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SPOTLIGHT

“Dried Mango”: Taiwan’s Fiercely Democratic Young Voters

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This short piece looks at the phenomenon of the “feeling of losing one’s country” (nicknamed “dried mango”) in Taiwan’s 2020 election and how it facilitated the Democratic Progressive Party in winning re-election by securing the support of young voters (typically defined as those under thirty). Previously, the fear of a change in the political status quo was typically used by the Kuomintang as an electoral tactic to mobilise its hardcore supporters. Yet, with the threat from a more assertive China, there emerged a reversal in partisanship. Taiwan’s voters under the age of thirty grew up without the experience of authoritarian rule, and they embraced democratic values more closely, which made them value political liberties more than their parents’ generation.

本文探討台灣 2020 年總統大選中出現的「亡國感」(通常戲稱為「芒果乾」)，以及這股風潮如何有助於民主進步黨獲得年輕選民(通常認定是三十歲以下的年青人)的支持，最後成功連任。以前，利用政治狀況劇變帶來的憂慮通常是國民黨使用的競選策略，目的在於動員其核心支持者積極為其投票。然而，在中國更具威懾力的威脅下，亡國焦慮的出現使政黨格局產生變化。台灣三十歲以下的選民沒有經歷過威權統治，他們更珍惜民主的價值，因此也比其父母那一代更懂得政治自由之可貴。

Keywords: Taiwan, Youth, Election, China

關鍵詞：台灣、青年、選舉、中國

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One of the emerging buzzwords accompanying Taiwan's 2020 general election was the so-called "feeling of losing one's own country" (*wangguogan* 亡國感). This term was particularly popular among Taiwan's young voters, and since they were heavily influenced by an internet culture that placed a premium on creative and satirical expressions, the fashionable term was quickly substituted by the pun "dried mango" (*manguogan* 芒果乾) and went digitally viral. To be sure, *wangguogan* and *manguogan* are not exact homophones, but the word play is amusingly sarcastic and self-deprecating, using a humble snack to represent a visceral anxiety that should have been elevated and patriotic.

The following figure demonstrates the digital popularity of the term "dried mango" according to Google Trends. This webmetrics service measures the number of some online search words relative to all queries done on Google. Hence frequency on the y axis is a relative number, signifying the online interest and attention to a particular issue in comparison to all searches in a specific region and within a certain period of time. Unfortunately, *wangguogan* was not available in Google Trends, and the author had to use *manguogan* instead. This creates a potential problem of erroneously including those digital users who are genuinely interested in the preserved fruit only. Nevertheless, the data in the previous years provide a baseline to see the unusual fluctuation in the election year of 2019. In tropical Taiwan, mango is ripe for the market in early summer (June and July), and the online interest in dried mango typically surges in August, since the fruit has a very short shelf life: this is particularly noticeable in 2017 and 2018. Clearly, Taiwan's internet users' interest in "dried mango" gathered momentum on July 2019, when the charismatic Han Kuo-yu (*Han Guoyu* 韓國瑜) clinched the presidential nomination for the Kuomintang in a contested primary. The online attention lasted until January 11, 2020, the Election Day when Taiwan's voters headed for the polling booth. Interest then quickly declined, as the election resulted in a decisive victory for the incumbent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) received an unprecedented popular vote of 8.17 million (57.1%), and her party maintained the legislative majority by taking 61 seats out of 113 in total.

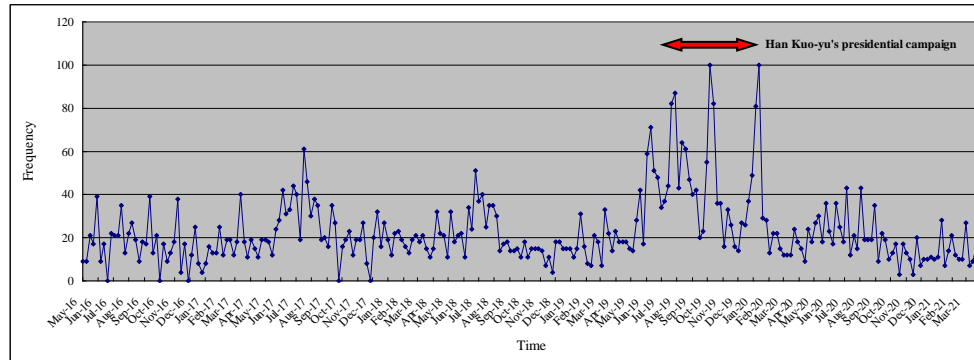


Figure 1: “Dried Mango” in Google Trends (May 2016-April 2021)¹

What does “dried mango” mean in Taiwan’s political context? The term refers to an existential anxiety that Taiwanese might have to forfeit their cherished freedom and lifestyle should voters choose a presidential candidate who was perceived to accommodate the People’s Republic of China’s territorial claim over the island. A post-election edited volume titled *“Counterattack against the Feeling of Losing One’s Own Country”* (*wanguogan de nixi* 亡國感的逆襲) (The Alliance of Losers 2020) documented the threat from China on political, cultural, economic, and other fronts. The Kuomintang’s reflection report after the election also acknowledged the fact that the DPP was effective in mobilising votes by appealing the “feeling of losing one’s own country” among the youth (Kuomintang 2020).

Interestingly, “dried mango” had the opposite incarnation in previous political history. Pan-blue politicians (the KMT and their allies) were actually the pioneers in evoking the feeling of crisis in their vote drive. During the 1994 election in Taipei City, which witnessed a split among the pan-blue camp that facilitated the DPP’s Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian 陳水扁) winning the campaign, Jaw Shao-kong (Zhao Shaokang 趙少康), then representing a split-off party from the Kuomintang, invented the slogan “The Republic of China (ROC) will perish” (*Zhonghua Minguo jiang miwang* 中華民國

¹ The area was restricted to Taiwan only. Accessed on April 29, 2021.

將滅亡), should the pro-independence DPP represented by Chen Shui-bian win the election. Ever since then, the impending crisis of the Republic of China has become a mantra frequently used by Kuomintang candidates in major elections. The pan-blue version of “the feeling of losing one’s country” is no less than a mobilisation strategy that specifically targets conservative voters with the power of negative thinking. Kuomintang politicians hope that their reluctant constituencies will eventually fall in line when they are reminded of the great stakes at risk.

DPP candidates were certainly no strangers to this convenient campaign tactic to rally hardcore supporters. A typical refrain was the claim the Kuomintang politicians would “sell off” (*chumai* 出賣) the Taiwanese to China once they were elected. However, until the 2020 election, the pan-green (the DPP and their allies’) version of mobilisation by fear was seldom about the country’s formal status. The difference reflects the fact that the DPP still remained a challenger, while the Kuomintang positioned itself as a defender of the status quo, at least in the public perception, even though Taiwan has witnessed three peaceful transitions of power since 2000.

Similar to the Kuomintang’s formula of “the ROC’s pending demise”, “dried mango” appeals to the deep-seated psychological resistance against change. So why did Taiwan’s two major parties trade positions, with the DPP emerging as the new defender of the status quo whereas the Kuomintang took on the mantle of a challenger? Their changing roles have a geopolitical cause as well as a demographic one.

The rise of a more powerful China and the resultant changes in the cross-strait balance have been redefining the status quo. Take the so-called “1992 Consensus” for example. That political formula, affirming that both Taiwan and the mainland belong to one China, has allowed the Kuomintang to build rapprochement with the Chinese Communist Party since 2005. Previously, Beijing looked away when Kuomintang politicians added a rider domestically that each side had its own interpretation of the formula. However, this wiggle-room is swiftly vanishing under a more assertive China. In the 2016 presidential election, while the KMT candidate upheld the 1992 Consensus as expected, the DPP’s Tsai Ing-wen countered with “maintaining the status quo.” In January 2019, Xi Jinping made a speech to commemorate the 40th anniversary of

the “Letter to Taiwanese Compatriots”, in which he appeared to adopt a more restricted understanding by linking the 1992 Consensus to “One Country, Two Systems.” Xi’s toughened attitude ended up by playing into the hands of DPP leaders, who were more justified in rejecting the 1992 Consensus because it implied the Taiwanese would have to accept a Hong Kong solution.

The protests in Hong Kong, on the other hand, also made the reality of “One Country, Two Systems” more realistic and more frightening to Taiwanese voters. After the flare-up of the anti-extradition movement in June 2019 and the continuing months of street confrontations, Hong Kong became a frequent topic in the public conversation as Taiwan’s electoral campaign heated up. From newspaper reports, I collected a dataset of 95 solidarity gatherings in Taiwan, from June 2019 to January 2020. These events were widespread, and there were even activities in rural Miaoli, Hualien, and Pingtung Counties. More than half of these rallies and demonstrations (49) were sponsored by students, either alone or in partnership with other NGOs (Ho 2021). Clearly, the sympathy for Hong Kong’s protesters and the fear of losing Taiwan’s future were mutually reinforcing, and such anxiety was particularly keenly felt by Taiwan’s youth.

Prior to the 2020 election, the generational conflicts between young voters, who overwhelmingly supported the DPP, and their conservative parents, who favoured the Kuomintang candidate Han Kuo-yu, became proverbial in Taiwan. Subsequently, research was commissioned by the Central Election Commission that confirmed the mobilisation power of “dried mango”. The turnout rate for voters aged from 20 to 24 and from 25 to 29 was 58.0% and 56.3% in 2016 respectively, while the figures shot up to 72.7% and 71.8% in 2020 (Juang and Hong 2021, 70).

In January 2021, the Taiwan Thinktank (*Taiwan zhiku* 台灣智庫) revealed the result of a public opinion survey, which offered an interesting glance into the mindset of Taiwan’s young citizens. 82% of the respondents in their twenties agreed with the statement “voting can effectively influence politics”, while the national average was 66%. 60% of them were “willing to take to the streets and join social movements to support one’s political ideas”, the average being 44%. Finally, 76% were in favor of the statement “social movements can promote self-realisation and social progress”, which was

supported by 54% in all age groups (Taiwan Thinktank 2021). Clearly, Taiwan's young citizens enjoyed a stronger sense of political efficacy, and they tended to adopt a more favourable view toward social movements.

How can we explain such a pronounced pro-democracy attitude among young Taiwanese? They are after all the children of Taiwan's own march toward democracy. Let's take a 25-year-old citizen in 2021 as an example. She or he was born in 1996, the year which witnessed the first direct election for president. And before they entered elementary school, the DPP had become the ruling party in 2000. When they were 12, the Kuomintang returned to power, and during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), Taiwan's youth movements surged, culminating in the 2014 Sunflower Movement. When student protesters were occupying the legislature, our young Taiwanese, likely to be a college freshman or freshman at the age of 18, was probably at the scene. In addition, Taiwanese under thirty grew up without the ideologically-loaded textbooks and curriculum at school, and they took the existence of freedom of speech, protest, and changes of the ruling party for granted. In short, they were born democrats, not tainted by the prolonged martial-law authoritarianism.

In hindsight, "dried mango" emerged because Taiwan's young citizens have come of age and become confident in asserting their political voices. In the 2020 election, this generational outpouring helped the DPP to secure another four years in power. But there is no guarantee that they will remain pan-green voters in the years to come. Young democrats are also critical and idealistic, and should the DPP incumbents fail their expectations, a mass exodus to the other camp is also a possible scenario.

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