

“Taiwanese identity emerged as an insurgent gesture under Japanese colonialism, endured forcible silencing under postwar authoritarian rule, and then propelled Taiwan’s democratization on many fronts.”

## Desinicizing Taiwan: The Making of a Democratic National Identity

MING-SHO HO

Since late February 2022, as the world’s eyes have been riveted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in another corner of the Eurasian continent the distant warfare has generated polarized responses across the Taiwan Strait. Before launching the assault, Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to Beijing to meet his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, signing a joint agreement declaring that the Sino-Russian bond had neither “limit” nor “forbidden areas of cooperation.” Once the war in Ukraine broke out, while China’s officials avoided clearly endorsing Putin’s military adventure, its netizens overwhelmingly rooted for a Russian victory. By contrast, in Taiwan, the government joined the democratic West in condemning the Russian act of aggression, and Taiwan’s political parties across the ideological spectrum voiced antiwar views. A spontaneous campaign soliciting donations for Ukraine sprouted among citizens and businesses, collecting NT\$930 million (US\$31.2 million) as of the end of April 2022. As dozens of solidarity rallies took place in Taiwan’s major cities, Taipei 101, the island’s iconic skyscraper, beamed the blue-and-yellow Ukrainian national flag in the evenings.

Clearly, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have drawn contrasting lessons from the war in Ukraine. Patriotic Chinese have been sympathetic to Putin’s irredentist attempt to restore his nation’s former glory—Xi has been engaged in a parallel project. But Taiwanese easily identified features they share with Ukrainians: above all, being part of an existentially threatened small democracy on

the doorstep of a saber-rattling authoritarian behemoth.

In a way, the divergent perceptions of the Ukrainian war were a throwback to the era of the high Cold War, when Taiwan stood on the international front line of the “Free World,” containing the spread of communism. During that period, both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole of China, and both tacitly assumed that Taiwanese were Chinese. As the Cold War waned in the late 1980s, Taiwan’s government began to allow visits to mainland China and commercial transactions. Reform-era China had an insatiable appetite for foreign technologies and money, and thus became the prime destination for Taiwan’s outbound investment and migration. Restrictions on China-to-Taiwan activity were lifted later, but the change was equally swift. In the mid-2010s, the number of mainland Chinese visitors to Taiwan reached its peak, comprising more than 40 percent of all international tourists coming to the island.

Riding on the high tide of globalization, there was an expectation that political boundaries would blur and mindsets would converge. It was thought that growing economic interdependence and more frequent people-to-people contacts via tourism, study, marriage, and religious and cultural exchanges would bring Taiwanese and Chinese closer—and perhaps facilitate the PRC’s avowed goal of bringing Taiwan back to the “fatherland.” Yet as the prism of the war in Ukraine has vividly revealed, Taiwanese and Chinese see the world differently, and the gap continues to widen.

PRC officials have persistently embraced an ethnonationalistic understanding of Taiwanese as

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a part of the “Chinese race” (*zhonghua minzu*) because of their biological, cultural, linguistic, and other linkages. But the emergence of a Taiwanese national identity that saw the self-governing island as an entity distinct from China was the driving force for Taiwan’s transition to democracy. Contrary to the PRC’s claim that the Taiwan independence movement’s pursuit of *de jure* statehood originated from a coterie of “political agitators” or from “international anti-China forces,” this article surveys the origins and development of this indigenous identity from a longer historical perspective.

### COLONIAL ORIGINS OF A NEW IDENTITY

In a posthumous article published in 2018, the China historian Arif Dirlik characterized Taiwan as “the land colonialism made.” From the seventeenth-century Dutch (1624–62) and Spaniards (1626–42) to the Japanese (1895–1945), and arguably to the ROC’s era of martial law (1949–87), Taiwan was ruled by foreign regimes whose functioning depended on collaboration with island residents without incorporating them institutionally. In all these periods, there was a strict division between the rulers and the ruled. Taiwan was reduced to an instrumental role serving the geopolitical goals of each regime as a trading outpost, an area of territorial expansion, or a bastion for military counterattack against mainland China.

Protracted colonial rule became a central topic in the pro-independence narratives that began to gain currency in the late 1980s. A frequent trope was that Taiwanese had not been allowed to “be their own master for the past four hundred years.” Lee Teng-hui, the first native-born president, famously expressed such sentiments of “the sorrows of being born as Taiwanese” in 1993.

Nationalistic narratives are prone to assuming the prior existence of a homogeneous *demos* and to seeing the ensuing history as the unfolding of this people’s potentialities on the way to a destined goal. Often, this *telos* justifies the imaginary need for a common origin. In this case, the problem with the story of “four hundred years of servitude” is the fact that there were no “Taiwanese” or “Chinese” four hundred years ago, in the modern sense of personal identity.

Taiwan was originally inhabited by Austronesian peoples (now known as the indigenous peoples, comprising around 2.4 percent of the population). Settlers from the Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong came in the sixteenth century, and waves of immigrants driven by demographic pressures on the mainland displaced and assimilated Taiwan’s indigenous peoples. Throughout the Qing reign on the island (1683–1895), Chinese settlers and their offspring did not develop a “Taiwanese” identity, since they tended to identify themselves with reference to their ancestral places in the mainland (Zhangzhou or Quanzhou) or language (Hakka). The absence of an island-wide appellation coexisted with the lack of a Chinese national identity. The latter emerged as an invention of Chinese intellectuals in the wake of a string of military setbacks for the Qing Dynasty at the hands of imperialistic powers, in particular the defeat in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese war that resulted in the handover of Taiwan to Japan.

Taiwanese mounted a campaign of armed resistance against the Japanese that lasted until 1915. However, it would be an anachronism to characterize these pushbacks as “nationalistic,” since they were not motivated by a Chinese national identity. That Taiwan in the

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early twentieth century was little affected by rising Chinese nationalism is further evidenced by the fact that the 1911 Revolution in China, which succeeded in overthrowing the Manchurian monarchy, drew only weak responses in Taiwan. Instead, the so-called Wilsonian moment of 1918, when the United States unleashed the principle of national self-determination as a global norm after World War I, generated a visible impact in Taiwan: intellectuals began to closely observe the contemporary strivings of Irish, Indian, and Korean independence movements.

The founding of the Taiwan Cultural Association (TCA) in 1921 marked a new beginning for the island’s anticolonial movement, attracting a more cosmopolitan and educated younger generation. It was also the coming of age of a Taiwanese identity. TCA leaders contended that Taiwan was more than a territorial possession of Japan—it belonged to Taiwanese and the world. Learning from contemporary anticolonial movements, the TCA strived for home rule by demanding the establishment of

a Taiwan Parliament. As TCA activists published newspapers and gave speeches to raise awareness, the 1920s witnessed the flourishing of Taiwanese nationalism.

The period also saw the emergence of more radical peasant and worker protests, which helped lead to the establishment of the Taiwan Communist Party (TCP) in 1928. Following the guidance of the Moscow-based Third International, the TCP was the only political force that advocated for national independence. Yet the TCP operated clandestinely in its brief three years of existence, and thus its radical demand went little noticed beyond its small inner circle.

The rise of an overarching Taiwanese identity was a direct result of colonial discrimination that treated Taiwanese “Islanders” (*hontojin*) as inferior to Japanese “Inlanders” (*naichijin*). The political movements of the 1920s sought equality and dignity. But they were also made possible by colonial modernization, including infrastructure development and mass schooling, which rendered previous subethnic or native place distinctions less salient. “Taiwanese,” as a political category, came about as an unintended consequence of the Japanese colonialism that homogenized the island inhabitants into a community of shared fate.

In this way, Taiwanese historical experience departed from that of regional neighbors. Whereas Koreans, Vietnamese, and Okinawans in their anticolonial struggles could refer to their previous political independence (under the Choson Dynasty, Dai Nam Kingdom, and Ryukyu Kingdom, respectively), Taiwanese did not possess such mnemonic resources. The Qing Dynasty no longer existed and republican China paid scant attention to Taiwan.

In contrast, Hong Kong’s small size, proximity to the mainland, and status as a “borrowed space” (a popular saying in colonial Hong Kong) meant that its future was inseparable from China’s. Chinese nationalism inspired the city’s anticolonial struggles throughout the twentieth century. The 1925–26 Canton–Hong Kong Strike and the 1967 Riot represented the greatest challenges to colonial rule; both anti-British episodes originated from the spillover of revolutionary struggles on the mainland. In Taiwan, without a glorious past to revive or a fatherland to rely on, mainstream Taiwanese activists under Japanese rule chose a moderate course on home rule rather than raising revolutionary demands such as independence or retrocession to China.

## LONG MARCH TO DEMOCRACY

The first sprouting of Taiwanese identity failed to achieve concrete results due to government repression. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Japan’s militarist transformation and wartime mobilization led to a coercive assimilation policy (*kominka*). After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the victorious Allied powers decided to return the island of Taiwan to Chinese rule without consulting the local people. For the Taiwanese, this reencounter with their “fatherland” proved to be tragic and traumatic. The ROC officials who took over the island were condescending, incompetent, and corrupt. Taiwanese hope for political liberation soon evaporated.

The February 28 Incident of 1947 was an island-wide uprising against neocolonial predation, articulating demands for democracy and autonomy. Bolstered by military reinforcements dispatched from China, the ROC regime brutally cracked down on the revolt and singled out Taiwanese leaders for systematic elimination; some scholars estimate that up to 20,000 were killed. In the wake of the 1947 massacre and the ensuing White Terror, alleged sympathizers of the Chinese Communist Party were ferreted out, and Taiwanese became leaderless, apolitical, and marginalized.

Meanwhile, the ROC suffered a string of military defeats in the civil war against its communist rivals and finally retreated to Taiwan in 1949. The Nationalists brought about one million mainland migrants (most of whom were forcibly drafted soldiers) to the island, which had roughly five million natives at the time, thus planting the seeds of postwar ethnic tensions. The Nationalist regime was able to consolidate its tenuous hold following the 1950 outbreak of the Korean War, when the government embarked on an ambitious reengineering of Taiwan into an anticommunist bastion. Taiwanese were forcibly resinicized: Chinese Mandarin was declared the national language, while other languages, including Japanese, Southern Fujianese, and Hakka, were restricted in public use. Taiwanese anticolonial movements in the colonial era were erased from public memory, and the education system promoted a China-centered curriculum saturated with the official narrative of Chinese nationalism.

The ruthless suppression of the Taiwanese longing for autonomy immediately engendered the pro-independence movement, pioneered by the Hong Kong–based Formosan League for

Reemancipation in 1948. (Formosa was the name for the island circulating among Western sailors since the sixteenth century, and because it had emerged earlier than the Chinese name “Taiwan,” it became a preferred choice among independence-minded islanders.) The overseas campaigners were first based in Japan; then, following a rise in the number of US-bound students, the center of gravity shifted to North America, leading to the establishment of the World United Formosans for Independence in 1970. Yet the diasporic mobilization failed to penetrate into the hermetically sealed island due to the regime’s repressive control.

In 1964, Dr. Peng Ming-min, a professor of political science at National Taiwan University, penned a Declaration of Formosan Self-Salvation with his student associates. The statement contended that the regime’s avowed goal of retaking the mainland by force was no longer feasible, and that native Taiwanese and mainlanders should work together to overthrow Chiang Kai-shek’s dictatorship over Taiwan and establish a democracy. The police raided a print shop to forestall the document’s circulation and arrested Peng and his comrades. The incident showed that Taiwanese identity remained a subversive force against the authoritarian rulers.

Facing the diplomatic crisis of losing its United Nations seat to the PRC, the Chinese Nationalist regime slightly eased its control in the 1970s. Chiang’s son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, recruited young Taiwanese into the ROC government, which was dominated by mainlanders, and allowed the partial election of representatives at the national level. The relaxation enabled the rise of an opposition movement that challenged the government via electoral channels. While political independence remained taboo and the government labeled discussion of Taiwanese identity as “splittist,” the younger generation in the 1970s launched a movement of what sociologist A-chin Hsiau has identified as “cultural nativism.” Intellectuals associated with the movement unearthed the history of resistance movements and literature under Japanese colonialism.

In the 1983 national election, opposition candidates raised a joint demand for self-determination. They contended that the island’s political future should be decided by “eighteen million Taiwanese residents,” rather than in a closed-door negotiation between Chinese Nationalists and Communists. From the mid-1980s onward, Taiwan

underwent a rather smooth political transition to democracy, culminating in the first peaceful turnover of power, to the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in 2000.

Taiwan’s march toward democracy was bound up with desinicization in several senses. First, legally speaking, Taiwan was still involved in the Chinese civil war: martial law remained in effect until 1987, and counterinsurgency mobilization measures lasted until 1991. These outdated wartime regulations served as an excuse to freeze constitutional rights and freedoms so as to perpetuate authoritarian rule. The unfinished Chinese civil war still prevented Taiwanese from freely speaking their minds.

Second, Taiwan needed to extricate itself from its legal and military preoccupation with mainland China in order to practice island-wide electoral democracy. Chinese Nationalists had restricted national-level elections by claiming Taiwan was a province of China.

Third, desinicization was related to Taiwan’s ethnic politics. The privileged mainlanders (13 percent of the population, according to the 1990 census) monopolized political power, while native Taiwanese were excluded. As Lee Teng-hui put it, the goal of Taiwan’s democratization was “Taiwanization (*bentuhua*) of Taiwan.”

Viewed from another perspective, the gradual process of democratization also meant the incorporation of the insurgent Taiwanese identity into ROC institutions. The opposition to the Chinese Nationalists had first raised the revolutionary demand for political independence; after electoral channels widened, it morphed into a pro-democracy movement. Once it was working inside the institutions, the opposition had to give up some of its pro-independence aims, such as changing the country’s name and flag. This partly explains why two DPP governments (2000–2008, 2016–present) have made limited progress on the agenda of political independence.

## YOUTH VS. CHINESE MEDDLING

Taiwan’s democratization was driven by Taiwanese identity, and the island was also lucky enough to have accomplished its political transition before the rise of China. But its politics took an unexpected turn in 2008, when the DPP was voted out of office amid popular discontent, particularly over financial scandals involving President Chen Shui-bian’s family. Ma Ying-jeou led the Chinese Nationalists to an electoral

comeback, winning the presidency on a platform of deepening economic and cultural exchanges with mainland China. In retrospect, the 2008 transition marked the nadir of Taiwanese identity, which was associated with the disgraced Chen. At the same time, as the fast-growing Chinese economy drew the world's attention, Taiwanese also favored more open measures to seize the opportunity.

With the DPP in disarray after its electoral defeat, Taiwan's civil-society actors unexpectedly surged to challenge China's increasing encroachment. In November 2008, as the newly installed Ma government rolled out the red carpet to receive a PRC envoy, pro-independence protesters were roughed up by the police. Student activists seized the moment and launched the Wild Strawberry Movement to protest the excessive policing and human rights violations. The name was a response to elders' complaints that young people were "as fragile as strawberries," similar in connotation to calling someone a "snowflake" in English.

Student rallies were held not only in Taipei, but in Taiwan's central and southern cities as well. Although these actions failed to sway the government, they marked an awakening from the prolonged quietude since the Wild Lily Movement of 1990, a seven-day student sit-in protest that succeeded in obtaining the government's promise to expedite democratic reforms. In the aftermath, student activists rebuilt their campus-based organizations and developed a nationwide network. Empowered by new digital media, student actions often outpaced and outsmarted the government, gaining public attention.

Student activists also engaged in a controversy over a media monopoly in 2012. The dispute originated with a vocally pro-PRC media tycoon's bid to enlarge his control over the domestic cable television system via a merger. Previously, opposition to the deal had been limited to academics; the involvement of students brought an instant national spotlight. The protesters contended that the transaction was more than a business deal—the pernicious influence of the "China factor" was undermining Taiwan's democracy from within. The regulatory authorities decided to set stringent conditions for the merger, which ultimately did not materialize.

As Taiwan's student activists were battling the media monopoly, Hong Kong's students, led by Joshua Wong, were campaigning against the implementation of a national curriculum. It soon dawned on both groups that younger Taiwanese and Hongkongers were confronting the same Chinese influence campaign in mass media and education. This belated realization opened the way for mutual exchanges and cross-fertilization among youth activists and civil society organizations, whose collaboration continues to the present day. This has been evidenced by the surge of Taiwan's spontaneous rallies in solidarity with Hong Kong's 2019 protests against a law allowing extradition to China, and humanitarian aid provided to Hong Kong refugees fleeing the effects of national security legislation enacted in 2020.

The Sunflower Movement of 2014 was the climax of this wave of student activism. It involved a 24-day occupation of Taiwan's national legislature in opposition to a free trade agreement with China. Unexpectedly for such a radical protest, it enjoyed popular support. Though the Chinese Nationalists

justified the proposed trade deal as an economic win-win for Taiwan and China, the opponents cited the procedural injustice of secret negotiations and lack of public consultation. They warned that the deal would adversely

impact Taiwan's small- and medium-sized firms in service sectors, worsen income inequality, and bring other problems. As the movement's momentum dwindled in the final week, student protesters were able to secure a split within the ruling party: a group of lawmakers gave in to the demand to legislate the procedure of cross-strait negotiation before reviewing the trade agreement. The students claimed victory while executing a peaceful retreat.

The driving force behind this unusual protest was the popular fear that further economic integration with China would lead to a change in Taiwan's democratic way of life, if not a step toward annexation by the PRC. In my analysis of 1,678 postcards and letters that were mailed to the occupied legislature, 59 percent of the messages referred to democratic values and 55 percent mentioned Taiwanese identity (Taiwan as the motherland, pride in being Taiwanese, and so on), whereas references to other values (nonviolence, generational justice, and opposition to free trade) were insignificant.

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The Sunflower Movement amounted to a powerful expression of Taiwanese identity as a form of democratic nationalism. In its wake, the ruling party suffered back-to-back electoral defeats, paving the way for the second DPP government to take office under Tsai Ing-wen in 2016.

## SHARPENING CONTRASTS

The PRC, loath to see the comeback of the DPP, began to exert coercive pressures. The number of mainland tourists started to decline in 2016; the number of mainland students began falling in 2019. Having witnessed the power of youth activists, Beijing unveiled a series of benefits for Taiwanese students and young professionals to attract them to China. At the same time, the PRC intensified its “united front work” to co-opt Taiwan’s various civil-society actors (religious groups, neighborhood organizations, and so on). But international politics were working in favor of a Taiwanese democratic identity.

After Xi Jinping took power in 2012, the PRC adopted a more assertive approach in the international arena, alienating its regional neighbors. Its imposition of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (which required self-reporting of incoming aircraft) sharpened tensions with Japan and South Korea, since it covered islands controlled by those nations. Meanwhile, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and in the Himalayas antagonized Vietnam, the Philippines, and India.

In 2018, the administration of US President Donald Trump imposed a series of punitive tariffs on China’s imports on the grounds of violation of intellectual property rules, and China retaliated with its own measures. The trade war between the world’s two largest economies had far-reaching consequences. Taiwan responded by diverting its investments from China to Southeast Asian countries or reshoring assembly lines, since China-made products carried political risks. The shift away from China chimed with the policy of Tsai’s government to deepen collaboration with Southeast Asia and South Asia in order to reduce economic dependence on China.

In 2019, Hong Kong saw a citywide protest against the measure to legalize the extradition of suspects to mainland China courts. The campaign evolved into a months-long struggle, as the

protesters adopted more disruptive and violent tactics. The police used force to suppress the movement; police brutality resulted in shocking images circulated in the international media. In 2020, Beijing unilaterally imposed national security legislation that effectively terminated the high degree of autonomy that had been promised to Hong Kong upon its handover to the PRC in 1997. Since the “one country, two systems” design was originally intended for Taiwan, but was first put in practice in Hong Kong, Taiwanese were horrified by the worsening situation in Hong Kong. The protest flared during Taiwan’s electoral season as Tsai was seeking her second term; many believed that the movement gave a boost to the DPP, which succeeded in retaining both the presidency and its legislative majority.

Finally, Taiwan’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened its international standing as a sanctuary of democracy and public health. Whereas Chinese mishandling of the initial outbreak in Wuhan and the subsequent cover-up led to the global pandemic, Taiwan immediately imposed border restrictions on mainland visitors

when Wuhan declared a lockdown on January 23, 2020. The early intervention minimized Taiwan’s domestic cases of contagion and death. With its strong capacities in the machinery industry, Taiwan quickly boosted the

production of face masks and other protective gear, and launched the #TaiwanCanHelp campaign to send donations of these materials abroad in April 2020. It would be difficult to find a more glaring contrast between an irresponsible and authoritarian China and a humanitarian and democratic Taiwan.

This helped Taiwan garner international goodwill. When Taiwan suffered from a shortage of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, in part due to the obstruction of a Shanghai-based firm, countries like the United States, Japan, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland gave some of their vaccine supplies to Taiwan.

On the domestic front, Taiwan’s democratic national identity was consolidated by the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2019; it became the first Asian country to realize marriage equality. Although disputes over the issue had evolved over more than a decade, involving robust mobilizations by conservative Christians, contentiousness declined after the passage of the new marriage law.

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*Can this democratic national  
identity be sustained over  
the long haul?*

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The empowering of lesbian and gay citizens helped project Taiwan's image as an inclusive and tolerant society in the international arena, in sharp contrast to China's official insistence on traditional masculinity and femininity.

### **THE FUTURE OF TAIWANESE IDENTITY**

Taiwanese identity emerged as an insurgent gesture under Japanese colonialism, endured forcible silencing under postwar authoritarian rule, and then propelled Taiwan's democratization on many fronts. In this transformation, the meaning of being Taiwanese changed from an ethnic label for native-born inhabitants to a more inclusive national identity. As more and more island residents identify themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese (62.3 percent versus 3.2 percent,

according to a 2021 survey by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University), this identity is strongly associated with preferences for democratic values and social tolerance.

But can this democratic national identity be sustained over the long haul? Taiwan's desinicization has angered China's leaders and its vitriolic netizens, increasing the likelihood of a PRC decision to use military force. This is how the ongoing Ukrainian war becomes relevant for Taiwan's own identity and future. A democratic nation needs to cultivate the will to self-defense: demonstrated resolve to defend its own existence is the strongest deterrent against annexation by force. It remains to be seen whether the Taiwanese identity can rise to this challenge in an era of expansionary dictatorships. ■