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# The Taiwan Elections in Historical Perspective

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## [The Taiwan Elections in Historical Perspective](#)

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By Sebastian Veg

During a recent trip to Taipei to observe the January presidential and legislative elections, like many people with little first-hand knowledge of Taiwan, I was struck by the unique traits of Taiwan's democracy. The elections also seemed relevant to many debates in China, not only because they were closely followed and tweeted by critical voices on the mainland, but also because of their significance against the broader historical and geographical context of the history of modern China, a connection which holds true even if one subscribes to the view that Taiwan had no previous connection with this history before 1945 and was drawn into against its will. While Taiwanese democracy is usually discussed as a model of post-authoritarian transition (which of course it is, as demonstrated by the peaceful and consensual electoral process this year), possibly for China to emulate, I believe Taiwan's experience also fits into a wider timeframe reaching back to Republican history.

I attended the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party)'s final campaign meeting on the eve of the election in Banqiao, held almost entirely in Hoklo and culminating in Lee Teng-hui's emotional statement "entrusting Taiwan" to Tsai Ing-wen. The candidate then appeared on stage, and began speaking almost exclusively in Mandarin, at which point a sizeable number of people around me began to ostensibly leave the stadium, highlighting—albeit in a rather anecdotal way—Tsai's difficulties in appealing to the green grassroots while positioning herself as a responsible candidate attractive to "light green" or "light blue" urban elites. The political polarization along the blue-green divide highlighted by Tsai's difficulties may seem puzzling or parochial to the visitor, recalling the similar bipartisan divide in Hong Kong between the pro-Beijing parties and the pan-democrats, the latter often appearing to have nothing to offer to the voter beyond their endorsement of universal suffrage, sorely lacking a more coherent agenda on social and tax policy, environmental or cultural issues. In Taiwan however, the DPP is not only a nativist, Taiwan-centred (or pro-independence) party: it has progressively acquired a double identity as an advocate for political democracy (as well as social, labour or environmental rights) and a party deeply rooted in local identity, in a way that the Hong Kong pan-democrats (despite their own variety of colonial history) are not.

This somewhat paradoxical combination (local politics are rarely seen as a stronghold of democratic values) of course has undeniable roots in Taiwan's own particular history, marked by its double colonial experience in the two halves of the last century. However, the binary that the DPP forms with the KMT (Kuomintang, "nationalist" party) also echoes and makes sense within a century-old dichotomy in Chinese history: as early as May Fourth times, the political debate at the republican end of the spectrum revolved around whether democracy should be based on a nation-state or on local polities. Today's KMT in Taiwan remains (despite its occasional neo-Confucian leanings, in particular its moralistic attacks on Chen Shui-bian) an heir to the pro-Western modernizers of the late Qing and early Republic, who believed that establishing a democratic regime on Chinese soil would depend on the Chinese people's ability to reproduce the political structures that had emerged in Europe and America since the late 18th century. The

first necessity in this perspective was, as is well documented, to transform China from an Empire into a nation-state, forging the somewhat fanciful idea of a *Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族 (or “Chinese” nation), encompassing the five ethnic groups materialized by the stripes on the new Republican flag. An entirely different streak of democracy activists took inspiration from the egalitarian traditions in local culture to oppose Confucian hierarchy and advance a utopian social agenda that did not predicate achieving a democratic polity on the existence of a nation-state. These Jeffersonian activists, many of them inspired by the early Zhang Binglin (who coined the name of the new state, *Zhonghua minguo* 中華民國, before inventing the expression *liansheng zizhi* 聯省自治 or federal self-government) and his esoteric commentaries of minor heterodox classics, took part not only in the New Culture movement in the late 1910s, but also in the provincial autonomy movement in the early 1920s. The provincial constitutions they drafted, as argued by Prasenjit Duara, were seen by some as a more principled base for democracy than an uncertain nation-state dominated by Beijing power politics. Many May Fourth intellectuals joined forces with their former classmates who had entered the military and were styled “warlords” but in fact shared a common background with them, like Chen Jiongmeng, recently discussed as a possible ancestor of self-governing experiments in Lufeng (Wukan). This federalist movement for the realization of democracy through provincial constitutions was subsequently vilified as “separatist” and effectively airbrushed out of history books, in the narrative forged by Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT in the 1930s, much of which was recycled by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) after 1949.

Therefore, while it would be hard to deny that the DPP is deeply Taiwanese, one might argue that it is not entirely surprising that the first stable institutionalized democracy in a culturally Chinese context was realized by the democratic accession to power of a party whose agenda is at odds with the nation-state paradigm consistently advanced by the KMT, and inherited from the late Qing (and hence shared by the CCP). As Frank Muryard writes: “the DPP has a bottom-up, grassroots concept and practice of the nation and nationalism, like all small/local territory-based and democracy-based movements of national self-determination against colonialism or ‘alien’ domination; there is no claim to rule over other territories/national groups ‘stolen’ or part of a former imperial state.” This raises a series of questions about the concepts of modern Chinese politics. The usual translation of the name of the KMT as the Nationalist Party, while well-entrenched, may be worth a moment of reflection. In theory, “National Party” might have been a more appropriate choice, or even “Citizen’s Party”; in practice, however, the English translation put forward at the time (which must have been approved by Sun Yat-sen), demonstrates the perennial subordination of the citizen (*guomin* 國民) to a *guo* 國, a nation-state on the Western model.

Incidentally, this point was raised recently when critical voices in Hong Kong opposed a project to step up *guomin jiaoyu* 國民教育 in Hong Kong schools, translatable as “citizen education” or “national education”, but which was widely rendered in English as “patriotic education,” in a telling revelation of how many Hongkongers continue to view the notion of *guo* as imposing some form of lip-service to patriotism (while Hongkongers tend to favour the word *siman/shimin* “citi-zen” 市民; on the mainland, the preferred term is now *gongmin* 公民). In this sense, this debate and others raise the question whether Hong Kong, although it shares its local identity with a much larger Cantonese-speaking area on the other side of the border, may also develop a truly democratic culture based more closely on its local identity and unique historical experience,

which reaches deeper than the “rule of law” discourse that all too often serves as a convenient stand-in for political democracy. In Taiwan, while the KMT victory also points to the reassuring security of a well-tested historical model offered by China’s oldest political party, which has succeeded in shedding most of the stigma of its long-time single-party status, the DPP’s encouraging result, which for many commentators points to a possible victory in four years, raises the question of how a more “respectable” DPP will fit into the cross-straits political game. Can the DPP complete its transition to a party that promotes Taiwan as a full-fledged nation-state without reproducing some of the exclusionary traits of the KMT? Can it embrace, as it sometimes did in the 1990s, a more culturally open, inclusive conception of the polity? Can it perhaps, in this way, even serve as a model for a new type of citizen activism in China, tracing its roots back to the early years of the Republic? In this sense, the strategic dilemmas of the DPP over the coming years, however disconnected they may be from Chinese politics, also point to the challenges that the democratic movement continues to face on the mainland.

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