed today, are there any other topics which you would like to contribute, that you feel may be pertinent to my research?

For each interview, this guide was followed in a semi-structured manner. For each interviewee, the questions may have been slightly reformulated, reshuffled, skipped, or further elaborated upon.

VIII. Bibliography

Achen, Christopher H, and Te-Yu Wang, eds. *The Taiwan Voter*. University of Michigan Press, 2017.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

Associated Press News. "Poll: Taiwanese Distance Themselves from Chinese Identity." May 12, 2020. https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-mao-zedong-international-news-asia-pacific-c8a1f7669442b2b86ddff1563c3bd0e9.

Blanchard, Ben. "Chinese Official Urges Taiwan's People to Make 'Correct Choice' on Election." *Reuters*, January 2, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-official-urges-taiwans-people-make-correct-choice-election-2024-01-03/.

Campbell, Angus, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller. *The Voter Decides*. Row, Peterson and Co., 1954.

Chen Rou-Lan. "Beyond National Identity in Taiwan: A Multidimensional and Evolutionary Conceptualization." *Asian Survey* 52, no. 5 (2012): 845–71. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.5.845.

Chen Yu-Jie. "Opinion | I'm Taiwanese, and I Want to Thank Nancy Pelosi." *New York Times*, August 5, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/opinion/taiwan-china-pelosi-democracy.html.

Chu Yun-han. "Taiwan's National Identity Politics and the Prospect of Cross-Strait Relations." *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004): 484–512. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.4.484.

Election Study Center, National Chengchi University. "Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity." February 22, 2024. https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961.

Gambino, Lauren, and Joan E. Greve. "US Senate Passes $95bn in Aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan." *The Guardian*, April 24, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/23/senate-aid-bill-ukraine-israel-taiwan.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973.

Ho, Norman. "Crafting the Taiwanese: The Ambivalence of Taiwan's National Identity." *Harvard International Review* 28, no. 1 (2006): 30–33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42763081.

Holland, Steve, Nandita Bose, and Trevor Hunnicutt. "U.S. Does Not Support Taiwan Independence, Biden Says." *Reuters*, January 13, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-us-does-not-support-taiwan-independence-2024-01-13/.

Jiang Yi-huah. "Reflection on the Current Discourse on Taiwan's National Identity." Taiwan Social Research Quarterly, no. 29 (1998): 163–229. https://doi.org/10.29816/TARQSS.199803.0007.

Jiang Yi-huah. "Taiwan's National Identity and Cross-Strait Relations." In Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace, edited by Lowell Dittmer. University Of California Press, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1w76wpm.5.

Lee Yimou and Ben Blanchard. "Taiwan to Vote in What China Calls 'Peace and War' Election." *Reuters*, January 10, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-vote-what-china-calls-peace-war-election-2024-01-10.

Lin Gang and Wu Weixu. "The Transition of Party System in Taiwan: Divergence or Convergence?" *The China Review* 17, no. 3 (2017): 141–66.

Liu Hong. "An introduction to Taiwan's national identity issues and historical evolution." Songye Cultural Enterprise Co., 2019.

Martina, Michael, and David Brunnstrom. "CIA Chief Warns against Underestimating XI's Ambitions toward Taiwan." *Reuters*, February 2, 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-says-chinas-xi-little-sobered-by-ukraine-war-2023-02-02/.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi: All People of Chinese Descent Should Jointly Oppose 'Taiwan Independence' and Support Peaceful Reunification." March 7, 2024. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202403/t20240308_11256422.html.

Muyard, Frank. "Taiwanese National Identity, Cross-Strait Economic Interaction, and the Integration Paradigm." In *National Identity and Economic Interest: Taiwan's Competing Options and Their Implications for Regional Stability*, edited by Peter C. Y. Chow. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Nachman, Lev. "Misalignment between Social Movements and Political Parties in Taiwan's 2016 Election." *Asian Survey* 58, no. 5 (2018): 874–97. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2018.58.5.874.

Rigger, Shelley. "Social Science and National Identity: A Critique." *Pacific Affairs* 72, no. 4 (1999): 537–52. https://doi.org/10.2307/2672396.

Rigger, Shelley. *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and "Taiwanese Nationalism."* East-West Center, 2006. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06533.

Shen Shiau-Chi and Wu Nai-teh. "Ethnic and Civic Nationalisms: Two Roads to the Formation of a Taiwanese Nation." In *The "One China" Dilemma*, edited by Peter C. Y. Chow. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Sullivan, Jonathan, and Lev Nachman. *Taiwan: A Contested Democracy Under Threat*. Agenda Publishing, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.7823690.

Taiwan People's Party. "Taiwan People's Party (TPP)." 2019. https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/about.php.

The Economist. "The Most Dangerous Place on Earth." May 1, 2021. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth.

U-Jin, Adrian Ang and Olli Pekka Suorsa. "The 'New Normal' in PLA Incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ." *The Diplomat*, September 27, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/the-new-normal-in-pla-incursions-into-taiwans-adiz/.

Wang T. Y. and Liu I-Chou. "Contending Identities in Taiwan: Implications for Cross-Strait Relations." Asian Survey 44, no. 4 (2004): 568–90. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2004.44.4.568.

Woo, Ryan, and James Pomfret. "China, Taiwan Opposition Warn of Threat to Peace from Ruling Party Candidate." *Reuters*, January 11, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-warns-taiwan-ruling-party-presidential-candidate-over-possible-2024-01-11/.

Yang Kuo-shu. "1984 Taiwan Social Change Survey (Round 1): Leisure, Religion, Family, Mental Health." *Survey Research Data Archive, Academia Sinica* (1999). https://doi.org/10.6141/TW-SRDA-C00001_2-1.

Yu Ching-hsin. "Parties, Partisans, and Independents in Taiwan." In *The Taiwan Voter*, edited by Christopher H. Achen and T. Y. Wang. University of Michigan Press, 2017.