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YOUTH POWER IN SHAPING
THE FUTURES OF TAIWAN,
HONG KONG AND THE WIDER ASIA

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Table of Contents

Research Articles

Introduction: Youth Power in Shaping the Futures of Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Wider Asia <i>Alan H. Yang</i>	1
Unpacking Asian Identity in Taiwan: An Empirical Study of Taiwanese University <i>Ian Tsung-Yen Chen, Yung-Ming Yen, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Shigeto Sonoda</i>	11
Enabling Student-led Activism in Taiwan-Southeast Asia Connectivity <i>Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Alan Hao Yang</i>	41
Youth Social Movements and the Consolidation of Hongkonger's Distinct Identity Before and After the Introduction of the New National Security Law <i>Aqmal Afiq Shamsul Bahri, Geetha Govindasamy and Nur Shahadah Jamil</i>	63
Delineating the Shaping of Asian Milk Tea Alliance: How Taiwan Enlightens Democracy through Activist Networking? <i>Chittaworn Warasiriphong</i>	91
Young and Promising: New Generation and the Resilience of Taiwan-Malaysia Relations <i>Sau Man Wong, Kean Yew Lee and Tsung-Yuan Chen</i>	107
Strengthening Asia's Future: Cross-Border Youth Initiatives for Lasting Resilience <i>Boon Yi Lim and Sana Hashmi</i>	139
Book Review <i>Wu Ling Chong</i>	163

Research Articles

Introduction: Youth Power in Shaping the Futures of Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Wider Asia

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Introduction

Youth represent the hope for national development and an innovative driving force in accelerating national development and progress. To a certain extent, they do embody the future of Asia. To envision Asia's future, it is essential to carefully explore how young generation perceive Asia and how they construct their Asian identities. Despite the importance of youth influence, there has been a lack of enlightening publications that explores the influence of youth in prominent area studies or international relations-focus academic journals, barring some recent publications (Lee, 2018; Mohamad and Iqbal, 2019; Gupta and Sharma, 2020). For this reason, the *International Journal of China Studies* has specifically arranged this special issue, calling upon international scholarship to address how youth shape the future of Asia. By echoing and the significance of *youth power* for the future of Asia, this special issue will highlight the following features:

1. **Innovation and Creativity:** Young people are often at the forefront of technological advancements and creative solutions. Their fresh perspectives can drive innovation in various sectors, including technology, environmental sustainability, and social entrepreneurship, which are crucial for Asia's economic growth and regional resilience.

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2. **Social Change and Activism:** The youth in Asia are increasingly engaged in social movements, advocating for issues such as climate change, gender equality, Social Justice, and human rights. Their activism can lead to significant societal shifts, promoting more inclusive and equitable policies that address pressing challenges.
3. **Demographic Dividend:** With a large youth population, Asia has the potential to harness a demographic dividend. By investing in education, skills training, and job opportunities, countries can ensure that their youth contribute positively to the economy, enhancing productivity and fostering long-term development.
4. **Global Connectivity and Collaboration:** Young people today are more connected than ever, thanks to technology and social media. This connectivity enables cross-cultural collaboration and exchange of ideas, fostering a sense of global citizenship, and democratic solidarity in particular, that can help address regional and global challenges collectively in general and enhance cross-national partnership in specific.

Hence, youth is the central theme of this special issue, which includes six research articles contributed by scholars from Japan, Thailand, India, Malaysia and Taiwan — featuring youth power in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Southeast Asia — on topics ranging from intangible regional identity towards Asia to concrete activist reforms, and focusing on diverse referents from university students to young activists. Importantly, the articles included in this special issue employ the mixed methodology, including quantitative survey research as well as qualitative approaches such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews. These articles provide in-depth insights into how youth influence Asia's future, how young people in Asia learn from each other, and how they create transnational and regional networks of cooperation and solidarity.

The Rise of Youth Power in Asia: Leaders and Institutions

Undoubtedly, Asia is a region full of vitality and young population, not only in terms of young workforce but also in the emergence of many next socio-economic and political leaders, most of whom are young and leading other

young cohort in reshaping social and national development agenda. As we explore the emerging youth leadership, many young leaders across Asian countries have gained significant international attention. These emerging leaders are active change-makers or advocates, serving as role models for their peer communities. For example, several Asian youth leaders play key roles in advocating for environmental sustainability, human rights, democratic governance, and youth policies. A few representatives can be found as follows.

In terms of political/policy influence per se, M. M. Manan of Malaysia is a clear example. As a prominent youth leader in Malaysia, M. M. Manan has been instrumental in mobilizing young voters and advocating for youth-centric policies. His efforts to engage the youth in political discussions have fostered greater political awareness and participation among the younger generation, emphasizing the importance of youth voices in shaping democratic governance.

In Korea, Ahn Cheol-soo, a former presidential candidate and co-founder of the People's Party, has significantly influenced South Korea's political landscape. Known for his advocacy on issues such as education reform and technology policies, he represents the aspirations of younger South Koreans who seek innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. His leadership has inspired a new wave of youth engagement in politics.

In India, Gaurav Bhatia is a rising political figure, known for his work in grassroots mobilization and youth engagement initiatives. As a member of the Indian National Congress, he focuses on issues affecting young people, such as employment, education, and mental health. His involvement in politics encourages greater participation from the youth, emphasizing their role in shaping the future of the nation.

Siti Sarah of Bangladesh, is a famous youth leader in advocating for women's rights and youth empowerment. As a representative of the youth in national discussions, she emphasizes the need for policies that address gender equality and education. Her leadership signifies the increasing recognition of young women in political spaces and their crucial role in driving social change.

In additions, youth leaders in Asia have been keen in promoting environmental justice and universal values such as freedom and human rights across Asia. Khanim Azhari, for example, as a young activist and politician in Indonesia, has emerged as a voice for youth empowerment in Indonesia.

Her focus on environmental issues and social justice resonates with young voters, making her a key figure in advocating for sustainable development. Azhari's work highlights the importance of youth leadership in addressing pressing social and environmental challenges. All these leaders exemplify the growing influence of youth in politics across Asia, addressing critical issues and inspiring future generations to participate in the democratic process.

In addition to individuals, various institutions that focus on or lead youth empowerment also reveal new directions for Asian development of the making of Asia as a regional community. Furthermore, in terms of organizations or forums concerned with youth issues and influence, these mechanisms connect to guide public opinion, facilitate the youth power, and gather more young talents to implement transformative actions. These institutions include as follows:

Asian Youth Council (AYC)

The AYC is a regional organization that promotes youth participation in decision-making processes across Asia. It aims to empower young people through leadership training, advocacy, and networking opportunities. By fostering collaboration among youth organizations, the AYC strengthens the voice of young people in regional and global forums.

Youth Employment Network (YEN)

Founded in collaboration with the United Nations and the International Labor Organization, YEN focuses on addressing youth unemployment and underemployment in Asia. The organization provides resources, training, and policy recommendations to help young people acquire the skills needed for the job market, thereby enhancing their employability and economic prospects.

Asia-Pacific Youth Exchange (APYE)

APYE is dedicated to fostering youth-led development through knowledge sharing and collaborative projects. The organization connects young leaders from different countries to work on social issues, promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. By empowering youth to take action

in their communities, APYE contributes to sustainable development in the region.

UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

UNICEF actively works on youth empowerment initiatives across the East Asia and Pacific region. The organization focuses on health, education, and protection issues affecting young people, providing programs that promote youth participation and advocacy. By involving youth in its initiatives, UNICEF ensures that their voices are heard in matters that impact their lives.

Youth for Asia (YFA)

Youth for Asia is a platform that engages young people in various development issues, including education, health, and environmental sustainability. The organization provides training programs, mentorship, and networking opportunities to empower youth leaders. YFA focuses on building skills and fostering a sense of agency among young people, encouraging them to take active roles in their communities.

These organizations play vital roles in empowering youth across Asia, providing them with the tools, resources, and opportunities needed to become active contributors to their societies. More recently, *the Nippon Foundation (TNF)* in Japan has been leading an initiative of Asian Philanthropy Congress (the *Aphic*) in facilitating the philanthropic organizations and foundations across Asian countries in networking and facilitating exchanges among each other since 2022. Youth Initiative is among its priority issue of *Aphic* Collaboration in materializing the vision of shaping a better and resilient Asia.

Moreover, there are increasing numbers of institutions and mechanisms, regional conferences or forum in particular, in the region planning exchanges and facilitating dialogues among youth leaders, working alongside regional organizations and institutions to advance these efforts. Regional forums and regularly held youth development conferences further stimulate discussions and foster consensus. At the same time, these events allow youth representatives to present concrete recommendations and collaborative actions.

For example, *Asian Youth Conference (AYC)* gathers young leaders from across Asia to discuss pressing issues such as climate change, social justice, and economic development. Its importance lies in fostering cross-cultural

dialogue and collaboration among youth, empowering them to propose actionable solutions to regional challenges and enhancing their leadership skills. Other regional forums and youth development conferences include:

Youth Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Held in various Asian countries, this forum focuses on the role of youth in achieving the SDGs. It is significant because it provides a platform for young people to share their ideas and initiatives, encouraging grassroots involvement in global development goals. This engagement helps to ensure that youth perspectives are included in policy-making processes.

ASEAN Youth Summit. The ASEAN Youth Summit brings together youth representatives from Southeast Asian nations to discuss regional cooperation and integration. Its importance lies in promoting a sense of community among youth in the region, fostering collaboration on issues such as education, employment, and cultural exchange, and strengthening regional identity.

Asia-Pacific Youth Conference serves as a platform for youth leaders from the Asia-Pacific region to address issues such as youth employment, mental health, and social inclusion. The significance of this conference lies in its focus on creating networks among youth organizations and encouraging collaborative projects that address common challenges faced by young people across the region.

Youth Innovation Forum (YIF). The YIF is dedicated to encouraging innovative solutions to social and economic issues through youth-led initiatives. Its importance stems from its emphasis on entrepreneurship and creativity, empowering young people to develop and implement their ideas, thus fostering a culture of innovation that can drive sustainable development in their communities.

Yushan Forum. This is an annual event organized by Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) which includes young leaders' forum in various editions, inviting young parliament members, policy practitioners, NGO leaders to exchange ideas and vision of enabling a resilient and progressive Asia through joint efforts with Taiwanese partners. TAEF also includes young

leader program as one of its five core action programs in organizing youth camp, youth engagement and empowerment. The above-mentioned forums and programs play crucial roles in empowering youth, fostering dialogue, and promoting collaboration to address the challenges faced by young people in Asia.

Summary of Research Articles

This Special Issue features six articles that focus on how young people in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the wider Asia view themselves and their nations or regions, how they influence their societies, and how they shape the futures of their nations. Each article incorporates elements of Taiwan, including its connections with Southeast Asia, as well as that of Hong Kong.

The first article, based on surveys on the Asian identity of Taiwanese university students in 2013 and 2018, explores the perception of Asia among Taiwanese university students. It contends that the Taiwanese university students' perception of Asia has been influenced by a complex combination of factors, including physical proximity, familiarity, and strategic concerns shaped by the region's geopolitical dynamics. This article also links with Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) regarding its impact on young Taiwanese people's perception of and identity with Asia. It argues that while the NSP is being actively promoted, its effect on changing the identity of Taiwanese youth with Asia remains limited in the short term as shown in the second survey conducted in 2018. Changes in identity and perception require a prolonged process of subtle influence in order to foster a deeper, more lasting sense of belonging.

The second article addresses the in-person connections between Taiwan's youth movements and those in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the "Blue Bird Action of 2024" (青鳥行動). Drawing from first-hand experiences through participatory observation and interviews during the protest, the article provides insights into how Taiwan's NSP influences the Southeast Asian youths through the participations of the latter's youth advocacy organizations during the Blue Bird Action 2024 protest.

The third article explores the connection between youth social movements and the exclusive identity of Hongkongers before and after the introduction of the new National Security Law (NSL) in 2020. With the decline of youth's physical social protests in Hong Kong — as witnessed in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Law

Movement — it is far from ending the distinctive identity of Hong Kongers per se. Instead, such identity of “we” versus “they” continued to be reinforced through social media platforms, with strong activism of those activists behind it. While this paper focuses solely on Hong Kong, the emergence of this new type of social movement in the city, is a testimony to the persistence of youths in consolidating and contesting Hong Kong’s identity against the Beijing-constructed national identity of the Chinese nation.

The fourth article discusses the formation and development of the “Milk Tea Alliance (奶茶聯盟)”, focusing on the online connections among student activists on democratic solidarity. Although the Milk Tea Alliance is a virtual initiative without a formal organization, it has facilitated solidarity among the new generation netizens of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and India and contributed to a new recognition of Taiwan in Southeast Asia. Among all, Taiwan’s lessons for democratic consolidation and social resilience, has become a focus of learning among netizens from Hong Kong, Thailand and India.

The fifth article centers on Taiwan-Malaysia relations, emphasizing how next generation Chinese youth promote bilateral relations between Taiwan and Malaysia through exchanges shared values and social resilience. For the longest time, Malaysia has been the largest source of international students studying in Taiwan among Southeast Asian countries. In the past decades, hundreds of thousands Malaysian students came to Taiwan for their degrees. Compared to these past experiences, the new chapter of Malaysia-Taiwan exchanges, driven by youth from both countries through new approaches, issues, and instruments, is worth examining.

Then, the sixth article unpacks the youth connections through initiatives by TAEF, a pilot think tank in Taiwan in promoting Taiwan’s NSP since 2018. Based on the approach of case study, it examines how the NSP strengthens exchanges with youth leaders in Taiwan and the region. Apart from that, it also highlights how TAEF-led initiatives facilitate cross-national youth cooperation to build regional resilience.

To sum up, this Special Issue aims to highlight the roles and impacts of Taiwanese, Hong Kong Youth and wider Asian youth in charting their futures in different political territories. They are not merely subjects of academic studies; beyond sharing common characteristics, they are connected by deeper ties. Through the existing cross-national solidarity among youths, young talents are emerging as a powerful force capable of shaping the future

of Asia.

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Unpacking Asian Identity in Taiwan: An Empirical Study of Taiwanese University Students' Perceptions of Asia¹

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving perceptions of Asian identity among Taiwanese university students, focusing on the impact of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP). The study uses data from the Asian Student Survey (ASS) to analyze how these students perceive neighboring Asian countries, particularly those targeted by the NSP. The findings reveal that Taiwanese students view Asia as a dynamic and diverse region but tend to prefer Western countries or developed Asian nations like Japan for education and career opportunities. The research also shows that while the NSP has enhanced Taiwan's image in some Southeast Asian countries, it has had a limited impact on altering Taiwanese students' perceptions of these nations. The study highlights the strategic significance of the NSP in fostering regional integration and mutual understanding, emphasizing the importance of people-centered exchanges in shaping regional identities. Despite the policy's achievements, the article suggests that further efforts are needed

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to connect Taiwanese society more deeply with the broader Asian region to fully realize the potential of regional cooperation and identity formation.

Keywords: *Taiwanese university students, Asian identity, New Southbound Policy, Regional integration.*

1. Introduction

The study of identity holds considerable significance, serving as a crucial indicator of how individuals understand their social and international contexts (Abdelal et al, 2006), as well as a vital tool for self-examination. The formation and articulation of identity break down the routines of daily life into dimensions of cultural significance and affinity. Identities tied to specific geographical contexts, in particular, encompass a complex interplay of political, social, and cultural elements (Paasi, 2003). These elements are deeply interdependent, each influencing and shaping the others, ultimately coalescing into a unique and multifaceted identity.

The survey project on university students in Asian countries represents a pioneering transnational academic collaboration that promotes self-reflection and mutual understanding among young cohorts across different nations. This research initiative, led by Professor Sonoda Shigeto of the University of Tokyo, Japan, aims to explore intra-regional perceptions within Asia—or more succinctly, how Asia perceives itself. As members of this international research team, we are pleased that Taiwan is actively contributing to this significant analytical endeavor. The survey and research on the identities of university students are particularly insightful, as these students are not only the intellectual and social elite in many Asian societies but also the future leaders of their respective countries. By examining the identities of Asian, particularly Taiwanese, university students, we gain deeper insights into how the next generation of Asian citizens perceives the region as a community, neighboring countries as partners, and themselves as essential participants in the collective effort to build and sustain this regional community alongside other emerging talents. This understanding is critical for anticipating the future trajectory of Asian regional cooperation and identity formation.

The identity of university students in Taiwan is shaped by both external factors and government policies. Externally, the ongoing cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China exert considerable influence. Beijing's

political pressure to limit Taiwan's international space has cultivated a unique perspective among the Taiwanese population, particularly within the university student demographic. This pressure has led to a heightened sense of distinctiveness and awareness among students regarding their national identity and international standing (Chen, 2012). Internally, the formation of student identity has been influenced by a series of government policies developed since the 1990s, particularly through successive waves of the Southbound Policies. The most notable of these is the New Southbound Policy (NSP), implemented in 2016. The NSP, with its distinctive people-centered rationale, has played a crucial role in fostering interpersonal exchanges between Taiwan and other countries in the region (Yang, 2018; 2022; 2023). This policy has not only strengthened Taiwan's regional ties but has also contributed to the formation of regional communities, encouraging a more interconnected and cooperative regional identity among Taiwanese university students. Through these external and internal influences, the identity of Taiwanese university students has evolved to reflect both the pressures and opportunities presented by their unique geopolitical context. This dual influence underscores the complexity of identity formation in Taiwan, highlighting the interplay between political forces and policy initiatives in shaping how students perceive themselves and their place in the broader regional and global community.

In light of our research findings based on the survey data, we have identified three key insights. First, the way Taiwanese university students perceive Asia reflects both Taiwanese society's affinity with and unfamiliarity with the region, as well as the deep-seated concerns arising from the pressures of international power dynamics. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of Taiwan's position within Asia, where a sense of belonging is tempered by the challenges posed by external geopolitical forces.

Second, given that Taiwan's civil society is vibrant, diverse, open, and highly internationalized, it is reasonable to expect that Taiwanese university students' perceptions of Asia align closely with those of their counterparts in neighboring Asian countries. Asia, as a whole, is seen as a developing, dynamic, and highly heterogeneous region. For Taiwan, Asia represents a positive and energetic image. While the movement of people and labor mobility are often key drivers in fostering a sense of Asian identity, it is noteworthy that Taiwanese students tend to prefer staying in Taiwan for their

future careers. This contrasts with trends in other countries where mobility is more common. For instance, young students from Southeast Asia often seek opportunities for further study or work abroad, driven by the closer ties facilitated by ASEAN-led regionalism. Similarly, young professionals in Japan and South Korea frequently pursue careers with international companies, often opting for positions in overseas branches or factories.

The third research finding is that the promotion of the NSP has generally led to an improved understanding of neighboring Asian countries among Taiwanese university students. These students increasingly recognize the profound impact that Southeast Asian nations can have on Taiwan's future. The strategic goals of the NSP are not only enlightening but also of significant importance. Beyond diversifying Taiwan's economic and trade dependencies away from China, the NSP's focus on people-centered development agendas aims to strengthen Taiwan's presence and connectivity within Asia. Enhanced cultivation of relationships and social networking are critical. We argue that only by fostering mutual understanding and exchanges among people can we promote a genuine sense of Asian identity, ultimately facilitating Taiwan's integration into the broader regional community. This approach underscores the importance of interpersonal connections as the foundation for a shared regional identity and Taiwan's active participation in the evolving Asian landscape.

2. Outlining Taiwan's Unique Focus with NSP features

Taiwan initiated the promotion and implementation of its NSP following President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in 2016. The NSP marks a significant departure from previous southbound policy initiatives, such as the "Go South" policy of the 1990s, which primarily aimed at balancing westward investment. Unlike its predecessors, the NSP is not merely a risk diversification strategy; rather, it represents a comprehensive effort to enhance Taiwan's connectivity and partnerships with neighboring Asian countries (Yang, 2018). The policy's scope extends to ASEAN member states, South Asian countries, New Zealand, and Australia, thereby fostering deeper regional integration.

Through the NSP, Taiwan has implemented five flagship programs designed to establish and strengthen constructive partnerships with these neighboring countries and societies. The first focus is on boosting economic, trade, and industrial links, aiming to enhance economic cooperation and

create mutually beneficial industrial partnerships. Secondly, the NSP emphasizes the cultivation of industrial talents and educational cooperation, promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills through educational collaboration and talent development. Additionally, the policy supports collaboration on public health and medical care, strengthening joint efforts in public health initiatives and medical services. Furthermore, regional agricultural cooperation is advanced through the NSP, aiding in the support of sustainable development within the region. Lastly, the NSP enhances social connectivity and fosters dialogue through initiatives like the Yushan Forum, building stronger social ties and encouraging regional discourse (Yang, 2018; 2022). Overall, the NSP is fundamentally about empowering Taiwan to form constructive and sustainable partnerships with neighboring Asian countries. It also facilitates collective efforts to advance a people-centered development agenda, underscoring the importance of cooperation in achieving shared regional goals. Through these initiatives, Taiwan aims not only to diversify its economic relationships but also to position itself as a key player in the evolving landscape of Asian regionalism.

It is worth noting that surveys on regional identity are relatively uncommon in Taiwan, as are surveys focusing on Taiwan's image and identity in Southeast Asian countries. However, as Taiwan continues to implement the NSP, efforts to explore these areas have gradually increased. Notably, the long-term Taiwan Social Change Survey series, organized and conducted by Academia Sinica, has included specific content since 2018 that addresses the perception of Southeast Asian countries, understanding of cultural characteristics, and attitudes towards migrant workers and new immigrants in Taiwan. These additions reflect a growing interest in gauging Taiwanese people's attitudes towards their neighboring countries in Asia and the immigrant populations from Southeast Asia. In parallel, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) has embarked on the first-ever large-scale project to survey the image of Taiwan and perceptions of Taiwanese businesses in various Southeast Asian countries. Since 2018, TAEF has completed three surveys in Vietnam (2019), Indonesia (2020), Thailand (2021), Singapore (2022), Malaysia (2023) and the Philippines (2024). These surveys have employed both telephone interviews and in-depth focus group discussions to capture the perspectives of local populations and business elites regarding Taiwan.

The objectives of this survey project differ from those of previous initiatives. While Academia Sinica's surveys focus on the general public's views and TAEF's surveys target business elites, the international team led by Professor Sonoda Shigeto has chosen to survey university students. This approach aims to capture how Taiwanese university students view neighboring Asian countries, including their general perceptions of Asia, favorability towards other nations, familiarity with them, and the likelihood of considering Asia as a future work destination. By analyzing these findings, our research seeks to offer a different perspective from the surveys conducted by Academia Sinica and TAEF. We hope that this detailed analysis will not only enhance our understanding of Taiwanese university students' views but also provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the NSP, enabling us to further evaluate its performance and impact on Taiwan's regional engagement.

3. Analytical Approaches

To analyze the perceptions of Asia among Taiwanese elite university students, this paper utilizes data from the second and third waves of the "Asian Student Survey" (ASS) dataset, developed by Dr. Shigeto Sonoda from the University of Tokyo. This comprehensive dataset includes university students from 11 countries, with a sample size of approximately 200 students per university.

The data analyzed in this paper specifically focuses on the Taiwanese student sample. The second wave of the survey was conducted at National Taiwan University (NTU) and National Sun Yat-sen University during September and October of 2013, while the third wave was conducted at NTU and National Chengchi University between September and December of 2018. The sample sizes for the second and third waves were 400 and 413, respectively. All three universities are widely recognized as Taiwan's most selective and prestigious institutions, with entrance examination percentile ranks for most programs exceeding 90%, and some programs at NTU requiring scores in the 99th percentile. Given the composition of the samples, it is important to note that the Taiwanese students discussed in this paper refer specifically to those attending elite universities, rather than being representative of the broader population of Taiwanese university students. This distinction is crucial, as the perspectives and experiences of elite university students may differ from those of students at other institutions.

This paper aims to explore the potential effects of the Taiwanese government's grand strategy, the "New Southbound Policy" (NSP), on Taiwanese students' perceptions of the region. The NSP, proposed by President Tsai Ing-wen in 2015 and implemented after she assumed office in 2016, is designed not only to enhance Taiwan's diplomatic and economic standing in the region but also to reshape Taiwanese people's perceptions of the NSP-targeted countries. A key objective of the NSP is to foster positive people-to-people exchanges by encouraging a more favorable and nuanced understanding of these countries among Taiwanese citizens.

To assess whether the NSP has achieved its intended policy outcomes, this paper compares data from the second wave (2013) and third wave (2018) of the ASS. If the NSP has been effective, its impact should be observable in the differences between these two datasets, particularly in how Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP countries have evolved over time. Therefore, the following analysis will focus primarily on a comparative examination of the survey data available from both waves. In instances where data from the second wave is not available or applicable, the analysis will center on the third wave dataset, with a comparative analysis across the countries included in this wave. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the NSP's influence on the perceptions of Taiwanese elite university students toward the region.

Based on the available data, the following analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on Taiwanese students' perceptions of Asia as a whole. This section examines their general views on Asia, with particular attention to the influence of the NSP. Since the NSP has gained prominence as a key strategic initiative in Taiwan, it has redirected significant attention and resources toward the NSP-targeted countries. This shift is likely to be noticed by university students, who are increasingly exposed to more student exchange programs with NSP countries and a growing presence of foreign students from these countries in Taiwanese universities.

As a result, it is theoretically expected that Taiwanese students' general perception of Asia should now incorporate a stronger emphasis on NSP countries. Furthermore, the perception of non-NSP countries may have shifted as well, potentially showing a decline in attention or resources allocated, or at the very least, remaining unchanged in comparison to previous years. This part of the analysis aims to explore these dynamics, offering insights into how the NSP may have reshaped students' broader understanding of the Asian region.

Furthermore, this paper examines Taiwanese students' perceptions of the NSP partner countries. In theory, these perceptions should have become more positive due to the Taiwanese government's increased allocation of resources toward NSP partner countries. The government has invested heavily in promoting people-centered exchanges and fostering positive images of cooperation with NSP countries. Consequently, we would expect the NSP-related indicators in the third wave of the survey to reflect more positive sentiments compared to those in the second wave. Additionally, this paper investigates students' perceptions of China. Interestingly, although the official discourse surrounding the NSP does not explicitly identify it as a response to the perceived threat from China, it is clear that the policy aims to reduce Taiwan's dependence on China by strengthening ties with NSP partner countries. By avoiding conflictual cross-strait rhetoric, the NSP is designed to be more acceptable and appealing to its target countries, minimizing potential objections from China. However, it is important to recognize that the NSP exists within the broader context of Sino-U.S. rivalry and cross-strait tensions. It would be misleading to view the NSP and Taiwanese perceptions of China as entirely separate phenomena. Therefore, it is theoretically plausible that students' perceptions of China in the third wave may have become more negative compared to the second wave.

The second part of this analysis focuses on the perception of Taiwan from the perspective of those living in NSP countries. Given the NSP's emphasis on people-centered exchanges, we would expect that individuals in NSP partner countries, particularly university students, would have developed a more favorable image of Taiwan. This is likely due to the significant investments made by Taiwan's Ministry of Education in cross-national student exchange programs and the generous scholarships provided to students from NSP partner countries to study in Taiwan. As a result, we would anticipate an increase in positive perceptions of Taiwan in the third wave of the survey compared to the second wave.

4. Perception of Asia in Taiwan

4.1 General Perception of Asia

Taiwanese students' perception of Asia appears to be strongly influenced by geographical proximity. According to the survey question, "Which countries are included in your image of Asia?", there is a high level of consensus that

Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, which are geographically closest to Taiwan, are considered part of Asia. Conversely, fewer students regard South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern countries, such as Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Iran, as part of Asia. This suggests that the farther these countries are from Taiwan, the less likely Taiwanese students are to perceive them as part of Asia.

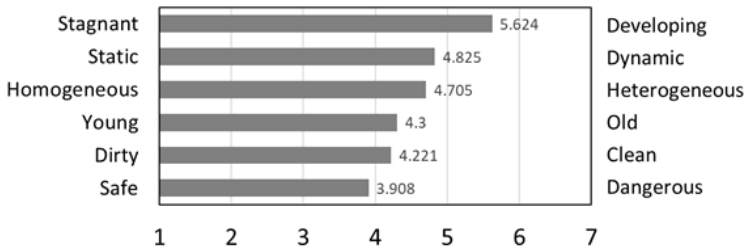
Interestingly, while 93.1% of students consider Indonesia to be an Asian country, only 74.5% view East Timor as part of Asia, despite the fact that East Timor's capital, Dili, is geographically closer to Taipei than Jakarta. This discrepancy indicates that students' perceptions of Asia are not solely determined by physical distance but are also influenced by their level of familiarity and knowledge of specific countries and regions. The Maldives provides another example of this phenomenon; few Taiwanese students can accurately identify its geographic location, reflecting a broader trend where countries that are less familiar or less prominent in public discourse are less likely to be included in students' mental maps of Asia. This suggests that geographical knowledge and exposure to certain regions play significant roles in shaping how Taiwanese students conceptualize the boundaries of Asia.

Another important issue to consider is how Taiwanese students perceive the concept of the "Indo-Pacific community." Although the Trump administration did not formally advocate the Indo-Pacific strategy until 2017 (Ford, 2020), the Obama administration had already introduced its "pivot to Asia" policy in the early 2010s (Clinton, 2011), attempting to position the United States as an integral part of Asia. Similar efforts to align with Asia were evident even earlier from the governments of Australia and New Zealand. However, these efforts appear to have had little impact on Taiwanese students' perceptions. Few students recognized the United States, Australia, or New Zealand as constituent members of Asia. This suggests that geographical distance plays a dominant role in shaping students' perceptions of regional belonging, with "Western" countries receiving less than 10% recognition as part of Asia. This finding underscores the strong influence of proximity on how Taiwanese students conceptualize the boundaries of Asia, despite political and strategic efforts by these nations to integrate more closely with the region.

In terms of the image of Asia depicted in Figure 1, the most prominent perception among Taiwanese students is that Asia is a "developing" region,

characterized by progress and growth rather than stagnation. Additionally, Asia is perceived as “dynamic” and “heterogeneous,” highlighting the region’s diversity and rapid changes. While there is a slightly stronger impression of Asia being “old”, “clean” and “safe” students’ perceptions of these attributes are more neutral compared to their views on development and dynamism. Overall, Taiwanese students view Asia as a dynamic and developing region with a diverse character. This perception likely reflects a broader recognition of the significant economic growth occurring in many developing Asian countries, which often surpasses that of the developed world. This understanding positions Asia as a region of both opportunity and transformation in the minds of these students.

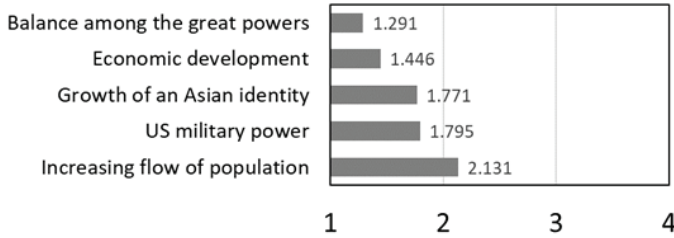
Figure 1. Taiwanese Students’ Image of Asia



In assessing the strategic perception of Asia, students were asked to evaluate the importance of various factors in maintaining stability in the region, using a scale from “1” (very important) to “4” (not at all important). As depicted in Figure 2, Taiwanese students consider maintaining a balance among the great powers to be the most crucial factor for regional stability. Other significant factors include sustaining economic development, shaping a cohesive Asian identity, and the presence of U.S. military power. In contrast, the cross-national movement of people is regarded as the least important factor among the options provided. These results suggest that Taiwanese students tend to adopt a realist perspective when considering regional affairs. Given the significant military threat posed by China across the Taiwan Strait (Zuo, 2019), it is understandable that Taiwanese students prioritize the involvement of other great powers in regional matters as a necessary counterbalance to China’s expanding influence (Beckley, 2017). Without such checks, there is a concern that China’s unchecked power could lead to

increased conflict and instability in Asia. This strategic outlook reflects the broader geopolitical anxieties present in Taiwan regarding regional security and the balance of power.

Figure 2. Factors Considered Important for Maintaining Stability in Asia



The survey results also reveal a sense of commercial liberalism and constructivism among Taiwanese students, who see economic prosperity and collective identity as key factors for stability in Asia. The belief is that as Asia becomes more economically developed, the likelihood of conflict diminishes, as initiating conflict would become increasingly unpopular and costly for most countries (Levy, 2009). Additionally, a stronger collective Asian identity is perceived as a stabilizing force, fostering greater mutual trust and understanding. This, in turn, could lead to countries in Asia treating each other as more trustworthy partners in cooperation (Acharya, 2005). However, despite the acknowledged importance of collective identity, it remains uncertain how far a heterogeneous Asia can go in developing such a unified identity, given its vast cultural and political diversity.

In terms of economic integration in Asia, Table 1 provides a comparison of survey data from the second and third waves. Students were asked to indicate their agreement with several statements regarding economic integration in Asia, using a scale where “1” represents “strongly agree” and “4” represents “strongly disagree.” This comparison reveals significant shifts in student perceptions between 2013 and 2018. The data indicates that the strongest agreement among students is with the statement that economic integration will ‘make environmental issues more serious,’ a concern that has shown a statistically significant increase by 2018. This suggests a growing awareness and apprehension about the environmental impact of regional economic integration. Additionally, students express concern about the potential for economic integration to exacerbate income inequality between

countries, reflecting an awareness of the uneven benefits such integration might bring.

Another noteworthy shift in perception is the declining agreement with the statement that economic integration benefits only foreign multinationals. By 2018, students are increasingly disagreeing with this notion, a change that is statistically significant. This shift could be attributed to the fact that ordinary Taiwanese citizens have begun to experience more tangible benefits from regional integration, leading to a more favorable view of its broader impacts. These findings reflect evolving attitudes among Taiwanese students towards the complex dynamics of economic integration in Asia, balancing concerns about environmental and social impacts with a growing recognition of its potential benefits.

Table 1. Do You Agree with “Economic Integration Will ...”

	2013	2018	Diff.
Make environmental issues more serious	1.992	1.829	-0.163*
Create greater income inequality between countries	1.995	1.921	-0.074
Create mutual trust among Asians	2.319	2.255	-0.064
Weaken state power	2.279	2.278	-0.000
Enrich our life	2.466	2.384	-0.082
Destroy domestic economies	2.429	2.443	0.014
Be beneficial only for foreign multinationals	2.538	2.823	0.285*

*Note: Using t-test, * $p < 0.05$.*

When it comes to personal connections with the Asian region, Taiwanese students exhibit relatively less interest in studying at Asian universities or working for Asian companies compared to their interest in more developed countries. Table 2 provides a comparison of students’ levels of interest in studying in various countries, based on data from the second and third waves of the survey. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest on a scale ranging from “1” for “very interested” to “4” for “not at all interested.” The data reveals that the most popular study destinations are Western developed countries and certain developed countries in Asia, such as Japan and Singapore. In contrast, there is noticeably less interest among students in pursuing education in developing Asian countries. Interestingly, the overall level of interest in studying abroad has decreased since 2013. The

only exception to this trend is South Korea, where the level of interest has significantly increased.

This decline in interest might be attributed to a variety of factors, including a general decrease in enthusiasm for studying abroad or pursuing advanced degrees among Taiwanese students. Additionally, the growing quality and appeal of educational opportunities within Taiwan or in nearby regions could be influencing students' decisions to stay closer to home rather than seeking education in less familiar or developing parts of Asia. The growing interest in South Korea may reflect its rising status as an educational destination, likely driven by its expanding soft power, including increasing cultural influence and the high regard for its universities. (Nye & Kim, 2019).

Table 2. Level of Interest in Studying in the Following Countries

Country	2013	2018	Diff.
USA	1.622	1.611	-0.011
UK	1.766	1.849	0.083
Canada	1.963	2.003	0.040
Japan	1.931	2.101	0.170*
Germany	2.064	2.156	0.092
Australia	1.989	2.221	0.232*
France	2.297	2.445	0.149*
Singapore	2.361	2.46	0.099
New Zealand	2.382	2.54	0.158*
South Korea	2.87	2.721	-0.148*
China	2.694	2.836	0.143*
Malaysia	3.032	3.23	0.198*
Thailand	3.24	3.292	0.052
India	3.175	3.331	0.155*
Philippines	3.345	3.395	0.050
Vietnam	3.343	3.413	0.069
Indonesia	3.342	3.427	0.085

*Note: Using t-test, *p < 0.05.*

Table 3 summarizes the preferred companies or organizations where Taiwanese students aspire to work. In Taiwan, employment with foreign companies is generally associated with higher salaries and greater prestige,

a perception that is likely even more pronounced among elite university students. However, the results in Table 3 reveal that the majority of students prefer to work for Taiwanese companies. This preference may be attributed to Taiwan's status as a global leader in the semiconductor industry and as a critical supplier of high-tech components (Ibitz, 2020).

Given that approximately half of the respondents are studying in science-related fields, such as natural sciences, engineering, medicine, or related disciplines, this preference aligns with the opportunities available in Taiwan's robust technology sector. Students also express interest in working for American, European, and Japanese companies, which are perceived to offer competitive salaries and career opportunities. However, there is almost no interest in working for companies from other Asian countries, particularly those in developing regions. This preference is rational, as companies from less developed Asian countries are generally expected to offer lower salaries and fewer career advancement opportunities compared to those in developed nations.

Despite Taiwanese students' recognition of Asia as a fast-developing and dynamic region, there is an ironic disconnect when it comes to their personal career aspirations. While they acknowledge the economic vitality of Asia, they still prefer to align their professional futures with developed countries, overlooking the potential opportunities within the broader Asian region. This trend suggests that while Asia's growth is recognized on a macro level, the specific career opportunities in less developed parts of Asia remain undervalued or overlooked by Taiwanese students.

Table 3. Which Company Would You Like to Work for Most

	2013	2018
Taiwan's company	48%	56%
American company	22%	26%
European company	16%	11%
Japanese company	9%	5%
Korean company	0%	2%
Another Asian country's company	4%	1%

*Note: Using t-test, * $p < 0.05$.*

4.2 Perceptions of NSP Countries

The Asian Student Survey (ASS) asked respondents to evaluate the influence of 13 countries on Taiwan using a scale ranging from “1” (good influence) to “5” (bad influence). The results, summarized in Table 4, reveal striking trends, particularly concerning Japan. Among the countries surveyed, Japan consistently stands out as the nation perceived to have the most positive influence among Taiwanese students. From 2013 to 2018, Japan’s perception not only remained highly favorable but also improved significantly. In both the 2013 and 2018 surveys, Japan was rated as the country with the most positive influence, reflecting the deep-rooted and growing sentiment of “Taiwan-Japan friendship” that has been widely observed over the past decade (Dreyer, 2021). This strong positive perception of Japan aligns with broader cultural and historical ties between Taiwan and Japan, as well as Japan’s prominent role in regional economic and political affairs. The increasing favorability suggests that Taiwanese students view Japan not just as an influential neighbor but as a key partner with whom Taiwan shares strong bonds of friendship and mutual respect.

Table 4. Do You Think the Following Countries Have a Good/Bad Influence on Taiwan?

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Singapore	2.355	2.343	0.012
Malaysia	2.536	2.522	0.014
Thailand	2.625	2.582	0.043
Indonesia	2.683	2.664	0.019
Myanmar	2.813	2.807	0.006
Philippines	3.254	2.930	0.324*
Vietnam	3.484	3.225	0.259
Japan	2.076	1.793	0.283*
China	3.268	3.814	-0.546*

*Note: Using t-test, * p < 0.05.*

Regarding NSP countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia, the ASS survey includes Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam for students to assess. The results from the 2013 survey indicate that Taiwanese students believe Singapore is the most likely

to have a positive influence on Taiwan. This favorable perception aligns with Singapore's reputation as an economically prosperous and politically stable state. In contrast, Taiwanese students' perceptions of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia are largely neutral, reflecting a more ambivalent view of these countries' influence on Taiwan. However, attitudes toward Vietnam (3.484) and the Philippines (3.254) are generally negative, suggesting that Taiwanese students perceive these countries as having less favorable impacts on Taiwan.

The ranking of scores among Southeast Asian countries appears to correlate with the level of economic development as perceived by the students. Countries that are more economically prosperous, such as Singapore, tend to be viewed more positively by Taiwanese students, while less economically developed countries, like Vietnam and the Philippines, receive more negative evaluations. This trend suggests that Taiwanese students' perceptions of Southeast Asian countries are influenced not only by cultural and historical factors but also by their economic standing and development within the region.

It's important to consider that subjective survey scores may be influenced by specific news events or broader geopolitical contexts. For example, the *Guang Da Xing* No. 28 shooting incident in May 2013, which led to heightened tensions between Taiwan and the Philippines, significantly affected public sentiment. The widespread anger in Taiwan at the time even led to instances of bullying and shaming of Filipino migrant workers. Given this context, it is not surprising that the survey conducted in September and October of 2013 reflected a negative perception of the Philippines, with many respondents viewing the country as a source of bad influence. Similarly, the survey results for Vietnam were even more negative than those for the Philippines. This could be attributed to differences in political regimes. Vietnam, governed by the Vietnamese Communist Party, operates under a socialist system that is unfamiliar to many young people in Taiwan. These students might draw comparisons with China, another socialist regime, which could further contribute to Vietnam's lower score in the survey.

However, it is expected that the continuous implementation of the NSP will foster a deeper understanding and increase social exchanges between Taiwan and Vietnam. As Taiwanese people, especially the youth, gain more insight into Vietnam's economy, society, and culture, the perception of Vietnam is likely to evolve. Over time, this growing familiarity should lead to a more nuanced and fair evaluation of Vietnam, independent of

the negative connotations associated with China. The NSP aims to build stronger, people-centered connections, which could eventually help reshape the perceptions of Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations among the Taiwanese public.

Among the 18 partner countries of the NSP, the Taiwanese government initially prioritized the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand during the early stages of policy implementation (Yang, 2017). It would be reasonable to expect that Taiwanese university students' perceptions of these key countries would improve following the launch of the NSP. However, the results of the 2018 survey do not provide strong evidence to support this expectation. While the good/bad influence scores for these countries do show changes in the anticipated direction, the variations are neither statistically significant nor substantively meaningful in most cases. The only notable exception is the Philippines, where the score improved from 3.254 in 2013 to 2.930 in 2018, indicating a shift in Taiwanese students' perceptions from negative to a more neutral stance.

Similarly, a perceptual change regarding Vietnam is observed, with the score decreasing from 3.484 in 2013 to 3.225 in 2018. Although this suggests a slight improvement in the perception of Vietnam, the difference is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that, despite the government's efforts under the NSP, the shifts in Taiwanese students' perceptions of these priority countries have been modest and, in some cases, insufficient to demonstrate meaningful or significant change.

The limited, if any, change in Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP target states can be explained by several factors. One plausible reason is that the good/bad influence scores reflect a more holistic evaluation of a target state, encompassing a broad range of factors beyond the scope of immediate policy initiatives. The NSP, with its focus on collaboration at the societal level, may not have been sufficient to raise the awareness necessary for Taiwanese students to significantly adjust their existing perceptions in a short period.

Additionally, the NSP's efforts, such as fostering educational exchanges, cultural interactions, and economic partnerships, while important, may not immediately influence deep-seated perceptions that are shaped by long-standing historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. These ingrained perceptions are often slow to change and require sustained efforts over time, particularly when they involve altering complex views about entire nations or regions.

Moreover, the influence of broader media narratives and limited direct exposure to these countries could mean that Taiwanese students' perceptions are slow to evolve, even in the face of policy-driven initiatives like the NSP. The results suggest that while the NSP may be laying important groundwork for future shifts in perception, significant and measurable changes in how Taiwanese students view their Southeast Asian neighbors may require more time and a broader range of experiences and interactions to take root.

A similar pattern emerges when examining the results for preferred destinations for advanced study. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest in studying in various countries, using a scale ranging from "1" (very interested), "2" (somewhat interested), "3" (not really interested), to "4" (not at all interested). Thus, a lower score indicates a higher level of interest among Taiwanese students in studying in the target country. Table 5 presents the results for six NSP partner countries.

Table 5. Level of Interest in Studying in NSP countries

Country	2013	2018	Diff.
Indonesia	3.342	3.427	0.085
Malaysia	3.032	3.230	0.198*
Philippines	3.345	3.395	0.050
Singapore	2.361	2.460	0.099
Thailand	3.240	3.292	0.052
Vietnam	3.343	3.413	0.069

*Note: Using t-test, * $p < 0.05$.*

Overall, NSP partner countries are not the top choices for Taiwanese students seeking to study abroad. Singapore consistently received the highest score in both the 2013 and 2018 surveys, despite not being a focus country under the DPP administration. Singapore's appeal largely stems from its status as an international hub with a well-developed higher education market (Sanders, 2020). However, beyond Singapore, the scores for other NSP countries suggest a lukewarm attitude among Taiwanese students. Moreover, a comparison of the 2013 and 2018 results reveals a clear trend of declining interest among Taiwanese students.

The fact that the differences between the two surveys for most countries (except Malaysia) are statistically insignificant suggests that the NSP has

had little impact, despite substantial investment in scholarship programs for Taiwanese students. It is also worth noting that the trend of declining interest is not exclusive to NSP partner countries. Compared with the 2013 survey, Taiwanese students in 2018 clearly showed a diminished enthusiasm for studying abroad in any target country except South Korea. This phenomenon may reflect growing anxiety among Taiwanese students; as post-college careers become increasingly uncertain, studying abroad no longer guarantees future success. Consequently, the last few years have witnessed a significant decline in interest in studying abroad.

The limited progress in Taiwanese students' understanding of NSP countries is also evident when examining the dimension of personal connections. Respondents of the ASS were asked about their acquaintances or friends from Asian countries, with responses ranging from "1" (Yes/close) to "3" (No). Survey data are available for both 2013 and 2018. As shown in Table 6, the majority of Taiwanese students do not have friends or acquaintances from NSP countries, although they report stronger personal connections with individuals from Northeast Asian countries and China. Among the NSP countries, Malaysia stands out with the most promising result (2.383), likely due to Taiwan's longstanding policy of overseas Chinese education. Ethnic Chinese students from Malaysia have been the most significant contributors to the foreign student population in Taiwan, making it reasonable that Taiwanese students are more likely to interact with Malaysian classmates in school.

Table 6. Personal Acquaintance with Asian People

Country	2013	2018	Difference
China	2.149	1.913	-0.236*
Indonesia	2.765	2.608	-0.157*
Singapore	2.685	2.740	0.055
Malaysia	2.383	2.177	-0.206*
Philippines	2.820	2.792	-0.021
Vietnam	2.853	2.797	-0.056
Thailand	2.793	2.855	0.062
Myanmar	2.908	2.940	0.062

*Note: Using t-test, * p < 0.05.*

Interestingly, some progress has been observed since the initiation of the NSP. Significant results in Malaysia and Indonesia may indicate that an increasing number of students from these countries have come to Taiwan for advanced study in recent years. However, for other NSP countries, the 2018 results do not indicate meaningful changes in Taiwanese students' personal connections. When combined with the results of other survey questions, it is plausible to conclude that Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP countries show limited signs of positive change. The policy mandate of the NSP to strengthen bilateral ties has not yet achieved satisfactory outcomes from Taiwan's perspective. Taiwanese students have not yet developed a mindset that views NSP neighbors as mutually beneficial partners.

4.3 Perceptions of China

For most Asians, whether viewed positively or negatively, the rise of China has been the most significant development of the last decade. Within the ASS, respondents were asked to assess the causes and effects of China's rise. According to Sonoda (2021), four frameworks are used to understand this phenomenon: political instability, increasing opportunities, global threat, and peaceful rise. The first two frameworks focus on domestic dynamics within China, while the latter two consider the broader external implications of China's ascent on the global stage. These frameworks were presented as statements for respondents to evaluate, with a 4-point scale ranging from "1" (strongly agree) to "4" (strongly disagree). This scale allows respondents to express varying levels of agreement or disagreement with the statements, thereby providing insight into how different aspects of China's rise are perceived across the region.

Sonoda (2018) suggests that the frameworks of "increasing opportunity" and "peaceful rise" are generally better predictors of how people view China's rise. However, the results for Taiwanese students present a somewhat different picture. In the 2013 survey, most Taiwanese students accepted the arguments centered around political instability and global threat, while they largely disagreed with the narratives of economic opportunities and a peaceful rise. Furthermore, Taiwanese students held a pessimistic view that a rising China would eventually surpass the United States to become the regional hegemon, leading to significant changes in Beijing's relations with Taiwan. Notably, even in the early 2010s, Taiwanese students were cautious about the argument of economic opportunities

presented by China. This counterintuitive stance may be partially explained by growing concerns over the PRC's economic encroachment.

The Sunflower Student Movement, which took place just a few months after the 2013 survey, vividly illustrated this perception shift (Chen, 2024). The movement, which halted the legislative process for the cross-strait service trade pact, reflected deep-seated worries among Taiwanese youth about China's growing influence. Given Taiwan's geographical proximity to China and the ongoing military threat, it is understandable that Taiwanese students are less inclined to view China merely as a land of opportunity, and instead, approach its rise with caution and skepticism.

As previously discussed, it is problematic to overlook the connection between the NSP and Taiwanese perceptions of China. While not inherently conflictual, the NSP could potentially encourage Taiwanese students to distance themselves from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) sphere of influence. The results of the 2018 survey largely align with this expectation. At a global level, Taiwanese students agree that China's rise poses a threat to global order, and they clearly reject Beijing's narrative of a peaceful rise. These attitudes mirror the findings from the 2013 survey but have intensified in the 2018 results, showing statistically significant changes. Regarding economic opportunities, the survey reveals a slightly more positive view, indicating that more Taiwanese students believe China could offer opportunities for future development. This shift may be linked to the aggressive expansion of Chinese capital since 2013. However, the difference between the two surveys in this regard is not statistically significant. Lastly, despite China's economic prosperity, most Taiwanese students continue to view China as politically vulnerable.

In addition to the four aspects mentioned above, Table 7 provides further insights that clarify Taiwanese students' perceptions. Regarding the causes of China's economic miracle, Taiwanese students have become increasingly skeptical of the argument that China's achievements are solely due to the efforts of its people. This shift suggests an underlying rejection of the PRC's legitimacy. Moreover, while Taiwanese students largely agree that China will eventually replace the United States as the hegemon in Asia, the 2018 survey reveals a significant shift in a more negative direction. This indicates a move away from a previously more pro-Beijing stance in their subjective perceptions.

Table 7. Evaluation of China's Rise

	2013	2018	Difference
The rise of China has been threatening the global order	2.137	2.021	-0.116*
China will maintain her peaceful relations with Asian countries in spite of her rise	2.739	3.019	0.281*
The rise of China offers us a lot of opportunities	2.268	2.184	-0.078
In spite of rapid economic growth, China is politically unstable	1.845	1.851	0.006
China will supersede US in terms of her influence in Asia	1.883	2.010	0.127*
The rise of China is the result of Chinese people's efforts	2.409	2.561	0.152*
Chinese-speaking people will increase due to the rise of China	1.754	1.630	-0.115*
The rise of China will change relations with our country	1.696	1.682	-0.014

Note: Using *t*-test, * $p < 0.05$.

Given the context of Sino-US rivalry and cross-strait tensions, the causal link between the NSP and a worsening perception of China cannot be confirmed without conducting a multivariate analysis. However, the survey data analyzed above provides no evidence to contradict the statement that the NSP has made Taiwanese people more cautious about China's influence. It is worth noting that Beijing has made considerable efforts in recent years to engage Taiwanese youth, particularly through exchanges in higher education, which have been strongly promoted by Chinese authorities. As indicated in Table 6, most Taiwanese students have personal connections with people from China, and this trend has improved between 2013 and 2018, with statistically significant changes. Nevertheless, Taiwanese students' interest in studying in China has significantly declined during the same period. Taken together, these findings suggest that Taiwanese students have developed a more strategically pragmatic perspective on China compared to their counterparts in other Asian countries.

5. Perception of Taiwan in NSP Countries

After examining Taiwanese perceptions of Asia and the impact of the NSP, the following section investigates the policy's effects within the NSP countries themselves. To evaluate potential policy outcomes, surveys conducted in several NSP countries have been selected, focusing specifically on students' perceptions of Taiwan. The central hypothesis is that if the NSP

has indeed had a positive impact, perceptions of Taiwan in 2018 should be more favorable than those in 2013. The countries with available data include Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Initial effects can be observed through the analysis of three selected survey questions, which are discussed below.

Table 10. Taiwan's Influence to Your Countries

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Philippines	2.507	2.194	-0.313*
Thailand	2.518	2.268	-0.250*
Vietnam	2.567	2.347	-0.220*
Singapore	2.211	2.105	-0.106*
Indonesia	2.456	2.352	-0.104
Malaysia	2.358	2.347	-0.011
Average	2.436	2.269	-0.167

*Note: Using t-test, * $p < 0.05$.*

The first question addresses how students in NSP countries perceive Taiwan's influence on their own countries. Students were asked to rate Taiwan's influence on a scale from "1" (good influence) to "5" (bad influence). According to Table 10, the average responses from six NSP countries in 2013 were generally neutral regarding Taiwan's influence, with Singaporean students holding the most positive views. However, following the implementation of the NSP in 2016, a statistically significant shift in perception occurred by 2018. The overall perception moved from neutral to a more favorable view of Taiwan's influence. Notably, significant improvements were observed in the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, where students' perceptions shifted towards viewing Taiwan's influence more positively. This change suggests that the NSP has had a tangible impact in enhancing Taiwan's image in these countries, indicating a successful outreach in fostering better relations and perceptions among students in the region.

The second question examines the personal connections students in NSP countries have with Taiwanese people. Students were asked whether they have Taiwanese friends or acquaintances, with responses ranging from "1" (yes, at least one is close to me), "2" (yes, but not close to me), to "3"

(no acquaintance). While the majority of students in NSP countries reported not having any friends or acquaintances from Taiwan, there has been a significant improvement in these personal ties since the implementation of the NSP. According to Table 11, the most notable improvements in personal connections have been observed in Vietnam and Thailand. These results indicate that the NSP has successfully contributed to fostering closer people-to-people ties between Taiwan and NSP countries, strengthening the social and cultural connections that are essential for deeper bilateral relationships.

Table 11. Personal Acquaintance with Taiwanese People

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Vietnam	2.847	2.545	-0.302*
Thailand	2.826	2.702	-0.124*
Singapore	2.394	2.283	-0.111
Malaysia	2.88	2.796	-0.084*
Philippines	2.666	2.61	-0.056
Indonesia	2.867	2.856	-0.011
Average	2.747	2.632	-0.115

*Note: Using t-test, * $p < 0.05$.*

The final question may be the most relevant to university students, as it directly addresses their interest in studying in Taiwan. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest on a scale from “1” (very interested) to “4” (not at all interested). Since the implementation of the NSP, the number of foreign students from NSP countries studying in Taiwan has increased significantly. Taiwanese universities have invested considerable effort in attracting students from these countries through increased publicity, marketing, and scholarships. It was anticipated that these efforts would positively influence students’ decisions to consider Taiwan as a desirable educational destination. The results shown in Table 12 align precisely with these expectations. Although, on average, university students in NSP countries still tend to prefer studying in other countries such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.S., their level of interest in Taiwan has significantly increased. This improvement is observable across almost all the countries listed in Table 12, with particularly notable increases in Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore.

The educational dimension of the NSP appears to have produced some of the most tangible and observable effects among the policy’s initiatives. Over the five years following the NSP’s implementation, there has been a marked rise in the number of students from NSP partner countries choosing to study in Taiwan (Tsay, 2015). For example, during the 2019 academic year, there were 128,157 overseas students studying in Taiwan, with 57,143 of them coming from NSP partner countries, accounting for 56% of the total number of overseas students. These students represent significant potential for future diplomatic and economic bridges, serving as cultural ambassadors and “student diplomats” who will contribute to forging stronger partnerships between Taiwan and their home countries.

Table 12. Level of Interest in Studying in Taiwan

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Thailand	3.446	2.702	-0.744*
Vietnam	3.164	2.545	-0.619*
Singapore	2.773	2.293	-0.480*
Philippines	2.852	2.61	-0.242*
Indonesia	2.963	2.856	-0.107*
Malaysia	2.663	2.796	0.133
Average	2.977	2.634	-0.343

*Note: Using t-test, * p < 0.05.*

Based on the above analysis, it appears that the policy effects of the NSP have been more significant in shaping NSP students’ perceptions of Taiwan than in altering Taiwan’s perception of NSP countries. Evidence suggests that views of Taiwan in some NSP countries have shifted positively, with students expressing a growing interest in studying in Taiwan. While there is still room for further improvement, the trend toward more favorable attitudes indicates that the people-centered approach of the NSP has achieved notable success in these areas. Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen has emphasized the importance of strengthening “values-based diplomacy” with “like-minded” international partners as a strategy to secure Taiwan’s niche in the global community. The NSP, as her flagship foreign policy initiative, plays a crucial role in promoting these values-based diplomatic efforts in Asia and with other aligned partners. The progress observed in student perceptions is a

testament to the effectiveness of this approach, underscoring the potential for further strengthening ties through continued engagement and collaboration.

6. Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented in this study, several key policy implications can be drawn regarding the impact of the NSP on both Taiwanese students and students from NSP countries. First, Taiwanese students' perceptions of Asia seem to be influenced by a combination of physical proximity, familiarity, and strategic concerns shaped by the region's geopolitical dynamics. The findings suggest that more resources, both public and private, should be directed towards enhancing Taiwanese society's understanding of NSP countries. Familiarity breeds connection, and it is only through increased knowledge and engagement that stronger ties can be fostered between Taiwan and the broader Asian region.

Second, despite Taiwan's vibrant, diverse, and international character, Taiwanese students still tend to view Asia as a dynamic yet heterogeneous region. Although Asia is perceived positively, there is a notable inward-looking tendency among Taiwanese students, with many showing a stronger preference for studying or living in Western developed countries or in Asian nations like Japan, rather than in neighboring NSP countries. While there has been a modest increase in interest in these countries since the implementation of the NSP, the change is not significant. This suggests a need for further efforts to connect Taiwanese people with those in the NSP region, thereby enhancing their interest and understanding of these neighboring countries.

Third, the NSP appears to have had a more pronounced impact on students from NSP countries than on Taiwanese students. Evidence suggests that students from some NSP countries have developed a more positive view of Taiwan following the NSP's implementation, particularly in the realm of education. This success reflects the effectiveness of the NSP's people-centered approach abroad and highlights the importance of continuing such efforts.

Fourth, while not fully captured by the survey data, the NSP holds strategic importance beyond its immediate people-centered goals. The policy plays a critical role in helping Taiwan and other countries diversify their economic dependencies away from China. Additionally, Taiwan can contribute to strengthening the role of NSP countries in the global

manufacturing network, particularly as China becomes a less favorable location for investment.

In conclusion, the NSP's focus on promoting regional identity and shared human values is crucial for Taiwan's integration into the broader regional community. Rather than merely exporting a "Taiwan model," the NSP should continue to emphasize values-based diplomacy with like-minded international partners. This approach aligns with President Tsai Ing-wen's vision of securing Taiwan's niche in the global community through strengthened relationships based on shared values. The case of Taiwan underscores the diversity of Asian identities and the significance of contextual factors, such as the NSP, in shaping identity formation and regional collaboration. Through ongoing efforts under the NSP, Taiwan can continue to build stronger, more meaningful connections with its neighbors in Asia, fostering a sense of shared identity and mutual prosperity.

Notes

- ¹ "This paper utilizes data from the second and third waves of the "Asian Student Survey (ASS)" dataset, collected by Prof. Shigeto Sonoda at the University of Tokyo, Japan. This comprehensive dataset includes university students from 11 countries, with a sample size of approximately 200 students per university. As to the concrete procedure of the research, sample size in each country as well as funding agencies for the research, see Sonoda (2021: 268-269)."

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Enabling Student-led Activism in Taiwan-Southeast Asia Connectivity

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Abstract

The student-led activism in Taiwan enjoys a long history of more than 100 years. This article focuses on examining the development of the student activism in Taiwan and explore its international connections. This article utilizes data from in-depth interviews with activists and NGO leaders of the student activism in Taiwan and in the region. Some analysis on recent movements is based on the interviews and participatory observation by the authors, including the participation in the latest student-led activism known as the Sunflower Movement (*taiyang hua yundong*) 2.0, or the Blue Bird Action (*qingniao xingdong*), happened in Taipei in May 2024. Hence, this article is divided into five parts. The first part serves as the introduction. The second part offers a brief history of student activism in Taiwan inclusive of its pre-modern development and modern progress. The third part summarizes the characteristics of the abovementioned student-led activism, including how technology matters in the new wave of student activism in Taiwan. Then the fourth part deals with its international connections, with a special focus on the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and the Blue Bird Action of 2024. The final part concludes with research findings of new

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waves of student activism featured with Taiwan's influence with three key words, namely, pluralistic practice, democratic solidarity and technological innovation.

Keywords: *Student-led activism, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Democracy, Blue Bird Action, New Southbound Policy*

1. Introduction

Taiwan is an Indo-pacific democracy where its civil society has been mature and progressive (Hsiao and Yang, 2021; Dunch and Esarey, 2020; Hsiao, 2018). Despite Taiwan has successfully navigated its democratizing transformation featured by three political party changes in its presidencies and the peaceful transfers of power in the past 20 years (Dreyer and deLisle, 2021), and is known as the beacon of democracy across the world, Taiwan's democratic development has not been always smooth and calm. The journey of Taiwan's political development is full of struggles, resistance driven by civil society movements in pursuit of democracy and social justice (Hsiao, 2018). Among them, the student-led activism that originated on campus, then triggering political reforms is extremely distinctive and politically influential (Cole, 2015; Ho, 2019).

The student-led activism in Taiwan enjoys a long history of more than 100 years (Yu, 2005; Ho, 2019). The pre-modern student-led movement in the Japanese colonial rule era was about resisting unfair rule of Japanese authority and promoting Taiwanese citizenship and nationalist sentiments, while the modern student-led movement since the 1970s was more closely related to safeguard Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic values. The student-led movement in Taiwan continues to navigate the journey of democracy and plays a crucial role. In terms of its modern practice after the 1970s, we contend that the early student movement was to "promote democracy" (democratic facilitation), while the later student-led movement since the 1990s, including the recent Sunflower Movement 1.0 and 2.0 is to "consolidate democracy" (democratic consolidation). In addition, we further argue in this article that the new wave of student movements in Taiwan not only enlightens the political contention domestically, but also facilitates an external appeal across the national boundary, promoting democratic solidarity between Taiwan and Southeast Asia countries (ACFA, 2023). Taiwan's new waves of student activism, we believe, may unpack some

puzzles unexplored in the existing literatures on student activism in Asia (Weiss and Aspinall, 2012).

Regarding the former, the mechanism through which the student activism promotes democracy is to gather young people and social forces to protest peacefully and enlighten public awareness to democratic reform so that policymakers have to face public opinion and respond to social demands with necessary reforms. In contrast, the latter attaches more importance to sovereignty and democratic values, and makes good use of digital technology to connect with social media and among activists. Students not only engage in peaceful resistance, but also have been more mature politically and self-restrained for not provoking violence or incident. The student activism in Taiwan not only affects domestic political development, but also influences the world. Both share similar features in that the students are easily mobilized; students are actively involved in politics and public affairs, and students are willing to connect with domestic civil society and the international community.

In this regard, this article focuses on examining the development of the student activism in Taiwan and explore its international connections. This article utilizes data from in-depth interviews with activists and NGO leaders of the student activism in Taiwan and in the region. Some analysis on recent movements is based on the interviews and participatory observation by the authors, including the participation and direct observation in the latest student-led activism known as Sunflower Movement (*taiyang hua yundong*) 2.0, or the Blue Bird Action (*qingniao xingdong*), just happened in Taipei in May. Hence, this article is divided into five parts. The first part serves as the introduction. The second part offers a brief history of student activism in Taiwan inclusive of its pre-modern development and modern progress. The third part summarizes the characteristics of the abovementioned student-led activism, including how technology matters in the new wave of student activism in Taiwan. Then the fourth part deals with its international connections, with a special focus on the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and the Blue Bird Action of 2024. The final part concludes with research findings of new waves of student activism featured with Taiwan's influence with three key words, namely, pluralistic practice, democratic solidarity and technological innovation.

We also argue that the student activism in Taiwan has at least three characteristics: it is actionable, it is networked, and it is related to the

broader political and economic reforms or defending the national integrity of Taiwan. With Taiwan's close exchanges and cooperation with neighboring countries and civil societies, the student activism originated in Taiwan has a wide regional implication.

2. A Century Journey of Student Movements in Taiwan

2.1 *Premodern Development*

The early student activism in Taiwan demonstrated nationalist sentiments and the appeals for equality and social justice among the young students during the Japanese colonial rule. The earliest student-involved movement in Taiwan can be traced back to the active involvement in the landlord-gentry class-led Taiwan Assembly Petition Movement and the reform activities initiated by Taiwan Culture Association (*taiwan wenhua xiehui*) during the Japanese colonial rule era in the 1920s. The student activism was impressive in arousing public consciousness but eventually failed to achieve any essential social and political reforms then.

Critically speaking, student activism in Taiwan have not always been so successful, nor is it a linear historical development process. Due to the change of political power, Taiwan's student activism has its own ruptures. During the post-war era, the most significant earlier student activism and protest was the Anti-Japanese Diaoyu Island Patriotic Protection Movement. However, by the 1960s, the college students who were under surveillance and repression began to develop conscious awareness for reform, and in the 1970s they were self-transformed into "angry youth" (*fennu qingnian*). Meanwhile, the student activists planned to turn the expectations of society and the appeals for reform into actions. That particular politicized student protest movement was later redirected by the authoritarian KMT regime into a new wave of depoliticized and conservative-turned Serve the Society Movement in the early 1970s. Entering the mid-1970s and early 1980s, many student activists were enlightened by the newly intellectuals and political activists-led social and political magazines aiming to push for political liberalization and democratization. Some of them even joined in the editorial teams of selected activist magazines.

Right in the 1990s, the number of universities in Taiwan began to increase, and more and more college students appeared, bringing their own ideas regarding civil society, democratic politics, and international

trends to the public. Taiwan's student activism since then was linked to the political activism in addition to their involvement in the selected social reform movements on the environment, women equity, labor justice, and farmer rights. It also sought to change the authoritarian rule. That is, the efforts made by student activism have facilitated Taiwan's democracy but not yet reached the stage of directly promoting democracy. Youngsters have mobilized social movements to arouse public awareness being open-minded to various social and political issues. This indeed help shape Taiwan's democracy under the KMT authoritarian rule.

2.2 Modern Progress

After decades of evolution, student activism has gradually developed new features. After the 1990s, another wave of student-led movements brought out, including the Wild Lilly Movement (1990), New Wild Lilly Movement (2004), and Wild Strawberry Movement (2008), which prioritize Taiwan's sovereignty and the democratic regime. These efforts were culminated in the Sunflower Movement (2014), which was more political in nature by linking to confront against the China Threats and to safeguard Taiwan's sovereignty and national integrity. The Sunflower Movement can even be seen as the most important student movement that consolidates Taiwan's democracy. After the Sunflower Movement, student activism in Taiwan began to shine, leading various reform appeals in specific social reforms movements such as sanatorium preservation, saving the farm land, anti-media monopoly, soldier's human rights and assisting migrant workers and cross-border marriage migrants. A diverse manifestations of student activism was detected again.

In January 2024, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the first-ever third presidential re-election in Taiwan's history. However, the KMT defeated DPP in Legislative election and became the largest party in Legislative Yuan (LY). Combined the seats of KMT with the third force (Taiwan People's Party, TPP), the DPP was unable to control the majority seats of the LY so that Taiwan's political landscape became divided. In May, the KMT partnered with the TPP to promote the parliamentary reform bill with the controversial measures. The procedures were flawed, which caused social doubts and led to the resurgence of the student-led movement around the LY. Very soon, 100,000 people gathered near the LY and launched the peaceful protest, known as the "Sunflower Movement 2.0" or "Blue Bird

Action.” Given the controversial measures were still passed, this new wave of modern student activism in terms of Sunflower Movement 1.0 and 2.0 is aimed at consolidating democracy.

3. The Characteristics

Taiwan’s student activism navigating the past 100 years, we argue, has developed the following five features, namely, (1) a time-honored tradition, (2) going beyond campus, (3) utilizing new technology for activism, (4) the legacy to the real politics and in-system reforms, and, more recently, (5) regional influence. The previous four characteristics are the driving forces for enabling political and social changes as well as propelling reforms within Taiwan, while the fifth one enables the unique political and civil society connectivity between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries.

3.1 A Time-Honoured Tradition

Taiwan’s student activism enjoys the longest history among all Asian countries, dating from the 1922 student movement at the Taipei Normal College to the present, which spans more than 100 years. Over the past century, Taiwan’s student activism has evolved from time to time, and it has continued to strengthen the influence and developed from facilitating Taiwan’s democracy to consolidating Taiwan’s democracy.

3.2 Developing Beyond Campus

The second feature is the evolving demand for forward-looking reforms. The student activism in Taiwan has developed from campus protests in the past into a reform drive that went beyond campus and led society on major reform issues, while concretely develops forward-looking democratic and political development. Beginning in the 1990s, the number of universities in Taiwan began to increase, and more and more college students actively showed their appeals for reforming Taiwan’s civil society and democratic politics, while addressed their concerns about the international issues that influenced Taiwan.

In March 1990, the largest ever student activism emerged - the Taipei Student Movement (also known as the Wild Lily Movement) - this movement had up to 6,000 college students from all over Taiwan gathered at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (renamed as the freedom square in

the 2000s). A sit-in in the square and a hunger strike were carried out to put forward four major demands: “dissolve the National Assembly”, “abolish the provisional provisions”, “convene a state conference”, and “timetable for political and economic reform”, demanding that the government carry out political reforms. The then president, Lee Teng-hui, took a positive view of the demands of the student activism and promised to recruit a founding committee and promote political reform. Then, in 1991, President Lee abolished the “Temporary Provisions on Mobilization for Rebellion Period”. This “March Student Movement” marked the significant contribution of the Taiwanese student activism in the 1980s and 1990s in accelerating Taiwan’s democratization, while the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and Operation Green Bird of 2024 committed to consolidate Taiwan’s Democracy.

3.3 Utilizing Technology for Activism

The student activism launched from the campus initially used the Internet (in particular, the Telnet Bulletin Board System, BBS) to connect and call on thousands of youngsters, including hundreds of students for protests. At that time, unlike today, there were not various social media such as the Facebook or Twitter (at present, X) that serve for facilitating convenient public communication. Students then could only use the popular BBS (particularly, PTT platform, established in 1995 in National Taiwan University) on campus to report in real time the police control measures and restrictions on dissenters in various localities.

At the same time, through this internet platforms, the student activists and like-minded partners connected each other and organized a flashmob protest in front of the Executive Yuan on November 6, 2008. The “1106 Action Declaration” was also posted and declared on the PTT and spread out to other internet platforms. Then, from November 6, 2008 to January 2009, increasing numbers of students and activists gathered to protest against administrative abuses of power through sit-ins and demonstrations initially in front of the Executive Yuan, then to CKS Memorial Hall, across Taiwan and on campuses.

The Wild Lilly Movement sought to demand actual democratic and constitutional transformation before the first ruling party change in 2000, the technology and the internet became important vehicle for communicating and connecting students across universities and activists in and outside Taipei to spontaneously join the movements. Moreover, the internet

facilitated the enthusiasm of the movement to be focused, consolidated and enabled the spontaneous actions everywhere not to be dispersed. The subsequent impact of this activism included the establishment of relevant clubs and organizations in various schools, and the network of connections between students participating in the student activism facilitated by technological tools. Then it also brought the student activism out of the campus and into society.

A few years later, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement in 2014 also attracted technological talents to participate and help assemble on the platform by the "G0V", a grassroots NGO operated by technological talents. Audrey Tang, for example, helped the student activists set up online cameras to live broadcast the protests. Later, Audrey Tang also assisted in building up the transparency of government information, and later become important leader for advocating openness and transparency of Taiwan's public sectors.

Technology seems more important in the Blue Bird Action of 2024, particularly the importance of digital connection has been strategized and materialized in communication and mobilization. According to the survey, the average age of rally participants is about 35 years old, while that of the Sunflower Movement was 28 years old. Moreover, the rapid advancement of technology has also caused rapid changes in the social media platforms mobilized. The survey also unveiled that the proportion of people who obtained event information this time came from Facebook (51%), online news (41%), traditional media (32%), and PTT (1%). During the Sunflower Movement of 2014, there has been a significant decline, especially the PTT which was 53.7% 10 years ago. The new social media and digital platforms also have different styles. In comparison, Instagram and Threads have emerged, especially Threads' share of 56%, has been surpassing Facebook (Mnews, 2024).

Picture 1. Activists Gathering Near the LY in the Afternoon



Photo Credit: The authors.

Picture 2. Signs and Reminders Are Everywhere to Warn the Activists Not to Break into Legislative Yuan and Not to Be Out of Control



Photo credit: The authors

Picture 3. Young student (17 Years-old Senior High Student) Stepping on Stage and Deliver Speech to the Young Activists (Mostly Undergraduate Students)



Photo credit: The authors.

Overall, to utilize digital technology *per se* is of strategic importance in Taiwan's practice of student activism for the following six reasons.¹

1. *Rapid dissemination and mobilization - social media and instant messaging tools:* Technology allows the quick spread of information. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and instant messaging tools such as LINE and WhatsApp allow activists to quickly mobilize large numbers of supporters. Moreover, these platforms can update movement progress, issue rally notices, and deliver emergency messages in real time, greatly improving mobilization efficiency and participation.
2. *Improve transparency and credibility - live broadcast and video:* Through live broadcast and video sharing, various activities and situations of the movement can be presented to the public in real time, increasing the transparency of the movement and reducing

misunderstandings and misinformation. Participants can utilize the live broadcast function to show live situations and enhance the credibility and influence of the movement.

3. *Resource and information sharing - cloud collaboration tools*: Using e-cloud collaboration tools such as Google Docs and Dropbox, activists and participants can easily share and collaborate on files, resources and information, achieving efficient organizational management and information transfer.
4. *Expand social influence - Digital activism*: Through the internet platforms, movements can quickly expand social influence and attract the attention of domestic and foreign media and the international community. These platforms can help the movement gain more support and create greater public pressure.
5. *Create online communities - The formation of online communities*: Technology makes it easier for like-minded activists to find each other and form online communities with common goals. These communities not only provide support during the movement, but also continue to drive discussion and action on related issues after the movement is over.
6. *Information warfare and public opinion manipulation - dealing with false information*: Although technology has brought convenience, it also comes with the challenges of false information and public opinion manipulation. Activist leaders need to use technological means to verify information, clarify rumours, and maintain the positive image of the movement and the authenticity of the information. The advancement of science and technology has not only changed the way the student activism is organized, but also greatly expanded its scope of influence and improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the movement. At the same time, it also provides new tools and platforms for movement participants to achieve their goals and cope with challenges more effectively.

3.4 The Profound Legacy to the Real Politics and In-system Reforms

Fourth, the legacy of the student activism keeps influential, particularly as it continues to ferment within the political system. After the movements, some student activists and leaders chose to enter into the real politics as the promoters of the in-system reforms or the so-called “new politics”. For example, in the earliest student activism during the Japanese colonial-rule

era, students who were dropped out of school went to study abroad and later became the thought leaders enlightening Taiwan's nationalist movements. Some of them also became leaders of political reforms.

Since the 1990s, the main activists of the Wild Lily Movement became key political leaders of the DPP, such as the convener of the decision-making taskforce of the Wild Lily Movement, Wen-can Zheng and other non-KMT figures, whereas the Wild Strawberry Movement and Sunflower Movement facilitated the formation of a third force apart from KMT and DPP, that is, the New Power Party (NPP) and brought new politics into Taiwan's democratic consolidation era.

More recently, many student activist leaders became cadres of Taiwan's main political parties, and then became elected officials as legislators of Taiwan's LY or City councilors of municipalities, actively continuing the momentum of political reform and social engineering. Next generation of student activists including Peiyi Wu (elected as Taipei City Councilor between 2018-2024, and legislator between 2024-2028), Feifan Lin (served as deputy secretary-general of DPP between 2019-2023 and currently Deputy Secretary General of National Security Council since 2024), Boya Miao (elected as Taipei City Councilor between 2018-2026), and etc.

In addition, former student activists have navigated their political journey for decades and became important political leaders of the government, inclusive of Chia-lung Lin (Foreign Minister since 2024; served as Secretary-General of the Taiwan's President Office between 2023-2024; Minister of Transportation and Communications between 2019-2021; elected as Taichung City Mayor between 2014-2018 and legislator between 2012-2014), Wen-can Zheng (served as Vice Premier of the Executive Yuan between 2023-2024; elected as Taoyuan City Mayor between 2014-2022). In particular, the technological talent Audrey Tang who assisted the student activists of the Sunflower Movement has become the minister without portfolio in charge of technology (known as Taiwan's digital minister) of Tsai-Ing-wen administration and then serve as the inaugural minister of the newly established Ministry of Digital Affairs (MoDA).

These in-system political leaders and decision makers explained the profound impact of the legacy of the student activism on Taiwan's democratization, which not only spread liberal thoughts nourished on campus to civil society, but also cultivated many democratic leaders and continued to lead the deepening of Taiwan's democracy.

In addition to these leaders, there are also some student activist leaders who have made different choices, and some have even become the targets of resistance and criticism by another student-led movement. For example, Huang Guo-chang, originally a law professor, who led the Sunflower Movement of 2014, later became a founding member of the NPP and even its chairman (2015-2019). Huang was elected as the NPP-affiliated legislator (2016-2020), then he left the NPP and joined the TPP (2023) and became its legislator-at-large (since 2024). However, as Huang and the TPP legislators cooperated with the KMT caucus to promote the controversial measures for parliamentary reform, which was considered by student activists to have betrayed the value of the Sunflower Movement. Therefore, much criticism during the Operation Green Bird was directed at Huang. In other words, we have to admit that not all student activism leaders can adhere to their original values and commitment to deepen and consolidate democracy within the political system in Taiwan.

3.5 Regional Influences

After the Sunflower Movement of 2014, the impact of Taiwan's student activism began to expand in the region. Through the facilitation of digital technology and online platforms, the resilience of Taiwan's student activism could be shared to neighbouring countries and became an important reference for young activists to engage. The democratic solidarity between Taiwan and Southeast Asia is thus shaping.

4. Unpacking Regional Connectivity

4.1 Differences of Student Activism in Taiwan and Southeast Asia

We believe such the regional influence, as a rather rarely explored issue among student activism literature, deserves in-depth discussion (Weiss and Aspinall, 2012; ACFA, 2023). Since Taiwan does not have formal diplomatic ties with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, political cooperation, even interaction, is indeed sensitive and difficult to advance under the pressure and intervention of People's Republic of China (PRC).

In the past thirty years, with the gradual opening up of society and the progress of technology and internet, student activism has gradually sprouted and developed in many Southeast Asian countries. There are four

fundamental differences, however, between student activism in Taiwan and those in Southeast Asia.

First, the movement in Taiwan is not originated from the traditional class confrontation. For example, an important leader who has been involved in the student activism in Thailand emphasized that the Thai student activism is mainly class-based confrontation,² while the student activism in Taiwan is more open and directly concerned about national policies and democracy. Moreover, the Wild Strawberry Movement (2008) and the Sunflower Movement (2014) were more political in nature and linked to confront against China Threats and to safeguard Taiwan's sovereignty and national security.

Second, there are differences in democratic systems. Taiwan's democratic transformation since the 1990s has become more mature. The liberal democratic characteristics of a robust civil society are friendlier to the social dynamics of political reform in general and student activism in particular. Compared with the political systems of Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Indonesia, it is not easy. In addition to non-democratic regimes, some countries are also swinging between military coups and democratic elections, which is even more challenging. Some Southeast Asian countries have different values and belief on democracy and liberal society due to structural factors such as religion or political ideology so that they are not conducive to the development of student activism.³

Third, there are also structural differences in political systems and political opportunities between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries. Taiwan's student activist leaders have more opportunities to enter into the political system serving as elected officials or promoted as senior officials. These former student activists and then political leaders commit to continue their original political appeals and push forward follow-up political reforms. Comparatively, there are fewer student activists in Southeast Asia who have entered into the political system of respective countries. Unlike the examples of Taiwan, some former student activists serving in the governments are early career officials or junior elected officials, instead of being key decision-makers.

Finally, the intensity of support for democracy and support for activism are different. Taiwan's support for Southeast Asian and neighbouring student movements is stronger and wilder than the mutual support of Southeast Asian countries. When activists in Southeast Asian countries seek support

for the solidarity, go visiting ASEAN countries to seek endorsement apparently is not their priority. In recent years, increasing number of activist leaders and organizations decided to visit Taiwan to seek partnership and supports, and even overseas activist institution, such as Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy has been established in Taiwan. In this regard, Taiwan's influence is more proactive and trustworthy than other ASEAN allies.⁴

Despite their differences, Taiwan's democracy has given many valuable inspirations to Southeast Asian countries. For example, Taiwan's open media environment, clean and transparent elections and campaigns, efficient vote counting, and the demeanour of politicians in defeat have greatly influenced the democratization of Asian neighbours. It's a good example. Taiwan has been transitioning to a mature democracy for more than 30 years. A vibrant civil society friendly to activism exists as the foundation to make Taiwan a beacon of democracy in Asia. This article argues that there are three types of influence from Taiwan on Southeast Asian student activism as to enlighten new wave of student activism.

4.2 How Taiwan Experience Matters to Student Activism in Southeast Asia

Utilizing Taiwan's Sunflower Movement of 2014 as a reference, Taiwan had a specific impact on the student movements in Southeast Asia, including the following nine features, including:

1. *Mutual communication and learning*: First, mutual communication and learning among activists and groups in Taiwan and Southeast Asia countries. Specifically, the new generation student activism in Taiwan, such as the Wild Strawberry Movement (2008) and the Sunflower Movement (2014) being more political in nature, highlight concerns related to state-survival and national integrity, becoming an exemplar for student activism in Southeast Asian countries. For example, in Indonesia, there are some protests and movements demanding the government to reduce its dependence on China's economy and investment. An example is the student activism in 2020 in which hundreds of students in Sulawesi, Indonesia, led to protest against the impact of Chinese migrant workers on Indonesian labours. Student activists conducted a blockade in Haluoleo airport in Southeast Sulawesi rejecting the 500 in-coming Chinese foreign workers.

In 2022, moreover, student activists launched a protest against the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway. They demanded the public accountability from Indonesian and Chinese government towards inhabitants that have been harmed (due to house damages and psychological damages) by the project. Finally, the movement in July 2023 by Coalition of Anti-National Project Strategy (Koalisi Anti Proyek Strategi Nasional) aims to protest against human rights violations in front of the Embassy of PRC in Jakarta over the human rights violations during the construction of Rempang Green Eco City project. Although these movements are relatively scattered, mostly local movements initiated by university students, with no direct evidence showing that Taiwan lesson matters, the young activists involved did refer to the successful international experiences of student activism, of course, including Taiwan's practice.⁵

Unlike the case of Indonesia, Taiwan's student activism is relatively limited in its influence on the student-led protests and movements in other Southeast Asian countries. The most apparent and direct impact of Taiwan's student activism to Southeast Asian democracy is still happening in Taiwan's localities. It is worth noting that in August 2020, the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy promoted a solidarity event in front of the Thai representative office in Taipei to support the large-scale student activism in Thailand. In addition to Thailand, in March 2021, the activist group University Youth Prayer Committee, composed of Myanmar communities and student organizations in Taiwan, severely condemned the Myanmar military junta for the political coup and organized a protest in Taipei's Freedom Square. Since it is difficult and unsafe to initiate activism and mobilize protests in Myanmar, Taiwan is an ideal site for endorsing support to distant student activism in Southeast Asian localities.

2. *Curating solidarity and support*: The second influence is to curate solidarity and show firm support to like-minded activist partners. Diversified solidarity networks, such as the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) that have been nourishing and circulating on the Internet since April 2020. The MTA is a cross-border connection and hyper network initiated by young people to connect countries or places striving for democracy such as Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong and later Myanmar,

which are all featured with different types of milk tea. The purpose of MTA is to strengthen transnational democratic community through advocacy and solidarity with each other. It is worth noting that after the passage of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, many Hong Kong pro-democracy activists moved to Taiwan. Together with pro-democracy activists in Taiwan, they supported democracy in various countries, especially Thailand, both online and in action. For example, in the spring of 2020, the largest anti-government protest movement broke out in Bangkok, Thailand. Many young people (including Hong Kong youth) actively connected on the Internet to advocate democratic solidarity. The cross-border student activism online has been very creative including the efforts of shaping the so-called “Asian Milk Tea Alliance”. In addition to online connections, flags representing Hong Kong and slogans supporting Taiwan’s independence can also be seen at demonstrations in Bangkok. In addition to Thai students, some Taiwanese youths living in Thailand, or student activists traveling from Taiwan to Bangkok to endorse the protest. These diverse solidarity networks reach far and wide through the Internet and continue to grow.

3. *Networking with like-minded partners*: The most viable connection between Taiwan’s student activism and Southeast Asian activists is jointly organizing protests and network with each other. As mentioned earlier, the March 2021 protest launched by University Youth Prayer Committee was a joint effort made by Taiwan’s Myanmar community, student activists and NGO volunteers, successfully gathering at Taipei’s Freedom Square condemning the military junta that launch the political coup.

Apart from Myanmar’s case, the August 2020 solidarity rally organized by the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy outside of the Thai representative office in Taiwan was another example. The activist group involved in this rally included Thai student activists, Thai nationals and Thai descent in Taiwan in partnership with members of Taiwan’s Green Party, human rights NGOs, and other like-minder Taiwanese activists.

4. *Stimulate democratic awareness and action*: The success of the Sunflower Movement inspired students in Southeast Asian countries,

awakened their awareness of democracy and civil rights, and promoted them to participate more actively in social and political activities. An important case in Thailand, for example, young people influenced by the Sunflower Movement and launched many large-scale protests, demanding that the government reform the education system and political system.

5. *References to tactics and strategies*: The organizational methods and strategies of the Sunflower Movement have become a reference model for student activists in Southeast Asia, including how to use social media to mobilize youngsters, how to organize peaceful protests, and how to respond to government pressure. A vivid case of Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and the student activism in Thailand showed that students drew on the organizational strategies from the Sunflower Movement, mobilized a large number of supporters through social media, and maintained the persistence and peace of the movement.
6. *Strengthen international linkage*: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement promoted the Southeast Asian student movement to pay more attention to international linkage and cooperation. Through exchanges with student movements in other countries, they shared experiences and resources and formed a cross-border movement alliance. For example, the leaders of the Sunflower Movement communicated with student activist leaders in Hong Kong, Thailand and other Southeast Asian Countries, which promoted the connections and cooperation between transnational movements and increased the international influence and support of the movement.
7. *Media and publicity strategy*: The Sunflower Movement's successful experience in media and publicity provided valuable reference for the Southeast Asian student movement. How to use the media to spread movement ideas and expand influence has become an important learning content. For example, in the student-led movements in Malaysia and Indonesia, media and publicity strategies have been strengthened, and movement leaders have learned how to use traditional media and social media more effectively to spread information and mobilize the masses.

8. *Raising legal and human rights awareness:* The Sunflower Movement emphasized the protection of law and human rights, which had a profound impact on the Southeast Asian student movement. Students focused more on protesting within the legal framework and called on the international community to pay attention to human rights issues. For example, in the student-led movements in the Philippines and Vietnam, participants began to resort more to legal means to protect their rights and interests, and actively sought support from international human rights organizations.

9. *Continuous supports from Activist groups from Southeast Asian countries:* The like-minded activist groups in the region responded to the student movement in Taiwan through video and on-site communication, and maintained connections with relevant partners. Take Southeast Asian Youth Activist groups’ participation in the Operation Green Bird of 2024 for example, there were totally 25 activist representatives from 10 organizations of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even Hong Kong to take part in Operation Green Bird of 2024 to observe on site and to show commitment to transnational democratic solidarity between Taiwan and their respective countries/localities (See Table 1).

Table 1: Foreign Youth Activist Organizations and Representatives Participating in Blue Bird Action of 2024

Country/ City	Organizations	Number of Participants
Thailand	Free Youth	2
Thailand	United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, UFTD	2
Hong Kong	Hong Kong Federation of Students, HKFS	4
Hong Kong	Scholarism	3
Malaysia	Malaysia Students Movement Alliance, MISMA	2
Malaysia	Bersih Youth	3
Indonesia	Indonesia Student Alliance, ISA	2
Indonesia	Youth Social Movement, YSM	2
Philippines	National Union of Students of the Philippines, NUSP	3
Philippines	Anakbayan	2

Source: The authors, based on data gathered from fieldwork and participatory observation in Blue Bird Action of 2024, Taipei, May 17 and 23, 2024.

5. Conclusion

To wrap up, this article ends with two arguments as the research findings. First, Taiwan's pre-modern student-led movement in the Japanese colonial rule era was about resisting unfair rule of Japanese authority and promoting Taiwanese citizenship and nationalist sentiments, while the modern student-led movement of Taiwan since the 1970s was more closely related to safeguard Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic values.

Second, with regard to the rationale of student activism in Taiwan, it has three features in essence.

1. *High degree of autonomy and spontaneity*: The student-led movement in Taiwan has demonstrated a high degree of autonomy and spontaneity. Students often do not rely on traditional organizations or leaders, but organize and mobilize spontaneously through social media and online platforms. For example, in the 2014 Sunflower Movement, students spontaneously occupied the Legislative Yuan to protest against the opaque review process of the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement. During the Operation Green Bird of 2024, students also spontaneously gathered and organized peaceful protests. At the same time, young activists were very disciplined in reminding themselves and exercising restraint to avoid causing violent conflicts and breaking into the LY.
2. *Emphasize citizen participation and democratic values*: Student-led movements emphasize citizen participation and democratic values. These movements not only focus on specific issues, but also on overall democracy and rule of law issues. The students hope that through action, more people will pay attention to civil rights and democratic systems, and actively participate in public affairs. This emphasis on citizen awareness was fully reflected in Operation Green Bird of 2024. Young students spontaneously expressed their strong dissatisfaction with the black-box operation of the LY, demonstrating their persistence in democratic values.
3. *Make good use of digital media and innovative technologies*: New wave of student-led movements make extensive use of digital media and innovative technologies to spread messages, organize activities,

and expand influence. Through social media platforms, students can quickly gather supporters and provide real-time updates on the progress and needs of the movement, thus creating strong public pressure. This has been reflected in many movements. For example, during the Sunflower Movement, students used live broadcasts and social media to update information and interact with the public in real time, which enhanced the transparency and participation of the movement.

Finally, we wrap up this article by identifying three key characteristics of Taiwan's student activism, that is, it is actionable, it is networked, and it is related to the broader political and economic reforms or defending the national integrity of Taiwan. With Taiwan's close exchanges and cooperation with neighbouring countries and civil societies, the student activism originated in Taiwan has a wide regional implication. It is expected that Taiwan's practice can promote Southeast Asian democracy to be stronger, more diverse, and more resilient in the future.

Notes

- ¹ Participatory observation in the Blue Bird Action movement and interview with a facilitator, Mr. L, in Taipei, on May 23, 2024.
- ² Interview with Thai democratic activist and a founding member of Move Forward Party (MFP) of Thailand, Mr. J., Feb. 4, 2024.
- ³ Interview with Indonesian Student Activist and a secretary-general of Indonesian Student Association, Mr. K, in Taiwan, January 27, 2024.
- ⁴ Interview with Thai democratic activist and a founding member of Move Forward Party (MFP) of Thailand, Mr. J., Feb. 4, 2024.
- ⁵ Interview with Indonesian student activist and a secretary-general of Indonesian Student Association in Taiwan, Jan. 27, 2024.

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Youth Social Movements and the Consolidation of Hongkonger's Distinct Identity Before and After the Introduction of the New National Security Law

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Abstract

In 2020, Hong Kong implemented the New National Security Law (NNSL), effectively ending citizens' protests in the city. Between 2014 and 2022, youths spearheaded various protests, including the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest and the 2020 NNSL Protest. Drawing on interviews with youth protesters and secondary sources, this study explores the connection between youth social movements and the exclusive identity of Hongkongers. This paper combines Christiansen's (2009) stages of social movement theory with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory to explain the progression of youth movements that shaped the 'we' versus 'they' identity in Hong Kong. The research underscores the impact of mainland China's intervention in local affairs, which has bolstered a civic identity in opposition to a state-constructed national identity.

Keywords: *New National Security Law, Youth social movements, identity politics, Hong Kong, Mainland China.*

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1. Introduction

The participation of youths in political movements has received much attention in academic research (Melucci, 1996; Constanza-Chock, 2012; Earl, Jennifer and Elliot, 2017). Constanza-Chock (2012) asserted historically, youth participation in social movements shows that young people are significant in many progressive social movements. Other than that, active participation by youths as well as their political socialization is apparent in protests as well as other forms of both conventional and non-conventional politics (Earl, Jennifer and Elliot, 2017). When youths' aspirations and collective feelings do not converge with the government's policies and are perceived as threatening their core values, the mobilization of social movement becomes imminent to demand more rights and changes. When involvement in conventional politics through official platforms is no longer feasible in producing positive outcomes, youths tend to seek opportunities to mobilize through collective activism and social movements. Countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Taiwan have had experiences in protests against their government led by the youth. The political trajectories and aspirations for more democratic governance have led to street protests, with youth directly engaged in the political space. This movement has somewhat bound these countries, forming a Milk Tea Alliance (Chan, 2023).

Similarly, in recent years, Hong Kong has become a prominent stage for youths to mobilize social movements and stage their protests against mainland China's increasing intervention in the city's domestic affairs. The retaliation of youths against the increasing intervention of mainland China over their rights forced Beijing to take a drastic response. The New National Security Law (NNSL) was implemented in 2020 as a response from Beijing to deter protests and as a way to maintain public order since youth protests became rampant and unpredictable. So much so that China declared the mobilization of youth social movements as an act of terrorism (BBC, 2022). Davis (2020) asserted that the introduction of NNSL by mainland China, which ultimately bypassed the consultation of both public and domestic legislative, has caused the autonomous status of Hong Kong to be frowned upon. NNSL has also exerted control over Hongkonger's citizens' rights and judiciary, resulting in the city's truncated autonomy (Lo, 2020). The implementation of NNSL is perceived by youths as eroding democratic values and autonomy that was granted in the 1997 Hong Kong handover by the British to China. The participation of youths in Hong Kong protests

has amplified the importance of preserving Hongkonger's identity. Youth have also increasingly distanced themselves from the values of mainland China, with such influences becoming an important part of the identity of Hongkongers (Gareth and Ho, 2014; Fung and Chan, 2016; Ortman 2020). The implementation of the NNSL has meant that the identity of Hong Kong residents is facing an existential threat due to the violation of the city's autonomous status. This is particularly evident with banning social protests, which leaves no space for Hongkongers to oppose, which is one of the more important elements of democracy.

To describe Hong Kong's identity, Ping and Kin-ming (2014) pointed out that the identity has been developed through distinct cultural elements, such as language, tradition, history and collective memory. Therefore, although they are identified as Chinese ethnically, like the Chinese in mainland China, the increasing assertions of Beijing's influence have caused Hongkongers to distance themselves from their Chinese identity and adopt a more localized identity instead. In a similar vein, Ortman (2017) pointed out that Hong Kong identity has been a result of the domestic political situation where there is a growing influence of China's central government in the city. Further, Steinhardt, Li and Jiang (2017) stated that the compatibility between national and local identities, which was prevalent for many years after the 1997 handover, has gradually eroded in recent years due to increasing distrust towards China's central government. More recently, scholars have pointed out that Hongkonger's identity is also based on the interactions between Hong Kong and China, which has resulted in a more civic uniqueness in comparison to the constructed state-identity by mainland China (Kwan, 2016; Veg, 2017; So and Ip, 2019; Chou, Fu, and Ng, 2020). Due to this, there has been a significant rise in upholding Hong Kong's identity recently, weakening Chinese nationalism, resulting from a shift in identity from three generations since 1997 in which Hong Kong and China have increasingly been perceived as separate entities (Kam, 2020).

This paper focuses on Hongkonger's exclusive identity that is projected through youth social movements after the implementation of NNSL, that has forbidden any form of political gatherings. The paper examines the development and outcomes of youth social movements from the Umbrella Movement (2014), the Anti-Extradition Bill Protest (2017) and the implementation of NNSL (2020) (see Table 1). Although these series of protests are grounded in political issues, the movement eventually

evolved into a discourse on Hongkonger's identity. This paper proposes that the implementation of NNSL has in fact paved the way for youth social movements to further consolidate Hongkonger's identity rather than deny it or even adopt a mainland Chinese identity exclusively. Hence, the question is how do protests consolidate an exclusive Hong Kong identity through the lens of youth social movements?

Table 1. Series of Youth Protests and Outcomes

Year	Name of Protest	Issues	Outcomes
2014	Umbrella Movement	Demands for universal suffrage	Mainland China continues to interfere in Hong Kong's electoral system
2017	Anti-Extradition Bill Protest	Protesting against the extradition bill introduced by mainland China for Hong Kong and Taiwan	The withdrawal of the bill and NNSL was promulgated to replace
2020	Protest against the implementation of NNSL	Demands for the cancellation of the proposed NNSL	The official implementation of NNSL in Hong Kong

Source: Developed by authors

However, protests such as the 2003 Anti-Article 23 and 2012 National Education protests have been omitted from this paper for several reasons. First, this paper seeks to focus on how youth social movements have contributed to the consolidation of Hongkonger's distinct identity due to the 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests. These protests are directly linked to the discourse of autonomy and resilience against mainland China's encroachments, which are significant to the implications of NNSL. However, the 2003 and 2012 protests are not as directly related to the discussion of NNSL compared to the 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests. Second, 2014, 2017 and 2020 protests marked critical points in the evolution of Hongkonger's identity in response to the encroachment of mainland China. Youth resilience and insistence became more visibly intense, which resulted in Hongkonger's identity becoming more pronounced. The 2003 and 2012 protests, however, were not as impactful in capturing this shift. Third, the protests discussed in this paper are exemplified by the involvement of youth, who play a prominent role in organizing, mobilizing and defining the movements. Though youths were involved in the 2003 and 2012 protests, their role was

not as prominent and transformative as in the later protests. Fourth, the protests discussed in this paper reflect a generational shift in youth social movements. The protesters are of a newer generation compared to those involved in earlier protests.

Past scholarly works point to the existence of a relationship between social movements and identity in Hong Kong. Kwan (2016) observed that the increase of civic nationalism within Hongkongers that has mobilized social movements was due to the rejection of the nationalism centered around mainland China's interpretation of Ethno-Chinese. Au (2017) argued that the social movements in Hong Kong, which enlist participants through collective identity, represent the Hongkonger's part of a continuous struggle for their distinctive identity. Putting youth in the context of social protests, Pearce (2009) believed that student movements in Hong Kong have acted as the conscience of the locals, working towards their well-being and expressing their strong sense of identity as Hongkongers, which is demonstrated in their willingness to protest. To highlight youth willingness to participate in a protest, Cai (2016) posited that most youth participants in the 2014 Umbrella Movement participated due to their discontentment with the declining democracy in the city. In relation to youth resistance against NNSL, Chan (2003) posits that the youth are resilient in resisting the new law because it reflects mainland China's encroachment which has created a political low-pressure zone for them. In addition, youths blamed both Hong Kong and mainland China's governments for suppressing freedom of speech and the right to protest in the city. Not surprisingly, Mei (2021) remarked that youths in Hong Kong identify more as Hongkongers instead of Chinese due to China's officious political values, leading to a stronger Hong Kong identity. In other words, the more China tries to assert control over Hong Kong's local governance, the stronger the mobilization of social protests by the youths is. Nevertheless, this is a blanket statement as it neglects the 'how' in the premise, only explains the 'what' of the situation, and heavily looks at the relationship between youth social movements and identity as a controlled and independent variable.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach through assessing and exploring the series of youth protests in Hong Kong. Youth respondents were gathered using snowballing technique from contacting a prominent youth protester

who wanted to remain anonymous due to safety reasons. Data was collected through the distribution of a semi-structured questionnaire to 20 youths, age ranging from 16 to 30 (during the protests), who were involved in the three protests in Hong Kong between 2014 and 2020 (see Table 2). This ensured that the information gathered on the respondents' opinions and positions on the political landscape and their stories, motives, and perceptions covered three protests.

Table 2. Respondents Involved in Hong Kong Protests, 2014 - 2020

Protests	Number of Youth Respondents
Involved in 2014 Umbrella Movement	5
Involved in Anti-Extradition Bill Protest	6
Involved in Anti-NNSL campaign and protest	9

Source: Developed by author

Due to the vague interpretation of NNSL, there is an increasing fear within Hongkonger's in discussing matters related to the Hong Kong political situation as there is a risk for them to be detained for participating in such discussions. Subsequent to this, in order to minimize the risk for the respondents as well as acknowledge the sensitivity of the topic, the questions were sent through an instant messaging mobile application, "Telegram". The process of theme development was driven by significant conceptual ideas relevant to this study, such as Hong Kong youth social movements, Hong Kong identity and NNSL. The data gathered from the respondents were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings were then corroborated with secondary sources, including scholarly works and news reports. The findings of this study were then constructed through the identification of patterns based on the responses of the respondents.

3. Theoretical Framework: New Social Movement, Stages of Social Movement and Social Identity Theory

There are many theories used to study youth movements in Hong Kong. For example, these include but are not limited to 'conscientization' popularized by Paulo Freire, relative deprivation theory, political opportunity theory, resource mobilization theory and so on. The 'conscientization' theory posits that youths should encourage humanization via peaceful means by using

social media to implement structural changes (Reyes, 2022). Classical social movement theories are able to examine the youth protests in Hong Kong but are not feasible for the specific case in this study, leaving a requirement for an applicable conceptual framework. On the other hand, relative deprivation theory pointed out that the general cause of mobilization of social movements is due to social inequality (Morrison, 1971; Gurney and Tierney; 1982; Flynn, 2011). Although it is acknowledged that the youth protest in Hong Kong does involve an element of social inequality, relative deprivation theory is unable to examine the identity struggle of the Hongkongers. Whereas, resource mobilization theory insinuated resources as the most important element in the mobilization of social movements. Resources include both economic and human capital (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; Flynn, 2011). Flynn (2011) suggests that there is a higher likelihood of successful mobilization of social movements when there are more resources available. This, however, falls short of examining youth protest and identity in Hong Kong, as the issues of economic and human capital are not the main scope of the case study. Another prominent classical social movement theory, political opportunity theory, looked at the political environment and political openness as the main factors in the mobilization of social movements (Eisinger, 1973; Beyeler and Rucht, 1996; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). While this theory is applicable in examining the youth social movements in Hong Kong, where the domestic political situation provides an opportunity for the youth to mobilize protests and collective efforts, it is unable to address the development of Hongkonger's identity. The inability of the three major classical social movement theories to examine this case study has led to the use of a new conceptual framework that is developed through a combination of New Social Movements theory and social identity theory that enables the examination of how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity after the introduction of the NNSL. Because classical social movement theories are inadequate to examine how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity, the next section discusses the two theories that will be applied to examine the case study of this paper.

3.1 New Social Movement Theory

The New Social Movement Theory (NSM) serves as the most viable theory to examine how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity. Calhoun (1993) stated that the NSM shifted the focus of social

movements from focusing on economic discourse and inequality towards values-oriented goals such as lifestyle, ethics and identity. Melucci (1996) emphasized that collective identity plays a prominent role in the cause of new social movements in which identity serves as shared feelings of a community against inequality. Many social movement scholars have since agreed and used Melucci's definition of NSM as a reference for their works (Avritzer and Lyrra, 1997; Martin, 2001; Vahabzadeh, 2001; Buechler, 2013). They concede that NSM contrasts with the traditional mobilizations of labor movements, where class difference is highlighted as the vital point in politics, and any social issue can be solved through economic transformation. The understanding of NSM integrated with the work of Aberle (1996) and Christiansen (2006) helps in the examination of how youth social movements consolidate Hongkonger's identity. Aberle (1966) significantly stated that the social movements are characterized by a diverse range of activism. Table 3 describes the four categories of social movements by Aberle.

Table 3. Aberle's Four Categorizations of Social Movements

Social Movements			
Types	Target	Change	Objective
Alternative	Specific individuals	Limited	Focused on self-improvement and specific change in individuals
Redemptive	Specific Individuals	Radical	Provoke inner change or spiritual growth in individuals
Reformative	Everyone	Limited	Seek to shift a specific matter in social structure
Revolutionary	Everyone	Radical	Seek to completely change every aspect of society in a dramatic way

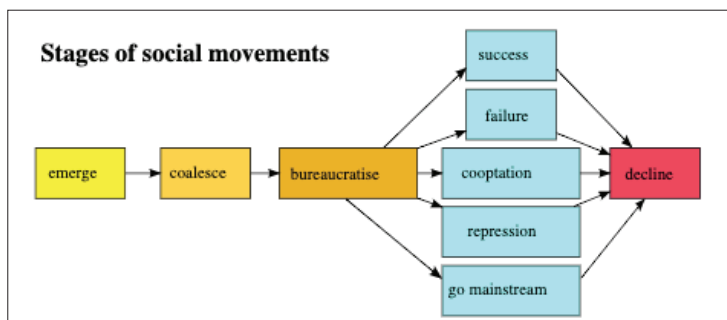
Source: Adopted from Aberle (1966)

Through the examination of Aberle's categorization of social movements, it is possible to identify that the social movements in Hong Kong belong to reformative social movements. This is because youth social movements look at identity as a matter that concerns Hongkongers and that the demand for change means reforming the political institution to grant Hongkongers more autonomy in the effort of protecting their identity. This categorization serves as the conceptual framework for understanding the nexus between youth social movements and identity formation.

3.2 Stages of Social Movements

The stages of social movements framework enable analysis of the developmental process of social emergence from its emergence to its decline as shown in figure 1. This framework allows for the examination of the development of Hong Kong youth social movements, from the 2014 Umbrella Movement until their decline due to the implementation of NNSL in 2020. This study adopted the stages of social movement theory of Christiansen (2009) which was developed from previous works of Blumer (1995), Mauss (1975) and Tilly (1978). Christiansen stated that there are four stages of social movements: (1) emergence, (2) coalescence, (3) bureaucratization, and (4) decline. The emergence is the stage that marks the beginning of collective actions driven by shared sense of dissatisfaction with values perceived as a threat to the norms of a community. The second stage, coalescence displays the start of the collective actions that are more coordinated and organized where roles are established. The third stage of social movement is bureaucratization in which awareness of one particular issue that is being fought for are successfully formed and the movement requires a more structured strategy. Lastly, the final stage of social movements is the decline. Christiansen insinuated that social movements should not be considered as failures if they decline; at times, their decline could also indicate a success. The causes of decline in social movements include repression by authority, cooptation by agency or individuals, the achievement of the movement's goals, and the acceptance of the movement's ideology as a new norm in the society. The stages of social movements are as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Stages of Social Movements

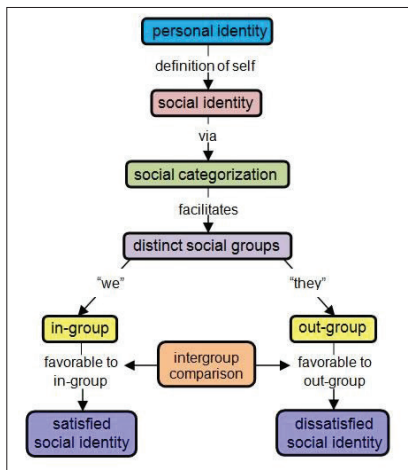


Source: Adopted from Christiansen (2009)

3.3 *Social Identity Theory*

To examine Hong Kong identity in particular, this study has adopted the social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory clarifies the concepts of ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ that helps to explain the youth social movements intergroup comparison in Hong Kong. This comparison helps them to strengthen their sense of self-communion by rejecting mainland Chinese values and identity. Moreover, the social identity theory enables the analysis between the formation of satisfied social identity (Hongkongers) and dissatisfied identity (Chinese identity). Social identity theory also involves the identification of social categories within groups, which allows individuals to determine which category they belong to and develop a sense of belonging that contributes to their self-definition. The first step in categorizing ‘we’ and ‘they’ is by separating defined behaviors in reference to the group norms that fit their social environment. Next, social identification is achieved through a sense of membership that is formed by creating a sense of belonging. The next stage is social comparison where a competition between two identities is formed in order to maintain self-esteem. In this stage, an enhancement of self-identity is projected by narrating a bad impression towards the dissatisfied identity, which in turn would form the ‘we’ and ‘they’ identities. Figure 2 demonstrates the stages of social identity in the creation of satisfied against dissatisfied identities.

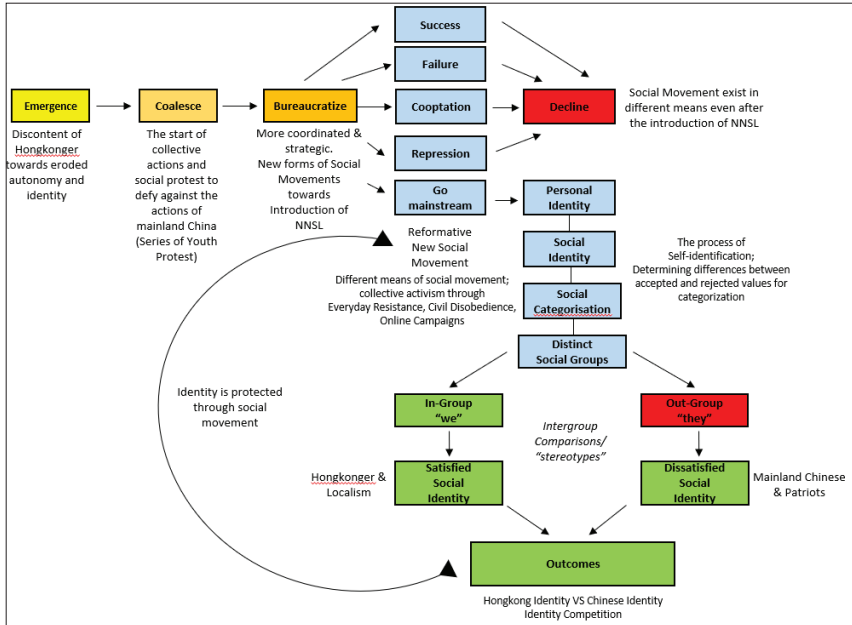
Figure 2. Social Identity Theory



Source: Adapted from Tajfel and Turner (1979)

3.4 Conceptual Framework

Figure 3. Conceptual framework combining Stages of Social Movement and Social Identity Theories



Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 3 shows the conceptual framework for this research which is a combination of stages of social movements and social identity theories which enables the explanation of how youth social movements began consolidating Hongkongers' identity between 2014 and 2020. The premise is that the youth social movements in Hong Kong are considered a success if China relinquishes its assertion of influence over Hong Kong, whereas the failure of protest would be marked by the disintegration of social movements. Generally, the youth social movements in Hong Kong passed the stage of 'go mainstream' in which movements looked at alternative means to project their sense of collectivism to achieve a specific goal. In this sense, it was to maintain and strengthen Hongkonger's identity that included both autonomy and democratic values and more importantly, the rejection of Chinese identity. The rejection is then exemplified through social identity theory which highlights how social categorization distinguishes Hongkongers from

Chinese identity and create rather positive projections of their own identity. The identity is then protected through reformative social movements which targets everyone (Hongkongers) and aims at shifting specific matter in social structure (autonomy to strengthen identity).

4. Research Findings

The series of protests in Hong Kong, apart from going against the assertion of mainland China's increasing influence in the city, has shown the development of projecting and protecting Hongkonger's identity. It is imperative to understand the narratives and definition of Hongkonger's identity from the lens of youth as they were the leading actor in the series of protests from 2014 until the implementation of NNSL in 2020. Through thematic analysis, three major themes were identified based on the data collected from the respondents. The findings show that the discussion on how youth social movements consolidated Hongkongers identity is rather multifaceted and complex.

4.1 Hongkonger's Characteristics and Identity Consolidated through Youth Social Movements

This section presents youth respondents' perception over the descriptions and characteristics of Hongkongers. Then, these values are examined and explained based on the conceptual framework designed. This enables the assessment of how the Hongkonger's identity is consolidated through youth social movements. Firstly, all respondents agreed that Hongkonger's identity is about valuing democracy and the right to free speech, which they believe is distinctly different from mainland China's idea of identity. They believed that Hong Kong should have the autonomy to decide its own future, and that the government should be accountable to its citizens. Respondents also highlighted the importance of being able to voice out opinions without the fear of repression. According to several respondents, the core of Hong Kong identity is the shared belief in the importance of democracy and free speech. The youths saw themselves as a community that strongly values the ability to voice out opinions and participate in the political process. One respondent stated, "*we believe in the freedom of speech and democracy while China Communist Party (CCP) tries to oppress us. What the Hongkongers share is the identity of mutual discontentment against mainland China.*"

The sentiment was supported by others who also emphasized the importance of these values in shaping Hong Kong's identity as a distinct community. The respondents believed that the ability to express freely is a defining characteristic of Hong Kong, and they feel that their identity is under threat from China's attempt to limit those freedoms. One respondent stated; "*Mainland China has betrayed us, the Hongkongers, and I think that due to that, we separate ourselves from them. We realized China will never grant us democracy and that is the value we think can describe us, the Hongkongers*". The belief in the importance of democracy and freedom of speech is seen as a unifying force that sets Hong Kong apart from mainland China. Despite recent challenges to these values, respondents collectively expressed a strong belief in the importance of upholding them. They view the ability to express themselves freely as a fundamental aspect of their identity, and that they were committed to defending these values.

Secondly, respondents also identified *One Country, Two Systems* as a key principle that shapes Hong Kong's identity. They viewed this principle as a cornerstone of Hong Kong's unique identity, allowing them to maintain their own political and economic systems while still being part of mainland China. One respondent explained, "*Hong Kong identity is about the difference in the system. We are used to the system that we are practicing and it should be protected*". The principle of *One Country, Two Systems* has been a source of tension in recent years, as some respondents see it as being undermined by mainland China's actions. They view it as a way to maintain a distinct identity while still being part of mainland China. This arrangement is also seen as a way to protect Hong Kong's unique way of life, including its freedom and autonomy. Respondents expressed a strong belief in the importance of maintaining this system as they see it as a fundamental aspect of Hong Kong's identity. This view is grounded by the belief that Hongkongers should have the right to govern themselves and determine their own future. This is reflected through responses such as "*Hong Kong identity is about the differences in the system. We are used to the system that we have been practicing and it should be protected and We believe that One Country, Two Systems provides us space to practice our rights in democracy and freedom to voice it out*". These statements evidently highlight the importance of autonomy in Hong Kong identity which is seen by the youth as means to protect unique aspects of Hong Kong's cultural and political systems. Youths also believed that the autonomy granted has been eroding

for quite some time, significantly since the 2014 Umbrella Movements where mainland China's intervention in local governance became more obvious. 16 out of 20 respondents insinuated that they have been betrayed by the Chinese government through their refusal to provide Hongkongers' the autonomy that was promised under the *One Country, Two Systems* principle. Hence, this theme reflects the desire of Hongkongers to project their own identity by perceiving themselves as a unique community, distinctly different from their mainland Chinese counterparts.

Moving on, youth respondents also agreed that Hongkonger's identity is distinct from mainland Chinese due to the differences in culture. They believe that Hong Kong should be perceived as its own community and should not be culturally associated with mainland China. Respondents who expressed this theme believed that Hong Kong has its own practice that includes the differences in language usage, customs, and way of life. Among the prominent differences are politics and language in which Hong Kong is more democratic and the usage of Cantonese is prevalent as the main language on the island. One respondent stated because of these differences, which are "*...different from mainland Chinese, we identify ourselves as our own unique community.*" Another respondent expressed pride in the fact that the people of Hong Kong are now able to live as "*One unified community*" and emphasized the importance of Beijing understanding this fact. These sentiments were echoed by other respondents who underlined that Hong Kong has its own unique cultural identity, and that they see themselves as Hongkongers, the people of Hong Kong rather than a citizen of mainland China. Language seemed to be a crucial part of Hong Kong's cultural identity. For example, in emphasizing this narrative, one respondent stated while mainland China has shown its policy preference of using Mandarin in formal and official matters to replace Cantonese, there is a significant refusal within the Hongkongers to acknowledge the usage of Mandarin. This attempt to switch languages is perceived by youths as threatening Hongkonger's distinct identity.

It is also imperative to include the opposing reactions against these values and features. An ex-official of mainland Chinese government stated that Hong Kong identity is considered 'non-existent' as it is used to provide a reason to reject mainland China's influence in the city's political issues. Furthermore, the ex-official added that the idea of Hongkonger's identity is driven by the refusal of the Hongkongers to acknowledge their weakness in

understanding the political position and relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. In this context, it is insinuated that it is easier for the Hongkonger to blame Mainland China's interference in local political affairs as threatening their exclusive identity when Mainland China only wants to restore public order. There is also a sense of scepticism against the narrative that youth protested to protect their identity. Bing (2022) stated that many youths romanticize the movements as it became popular while disregarding the real motivations behind the protests, using identity as the main discourse and arguments, when it is unclear whether or not mainland China is really planning to break Hongkonger's identity. Bing also added that there is also a sense of injustice regarding the term 'they' used by the Hongkongers to refer to mainland Chinese, as the term is highly demonized, portrayed as obedient to communist authorities or brainwashed. Other than that, while the youth protesters have described that the *One Country, Two Systems* as an arrangement that would uphold Hongkonger's identity, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, had stated otherwise. Xi firmly stated during the 25th anniversary of Hongkong's return to China that mainland China would reassert that Hong Kong's autonomy under the *One Country, Two Systems* would be upheld, but with Beijing's full jurisdiction (Yiu, 2022). Xi also insinuated that mainland China has an obligation over the security of Hong Kong and that the recent series of protests is a threat to national security. Therefore, Xi believed that Hong Kong can no longer afford any 'foreign influence' in the city and declared that only patriots should govern the city. Xi's outlook shows that Mainland China asserts that Hong Kong is under Beijing's full jurisdiction as opposed to the youths who believe that Hong Kong has full autonomy or rather should be given full autonomy to govern itself.

4.2 Youth Collective Activism Rejecting Chinese Identity after the Implementation of NNSL

Since the NNSL has banned protests, youths have shifted to different means of collective activism in place of physical social protests. Even with the risk of being detained, youths have insisted on continuous collective activism to uphold their identity against Chinese identity. Based on the conceptual framework, the youth social movement in Hong Kong went through a mainstream phase where they projected social categorization by dividing Hongkonger's characteristics against mainland Chinese's characteristics

establishing an ‘us’ versus ‘they’ identity. The following section provides the findings gathered on how the rejection of Chinese identity through social movements represents the consolidation of Hongkonger’s identity through the lens of the youth.

Firstly, Hong Kong youths have acknowledged that the use of collective activism through online protests and civil disobedience after the implementation of NNSL has marked a transition in the way youths protest. Social media protests have provided space to express youths’ rejection of Chinese identity. More significantly, commitment to the city’s autonomy and way of life is constantly being upheld. This new method has brought together people of different backgrounds, ages and political stances who echo the same desire and goals. This is represented through the narratives alluded by the respondents where they insist that collective activism through online platforms have increased the volume of participation which showcases anxiety over the encroachment of mainland China’s influence in Hong Kong’s domestic affairs. Respondents stated that although the NNSL has ended their traditional way of protesting on the streets, instead it has sparked increased youth participation in online activism, mainly due to the anonymity factor. Subsequently, this has helped increase the intensity of projecting Hongkonger’s identity against an imposed mainland China identity. Particularly, there is more intensity in emphasizing the importance of the *One Country, Two Systems* principle as a method to govern Hong Kong. As elaborated earlier, this principle is considered the cornerstone of Hong Kong’s rather unique identity and that projecting it collectively through an intense online campaign is designed to rattle China’s political imposition on Hong Kong. One respondent was concerned that the projection of this principle through online platforms could possibly trigger a more oppressive reaction by China. The fear is that internet users in Hong Kong and any form of social movements would be banned by mainland China if the situation persists.

The implementation of NNSL has managed to deter the visibility of Hongkonger’s collective feelings against mainland China from the global community. Respondents believed that physical social movements replaced with online movements propagates awareness, propagandas and sentiments of youth rejection against mainland China, therefore successfully maintaining intensity and visibility of Hongkonger’s exclusive identity. Moving on, the respondents also observed that protesting through different

means provides an alternative means to project Hongkonger's distinct identity to the global community. In doing so, it highlights Hongkonger's identity as unique and being oppressed by mainland China's interferences. Respondents opined that a wider projection of Hongkonger's identity would invite the global community to pressure China to stop its encroachment over Hongkong.

At the same time, respondents believe that the online protests allow for augmentation of the idea of "us" versus "they" where Hongkongers are free to reject oppressive laws in comparison to mainland Chinese where the rule of law is adhered strictly as reaction from authorities is highly feared. Respondents remarked although they faced risks of being detained by protesting, it demonstrates their commitment in protecting the city's autonomy and way of life. Through online campaigns, they are able to share information on the latest actions by mainland China and retaliate, despite the Hong Kong government heavily censoring online contents. Youths also pointed out that the usage of social media platforms such as X (formerly known as twitter), Instagram and Telegram enables them to share their message, images, videos of previous protests as well as police brutality and at the same time provides them a space to strategize their reactions online. Not only that, youths have also shown that they are able to underscore their messages with the usage of innovative and creative tactics through online platforms in order to resist repression and censorship. They emphasized that this method enables the amplification of their rejection against mainland China and helps them in projecting the Hongkonger's identity globally especially when internet content is accessible throughout the globe albeit with some form of censorship.

Civil disobedience also plays a vital role in protesting and projecting Hongkonger's identity. One of the respondents stated that "*Not directly following Hong Kong's law does not necessarily mean we are breaking the law. We just want to show that China can't never control us as the people of Hong Kong.*". This sentiment is shared by all respondents where they view civil disobedience as an instrument to show rejection of the authorities in Hong Kong and mainland China. When asked how this contributed to consolidating Hongkonger's identity, all respondents believed that Hongkongers value autonomy and freedom of speech, and by persistently demonstrating these values would enhance the projection of Hongkonger exclusive identity.

5. Discussion

Throughout the series of protests leading to the implementation of NNSL, Hong Kong's youth social movements have been significant in projecting the city state's identity as a distinct and separate entity from mainland China, by using the narrative of 'us' versus 'they'. These social movements directly amplified Hong Kong's unique culture, history and way of life as part of the city state's identity. More importantly, this is not to say that Hongkonger's identity was vague between 2014 and 2020, rather, respondents were convinced that consistently projecting the idea of a distinct identity against mainland China has grounded the position of Hongkonger's identity with a set of standardized norms and values. More importantly, they believe that collectively, youth protests act as a deterrent mechanism against mainland China's increasing encroachment in domestic affairs.

Overall, this study has highlighted the complex nature of Hongkonger's identity from the lens of youths who were involved in the protests between 2014 and 2020 and how this distinct identity is prominently shaped by a variety of factors including values, principles, cultural practices and the opposition to the mainland Chinese government particularly. This has intensified Hongkonger's projection of Hongkongers 'us' identity against mainland China's 'they' identity. The findings of this study suggest that the series of protests in Hong Kong are not merely about opposing the increasing encroachment of mainland China in the city, but also extend to the discourse of identity. Apart from other segment of society, youths have played a role in representing the will of Hongkonger's demand for greater autonomy. The retaliation of mainland China against the protests is a testimony of how youths have managed to threaten the political and social position of mainland Chinese authorities in the city.

The study's findings suggest that democracy and freedom of speech are central to the identity of many Hongkongers, which serves as fundamental values that shape their way of life, sense of self-expression and expression of identity. This belief is rooted in the city's history, where Hong Kong citizens have been fighting for their rights and freedoms since the days of British colonial rule. In present day, with *One Country, Two Systems* as a governing principle, the preservation of democracy and freedom of speech are considered critical aspects of Hong Kong's identity. Hongkongers feel that they are being oppressed by Beijing, and their identity is a direct response to this oppression. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the recent

pro-democracy protests are examples of how youths showed that they are fighting for democracy, identity as well as autonomy.

Respondents have expressed a strong belief in the importance of democracy, freedom of speech, preservation of civil liberties, cultural differences and anti-Chinese sentiments that illustrates the complexity of Hong Kong's identity. Through their experiences of living in a democratic city, the youths have grown accustomed to democratic values, freedom of speech, and access to uncensored information, which they believed were under threat from increasing encroachment of mainland China on Hong Kong's political system. Interviewed youth activists in Hong Kong view social movements as a crucial instrument to consolidate Hong Kong's identity, with the theme of freedom being a central idea. Youth respondents also believed that their persistence in rejecting the 'they' identity is a symbol of resistance against authoritarianism and the erosion of civil liberties. In fact, they opined that their consistent efforts have further embedded the values of Hongkongers locally and internationally.

They believe that the concept of 'us' is amplified through the consistency of protesting regardless of the type of platform. The central idea of Hong Kong's youth social movements revolves around the discourse of identity which fits Aberle's (1996) definition of reformative new social movements whereby the demand for change is limited to the system that affects Hong Kong's identity and affects everyone as a community in the city state.

Although NNSL has managed to terminate physical social protest, youths have not lost their will to project the 'us' identity. Findings suggest that collective activism through physical or online campaigns and civil disobedience has managed to spark relevant discussions about autonomy, freedom and democracy in the region. The implementation of NNSL is testimony that the series of youth protests did put some political pressure on mainland China. Although NNSL is used as an instrument to halt any form of physical social protests and to further deter the gap between Hong Kong and mainland China, youths believe that NNSL is just another challenge for them to adapt and adopt different collective means to protests. As a result of their persistence, it has completely changed how social movements in Hong Kong would likely proceed in the near future.

6. Conclusion

Social movements in Hong Kong have undergone various stages of development, including emergence, coalescence, and bureaucratization phases in recent years. As noted by Christensen (1979), in the long run, social movements may decline due to a range of factors. Overall, despite the NNSL's introduction as a deterrent against the series of protests in Hong Kong, the decline of street protests has led to the emergence of alternative means of mobilizing collective activism. This study shows that the decline of youth's physical social protests in Hong Kong has led to an alternative collective activism through social media activism and collective activism that reinforces the sense of "we" versus "they". This phenomenon reflects the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which highlights the formation of satisfied social identity in contrast to dissatisfied identity. For instance, findings reveal that young activists in Hong Kong define their identity by prioritizing values such as autonomy, freedom of speech, and democracy. These represent Hong Kong's civic values against state-constructed national values of mainland China. This situation has created competing identities that is reinforced through civil disobedience, physical and online campaigns, mainly projecting the exclusivity of Hong Kong's identity.

The emergence of new types of social movements is a testimony to the persistence of youths in consolidating Hong Kong's identity and rejecting mainland China's encroachment in the city's social and political affairs. Due to the restrictions of NNSL, currently, there are no prominent groups advocating for Hong Kong's autonomy. The infamous trial of 'Hong Kong 47' in 2021 which consisted of pro-democracy campaigners who protested against mainland China did embed fear amongst youth in participating in resistance movements. The arrested pro-democracy figures were convicted of conspiracy and were found guilty under the NNSL (Yeung, Gan and Lau, 2024). Despite this, youths' involvement in the protests did establish a continued legacy in instilling their willingness to individually advocate for Hong Kong's autonomous status. For example, through the usage of alternative platform, mainly social media, Nathan Law, Francis Hui and Sunny Cheung are consistently vocal about their dissatisfaction over the actions of mainland China in Hong Kong. While the future of Hong Kong is predictable with the One Country, Two Systems principle set to end in 2047, it is unclear the extent to which Hongkonger's identity will prevail, more so

with youth social movements that might face increasing censorships from China in the near future.

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Appendix

Semi structured questions distributed to the respondents:

Disclaimer: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question, please be aware that you are allowed to withdraw from this survey at any point. It is with most regard that your views and opinions are very important and will be of high value for this research.

Introduction

In recent years, The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR) or commonly referred to as Hong Kong has seen the mobilization of youth social movement. Hong Kong has seen massive protests in 2014 Umbrella Movement, 2017 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest and 2020 Protest against the implementation of NNSL. The central narrative brought upon the youth in justifying their mobilization of social protests is to reject mainland China's increasing assertion of its policies and control over the city-state's governance and identity, which is perceived as violating the autonomy that was promised until 2047. Additionally, as a result, there is a strengthening of the identification of Hongkonger's exclusive identity as well a larger gap in the understanding of nationalism between mainland China and Hong Kong. In addition, after the introduction of the New National Security Law (NNSL) in 2020, physical social protests were banned and as a result, youths have resorted to a new interpretation of mobilizing youth protest via neo-collective activism.

The purpose of this study is to examine **youth social movements** and **the consolidation of Hongkonger's distinct identity** before and after the introduction of the New National Security Law (NNSL)

Below some of the keywords and their meaning used.

Keywords	Meaning
New National Security Law (NNSL)	Law that established four particular crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organization. Any form of actions including, open speech, or mobilization of protest to promote Hong Kong’s secession from China are considered as crime.
Hongkonger’s identity	An identity that replaces Chinese nationalism that is based on race and ethnicity. Moreover, the terminology focuses on the nature of interaction between Hong Kong and China by embracing democratic values
New form of collective activism	An approach of mobilizing protest through unconventional approaches by replacing physical protests.
“we” identity	A term used by Hongkonger’s to distinctly disassociate themselves from mainland Chinese.
“they” identity	Mainland Chinese nationalism and identity that is based on race and ethnicity, loyalty towards the China Communist Party (CCP)

1. As youth who were once involved in the any of the three protests, what is Hongkonger’s identity?

2. What is your view and perception in “One Country Two Systems” and its relation to Hongkonger’s identity?

3. What is your opinion on the treatment of mainland China towards the “One Country, Two Systems” principle?

4. How do the youths propagate Hongkonger's identity after the introduction of NNSL?

5. What are the implications of NNSL in the context of protest?

6. Why do youths persist on mobilizing protest through new methods (online collectivism) as an approach even though there are repercussions after the introduction of NNSL?

7. The youth are forced to abandon the classical approach of protesting through social movement under the NNSL. How does the new collective activism consolidate Hongkonger's identity particularly in projecting 'us' versus 'they' identity?

Delineating the Shaping of Asian Milk Tea Alliance: How Taiwan Enlightens Democracy through Activist Networking?

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Abstract

Amid the democratic crisis in Asia, the Milk Tea Alliance emerged as a youth-led transnational movement advocating for democracy. It involved groups of young netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and became a symbol of democratic solidarity both within and beyond the region. The dynamics of the Milk Tea Alliance demonstrate that pro-democracy activists are increasingly connected through online social networks, which have facilitated their transition into offline engagement, such as protests and advocacy activities. In this context, cyberspace has served as a critical platform for pro-democracy activists to communicate, coordinate, and mobilize against authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, young activists have leveraged online communities to garner global attention, mobilizing netizens worldwide to raise awareness and support civil society efforts in opposition to authoritarianism. This article examines the formation of the Milk Tea Alliance by highlighting Taiwan's role and how its experience as a beacon of democracy in Asia has contributed to the development of democratic solidarity in Southeast Asia. Additionally, it argues that Taiwan's leadership in shaping the Milk Tea Alliance will foster the development of a new identity for Taiwan within Southeast Asian societies.

Keywords: *Milk Tea Alliance, netizens, authoritarianism, democracy.*

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the rise of digital technology has facilitated the widespread use of the internet globally, and the advent of online social media platforms on smartphones in the 2000s further enhanced real-time communication and social networking, thereby creating a global community. Today, various online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are not only used by “netizens” — particularly the youth — for personal entertainment and everyday interactions, but also serve as crucial tools for public engagement, networking, and advocacy (Keohane & Nye, 2004; Nye & Joseph, 2012; Risse-Kappen, 2021).

The term “netizen” refers to individuals who devote a significant portion of their time to online activities, engaging in parallel with their daily lives. Cyberspace, in this context, serves as a virtual social space where netizens interact and communicate. Notably, cyberspace is characterized by its borderlessness, allowing individuals from diverse geographical locations to easily engage with each other on public and policy issues through various platforms, thus forming online communities for collective action (The 101. World, 2021; Temby, 2021). One prominent example of such an online community is the advocacy for democracy led by young netizens in Asia, particularly in Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, and Southeast Asia, under the banner of the Milk Tea Alliance. The co-founders of this movement are netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The Milk Tea Alliance originated as a transnational online movement, initially mobilized through the use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag across social media platforms. Over time, the hashtag became a symbol of democratic solidarity and was adopted in street protests to demonstrate youth-led support for democracy.

Amid the widespread democratic erosion in Asia, including growing discontent with Thai democracy, the suppression of free speech in Hong Kong, the political coup in Myanmar, and China's authoritarian threats against democratic Taiwan, young people in these regions have played pivotal roles in fostering social solidarity in the fight for democracy and liberal values. These youth-led confrontations against authoritarianism and autocracy are evident both in mainstream media and among netizens' accounts. The emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance has become a symbol of democratic resistance across the region, and while the movement is fundamentally pro-democracy, it has also become associated with anti-China sentiment (Ting-Hsuan, 2020; Wang, 2021-22).

Thus, it appears that online social media have been utilized as a crucial tool by youth netizens in resisting the coercion and oppression of authoritarianism and autocracy. This article aims to delineate the formation and operation of the Milk Tea Alliance and explore its impact. First, it examines the power dynamics embedded within the Milk Tea Alliance movement, focusing particularly on the relationship between authoritarian governments and pro-democracy activists, including netizens and protesters. Second, the article highlights the outcomes of the Milk Tea Alliance movement, particularly in terms of online networks and on-the-ground street protests. Finally, the article discusses the collaborations and the materialization of the Milk Tea Alliance in Taiwan, considering its connection to the broader democratic climate in the region.

2. Confronting Power Relations Embedded in Milk Tea Alliance Movement

Living in the internet era, the costs of cross-border communication have continuously decreased. The ease of information transmission has fostered interdependent relationships between various actors in global politics, both state and non-state. Amid the pursuit of diverse interests, power relations have evolved into asymmetrical and complex interdependencies (Keohane & Nye, 1971; Keohane & Nye, 1981).

Today, online social networks, especially those on smartphones, are widely used by youth groups. The flow of news and rumours in cyberspace has become much faster, both within domestic contexts and across national borders. In the pre-internet era, the power of governments, especially autocratic regimes, was characterized by absolute control and surveillance over media use within their borders. However, in the post-internet age, governments face significant challenges in monitoring virtual communities. Although the People's Republic of China (PRC) can block websites, citizens, including both Chinese nationals and foreign residents, can still access restricted content via VPNs (The 101. World, 2021).

The Milk Tea Alliance movement, a youth-led transnational initiative emerging from online advocacy by young netizens across Asia, has garnered widespread attention in the region. One notable example of its formation occurred during an online conflict between Chinese and Thai fans of a Thai actor, including Chinese trolls. In response, youth in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong quickly mobilized on Twitter, creating and using the

#MilkTeaAlliance hashtag to express pro-democracy and pro-human rights sentiments against hostile online posts. This hashtag became a powerful tool for demonstrating free speech and resistance to dictatorship through sarcastic posts, memes, and counter-responses (Tuntiwisanusopit, 2021).

The use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag has strengthened the interconnectedness of young internet users worldwide, creating mutual-support groups on online social networks. Many young netizens have used the hashtag to advance democratic demands in the face of authoritarian coercion, both domestically and internationally. For instance, during street protests in Thailand and Hong Kong, the hashtag was widely shared by netizens from Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan, garnering attention from global audiences. Additionally, many cyber-native users have observed authoritarian governments' coercion and threats against protesters through the posts associated with the #MilkTeaAlliance, and the protesters' responses. As a result, the global feedback surrounding the Milk Tea Alliance has created transnational mutual-help groups advocating for democracy against autocratic regimes abroad (Treesuwan, 2020).

The posts and shares of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag have become essential viral tactics, facilitating the transmission and exchange of information between pro-democracy activists and protesters across borders. For example, strategies like Taiwan's "Be Water" approach were adopted in Hong Kong and Thailand protests. Common symbols, such as the wearing of masks and yellow helmets, were shared among activists and protesters in these regions, as well as in Myanmar. Furthermore, real-time information sharing among protesters was facilitated by smartphone tools such as Apple AirDrop and Android Nearby, enabling more effective communication during street protests. The leaderless nature of the movement was evident in Hong Kong and Thailand, while the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games*, symbolizing resistance to autocracy, spread from Thailand to Myanmar during protests (Ting-Hsuan, 2021).

The Milk Tea Alliance movement demonstrates the ability of young netizens to resist authoritarianism and autocracy virtually, while transforming into in-person street protests. However, as pro-democracy activists in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Myanmar faced challenges imposed by authoritarian regimes, they encountered internet access blocks, surveillance of online activities, and police intervention during protests, all of which hindered online mobilization (Solace Global, 2021).

To sum up, the evolution of the Milk Tea Alliance highlights how pro-democracy activists across the region have utilized digital tools to facilitate both online and offline engagement and mobilization for democracy. Although these movements lack a formal organizational structure or leadership and may not directly overthrow authoritarian regimes, they have fostered transnational civic consciousness and democratic solidarity. As a result, these movements are viewed by young people in Asia as positive and hopeful efforts for reform, helping to challenge human rights violations and democratic repression by authoritarian leaders.

3. The Origin of the Milk Tea Alliance Movement

The Milk Tea Alliance movement emerged in early April 2020 on Twitter, initially fuelled by the widespread use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag. This hashtag became a symbol of a collective ideology rooted in democratic values, anti-China sentiment, and resistance to authoritarianism. The movement was co-founded by netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, who used the online platform to express solidarity. The hashtag first gained traction during an online conflict between Chinese and Thai fans of the popular Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree, known as Bright, who starred in a Thai Boy Love series. Chinese trolls, known as “Little Pink” and “Wumao”, escalated the situation by spreading hate speech and rumours about Bright, the Thai government, and the Thai royal family. The online dispute quickly attracted the attention of Taiwanese and Hong Kong netizens, who supported the Thai netizens and helped popularize the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, transforming it into a grassroots movement (Poetry of Bitch, 2020).

The conflict was sparked when Chinese fans discovered that Bright had retweeted a post mentioning Hong Kong as a separate entity, and they misinterpreted his conversations with his girlfriend on Instagram, viewing them as supportive of Taiwan's independence. The situation worsened when rumours claiming that COVID-19 originated in China were attributed to Bright and his girlfriend. Despite Bright's apology, Chinese fans remained outraged (Khosaviwat, 2020). The conflict escalated when Chinese fans began sharing hate speech and negative rumours about Bright and his girlfriend on platforms such as Weibo and Twitter. In response, Thai fans rallied online to defend Bright's reputation, using the hashtags #nnevvy and #StandingWithBright. The quarrels intensified as Chinese trolls continued

to attack both the Thai actor and the Thai royal family, while also asserting that Thailand owed a debt of gratitude to China for aid during the COVID-19 pandemic (Temby, 2020).

The derogatory remarks about the Thai government and royal family from Chinese netizens galvanized Thai netizens, who responded with sarcastic and humorous retorts. These online exchanges, which had initially focused on defending Bright, gradually evolved into a broader discussion about democracy and resistance to authoritarianism. The #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag quickly became a unifying symbol for netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, who shared common values of democracy and freedom of speech. The hashtag spread widely across online platforms, both as a tool for countering Chinese trolls and as a form of support for Thai netizens against authoritarian regimes. Additionally, the hashtag came to represent solidarity with Taiwan’s independence and the fight for freedom in Hong Kong. Over time, the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag became recognized as the symbol of a grassroots movement against authoritarianism and Chinese assertiveness in the region (Salam, 2022; Poetry of Bitch, 2020).

Photo 1. The Ridiculous and Sarcastic Memes of War-of-Words between Thai and Chinese Netizens



Photo Credit: The author.

The online solidarity among netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong attracted the attention of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Embassy in Bangkok, which reiterated its stance on the One China Principle

and emphasized the importance of maintaining friendly relations between Thailand and China. The PRC Embassy responded on its official Facebook page, issuing a detailed statement reaffirming the One China Principle and stressing the notion of Thailand and China as “one family” (*zhongtai yijia qin*). However, the Embassy’s statement regarding the online dispute was met with widespread dissent from Thai netizens, who responded with a variety of dissatisfied, sarcastic, and humorous comments and memes. These reactions were shared by young netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, further intensifying the online exchange (Chinese Embassy Bangkok, 2020).

Initially, the use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag was apolitical, primarily aimed at defending the reputation of the Thai actor involved in the online quarrel. However, the movement soon evolved into a transnational online solidarity platform advocating for democracy, human rights, and opposition to Chinese political influence. Netizens from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia increasingly used the hashtag to express shared values of democratic resistance and to challenge Chinese authoritarianism. The movement’s influence clearly resonated in both domestic and international political contexts, highlighting its significance beyond a mere online dispute.

4. Lessons from the Milk Tea Alliance Movement

The mechanism of the Milk Tea Alliance movement, as both an online solidarity and grassroots initiative, underscores the role of Asian youth in advocating for pro-democracy and human rights values in opposition to authoritarian regimes, particularly the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The operation and spread of the Milk Tea Alliance highlight the pivotal role of cyber natives, who leverage online platforms to challenge authoritarian coercion and oppression through innovative and collective approaches.

Although the Milk Tea Alliance initially emerged in cyberspace, it eventually transcended the digital realm, evolving into in-person engagement and mobilization. This transformation is evident in street protests and demonstrations of democratic solidarity on university campuses (see Photo 2). The shift from virtual solidarity to tangible social movement and activism has had significant impacts, illustrating the potential of online movements to catalyze into real-world political action.

Photo 2. Poster of The Milk Tea Alliance in Support of Taiwan on Campus of National Chengchi University in Taipei



Photo Credit: The author.

First, the Milk Tea Alliance movement, which originated in Thailand and sparked online cooperation across the region, represents an unprecedented phenomenon. The spread of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag triggered what has been referred to as “the first transnational geopolitical Twitter war”. Furthermore, the use of online social networks enabled Thai netizens to elevate domestic political concerns to the level of interstate politics.

Numerous Thai youths have long expressed scepticism regarding the legitimacy of the Prayut government’s 2019 election results. Many perceived the government as lacking transparency and were particularly concerned about the increasing influence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on Thai administration, including Thailand’s arms procurement from China and its reliance on Chinese-supplied Covid-19 vaccines. In response, Thai netizens utilized online social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, to challenge the authoritarian regime and assert their democratic rights since 2019.

Amid this growing online movement against the Prayut government, the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag emerged. Initially used to defend the reputation of a popular Thai actor, the hashtag soon became a rallying cry for pro-democracy sentiments, targeting both local politicians and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Thai netizens, along with their counterparts

in Taiwan and Hong Kong, adopted the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, the domestic political struggle between the Prayut government and Thai youth garnered widespread attention from the international community. Pro-democracy activists from around the world began to engage with and support the movement by sharing and promoting the hashtag, helping to amplify street protests and online activism in Thailand (Dedman & Lai, 2021; Ponglamjiak, 2021).

Second, the Milk Tea Alliance movement highlighted the collective power of non-state actors, particularly young pro-democracy netizens, who used online platforms to demand democratic reforms and to offer support to fellow netizens in other countries facing authoritarian oppression. Online social movements, particularly in repressive environments, can help activists avoid government surveillance and intervention. However, such movements also face the threat of government-imposed internet restrictions and censorship.

Third, following the military junta's coup in Myanmar and the subsequent declaration of a two-year state of emergency, widespread protests erupted across the country. As Myanmar's anti-coup movement gained momentum, activists and protesters sought international support via online platforms, once again utilizing the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag. This hashtag quickly re-emerged as a symbol of global solidarity with Myanmar's anti-coup movement, attracting attention from the international community. However, in response, the junta imposed internet blackouts and restricted access to social media, curtailing online collaboration and communication between Myanmar's activists and their international supporters. Consequently, Myanmar's anti-coup protestors had to face the junta's forces with limited external support (Solace Global, 2021).

Fourth, unlike earlier social movements, the digital era allows pro-democracy activists to use online platforms to share valuable information and strategies with one another. The use of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag facilitated the exchange of tactical knowledge across countries. For instance, Taiwan's "Be Water" strategy, which emphasized the fluidity and flexibility of protest tactics, was successfully adapted in Hong Kong and later in Thailand. Other tactics, such as wearing masks and yellow helmets to protect against tear gas and facial recognition, were similarly transferred between these movements. Additionally, tools like Apple AirDrop and Android Nearby Share enabled activists to exchange real-time information during protests. The principle of leaderless movements, to avoid arrests,

was adopted across these protests (Solace Global, 2021; Ting-Hsuan, 2021; Tanakasempipat & Chow, 2020).

Fifth, as the Milk Tea Alliance spread virtually, it not only reinforced pro-democracy and human rights sentiments but also fuelled anti-China sentiment, particularly in response to the PRC Embassy's intervention in the movement. The PRC Embassy in Bangkok issued a statement reiterating the One China Principle and stressing the importance of Sino-Thai relations, which provoked further dissatisfaction from Thai, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong netizens. Many Thai netizens criticized the PRC's interference in Thailand's domestic politics.

Finally, Taiwan's netizens closely followed the Milk Tea Alliance movement, and several political leaders publicly supported the pro-democracy solidarity in Thailand. Notably, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen expressed solidarity with the Thai people by tweeting in Thai to celebrate the Songkran Festival, which coincided with the movement's rise in early April 2020. This gesture demonstrated Taiwan's solidarity with Thailand, especially given the travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Other Taiwanese political figures, including Vice President Lai Ching-te and Taoyuan City Mayor, Cheng Wen-tsan, also expressed support for Thailand and emphasized the importance of international cooperation during the pandemic. These acts of solidarity underscored Taiwan's commitment to democratic values and its relationship with Thailand amid the global health crisis (Khosaviwat, 2020).

Photo 3. The Tweet of President Tsai Ing-wen



Photo credit: The author.

Photo 4. The Tweet of Vice President Lai Ching-te



Photo credit: The author.

Photos 5 and 6. The tweet of the Mayor of Taoyuan City, Cheng Wen-tsan



Photo credit: The author.

5. Enabling the Milk Tea Alliance Activism in Taiwan

In Taiwan, the formation of the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD) has successfully translated the #MilkTeaAlliance from an online hashtag into a tangible, cross-border network driven by young activists across Asia. Established in 2020, TATD was founded by a group of Thai residents and foreign activists living in Taiwan, in collaboration with Taiwanese youth activists. The core members of TATD have been actively advocating for democratic values, emphasizing the importance of solidarity for democracy and human rights as the foundation of their activities.

However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of the Emergency Decree, large-scale demonstrations were prohibited in Thailand. As a result, pro-democracy activists and protesters in Thailand, disillusioned with the legitimacy of the Prayut government, found it difficult to organize protests against the authoritarian regime. Despite some efforts to hold street protests, young activists in Thailand frequently faced surveillance and intervention by Thai authorities and police forces (Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy, 2020).

Amid these challenges, the TATD sought to forge partnerships with Taiwanese activists and NGOs to organise pro-democracy and pro-human rights rallies in Taiwan. These events in Taiwan were strategically coordinated to align with similar rallies in Thailand, demonstrating the transnational solidarity of the Milk Tea Alliance. For instance, one key event, titled “Stand with Thailand, Democracy Now!!”, was co-organized

by TATD and the Green Party Taiwan. It attracted Taiwanese politicians, journalists, NGOs, and foreign activists who rallied in support of the Thai pro-democracy movement. During this event, TATD publicly outlined three demands to the Prayuth government: (1) the dissolution of parliament, (2) the establishment of a new democratic constitution (as opposed to one framed by the military), and (3) the cessation of harassment towards government critics.

Additionally, the event served as a platform to call on Taiwan’s government, led by President Tsai Ing-wen, to formally engage in the Milk Tea Alliance movement. Speakers urged the Taiwanese government to take on a more active role in supporting regional democracy, particularly by passing a refugee law to provide shelter to foreign activists in need. Some activists further argued that President Tsai’s New Southbound Policy (NSP), which mainly focuses on promoting economic, educational, agricultural, and public health cooperation with partner countries, should also integrate efforts to protect and advance democracy and freedom across the region (Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy, 2020).

Photo 7. TATD Event on “The Stand with Thailand, Democracy Now!!”



Photo Credit: TATD.

The Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD) organized several rallies in Taiwan, which garnered significant attention from both Taiwanese and international participants and observers. Notable demonstrations were held at key locations in Taipei, such as Taipei Main Station, the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, and in front of the Thailand Trade and Economic Office in Taipei (the de facto embassy of the Kingdom of Thailand). Many of these events were coordinated to coincide with protests taking place simultaneously in Thailand. Led by young activists from TATD, these rallies aimed to amplify support for the pro-democracy protests in Thailand, demonstrating the solidarity of the Milk Tea Alliance.

Additionally, TATD actively participated in other rallies and events in Taiwan that advocated for democracy and human rights in Asia. These included the rally for Myanmar's anti-coup movement, protests in support of Hong Kong, the "Stand with Tibet" campaign and the "Stand with Ukraine" campaign (Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy, 2020).

In sum, the transformation of the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag into in-person engagement through rallies in Taipei led by TATD highlights the effective operationalization of online solidarity. The youth-led activism of TATD exemplifies how online networking can be turned into tangible, on-the-ground action in support of democratic movements across the region.

6. Conclusion

This article examines the origin, development, and operation of the Milk Tea Alliance, with a focus on its activities in Taiwan. "Milk tea" serves as a shared cultural symbol for the communities of the netizens involved. Initially, the online network had no political agenda, but after being politicized and misinterpreted by the People's Republic of China (PRC), it ignited criticism and controversy among netizens. As various countries faced democratic crises, young activists and netizens began to creatively leverage this online network to foster democratic solidarity in their societies.

While many critics argue that the Milk Tea Alliance only exists in the virtual world, this article highlights that in Taiwanese society, numerous rallies, activities, and forums organized by democratic activists and NGOs have gained support and participation from activists across Asia, including those from Thailand, Myanmar, and Hong Kong. On Taiwanese university campuses, Milk Tea Alliance-related posters are visible, and "anti-authoritarianism" walls created by students reflect the efforts of Taiwan's

youth to support democratic values and human rights in both Taiwan and the broader region. These actions underscore the tangible existence of the Milk Tea Alliance and its role in promoting democratic solidarity across Asia.

Furthermore, the article explores how the Milk Tea Alliance's commitment to safeguarding democratic values extends beyond Asia, with solidarity shown for Ukraine amidst the erosion of democracy due to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Overall, the article demonstrates how digital technology and the internet have empowered the younger generation to foster democratic solidarity, and argues that the continued growth of the Milk Tea Alliance will play a vital role in strengthening democratic resilience in Asia and beyond.

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Young and Promising: New Generation and the Resilience of Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia. The focus is on the growing importance of people-to-people diplomacy, particularly through youth engagement. They have become central in fostering exchanges related to democratic values and popular culture, bridging the two societies in significant ways. Using literature and interview data, the paper analyzes the mutual exchanges between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese youth, exploring the driving factors behind the rise of youth power and their tangible actions. Furthermore, the concept of a *new ethnicity* is examined, highlighting how their identities and behaviors diverge from traditional Chinese communities. This shift in identity, shaped by global influences and local contexts, marks a significant transformation in how these youth relate to one another and the broader Chinese diaspora. This evolving identity is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the future of Taiwan-Malaysia relations, suggesting that the younger generation will continue to play a vital role in strengthening bilateral ties and promoting cross-cultural understanding in the years to come.

Keywords: *Taiwan-Malaysia Relationship, Youth Power, Democratic Values, Pop Culture, New Ethnicity.*

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia has changed significantly since 1974. In 1974, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and ended its official ties with the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan (Jing, 2016). In response, Taiwan quickly set up the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Kuala Lumpur to keep unofficial communication open. In 1987, Malaysia countered by opening the Malaysia Friendship and Trade Center in Taipei, which helped maintain informal exchanges in trade and culture (Ku, 2000).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Taiwan and Malaysia had a relatively quiet relationship with little official interaction. However, this changed in the mid-1990s when Taiwan launched its Go South Policy (Hsu, 2017) to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia. This led to increased investment from Taiwanese manufacturers in Malaysia, taking advantage of currency benefits and technology. Soon, Taiwanese businesses became one of the largest foreign investors in Malaysia.

Malaysia's diverse society includes Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, each with unique cultural and political needs, which has shaped its foreign relations. The government primarily focuses on Malay interests, leading to policies like the quota system that limits access for the Chinese community to public education, economic, and professional opportunities (Koon, 1997; Chin, 2022). As a result, many Malaysian Chinese have turned to the private sector and sought education abroad to avoid these restrictions.

Historically, Malaysia's strong Chinese-language education system has strengthened ties with Taiwan. Since the 1950s, studying in Taiwan has been popular among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. Taiwanese students often encounter Malaysian Chinese as peers. The Overseas Youth Vocational Training School program, supported by Taiwan's Overseas Community Affairs Council, sees a majority of Malaysian participants compared to other countries. In 2016, there were 16,051 Malaysian students in Taiwan, making up 54 percent of students from the ten ASEAN countries and reinforcing Taiwan's role as Malaysia's top educational partner in Southeast Asia. However, recent trends show a shift toward English as the primary language of instruction, with local private universities becoming more prominent.

Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) aims to strengthen ties with the Malaysian Chinese community by fostering diaspora relations and supporting

engagement in Southeast Asia. However, Taiwan faces diplomatic challenges and geopolitical tensions with China, especially due to the competition from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chao, 2016). Malaysia must navigate these issues within its domestic policies, affecting future bilateral relations.

Looking ahead, the future of Taiwan-Malaysia relations will depend on the involvement of Taiwanese businesses, alumni, and pro-Taiwan networks in Malaysia. The younger generation will play a vital role in deepening these ties. Their collaboration will be important for enhancing international relations between the two communities. They are likely to have the most significant influence in areas such as business, education, and cultural exchanges.

2. Review of Taiwan-Malaysia Exchange Development and Analytical Framework

Over the past fifty years, key topics in Taiwan-Malaysia relations include education, international marriage, and economic investment. During the Cold War, Taiwan's alignment with the U.S. encouraged Malaysian Chinese youth to study in Taiwan, partly due to Malaysia's quota system (Lee, 2023). By 2022, over 12,000 Malaysian students were enrolled in Taiwan, making them the third-largest group of international students from ASEAN (MOE Taiwan, 2023). Many alumni return to Malaysia as influential leaders, helping strengthen ties through networks like the Federation of Alumni Associations of Taiwan Universities in Malaysia (Yeoh et al., 2018).

International marriage has also been prominent in research. Toyota (2008) examines how international marriages intersect with state control and individual rights, while Jones and Shen (2008) highlight trends and social integration related to these marriages in East and Southeast Asia. Specifically, Chee, Lu, and Yeoh (2014) analyze the challenges Taiwanese wives face in securing citizenship in Malaysia, showing the impact of ethnicity and nationality on cross-national family rights. Researchers like Ku (2006) and Tai and Ku (2001) explore Taiwanese immigration and investment patterns and their intersection with Malaysia's diverse ethnic relations.

Taiwan's policies, including the Go South Policy and the New Southbound Policy, focus on human-centered exchanges in areas like healthcare and youth engagement, emphasizing social connections over mere trade. Recent research has shifted to explore the socio-economic

impacts of the New Southbound Policy on diaspora communities and cultural exchanges (Soong & Claire, 2021; Yang, 2017; Wu, 2020). Hsu (2019) looks at Taiwan’s soft power strategies, while Russell Hsiao (2023) highlights the importance of Taiwan-Malaysia relations amid U.S.-China competition under Anwar Ibrahim’s leadership. New research avenues are multidimensional, examining Chinese female intellectuals’ roles in Malaysia’s political landscape (He & Chen, 2021) and the “Milk Tea Alliance” youth movement, which promotes democratic values through social media (Phalapong, 2023; Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023). Karl Lee (2020; 2023) discusses Taiwanese soft power and its global influence.

Overall, while ethnic relations and government policies have traditionally shaped Taiwan-Malaysia relations, contemporary research increasingly examines technology, socio-cultural exchanges, and NGOs in promoting transnational communities. Ngu and Chai (2017) and Yang (2023) focusing on cultural belonging and contemporary food practices that reflect modern identities. This article emphasizes the younger generation’s role in shaping relations through democratic values and popular culture, viewing transnationalism as a grassroots globalization process that offers new insights into Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

Table 1. Comparative Key Areas on Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

Key Area	Traditional	Young
1	Economic and Investment	Democratic Values
2	International Marriage	Pop Culture
3	Education	New Ethnicity

Source: The authors.

2.1 Transnationalism

Transnationalism is a key framework for understanding cross-border movements of people, ideas, and goods, challenging traditional nation-state views. Early scholars like Cristina Szanton Blanc, Linda Basch, and Nina Glick Schiller (1995) described transnationalism as the process through which immigrants create and maintain multi-stranded social relations between their home and host countries. This results in “social fields” that allow individuals to stay engaged with their countries of origin while living abroad. Faist (2020) further explores how migrant communities sustain

social, economic, and political ties across borders, leading to “transnational social spaces.”

In the context of Taiwan-Malaysia youth cooperation, transnationalism reveals how young people connect through informal networks and digital platforms. These connections, driven by shared cultural interests like pop culture and democratic values, facilitate collaborative projects beyond formal diplomatic channels. Scholars like Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) emphasize the role of transnational social fields in maintaining cross-border relationships. Malaysian and Taiwanese youth build networks that promote the exchange of ideas and cultural products, highlighting grassroots movements in globalization.

Several Malaysian artists, such as Fish Leong, have gained international recognition; Leong made her mark in the Taiwanese market in 1997 and has since released 12 albums, becoming a prominent figure in the Mandopop scene. She has enjoyed successful tours across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

2.2 Flexible Citizenship

The concept of flexible citizenship, introduced by Aihwa Ong (1999), She argues that flexible citizenship acts as a survival strategy, enabling individuals to adjust their national affiliations to benefit from global flows of capital, labor, and culture. For Taiwanese and Malaysian youth, this concept is especially relevant as they form complex identities shaped by transnational experiences. Ong’s framework also highlights the rise of new ethnicities, as youth blend their backgrounds with influences from Taiwan’s entertainment industry, promoting political and cultural cooperation across borders.

Scholars like Steven Vertovec (2004) stress the importance of transnationalism and flexible citizenship in helping diaspora communities, such as the Chinese in Southeast Asia, navigate economic and political challenges. For many younger Malaysian Chinese, their identity is primarily Malaysian rather than Chinese, showcasing a complex negotiation of cultural and national identities.

Zhou and Li (2018) further explore how cultural gifts and exchanges help maintain cultural identities and social status in the host country. Their study sheds light on how communities navigate their social standing through cultural practices, particularly highlighting the experiences of the Malaysian Chinese community in relation to Taiwan.

2.3 *The China Factor*

The “China factor” has become an important aspect of Taiwan-Malaysia relations, especially with China’s expanding influence in Southeast Asia. Scholars like David Shambaugh (2013) have examined China’s rising global power and its implications for the region. While this growing presence offers opportunities for Southeast Asian nations, it also poses challenges for countries like Malaysia, which have deep historical and cultural ties to China.

In shaping the identities and political values of youth in both Malaysia and Taiwan, Yeoh (2019) notes that Malaysian perceptions of China are shaped by various economic and societal factors, influencing how the younger generation views their cultural heritage. Ren (2021) highlights that Malaysian Chinese youth are increasingly reconnecting with China through transnational networks, creating a dynamic interplay between their Malaysian identity and ancestral roots. Benton and Gomez (2016) discuss how younger generations of the Chinese diaspora are redefining their sense of belonging amid shifting geopolitical landscapes, blending both Chinese and Taiwanese cultural expressions while navigating their ties to China.

While elder Malaysian Chinese maintain strong ties to China, younger generations tend to engage more with Taiwanese pop culture and democratic ideals, reflecting a generational shift in cultural engagement. This evolution impacts youth cooperation between Taiwan and Malaysia, as young individuals embrace both Taiwan’s soft power and China’s pop culture.

Despite advancements under Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy, challenges remain due to competition from China’s Belt and Road Initiative and escalating tensions between China and the West. Some Southeast Asian nations, like Vietnam and the Philippines, have resisted China’s expansion, but Malaysia’s traditional Chinese community, with its close ties to China, continues to advocate for strong relations with the Chinese government. This balance of influences makes Malaysia’s stance on China particularly significant in the context of Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

2.4 *Youth Generational Shifts*

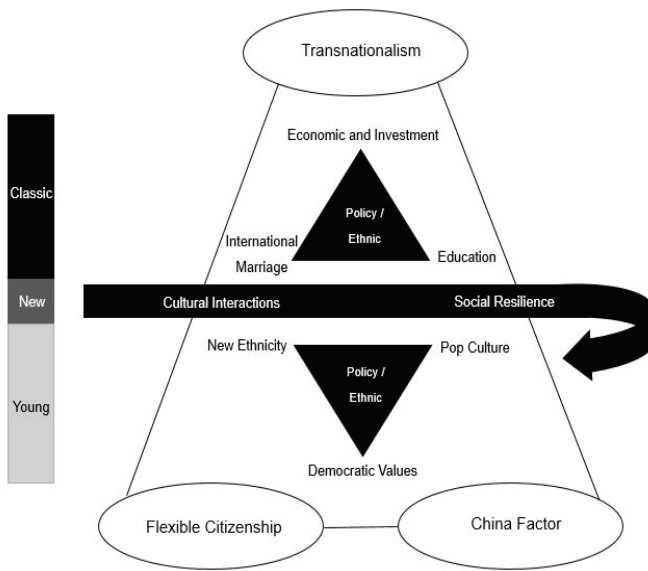
Generational changes in Taiwan are influencing how youth engage with political and cultural issues. Scholars like Dafydd Fell (2018) and Ryan Brading (2017) highlight the role of Taiwanese youth in promoting political

change, especially within Taiwan's evolving democracy. The 2014 Sunflower Movement, led by youth activists, aimed to protect Taiwan's democratic institutions from perceived Chinese influence. This shift towards activism is evident in how Taiwanese youth interact with their Malaysian peers, sharing experiences related to democracy and governance. Additionally, Chang Mau-Kuei (2005) discusses how younger generations in Taiwan are redefining their identities beyond traditional ethnic and national boundaries. This trend parallels developments in Malaysia, where youth of Chinese descent encounter different political models and cultural influences through their connections with Taiwan. Understanding these generational shifts is crucial for grasping how youth in both regions engage with democratic values, popular culture, and evolving ethnic identities.

Existing literature, particularly from Taiwan, often emphasizes a "people-to-people" approach in Taiwan-Malaysia relations. However, much of this research focuses on government actions and policies, overlooking the role of civil society, especially among youth. Moreover, Malaysian scholars rarely address this topic, likely due to political sensitivities. This study aims to fill that gap by highlighting the political and cultural ties between Taiwanese and Malaysian Chinese communities. It seeks to move beyond binary narratives in current discussions and provide new perspectives on these relationships. The research also offers insights for future policy considerations, though it does not extensively cover the views of non-Chinese communities, which remains an area for further exploration.

In the absence of formal diplomatic relations between Taiwan and Malaysia, how can youth strengthen bilateral ties? This research will explore why key areas of interaction can deepen Taiwan-Malaysia relations. Given the shared pluralistic values in both societies, what opportunities do these areas present for youth engagement? How can youth drive future collaborations while addressing gaps in the literature on multi-track diplomacy in international relations? What policy recommendations can be made for both Taiwan and Malaysia?

Figure 1. Analytical Framework



Source: Compiled by authors.

3. Three Key Areas of Youth Interactions between Taiwan and Malaysia

3.1 *Democratic Values*

The democratic values of Malaysian Chinese have been shaped mainly by policies promoting segregation and inequality. Both British colonial authorities and post-independence Malay leaders created legal frameworks that classified ethnic groups and treated non-Malay communities differently. The Malaysian Constitution, established after independence, guarantees special privileges for the Malay majority, and UMNO-led government policies have aimed at redistributing resources, reducing Chinese economic power (Jomo, 2017; Neo, 2006; Koon, 1997).

For over fifty years, the Malaysian Chinese community maintained a conservative political stance. However, generational shifts have led to increasing support for opposition parties, particularly in urban areas during the 2013 elections, which were described by authorities as a “Chinese tsunami” (Ng et al., 2021). The 2018 elections saw the rise of young voters

as a significant force, resulting in Malaysia's first political transition. While this indicated a resurgence of democratic awareness, it did not lead to substantial changes in the national system.

These generational shifts have produced varying political orientations across age groups in both Malaysia and Taiwan. Youth in both communities share a challenge: the difficulty of achieving their democratic values and desired changes through official channels. As a result, they are increasingly turning to alternative methods, forming connections with like-minded groups to promote dialogue and collaboration.

(I) The Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) Abolition

The demand for the abolition of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) reflects the youth's growing aspirations for democratic values. Enacted in Malaysia, the UUCA regulates the administration of universities and university colleges, granting the government significant control over the management and policies of higher education institutions (Wan, 2019). One of the most contentious aspects of the law has been its restrictions on student political participation, limiting their ability to engage in political activities (Wan & Morshidi, 2018). Over time, this law has faced increasing criticism for curbing student activism and suppressing freedom of expression, prompting calls for its repeal or reform (Aun, 2019; Weiss, 2003; Malaysiakini, 2023, March 7).

Figure 2. University Student's Group Call to Abolish UUCA



Source: Malaysiakini

Figure 3. Ho Chi Yang's Announcement Supporting the Abolishment of the UUCA



Source: Official Page of Ho Chi Yang, State Assembly Representative of Tanah Rata, DAPSY National Varsity Affairs Bureau Director.

Before the enforcement of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) in 1971, Malaysian youth actively participated in political movements and social activism, advocating for independence and addressing national issues (Mohd, 2017). They played a key role in the struggle for Malaysia's freedom from colonial rule, engaging in rallies, student organizations, and political parties. This involvement instilled a sense of responsibility among university students, who managed their own governance, helping to prevent corruption and ensure transparency in decision-making. Youth activism during this time significantly shaped the nation's political landscape and promoted democratic values.

There are growing calls to abolish or reform the UUCA due to concerns about its restrictions on student activism, control over academic freedom, and outdated provisions. Critics argue that the UUCA limits students' rights to free speech and participation in political activities, inhibiting civic engagement (Weiss, 2005). The Act is viewed as incompatible with the evolving political landscape and the youth's increasing desire for greater democracy (Zuan, 2021; Rathore, 2016). Advocates for reform seek to create an environment that fosters critical thinking, aligns Malaysian higher education with international standards, and empowers students to engage with important social and political issues.

(II) Sunflower Student Movement

The Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan in 2014 was a significant political protest mainly led by students and youth activists (Rowen, 2015; Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023; Phalapong, 2023). It arose in response to the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) between Taiwan and China, which many viewed as a threat to Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic processes (Hsu, 2017). Protesters occupied Taiwan's legislature for 24 days, demanding greater transparency in government dealings and increased public participation in decision-making. This movement marked a pivotal moment in Taiwanese political history, reshaping political discourse.

The Sunflower Movement greatly impacted Taiwan's political landscape by raising awareness and encouraging youth participation in civic matters. The movement also led to the creation of various civic organizations advocating for social justice and labor rights. Today, it remains a symbol of youth activism in Taiwan, influencing ongoing discussions about democracy, civil rights, and governance, and inspiring similar movements throughout the region.

Figure 4. Protesters Occupied the Legislature



Source: Commonwealth Magazine

During the Sunflower Student Movement, young activists gathered around democratic values, showcasing the transformative power of collective action enabled by social media (Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2023). Their involvement not only impacted Taiwan's democratic processes but also cultivated a strong political identity among youth. The movement

demonstrated how young people could challenge authority, advocate for their beliefs, and play a vital role in shaping political discourse. By forming coalitions and effectively using digital platforms, the activists established a significant precedent for future generations of activists in Taiwan and beyond, highlighting the importance of youth participation in political movements and democratic change.

(III) How Does the Milk Tea Alliance Inspire the Youth of Malaysia and Taiwan?

The Milk Tea Alliance is a loose coalition of pro-democracy movements and activists from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and other regions, brought together by their love for milk tea and opposition to authoritarianism (Huang & Svetanant, 2022; Asia Centre, 2021). It emerged in 2020 in response to perceived threats to democratic freedoms and human rights, particularly from increasing Chinese influence and political repression. The alliance effectively uses social media to foster solidarity among youth, with the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance serving as a rallying cry for democracy, freedom, and social justice (Chan, 2024; Dedman & Lai, 2021). This movement highlights cross-border cooperation among Asian youth and emphasizes the importance of shared cultural ties in resisting authoritarianism.

Figure 5. Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy Held On and Attended the Protests in Taiwan



Source: Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy's Facebook Page.

For Taiwanese youth, the Milk Tea Alliance strengthens their commitment to political activism and social justice, inspired by other youth movements in the region. This shift indicates a departure from the more conservative views of older generations, who often prioritize stability and traditional values. Taiwanese youth seek greater autonomy from China's influence while advocating for their democratic rights. The alliance encourages them to engage in conversations about identity and governance, demonstrating how youth-led initiatives can shape political discourse and promote democratic change.

For Malaysian Chinese youth, the Milk Tea Alliance offers a chance to connect with like-minded individuals in Taiwan and beyond, fostering a shared understanding of cultural and political challenges. This connection is especially important given the China factor, as Malaysian Chinese youth navigate their identities in a multicultural society while addressing historical ties to China. By learning from Taiwanese experiences, they feel empowered to engage in discussions about their rights, racial equality, and representation.

This enables them to better navigate their socio-political environments while advocating for democratic values. Ultimately, the Milk Tea Alliance inspires individual youth and strengthens the relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia through shared democratic ideals. Democracy is not just about parliamentary actions or social protests; it is also practiced in everyday life, fostering creativity and encouraging innovation—an aspect that both Taiwan and Malaysia must value and protect.

3.2 Pop Culture

Before the 2000s, Taiwanese popular culture, especially music and drama, deeply influenced Southeast Asia (Meesomboonpoonsuk, 2019). In recent years, however, Chinese pop culture has gained significant popularity in Malaysia due to platforms like Douyin, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), as well as various streaming services (Bong, 2024). These digital platforms have facilitated the widespread sharing of Chinese music, dramas, films, and variety shows. Movements such as the Hanfu Movement, which promotes traditional Chinese clothing, have gained popularity among young Malaysians, merging traditional customs with modern fashion and identity (Chen, 2020). The appeal of these cultural products lies in their entertainment value and their connection to the Malaysian Chinese community's shared cultural heritage (Yang, 2022).

At the same time, Taiwanese pop culture continues to attract younger generations in Malaysia. Taiwanese dramas and music, known for their relatable themes and engaging storytelling, resonate with many Malaysian youth. Works by Malaysian artists and filmmakers, like Tsai Ming-liang and Namewee, have received recognition in Taiwan and internationally (TaiwanPlus, 2023). This cultural exchange highlights the dynamic nature of hybridization and the growing interconnectedness between Taiwan and Malaysia in popular culture.

Figure 6. *Abang Adik*, A Collaborative Film between Taiwan and Malaysia, Represents Malaysia's Bid for the Best International Feature Film Category at the 97th Oscars Awards in 2025



Source: GOXUAN's Official Facebook Page.

A significant aspect of the cultural exchange between Taiwan and Malaysia is the contemporary food culture that has emerged from blending Chinese and Taiwanese culinary traditions (Khoo et al., 2016). For instance, dishes like bak kut teh, traditionally linked to Malaysia, have gained popularity in Taiwan (Yang & Khoo, 2015), while numerous Malaysian restaurants have opened in Taiwan to cater to local tastes. In both regions, food culture is primarily a source of enjoyment, contrasting with China's regulatory approach, exemplified by campaigns like the "Clean Plate Initiative," which aims to reduce food waste. Such government interventions are less common in Taiwan or Malaysia.

The rise of Taiwanese bubble tea shops, the vibrant night markets offering a variety of street food, and the popularity of traditional Chinese dishes reflect a dynamic culinary landscape that attracts younger generations. Furthermore, Taiwanese companies seeking halal certification to enter the Malaysian market exemplify the growing mutual influence of these cultures (BERNAMA, 2023, August 27). This fusion of traditional and modern culinary elements enhances the visibility and acceptance of both Chinese and Taiwanese pop cultures, leading to increased interaction.

As youth embrace these cultural forms, they engage in a vibrant cultural dialogue that celebrates their shared heritage while fostering a sense of belonging in Malaysia's multicultural society. This interaction reinforces cultural ties among Malaysia, Taiwan, and China. Before 2000, Taiwan's pop culture significantly influenced Southeast Asia, but China's increasing presence has altered these dynamics. However, China's political controls on its creative industries have stifled the development of a more open and diverse cultural environment (Staats, 2011), making it less conducive to the multicultural, democratic context seen in Taiwan and Malaysia. This situation highlights the need for both Taiwan and Malaysia to nurture open, diverse cultural environments that promote creativity and innovation.

(1) The Food Culture of Contemporary Young Malaysian Chinese

The contemporary food culture of young Malaysian Chinese is a unique blend of traditional Chinese influences, local flavors, and modern trends. Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, share many dishes with southern China, such as spring rolls, oyster omelets, and festive foods like rice dumplings for the Dragon Boat Festival and mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival. However, these dishes often incorporate local ingredients and tastes, with Malaysia's preference for spicy food distinguishing its culinary offerings. For instance, Hainanese chicken rice, bak kut teh, and laksa are adapted to include distinctly Malaysian flavors. The large Chinese population in Malaysia fosters culinary innovation and commercialization, enabling the global spread of Malaysian Chinese dishes through local restaurants. These dishes represent not only the effects of migration and settlement but also a transformation process involving food reproduction, localization, innovation, and globalization (Tan, 2012).

Youth embrace traditional foods but also seek modern culinary experiences that blend Western flavors and new cooking techniques. Social

gatherings around food are vital for identity and cultural preservation, nurturing a sense of belonging and continuity in Malaysia's multicultural society. Popular Chinese cuisines like hotpot have become a communal dining experience in Malaysia, reflecting cultural values of sharing and community. Additionally, regional specialties such as Sichuan dishes highlight the strong presence of Chinese cuisine, augmented by customizable dining trends and fusion street foods.

Figure 7. The Image of Two Pesos Restaurant Shared on Social Media Platform Shows its Popularity



Source: Facebook Page

The younger generation today often shares their food experiences on social media as part of their daily digital behavior (Khalid et al. 2018). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) are filled with food content, showcasing beautifully plated dishes, dining experiences, and recipes. This trend goes beyond merely showing off meals; it's a form of self-expression and a way to build a personal brand or identity (Duruz & Khoo, 2014). Food posts create engagement, as people seek recommendations, reviews, and culinary inspiration. Sharing food pictures also connects users across cultural boundaries, fostering a global exchange of food trends and appreciation.

(II) Comfort Food and Cultural Identity in Taiwan's Young Generation

Taiwan's culinary heritage has transformed significantly over the past century, shaping the comfort food preferences of its younger generation. For

Taiwan's youth, food goes beyond mere sustenance; it is deeply connected to cultural identity and personal comfort. Comfort foods like bubble tea and night market snacks are especially meaningful, linking young people to their roots while symbolizing the dynamic, modern society they inhabit (Erway, 2015). Many share their dining experiences on social media platforms like Instagram or Threads, reflecting a desire for community and validation that reinforces their connection to Taiwanese culture in a globalized digital space.

Milk tea, in particular, has become a symbol of Taiwanese identity both locally and internationally (Putri & Baskoro, 2023). Originally a street drink, it has evolved into a global phenomenon that represents Taiwan's fusion of tradition and innovation. Taiwanese youth embrace milk tea as part of their cultural heritage, while its global popularity serves as a form of Taiwan's soft power. Sharing images of milk tea or street food online allows young people to engage in cultural exchange, asserting their belonging within a global trend while maintaining connections to their homeland.

Comfort food is crucial for Taiwanese youth, providing emotional support, cultural heritage, and a sense of belonging (Lin, 2024). In today's fast-paced world, comfort foods like beef noodle soup, milk tea, or pork rice evoke familiarity and warmth, often reminding them of home, family, and personal experiences. These foods serve as cultural touchstones, reflecting Taiwan's unique food traditions and helping young people navigate modern challenges while remaining grounded in their cultural roots.

(III) What Potential Does the Comfort Food Culture Hold for the Young Generation in Taiwan and Malaysia?

Comfort foods like milk tea and hotpot play a vital role in the emotional well-being of young people in both Taiwan and Malaysia, symbolizing more than just nourishment. Phrases such as "There's nothing a hotpot meal can't fix" and "If you're feeling down, drink a milk tea, and if that doesn't work, have two" illustrate the deep emotional connection younger generations have with these foods, viewing them as sources of joy, solace, and comfort in their daily lives. These foods are essential not just for sustenance but also as emotional anchors in a fast-paced and often challenging world.

By shifting from competitive to cooperative approaches, Taiwan and Malaysia can improve communication and collaboration with China, positively influencing global food culture. Comfort food, being a universal necessity and a source of emotional connection for youth worldwide, serves as a powerful

tool for cultural exchange and influence. Through these collaborative efforts, Taiwan and Malaysia can integrate their culinary traditions into global trends, contributing to a shared and evolving food culture.

Figure 8. Taiwanese Global Franchise, Chatime’s Official Announcement of its Halal Certification in Malaysia



Source: Chatime’s Official Facebook Page.

In today’s digital era, the food culture of the younger generation goes beyond just the food itself. Behaviors such as sharing meals on social media and creating content around culinary experiences have become increasingly significant. These actions reflect cultural connections and values, emphasizing that the meaning behind them is more important than ever. This evolution shows how food culture serves not only as a source of comfort but also as a powerful medium for expressing identity and strengthening community ties.

Taiwan is well-positioned to lead in creating innovative food trends and redefining food culture due to its culinary creativity. In contrast, while young Malaysian Chinese may not have the same level of creative expertise, they are very open to foreign cultures. The inclusive nature of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia makes Malaysia a strong candidate for promoting diverse food cultures. This cultural richness allows Malaysia to potentially act as a facilitator in the global culinary landscape, fostering an exchange of ideas and flavors that resonate with young people across the region.

The synergy between Taiwan and Malaysia, especially in comfort food, presents an opportunity to enhance their bilateral ties. Collaborative food

festivals, culinary exchanges, and joint ventures in the food industry could promote mutual understanding and appreciation. By recognizing China's influence while establishing their unique identities, Taiwan and Malaysia can strengthen their partnership, using comfort food culture as a bridge to cultivate lasting ties and a shared cultural heritage for the future.

3.3 *New Ethnicity*

(I) The Emerging Hakka New Ethnicity in Taiwan and Malaysia

Michael Novak's (2003) concept of "new ethnicity" highlights a shift in identity formation among immigrant descendants, moving away from traditional focuses on language, community ties, and cultural practices. Instead, this new identity emphasizes civic rights, social justice, and personal autonomy, reflecting broader changes in how ethnic identities are constructed in a globalized world.

In Malaysia, the Chinese community's identity is shaped not only by its linguistic and cultural heritage but also by its engagement with other ethnic groups in specific historical and social contexts (Tan, 2000; Vollmann & Soon, 2018). The formation of Malaysian Chinese identity often explores how this minority group navigates its ethnic identity within a multi-ethnic society.

In today's globalized context, constructing ethnic identity extends beyond local or historical factors; it also involves evolving relationships with ancestral homelands. For instance, Malaysia's Chinese community, which holds substantial economic influence and is increasingly involved in China's affairs, illustrates how global connections shape contemporary identity (Lean & Smyth, 2016). China's growing influence, supported by initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, has instilled pride and confidence within Malaysia's Chinese population. The rise of China has also changed perceptions of the Chinese community, shifting from past stigmas associated with communism to views of the community as economically powerful and culturally vibrant.

In this context, ethnic identity is becoming more individualistic, confident, and open to integration, advocating for equal opportunities for all cultural groups while maintaining awareness of ethnic roots. This transformation is particularly evident in the emergence of the Hakka "new ethnic" identity in both Taiwan and Malaysia. Supported by Taiwan's Hakka Affairs Council and related academic communities, the concept of "Global Hakka" is gaining prominence alongside the traditional "Central Plains

Hakka,” serving as a key platform for promoting youth interactions and fostering a shared sense of Hakka identity across borders (Leo, 2015; Lim & Hsiao, 2009).

(II) Understanding Hakka Identity among Youths in Sarawak

To explore the emerging Hakka identity, a survey was conducted between July and August 2022 with Chinese students in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. A total of 178 valid responses were gathered from participants aged 13 to 21 years. Among the respondents, 65.7% were female and 34.3% were male. Most identified as part of the Hakka dialect group, with 74.4% of fathers and 53.3% of mothers being Hakka. Additionally, 86.5% reported having Hakka ancestry.

In terms of language usage at home, 94.3% of respondents primarily spoke Mandarin, followed by Hakka (53.3%), Hokkien (19.1%), English (17.4%), and Malay (7.8%). The family environment was the main setting for learning the Hakka language, with 84.8% indicating this as their primary avenue for acquisition.

Respondents were also asked to choose words that best represented the qualities or spirit of the Hakka people, selecting up to five words. As shown in Table 1, the top 10 words were largely associated with economic and work-related traits, emphasizing a strong connection between Hakka identity and characteristics like resilience, industriousness, and determination.

Table 2. Perceived Hakka Traits among Respondents

Rank	Option	Responses	Percentage
1	Frugal	72	40.4 %
2	Generous	60	33.7 %
3	Hospitable	49	27.5 %
4	Hardworking	46	25.8 %
5	Mutual Assistance	44	24.7 %
6	Friendly	42	23.5 %
7	Kind	31	17.4 %
8	United	30	16.8 %
9	Enthusiastic	27	15.1 %
10	Optimistic	26	14.6 %

Source: Survey by authors.

The final survey question allowed respondents to share their views on the significance of Hakka identity, language, and culture. Many noted that Malaysian Chinese often identify simply as Chinese, with little emphasis on specific ethnic roots like being Hakka. The dominance of Mandarin and English, combined with a historical lack of encouragement for dialect learning, has restricted opportunities to learn Hakka, which is often gained through listening to elders. Despite their limited knowledge, some Hakka youth express interest in exploring and sharing aspects of their culture.

Here are representative responses from the survey:

1. *“I believe Hakka represents a tradition. During the Hakka Festival, I feel a sense of reunion among Hakka people. The Hakka language serves as a medium for communication. Without a unique language, it would be difficult to connect. Its significance, like that of any ethnic origin, is to unite Hakka individuals, reminding them they are not alone, and that Hakka will always be their home.”*
2. *“I’m not particularly clear about Hakka culture, perhaps due to educational policies (our school prohibited speaking dialects in elementary school). I feel there are fewer young people fluent in Hakka among our generation. My grandparents passed away early (before I was born), and the other elders were busy with work, so I received little explanation about Hakka culture. However, we do observe some traditional customs, like eating Lei Cha and ancestral worship, but I don’t fully understand these practices. The elders seldom mention them, creating a gap in knowledge. I feel it’s quite unfortunate; I didn’t see the practicality of learning Hakka during my schooling years, and now I regret not having pursued it.”*

The emerging Hakka new ethnic group in Taiwan and Malaysia represents a transformative phase in Hakka identity, reflecting a broader trend toward cultural revival and globalization. This movement is closely related to the concept of “Global Hakka,” which fosters connections among Hakka communities worldwide and emphasizes cultural continuity while adapting to contemporary challenges.

In both Taiwan and Malaysia, Hakka youth face the dual challenge of embracing their heritage while integrating into multicultural societies. Survey responses indicate a significant disconnect among younger Hakka

individuals regarding their cultural identity, often influenced by historical factors like language suppression and limited exposure to traditional practices. Through participation in cultural events, use of social media, and exploration of educational initiatives, they can cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural pride that transcends geographical boundaries.

These initiatives help the younger generation connect with their roots and each other, reinforcing a shared identity that is both rooted in tradition and adaptable to modern contexts. The “Global Hakka” movement encourages cultural hybridity, making Hakka identity a dynamic construct that incorporates diverse influences while maintaining core traditions. By embracing local traditions and global influences, Hakka youth contribute to a rich and evolving cultural landscape that honors their history while looking toward the future.

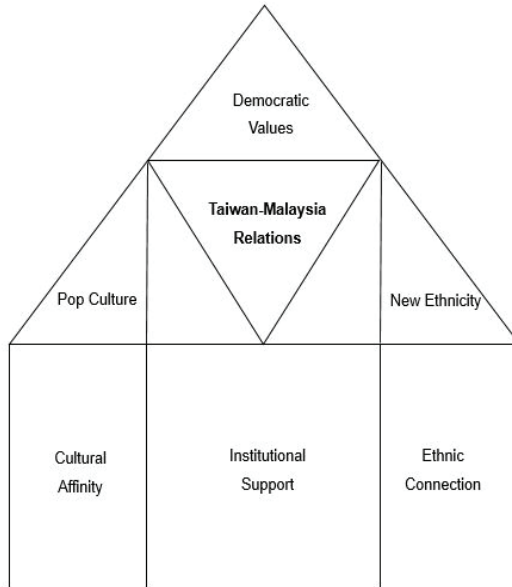
Table 3. Key Areas for Taiwan-Malaysia Youth Interactions

Factors	Democratic Values	Pop Culture	New Ethnicity
Generational Differences	Older generations believe that China’s strength helps elevate the status of the Chinese community, reducing discrimination. Youth prioritize equality and civil rights, viewing interactions with China as mutually beneficial.	Older generations have nostalgic sentiments, ethnic identity, and seek connections with Chinese culture. Youth are drawn to novelty, innovation, and multiculturalism, seeking self-expression and personalized entertainment.	Older generations participate in Chinese tours, seeking family roots and engaging in business, linking ethnicity directly to China. Youth engage in studying abroad, influencer culture, and various scholarships, with ethnicity forming part of their identity.
Impact on Taiwan-Malaysia Relations	Difficult to expand cooperation to official levels or scale. Enhancing social resilience by empowering youth to collectively tackle societal challenges and advocate for transparency and inclusivity in governance.	Taiwan’s lack of funding and resources compared to China diminishes its influence unless creative approaches are taken.	Except for Kinmen, Taiwan is not considered a “hometown” for overseas Chinese; global Hakka narratives align more with local realities, allowing for cooperation in more fields.

Factors	Democratic Values	Pop Culture	New Ethnicity
Potential Role of Youth	Democratic ideals are similar, drawing inspiration from Taiwan for political engagement and social movements.	Taiwan’s multiculturalism and freedom of speech offer more space for living and creativity, making it conducive for youth entrepreneurship.	Harnessing the flexible advantages of new ethnicities to construct diverse and resilient transnational networks.

Source: Compiled by authors.

Figure 9: Three Key Areas Providing Strength and Support for Taiwan-Malaysia Relations



Source: Compiled by authors.

Conclusion: Youth as Catalysts in Taiwan-Malaysia Relations

This research highlights the important role youth play in shaping the informal relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia. Engaging young people offers a promising opportunity for fostering deeper cooperation, despite existing challenges. While there have been advances in cultural exchanges and economic interactions, significant potential remains untapped, especially among younger generations who are increasingly influential in contemporary discussions.

One key finding is that youth act as essential agents in promoting cultural interactions and social resilience within Taiwan-Malaysia relations. Through cultural exchanges, they create social bonds that enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. Engaging in cultural expressions such as art, food, and digital platforms allows young people to break down barriers and foster fluid identities that transcend national borders. This shared culture strengthens social resilience by encouraging collective action and solidarity in the face of external influences from larger powers like China and the U.S.

The study also reveals unique characteristics of Taiwan-Malaysia youth interactions. Embracing multiculturalism and using digital platforms as mediators facilitate transnational dialogues and exchanges. This openness to diverse cultural influences enriches the experiences of youth on both sides, enabling them to develop hybrid identities that reflect both local and transnational elements. Such interactions promote understanding and create networks that serve as vital channels for communication and collaboration.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of youth engagement in this context. Currently, youth are not at the political core, and while their efforts are impactful, they may not lead to formal political influence or the resumption of official diplomatic ties. This reality underscores the need to manage expectations regarding the capacity of youth to drive significant political changes.

By focusing on grassroots experiences, this article provides a fresh perspective that highlights the importance of social and cultural factors in international relations. It suggests that meaningful relationships can develop outside traditional diplomatic channels, paving the way for more inclusive forms of cooperation. To establishing a collaborative framework that prioritizes youth engagement will be essential. By fostering dialogue, understanding, and joint initiatives, both countries can strengthen their relationship, benefiting themselves and serving as a model for other Southeast Asian nations looking to enhance their cooperative efforts. Ultimately, proactive engagement from both sides, along with a commitment to mutual understanding, will be crucial in realizing the full potential of Taiwan-Malaysia relations.

Notes

- ¹ Shihlin Taiwan Street Snacks® is everybody's favourite Taiwanese food chain featuring popular snacks from the alleys of Taiwan's night markets. Prepared the way they do over in Taiwan, the menu features authentic favorites such as XXL Crispy Chicken, Crispy Floss Egg Crepe, Handmade Oyster Mee Sua and Seafood Tempura.
- ² Taiwan's Hakka culture industry, "Burst Dragon" culture in Miaoli, the Hakka Museum, Hakka imagery, the development trend of the Hakka leisure industry, and innovative elements to promote Hakka culture industry, Malaysia's Hakka clans and associations and culture industry in Kampar, Hakka leaders, community interaction among Hakka clans in Kampar, the connotation and extension of Hakka folk songs.

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Strengthening Asia's Future: Cross-Border Youth Initiatives for Lasting Resilience

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Abstract

Youth participation and empowerment are intrinsically linked, serving as vital components in addressing the multifaceted challenges facing Asia today. The continent presents a striking dichotomy: while some countries grapple with severe aging populations, others are characterized by vibrant, youthful demographics. This juxtaposition embodies both challenges and opportunities, highlighting the necessity of innovative solutions to tackle transnational issues that affect the region as a whole. In this context, this paper discusses youth-led initiatives aimed at addressing both national and transnational challenges, examining the obstacles encountered by these young leaders. It argues for the urgent need to empower youth, positioning them as crucial agents in bridging the significant gaps that exist in confronting these challenges. By exploring various case studies and successful youth-led initiatives across Asia, this paper highlights effective strategies for fostering empowerment and participation. It advocates for policies that support youth engagement in decision-making processes and emphasizes the essential role of education and mentorship in cultivating the next generation of leaders.

Keywords: *TAEF, New Southbound Policy, the SEASAT Youth Camp, NSP Youth Corridor.*

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1. Introduction

Geopolitical uncertainty continues to cast a widening shadow over Asia, a conflict hotspot with the involvement of several great powers competing for influence, such as the United States (U.S.), China, Russia, Australia, the European Union, and India (Tien & Nguyen, 2023). The ongoing human rights crisis in Myanmar, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and shifting alliances in Southeast Asia further complicate the region's fragile stability. These challenges extend beyond geopolitical concerns, impacting security, economic growth, and social cohesion. The stakes are high, and the repercussions of instability ripple across borders.

Adding to this complexity, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed vulnerabilities in governance, public health systems, and economies, especially in lower-income countries, exacerbating inequality (Jurzyk et al., 2020). Rapid technological advances- from AI to automation- are also reshaping industries and societies at an unprecedented pace. In this volatile landscape, one certainty remains: the future will bring unforeseen challenges that demand resilience, adaptability, and a collective response involving governments, civil society and individuals.

The interconnected nature of these issues underscores that no country can tackle them in isolation. Cross-border collaboration is essential to respond to these shared challenges effectively. However, intensifying great power competition in Asia has led countries tread cautiously, hindering genuine regional cooperation. Taiwan, in particular, faces a unique set of challenges, being excluded from major international platforms like the United Nations (UN) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), despite its strategic importance and capacity to contribute.

To breakdown silos and harness the synergy between countries in addressing the region's common challenges, young people could be the key. As Kofi Annan (2013), seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, put it, "any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind." Throughout Asia, youth have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to bring about meaningful changes, tackling complex challenges from bolstering democratic stability to combating climate change. For instance, youth-led movements in countries such as India and the Philippines have made significant strides in climate justice and environmental protection, achieving notable outcomes such as banning single-use plastics (United Nations Environment Programme,

2021), controlling plastic pollution and ocean pollution, and advocating for renewable energy policies (World Economic Forum, 2023). In Hong Kong, youth activism focused on democracy has garnered global attention (Ku, 2020). In Southeast Asia, young people in Thailand have been instrumental in pushing for social and political reform (Panarat & Sawaros, 2023). In Taiwan, youth have played a crucial role in championing human rights and democracy, particularly during the Sunflower Movement in 2014. This pivotal movement, saw students and young activists successfully oppose a controversial trade agreement with China, igniting broader discussions on transparency, sovereignty, and the nation's future (Rowen, 2015).

This paper argues that youth must be placed in the driver's seat to foster the regional resilience regional resilience, citing notable examples of youth-led efforts in addressing climate change, digital transformation challenges, employment issues, and human rights development mainly in the Asian context. It then discusses the challenges that youth commonly face, including a lack of structural support, civic engagement, and inclusivity. Additionally, it presents a case study of a Taiwan-based think tank- Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) and its initiatives to foster cross-border and regional youth collaboration in response to these gaps, and offer policy recommendations for empowering youth in Asia as a key player in regional development.

2. The Role of Youth in Asian Regional Development

According to the United Nations' World Youth Report, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 constitute 16% of the world's population, with more than 50% living in Asia-Pacific. A figure like this can be viewed either as a huge logistical liability or an enormous opportunity. However, either way, their influence on regional development is too immense to be ignored. In addition, cross-national surveys over the decades show that younger people are generally more internationally oriented, with more positive views on international organizations, and more likely to prioritize international cooperation compared to older adults (Pew Research, 2023).

In the face of mounting challenges, youth have emerged as a vital force in shaping the future of Asia. Issues such as climate change, digital transformation, employment and human rights are complex and interconnected, demanding solutions that extend beyond national borders. Youth with their adaptability, innovation, and technological expertise, are uniquely positioned to foster regional resilience through collaborative efforts.

Rather than viewing these challenges in isolation, it is crucial to underscore the transformative role that young people play in creating impactful solutions across borders. The following examples showcase some of the most influential youth-led movements that have driven meaningful changes on a regional scale.

2.1 *Climate Change*

Youth worldwide have been at the forefront of climate advocacy, driving movements that transcend national boundaries. As they participate more in transnational debates, they are also more engaged in policy networks (Ball 2012; Ball & Junemann 2012). For instance, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) which gathered the world's decision-makers for climate change negotiations saw the highest youth participation and the launch of a global initiative, the International Youth Climate Delegate Program, by the COP28 Presidency (Institute for Policy Research, 2023). In Asia, movements like the ASEAN Youth Climate Action Network (AYCAN) have mobilized and united young people across Southeast Asia in demanding stronger climate policies from their governments. Indian youth have also spearheaded several initiatives, including the Indian Youth Climate Network and Young India, We Can, We Will. Notable grassroots movements in India include the Save Mollem campaign and the 2021 Chipko movement, both of which exemplify the power of youth engagement in environmental protection. These youth-driven initiatives emphasize grassroots efforts to enhance local climate resilience, introducing innovative solutions such as the green technology adoption and sustainable practices. The need for collaboration is urgent, as climate change poses profound risks to communities across Asia, especially for coastal countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which face existential threats from rising sea levels. Through efforts like AYCAN, youth amplify their voices in regional climate diplomacy, creating platforms for collaboration and ideas exchange between all stakeholders, which is crucial to the development of innovations at the regional level (Arino et al., 2021).

2.2 *Digital Transformation and Misinformation*

Youth generally have greater access to digital technologies and skills than other age groups, with higher internet usage (Park, 2022). The pandemic

has exacerbated this situation to an unprecedented degree through social media, particularly among youth (Pérez-Escoda, 2021). While social media offers significant benefits, they are often misused to undermine democracies and sway public opinion. Disinformation and misinformation have become pervasive, creating an urgent need to counter these challenges. As rapid digital transformation exposes new vulnerabilities, youth have risen to address the surge of misinformation threatening political stability and social cohesion. With billions of internet users across the region, discerning fact from fiction is now an essential skill. Youth are not only early adopters of digital tools but also leaders in combating misinformation through media literacy programs and technological innovation. Initiatives like the Digital Grassroots Youth Network bring together young digital advocates across Asia to bridge the digital divide and promote responsible online engagement. By emphasizing digital literacy, these initiatives empower youth to counter misinformation and build more resilient digital communities. In countries like the Philippines and India, young advocates are spearheading fact-checking efforts and educating their peers on navigating online spaces safely. With over 900 million active internet users, India has witnessed a significant increase in individual fact-checkers and online portals dedicated to combatting misinformation. The Indian government and several major media organizations have also launched initiatives to fact-check misleading information. India is particularly vulnerable to disinformation, which can spread rapidly through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter (now called as X), leading many to fall prey to propaganda without verifying the information. A similar situation exists in Taiwan, which has become home to several youth-led digital organizations, such as Digital Diplomacy and IORG, that are actively working to address these challenges. These initiatives emerging from different Asian countries are playing an instrumental role in strengthening digital resilience across the region, ensuring that youth are both safeguarded against misinformation and empowered to lead in the digital age. However, it is also important to note that a significant number of young people in developing countries still lack digital access and digital literacy, and could fall through the cracks if such inequality is overlooked in the issue.

2.3 Youth-Led Employment Initiatives and Economic Participation

Employment remains a significant challenge across Asia, with youth facing high rates of unemployment and underemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, with young people disproportionately affected by job losses and economic instability (International Labor Organization, 2020). However, youth are not waiting for solutions to come from governments alone. Instead of confining themselves to looking for a job in the labour market, young people are increasingly seeking careers with positive social and environmental impacts joining or establishing social enterprises. Youth-led social enterprises address critical issues while creating valuable job opportunities for young people (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2022). Grassroots entrepreneurship initiatives have gained momentum, with young leaders creating opportunities that transcend borders. Programs like Tatler Gen T's Leaders of Tomorrow showcase youth entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific region, where young innovators are establishing projects focused on social causes like literacy improvement and waste recycling, while simultaneously helping generate transnational job opportunities (Tatler Asia, n.d.).

At the policy level, regional frameworks like the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021-2025 and Quad Infrastructure Fellowships aim to tackle youth employment challenges by promoting skills development, leadership, entrepreneurship, and labour market access. Youth leaders from ASEAN-affiliated organizations contributed to the Work Plan by sharing insights from their communities, advocating for human rights components, and suggesting capacity-building activities to enhance meaningful youth participation in ASEAN Community-building (ASEAN, 2022). Meanwhile, the Quad Infrastructure Fellowship, which aims to enhance capacity and professional networks in the region for designing, managing, and attracting investment in infrastructure projects, has grown to over 2,200 experts and has offered more than 1,300 fellowships in the past year (The White House, 2024). These frameworks provide the structural support necessary to foster collaboration across borders, ensuring that youth acquire the skills needed for a rapidly changing job market. Nonetheless, the role of youth in driving these initiatives cannot be overstated. By establishing regional collaborations and creating new industries, Asian youth are not only addressing their own employment challenges but also contributing to the region's economic resilience.

2.4 Human Rights Advocacy and Cross-Border Movements

Youth-led movements in Asia have brought the fight for human rights into sharp focus, exemplifying cross-border collaboration at its most impactful. Amidst repression, young activists have united across national lines to advocate for democratic freedom and social justice. A powerful example is the Milk Tea Alliance, a transnational youth movement born out of solidarity and resistance to pro-democracy crackdowns in Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Myanmar. The Milk Tea Alliance, draws its name from a cultural and culinary bond—the popularity of milk tea in countries such as Taiwan (bubble tea), India (spiced milk tea), Hong Kong (milk tea), and Thailand (Thai iced tea), contrasting with China's traditional preference for tea without milk (The Economist, 2021).

Amid the 2020 Galwan clashes between India and China and China's escalating military intimidation and economic coercion, Taiwanese civil society and Indian internet users discovered common ground by embracing a shared "milk tea heritage" as a symbol of solidarity against Chinese aggression. Bubble tea in Taiwan and spiced tea in India became unifying symbols, embodying both cultural similarities and mutual resilience (Hsu, 2020). This movement gained significant attention, with a viral meme of former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi toasting with tea further amplifying the camaraderie between Taiwan and India and fostering deeper familiarity and connection between the two societies.

Using social media as a powerful tool, these young activists exchanged strategies, amplified awareness, and fostered mutual support in their shared pursuit of freedom and human rights. As online communities are borderless by nature, the Milk Tea Alliance example also suggested that when regimes employ online repression due to local protests, there will be a backlash that will facilitate the emergence of transnational social movements (Kreutz & Makrogiann, 2024). Despite being excluded from formal international platforms like the UN or ASEAN, the Milk Tea Alliance was able to successfully divert global attention on Taiwan, illustrating the power of cross-border solidarity in countering authoritarianism.

Youth-led social movements and political activism are gradually emerging in Asian countries, fuelled by the global rise of democracy and human rights. There is even a trend of mutual learning and connection among these movements. For instance, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement has

had a profound impact on Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution, as well as on student-led movements and organizations in countries like Thailand and Indonesia (Yang & Hsiao, 2024). This interaction has not only deepened their collective understanding and imagination of democratic politics and governance but also facilitated learning among student activists and fostered transnational democratic solidarity. These examples highlight how Asian youth are using their ideas and actions to enlighten social changes and facilitate political reform among Asian countries.

These youth-led movements transcend mere resistance and they are actively shaping a more inclusive and equitable future for Asia. Through cross-border collaboration, young people can build networks to challenge existing regimes and advocate for regional reforms (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2016). In politically sensitive areas where governments may be fall short in safeguarding civil liberties, such collaboration becomes essential, creating a counterbalance that keeps human rights firmly on the regional agenda.

The challenges posed by climate change, digital transformation, employment, and human rights are not isolated. They are intricately interconnected and demand comprehensive, cross-border solutions. Asian youth, with their adaptability, innovation, and collaborative spirit, are pivotal in addressing these challenges and enhancing regional resilience. Time and again, they have demonstrated their capacity to lead, whether through environmental activism, combating misinformation, driving entrepreneurship, or advocating for human rights. As governments and international organizations grapple with these complex issues, it is essential to acknowledge the vital role of youth in advancing regional development. Cross-border youth collaboration is not only necessary and it represents the most dynamic and forward-thinking approach to building a resilient Asia.

3. Challenges

3.1 Lack of Representation and Access

Despite the initiatives taken, willingness to contribute and take charge and successes, significant barriers continue to limit youth participation and expression. In East and Southeast Asia, youth remain underrepresented in political processes and do not fully realize their potential as democratic citizens (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). For instance,

despite half the world's population being under 30, only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians globally- and just 1.84 percent in Asia- are from this age group (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Only 5 percent of the countries worldwide have national level quotas with youth representation, with the Philippines being the sole Asia-Pacific country among them (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Youth representation in parliaments across Asian countries remains relatively low. An article titled "Young India, Ageing Parliament" (Patel & Sekher, 2024) aptly describes India's limited youth presence in its legislative body. Following the 2024 elections for the 18th Lower House (Lok Sabha), the average age of a Member of Parliament (MP) in India stands at 55.6 years, with only 10.6 percent of MPs falling within the 25-40 age group. This reflects a stark generational gap, despite India having one of the world's youngest populations. Another piece labels India "a young country with old leaders," noting that while politics engages large numbers of youth, the system often overlooks their specific interests and priorities (Kumar, 2019). Taiwan also demonstrates low participation in its parliament, with only about 22 percent of legislators under the age of 40 (Chen, 2024). This lack of youth representation is particularly striking amid discussions on engaging the new generation of voters in Taiwan, especially in the context of evolving national identity. In contrast, the Philippines is making strides in youth representation, with 31.5 percent of parliamentarians under the age of 45 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.).

3.2 The Overlooked Generation: Young Voices in the Shadow

Contemporary problems demand innovative solutions from those directly impacted. However, in Asia, many young people are excluded from national and international dialogues, restricting their ability to influence critical decision-making processes that affect their future and from serving as productive members of the society (Do et al., 2024). There is a significant gap between the challenges they face and the solutions generated. Without the voices of young people, existing future systems and frameworks are unlikely to reflect their political priorities and perspectives, leading to a diminished focus on pressing issues such as education, unemployment, and climate change. Additionally, structural barriers- like visa restrictions, limited funding, and inadequate institutional support- further hinder young people's access high-level forums and collaborations (United Nations, 2021). It is essential to go beyond tokenism and create genuine space for youth at the

decision-making table, ensuring their voices are heard. However, the ongoing neglect of their opinions and participation continues to pose a significant challenge to both national welfare and regional development.

3.3 Lack of Social and Digital Cohesion and Collaboration

The imbalance of socioeconomic development, unique cultural contexts, and varying political sentiments across Asia also presents a complicated set of hurdles to bridging young people for collaboration. For instance, despite a shared concern for climate change, children and youth in developing countries are especially vulnerable to climate change due to their disproportionate exposure to extreme weather events and limited access to social safety nets, healthcare, and robust governmental support (Hanna & Oliva, 2016). While young people in the Philippines need to deal with serious vulnerability to online manipulation, millions of Indian youths in rural regions remain disconnected from online spaces as they lack internet access.

Whereas in employment, while Indian youth face additional hurdles to obtain education due to social structures like the caste system in India (Lalitha et al., 2023), young people in Japan and South Korea are facing immense academic pressure and intense competition for jobs in a shrinking economy (Kotoky, 2021). In terms of human rights, such as gender equality in LGBTIQ+ awareness, data on LGBTQIA+ policies, such as decriminalization of same-sex relations, marriage equality, hate crime protections, and gender marker changes, indicate that New Zealand, Australia, Thailand, Taiwan, and Nepal are the most progressive in the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Maldives, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan are noted for their more restrictive LGBTQIA+ policies (Kenny, 2023).

Additionally, despite being a leader among Asian nations in civic participation, whose youth are leading significant social change, Taiwan is regularly excluded from meaningful participation in key international discussions and groupings (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This limits on a global scale. These factors ultimately limit opportunities for Taiwanese youth to connect and collaborate with their peers across borders. However, Taiwanese youth have much to contribute, and their active participation is crucial for fostering regional collaboration. More importantly, it would be counter-intuitive to strive for resilient region by isolating any country, as the challenges faced by youth across Asia are deeply interconnected.

In this context, the authors highlight the efforts of the Taipei-based think tank, Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, which is dedicated to fostering cross-border youth collaboration. Through its innovative cross-sectoral approach, the foundation has successfully expanded the boundaries of traditional diplomacy and promoted inclusive youth participation in tackling some of Asia's most pressing challenges.

As part of Taiwan's efforts to expand its presence across the Indo-Pacific region, its former President Tsai Ing-wen introduced the New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016. The NSP aimed to strengthen Taiwan's ties with ten ASEAN countries, six countries in South Asia, and Australia and New Zealand. Recognized as a signature foreign policy, Tsai described the NSP as "Taiwan's regional strategy for Asia" and "at the centre of its own Indo-Pacific strategy (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), 2023)." While various countries and regional groupings have proposed their Indo-Pacific policies, visions and strategies, the NSP distinguishes itself through its unique cross-sectoral configuration. This approach emphasizes coordination among the public sector (government), the private sector (businesses and enterprises), and the people sector (NGOs and civil society) in the policy implementation, collectively referred to as the P-P-P Practice or P-P-P-P (Hsiao and Yang, 2022).

In particular, the NSP underscores the vital role of NGOs and civil society in supporting its outreach efforts. Such civil society stakeholders have been contributing to the international community since a time when Taiwan's international presence was much more limited than it is today. For instance, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation, which started by a group of homemakers in rural Taiwan in 1966, rapidly expanded its involvement in major international disaster relief efforts in the early 1990s, and is now active across 68 countries across regions (Tzu Chi USA, n.d.). Over the years, NGO and civil society organizations in Taiwan have evolved from focusing primarily on developmental assistance to engaging in a diverse range of areas, including democracy and human rights, gender equality, environmental sustainability, humanitarian assistance, public health, and the art and athletics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2020). Today, there are approximately 4,000 NGOs in Taiwan, with one in four linked to international organizations or having global presence (International Cooperation and Development Fund, 2002). These NGOs work closely with the local counterparts, even in countries where Taiwan

does not have diplomatic ties (Hsiao and Yang, 2022).

This highlights the crucial role of civil society actors in forging connections beyond political realms. A fundamental issue regarding youth empowerment is their limited participation in traditional mechanisms, which hinders their contributions. The successful approaches and experiences of Taiwanese NGOs and civil society actors in overcoming these obstacles and collaborating for the common goods serve a model for youth, empowering them to realize their potential and address pressing challenges in the region. Additionally, NGOs and civil society actors advocate for a diverse array of causes, many of which intersect with the concerns of young people.

3.4 Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation's Young Leaders Engagement Program

Taiwan presents a unique case study, as the nature of diplomacy here differs significantly. Due to the lack of direct contacts between the government and several countries, along with hesitance to engage directly with government entities, civil society and NGOs play a vital role. Recognizing the importance NGO as intermediaries between the government, private sector, and civil society in implementing the NSP, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) was established in 2018 as a civil think tank/NGO aimed at filling the void and strengthening areas of collaboration and cooperation between Taiwan and the NSP countries. The foundation focuses on five main pillars of work—or its Five Flagship Programs—including young leaders' engagement, think tank collaboration, regional disaster resilience, civil society connectivity, and cultural exchanges. These areas have been carefully chosen for their potential to foster a strong social connection between Taiwan and the targeted countries, facilitating government's collaboration with NSP countries in sectors such as economy, education, healthcare, and agriculture, while also enhancing private sector business engagement. In essence, young people are identified as key actors in cultivating the social connectivity essential for effective implementation of Taiwan's foreign policy objectives.

Among its five flagship programs, the TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program has been in place since the foundation's inception, aiming to cultivate talents in social innovation and public governance from Taiwan, the NSP countries, and other like-minded nations. While numerous youth capacity-building initiatives run by governmental agencies and NGOs, the TAEF occupies a unique position at the intersection of NGOs, academia, and the government, creating an additional complementary space

for youth programs that address two key goals: First, TAEF has been able to effectively address the gaps left by governmental institutions, which frequently struggle with resource limitations, political constraints, and bureaucratic inefficiencies that impede their ability to meet the diverse needs of youth. TAEF possesses the flexibility to create tailored programs that empower young people with essential skills and capabilities, while also leveraging resources from various stakeholders within the cross-sectoral partnership.

One notable example is the 2018 event titled “Asian Dialogues: Transformative Leadership in Action”, jointly organized by the TAEF, the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation in the Philippines (often referred to as Asia’s Nobel Prize), and the American Institute in Taiwan (de facto US embassy in Taiwan). The event convened leaders from the public sector, academia, and NGOs to discuss three critical themes: democratic deficit, development deficit, and trust deficit. Among the distinguished participants were Audrey Tang, former Minister without Portfolio of Taiwan; Cielito Habito, former secretary (minister) of Socioeconomic Planning of the Philippines; Lee Khai Loon, Assemblyman of Penang, Malaysia; Rakshita Swamy, Honorary Member of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, India; and Ketty Chen, Vice-President of Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, alongside numerous young leaders dedicated to in open government and socio-economic development. The event showcased a unique blend of politicians and NGO leaders from various countries, facilitating a public exchange on these three pivotal themes from both systemic and grassroots perspectives. The discussants reached a consensus on the importance of youth civic participation for fostering effective democracy, holding the media accountable, reducing distrust, and ensuring that socio-economic development is inclusive, leaving no one behind. Moreover, by holding the event publicly, young people from diverse fields and countries had the opportunity to engage directly with these influential figures, promoting meaningful discussions. This open interaction is essential for inspiring and encouraging civic participation among young people.

Another key initiative was the “Future of Work (FOW) for Asian Youth” research project, a collaborative effort by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Japan’s Social and Economic Governance in Asia (SOPAS) and the TAEF. Launched in August 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project introduced a timely webinar series that brought together experts

from government, academia, think tanks, and civil society to discuss how emerging trends are transforming employment and quality of life for young people across region. The research began by profiling four countries- Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam and has since continued, tracking the evolving employment landscapes for youth in Asia from the early post-pandemic period to the present.

The study now includes new influences such as shifting geopolitics, demographic challenges, and technological advancements, with insights examined both at the country-specific and regional levels. Findings over the years highlight that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for addressing employment issues across diverse countries. However, both policymakers and scholars agree on the importance of policies focused on migration and regional cooperation to help balance workforce disparities between countries with demographic dividends and those facing demographic deficits. Additionally, regional solutions to address educational inequality, particularly in the digital economy era, will be essential for the future.

Secondly, TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program provides neutral and inclusive platforms for collaboration that go beyond national or political agendas. This is especially important in Asia, where differences in foreign policy and issue sensitivities around key issues often hinder cross-border cooperation. The TAEF's Southeast Asia-South Asia-Taiwan (SEASAT) Youth Camp exemplifies its approach to fostering collaboration. Held annually, the SEASAT Youth Camp brings together 40 to 60 young leaders aged between 18 to 27 from across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Taiwan, and like-minded countries, encouraging them to exchange ideas, build mutual understanding, and work together on shared issues. Over the six editions from 2019 to 2024, participants have shown consistent enthusiasm for key themes, especially gender. Discussions in this theme went into complex issues like gender-based violence, LGBTIQ marginalization, and the intersectionality of age, gender, and social norms. These sessions encouraged participants from various countries to engage in open conversations, gaining insights into the nuanced ways these issues manifest across different context. For example, during the "gender workshop" in the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp, participants shared that in the Philippines and Vietnam, traditional gender concepts remain deeply ingrained, with some viewing alternative perspectives as Western ideologies influence. In contrast, while Thailand is relatively accepting of gender diversity, societal attitudes

often reflected indifferent 'none of my business' stance rather than active support for LGBTIQ rights. Taiwan, as the only Asian country to have legalized same sex marriage at that time, contributed its experience to the discussion while gaining a deeper understanding of regional sentiments. This exchange enabled young people to reflect on how best to advocate for gender rights, considering the diverse political and cultural landscapes across Asia.

Another example is the 2024 "Human Rights in Asia: A Multigenerational Dialogue" co-organized by the TAEF and Taiwan's National Human Rights Commission. This dialogue sought to foster inclusive discussions across generations, borders, and cultures, particularly among Asian societies that often occupy diverse positions on the human rights spectrum. Senior and emerging human rights advocates from Taiwan, Myanmar, and Vietnam shared their experiences on issues such as youth participation, LGBTIQ+ rights, and the rights of migrants and refugees across Asia. The successful forum not only created a platform for meaningful exchanges among young people from different Asian countries but also established a strong foundation for future cross-border and intergenerational human rights cooperation. In a post-event survey, participants highlighted their appreciation for the diverse lineup of speakers and panellists from various countries and fields, as well as the chance to engage with advocates who brought practical, hands-on experience to human rights rather than mere token support. Above all, insights from the various initiatives within TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program highlight a common conclusion: to genuinely empower young people to tackle challenges that threaten regional resilience, their civic participation must be substantially strengthened.

To truly strengthen youth civic participation, ensuring information integrity becomes a crucial priority. With over 2.5 billion internet users in Asia-many of them young people-this generation is highly connected and digitally adept yet also vulnerable to misinformation. The widespread use of social media across Asia magnifies the reach of disinformation, posing risks to informed decision-making, political stability, and youth engagement in civic life.

In light of these challenges, the 2024 SEASAT Youth Camp hosted a session on "Understanding and Countering Information Manipulation and Influence Operations." Ketty Chen, Taiwan Representative of National Democratic Institute (NDI), highlighted how authoritarian states often wielded sharp power, such as censorship and manipulation- to exert

influence. She emphasized the crucial role that civil society can play in countering these operations. For example, fact-check organizations in Taiwan have become so robust that even the Ministry of National Defence sometimes relies on their insights. However, delegates expressed concerns about the true influence of youth countering large-scale issues like compromised education systems and echo chambers that amplify influence operations. They cited an example from the Philippines, where disinformation campaigns significantly impacted election outcomes by exploiting these vulnerabilities. In response, Penghsuan Lee, program manager from NDI, pointed out that in an interconnected world, local issues often have global implication. She emphasized that through cross-border collaboration, civil society organizations can more effectively connect people with the resources needed to address these challenges.

Beyond joining civil society organizations, one of the most impactful and direct forms of civic participation is voting. In 2024, Asia is undergoing a wave of elections, with countries such as Taiwan, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Bangladesh, and Pakistan all heading to the polls, bringing millions of young and even first-time voters into the electorate (Khaliq, 2024). Yet, Taiwan remains one of the only 12 countries globally that has not yet lowered its voting age to 18, limiting full youth participation in shaping the nation's future. At the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp, a session titled "Youth in Action – Democratic Participation," featured two young leaders who spearheaded efforts to lower the voting age in Malaysia and Taiwan. The first panellist, Tharma Pillai, founder of UNDI18, discussed how his organization successfully pushed for a bill to lower Malaysia's voting age to 18. UNDI 18 began a how young people can leverage technology to empower themselves in civic participation.

The second panellist, Chang Yu-meng, President of Taiwan Youth Association for Democracy (TYAD), highlighted TYAD's efforts in securing a referendum on lowering Taiwan's voting age. The referendum, however, ultimately failed due to a high voter turnout threshold. Both panellists pointed to similar obstacles in their advocacy journeys, including limited resources and the challenges posed by navigating partisan divides. The discussion and sharing of knowledge underscored the importance of cross-border experience sharing, as many countries face similar barriers. It also highlighted that Taiwan has made noticeable strides in human rights and civic participation, there is equally valuable learning to be gained from the

experiences of other Asian countries. The interconnected nature of these challenges makes cross-border youth collaboration not only beneficial but essential.

In addition to fostering civic participation through voting, it is equally crucial to nurture young people into effective leaders. The discussion of leadership is particularly relevant this year which is marked by significant leadership transitions in many Asian countries, from a new government in Malaysia and Taiwan, to the return of government in India and familiar faces returning to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia. Such leadership transition and continuity are expected to reshape the national and global political landscapes, creating new opportunities and connections between countries (World Economic Forum, 2024). Leadership plays a pivotal role in determining the future direction of policies and governance, making it essential to invest in developing the next generation of visionary leaders. Acknowledging the importance of youth leadership, TAEF consistently invites delegates from its Young Leaders Engagement Program to join the Yushan Forum. This regional dialogue initiated by Taiwan, gathers high-level officials and inspirational leaders from across the Asia-Pacific for forward-looking discussions on regional challenges and cooperation prospects under the NSP.

For instance, young leaders from Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States participated in the 2019 Yushan Forum, contributing to comprehensive discussions that enriched the diversity of perspectives on Taiwan's engagement with their countries. Their initiatives included establishing a healthcare model between Taiwan and Cambodia, creating two-way medical internships between Taiwan and Myanmar, and providing training for over 700,000 Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan. These collaborations illustrate many avenues for cross-border partnership (Baral, 2019). More importantly, they showcased those matured insights of young people into regional development, demonstrating their leadership capabilities to the international audience of the forum.

Above all, it is crucial to empower young people in a manner that fosters self-sufficiency and sustainability in their efforts. In line with this vision, the TAEF Young Leaders Engagement Program launched the SEASAT Alumni Network in 2024. This network connects alumni- now active in various fields and regions- to maximize opportunities for youth across Taiwan and Asia by

leveraging their unique strengths (Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, 2024). By fostering connections among alumni, the program aims to break down silos and encourage resource-sharing, enabling young leaders to amplify their impact and drive positive changes. This initiative lays the groundwork for the vision of the next phase of the NSP, known as NSP+: the creation of an NSP Youth Corridor, which will further empower youth to play a central role in strengthening regional resilience.

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1 NSP Youth Corridor: Taiwan Could Lead

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan exemplified its capacity to lead through humanitarian aid, providing masks and essential supplies worldwide. Taiwan's youth activism has also become a defining force, shaping the nation's future through movements like the 2014 Sunflower Movement and, more recently, through electoral engagement. The NSP has served as a vital policy framework, where innovative diplomacy has fostered meaningful connections across Asia. A key focus has been youth engagement, leading to initiatives such as the NSP Elite Study Program, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation's (TAEF) SEASAT Youth Camp, and the Young Leaders' Engagement Program.

However, there remains a pressing need for a dedicated NSP Youth Corridor with targeted policy initiatives to foster cross-border collaboration. This Youth Corridor could align Taiwan's youth activism with similar movements in other Asian nations, creating a stronger, united front for regional progress.

4.2 Fellowships and Scholarships for Imparting Knowledge and Experience

It is essential to learn from each other's best practices and to invest in training the next generation of leaders. For instance, India's Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellowship offers young Indians a unique opportunity to gain firsthand experience in law-making and public policy. Through this program, young graduates work directly with parliamentarians, gaining valuable insights into parliamentary processes. Think tanks can also play a crucial role in this effort. For example, India's Raisina Dialogue includes the Young Raisina Fellows program, and TAEF's offers the Yushan Forum's Young Fellows program. A similar model could

be adopted across other Asian countries, potentially leading to cross-country fellowships that enable regional youth to learn from one another's democratic practices.

4.3 Shifting Mindsets for Strong Leadership and a Better Future

Tokenism is insufficient and true progress demands equal representation. Statistics show a lack of youth presence in mainstream politics, highlighting the need for youth-led initiatives and a shift in mindset. Integrating young people into politics and activism is essential, and this requires a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach. For the current leadership of international organizations and individual countries, viewing youth as a solution rather than a challenge could address half the problem. Youth activism, especially in areas like climate change and human rights, often surpasses government efforts that remain heavily focused on security issues. Shifting this mindset would not only empower young people but also strengthen nations as a whole.

5. Conclusion

“Catch them young” underscores the importance of youth participation in addressing critical issues. Youth are powerful drivers of change, emerging as the leaders of today and tomorrow. They have shown that small steps and grassroots activism can tackle even the most significant challenges. The national and transnational issues we face today demand that youth be at the forefront, and it is essential to create and expand spaces for young people to lead.

At this pivotal moment, Asian solidarity is crucial, with government actions focusing on empowering youth and amplifying their voices and initiatives. Across much of Asia, civil society and think tanks are working closely with governments, serving as a bridge to connect them with young people. This collaboration is vital for developing solutions to transnational issues and positioning youth at the centre of progress.

There are numerous foundations and civil society organizations across the Indo-Pacific region that have long been committed to youth-related issues, inclusive of various Youth engagement and empowerment initiatives. In 2022, the Tokyo-based Nippon Foundation (TNF) launched the Asian Philanthropy Congress (APHIC), leading more than twenty major

foundations and Philanthropy organizations in Asia to explore the role and capacity of philanthropy in promoting sustainable and inclusive growth for societies, as well as for a more resilient Asian region and regional states. The annually held congress aims to foster collaboration among regional partners in realizing a vision for a more equal and inclusive society. Since 2022, TAEF has been joining this network, where it shares Taiwan's lessons in youth empowerment efforts and aims at collaborating with TNF and like-minded Aphic organizations to advance collective efforts, promote youth exchanges, and empower them to become change makers for Asia's future through meaningful initiatives and programs.

Youth-led initiatives have already proven successful in tackling challenges from climate change to human rights. Learning from these examples and amplifying youth voices can help make Asia a region of growth. Success stories from countries like India, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam provide evidence of the impact of youth-driven efforts on national issues. While forging cross-border collaboration among countries with diverse approaches is challenging, there is a silver lining: by learning from each other's successes, challenges, and setbacks, Asian countries can find solutions to shared concerns and transnational challenges.

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Book Review

Ying-kit Chan and Chang-Yau Hoon, *Southeast Asia in China: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Engagements*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. 167 pages. ISBN: 978-1-7936-1214-4.

Due to geographical proximity, Southeast Asia has been perceived as a close neighbour of China all this while. However, their relations have been rather asymmetrical, thanks to the immense size, technological advancement and economic power of China. As the authors of this volume rightly note, “The power asymmetry is reflected in the apparent bias in the literature where most studies are about China’s presence in or engagement with Southeast Asia rather than the reverse. Studies on the presence or influence of Southeast Asia in China have been a marginal enterprise” (pp. x-xi). Moreover, “the attention paid to historical and socio-cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia remains scant” (p. x). Hence, this volume could fill this lacuna by examining the complicated relations between China and Southeast Asia from a Southeast Asian perspective.

This volume comprises two main parts. The first part is made up of three chapters dealing with Southeast Asia’s historical entanglements with China. The second part consists of another three chapters which focus on Southeast Asia’s contemporary engagements with China. However, this review will focus on the first, third and last chapters that deal with very important but still understudied themes.

The first chapter explores the role of Southeast Asian Chinese volunteers in wartime China. This is an important but still understudied topic related to the contributions of Southeast Asian Chinese to China. The Southeast Asian Chinese volunteers were ethnic Chinese male labourers who left Southeast Asia for southwestern China during China’s war with Japan in 1937-1945 to get involved in the Allied war efforts. Most of them were ethnic Chinese in Malaya. To a great extent, their involvement in the war effort was an outcome of China’s Nationalist regime’s attempt to tap into the ethnic Chinese in Malaya “as a war resource” (p. 7). Nevertheless, after the end of the war and the establishment of Communist China in 1949, their contributions to the war effort were ignored by the Chinese regime because

of the hostility between the Nationalist and the Communist forces. This is also due to the volunteers' "fluid — if not fragmented — identities at a time when citizenship had yet to become an important qualification of the nation-state" (p. 4).

Based on the biographies and autobiographies of Singapore's first three ambassadors to Thailand, the third chapter explores how these ambassadors, who were ethnic Chinese Singaporeans, made use of their Chineseness and cultural upbringing in laying the foundation of Singapore-Thailand diplomatic relations. They also had a strong affinity with China. The first and third ambassadors were born in China but later moved to Southeast Asia with their parents. The second ambassador was born in Singapore but later went to China to further his studies. Prior to their appointment as ambassadors, they had established strong business connections with ethnic Chinese capitalist elites in Thailand. In comparison with other neighbouring countries of Singapore such as Indonesia and Malaysia, the Thai government was much less suspicious and hostile to its ethnic Chinese minority because in general they were already highly assimilated into Thai society. Indeed, Chinese Thais "were perceived to be indispensable to economic development" of Thailand (p. 47). Hence, Singapore was able to tap into the well-established business networks between Chinese Singaporean businessmen and Chinese Thai capitalist elites in cultivating diplomatic relations with Thailand.

The role of Southeast Asian capital in China since the Reform and Opening-Up Policy in 1978 is the central theme of the last chapter. Ethnic Chinese conglomerates and prominent ethnic Chinese capitalists are the source of capital. The Reform and Opening-Up Policy opened up ways for ethnic Chinese conglomerates in Southeast Asia to invest in China. As this chapter notes, the shared cultural background between Southeast Asian Chinese investors and local Chinese in China "was able to help them foster trust and develop relationships with key figures and other major investors" (p. 122). Many ethnic Chinese capitalists invested in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or their ancestral homeland in southern China. Some of them also cooperated with China's state-owned enterprises in various industrial and development projects. Therefore, the investments of ethnic Chinese conglomerates and prominent capitalists in China have significantly benefited the development of China's economy and infrastructure. Nevertheless, this chapter also cautions that the expansion of Southeast Asian Chinese business

in China might rekindle the deeply-rooted suspicion of the loyalty of the ethnic Chinese among the Southeast Asian indigenous population. Therefore, it is crucial “for Southeast Asian Chinese capitalists to negotiate and balance their national and political identity with their cultural and ethnic identity” (p. 125).

Overall, this volume is a welcome and significant addition to the scholarship on the relations between Southeast Asia and China. It provides readers with valuable insights into the presence or influence of Southeast Asia in China, as well as a more balanced perspective on historical and socio-cultural exchanges between Southeast Asia and China. It would be of greatest use to scholars and general readers with an interest in this area of study.

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