An introductory guide to institutionalize Taiwanese identity

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On Sunday, October 16, we conversed with Samantha Tai, a 30-year-old liberal candidate in New Taipei City's city council. She is working in favor of "gender-friendly" policies, LGBTQIA+ rights, intergenerational dialogue, and direct contact with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (see Appendix B). What is fascinating, however, is that Tai is running as a low-budget candidate for the conservative Kuomintang (KMT) party in a district dominated by "old people" hostile to most of her causes. Her primary justification for being endorsed by the KMT is that she needs the support of the older generations to win.

I argue that her campaign could be complemented by the institutionalization of Taiwanese identity that would supersede the generational differences in Tai's campaign. I consider Fukuyama's (2014) understanding of nationalism through state political boundaries corresponding to shared language and culture and being publicly recognized. Identity is political (Brown, 2004) and can be explored in electoral processes.

The biggest challenge for Tai is, then, the generational gaps. Rigger (2006) explains that the preference patterns of different age groups are manifestations of enduring generational differences, giving rise to four distinct generations in Taiwan — those from the Japanese colonial period, from the rise of the KMT, from the transition to democracy, and those born after the democratization.

So, how should the government construct a solid Taiwanese identity despite generational differences?

Geisler (2005) suggests that recently independent countries are burdened by not only "inventing" a new identity but doing so in a way that erases and overwrites colonial symbols and rituals. Although the following factors are not sufficient for nation-building, they are necessary.

The first step is to institutionalize the Mandarin language. As per the 1947 Taiwan Constitution and the 2019 Development of National Languages Act, "national language (…) mean the natural languages and sign languages used by the different ethnic groups in Taiwan" (ConstituteProject.org, 2002; Ministry of Culture, 2019). Solidifying Mandarin as the official language tackles the generational gaps since it recognizes Mandarin as the most common language (Rigger, 2006). One can draw a parallel to Indonesia's unification under a lingua franca, as Fukuyama (2014) describes since modern states can erode intra-regional cleavages by establishing a standardized language-of-state (Jaffrelot, 2003). Unifying under a common language was present in Taiwan's history s since it is in parallel to the Japanese efforts during the colonial period to impose the Japanese language in schools as well as the creation of the Taiwanese state with the Written Taiwanese Movement (Xue et al., 2005).

However, Cheng (1979) argues against language unification: to eliminate language differences is to risk losing essential features of political unity to attain less essential features of political unity. Cheng (1979) then suggests that the Taiwanese government should establish a commission on bilingual language planning at both the central and provincial levels since "democracy only works when people know their interests and their desires as well as those of other groups" (Cheng, 1979).

Secondly, we must address Taiwanese culture and traditions.

Because the younger generations do not perceive themselves as either/or Chinese— ethnic plurality increased over the years (Rigger, 2006) — it is possible to reinstitute the KMT's nationalistic efforts (Chun, 1994). The KMT imposed a Renaissance of "traditional Chinese culture" through an all-encompassing ethos for the moral conduct of everyday life through institutions, such as the military and the school (i.e., courses in Chinese culture from middle to high school) (Chun, 1994). An example of an institution that can do so is the Ministry of Culture since public institutions are influenced by established social values and norms (Kangas & Vestheim, 2011). National unity can be pursued as a cause and consequence of national success (i.e., sports events and economic growth) and cultivation of cultural consciousness linked to the development of, for example, the tourist industry, preservation of historical artifacts, and incentive for international students (Chun, 1994).

Nevertheless, we must be careful not to misuse the institutionalization of living practices, as was the case in Peru. (Losson, 2013). The institutionalization of everyday practices developed a romanticization of the national identity better suited to the expectations of foreign visitors and "provoked a progressive deterioration in [the Peruvian] identity" (Losson, 2013).

For Ogasawara (1998), Taiwanese identity involved three elements: emphasis on "Taiwanizaiton" against the mainlander, democratization against the KMT, and independence against China. In summary, Xue et al. (2005) defend that general awareness of Taiwanese identity only surged during the Japanese colonial period, similar to Anderson's theory of imagined communities (2016) and Fukuyama's (2014) description of nation-building: juxtaposing it with another group of people (i.e., "we are Taiwanese because we are not Japanese"). One can make an argument in favor of the independence movement as a reinforcing force for national identity since

attempts by the People's Republic of China to suppress Taiwanese identity only strengthen it (Brown, 2004). The "Taiwan Problem" is fundamentally an issue of identity (Brown, 2004).

The third factor that can help institutionalize Taiwanese identity is the conflict with the PRC, whether through military or diplomatic means and getting support from the international community. This factor is reminiscent of Fukuyama's (2014) claim of public recognition. According to Brown (2004), China has three options: go to war, proceed with political reforms that might lead to democratization to draw Taiwan in, or accept that Taiwan will not return to China. On the other hand, Taiwan has to achieve cooperation across party lines to "persuade the international community that the new Taiwanese identity is not only reasonable and justifiable but real (…)" and economically necessary. (Brown, 2004). In this sense, Samantha Tai's campaign on maintaining negotiations with China and having an open partnership with national parties (i.e., DPP) is positive for her campaign. When Taiwan has institutions to deal with the country's relationship with China, it argues that two separate identities must be in constant dialogue.

We will only know the election's outcome on November 26, 2022, and, hopefully, Samantha Tai will win. If that is the case, solidifying Taiwanese identity should be her priority to overrule generational differences.

Word count: 1006

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Appendix A — LOs application

#constructivism

This was the central LO I used since I wanted to discuss nationalism in Taiwan. Not only did I discuss how nationalism was developed in Taiwan with the Japanese colonization, but how it's linked to modern-day institutions and how these institutions can be used to construct a sense of identity (see the next LO). I purposely decided not to address ethnicity, for example, because I followed Fukuyama's (2014) main points on language, culture, and international recognition — being that every step in the guide is a reflection of the elements. I also mentioned Anderson's (1983) theory of imagined communities, a central reading for AH112 that is a part of #AH112-communitiestheories.

#institutionalism

I had more difficulty with this LO than with #constructivism, but I explained how different types of institutions could serve the purpose of creating a national identity. These institutions could be schools, ministries, or constitutions, for example. When a country mentions a specific language in its constitution, it institutionalizes the language — which is not the case in Taiwan. I wanted to create an (oversimplified) guide to indicate how institutions are constructed and serve a purpose.

Appendix B — Meeting with Samantha Tai

Figure 1. Meeting Samantha Tai.

Figure 2. Samantha Tai's campaign poster that goes against the use of dark blue and red (KMT's traditional colors)