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The Visual Politics of Taiwanese Nationalism: Contested National Identities in Sunflower Movement Imagery

My dissertation research explores how national identity is constructed and contested in visual media in Taiwan. I do this by analyzing the use of national symbols in the visual materials—posters, pamphlets, costumes and graffiti—produced by the 2014 Sunflower Movement (SM) and comparing these with imagery published by the government. The SM was a direct response to two main issues. First, its members were concerned about the potential impacts of the Cross Straits Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), a major free trade agreement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that would open up Taiwan’s service sector. The agreement’s opponents were concerned that it would increase mainland influence over local media and the economy, which the PRC could use as political leverage. The second issue was how the government was trying to pass the agreement. Lawmakers from the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party used administrative loopholes to force the agreement through committee review. This action led to a protest on March 18 outside the Legislature, which escalated into a 23-day long occupation of the building by protestors, supported by some of the largest protest rallies in Taiwan’s history.

I investigate three research questions:

1. How are concepts of the nation constructed and reproduced in images?
2. How does the representation of national identity differ between the imagery of SM and the government?
3. How can national symbols problematize or contest ideas of the nation?

In other words, how can a signifier be used to complicate the very concept it conventionally signifies?

I argue that the imagery produced by the SM demonstrates a significant reformulation of Taiwanese national identity. This conception of Taiwanese identity is framed primarily in opposition to KMT-promoted version of Chinese identity. However, it also differs from previous conceptions of Taiwanese identity through its selective appropriation of symbols and motifs typically associated with Chinese identity. I show how SM images repeatedly use context and composition to realign or re-signify the conceptual boundaries of Chinese and Taiwanese identities. This indicates that conventional ethnic



SM poster showing hands peeling the KMT logo off the ROC flag to reveal the PRC flag underneath. Source: [Sunflower Movement archive](#). Used under [Creative Commons License](#).

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categories are no longer the primary fault line in Taiwanese politics. This is a central dynamic in both domestic politics in Taiwan and cross-strait relations with the PRC.

Methodologically, this project offers novel insights into how national identity is reproduced and contested through visual means. I show how images have a visual grammar, or a distinct set of conventions for producing meaning. Although imagery interacts with verbal or written discourse, it is also distinct because it is mimetic and non-linear. As most people are not used to thinking critically about how we see, visual materials are a rich and largely untapped source of information about the implicit attitudes and dispositions which make up national identity. To my knowledge this is the first sustained analysis of visual expressions of national identity in Taiwan.

My analysis focuses on three themes that commonly appear in SM and KMT imagery. First, I examine the use of the Republic of China (ROC) flag. I show how the most prototypical national symbol—the flag — is, in fact, quite ambiguous. SM and KMT imagery use the same flag to mark themselves as the legitimate advocates of the national interest. This is an unexpected symbolic move in Taiwan, where symbols and institutions of KMT party and ROC state are historically intertwined.

Second, consider how images produce different narratives of national history. This includes resignifying specific symbols, such as the founding father of modern Chinese nationalism, Sun Yat-sen, as a figure of a distinctively Taiwanese history. I show how stylistic conventions evoke different national histories that in turn frame policies, actors or political values as part of or foreign to “the nation.”

Finally, I consider how visual representations of space—maps and map-like logos—frame Taiwan in relation to “China.” KMT imagery de-emphasizes contested political boundaries—or even boundedness—by visually emphasizing global integration, connectivity and flows. This contrasts with SM imagery that stresses Taiwan as bounded national territory—a discrete political space. This framing is accomplished not only by juxtaposing the island of Taiwan with symbols of the PRC, but also through stylistic choices that position the viewer in affective relationships with the map-image that frame Taiwan as distinct political territory.

My analysis offers a nuanced picture of the role of national identity in the SM and in contemporary Taiwan more generally. Rather than a blanket rejection of Chinese identity, we see a conflict over which symbols are “Chinese” and which are “Taiwanese.” The prevalence of this symbolic contestation in the SM supports other scholarship that suggests that there has been a generational shift in identity politics in Taiwan. By looking at the visual framing strategies that the movement used, my project adds a neglected ideational dimension. Finally, my attention to the impact of context and composition on the preferred reading of national symbols adds empirical support to the theoretical assertion that national identity is a contingent and contested process of identification. It indicates that there is no essential “Taiwanese” identity, or any other national identity. Rather, it is a continual process of imagining and reimagining the national community.