

## 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 liner 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.<sup>1</sup>

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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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