

Pawel SENDYKA

**Taiwanese Identity – a Done Deal? Understanding the Contemporary Consolidation of Taiwanese Identity**

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## **Taiwanese Identity - a Done Deal? Understanding the Contemporary Consolidation of Taiwanese Identity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Taiwanese identity has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry in recent decades. The rapidly changing political, social and international environment around Taiwan has made the question of what it means to be Taiwanese both more complex (in terms of aspirations for the future of Taiwan) and simple (that being Taiwanese is different from being Chinese). The purpose of this study is to explore the intricacies of Taiwanese identity in the face of recent developments such as changes in education, shifting attitudes towards China as a result of ongoing tensions between Taiwan and the mainland. The study posits that the previously ambiguous Taiwanese identity, which might have been a subject of contention during the 1990s, has now become a distinct and unified construct. This can be attributed to the maturation of Taiwanese society following decades of martial law, leading to a clear consensus among the majority of Taiwanese citizens that they do not wish to be absorbed by the People's Republic of China. In order to understand the Taiwanese identity, it is essential to examine the collective aspirations and hopes of the Taiwanese population for the future of their nation. This can be seen through the active involvement of individuals in various civic movements and volunteer initiatives. The way in which the Taiwanese people envision their society, government, and place in the world is heavily influenced by their past and present experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** , digital activism, g0v, "gov zero", "China Model", identity formation, Taiwan-China relations, Taiwanese identity, "Taiwan Model", Ukraine and Taiwan

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**Introduction**

Taiwan is an island located off the coast of southeastern China, with a rich history despite the fact that its recorded part is brief compared to other Asian countries. Chinese settlements started appearing on the island in the early 17th century. The Dutch traders established forts and built a colony on Taiwan in 1622, followed by a brief Spanish incursion and a pirate kingdom of Zheng Chenggong known to westerners as Koxinga. In 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan by the Qing dynasty as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, following the Sino-Japanese War. Before the arrival of the Japanese troops, the Taiwanese made a bid for independence by declaring the Republic of Formosa, but its forces were eventually overcome by the Japanese (Manthorpe 2005). Taiwan was handed over to the Chinese mainland rule when Japan lost in the Second World War.



**Figure 1:** Republic of Formosa flag in the National Taiwan Museum.

Source: 林高志 (Lin Gao-zhi), Wikimedia Commons.

Since 1912, Republic of China was ruled by the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT). They were involved in a fierce civil war with Mao Zedong's communists. Instead of becoming one of the provinces of China, Taiwan became Republic of China's final outpost when Chiang Kai-shek, his defeated nationalists and their army arrived in 1949. The KMT rulers imposed the mainland culture and

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Mandarin language on the predominantly Hokkien-speaking majority. The mainland Chinese rulers were often seen as more brutal than the Japanese. Even before Chiang Kai-shek's arrival, tens of thousands of people were killed in the unrest following the "228 incident." The years of "White Terror" followed.



**Figure 2:** The 228 incident. "The Terrible Inspection", a wood cut by Huang Rong-can (1916-1952).  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons*.

The educational system in Taiwan became skewed against people born on the island, as admissions to high schools and universities were based on provincial origin. Additionally, the KMT government imposed Chinese culture on the local population. Their goal was to retake China and that required instilling a sense of Chinese identity in the local population.

In 1987, the martial law (which lasted from 1949) was lifted and Taiwan developed into a world's industrial powerhouse producing over 60% of the world's computer chips, with just one company: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) holding over 50% of the world market share (Y. N. Lee 2021). Taiwan also developed into a unique, vibrant and open society, one in which there is a cultural consensus across the board supportive of a Western-style democratic system of governance and anti-authoritarianism (Huang, Liu, and Chang 2004, 160). Taiwan's

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late president Lee Teng-hui (of the KMT) (1988-2000) called all Taiwanese, regardless of their background, a "community of shared fate," while president Chen Shui-bian's (of the DPP) (2000-2008) a "community of shared destiny." Whether it is "of fate" or "of destiny," the issue of China always casts a big shadow over it.

Taiwan was the first country in Asia to legalise same-sex marriage in 2019. Taiwan's openness towards the LGBTQ+ people is in stark contrast to China where the government decided to censor the LGBTQ+ depictions, as well as removed the community and activists' social media accounts ("LGBTQ in China Lament 'Dark Day' after Social Media Crackdown | LGBTQ News | Al Jazeera" n.d.).

The proximity of China is both a threat and a reminder of the direction Taiwan should not go, as the Taiwanese people construct their identity acknowledging Chinese history, language, and culture, but in opposition to China's authoritarian rule. According to Barth (1969), the formation of a distinct identity is accomplished by setting boundaries that distinguish between members and non-members of the group. Increasingly, the old divisions within Taiwan are giving way to a new boundary between the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese.

Due to the educational system under the KMT regime being geared towards promoting Chinese culture and history while marginalising native Taiwanese identity, a generation of Taiwanese, who are now in their 50s, had to actively construct their own sense of identity separate from the dominant narrative of Chinese culture and history. Frequently, experiences of visiting or working in China had a pivotal role in fostering the realisation of being different from Chinese. However, it appears that the younger generations in Taiwan possess a more clear and natural understanding of who they are, indicating a shift towards greater recognition and validation of the native Taiwanese identity. During my fieldwork, I found that there was a marked generational gap in thinking about the subject of Taiwanese identity and political sympathies. Respondents told me how they would nod in agreement to their elders on how to cast their vote (for KMT – more pro-China) and would do the opposite (DPP – more pro-independence) at the ballot box. I have only met only one person under 30 who unequivocally identified as Chinese. But he too was not interested in becoming the subject of the CCP, but rather saw Taiwan's mission as one of, not so much "liberating" the mainland (which used to be KMT's rallying cry), but helping to guide it out of its current totalitarian state. In his words, the Taiwanese people should not be so "selfish" as to hoard the culture they have saved from destruction, and abandon China, which clearly needs it, by seeking independence. As peculiar and

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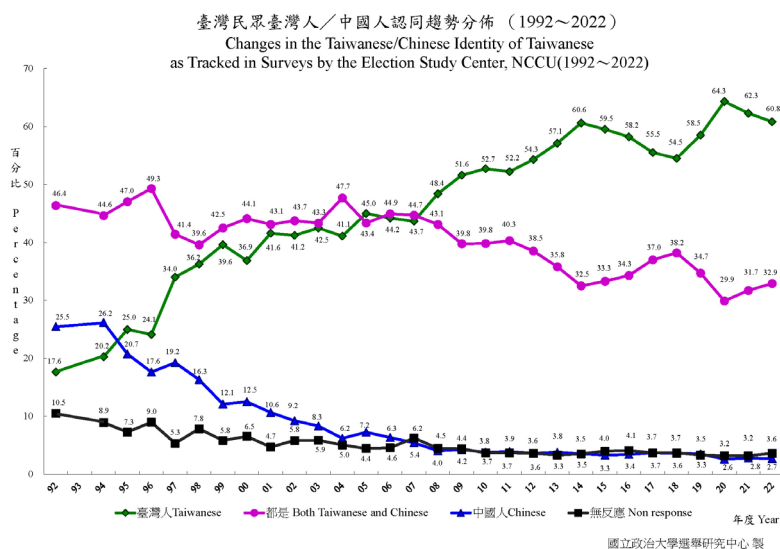
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outlying as such views are, it is worth pointing out that the big draw for this particular respondent was the ancient Chinese culture and not the current police state run by the CCP.

This generational shift in attitudes is certainly visible in the civic and civic-digital movements that are going to be discussed later in the article.

**Taiwanese Identity - Trends**

Since 1992 National Chengchi University's Election Study Center has been conducting regular polls on how the citizens of Taiwan self-identify, as well as the attitudes towards unification with China and party sympathies.



**Figure 3:** Source: *Election Study Center, National Chengchi University n.d.*

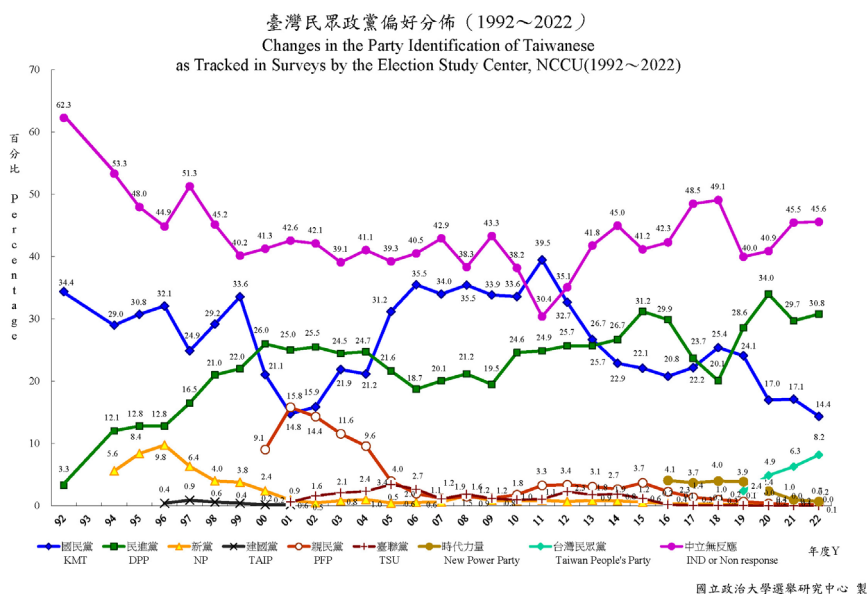
In my previous article (Sendyka 2020) I explain which historical events formed a background to the data points on the graph and how the respondents may differently understand the questions presented to them. The updated survey results show a slight uptick of the “both” Taiwanese and Chinese identity at the expense of the Taiwanese only identity (of about 3%) from 2020. Anthropology is a discipline that

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offers a way to gain an increased granularity of such aggregate figures and this is what this article will attempt. “I’m culturally Chinese, but politically Taiwanese” would be a response I would sometimes get that could go a long way towards explaining some of what is happening in the graph.

It is interesting to note that the same survey also shows that the party preferences shifted away from the KMT in the last two years, yet it is the party who just celebrated its local elections victory in 2022.



**Figure 4:** Source: *Election Study Center, National Chengchi University n.d.*

The KMT's victory is largely attributed to voter concerns over economic issues. This highlights the fact that there are different priorities among the Taiwanese electorate. The DPP's failure to convince voters to re-elect them, despite their strong stance against unification, shows that the China issue can be overshadowed by the daily hardships of living. Out of the two major parties, KMT is more likely to be a party that would seek unification with China. However, the electorate's current views on this

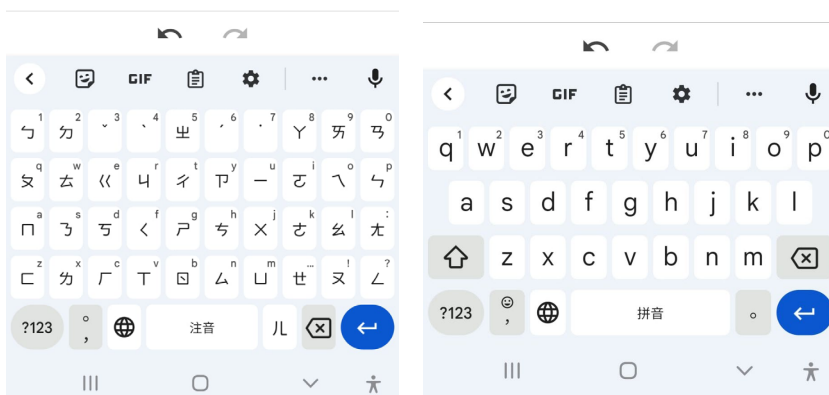
issue are not in line with the party's stance, making it an interesting point of contention for the future.

### Taiwanese Identity and Chinese Culture and Language

The decades-long martial law and authoritarian rule of the KMT had a significant impact on the cultural identity formation of the Taiwanese population. The KMT government, driven by its goal of retaking the mainland from the communists, made a concerted effort to assimilate the Taiwanese society to its Chinese origin and worldview. This was achieved through a variety of means, including coercion, education, restructuring of social status, and the creation of a new pro-Chinese identity for the Taiwan-born population (Chen 2008, 188).

在中國，同性戀仍然是一個  
禁忌的話題

在中国，同性恋仍然是一个  
禁忌的话题



**Figure 5:** Zhuyin and Pinyin keyboards with a sentence: "In China, homosexuality is still a taboo topic" typed in Traditional and Simplified characters. The Taiwanese use the Zhuyin input method. Most Taiwanese can read Simplified, while the Chinese overwhelmingly cannot read Traditional.

One notable aspect of the KMT's efforts was the imposition of Mandarin as the primary language of instruction in schools, while the use of Japanese and local dialects was disallowed in public. Chinese teachers, who had arrived with Chiang Kai-shek from the mainland, became the primary educators, while local teachers were relegated to supportive roles (Chen 2008, 201). The songs taught to children



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in schools during this time are telling of the government's agenda: "Fight our way back to the Mainland," "I am a Chinese," "China will be Strong," and "I love China" (Chen 2008, 201).

As the seat of the Republic of China government, Taiwan was, in theory, an ark for all the people of the mainland, which consisted of 35 provinces prior to the civil war. Admissions to high schools and universities were based on provincial origin, leading to a disproportionate representation of mainland Chinese in better schools and universities (Chen 2008, 203).

The Mandarin language in Taiwan is noteworthy for its differences from the Mandarin used in mainland China. Besides the obvious differences in accent, the usage of traditional Chinese characters instead of simplified characters, as well as the traditional phonetic alphabet Zhuyin (bopomofo) in contrast to the Roman alphabet-based Pinyin, serves as a visible marker of the ongoing influence of pre-revolutionary Chinese culture in Taiwan.



**Figure 6:** *National Palace Museum.*

*Source: photo by CEphoto, Uwe Aranas via Wikimedia Commons.*

Today, Mandarin remains the official and dominant language in Taiwan, and many younger generations of Taiwanese are more comfortable speaking it than their once-



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native Taiwanese (Hokkien), Hakka and other tongues. This can be seen as a lasting legacy of the KMT's efforts to impose Chinese culture on the local population.

Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution had catastrophic effects not just in terms of loss of life, but also in the destruction of priceless historical artefacts during the campaign to eliminate "the Four Olds" (old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas). In stark contrast, the books, scrolls, artefacts, and works of art brought to Taiwan by Chiang Kai-shek now rest in the National Palace Museum for all to see. Artefacts include items from the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City in Beijing which were taken by the KMT to Taiwan as they have retreated.

Chinese culture and PRC culture are not one and the same, and cultural heritage of Taiwan serves as a unique window into the richness of the pre-revolutionary Chinese culture. This is the cultural heritage that the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) now share. The presence of Chinese cultural influence in contemporary Taiwan does not lend legitimacy to PRC claims over the island and the presence of ancient Chinese cultural influence on the island does not negate Taiwan's distinct cultural identity.

**Taiwan's Past and Present and Identity**

The way in which the Taiwanese envision their society, government, and place in the world is heavily influenced by their past experiences as well as present circumstances.

For example, the traumatic White Terror era, which saw thousands of political dissidents killed or imprisoned by the KMT regime, serves as a constant reminder of the dangers of authoritarian rule, and shapes the Taiwanese desire for a democratic government that respects human rights. For a list of other important events in Taiwanese history please refer to Sendyka (2022).

On the other hand, most recent events include the Hong Kong protests, the pandemic, politics and the military aggression and intimidation by the PRC which most recently, in 2022, culminated in a furious display of force after the US House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit.

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**Taiwanese Identity – a Done Deal? Understanding the Contemporary Consolidation of Taiwanese Identity****Figure 7: Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution".**

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

**Figure 8: Demonstrations in Taiwan in support of protesters in Hong Kong.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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What happened in Hong Kong serves as a constant reminder to the Taiwanese of what would happen if China ever got control over the island. Many of my sources pointed to the events in Hong Kong as proof that the CCP cannot be trusted, and any agreement reached with them would not be worth the paper it would be printed on. China's plans to "reeducate" the Taiwanese to become "more patriotic" after the invasion, as laid out by China's ambassador to France Lu Shaye ("China Would Re-Educate Taiwan in Event of Reunification, Ambassador Says" n.d.), understandably do not make the prospect any more attractive.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are one people showed how totalitarian regimes can try to impose their will on reality. The Taiwanese public took notice of that, but also of what a smaller yet determined adversary defending its own territory is capable of. The civil defence movement dramatically gained in popularity. Taiwanese billionaire Robert Tsao vowed that he "will not let Taiwan become Hong Kong" and pledged 100 million USD of his personal funds to help to eventually train a 3 million strong self-defence force, 10% of which would be snipers, and a million military drones whose usefulness has been shown recently in Ukraine ("Taiwanese Billionaire Robert Tsao to Support Anti-Beijing Resistance Fighters. See How - The Economic Times" n.d.) ("Inside the Battle for Taiwan and China's Looming War Threat | 60 Minutes Australia - YouTube" n.d.).

### **Taiwanese Identity Through Actions**

The rapidly changing political, social and international environment around Taiwan has made the question of what it means to be Taiwanese both more complex (in terms of aspirations for the future of Taiwan) and simple (that being Taiwanese is different from being Chinese).

I propose that identity, particularly as it relates to Taiwanese population, can be understood through an examination of the way in which the Taiwanese people envision their society, government, and place in the world. A nuanced understanding of Taiwanese identity can be obtained through careful observation of the aspirations and hopes of the Taiwanese people, as reflected in their participation in civic movements and volunteer efforts. To this end, the article examines samples of activism that has emerged along the vectors of labour movements, the Nylon Cheng Liberty Foundation (which both bear strong links to Taiwanese history) and digital

activism (with an exploration of ways in which technology is reshaping the expression of identity among the youth). The digital sphere is very important in Taiwanese democracy as, through a quirk of history, the country's democratisation coincided with the birth and growth of the Internet.

### **Taiwan Labour Front**

Taiwan Labour Front (TLF) is a labour movement founded in 1983 with the goal of promoting the rights and well-being of the working class in Taiwan. The organisation is considered to be "centre-left" and advocates for the fair distribution of wealth and resources. The question of Taiwan's independence is closely tied to the TLF's mission, as they believe that the distribution of resources should take place exclusively within the borders of Taiwan. The TLF's philosophy is rooted in the belief that workers should be independent and that unions should also be independent. Therefore, they believe that an independent Taiwan is, for them, a logical goal. This is a key aspect of their political stance.

TLF has been involved in various movements and campaigns aimed at improving the lives of workers in Taiwan. One notable example is their involvement in the 2021 occupation injuries insurance campaign of the Tsai government, as well as their efforts to raise the minimum wage in Taiwan. According to them, both the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) believe in a fallacy that low pay and long working hours give Taiwan a competitive edge in the global market. TLF believes that the current economic model needs adjustment and is working with the concept of "economic democracy" through the promotion of cooperatives for which it would like to see a creation of a legal framework. It is currently promoting the issue of whistle-blower legislation.

In contrast to the TLF, there is another labour movement in Taiwan. The Labour Party supports unification with China but because this is a fringe view, it lacks popular support. The Labour Party is seen as prioritising China-centric identity over class movements, as manifested by their condemnation of the Sunflower Movement in 2014 in which the student protesters occupied the parliament in protest to a free trade agreement with China (explained in more detailed later).

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**Taiwanese Identity – a Done Deal? Understanding the Contemporary Consolidation of Taiwanese Identity****Nylon Cheng and the Nylong Cheng Foundation**

The life and legacy of Nylon Cheng serves as a testament to the complexities of Taiwanese identity and the role it plays in shaping the lives and destinies of individuals. Nylon Cheng was a prominent pro-democracy activist and the founder and publisher of Freedom Era Weekly. Born to a mainlander father, Nylon's family was protected by their Taiwanese neighbours from retaliation following the 228 massacre. Throughout his journalistic career, Nylon constantly challenged the authority of the KMT government and became the first person to openly advocate for Taiwan independence.

One of Nylon Cheng's most notable acts of defiance, and as it turned out, one his his last, was the publication of Hsu Shih-kai's "Draft for a Taiwan Republic Constitution," which resulted in the KMT pursuing him on charges of sedition. Nylon Cheng vowed: "The KMT will only take my body, they will never take me alive." He stayed in his office for over 70 days before ultimately setting himself on fire when the police attempted to force their way in.



**Figure 9:** Nylon Cheng with the covers of his magazines.

Source: Nylon Cheng Liberty Foundation.

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Today, the Nylon Cheng Museum and Foundation seek to preserve and disseminate Nylon's writings and philosophy, with the goal of educating the younger generation about Taiwan's fight against dictatorship and its long way to a democracy it is today. The foundation views Nylon's legacy as a valuable perspective on the ongoing issues facing Taiwan, such as the CCP missile threat, its military aggression, corruption in the army and other institutions, and the need for long-term independence. Nylon's philosophy advocates against making any deals with the CCP.

Nylon's story is not only significant in and of itself, but also because it sheds light on the opposing forces within Taiwan. The man tasked with arresting Nylon in 1989 was one Hou You-yi, who went on to have a successful police and political career. Hou defended his past actions with the "I was only following orders" argument. The fact that he remains consistently popular is significant. The story of Nylon Cheng and Hou You-yi can be seen as a microcosm of the larger dynamics at play in Taiwan with the ongoing tensions and conflicting perspectives within Taiwanese society.



**Figure 10:** Hou You-yi as Director-General of the National Police Agency and New Taipei City Mayor.  
Source: Police Department of the Ministry of Interior and New Taipei City Government via Wikimedia Commons.



### **Open Society (but with a Dark Past and an Uncertain Future)**

The open nature of Taiwanese society is evidenced by the fact that today, even radical voices advocating for immediate submission to CCP rule are allowed to openly air their views and try to persuade voters. This is in stark contrast to the White Terror era, during which the heuristic that it is better to kill 1000 innocents than let one communist get away (attributed to Chiang Kai-shek but actually spoken by another KMT politician) was enthusiastically acted upon. Today, on the one hand, the Nylon Cheng Museum and Foundation work to preserve the memory of Taiwanese revolutionary and activist, on the other, the former head of the police operation that led to his death now serves as mayor of New Taipei City and harbours presidential ambitions ("Cop, Philosopher, and President? - The News Lens International Edition" n.d.). However, this level of openness is not without controversy. The Nylon Cheng Liberty Foundation points out the flaw in Hou You-yi's defence by citing the case of Oskar Groening, a former SS member who was convicted of being an accessory to the murder of 300,000 people (not personally killing anyone) and was sentenced to four years in prison for his role in the Auschwitz concentration camp genocide ("KMT's Hou You-Yi Criticized over Deng Nan-Jung Comments - Taipei Times" n.d.) It may be seen as a weakness but perhaps it is Taiwan's secret to long-term survival that such differing attitudes can coexist. By allowing all the divergent currents in society to have a voice, no one is forced underground, except those actively breaking the law, like the pro-Beijing Chung T'ien Television (CTi) which was taken off the air for repeatedly spreading misinformation.

The station had also been named by Wang Liqiang, a former CCP spy (who defected to Australia) as one of the stations paid by the PRC government to broadcast negative coverage of the DPP before the 2020 election ("Pro-China TV Station in Taiwan Ordered off Air over Disinformation | Taiwan | The Guardian" 2020). Although the Taiwan's National Communication Commission found no evidence of the money exchanging hands, it is not inconceivable that Beijing would resort to all sorts of steps to sway the voters towards the more Beijing-pliable KMT. However, the Taiwanese public is not just passively receiving the information from the media. There are activists who seek to actively filter out harmful and false media content.



### **Cofacts (Collaborative Facts) - a Civic Cleanup of the Web**

The issue of disinformation is not just Taiwan's problem, but is of concern globally. However, government intervention can often lead to mistrust of their motives by the public. This was exemplified by the withdrawal of the planned media law in Taiwan in 2022, as the Taiwanese society, having vivid memory of the past dictatorship, reacted strongly to possible freedom of speech implications.

Some see engaging ordinary citizens in the effort to combat disinformation as crucial. One such successful initiative is Cofacts, a project aimed at purifying the information space. Cofacts operates as a chatbot on Line (an ubiquitous messaging app with over 90% market saturation in Taiwan).

Combating disinformation, given the end-to-end encryption of the Line platform, is more challenging than on open platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. It is difficult for users to verify the credibility of messages and links they receive in private chats.

The Cofacts system works by allowing anyone to add the chatbot as a friend and send questionable messages to it. Cofacts then checks its database to see if the message has already been verified, and within a few seconds, it sends back a credibility evaluation. The user can then share it in the original chat room, preventing the spread of fake news. The bot can also be added directly to a chat room to provide automatic credibility ratings for previously unmasked disinformation. In addition to determining the accuracy of information, Cofacts also enables fact-checking volunteers to distinguish between facts and opinions thus further educating the public on how to critically evaluate the information received. Other possible perspectives on the same issue are also shared as a response.

Personal motivations behind the creation of Cofacts are noteworthy. One of the original creators shared with me their journey and what led them to join the g0v collective and propose this project. In 2016 there was a significant amount of misinformation regarding the gay marriage proposal, which became particularly relevant in the lead-up to local elections. The proliferation of such disinformation was of particular concern to them. Christians were protesting and there were other culturally-based arguments used against it. Claims were made that gay foreigners would marry Taiwanese to access the country's excellent healthcare (and bring their horrible diseases with them). The misinformation around this issue was particularly divisive and in my interlocutors' opinion contributed to a rise in teenage suicides at the time. With the spotlight shining a negative light on these issues, many Line and

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Facebook groups became echo chambers, further perpetuating false information. As an unmarried woman, President Tsai Ingwen, was criticised for pushing the issue she could not understand.



**Figure 11:** "Do you think you've received a rumour?" Cofacts project seeks to help to clean up Taiwan's information space.

Source: Cofacts project website (<https://cofacts.g0v.tw/>).

Over 2,000 volunteers have participated in the Cofacts project since its inception over 6 years ago, and the database now contains over 87,000 suspicious articles. The name "Cofacts" is derived from the collaborative nature of the project, as it emphasises the importance of working together to tackle disinformation.

Cofacts' database is utilised by journalists and research institutions for analysis and insights into the disinformation landscape in Taiwan. Cofacts is one of the projects that have originated from the g0v community. What g0v is and how it came about are both noteworthy from the identity perspective and will be discussed later in the article.

### **War in Ukraine: Report on Disinformation**

One of the organisations utilising Cofacts data is the IORG team (originally stands for Information Operations Research Group though the full name is rarely used anymore), a civic think-tank that regularly publishes reports on the state of disinformation campaigns in Taiwan, which are often correlated with events on the Taiwan-China front and on the global stage. China, of course, has a particular role in the influx of false information as a source or propagator.

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine and immediately after, the Taiwanese internet was flooded with threads related to the event. Based on the Cofacts database, the IORG report details the types of narratives and who promoted them.

For example, posts comparing the Russia-Ukraine relations to those of husband and wife were amplified by the Chinese government media. Similarly, the clearly false information that the United Nations had voted on a resolution to fight fascism, with only Ukraine and the United States opposed, was promoted by Russian government media and spread by their Chinese counterparts. To these disinformation narratives local flavours were added. To the story that Americans trained the neo-fascist Azov battalion the add-on was that was also the Americans who pushed the protesters in Hong Kong to violence.

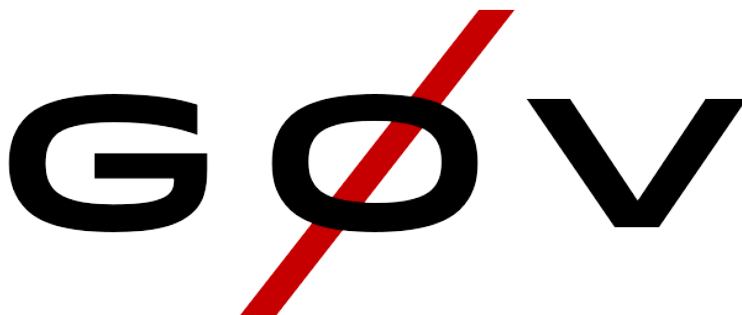
Other "news" had the subtext of frightening Taiwanese from considering independence or resisting the CCP because "no one came to help Ukraine, and no one will come to help Taiwan." This message was repeatedly spread by Chinese state media. As was the victim-blaming that the war was Ukraine's fault for allowing itself to be used as a pawn by the United States. The conclusion was that Taiwan cannot afford to be an American pawn. Finally, there was the morale-destroying slogan "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow."

As IORG notes, anyone can become the target of manipulation, especially under the influence of surprising events and accompanying emotions that favour the suspension of common sense. Based on its own research, IORG observed that during important events in US-Taiwan relations, sceptical narratives of the US appear. "These narratives, often amplified by the Communist Party of China, can divide our society and negatively impact Taiwan's relations with our important allies. Let us be vigilant," the report concludes.

### **G0V: a Citizen-Led Movement for Digital Governance in Taiwan**

The g0v (pronounced "gov zero") community where the Cofacts project originated is a central player in the civic digital movement. It was established in 2012 as a result of the Yahoo Open Hack Day. The hackathon was intended for solving business-related problems but one of the teams abandoned their commercial project and instead created a website that visually presented information about government spending. This was in response to a strange advertising campaign and somewhat insulting statements by President Ma which claimed that the state's economic policy was too complicated for the average citizen to understand and that therefore they should just trust the ruling party.

The aim of the project was to make the state budget accessible and easy to comprehend, as the document was a 500 page pdf written in a difficult language and thus not easily accessible to the public. After the hackathon, which earned them an honourable mention and some prize money (M.-C. Lee 2020, 58), the activist programmers purchased the ".g0v.tw" domain and transformed themselves into auditors and critics as well as a source of new ideas on how to run the government. On the "g0v.tw" (instead of "gov.tw") this hacker collective delivers an interactive and open-source vision of the public services ("Audrey Tang: Digital Social Innovation to Empower Democracy | TED Talk" n.d.)(The National Budget Visualisation project continues until today and can be accessed at [budget.g0v.tw](http://budget.g0v.tw)).



**Figure 12:** The logo of g0v. Source: [g0v.tw](http://g0v.tw).

The g0v community rose to prominence after the 2014 "Sunflower Movement", in which young people took to the streets (and even occupied the parliament for a

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while) to protest the signing of a free trade agreement with China. During this time, g0v provided protesters with internet access to live stream their arguments to the public. (It is a testament to the nature of Taiwanese democracy that the protests were peaceful and so was the police response and no lives were lost during that turbulent time.)

The g0v community was formed as a result of the complex recent history of Taiwan and the need for citizens to participate in the political and social life of the country. Despite the country's assumptions of freedom and democracy, citizens felt they were not really able to effectively participate in the existing system.

G0v has been described as an attempt to "hack governance" by creating alternative forms of social solidarity and cooperation (M.-C. Lee 2020, 18). It remains a dispersed collective that organises hackathons every two months and focuses on specific projects as a central form of political action. Anyone who has a particular interest in a project, or proposing one, can join.

**“China Model” vs “Taiwan Model” during the pandemic and Taiwan’s digital affairs minister Audrey Tang**

The g0v movement in Taiwan has produced several notable figures, but none more prominent than Audrey Tang. In 2016, at the age of 35, she was appointed as the minister without portfolio for digital affairs in the government of President Tsai Ingwen, making her the youngest government official in Taiwan's history. In 2022, she was named the head of the newly established Ministry of Digital Affairs.

Tang, a trans woman, hacker, open-source activist, and start-up entrepreneur, brings a unique perspective to her role in the government. In the Western world, there is a lot of scepticism towards the Internet and new technologies due to the post-truth campaigns (like Brexit and the Trump election) and emerging knowledge on totalitarian regimes using them to their own nefarious ends. But in Taiwan, they actively try to leverage the power of the Internet for good.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a prime example of the potential benefits of this approach. While China touted the success of its COVID-19 strategy (the “China Model”), using it as proof of the superiority of the Chinese-Marxist political system over liberal democracies, Taiwan showed that virus prevention and control can be achieved while respecting individual rights and protecting privacy. This has been

referred to as the "Taiwan Model," with Audrey Tang as one of its prominent advocates.

Thanks to the effective use of technology and prompt action, Taiwan managed to prevent local transmission of the virus during the first two years of the pandemic, until the vaccines became widely available. This was largely due to the collaboration between civil society and government bureaucracy. Most notably, a digital contact tracing system initiated by private individuals (which balanced public welfare and privacy protection issues) was adopted and implemented on a large scale by the government for the entire island.

The "Taiwan Model" demonstrates the potential for a harmonious combination of the energy and talents of civil society with the administrative powers of the government bureaucracy. The successful pandemic experience is a source of pride of the Taiwanese and the "Taiwan Model" further underscored that the Taiwanese are different from Chinese and that this difference is based on the diametrically opposed value system. As such "Taiwan Model" is deeply rooted in Taiwanese identity and reflects its core values of democracy, freedom, and human rights. In contrast to the "China model", "Taiwan model" has demonstrated how these values can be upheld in practice, even during the most challenging of circumstances, like the pandemic.

### **Conclusions**

Taiwanese identity is inextricably linked to the values that the Taiwanese people hold dear. Democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, and civic rights are at the core of what it means to be Taiwanese today.

The history of Taiwan's journey to being a vibrant, Western-style liberal democracy is key in understanding Taiwanese identity. Historical events of the White Terror era, when Taiwan was under military dictatorship, are particularly significant. During this time, freedom of thought was stifled and many people were imprisoned, killed, or disappeared, simply for being suspected of opposing the KMT regime. In a sense, Taiwan was a giant prison. The aforementioned motto that it's better to kill 1000 innocents than let 1 communist get away speaks to the horrors of that time.

The situation has changed dramatically since then. Generations of Taiwanese have grown up free, both physically and intellectually. They live in a society where they can express their ideas and live their lives as they see fit, a freedom that their

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grandparents could never have imagined. During my fieldwork, I found that there was a marked generational gap in thinking about Taiwanese identity and political sympathies. This shift in thinking and the rise of Taiwanese identity will undoubtedly strengthen resistance to Chinese infiltration and aggression.

What makes Taiwanese identity strong, is not that it is "anti-China" but that being Taiwanese goes hand-in-hand with core values of democracy. To insist on Chinese identity for the Taiwanese is to ignore not only history but also the values and wishes of the people. The invasion of Ukraine reminded the Taiwanese the constant threat that they face, but also showed them what a smaller, determined adversary defending its own territory is capable of.

The importance of the values that make up Taiwanese identity cannot be overstated. The fact that the regime across the Taiwan Strait poses a threat to these values only underscores the importance of safeguarding them and the Taiwanese way of life.

For decades of martial law, Chinese nationalism was the official doctrine, which sought to impose a sense of Chinese identity on the island. Today, the Chinese propaganda machine continues to try to undermine and subvert Taiwanese democracy by disseminating a message that Taiwan is merely a province of China, and that resistance is futile.

However, paradoxically, these attempts to undermine Taiwanese identity only serve to reinforce it. The answer to the question posed in the title of this article, in anthropological terms, is "yes". Taiwanese identity is a done deal. The younger generations do not face the same struggles to find their identity as the older generations who experienced the White Terror era of Chinese nationalism. And, as the older generations start to shrink in numbers and influence, these attitudes will only become more prevalent.

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