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DIVIDED, WE STAND IN AGREEMENT:
THE OBSTRUCTIVE ROLE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN
CONTEMPORARY TAIWANESE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

In the international consciousness, the name “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 and highly symbolic view of national identity 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 the maintenance of the status quo is the only current logical course of action. Despite proof of the population’s pragmatic indifference towards national identity, the Kuomintang(KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party(DPP) continue to perpetuate the reductive symbolic national identity as the representative issue in Taiwanese politics, overshadowing even uncontroversial questions of economic reform. In contrast to the two major political parties, the recently-formed Taiwan People’s Party and their leader, Ke Wen-zhe, claims to offer the population a way out of this frustrating dichotomy, actively criticising the political theatre of the KMT and DPP. Indeed, most of the population 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 concrete manifestation of societal frustration towards national identity’s position as a roadblock to social, economic, and political progress.

Key words: *Taiwan, Republic of China, national identity, cross-straits relations, 2024 elections, Ke Wen-zhe, Kuomintang, Democratic People’s Party, polarisation, politicisation of national identity*

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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, thrust under the spotlight during Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s 2022 visit, 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, Taiwan consistently receives what seems to be a disproportionate amount of attention for a country with political stability, economic prosperity, and a robust liberal democratic system (The Economist, 2021; Chen, 2022; Gambino and Greve, 2024). 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 that 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 (Holland, Bose, and Hunnicut, 2024). 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 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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). In China's view, shared blood 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 (Associated Press, 2020), but rarely mentions the preference for status quo maintenance held by the bulk of the population.

This reductive 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 (Woo and Pomfret,

2024). 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 largest voter turnout 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 conceptualise 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?

This thesis 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. Then, it will 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 thesis will conclude by analysing the influence of voter perceptions of national identity in the 2024 elections, particularly given rising tensions with China and the rise of Ke Wen-zhe as a third party candidate.

Literature Review

I. Construction and Operationalisation of National Identity

It is impossible to understand national identity in Taiwan without first reviewing both historical and contemporary scholarship on the subject. Since the earliest stages of democratization, even before the lifting of martial law in 1987, scholars have been intrigued by the question of national identity in contemporary Taiwan. 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 led by Yang Kuo-shu and Chiu Hai-yuan at the Academia Sinica 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?”

Unsurprisingly, given that the dominant ideology of the then-authoritarian Kuomintang party was to “Liberate the Mainland” (*fangongdalu*), 57% of respondents agreed in varying degrees, while 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. In these early surveys, the question of

national identity is analysed 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 operationalisation, 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. 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 – equating the ethno-cultural nation to the political state – led to analysis that fundamentally misunderstood Taiwanese society, as most Taiwanese held a liberal view of national identity – one which separates the entities of nation and state, prioritising the democratic nature of the state rather than its geographic boundaries. 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 the status quo of ambiguous statehood is currently the most stable provider of a democratic state. However, Jiang rightfully maintains that aspects of nationalist thinking are relevant, calling for a theoretical framework of “pragmatic thinking with a liberal base” (Jiang, 1998), dually recognizing the importance of the liberal prioritisation of democratic constitutionalism and the nationalist response to crisis in the formation and evolution of national identity.

Over time, new dominant theories of national identity construction emerged. In more recent publications, Chen Rou-lan (2012) and Jiang Yi-huah (2017) agree that Modernism is the favored framework of contemporary Taiwanese scholars, with Primordialism taking a less prominent, role in national identity discourse. While primordialists take after Clifford Geertz,

believing in a set of historical and unchanging “assumed givens” (Geertz, 1973) which bond a population together, 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 (Jiang, 2017). 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” (Anderson, 1983) or nation, with the goal of rendering the Taiwanese national unit congruent to its political unit – a mission which has not yet been achieved.

Chen then critiques these two theories for their unidimensionality, raising the same complaints that Rigger and Jiang proposed more than a decade ago, that they still cannot explain why the majority prefer maintaining the status quo. Instead, Chen proposes a multidimensional theory of national identity, which considers both the primordial ethno-cultural and modern socio-political aspects of nationalism in a dual-identity model (Chen, 2012). Interestingly, this ‘new’ multidimensional model appears somewhat familiar. Recalling Jiang’s 1998 call for new theoretical frameworks, one notices that the two authors are approaching the same issue from different perspectives. Indeed, the Modernist theory that Jiang references as dominant in the field in 2017 is simply a repackaging of the Nationalist theory he accused of blinding social scientists two decades ago in 1998. Similarly, Chen’s 2012 dual ethno-political theory of national identity is reminiscent of Jiang’s proposed “pragmatic thinking with a liberal base” (Jiang 1998). While

both authors look to provide a more nuanced view of national identity through the combination of ethnocultural and political identifications, the difference lies in the shifting conceptions of ‘ethnocultural’ over time. On one hand, Jiang’s 1998 paper was published alongside an emerging Taiwanese-exclusive identity and attributes the dominating preference of the status quo as being the result of the Taiwanese population’s attachment to human rights and democracy, separate from an ethno-cultural Taiwanese identity. However, Chen speaks from a 2012 social context in which a majority of the population identify themselves solely as Taiwanese. Thus, she looks to explain the persistence of dominating status quo preference as individuals remaining ethno-culturally affiliated with China. These parallel ‘new’ theories affirm Chen’s argument that definitions of national identity shift in tandem with changing external contexts, namely the democratization process and cross-straits relations, but at the same time point to a deeper issue in national identity scholarship in Taiwan.

While valid critiques such as Rigger, Jiang, 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. Additionally, a vast majority of existing literature is based on combining theories of national identity with survey data. 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. Favoring quantitative analysis, this data adds little to the understanding of causation on the individual level. For example, what factors contribute to an 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-straits tensions may emerge in longitudinal data, little is said about the micro effects of personal life events such as education. Further, the longest-running and most prominent longitudinal survey on national identity, conducted yearly since 1992 by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University, is not necessarily the most accurate measure of national identity. The 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. The limitation of respondents to four narrow categories also highly restricts the analytical capabilities of scholars working with the data. 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.

II. 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 (Chu, 2004), 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 (Lin and Wu, 2017; Yu, 2017). Indeed, even as the leading parties of the pan-Blue and pan-Green camps (the Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Parties, respectively) have responded to the majority public support for status quo maintenance by slowly converging their respective stances on cross-straits relations towards this median voter profile, (Rigger, 1999; Wang and Liu, 2004; Lin and Wu, 2017; Jiang, 2017; Nachman, 2018), the central debate during national elections has remained Taiwan's relationship with China, with minimal divergence in other aspects of the presidential platform (Nachman, 2024). 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-straits relations to the forefront in national politics (Rigger, 1999; Chu, 2004; Wang and Liu, 2004, Nachman, 2024). Thus, when Taiwanese people vote, they must keep China in mind. While the *tangwai*¹ movement and early stages of the DPP were not necessarily pro-independence (Yu, 2017), 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, and associate the DPP with pushing a pro-independence, Taiwanese-exclusive identity (Ho, 2006; Liu, 2019) while failing to recognize the same actions by the KMT regarding the promotion of a Chinese-exclusive identity.

¹ *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.

The extent to which political parties affect national identity can be debated. In fact, the previously discussed congregation of both pan-Blue and pan-Green camps around the status quo may instead reflect the majority support for the status quo, lest an extreme stance towards either independence or unification lead to “career suicide” (Jiang, 2017). Studying the habits of party affiliation and national identity ideology across four generations, Rigger (2006) 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. This is supported by the party identification theory articulated by Campbell et al. (1954), in which it is argued, based on studies of American voters, that personal experience and preference influences party identification alignment and intensity, which then shapes political attitudes, issue positions and political actions. Rigger argues that based on

the theory of generations² proposed by Mannheim, the second generation – whose maturation coincided with the democratization process and rise of the DPP in opposition to the KMT – produced individuals who were 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 more mellow when it comes to party identification, national identity, and opinions on China (Rigger, 2006; Wang and Liu, 2004). More relaxed attitudes towards national identity and political affiliation of the more recent generations reflect the comparatively relaxed socio-political 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 and birthed a new generation of progressive political leaders and activists, many of whom expressed disapproval with the DPP's move away from an explicitly pro-independence platform, creating their own parties and throwing support behind more radically pro-independence small parties (Nachman, 2018).

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-straits tensions, the DPP's historical third consecutive term presidential win, and the unprecedentedly strong presence of the TPP presenting itself as an alternative to the traditional

² 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.

Blue-Green dichotomy, the past patterns of national identity, political identity, and attitudes towards cross-straits relations are evolving with the a new generation who has only ever experienced a democratic Taiwan. An updated comparative analysis of younger generations' sociopolitical attitudes is therefore apt. And while past literature explores the evolution of Taiwanese public opinion of China and the effect of changing cross-straits 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. How do Taiwanese people interact with the idea of national identity? How do the intergenerational differences of these relationships manifest? What, if any, are the societal repercussions of such a diverse array of national identities?

Methodology

This qualitative study will be primarily based on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Taiwanese individuals with diverse background characteristics from 19 December 2023 to 12 January 2024. 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.

1. Generation A: Individuals who reached maturation before the beginning of the democratic process, born before or soon after the arrival of the KMT government. (Born before 1960)
2. 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)

3. 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 an individual's family's immigration history to Taiwan – whether they themselves, or their ancestors are *waishengren* (those who arrived in Taiwan before 1945 and their descendants) or *benshengren* (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.

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. 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. 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. Though this falls outside the scope of this paper, it is an interesting point to set aside for later study.

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’ level of involvement in politics, political views, and opinions on the 2024 national elections. After politics, the interview transitioned towards the topic of national identity. The final section of the interview included questions pertaining to events, trends, and concepts relevant to Taiwanese society. The interview guide may be found in 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 26 interviewees. 19 are male, and 7 are female. There are 7 participants in generation A, 11 in generation B, and 9 in generation C. A reference table may be found in Appendix A with further information.

Discussion

I. Constructions of National Identity

The primary issue with the question of national identity in Taiwan is the inability for both scholars and everyday citizens to agree upon definitions of basic concepts. 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 (NCCU, 2023). 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 53 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," clearly defining Taiwan 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 60-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.” 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!” 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.” Both individuals hold radically completely different conceptions of what their ‘country’ entails. 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 22 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...” 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 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 analyse national identity in Taiwan. Besides the NCCU survey mentioned above, which considers 'Taiwanese' and 'Chinese' distinct from one another, there exist many other studies using various framework methodologies to operationalise national identity. Some of these studies include Wang and Chou (2004) who define Taiwanese national identity through the clarification of the terms 'country,' 'countrymen', and 'cultural orientation', Shen and Wu (2008), who categorize individuals based on their attitudes towards unification and independence in different political atmospheres, and Chen (2012), who defines national identity along a dual primordial-political axis. While further discussion on the specific merits and shortcomings of each different framework may be found in Jiang (2017), all aforementioned studies explore the question of national identity from different angles without capturing the entire picture. While processing the 26 in-depth interviews conducted for this paper, the researcher attempted to define and categorize national identity through qualitative analysis, an approach that had not been seen in the previous survey-based studies. Though a form of classification based on the interviewee's attitude towards the Republic of China – whether it 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 – proved to complement existing research by adding a new dimension of regimental attitude, it still fell short in the definition and categorization of national identity in Taiwan. This attempt to reconceptualise national identity emphasises the arbitrary nature of categorisation of respondents under each framework. By allowing interviewees to provide justification for their answers, this method demonstrated that individuals who are grouped in the same category may nominally agree on the metric of categorisation but have opposing views on tangential factors. Additionally, two individuals who are placed in the same category under this framework may be grouped in different categories under another. As such, the same sample of respondents may be categorised in infinite ways. 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 27-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 that “I would say that deep down, I would very much hope that Taiwan could become a name, a country’s name,” 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.” 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 labelled the same. However, this is not the case for the following example of CVD and CQZ – a 60 year-old retired military communications officer and a 24 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. While 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,”

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.” 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 seemingly 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 26 interviewees, 25 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, respectively 25 year-old and 21-year old males. 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,” and KLT explains, “The only reason I don’t support the Taiwanese independence faction is because I don’t want to fight in war.” 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 prioritise 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 72-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 55, 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.

Similarly, AMF, a 68-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.

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. Among all generations, we can see the logical view of personal, familial, and

national physical safety win out over any national identity. 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.” 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 21 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 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.

II. Politicisation of National Identity

National identity has been a political project in Taiwan since the arrival of the KMT to Taiwan in 1949. This association is evident through the experiences of Generations A and B. All individuals of these two generations recall their schooling under the KMT government as being laced with nationalist Republic of China propaganda. GPK, an 87-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.” 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 it was prioritised over infrastructural and political development. SCU, a 52-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.

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.” The strict linguistic and ideological education children received all throughout their schooling from 1949 until democratisation was so effective in instilling a Chinese identity in some students that YSS, a 56-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.

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 democratisation. Others, such as XLA, a 53-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 for allegedly holding Communist sympathies, her family became strongly opposed to the Chinese nationalist project. 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 democratisation 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,” (GPK.). Putting it more plainly, AML, a 68-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.” Because of the DPP’s reputation as ‘homegrown,’ and their position in 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 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 politicising the discussion of national identity.

This politicisation of national identity has forced it to remain a polarising 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-straits relations is the manifestation of the politicisation of national identity. Because of the popular assumption that deeper economic integration leads to closer cultural and political ties – though this idea is yet unproved 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 (Muyard, 2012). Indeed, while one side fears the KMT “selling Taiwan to China” (USC, 2024), the other laments how the DPP is trying

to “completely cut off Taiwan from China” (TJP, 2024). 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-straits 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-straits 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-straits relations, not much else differentiates the platforms of the KMT and DPP. JTH, a 22 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.

KYR, a 22 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, “OK, 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.” 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-straits 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 criticise 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 respective disfavored parties.

The two main critiques fielded by interviewees against the political system are succinctly summarised by AJM, a 27-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-straits 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.

First, the lack of variety in policies other than cross-straits issues, and to a lesser extent, nuclear power, forces what is essentially one-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-straits 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 one-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-straits 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 expressed frustration towards the wider political system for arguing over the empty issue of cross-straits relations rather than addressing these uncontroversial issues. CGZ, a 45-year old stay-at-home mother sees cross-straits based polarisation 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.

In addition to negatively affecting cross-straits 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.” 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 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 Kuomintang then said, ‘Ah, what can I say, then you are sacrificing the health of the Taiwanese people’.

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” 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. While all interviewees agree that people can believe whatever they want, “After all, we all carry Taiwanese passports, so they can do whatever they please. After all, the constitution guarantees freedom of speech” (KNK, 2024), 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 the 1) possibility of serious interpersonal conflict, and 2) because 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 50-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.” While the breaking of interpersonal bonds over a difference in political view may seem exaggerated, many of the interviewees express a complete inability to understand, empathise, or communicate with the ‘other side’. Shaking his head, JTH vehemently declares, “It’s not just that I can’t empathise 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.” 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.

Thus, rather than engaging in these divisive and ultimately unproductive debates, most Taiwanese opt to self-censor around the topic of serious politics, engaging only in superficial gossip, even with friends and family. Although as proved by CQZ³, there is indeed an intersection between identifying with the Republic of China and agreeing with Taiwanese independence, it is perhaps the lack of open and serious discussion that prevents DKF and other individuals from realising 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.

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

³ Refer to section I. Constructions of National Identity. CQZ identifies with the Republic of China, but would accept Taiwanese (along with Hongkong and Shanghai, etc.) independence upon the reunification of the mainland and Taiwan under the ROC regime.

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 polarising 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. Interviewees have shown that 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.

III. The Rise of Ke Wenze in the 2024 Elections

The 2024 presidential election in Taiwan has been widely deemed pivotal for determining Taiwan's future direction, however outlooks in Taiwan prove to be less than enthusiastic, even for those holding strong attitudes towards national identity and cross-straits 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],” (Burns, 2023 as quoted in Gazis, 2023). This, along with the steadily increasing daily incursions of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone following American Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s delegation visit to Taiwan in 2022, increasing Chinese import bans on Taiwanese goods, and the continual poaching of Taiwan’s dwindling diplomatic allies during Tsai Ing-wen’s two terms, is indicative of the mounting political and economic pressure exerted on Taiwan by China (U-jin and Suorsa, 2022; Associated Press, 2024). This 2027 deadline, allegedly set by Xi Jinping to prepare for an offensive invasion of Taiwan, is the most openly aggressive posture taken by the PRC since signing of the 1992 Consensus. Though not 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 too, has emphasised 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” (Zhang, 2024 as quoted in Blanchard, 2024). 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, declaring that “Hou Yu-ih opposes Taiwan independence, will allow cross-strait peace, restart dialogue and exchanges, strengthen national defence and let everyone live in peace in Taiwan,” (Hou, 2024 as quoted in Lee and Blanchard, 2024), 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. The exception to this are certain members of Generation A, who continue to vehemently support the parties they have historically supported. 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.

With similar intensity and conviction, HMM, a 74-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.

The correlation between generation and strength and dimensionality of political support fully supports the findings of Rigger (2006). 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, that whatever choice Taiwanese voters make, the real outcomes of cross-straits relations, the economy, housing prices, and more will ultimately turn out 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.

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 war⁴. 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 seen as relatively pro-Russia at the time of his election, upon Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he became the face of the anti-Russian movement in Ukraine and worldwide. 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.

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

⁴ See I. Constructions of National Identity

national identities is fragile. Given the previously established congruency of the KMT and DPP's platforms in all areas but the matter of cross-straits 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.

Along the same line of thinking, 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-kong⁵, so I will vote for Lai Ching-te.

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 be least damaging. 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 (TPP).

⁵ Jaw Shawkong was the chosen running mate of KMT presidential candidate Hou You-ih

The rapid rise of Ke Wen-zhe's Taiwan People's Party in the last 5 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..." (Taiwan People's Party, 2024). This rational outlook touted by Ke and the TPP seems to address all of the interviewee's 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 democratisation allows Ke Wen-zhe to claim that he has escaped the need to align himself with any symbolic national identity. Then, 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 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 Wenzhe.

Analysing the voting plans of the 9 interviewees in Generation C, DKF's assessment seems to be somewhat accurate. Of 9, 4 favor Ke Wenzhe, 1 favors the KMT, 1 favors the DPP, and 3 are undecided or abstaining. Supporting Rigger's 2006 conclusion that subsequent

post-democratisation generations would mellow in the directionality and strength of national identity and political identification, Generation C is by far the least decisive in their voting and most tentative in their support towards any political candidate. In comparison, Generation A has 4 DPP supporters and 3 KMT supporters, each staunch in their position, while Generation B comprises 6 DPP supporters, 3 Ke Wenzhe supporters, and 1 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 criticising his lack of concrete policy implementation. Among Generations B and C, the very traits that endear him to some turn others away. Those in opposition point out his habitual use of unpolished, 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-straits relations, he actually doesn't have any specific policies, policy guidance, or any specific plans..." (KYR, 2024), and "I feel that Ke Wenzhe's supporters don't have a rationale at all. I don't know if they know what they are supporting, to be honest" (JTH, 2024). 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-straits relations, suggesting some young voters still place value on cross-straits relations and symbolic national identity as a political issue, despite the frustrations that arise due to their proxy for political camp affiliation. On the other hand, Ke Wen-zhe's supporters say, "Even though Ke Wen-zhe has the tendency to say really stupid things, that is part of the reason why I like him. He

is straight-talking and cannot shut up, so he lets us decide if the things he says are logical or not” (KNK, 2024). 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 seen as a form of transparency and honesty by his supporters. Additionally, their support does not appear to arise from any specific policies presented by Ke. 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.” This desire for change is echoed by KMA, a 47 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.” 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 8 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 polarised 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 talent. Additionally, following the TPP's future actions, the extricability of symbolic national identity and identity politics from Taiwanese politics will finally be addressed. Though the TPP disavows the Blue and Green camps for their identity politics-based squabbling, it is already evident that Ke Wen-zhe's own lack of a clear stance on national identity and cross-straits relations raises skepticism in some. Given that Taiwan's ultimate national goal of unification or independence is such an enormous and emotional matter that appears to be tied to equally large topics such as national security and cross-straits 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 theorises, “only after a cohesive national identity is established can Taiwan's democracy be possible,” (YSS). 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-straits relations, but also his ability to shape the domestic political landscape of Taiwan into a healthier and more robust democracy.

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. Though the effects of differing national identities are largely irrelevant in day-to-day life, Taiwan's two main political parties, the KMT and DPP continually play to the public's emotions, politicising the issue of national identity in relation to cross-straits relations, flattening the complex constructions of national identity into symbolic dichotomous stances. This reductive operationalisation of national identity by political parties, which uses symbolic national identity as a proxy for political alignment, cross-straits relations, and the independence-unification debate, contributes to the polarisation 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 politicised 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 essentially 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-straits 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-straits tensions heighten these feelings once more?

The results of this research hold implications that may read as nihilist, but one should look to Taiwan's future with optimism. As shown through their interviews, Taiwanese citizens are logical, full of passion, and truly want the best for their country. They have already identified the self-destructive nature of symbolic national identity in politics, and are able to discuss their own identities with nuance. 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.

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APPENDIX A: Interviewee Profiles

(All interviews conducted between 19 December 2023 and 12 January 2024)

NAME	NOMINAL NAT. ID.	AGE	GENERATION	GENDER	2024 VOTE	FAMILY**
DKF	Chinese	27	C	M	NONE / KE*	WS/BS
WLT	undeclared	21	C	M	KE	BS
KYR	Taiwanese and Chinese	22	C	M	KMT	WS/BS
CVT	Taiwanese and Chinese	27	C	M	DPP	WS/BS
AJM	undeclared	26	C	M	UNDECIDE D	WS/BS
CQZ	Chinese	24	C	M	KMT	BS
PT	Taiwanese	27	C	M	ABSTAIN	BS
JTH	Taiwanese	22	C	M	DPP	WS/BS
KNK	Taiwanese	25	C	M	KE	WS/BS
GPk	Taiwanese	87	A	M	DPP	BS
TJG	Taiwanese	72	A	M	KMT	BS
TJP	Chinese	71	A	F	KMT	WS
AMF	Taiwanese	68	A	M	DPP	BS
HMH	Taiwanese	74	A	F	KMT	BS
AML	Taiwanese	68	A	F	DPP	BS
CLZ	Taiwanese	75	A	M	DPP	BS
CVD	Chinese	60	B	M	KMT	BS
KMA	Taiwanese	47	B	F	NONE / KE*	WS/BS
USC	Taiwanese	52	B	M	DPP	BS
LOT	Undeclared	52	B	F	DPP	BS
XLA	Taiwanese	53	B	F	DPP	BS
TTD	Taiwanese	53	B	M	DPP	BS
TPT	Taiwanese	51	B	M	DPP	BS
YSS	Taiwanese	56	B	M	DPP	BS
CGZ	Taiwanese	45	B	F	KE	WS/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)

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

A: Personal Profile

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

B: Political Profile

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

C: National Identity

1. What does the term national identity mean to you?
2. What is your national identity?
 - a. How did you come to develop this identity?
3. What is the relationship between Taiwan and the Republic of China?
4. How do you define 'Taiwanese culture'?

D: Current Events

1. What do you think of Taiwan's current social environment?
2. What do you think of Taiwan's current political environment?
3. What are your thoughts on the concept of transitional justice?
4. Has your opinion of Taiwan changed over time?
5. 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.