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## **National Identity Formation Under Pressure: Building a National Identity Distinct to a Significant Other**

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# **National Identity Formation Under Pressure:**

## **Building a National Identity Distinct to a Significant Other**

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# 1. Introduction & Methodology

## 1.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the formation of national identity under pressure of a significant Other, using the cases of Taiwan (also referred to as Republic of China (ROC)) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). More specifically, national identity under the influence of foreign information warfare is examined, as new information ecosystems provide fertile ground for various actors to influence opinions abroad. It will be examined how Taiwanese national identity has responded to a PRC which seeks reunification and therefore, among other strategies, uses disinformation campaigns. At the latest with the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America, public awareness of disinformation campaigns by foreign governments has increased. Many democracies around the world suffer from foreign intervention in the form of information warfare which seeks and also accomplishes to destabilize and divide societies, as well as democratic institutions. National identity shifting towards a Taiwanese identity is not a recent phenomenon, however, the scope of disinformation and propaganda coming from the Chinese government has increased since 2016. In 2016 the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the elections and Tsai Ing-wen became president. The PRC aims at undermining democratic institutions, especially at harming the pro-independent government, and presenting democracy as a failure. The new Taiwanese identity is not based on an ethnic or cultural distinction from China but rather on a civic nationalism and a democratic political identity that is distinct from China's autocratic system. I argue that the disinformation campaigns have a "backlash" effect by reinforcing differences rather than undermining Taiwan's national identity. The "othering" of China leads to a stronger Taiwanese national identity, that differs from the Chinese one. The research question asks: *To what extent does the Taiwanese national identity get stronger despite increasingly Chinese sharp power attacks?* Stronger means that more people identify themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese or both. To answer the question, a theoretical foundation of the concept of national identity was laid and literature of national identity formation and disinformation in Taiwan reviewed. Finally, speeches by Tsai and secondary literature were analyzed and results discussed.

## 1.2 Methodology

In this qualitative research, I will conduct a single case study of Taiwan's national identity in the context of China's attempts to undermine its sovereignty through the use of disinformation campaigns. The issue of national identity formation and change is a very complex topic that continues to be important and Taiwan provides a perfect case in point. The choice of a single case study design allows for a comprehensive examination of the issue and application of existing theories. Taiwan lends itself to this study because it has undergone various identity shifts in history and identity is an important topic until today. As the Taiwanese nation has experienced various processes of nation-building and today relies on a civic nationalism based on an acquired identity, it can be approached through a constructivist lens. This study contributes to the existing literature on the formation and transformation of national identity in Taiwan and adds a new perspective to the theory of "othering" by using Chinese disinformation campaigns and countermeasures as a vivid example. Moreover, disinformation as a tool to sow division in democracies is an extremely recent and important topic to study.

The use of a discourse analysis of primary sources to analyze the political phenomena of national identity and disinformation seems appropriate. Looking beyond the literal meaning of what was said reveals meaning about the discourse on identity, how it has shifted, and how it is threatened. A textual analysis of secondary sources will provide context. Due to a language barrier, this research relies on secondary literature of disinformation campaigns and countermeasures. The primary sources for the analysis are speeches by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, and are firstly the document "important speeches", published in 2022, and secondly a speech to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) from 2018. The first document compiles speeches for the National Day, New Year's Day, DPP National Congress, and Tsai's inaugurations between 2016 and 2020. Those occasions are moments when Tsai addresses Taiwanese citizens and speaks about issues that affect the whole nation. It is obvious that someone from the opposition would speak differently about those issues, however the DPP and Tsai were legitimately elected by the nation, so these speeches are representative to analyze the discourse on national identity. Moreover, the primary source was selected because the DPP and Tsai advocate independence from the PRC and represent a local Taiwanese identity that is distinct from a Chinese one. Data from 2016 to 2020 was analyzed because Tsai was elected in 2016, re-elected in 2020, and China intensified disinformation campaigns after 2016 to prevent her re-election. I will analyze the speeches based on different narratives in order to draw a meaningful conclusion. Those narratives are based on a thorough review of

literature on Cross-Strait relations, national identity in Taiwan and disinformation. The narratives are the following: National identity based on civic nationalism and democratic values, Chinese pressure and threats, particularly in the form of information warfare, and Taiwan's response to them.

## **2. Theory & Literature**

### **2.1 Foundational Literature on National Identity Formation**

Primordialists view national identity as fixed, while the constructivist interpretation views identity as not innate but constructed and thus re-constructible (Chen, 2013, p. 231). Political leaders in particular, portray national and ethnic identity as something fixed that is not influenced by the experiences surrounding the individual (Brown, 2012, p. 13). By taking a constructivist approach that emphasizes socio-political experience rather than ethnicity, I will attempt to theorize how identity can change or evolve in the presence of an external significant Other that seeks to influence a group, as "identities are both fluid and changeable" (pp. 16). Anderson (2006) famously argued that the nation "is an imagined political community", and that the belief in boundaries and sovereignty of the nation is what delimits the nation (p. 6). The nation is bounded because there are other nations that exist beyond its national borders (p. 7). Anderson's idea of an "imagined community", constructed through shared socio-political experiences, contrasts with the idea of a national identity that is only defined by ethnicity and a shared bloodline (Kwan, 2016, p. 934). The difference between these two approaches is whether nationhood is based on ascriptive or acquired characteristics (p. 944). Ethnic nationalism is based on ascriptive or given characteristics that cannot be chosen. Nationalism that arises from shared social and political experiences on the other hand is a civic nationalism based on acquired characteristics. This "acquired identity is based upon common values and patterns of social interaction which are demonstrated through institutions and historical memory", and anyone "can become a member of the community through adaption of a certain set of political and social interaction", regardless of birth or ethnicity (p. 944). If we assume that national identity as part of the nation is not fixed by ethnicity but constructed around meaning (Chen, 2013, p. 231), identity can change with changing norms because identities are formed through interactions in everyday life. This interaction between individuals occurs between groups that share the same identity but also with those who claim a different identity

(Brown, 2012, p. 15). The self is defined in relation to and in opposition to the Other and thus constructs its meaning around this social relationship with the Other (Zhong, 2016, p. 339).

Anthony Smith's theory of national identity encompasses shared perceptions, aspirations, and ideas that bind people together as a nation (Guibernau, 2004, p. 132). Connor also believes that there is a bond that holds people of the same nation together and is the essence of national identity: "a sense of belonging" (Triandafyllidou, 2010, p. 595). He further argues that additional features such as a shared territory, language, history, and traditions which are also part of a national identity according to Smith's definition, only reinforce national identity (p. 597). People form a group based on a "felt closeness" that unites those who are part of the nation (Guibernau, 2004, p. 135) and this "felt closeness" refers to an imagined national identity based on acquired characteristics, as people feel close to each other, based on shared experiences. As stated before, according to Anderson the nation is limited in the sense that the world consists of more than the nation in which one lives and these nations all have the same rights, are all unique and have special characteristics, as well as imagined to be sovereign. The desire for self-determination is based primarily on the fact that a nation has a "common past and a common project for the future" (Guibernau, 2004, p. 132). A nation's past or history also plays a role for Dittmer (2004) who notes two important dimensions of national identity. One is finding a narrative about the nation's history and finding a role for the nation in international society which leads to "a sense of shared interest in the fate of the whole" (p. 476). The nation's right of self-determination becomes its most important project (Triandafyllidou, 2010, p. 595). The assumption of common interest in the context of national identity is also found in Brown (2012) where it is argued that the most common mistake is to view national identity as "based on common ancestry and/or common culture and therefore [assume] that identity is grounded in antiquity" (p. 2). It is rather socio-political and economic experiences that shape a national group, than ancestry and culture (pp. 2, 10). National identity, thus can be political and formed by shared experiences and interests and need not be based on ethnic characteristics.

If we assume that we live in a world of different nations striving for independence, the idea of the Other is linked to the idea of a nation, its identity and its right to govern itself. Considering national identity from this perspective reveals a very crucial factor for its conceptualization, namely that it is not absolute, but relative (Triandafyllidou, 2010, p. 598). Identity requires relationships between ingroups and outgroups, so that members of a nation know who they are by knowing who they are not (Zhong, 2016, p. 388). Shared characteristics can be especially useful when they are unique to the nation because they are different from those outside the group (Dittmer, 2004, p. 467). The formation of national identity is an

interactive process between the self and the Other, both inside and outside the nation (Chen, 2013, p. 231). The article "National Identity and the 'other'" by Triandafyllidou (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of the role of the Other in national identity. Through the Other, "national identity can thus be conceived as a double-edged relationship" that is defined internally and externally (p. 599). National identity can feature a shared culture, history, and memory, as well as a notion of common territory and economy which are inward-looking factors. But it especially involves differentiation from others who are not part of the national identity. The possibility that the significant Other poses a threat to one's group may be one reason why national identity is solidified. Thus, national identity is strengthened, both because the ingroup's characteristics contrast them with the outgroup's characteristics and because the Other can also represent a general threat or an enemy which leads to a consolidation of identity. The significant Other may be a territorially proximate nation that poses or is perceived as posing a threat to the ingroup's self-determination. The Other can also impact identity by attempting to actively influence the formation or change of a national identity (Triandafyllidou, 2010, pp. 601-603). Another role the significant Other can play is when the ingroup's national identity is challenged by a crisis within the nation, as for example strong political polarization among citizens. In this case, the external significant Other can help unite the polarized nation by highlighting a common threat and reminding people how they are different from the Other and thus who they are. At this moment, it is more important to unite against the enemy than to focus on internal division (Triandafyllidou, 2010, p. 603). People feel united "through the collective experience of feeling attacked by an outsider" (Bauer & Wilson, 2022, p. 22) and can put aside concerns that have led to internal polarization.

## **2.2 National Identity Formation in Taiwan**

Due to several periods of external authoritarian rule in history, Taiwanese national identity is a contested topic. Prior to liberalization and eventual democratization, Taiwan was ruled colonially and subsequently by a repressive and authoritarian regime. Since experiences with those regimes contributed to a democratic national identity it is important to take a closer look at how these decades have influenced today's national identity and political landscape.

The island of Taiwan was inhabited by native people until European powers established their colonial empires. Before the Qing dynasty took over in 1684 the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish exercised rule in Taiwan. At the end of the war against Japan, the Qing Dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan, and colonial rule began in 1895 and lasted until 1945. Taiwanese were considered second-class citizens, Japanese culture was forced on them and tens of thousands

were killed (Jacobs, 2012, p. 30). Moreover, modernization efforts like the establishment of an administrative and educational system, the building of infrastructure and the improvement of public health were implemented (p. 12). In 1919 the regime liberalized in light of "Taisho democracy" in Japan and Woodrow Wilson's speech on "self-determination" (p. 27). After the Japanese defeat in World War II, Taiwan was returned to the ROC and in 1949 Chiang Kai-shek withdrew from the mainland to Taiwan in the face of defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (Chong & Pan, 2022, p. 452). Similar to the Japanese regime, the subsequent Kuomintang (KMT) regime was repressive, discriminated against Taiwanese people, and killed thousands. Nevertheless, it contributed to Taiwan's democracy by allowing certain liberalizations. The KMT regime attempted to reintegrate Taiwan into the Chinese nation through forced Sinicization campaigns. Part of these campaigns was the introduction of the Mandarin language in schools and other public spaces (Lynch, 2004, p. 518) and, at the same time, the prohibition of native languages and Taiwanese history or geography classes in school (Jacobs, 2012, p. 30). Events around February 28, 1947 led to uprisings against the KMT government. When authorities beat a woman after she protested against the confiscation of her cigarettes, a crowd of people came to her aid, and one of the guards killed a bystander. People started demonstrating and several other demonstrations in Taipei and in surrounding areas occurred against the repressive regime (Jacobs, 2012, p. 25). Over the next few weeks, at least 10,000 to as many as 28,000 Taiwanese were killed and martial law was declared for the next 40 years (p. 33). The period of martial law, also referred to as "white terror", allowed "mainlanders to maintain dominance in civil and political spheres" (Chen, 2013, p. 232). About 140,000 people suffered repression during this period and 3000-4000 people were executed (Jacobs, 2012, p. 34). The KMT's policy led Taiwanese to regard mainlanders as "outsiders" (Li & Zhang, 2016, p. 23).

In the late 1980s Taiwan began to liberalize and transform into a democracy. Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo became president in 1978 and due to pressure from within, as well as from outside Taiwan, his rule included reformist elements (Jacobs, 2012, p. 10) which were inevitable for Taiwan's democracy. Chiang made some important decisions such as electing Lee Teng-hui as his vice president in 1984 and allowing the founding of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986. Moreover, martial law was officially lifted in 1987, the regime allowed people to visit relatives in mainland China, and restrictions on newspapers were lifted in 1988 (pp. 66-68). After Chiang's death in 1988, Lee became president and passed amendments that formed the basis for the first democratic elections in 1996 which he won overwhelmingly. The "Wild Lily Movement" in 1990 contributed

significantly to this development by calling for direct elections of the president and vice-president (Chen, 2022, p. 147). The election in 2000 was then a true moment of democracy, as a change of government took place and Chen Shui-bian of the DPP won the election. At this time the PRC published a white paper entitled "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Question", where it was clarified that Taiwan is a part of China and that the PRC government is the only government that can legally represent China (p. 144). It did so because Chen promoted a Taiwan-centric view of the island, as to teach about Taiwan's history, culture, and the differences between Taiwan and China (Li & Zhang, 2016, p. 24). Fitting Anderson's idea of imagined communities, the developments under Chen represented a "Self-conscious Nation Building" by imagining a Taiwanese nation (Lynch, 2004, p. 513). Taiwan was in the process of "thoroughly de-Sinifying culture" (p. 513) and in order to imagine a new Taiwanese nation "the challenge remaining is to construct a strong collective identity" (p. 514). Under Chen, a notion of Taiwan as a "subject of history" had emerged that had resisted those to whom it was subjected throughout history (pp. 516-517). "Taiwanization" of the island was reversed somehow by the end of Chen's presidency in 2008, when KMT politician Ma Ying-jeou became president. Many people, especially from the opposition, believed that he was not interested in Taiwan's independence from the PRC and had even abandoned it in order to strengthen economic ties with the PRC (Jacobs, 2012, pp. 250-253). Nevertheless, important protests took place during his tenure that contributed to a distinct Taiwanese identity. The largest of these was the Sunflower Movement in 2014, which lasted from March 18 to April 10 and was primarily led by students. The movement emerged in response to the Taiwan-PRC Trade in Services Agreement which was passed by the KMT despite numerous concerns about the transparency of negotiations with the PRC (Kwan, 2016, p. 954). The Taiwanese saw the Ma government as a threat to a distinct Taiwanese identity built on civic components such as democracy and sovereignty, as demonstrated by other protests in 2015 against the Sinicization of history books (p. 956). In January 2016, Tsai and the DPP won both the presidential and parliamentary elections and were re-elected in 2020.

Politics in Taiwan are historically seen as ideologically divided between the KMT Party, presenting "Chinese nationalism", and the DPP Party presenting "Taiwanese independence" (Kwan, 2016, p. 951). The first reliable national identity survey dates back to 1989 when 52% identified themselves as Chinese, 16% as Taiwanese, and 26% as both. Comparing these numbers with recent figures, significant differences can be seen. In 2022, 60.8% identified themselves as Taiwanese, 2.7% as Chinese, and 32.9% as both (National Chengchi University (NCCU), 2023). An identity shift from Chinese to Taiwanese is evident

and one explanation is that the term China has taken on a new meaning. Today the term China refers to the PRC and not the ROC, as the latter was expelled from the UN in 1971, the PRC joined instead, and countries broke off diplomatic relations with the ROC (Chen, 2022, p. 146). The concept of China took on a new meaning on the international stage, and the people of Taiwan had to rethink their identity apart from being Chinese (Zhong, 2016, p. 345). Another crucial factor in identifying as Taiwanese is age since intergenerational differences are a factor in people's understanding of politics (Schneider, 2019, p. 8). A generational effect could therefore explain a decline in identification as Chinese, as younger generations have had different socio-political experiences (Chen, 2013, p. 233). Younger generations in Taiwan, especially those born in the 1980s or 1990s who experienced democratization, identify more strongly with democracy and Taiwan and reject Chinese autocracy. Older generations, who may have come with the KMT or lived in Taiwan before, have had different experiences of how identities were constructed during the different eras of rule from abroad. It is not as clear for them to simply and unambiguously identify as Taiwanese, but rather they have had an identity struggle (Schneider, 2019, p. 9).

National identity was conceptualized as relational, shaped by internal and external factors. Only internal factors such as ethnicity, language, or culture cannot explain a distinct Taiwanese national identity, as Taiwanese primarily speak Mandarin and share an ethnicity with the Han Chinese (Li & Zhang, 2016, p. 23). A survey has also shown that the majority of the Taiwanese do not reject their Chinese ethnic-cultural identity (Zhong, 2016, p. 340). The problem is that mainland China seeks to make Taiwan a part of China by legitimizing it with the Han Chinese ethnicity (Kwan, 2016, p. 952). While recognizing their Chinese roots, Taiwanese people reject a Chinese ethno-nationalism. They have developed their own civic nationalism and identity: a civic nationalism and national identity based on universal values, democratic and transparent institutions (Zhong, 2016, p.349). Constructivist theory best explains identity change in Taiwan. As norms and social interactions have changed, identity also changed. "Identity is formed and solidified on the basis of common social experience, including economic and political experience" (Brown, 2004, p. 2). Social, economic, and political experiences have changed in Taiwan, and they have developed a national identity based on those experiences which have political rather than ethnic or cultural characteristics. "This experience has solidified over time and created a unique Taiwanese identity" (Li & Zhong, 2016, p. 18), which is built on democracy and, more importantly, different from that of China, and thus Taiwanese cannot identify with the PRC.

Basing an identity on democracy makes sense because it is likely the result of decades of struggle against authoritarian rule. This struggle continues, even after Taiwan's democratization, as China has repeatedly threatened to use military force. These threats intensified after the DPP's first election victory in 2000 (Niou, 2004, p. 555). Threats, however, tend to have a backlash effect, as they further unite Taiwanese people and lead to greater differentiation between the two nations. Surveys have shown that Taiwanese people are ready to fight if the PRC invades Taiwan (Chong & Pan, 2022, p. 444). Taiwanese textbooks state that "Taiwanese people have repeatedly demonstrated heroism over the centuries by resisting the imposition of authoritarian rule from abroad, especially from China" (Lynch, 2004, p. 516). Chong & Pan (2022) find that Taiwanese people identify with a desire to protect democratic values and resist autocratic practices such as one-party rule in the PRC, and thus consider the PRC incompatible with their own identity (pp. 454-461). The difference between the regime types and the different experiences of the current and older generations, as well as the monopolization of the term China by the PRC, give the Taiwanese little reason to identify as Chinese, considering that democracy is at the core of national identity in Taiwan. Threatening Taiwan only highlights these differences.

The Chinese government does not welcome this shift but seeks unification and therefore seeks to disrupt the Taiwanese identity by attacking its democracy (Li & Zhang, 2016, p. 17). In attempting to "exert control over a democratic Taiwan, [the PRC] must resort to destabilizing steps and coercive means that risk conflict" (Chong & Pan, 2022, p. 470) and disrupt democratic processes. To this end, the PRC uses disinformation campaigns on social media and traditional media.

### **2.3 Disinformation Campaigns (in the context of China and Taiwan)**

The concept of disinformation has become indispensable in today's digital world, as it increasingly encompasses the political sphere. Howard (2020) defines disinformation as "purposefully crafted and strategically placed information that deceives someone - tricks them into believing a lie or taking action that serves someone else's political interests" (p. 15). Misinformation, on the other hand, is spread not intentionally to deceive someone but because they do not know any better (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020, p. 8). In particular, democracies that have a free and democratic political and economic system are vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. Inherently good features such as freedom of speech and general openness provide fertile ground for both domestic and foreign actors behind disinformation campaigns (Center for Strategic and International Studies

(CSIS), 2021, p. 3). It is certainly not only authoritarian regimes that use disinformation campaigns as political communication strategies, best exemplified by the BREXIT referendum in the UK in 2016 (Howard, 2022, p. 11). Disinformation pose a threat to elections which are at the heart of a democracy. Moreover, the deliberative features of a democracy are threatened because people exposed to false information or lies are unable to form informed opinions (McKay & Tenove, 2020).

China conducts foreign disinformation campaigns, particularly in Taiwan. According to V-dem, Taiwan is the country in the world most affected by foreign disinformation (Chen, 2022, p. 145). Although it is very certain that China is the actor behind most campaigns, it is not behind all. Domestic actors such as patriotic netizens and political parties also play a role in the production and dissemination of mis- and disinformation in Taiwan (CSIS, 2021, p. 8). Next to the goal of reunification with Taiwan, experts believe that the reason for disinformation campaigns is that Taiwan is a testing ground to optimize sharp power capabilities (Harold, 2021, p. 113). Although China stated in 2015 and 2016 that it would not interfere in Taiwan's elections (Li & Zhang, p. 25), it did the opposite: "Realizing China's complete reunification is a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Xi Jinping promised to make all necessary efforts to achieve this aspiration (Huang, 2020, p. 8). The concept of "sharp power" explains disinformation efforts of China. Sharp power refers to authoritarian regimes which "seek to manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression within democratic settings" (National Endowment for Democracy (NED), 2021, p. 2). The openness of technological platforms allows them to disrupt information ecosystems and disseminate their own narratives (NED, 2021, p. 4). Sharp power has political aims and tries to manipulate, divide, and confuse societies (Huang, 2020, p. 7). The concept of political warfare also adds to the explanation of Chinese use of disinformation campaigns: "[China] uses all instruments of national power, without resort to clash of arms, against rival governments and societies to realize political ends" (Yoshihara, 2020, p. 231). China has already conducted sharp power attacks in Taiwan in the early 2000s (Huang, 2020, p. 13) and intensified them in 2016 after the presidential election of Tsai (CSIS, 2021; Harold, 2021). When the disinformation campaigns appeared in 2016 many, especially older people, were using social media platforms which, next to traditional media, contribute a lot more to the spread of disinformation. In light of the next presidential elections in 2020, China increased their pressure and tactics of trying to influence Taiwan's politics (Huang, 2020, p. 13).

In this paper, the example of disinformation as a means to undermine democracy is examined. PRC disinformation in Taiwan, especially Taiwanese countermeasures have attracted a lot of attention. However, the focus has not been on Taiwanese national identity, which is the main target. As shown above, disinformation usually lead to polarization and harm democracy, which is to a certain degree also true for Taiwan. In this particular case, however, Taiwan's counterstrategies and historical relationship with the PRC may contribute to the strengthening of a distinct Taiwanese national identity, and the further rejection of Chinese identity. Therefore, the research question that emerges from the literature review is as follows: To what extent does the Taiwanese national identity get stronger despite increasingly Chinese sharp power attacks?

### **3. Taiwanese National Identity, the “Other”, and Disinformation Campaigns: Discourse Analysis of Important Tsai Speeches**

The notion of an acquired Taiwanese national identity through shared socio-political experiences such as authoritarian rule and the eventual democratization, and reinforcement of this identity through a significant Other who threatens this identity, are illustrated in a discourse analysis of speeches by Tsai. This acquired national identity is based on democratic values and more importantly different to an autocratic China, who wants to disturb this identity by disrupting democracy through disinformation campaigns.

In various speeches, Tsai emphasizes that Taiwan is committed to democratic values and the sovereignty of Taiwan. Taiwanese people are free, democratic, and committed to defend their freedom and see “democracy as a way of life” (Tsai, 2016/2022, p. 108). Seeing democracy as a way of life makes it part of an identity, a national identity. Sentences like “This country has been through authoritarian rule and social conflict” (p. 125), and “we should remember that democracy and freedom are rights that only came following the joint efforts of all Taiwanese people” (2017/2022, p. 137), show where an identity based on democracy comes from. Decades of struggle against authoritarian rule and shared socio-political experiences have led to a civic nationalism where acquired characteristics form a new identity. In Taiwan’s case, it is the struggle for independence and democracy, and thus today's identity is indeed political. Tsai often speaks of sovereignty to stress her stance against China’s “one country, two systems” approach. In the theory section, it was established that sovereignty is a national project, crucial

to a nation's identity. Tsai considers it a fundamental responsibility to protect Taiwan's national identity and sovereignty (p. 283). The issue of sovereignty is so important because it was questioned and undermined during history and still is. The PRC seeks reunification through a "one country, two systems" solution which also describes the PRC governance of Hong Kong and Macau. According to Tsai, however, people of Taiwan reject this: "if we were to accept "one country, two systems", there would no longer be room for the ROC existence" (2019/2022, pp. 187-188). She also refers to the "1992 Consensus" which was meant to handle Cross-Strait relations based on the idea of "one China with different interpretations" (Wang, Yeh, Wu & Chen, 2021, pp. 212-213), meaning that both sides have different interpretations of that concept. Tsai rejects this Consensus and only respects it as a "historical fact" (Tsai, 2016/2022, p. 130). Furthermore, she accuses China of using the Consensus to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty and deprive its surviving (2019/2022, p. 304), thus associating it with "one country, two systems". Wang et. al (2021) argue in their article that also among the Taiwanese, people understand this Consensus differently. However, when they asked Taiwanese citizens which version they preferred, 75.1% chose the version in which the PRC and Taiwan are two different countries (p. 213). Given Tsai's stance on Taiwanese sovereignty and independence, it is interesting that she speaks of a "status quo" that she wishes to maintain (Tsai, 2016/2022, p. 130) but accuses China of challenging it (2018/2022, pp. 161-163). Similar to the 1992 consensus, where there is no consensus on what it means, the two sides also interpret the status quo differently. For the PRC, it means that Taiwan has always been a part of it, and for Taiwan, it means that it is separate from China. What Tsai says about those concepts is only one side of different interpretations and ideologies.

For Taiwan, it was important to build a sovereign national identity distinct to what the Other imposed on them: "We have always believed that our distinctive resilience allows Taiwanese to respond to never-ending internal and external challenges" (p. 177). In this case, it is democracy that distinguishes Taiwan from the authoritarian system in which it has found itself for many decades: "Historical experiences from Japanese colonial rule through martial law and democratization have fostered a growing sense of distinctiveness and self-awareness" (Chong & Pan, 2022, p. 447). Tsai emphasizes this resilience: "These shared emotions come because we live on this land together, we share living experiences, we share sentiments, we must shoulder a shared future" (Tsai, 2017/2022, p. 144), and that Taiwan "has grown more resilient and unified through countless challenges" (2020/2022, p. 220). A national identity based on a "felt closeness", a narrative about the history, and a national project for the future (Dittmer, 2004; Guibernau, 2004) can be found in the speeches: "These shared memories

exemplify the resilience of Taiwan's people, a resilience [...] that led us on the arduous path of democratization" (Tsai, 2019/2022, p. 189). Tsai conveys a Taiwanese national identity shaped by shared experiences of struggles for democracy and against authoritarian rule. One country in particular contributes to this: the authoritarian PRC. It was established before that the idea of the Other is linked to national identity and that members of a group know who they are by knowing who they are not. Common characteristics of a group are particularly binding when they involve differentiation from the Other, as in this case political identity. Tsai says: "Democracy and authoritarianism cannot coexist within the same country" (p. 198). Moreover, it has been noted that when the Other poses a threat to one's group, it can solidify identity by unifying the group through a shared experience. The PRC represents both, a significant Other and a threat to Taiwan. The main difference lies in political identity, as Taiwan has based its identity on democratic values, while China is a one-party authoritarian state that does not hold democratic values. "[The Taiwanese] see such characteristics as exemplifying common values and aspirations for society while rejecting arbitrary, untransparent governance that lacks meaningful citizen participation", and "the PRC becomes more of a "negative other"" (Chong & Pan, 2022, pp. 452-453). There is not only a visible contrast, but also a constant sense of threat from the PRC (Chen, 2013, p. 233). Tsai emphasizes Taiwan's commitment to peaceful relations based on dialogue and communication, while maintaining Taiwan's democracy and sovereignty (Tsai, 2016/2022, pp. 117-118). She urges the PRC government to "face up to the reality that the Republic of China exists, and that the people of Taiwan have an unshakable faith in the democratic system" (2016/2022, p. 131). However, as noted above, the PRC does not welcome this faith in democracy, and in 2017 Tsai said that "China's intention to expand their military presence in the region has become increasingly evident" (2017/2022, p. 146). For the past two years, relations have become even more complex and Chinese pressure has increased and challenged the peace in the Taiwan strait (2018/2022, p. 161). In her 2019 National Day Address she speaks about "China's rise and expansion, as they challenge free, democratic values and the global order through a combination of authoritarianism, nationalism, and economic might" (2019/2022, p. 189). China would also "hope that Taiwan will elect a regime that bows its head to Beijing under all circumstances" (2019/2022, p. 304).

In fact, China does not only "hope" that Taiwan "bows its head" but actively attempts to disrupt Taiwanese identity. In 2018, Tsai talks about "preventing foreign powers from infiltrating and subverting our society, ensuring that our democratic institutions and social economy function normally" (2018/2022, p. 166). Taiwan would take steps to prevent external actors from infiltrating the society's freedom and create chaos, "whether it be disseminating

disinformation“ or “intervening in the election process” (p. 166). Later in her speech, she directly addresses China: “especially China’s attempt to use the openness and freedom of our democratic system to interfere in Taiwan’s internal politics and social development” (2019/2022, p. 182). The media ecosystem in Taiwan is very profit-driven, and social media is a big competitor for traditional media, leading to the publication of attention-seeking stories and propaganda through advertising (Huang, 2020, p. 19). Moreover, there is a reluctance to regulate the press, because during the authoritarian KMT regime, martial law restricted the freedom of hundreds of thousands of people (Huang, 2020, p. 20). In addition, traditional media is heavily influenced by the PRC, providing advertising funds that traditional media rely on to survive (Harold, 2021, p. 55). In 2019, Tsai says that “China is encroaching on us through their sharp power” (Tsai, 2019/2022, p. 190) and that “the flood of disinformation, including from the other side of the strait, has unsettled hearts and minds” (pp. 183-184). China seeks to undermine the status of Taiwan and by infiltrating Taiwanese society, sow division (p. 200), and threaten the Taiwanese, democratic way of life (Tsai, 2018, p. 4). Tsai (2020/2022) asserts that “China’s objective is clear: To force Taiwan to compromise our sovereignty” (p. 198), as Huang (2020) also assumes “to destabilize democracy and weaken governance in a target country by sowing doubts and chaos in its society, undermining its self-confidence, and increasing polarization and disunity” (p. 5). China seeks “to sow discord, undermine trust in the central government, spur doubt about the nation’s military competence”, and present the Taiwanese government as a failure, while China is presented as an opportunity (Harold, 2021, p. 4).

Increasingly sharp power attacks in the form of disinformation occurred in 2016 after Tsai's election and intensified from late 2017, in the run-up to the 2018 local elections and the 2020 presidential election (CSIS, 2021; Huang, 2020). The PRC “wants to make the DPP government seem ineffective [...] and support the China-friendly Kuomintang, as it sees KMT as less encumbered by ideology and better able to stabilize cross-Strait relations” (Huang, 2020, p. 17). The campaigns aim to undermine the general confidence of Taiwanese and make them feel helpless so that they consider unification with the PRC as inevitable. They also aim to reinforce the existing polarization and division in society in order to turn citizens against each other (Chen, 2022, p. 149). When the Taiwanese lose confidence in their democratic institutions and government, they also lose confidence in their national identity. The Doublethink Lab (2021) conducted a study on disinformation between January 5, 2019 and January 31, 2020. They looked at platforms like YouTube, LINE, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, as well as websites, and categorized media items into different themes and narratives. The

narratives that dominated the 2020 election were that “Democracy is a failure”, and leads to “moral decadence” (p. 5), and that democracy “has failed to give the people strong/good governance, good leadership, positive international relationships, and a strong economy” (p. 45). Other prevailing narratives were that the DPP was “corrupt, elitist, manipulative, and dishonest” (p. 45). Moreover, it was disseminated that Tsai Ing-wen was incompetent, whereby this often comes from the KMT and is based on sexism, rather than about Cross-Strait relations (p. 121). Another narrative is that there was Green Terror in Taiwan, referring to the martial law period which was called White Terror. The color green represents the DPP and other pro-independence parties (p. 44). In addition to disinformation, China also propagates its ideology of justifying reunification on the basis of ethnicity: “all Chinese should be part of one nation/family” (p. 45), implying that they should also be part of one political system. Specific examples within these narratives include that Tsai was giving up Taiwan’s national sovereignty by ceding territory to the United States of America, or that she planned to ban fireworks and the burning of spiritual money, which is part of an important cultural tradition. The latter actually led to tens of thousands protesting (Harold, 2021, p. 67). It was also falsely disseminated that pension reforms would affect more and restrict more people than it was actually planned (p. 68). One of the most famous examples of disinformation is the incident of Typhoon Jebi in Japan where thousands of people were stuck at the airport. China spread disinformation that a Taiwanese official did not help these people return, but that the PRC did. This official was vehemently attacked on the Internet and committed suicide (p. 69).

The loss of the DPP in 2018 cannot be directly linked to disinformation, however, the National Policy Agency received 64 reports of disinformation immediately before election day (Chen, 2022, p. 153). This election contributed to the public being alert and the government learning their lesson for the next elections in 2020 (Huang, 2020, p. 36). In the 2018 National Day Address, Tsai promised that the government will counter disinformation and take preventive measures such as: “monitoring and notification mechanisms, so that together, we can respond to any damage or negative impact that disinformation has on social stability” (Tsai, 2018/2022, pp. 166-167). She would have “already asked the Executive Yuan to submit concrete countermeasures to address the spread of disinformation” (2019/2022, p. 184). In May 2019 the Political Warfare Bureau then submitted a report entitled “Countermeasures Against Chinese Disinformation Psychological Warfare” (CSIS, 2021, p. 9). Taiwan is applying a “whole-of-society approach” to counter China's sharp power by having the government, private sector, and civil society work together. The Warfare Bureau report suggested that the government counters disinformation mainly in five ways: monitoring the media, debunking

disinformation, spreading awareness of sharp power attacks, and increasing media literacy efforts, as well as lawfare and cooperation with other countries (Huang, 2020, p. 30). The government relies on a "humor before rumors" approach and has established so-called "meme engineering teams" to respond to disinformation and disseminate corrected versions. Debunking memes serve as inoculation, as they are funny, easy to understand, and spread. The goal is to respond to disinformation within 60 minutes (CSIS, 2020, p. 16), and Facebook confirmed that debunking attempts actually spread faster than the disinformation itself (Huang, 2020, p. 32). The government has also taken various legal actions. The Social Order Maintenance Act is used in response to "spreading rumors that undermine public order and peace" and allows for a fine or detention (Quirk, 2021, p. 550). This law has been criticized for failing to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation, the latter being the unintentional spreading of false information (CSIS, 2020, p. 18). Probably the most widely discussed legal response is the Anti-Infiltration Act which "criminalizes political activities funded or otherwise supported by "hostile external forces"" (Quirk, 2021, p. 553). Tsai responds to this criticism: "only actions that are prohibited by law, and carried out under instructions from China [...], or funded by China, will constitute infiltration", and she further guaranteed that the law will not restrict freedom of speech but will protect democracy (Tsai, 2020/2022, p. 200). The KMT and PRC friendly politicians accused Tsai of "which-hunt legislation" (Quirk, 2021, p. 553) and to "stifle dissent and tarnish her political rivals" (pp. 554-555).

As for civil society, the public was motivated to actively engage and counter disinformation. Organizations like "MyGoPen" or "Cofacts" cooperate with social media platforms and try to draw attention to the spread of disinformation. Other organizations are the "Taiwan FactChek Center" and the "Doublethink Lab" which seek to combat disinformation on social media. These organizations are independent but also work with the government and private sector (Quirk, 2021, p. 541). As for the private sector, tech companies work with the government and independent organizations. For example, LINE, Google, and Facebook signed the "Industry Code of Practice on Countering Disinformation" in Taiwan (Quirk, 2021, p. 542).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The discourse analysis of speeches by Tsai between 2016 and 2020 has contributed to understand the political phenomena of national identity formation in Taiwan, what has impacted it, and how underlying ideologies and beliefs shaped meaning of this identity. Tsai conveys the narratives of a shared history and future of Taiwan by emphasizing common socio-political experiences. A Taiwanese national identity based on civic nationalism, grounded in democratic values stemming from a long history of resistance to foreign domination by authoritarian regimes, is represented. She further illustrates that those values cannot be more distinct to the authoritarian PRC which seeks unification by trying to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty. Given the increase in sharp power attacks aimed at influencing the 2020 elections, it appears that China's attempts to interfere in Taiwan's politics were not as successful, as Tsai won the elections (Huang, 2020, p. 28). One could argue that the campaigns have had a backlash effect and have rather strengthened than undermined national identity. In 2016, 58.3% identified themselves as Taiwanese and 3.4% as Chinese, while in 2020, 64.3% identified themselves as Taiwanese and 2.6% as Chinese (NCCU, 2023). Only 54.5% identified themselves as Taiwanese in 2018, which could be because after 2016 the sharp power attacks increased, the Taiwanese government had not yet taken countermeasures, and the society was not as aware of it. The countermeasure taken after the 2018 election not only limited the spread of disinformation, but also helped portray China as different to Taiwan, as the Other, and drew attention to China's undemocratic and interventionist behavior. The use of memes and the cohesion in society to respond to disinformation also created a contrast: Sharp power attacks that seek to manipulate opinion, next to the Taiwanese government's humorous and friendly attempts to communicate with and protect the society.

An alternative explanatory variable for an identity distinct to the Chinese one, is the Hong Kong protests in 2019 which were beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the protests have possibly contributed to the 2020 election results and the rejection of Chinese identity in Taiwan. The protests against "one country, two systems" were shut down by the PRC, and this "only helped bolster anti-Beijing hardliners within the DPP and broader society" (Quirk, 2021, p. 535). Tsai (2020/2022) mentioned the protests various times: "Governmental abuses of power have completely eroded people's trust in "one country, two systems"" (p. 198). Thus, the protests reinforced a sense of distinction from and incompatibility with the Chinese system, while appreciating the own identity even more: "We will cherish our own hard-earned freedom and democracy even more deeply" (p. 270). Disinformation welded Taiwanese people

into a greater unity against China and the presence of an external threat made their identity more salient through othering China. Tsai (2019/2022) said that “regardless of party affiliation or political position” (p. 187), the Taiwanese reject unification with China. Bauer and Wilson (2022) also found that in the context of Chinese disinformation in Taiwan, “citizens may put aside partisanship when confronted with false news that is plausible linked to an external actor” (p. 21). However, Taiwan is not immune to disinformation and political polarization and it was also found that, although the elections were not influenced, the attacks reinforced polarization and have worsened intergenerational conflict to some degree (Doublethink Lab, 2021, pp. 97-98). Nevertheless, it was found before that national identity in Taiwan is political, so election results matter for identity. Thus, I find that between 2016 and 2020, Taiwanese national identity was strengthened in the face of increasing Chinese sharp power attacks. First by facing an external Other and thus unifying, despite political differences and second, by having an identity based on democratic values, distinct from the authoritarian rule of the PRC. Finally, the countermeasures set contrasts and contributed to people being aware of the PRC's activities and undemocratic behavior. Concludingly, one can say that disinformation campaigns rather led to a stronger than weaker Taiwanese national identity. If one looks at the case of the 2016 US elections or the BREXIT referendum, experts agreed that disinformation from abroad did influence election results, however, Taiwan presents an exceptional case, in that it has managed to avert the damage of disinformation to some degree.

After this analysis, the question arises as to which path Taiwan will take in the future, whether it will continue to build on a democratic national identity and move further away from the PRC. More recent figures from identity surveys are important to consider, as between 2020 and 2022, the number of people identifying as Taiwanese decreased by 3.5% and identifying as Chinese increased by 0.1% (NCCU, 2023). While these are small changes, they are worth monitoring and studying as they could tell something about the long-term significance of this study. Moreover, it is recommended to closely observe disinformation efforts and other forms of attacks coming from the PRC, as the next presidential election in Taiwan is in January 2024. So far, disinformation campaigns have surged ahead of Election Day, but given Tsai's victory in 2020, the PRC may rely on new strategies. Beyond the case of Taiwan, it is also recommended to observe Chinese sharp power attacks in other countries, as China might seek to expand those attacks.

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