

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

Alan Hao *Yang**

*Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies, National Chengchi University
(NCCU)

Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NCCU

Department of East Asian Studies, Universiti Malaya

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.

* Professor, Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies, National Chengchi University (NCCU); Executive Director, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NCCU; and Elite Fellow, Universiti Malaya.

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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