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THE 2020 TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: WAS HONG KONG THE BIGGEST FACTOR?

IVAN YAN CHAO NG

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

This article examines the factors which led to Tsai Ing-wen's win in the 2020 Taiwan presidential elections, and critiques the importance that has been placed on the Hong Kong factor. An analysis of both internal and external factors which either preceded the Hong Kong protests or were independent of it suggests that Tsai would have won the election even without the Hong Kong factor. China's hostility towards Taiwan since 2016, the US-China trade war, generational shifts in Taiwanese identity politics and the weaknesses of Tsai's presidential opponent Han Kuo-yu had already laid the groundwork for a favourable outcome for Tsai by influencing middle-ground voters who are critical in any Taiwan election.

Keywords: Taiwan, 2020, election, Hong Kong, China, Tsai Ing-wen

Introduction

Tsai Ing-wen's landslide victory in the 2020 Taiwan presidential election marked an impressive reversal of the political fortunes of the Democratic Progressive Party ("DPP") (Kuo 2020a). It has been argued that had the election been brought forward and held at the same time as the 2018 Taiwan local elections, Tsai would not have won, given her poor approval ratings at the time, which were in sharp contrast to the sudden rise in popularity of her main rival, Han Kuo-yu from the Kuomintang party ("KMT") (Yang 2020). This article explores the various factors which contributed to Tsai's victory, and disagrees with the view that the Hong Kong protests decisively led to her victory. Multiple commentators have stressed the pivotal role of the Hong Kong protests in convincing Taiwanese voters to vote for Tsai and the DPP (Huang 2020, Ewing 2020, Ghosh 2020, Dawley and Soon 2020), but there are also other external and internal factors which swayed votes in Tsai's favour which either preceded the events in Hong Kong or were independent of it. The Hong Kong factor can be seen as part of a larger, overarching China factor, with events in Hong Kong simply being one of the manifestations of a more assertive China since Tsai first came to power in 2016. As a preliminary matter, I will first discuss, in Section I, the literature on Taiwanese voting dynamics, focusing in particular on the middle-ground voters who are decisive in Taiwanese elections. I will then consider, in Section II, the external factors which contributed to Tsai's victory, starting with the mainstream analysis, that it was due to the Hong Kong factor. Section III will examine the internal factors contributing to Tsai's

victory, before coming to the conclusion that the Hong Kong factor, while important, simply built upon the other factors contributing to Tsai's win. The 2020 elections were indicative of a tectonic shift in preferences amongst the Taiwanese electorate for a more independent stance in cross-strait relations, to the electoral advantage of the DPP and pro-independence politicians like Tsai.

Section I: Taiwanese voting dynamics

How Taiwan should handle its relationship with mainland China has been a perennial issue in Taiwanese elections ever since elections were first introduced following Taiwan's democratisation after the end of the Cold War. Wu (1999: 565-566) usefully contrasts the 'monolithic' mainland policy of the authoritarian KMT regime prior to democratisation with the competing mainland policies of the various political forces which sprung out after democratisation. Broadly speaking, the opposite visions of cross-strait relations can be found in the two main political parties, the conservative KMT and the pro-independence DPP. Hsieh (2017: 1) points out that the key difference between these two parties lies in how they approach cross-strait relations, while Wu (1999: 566) goes further to say that "the policy positions of the major political parties can be pinpointed only with reference to [cross-strait] issues". Thus, while Taiwanese elections are not exclusively about cross-strait relations, cross-strait relations are of significant and far-reaching importance when it comes to making decisions as to who to vote for at the ballot box, as the state of relations affects both the economic and security interests of Taiwan. Indeed, in the case of the 2020 election, it has been argued that the election was fundamentally about Taiwan's relationship with China (Wu 2020).

A number of academic studies have investigated Taiwanese voting dynamics and political preferences. Broadly speaking, there are two extremes. On one extreme, there is the 'deep Blue' constituency, associated with the KMT, which favours unification with China as soon as possible (Huang and James 2014: 686). On the other extreme, there is the 'deep Green' constituency, associated with the DPP, which favours an expeditious formal declaration of independence (Huang and James 2014: 686). Voters belonging to these 'deep' constituencies can be assumed to be reliable vote banks for either the KMT or the DPP. Huang and James (2014: 686, 670-672) point out that the size of these extreme constituencies has actually diminished over time. Instead, they argue that the 'status quo', the maintenance of Taiwan's *de facto* independence from China while not declaring *de jure* independence, is likely to be entrenched with the passage of time. This is due both to loss aversion (moving towards either extreme risks potential damage) and a desire to maintain second-mover advantage (as being the first-mover risks greater damage than not doing anything at all, if the desired outcome is not achieved). Thus, Huang and James (2014: 688) predict a convergence of the Blue and Green camps in Taiwanese politics, producing a status-quo Aquamarine position "as the lasting colour of Taiwan". Their analysis suggests that to win Taiwanese elections, pandering to either of the 'deep' camps is unlikely to be a useful strategy, but rather, one should focus on the preservation of the status quo as this is favoured by most middle-ground voters.

This is similar to the conclusion by Chu (2004: 486), who disagrees with both predictions that Taiwan is moving inexorably towards independence under the DPP as well as predictions that Taiwan's reunification with China is not too far off in the future. Despite DPP attempts under Chen Shui-bian to move the Taiwanese population towards the path of independence, Chu (2004: 486) argues that this was counterbalanced by an increasing sense, especially amongst the younger generation, that Taiwan's closer economic integration with China was an inevitability. Like Huang and James, Chu (2004: 486) finds that neither the deep Blue nor deep Green voters (whom he calls the 'principled believers in unification' and the 'principled believers in Taiwan independence' respectively) are sufficient in number to provide an obvious mandate for Taiwanese leaders to move Taiwan unambiguously in either direction. Instead, Chu (2004: 487) argues that the election kingmakers are the large number of 'rationalists' – who do not hold extreme views and could support either the Blue or Green camps depending on whether conditions favour reunification with China or Taiwanese independence. So long as there are enough rationalists, the future of Taiwan is harder to predict, as the political equilibrium may swing either way (Chu 2004: 506). Again, this suggests that Taiwanese politicians need to focus on the middle-ground voters.

Tang's study of Taiwanese national identity and electoral outcomes is similar to the conclusions reached by the other two studies. Middle-ground voters, whom Tang (2007: 493) calls 'fence-sitters', are a key political force affecting electoral outcomes in Taiwan. Fence-sitters are pragmatic and prefer to listen to the campaigns by the candidates before making a decision at the last minute, based on their assessment of which candidate could bring them better economic benefits (Tang 2007: 494). Importantly, Tang (2007: 491) examines the factors which affect fence-sitter voting behaviour. There are individual factors (such as whether a voter is *benshengren* (本省人) or *waishengren* (外省人),¹ education and income levels) as well as external factors (such as the effects of political rallies, political scandals, social organisations and economic conditions). For external factors, Tang (2007: 491) notes that political rallies and political scandals are quite important in swaying these fence-sitter voters. Economic conditions appear to work both ways. When economic conditions are favourable, fence-sitters are more likely to vote for the incumbent, whether Blue or Green, if the state of the economy is believed to be due to the incumbent government (Tang 2007: 493). Individually, young fence-sitters aged between 20-30, who are *benshengren* and of low income and education levels are more likely to vote Green (Tang 2007: 493).

1 *Benshengren* (本省人) refers to Han Chinese and their descendants who have lived in Taiwan prior to the arrival of the KMT in 1945. *Benshengren* form the majority of Han Chinese in Taiwan. *Waishengren* (外省人) refers to Han Chinese and their descendants whose origins are in Mainland China and came to Taiwan relatively recently, from 1945 onwards.

The time series in Figure 1, which tracks the party identification of Taiwanese voters surveyed by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University in Taiwan, supports Tang's argument about the importance of fence-sitter voters. The purple line, representing respondents who did not identify with any particular party or did not respond, has consistently been the largest percentage of Taiwanese voters since 1992. Although there has been a clear downward trend in the percentage of voters who are fence-sitters (from 62.3% of voters in 1992 to 37.8% of voters in 2020), they still remain the single largest group of voters.

A final point has to do with voting behaviour as a result of hostility from China. On previous occasions, China has engaged in hostile acts aimed at swaying the Taiwanese electorate to vote against independence-leaning Green camp politicians. A notable example of this was the lead-up to the 1996 Taiwan presidential election, when China conducted military exercises and fired missiles near Taiwan (Ross 2000: 111-112). Two of the aims of China in this instance were to force Taiwanese politicians to stop their moves towards independence and to intimidate Taiwanese voters into voting against independence (Ross 2000: 111-112). There were Chinese fears that the independence issue would be used by Lee Teng-hui to galvanise electoral support (Ross 2000: 105). Yet, Chinese coercion actually helped Lee to win a clear victory in the 1996 election, obtaining more than half the popular vote (Ross 2000: 115). As Ross (2000: 118) argues, "Chinese threats made the people of Taiwan less likely than ever to consider unification". Similarly, Wu (2005: 56) observes that Chinese sabre-rattling in the 2000 Taiwan presidential election had the effect of pushing voters towards Chen Shui-bian's Green camp. Thus, another important factor influencing Taiwanese voter preferences is whether or not China engages in hostile behaviour in the period preceding an election.

Before proceeding to my analysis of the factors which contributed to Tsai's 2020 election victory, the salient points about Taiwan's voting dynamics can be summarised as follows:

- Firstly, while there are extreme 'deep Blue' and 'deep Green' voting constituencies, they are a minority and no Taiwanese politician can come to power on the support of either camp alone.
- Secondly, middle-ground voters make up the majority of Taiwan's voters, and their votes are decisive when it comes to any candidate seeking to win office.
- Thirdly, middle-ground voters tend to make their voting decisions at the last minute, with a variety of individual and external factors influencing their decisions.
- Fourthly, strong economic performance would generally benefit the incumbent.
- Lastly, hostile actions by China towards Taiwan tend to push voters to vote for the pro-independence Green camp.

臺灣民眾政黨偏好分佈 (1992~2020.06)
Changes in the Party Identification of Taiwanese
as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU(1992~2020.06)

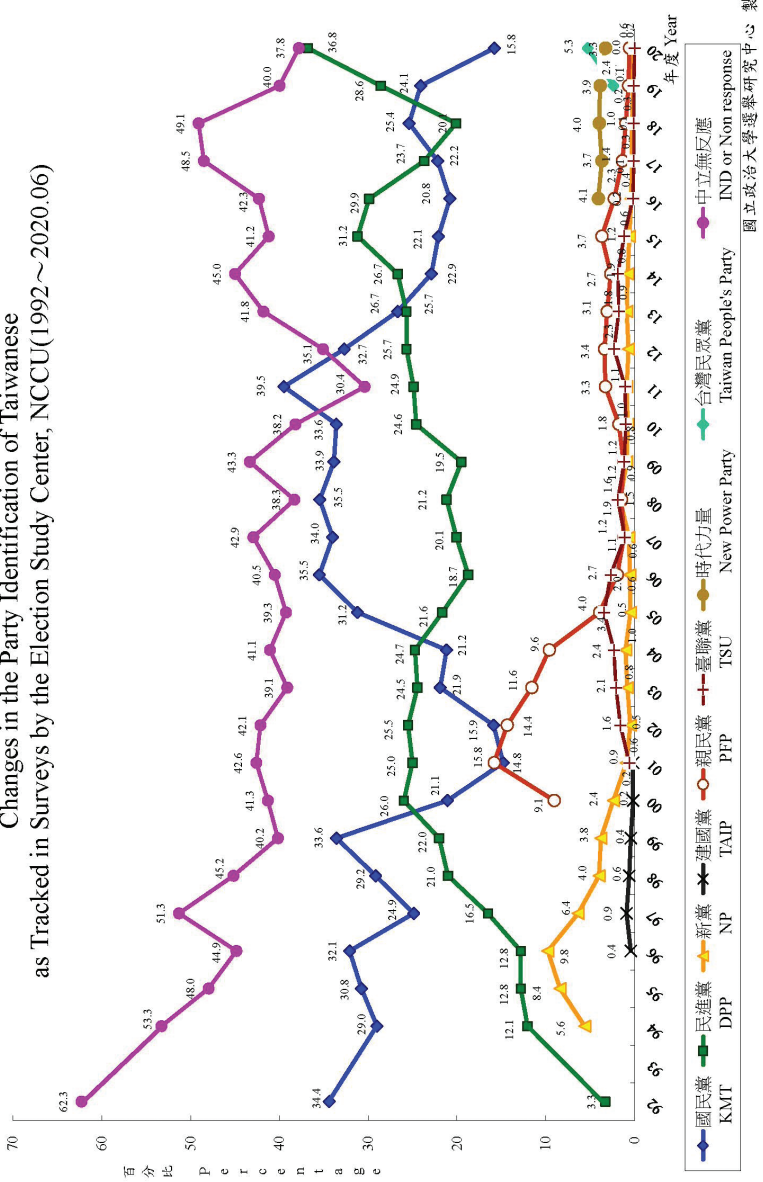


Figure 1: Changes in the Party Identification of Taiwanese, survey by Election Study Center, National Chengchi University 1992-2020. Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Party Preferences(1992/06~2020/06)" <<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/course/news.php?Sn=165>>

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Section II: External factors contributing to Tsai's 2020 election victory

As Huang (2020), a long-time journalist of Chinese affairs pointedly observes, Taiwan is probably the only place in the world where external issues are more important than internal issues in elections for the highest office in the land. The Hong Kong factor is one such external issue, which mainstream analysis considers to have played a pivotal role in Tsai's 2020 election victory (Huang 2020, Ewing 2020, Ghosh 2020, Dawley and Soon 2020). A brief discussion of events in Hong Kong in 2019 is apposite. The protests were sparked off by the opposition of many Hong Kongers to a proposed extradition bill in the Hong Kong Legislative Council, which would have allowed criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be extradited to other jurisdictions, including mainland China (Purbrick 2019: 468). Many protestors were fearful that the new law would provide a basis for political persecution and have a chilling effect on free speech, considering this law an encroachment on the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle which was guaranteed to Hong Kong when it was transferred back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Purbrick 2019: 468). Under this principle, there is political autonomy and a separate legal system, but the territory is under clear Chinese sovereignty (Grossman 2020).

A sit-in opposing the proposed extradition bill first occurred on 15 March 2019, which only involved a small number of protestors (Su 2019). However, it was only from 31 March 2019 that large-scale demonstrations began to take place (Reuters 2020). For more than half a year from June 2019, Hong Kong was paralysed by such regular, large-scale protests. While initially peaceful, the protests later took a violent turn and degenerated into bloody clashes between protestors and the police, stretching the capacity of the police to its limits (Purbrick 2019: 465).

Because Beijing has consistently stressed the same 'One Country, Two Systems' (*yi guo liang zhi*, 一国两制) principle for future reunification with Taiwan (Lee 2020: 208), Taiwanese voters have often observed the situation in Hong Kong as a tangible example of how the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle works in practice (Zheng 2020). Chinese President Xi Jinping specifically called upon Taiwan to embrace the 'One Country, Two Systems' model in a 2019 speech to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1979 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan' (Ng and Chung 2019), and promised that "the social system and way of life in Taiwan will be fully respected, and the private property, religious beliefs and legitimate rights and interests of Taiwan compatriots will be fully protected after peaceful reunification is realised" (China Daily 2019). As expressed in Tsai Ing-wen's pithy slogan "Hong Kong today, Taiwan tomorrow" (Chung and Cheung 2020), events in Hong Kong serve as an indicator to Taiwanese voters as to whether Chinese promises are genuine, or if their Taiwanese identity – including their democratic political system and freedoms – will be marginalised upon reunification with China (Channel NewsAsia 2020).

The Hong Kong protests, borne as they were out of unhappiness that Hong Kong's autonomy was not being sufficiently respected under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, were thus a significant electoral boon to Tsai and the DPP. As Templeman (2019) observes, the Hong Kong protests shifted the focus of the 2020 Taiwan election campaign to issues of Taiwanese democracy and sovereignty in the face of a more assertive China. These issues were simultaneously to the electoral advantage of the

independence-leaning DPP and heavily disadvantageous to the pro-China KMT (Templeman 2019). Tsai was quick to position herself as a supporter of the Hong Kong protestors relatively early in June 2019 – reinforcing her image as a “guardian of freedom, democracy and human rights against Chinese encroachment” (Chiu 2020). As noted earlier, political rallies are very important in swaying fence-sitter voter opinion, and Tsai certainly made full use of the Hong Kong protests to her electoral advantage (Lo 2019). Stories of the suffering and trauma of Hong Kong protestors were deftly woven into her campaign speeches, and Tsai even read a letter she received from a young Hong Kong protester during the final televised debate between the 2020 presidential candidates (Chung and Cheung 2020). The Hong Kong protests created a sense of existential crisis, especially among younger voters (Chiu 2020), as encapsulated in the expression that has been used to describe the resulting general sentiment in Taiwan, *wang guo gan* (亡国感)² (Takamura 2019). Significant party resources were devoted to appealing to younger voters in campaigning, with younger voters being actively encouraged to travel back to their households to vote and to support young Taiwanese candidates who were pro-independence, even if not belonging to the DPP (Hioe 2020, Kuo 2020b). Voter turnout at the 2020 election was also 9 percent higher than the 2016 election, suggesting that younger voters were taking the political process seriously and wanted their preferences to be felt (Chung 2020).

On the whole, however, the Hong Kong protests should arguably be viewed not as a discrete factor which contributed to Tsai’s victory, but as part of a larger, overarching China factor. The Hong Kong protests were an acute and serious manifestation of a more assertive China, but Taiwanese voters were also influenced to vote for Tsai because of Chinese actions apart from what was happening in Hong Kong. Shen argues that even before the intensification of the Hong Kong protests in the middle of 2019, Tsai was already beginning to rise in popularity from the beginning of the 2019 (Shen 2019) – in other words, Tsai’s rise in popularity preceded the Hong Kong factor.

Shen’s argument is supported by evidence from Academia Sinica’s annual survey (Chien 2019) among Taiwanese respondents, where respondents are asked which they considered more important in the context of cross-strait relations – the pursuit of economic benefits or the upholding of Taiwan’s sovereignty. From 2013 to 2018, the percentage of respondents who prioritised economic benefits over sovereignty has consistently been higher than those who prioritised Taiwan’s sovereignty (Chien 2019). There was, however, a major change in March 2019, when the percentage of respondents prioritising Taiwan’s sovereignty rose sharply to 58.3%, while those in favour of economic benefits declined to become a minority of 31.3% for the first time (Chien 2019). This shift, occurring in March 2019, clearly preceded large-scale and violent protests in Hong Kong. Although there had been concerns raised about the proposed extradition bill in Hong Kong after it was announced in February 2019, large scale protests did not begin in Hong Kong until the end of March 2019, and even then the protests were still largely peaceful. This would suggest that regardless

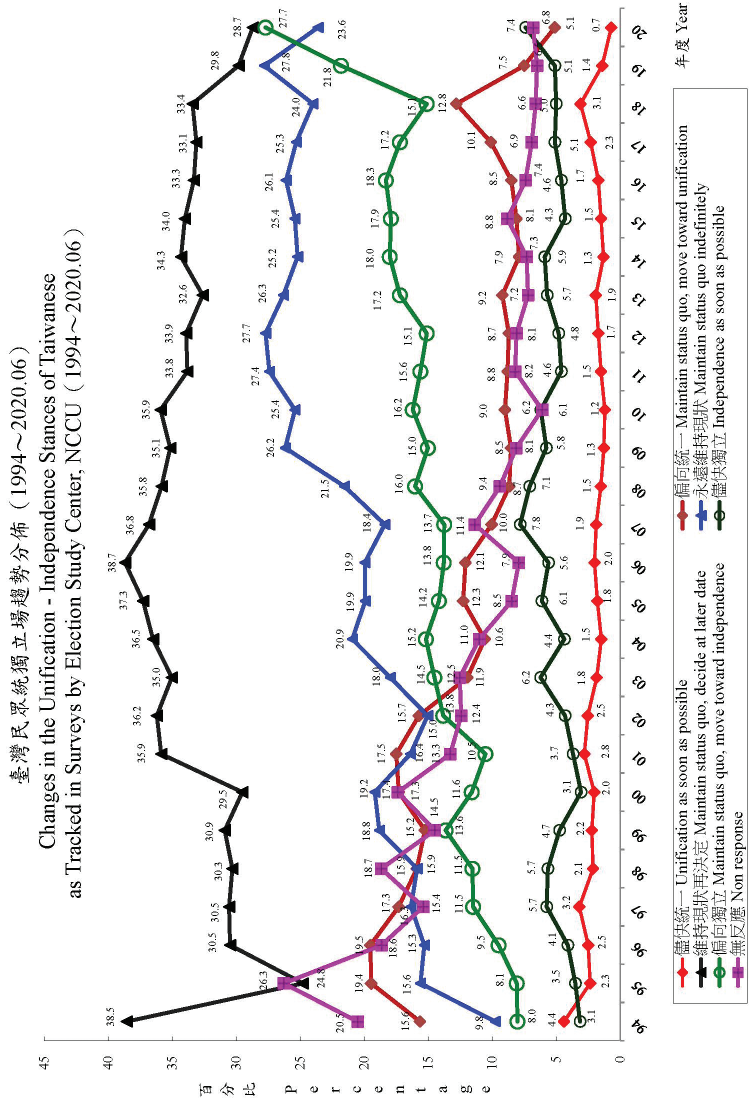
2 *Wang guo gan* (亡国感) directly translated into English refers to a feeling that the country is doomed or about to cease existing.

of what was happening in Hong Kong, there was in Taiwan itself a growing sentiment amongst Taiwanese voters that Taiwan's sovereignty was even more important than the economy, if a choice had to be made between the two.

Shen (2019) points to Chinese President Xi Jinping's January 2019 speech at the anniversary of the 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan' as marking an important shift amongst Taiwanese voters towards Tsai. In his speech, Xi stated that resolving the 'Taiwan question' through complete reunification was a historic task and repeated that this was an issue which 'should not be passed from generation to generation' (*bu neng yi dai yi dai chuan xia qu*, 不能一代一代传下去) (China Daily 2019, Xinhua 2019). Crucially, Xi declared that although 'Chinese do not fight Chinese' (*zhong guo ren bu da zhong guo ren*, 中国人不打中国人, China did not rule out the possibility of the use of military force to achieve reunification (*bu cheng nuo fang qi shi yong wu li* 不承诺放弃使用武力) (Xinhua 2019) – a point which was extremely concerning for many Taiwanese (South China Morning Post 2019). Within hours of Xi's speech, Tsai responded with a speech of her own, vowing that Taiwan would 'never' accept 'One Country, Two Systems' (*jue bu hui jie shou yi guo liang zhi*, 绝不会接受一国两制) (China Times 2019) and vigorously rejecting Xi's overtures with such force that she received a 10% improvement in her approval ratings in the monthly poll conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation (Templeman 2019).

As Taylor (2019) argues, Xi's speech was "almost as if Xi handed [Tsai] the gift of a revived political career", for two reasons – there was nothing new in what Xi was suggesting, and the ideas in his speech were political poison in Taiwanese politics. Xin (2020: 2) notes that on a fundamental level, there has been "conspicuous continuity" in Beijing's Taiwan policy over the years – Beijing has always claimed that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China. Xin also argues that since the vast majority of Taiwanese voters are against reunification, Taiwan's electoral system is such that both the KMT and DPP are constrained in their ability to pursue reunification (Xin 2020: 3). This is supported by data from the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University, as seen in Figure 2. The combined percentage of respondents who support unification (whether as soon as possible, or a gradual move towards unification) has been extremely low especially in recent years, at 8.9% in 2019 and 5.8% in 2020. Being seen as actively working towards reunification with China, while popular amongst this segment of voters, risks alienating the vast majority of Taiwanese. Although the KMT may be a pro-One China party vis-à-vis the DPP, that does not automatically make it a pro-reunification party (Xin 2020: 3). Effectively, Xi had redefined the 1992 Consensus in the speech, when he assumed that Taiwanese leaders shared Beijing's definition of 'One China' as being equivalent to 'One Country, Two Systems' under the 1992 Consensus (Tenreiro 2020). This was unacceptable to both the KMT (which believes the 1992 Consensus is deliberately ambiguous and open to interpretation) and the DPP (which rejects the 1992 Consensus altogether), but because the KMT traditionally supported closer ties with China, it became associated with Xi's speech and overtures, to the KMT's electoral disadvantage (Taylor 2019).

China had also engaged in hostile acts against Taiwan, short of the use of force, ever since Tsai took office in 2016. Shortly after her election, China discontinued its policy of engagement with Taiwan that had been in place under the preceding Ma Ying-jeou



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Figure 2: Changes in the Unification-Independence Stances of Taiwanese, survey by Election Study Center, National Chengchi University 1992-2020. Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Party Preferences(1992/06~2020/06)" <<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/course/news.php?Sn=167>>

administration (Tan 2017: 123). Unless Tsai and the DPP recognised the ‘One China’ principle under the 1992 Consensus, direct negotiations between China and Taiwan were discontinued (Tan 2017: 124). On the diplomatic front, China managed to get Malaysia and Kenya to extradite 77 Taiwanese to them in spite of Taiwanese protests (Tan 2017: 124), established diplomatic relations with Gambia (which hitherto recognised Taiwan), and prevented Taiwan’s participation in several United Nations bodies (Schreer 2017: 51), further diminishing Taiwan’s international standing. Economically, China signalled its displeasure with the Tsai administration by reducing the number of Chinese tourists allowed to visit Taiwan in 2016 (Schreer 2017: 51), which escalated to a full ban on individual Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan in 2019 (The Straits Times, 2019).

Perhaps most important of all was China’s military coercion. Right before Tsai’s official inauguration in May 2016, China conducted large military exercises on its side of the Taiwan Strait, a move Tan (2017: 124) observes was similar to China’s previous military exercises right before the 1996 Taiwan elections. Schreer (2017: 52) explains this through the concept of coercion – coercion being the influencing of the other party to act in a certain way, without the use of force itself, but through the threat of inflicting damage to the other party. He divides Chinese coercion towards Taiwan into two dyads – coercion to *deter* Taiwanese independence, and coercion to *compel* Taiwanese acceptance of reunification (Schreer 2017: 52). Whilst China’s coercion to deter Taiwanese independence has been quite successful, Schreer (2017: 55) argues that this has simultaneously made the successful compellence of Taiwan to reunify peacefully with China nearly impossible. China’s hostile actions since 2016 aimed at deterring Taiwanese independence have caused Taiwanese resentment towards China to increase since then (Schreer 2017: 55). This is resentment which preceded the 2019 Hong Kong protests, forming part of a general anti-China sentiment amongst many Taiwanese, and which later translated into votes of confidence in the 2020 elections in Tsai’s ability to protect Taiwan’s sovereignty in the face of increased Chinese hostility (Kuo 2020a). This is consistent with the historical record as discussed in Section I, when previous hostile Chinese acts had the effect of pushing Taiwanese voters towards pro-independence politicians.

A final external factor which played a role in gaining votes for Tsai was the perhaps surprisingly beneficial effects of the trade war between the US and China. Starting from 2018, a trade war between the US and China began when US President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on certain Chinese goods, leading to retaliatory tariffs by China (BBC 2018). This had a significant adverse impact on Taiwanese technology companies with manufacturing facilities in China, as the manufactured products would become subject to US tariffs (Fulco 2019). A large influx of Taiwanese companies relocating back to Taiwan thus occurred in 2018 (Zhou 2020). These returning companies had committed a total of 27 billion US dollars in investment into the Taiwanese economy by the end of 2019, mainly in the Information and Communication Technologies sector, injecting economic dynamism and creating new jobs (Lee 2019). Furthermore, as a United Nations (2019) report notes, the ‘trade diversion effect’ caused by the US-China trade war has made Chinese exports less competitive in the US market, while boosting the competitiveness of other economies. Taiwan was actually the biggest beneficiary of this trade diversion effect, gaining a windfall of 4.2 billion US dollars in additional exports to the US in the first half of 2019 (Jennings 2019).

On the whole, the Taiwan's GDP grew by 2.91% in the third quarter of 2019, exceeding the growth in the other three export-reliant 'little dragon economies' of South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong, which are traditionally viewed as Taiwan's economic rivals (Tan 2019). As noted in Section I, strong economic performance generally benefits the incumbent. It has been argued that strong economic performance is an excellent way for an incumbent government to achieve re-election (Bochsler and Hanni 2019: 30), and the state of the economy is certainly an important issue for Taiwanese voters, even if the specific percentages of voters who prioritise economic benefits over sovereignty may fluctuate from year to year (Chien 2019). Although the US-China trade war was a fortuitous matter completely outside Tsai's control, it proved to be an economic boon for Taiwan, thus allowing Tsai, as the incumbent, to take credit for it in her election campaign. Rather than face a difficult choice between Taiwan's sovereignty and economic performance, Tsai presented to Taiwanese voters a unique opportunity to have their cake and eat it too – a vote for her was not only a vote for the protection of Taiwanese sovereignty, but continued economic prosperity.

Section III: Internal factors contributing to Tsai's 2020 election victory

I now discuss two major internal factors which contributed to Tsai's victory – generational differences in political identity and the weaknesses of Han Kuo-yu as a candidate. The generational rift over political identity in Taiwan was a major factor which Tsai was able to take advantage of through political mobilisation. As Butler (2020) argues, there is a growing generational gap in Taiwan when it comes to political identity. The younger generation has been called the 'born independent' generation, lacking family and cultural linkages with the Chinese mainland compared to the older generation (Butler 2020). Several polls conducted over the past 5 years indicate a strong inter-generational difference when it comes to the issue of Taiwanese independence, with the majority of younger Taiwanese supporting such a stance. A 2015 poll found that among Taiwanese aged 20 to 29 years of age, 79.1% of them supported independence, with only 12.7% supporting reunification (Loa 2015). Four years later, a 2019 poll showed that 83.1% of young Taiwanese consider themselves exclusively Taiwanese – considerably higher than the overall 59.6% of Taiwanese across all age groups who see themselves as exclusively Taiwanese (Ng 2019). Younger Taiwanese aged 18 to 29 are also less supportive than older Taiwanese of Taiwan becoming closer to China economically and politically (Devlin and Huang 2019). As Pate (2016: 158) observes, "nationalism and separatism is strong among the youth in Taiwan, and it is growing".

Unsurprisingly, these younger Taiwanese have a tendency to support Tsai and her policies stressing Taiwanese sovereignty and distancing from China (Ng 2019, Pate 2016). Crucially, Tsai was able to convert this support from the younger generation into an actual victory at the polls through the use of political mobilisation. As Nachman (2020) argues, an important factor in Tsai's victory "was convincing enough new voters – likely young voters – to vote this election". Echoing Nachman, Tu (2020) emphasises that the participation of first-time voters, aged between 20 and 23, was a key factor in Tsai's victory. Youth voter mobilisation was certainly helped by the events in Hong Kong, but is unlikely to have been as effective had Tsai and the DPP not played upon

the generation gap and framed the election as, in effect, a matter of life and death for Taiwan, which spurred many young Taiwanese into voting (Nachman 2020).

The other key internal factor has to do with the missteps and weaknesses of Han Kuo-yu as presidential candidate. Ng (2019) points out that Han's unpredictable style and penchant for controversy made him a very 'un-KMT' leader. Unlike other KMT nominees, Han had very little political experience prior to his election as Kaohsiung mayor – certainly much less than veteran KMT politicians such as Eric Chu, Wu Den-yih and Chou Hsi-wei (Templeman 2019). Apart from his regular use of vulgar language and sexist remarks, which contributed to his unpopularity with younger voters (Butler 2020), perceptions of his fitness for office were also negatively affected by his poor performance as Kaohsiung mayor (Spencer 2019) and an alleged drinking problem which led to members of Han's own KMT party asking him to quit drinking before the 2020 election (Nachman 2020).

Polls conducted by My Formosa from November 2018 to September 2019 suggest a dramatic transformation in the Taiwanese electorate's perception of Han over the course of a year. While 52.1% of respondents in November 2018 indicated they trusted Han, this had fallen sharply to 28.9% of respondents in September 2019 (SET News 2019). On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who mistrusted Han more than doubled from 26.6% in November 2018 to 65.5% in September 2019 (SET News 2019). Han's perceived (excessive) closeness to China due to his previous meetings with Chinese officials in the mainland and Hong Kong in 2019 is believed to have contributed to a mistrust of him amongst many voters (Everington, 2019).

In the crucial final weeks leading to the actual election in January 2020, opinion polls continued to indicate that Han was lagging far behind his incumbent opponent. Han had only the support of 27.5% of respondents as compared to Tsai's 40.5% in November 2019 (Chen 2019) – a gap which further widened by 30 December 2019 (mere days before election day on 11 January 2020) to 20.3% for Han and 48.2% for Tsai (My Formosa 2019). The results of these opinion polls, being conducted in the critical period right before the actual election, are significant in light of the observation noted earlier by Tang, which is that many Taiwanese 'fence-sitter' voters wait to the very last minute before deciding who to vote for. The phenomenon of last minute 'fence-sitter' voters could thus explain why Han's earlier popularity in November 2018 was not sustained a year later, as these voters prefer to wait until shortly before an election to make a decision.

On the whole, Templeman (2019) observes that Han Kuo-yu was an 'unusually polarising' politician. Whilst Han was able to gain the support of deep Blue voters with his old-school nationalism (Nachman 2020) and many working-class blue-collar voters due to his cultivation of a 'ordinary Taiwanese' image (Smith 2019), his appeal outside these constituencies was very much limited, failing to convince middle-ground voters that he would be able to protect Taiwan's interests if successfully elected (Templeman 2019). As earlier noted in Section I, having the support of the 'deep' constituencies alone is insufficient to carry a candidate to victory in Taiwanese elections due to the large number of middle-ground voters.

Conclusion

The Hong Kong factor certainly assisted Tsai in winning the 2020 election. It created a sense of existential crisis which convinced many Taiwanese voters to vote for Tsai, who was perceived as being a better protector of Taiwan's sovereignty than Han Kuo-yu. It can, however, be argued that the Hong Kong factor's role in Tsai's victory was as part of a larger 'China' factor. Many Taiwanese voters had been suspicious and mistrustful of China even before the outbreak of the Hong Kong protests, and this is especially so for the younger generation. China's increasingly hostile political rhetoric, threatening military exercises, economic pressure and diplomatic moves to isolate Taiwan further were all par for the course ever since Tsai Ing-wen became Taiwan's president in 2016, long before anyone could have predicted the outbreak of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The Hong Kong protests thus helped to intensify pre-existing Taiwanese antipathy towards China, rather than creating this sentiment out of thin air. Tsai and the DPP also had agency, in the sense that they were able to cleverly exploit the situation in Hong Kong for political mileage, especially through their mobilisation of the younger voters. As the incumbent, Tsai was able to take credit for the strong economic performance Taiwan had as a partial result of the US-China trade war, and was also fortunate that her main rival Han Kuo-yu committed many electoral faux pas and alienated a large number of Taiwanese voters, especially the younger ones. Both external and internal factors were already in Tsai's favour before the outbreak of the Hong Kong protests, which then provided a final, decisive victory over Han Kuo-yu.

Moving forward, factors like the state of the global economy and the quality of the candidate will continue to have an effect in swaying voters to vote for either the KMT or DPP. However, it is arguable that the slow, tectonic shift in political identity amongst younger Taiwanese who feel increasingly disconnected from China with each passing generation will be to the long-term advantage of DPP presidential candidates in future elections, especially if China's Taiwan policy continues to be assertive and viewed as a threat by Taiwanese voters.

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Biographical Note

Ivan Yan Chao Ng (黄彦超) is a postgraduate student research assistant at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he is a candidate for a Master of Science in Strategic Studies. He holds a Bachelor of Laws and a Master of Arts (Southeast Asian Studies) from the National University of Singapore. His research interests are in ethnic politics and security. He can be contacted at ngya0018@e.ntu.edu.sg.

