

Generational Consciousness and Political Mobilisation of Youth in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT: This article is a contribution to theoretical reflection on the notion of generation applied to the study of youth in Taiwan. Starting from the polysemy of this concept, which has remained problematic for the social sciences since the nineteenth century, it shows that beyond the simple demographic cohort, the young people born in the 1980s and 1990s form a new “actual” generation, in the sense of Mannheim, i.e. characterised by objectively distinctive traits and a generational consciousness that contrasts with their elders. It also seeks to explain the process of formation of this generational consciousness and its implications for political mobilisation.

KEYWORDS: Taiwan, generations, youth, identity, politicisation, political mobilisation.

Introduction

The Taiwanese media is full of commentaries and analyses that have gradually made evident the existence of a young generation separated from their elders by a growing gap in terms of values, identity dynamics, and political behaviour. However, there is a persistent vagueness about the social reality covered by the media’s use of the word generation, to which numerous qualifiers are attached depending on the articles and authors, even though they are all supposed to be talking about Taiwanese youth. The latter are alternately assimilated to the fragility of strawberries or grouped under the generational labels such as “small happiness” (*xiao quexing* 小確幸), “poor” (*qing pin* 青貧), “angry” (*fennu* 憤怒), “naturally independent” (*tianrandu* 天然獨), “sunflowers” (*taiyanghua* 太陽花), or “millennium” (*qianxi* 千禧).

In comparison, there are few scholars working from a generational perspective in the field of Taiwan studies. For example, none of the 170 papers presented at the Second and Third World Congresses of Taiwan Studies (in 2015 and 2018) adopted a generational approach. Similarly, the papers devoted to the social movements of the 2010s, while acknowledging that they were mostly student movements, focus on their context, modes of organisation, and social consequences, but surprisingly do not question the relevance of a generational perspective in explaining this wave of social mobilisations. The papers in the symposium “Student Movements and Social Justice” (*Xuesheng yundong yu shehui zhengyi* 學生運動與社會正義) organised by the Institute of Sociology at Academia Sinica on 29 and 30 May 2015, and the contributions to the book *Taiwan’s Social*

Movements under Ma Ying-jeou (Fell 2017) are two examples.

Finally, among Taiwan studies researchers who use it, the notion of generation is subject to multiple uses. From one publication to another, it can be understood as a demographic cohort (a group of people born at the same time), as a position in a family lineage, or as a generational cohort “in itself” characterised by distinctive traits. Moreover, these works generally avoid an in-depth critical reflection on the concept of generation, with the notable exception of Hsiao (2021), who combines historical and sociological approaches to analyse the emergence of a “back to reality” generation in the 1970s, and Rigger (2006, 2016), who attempts to delineate and define the different political generations that coexisted during the 2000s and 2010s.

This leads to the paradoxical situation in which the existence of a young generation has become a commonplace and seems self-evident to the observer of the Taiwanese political situation, while a careful definition is rarely made to avoid the pitfalls generated by the polysemy of this term which, as Attias-Donfut (1988) points out, has remained problematic for the social sciences since the nineteenth century. This article therefore aims to review the possible application of the notion of generation to Taiwan studies through a critical reflection on existing works. After proceeding with this task, I will show how Taiwanese youth born after the 1980s have progressively moved from a generational cohort “in itself” to an “actual” generational cohort, i.e. a generation “for itself” whose members are united and mobilised by the emergence, from the early 2010s onwards, of a social and political configuration in which several spaces for the production of a generational consciousness are rapidly developing. In the course

of this process, this generation has moved from a mostly passive citizenship to a much more active citizenship in two phases corresponding roughly to the 2000s and 2010s. This last part of the article is based on 261 interviews conducted between 2004 and 2020, as well as 11 focus groups conducted between 2011 and 2019, and 17 sets of interviews conducted in a longitudinal perspective from 2007 to 2020.

A configurational approach to Taiwanese youth studies

Even if we leave aside the many uses of everyday language and marketing, it is still possible to identify three definitions of generation that are regularly used in the social sciences and the media (Alwin and McCammon 2007). In its first sense, the notion of generation refers to the position occupied by individuals in a family lineage. "Nested within families" and linked by the life cycle, generations serve as units of description and analysis for social scientists studying kinship relations and families (*ibid.*: 221).

However, individuals are both members of a generation in the family sense and of a group of people "born at approximately the same time and who together pass through the same historical period" (Attias-Donfut 1989: 2). The term generation is then synonymous with birth cohort. If a cohort was exposed in its youth to events that were particularly significant in themselves and because of their consequences (war, coup d'état, economic recession, cataclysm, etc.), or to changes that greatly destabilised the preexisting order (democratisation, new economic regime, technological revolution, etc.), and if the effects are lasting, we speak of a "cohort effect." A generational cohort is thus constituted "at the unique intersection of biography and history" experienced by its members (Alwin and McCammon 2007: 226). Hence, it has no predefined standard size and can include people born over a more or less lengthy period. Finally, it refers to a set of specific characteristics that can be objectified by survey work (Ryder 1965: 845).

Therefore, the generational cohort defined may remain in a state of potentiality in the historical process and thus may not become a collective actor of social change, or it may be "activated" into an "actual generation," which according to Mannheim (1968: 303) exists only "where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of dynamic de-stabilization." As Alwin and McCammon (2007: 229-31) point out, it is with this "concrete bond" that unites its members that the third definition of the notion of generation, the actual generation, takes shape, adding to the characteristics of the generational cohort an identity dimension linked to the formation of a generational consciousness. In so doing, we move from the "generation in itself," whose characteristics can be described objectively, to the "generation for itself," which implies the awareness of an "us" versus a "them" on a generational level. This actual generation is no longer defined solely by the events that shape the formation of mental experiences and representations that are more specifically characteristic of a cohort, but also by a sense of

belonging that leads many of its members to actively participate in the intellectual and social movements of the time.

Research published since the mid-2000s that focuses, at least in part, on recent Taiwanese youth adopts the perspective of the generational cohort. In their investigation of generational identity differences, Chang and Wang (2005: 35) explain that a "political generation can be defined as a group of people who share common experiences and historical memories, due to the fact that they are born in a same time period and live through the same social and economic environment." Rigger (2006) uses this definition and opts for a similar division of the Taiwanese population into four political generations. More recent studies also follow this perspective, although each adopts its own generational divisions (Lepesant 2011, 2012; Rigger 2016; Brading 2017; Lin 2017; Liu and Li 2017). Three recurring criticisms, however, are levelled at the use of the generational cohort as a category for analysing social behaviour and change. The first concerns the objectivity of the criteria for their delimitation, and the other two are about the difficulty of distinguishing, on the one hand, a "cohort effect" that would be essentially limited to one generation from a "period effect" that would extend to the entire social body, and, on the other hand, a persistent cohort effect from an ephemeral "age effect" during the life cycle of the people concerned.

The problem that arises from the outset is the delineation of generations (Alwin and McCammon 2003). Research on the political representations and behaviours of Taiwanese youth generally uses specific dates as generational boundaries. However, these dates differ from one survey to another and their choice is open to the first of three criticisms: that the generations are the result of the researcher's arbitrariness. The first two studies identifying the emergence of a fourth political generation (Chang and Wang 2005; Rigger 2006) consider that it would include those born after 1968, i.e. at least 18 years old at the time of the creation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). A decade later, Liu and Li (2017) use the same division to add a fifth generation, born between 1979 and 1988, and a sixth, born after 1989. The fifth generation would have been marked by the missile crisis that preceded the first presidential election by direct universal suffrage in 1996, and by the first political alternation with the election of Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 and the formation of a DPP government in 2000. Lin (2017) identifies five political generations and starts the youngest with those born in 1976 and "having reached adulthood" in 1996, but he does not specify why it should end in 1995, nor why he believes that the legal age of majority set by the legislature at 20 would correspond sociologically to adulthood. Finally, Brading (2017: 134-6) considers that there is a "millennial generation" whose representations and behaviours have been shaped by the global conditions of existence at the end of the twentieth century, since he makes no reference to the Taiwanese context at all and relies on the definition adopted by researchers working on political participation in the United Kingdom, i.e. "young adults who turned 21 just before or just after the turn of the millennium."

As we have seen, the appearance of a new generational cohort

is the product of major social upheavals that have left their mark on the mental representations of the young people who have experienced them. It may be thought that it is not possible to make a precise a priori division of a generational cohort and that the boundaries chosen are primarily working hypotheses: how intensely does an upheaval influence the young people who have experienced it? In the case of major disruptive events, it is likely that the impact will be significant. Otherwise, it will be necessary to highlight a convergent cluster of medium-sized crises, small ruptures, reforms, and partial adaptations that lead to a more radical change in social configuration, and then to show to what extent these transformations have had an effect on socialisation and mental representations.

Therefore, it is from a configurational rather than an event-based perspective that Taiwanese born from the 1980s onwards form what I have called a "post-democratic reform generation." Rather than the creation of the DPP (1986) or the end of martial law (1987) marking the beginning of the democratisation process, it was a converging bundle of reforms and changes that disrupted the Taiwanese social configuration and the objective conditions of existence and socialisation of the youngest. By a "configurational approach," following the work of Elias (1991), I mean the theoretical perspective according to which a society is not an aggregate of individuals conceived as isolated, rational atoms, but a very dense network of social interactions and interdependencies within which each human being is caught up from birth and which "becomes impregnated in him" (*ibid.*: 50) in the form of mental representations and incorporated patterns of action that are more or less coherent or conflicting depending on the degree of social complexity and heterogeneity. As Lahire (2016: 55-6) recalls, this does not mean that "intentions or wills are non-existent," but:

(...) only that choices, decisions and intentions are realities at the intersection of multiple constraints. These constraints are both internal, made up of all the dispositions to believe, see, feel, think and act, forged through various past social experiences, and external, because choices, decisions and intentions are always anchored in social contexts (...).

Democratisation and the production of a new social configuration

The upheavals in Taiwan's social configuration from the late 1980s onwards have profoundly influenced the order of these internal and external constraints. From an ideological and institutional point of view, democratisation meant, on the one hand, the settling down of the Republic of China's institutions, which were refocused on Taiwan as a result of the Kuomintang's (KMT) official abandonment of the objective of reconquering the mainland, and, on the other hand, the creation of a new intellectual and symbolic environment highlighting the multicultural, insular, and resolutely democratic character of the Taiwanese political community.

In this context, the education system, which had previously

served the KMT's Chinese nationalist propaganda, underwent a profound change. From the 1990s onwards, secondary school teachers enjoyed much greater pedagogical freedom and had at their disposal "a diverse range of textbooks and resources" (Ho and Hindley 2011: 92), notably with the use, from 1997 onwards, of a series of new textbooks devoted to history, geography, economics, literature, the arts, and the functioning of Taiwan's democratic institutions. Highlighting the richness of the territory and the cultures it bears, these textbooks, which were studied by people born from 1984 onwards, clearly seek to build a Taiwanese consciousness, pride, and community of destiny. In contrast to the patriarchal essentialism of the Chinese nationalist morality of abnegation, loyalty, and obedience to the Kuomintang state (Liu and Hung 2002), the education system has thus gradually shifted towards training citizens with the values, knowledge, and skills necessary for life in a democracy (Lien 2014: 33-4).

Democratisation has also brought about a radical transformation of the media environment following the liberalisation of the written press (1989) and then the audiovisual media (1993). In terms of access to and relationship with information and knowledge, the generation born from the 1980s onwards was immersed in a flourishing media environment that was totally different from that experienced by its elders. Taiwanese people who are now just under 40-year-old entered adulthood at the same time as the first tremors of what Delmas calls the "digital tectonics" (2020) were felt, disrupting our daily lives as citizens and consumers within a decade.

In Taiwan, this was reflected in very rapid behavioural changes: the first Internet service provider was launched in 1996, and by 2001, Internet penetration had already reached 32% (Liu *et al.* 2002). Five years after the launch of its non-simplified Chinese version in 2008, Facebook had the highest penetration rate in the world (65%).¹ As Sullivan notes, this has led to a generational divide "not only in the use of different types of media, but also in the attitudes and expectations" that emanate from these differentiated uses (2019: 101). Older generations behave more conservatively by having traditional media as their primary source of information and resorting to restrictive, invitation-only social networks such as Line messaging (*ibid.*: 98).

Finally, in material terms, due to the rapid increase in GDP per capita after the economic take-off of the 1960s and 1970s, and the decrease in the number of children per woman, the generation born from the 1980s onwards has grown up in a prosperous society and has not experienced the constraints of its elders. It is also a society that is increasingly integrated into the flows of globalisation and whose economy is highly dependent on links with China, since in the early 2000s, a third of Taiwan's exports went there (40% in 2019) and several hundred thousand Taiwanese work there (404,000 in 2018).²

1. "Taiwan Likes Facebook, Has Highest Penetration," *Taipei Times*, 28 February 2014, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/biz/archives/2014/02/28/2003584495> (accessed on 7 February 2022).

2. Central News Agency, "Number of Taiwanese Working in China Hits 10-year Low," *Taiwan News*, 18 December 2019, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3839550> (accessed on 6 February 2022).

Temporal delineation of the post-reform generation

All the dimensions of socialisation generally considered fundamental, i.e. family, school, peer groups, and the wider intellectual and symbolic environment in which a person evolves, have thus been more or less profoundly affected by democratisation, creating the objective conditions for the emergence of a generational cohort. Nevertheless, since the upheaval of the Taiwanese social configuration is the result of a set of changes with cumulative effects in a large number of fields and over more than a decade, it is not possible to assign a precise year of birth to this new generation. For convenience, I have started it with those born in 1980, but it may of course extend partly into the late 1970s. However, the deeper one goes into the early 1970s and the late 1960s, the more people born in those years show a real difference in experience from their younger counterparts. During their youth, China was an abstraction idealised by KMT propaganda (it was forbidden to go there), studied in school textbooks at the expense of knowledge about Taiwan. The nationalist dictatorship became part of everyday life in the form of anticommunist school and extracurricular activities, patriotic songs, ceremonies to glorify the Party-state, fear of military instructors and the Disciplinary Bureau present in all schools, corporal punishment, and the prohibition of speaking local languages, disregarded by the authorities.

Despite these differences in experience, it may be objected that democratisation and the upheavals that accompanied it have influenced the entire Taiwanese population, causing what is known as a "period effect." This leads to the second criticism of the concept of generation: how can we differentiate between a cohort effect and a period effect, i.e. the effect of an upheaval that has spread to the entire social body? Why should democratisation have a more profound influence on young people than on the rest of society? Following Durkheim (2013), numerous studies have shown that experiences during childhood, adolescence, and the first years of adulthood impregnate mental representations more deeply and more durably and that they generate a sedimentation of the dispositions underlying action, even if these continue to be modified by subsequent experiences (Winnicott 1969; Bourdieu 1980; Elias 1991: 63; Berger and Luckmann 1996; Lahire 2011). According to these scholars, on the one hand, children and adolescents are more socio-affectively dependent on the adults around them, mainly in the family and at school, and on the other hand, they do not yet have firmly established preconceptions about the world. This makes them more malleable, more easily impressed, but also more open to social change and novelty. They do not yet have the filters, prejudices, and analytical grids that underpin world views and guide action.

This is why disruptions in their socialisation framework are likely to produce "more or less lasting" cognitive, identity, and behavioural effects (Lahire 2013: 117). But this "more or less lasting" poses a problem in the context of a generational analysis. It seems difficult a priori to distinguish between what would be a "cohort effect," which would therefore persist over the course of the life cycle, and an "age effect," which would disappear,

or be greatly attenuated, over the years. This is the third classic objection to the concept of generation. Faced with this criticism, one must first recall with Attias-Donfut (1989: 4-5) that in the "three-stage model" that distinguishes between age, generation (or cohort), and period effects, there is obviously no pure or autonomous effect, but rather interactions: "The generation is built up as it ages (...), the generation effect is continually being restructured."

Furthermore, while it was difficult to identify with certainty the emergence of a new generation in the 2000s, we now have a large amount of data that allows a longitudinal analysis to be carried out, highlighting a certain number of persistent traits over the life cycle of people now under 40.

Data mobilised

As regards the quantitative data, the three questionnaire surveys I conducted in 2005, 2010, and 2014 in 12, 15, and 45 higher education institutions spread across the island have been the subject of detailed presentations elsewhere (Lepesant 2011, 2012, 2017) and are not really the focus of this article. Indeed, these three quantitative surveys are primarily concerned with highlighting the existence of a generational cohort, whereas the following developments show the effects of the emergence of a generational consciousness, and thus of the transition from a "generation in itself" to a "generation for itself," on the political mobilisation of the under-forties. To do so, I rely on data from several series of interviews that I have conducted since 2004. Their methodology can be presented succinctly by grouping them into three categories: individual interviews, thematic focus groups, and interview series in a longitudinal perspective.

Over the period 2004-2020, I conducted a total of 261 individual interviews with people born in the 1980s and 1990s. They are divided into 14 waves. Six of them correspond to election campaigns (national elections in 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020, and local elections and referendums in 2018). Three were conducted in addition to statistical surveys. Four others were conducted during social movements (Losheng Leprosarium in 2007, Wild Strawberries in 2008, Antinuclear in 2011-2014, Sunflowers in 2014). And one was conducted in 2011 on the perception of the labour market and working conditions in the context of the rapprochement with China initiated by Ma Ying-jeou's 馬英九 administration.

These 261 interviews are of two types. 159 semistructured interviews after appointments were made, enabling a purposive sampling strategy in order to ensure a diversity sampled according to age and the criteria considered most relevant in terms of their potential influence on political representations and behaviour: gender, place of schooling/socialisation in primary and secondary school, higher education stream and institution, and parents' socioprofessional category. The 102 individual interviews of the second type were conducted on site during the rallies of the six electoral campaigns and the four social movements monitored. They provide access both to a greater variety of profiles (chance encounters) and to on-the-spot discussions on the subjects directly at the heart of the electoral rallies and demonstrations.

Table 1. List of focus groups

Groups	Date	Context	Subjects discussed
1	November 2011	2012 national election campaign	Perception of economic rapprochement with China (influence on the labour market, future prospects), identity and Taiwan-China relations
2	December 2011	2012 national election campaign	Assessment of the Taiwanese media landscape, information access channels
3	March 2012	2012 national election campaign	A look back at the election results
4	March 2014	Sunflower Movement (<i>taiyanghua xueyun</i> 太陽花學運)	Identity, Taiwan-China relations, intergenerational relations, political affiliation, partisan identification, politicisation and political mobilisation, personal values and aspirations
5	April 2014	Sunflower Movement	<i>Ibid.</i>
6	May 2014	Work on the 4 th nuclear power plant halted, victory for the Antinuclear Movement	Environmental issues, politicisation, and political mobilisation
7	November 2018	Local elections, referendums on energy transition, nuclear power, legalisation of gay marriage, and sex education	Assessment of the Tsai administration at mid-term, legalisation of gay marriage, gender equality
8	November 2018	<i>Ibid.</i>	<i>Ibid.</i>
9	June 2019	Protests against the extradition law in Hong Kong, DPP primary, popularity “surge” for Han Kuo-yu 韓國瑜, the KMT mayor of Kaohsiung elected in November 2018	The “One country, two systems” principle and the future of Taiwan-China relations, protests in Hong Kong, candidates in the DPP primaries, the image of potential presidential candidates Han Kuo-yu and Ko Wen-je 柯文哲
10	November 2019	2020 national election campaign	Assessment of Tsai Ing-wen’s 蔡英文 first term in office, image of the various presidential candidates, influence of Hong Kong events, partisan affiliation, intergenerational relations
11	December 2019	2020 national election campaign	<i>Ibid.</i>

Source: author.

In parallel, I also held 11 focus groups, each with four to six people for about two hours. The time period, context, and themes of the focus groups are briefly presented in Table 1.

Finally, Table 2 presents the profiles of the 17 people who participated in the series of interviews conducted in a longitudinal perspective. The first of these have been followed since 2007. These interviews were conducted at least every two years. They addressed the following four themes: identity (identification with Taiwan, perception of China, ethnicity); political behaviour (political affiliation, party identification, voting behaviour); personal values and aspirations (degree of attachment to the democratic system, gender equality, definition of “freedom” and “success,” lifestyle and location); and intergenerational relations (generational self-perception, perception of elders, family relations).

Social configuration, generational awareness, political mobilisation

The process of the formation of a generational consciousness and the growing political mobilisation of youth is structured by

three intersecting dimensions. In the first, which is identity-based, the generation is the object of a growing sense of belonging that goes hand in hand with the formation of an “us/them” generational opposition within the cycle of the “three ‘moments’ of identity” as envisaged by Heinich (2018: 67-77): the moment of “naming” by others, the moment of “self-perception” of an individual or group, and finally, the moment of “presentation” of oneself, or of the group, to others.

The second dimension relates to the degree of politicisation. This is the “depth” of citizen awareness, namely interest in certain issues in the public debate, identification with certain causes or political movements, or even demands in an internalised state. This second dimension is therefore at the sub-commitment level of passive citizenship. Finally, the third dimension is political mobilisation in the sense of Tilly (1978), i.e. the transition to active citizen engagement. It takes shape in participation in civil society, in person or online, and in electoral participation.

Each of these dimensions has been affected by the evolution of Taiwan’s social configuration over the past 15 to 20 years, in two phases.

Table 2. Profiles of individuals who participated in the longitudinal interview series

Informant	Followed since	Sex	Year of birth	Education level	Place(s) of residence	Profession or main occupation	Marital status
1	2007	M	1981	Bachelor's degree	Nantou, Keelung	Shop manager	Married, two children
2	2007	F	1985	Bachelor's degree	Taoyuan	Entrepreneur	Married, two children
3	2007	M	1985	Bachelor's degree	Taipei	Entrepreneur	Single
4	2007	M	1985	Bachelor's degree	Taipei	Marketing executive	Married, one child
5	2008	F	1985	Master's degree	Taichung	Freelance translator	Single
6	2009	F	1988	Master's degree	Taipei	Civil servant	Single
7	2010	F	1989	Bachelor's degree	Taipei	Employed in import-export	Single
8	2012	F	1993	High school diploma	Taipei	Salesperson, then homemaker	Married, three children
9	2012	F	1990	Master's degree	Kaohsiung, Taipei	Employee in the automobile sector	Single
10	2013	F	1993	Bachelor's degree	Taichung	Student (Master's degree)	Single
11	2013	M	1993	Bachelor's degree	Taipei, Ilan	IT specialist	Single
12	2014	M	1994	Bachelor's degree	Taidong, Taipei	Civil servant	Single
13	2015	M	1995	Bachelor's degree	Kaohsiung, Taipei	Entrepreneur	Single
14	2015	M	1995	Bachelor's degree	Taipei	Administrative officer	Single
15	2015	F	1993	Master's degree	Keelung	Administrative officer	Married
16	2016	M	1996	Bachelor's degree	Kaohsiung	Student (Master's degree)	Single
17	2017	F	1997	Bachelor's degree	Kaohsiung	Student (Master's degree)	Single

Source: author.

Phase 1 – Restricted politicisation: The 2000s

The first phase of “restricted politicisation,” corresponding approximately to the 2000s, is characterised by the emergence of a generation in itself. In terms of identity, this generation is first shaped from the outside by the stigmatising designation of the elders who compare them to strawberries (*caomeizu* 草莓族), not only to refer to the privileged material and emotional environment in which these young people grew up, but also to criticise what they believe to be their emotional fragility, their lability, their lack of professional ambition, and their casual and superficial consumerism.³ These are all flaws that they believe threaten not only the future of the family, but also the economic and political future of the island.

Faced with this avalanche of criticism, young people do not yet have the means to respond. During the 2000s, the media landscape was mainly in the hands of the traditional media, which relayed these stereotypes. Apart from the bulletin board system (BBS), which played a central role in the Wild Strawberries Movement (*ye caomei xueyun* 野草莓學運) and whose operation by thematic pages and threads of posts prefigured Facebook (Hsiao 2017), young people did not yet have a powerful means

of creating a relatively autonomous sphere of information sharing, production, and dissemination. This may explain why they maintain a self-representation that incorporates some of the stereotypes attached to them. According to a survey conducted by *Career* magazine in 2004, although 59.5% of respondents consider their generation “more competent” (*nengli geng qiang* 能力更強) than older generations, just as many (62.3%) perceive themselves as “lacking in stress resistance,” and more than half (51.4%) consider themselves “unable to endure hard work.”⁴ In another survey carried out the same year by the Trendspotting Market Research Agency, to the question “Do you think you have the ability or opportunity to change or correct the political, economic, and social situation on the island?,” almost 90% of the young people questioned answered in the negative (49.2% “not at all” and 39.7% “not so much”).⁵ The same feeling of

3. Yvonne Chang and Joanne Chen, “Strawberries the Frame,” *Taiwan Today*, 1 October 2007, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=12,29,33,45&post=22182> (accessed on 12 July 2021).

4. Special feature “打造年輕世代的希望之國” (*Dazao nianqing shidai de xiwang zhi guo*, Creating the land of hope for the young generation), *Career* (就業情報) No. 335, March 2004.

5. Eric Lin, “Le pouvoir de réaliser son rêve” (The power to make dreams come true), *Taiwan aujourd'hui*, Vol. XXI (2), February 2004, p. 20.

powerlessness, but in the face of poor working conditions (unpaid overtime, stagnant salaries, hierarchical rigidities) emerges from the qualitative survey I conducted in 2011 among 27 working people aged between 24 and 30 (Lepasant 2011).

My interviews reveal that during this first phase, collective protest action seems unthinkable. The young people I spoke to are mostly confined to an atomistic self-perception; they see themselves as isolated from an all-powerful “system,” “society,” “forces,” or hierarchies. This self-perception can be explained by the persistent weakness of political socialisation in adolescence and early adulthood. In high school, priority is largely given to preparing for exams. University campuses are not very politicised, student unions are almost non-existent, and the network of associations and social movements that will mobilise part of the youth during the 2010s is still weak and without any persistent politicisation and mobilisation effects. This is notably the case for the two main student movements of the second half of the 2000s: the mobilisation against the project to destroy the Losheng Leprosarium, which reached its climax in March–April 2007, and the Wild Strawberries Movement against the abuses of the law enforcement authorities on the occasion of the visit of Chen Yunlin 陳雲林, the president of the (Chinese) Association for Relations Across The Taiwan Strait (ARATS), in November 2008 (Cabestan and Lepasant 2009: 80–1; Cole 2017: 20).

There is therefore still no alternative model of political commitment to the parties that occupy almost all the space. Yet, they are the object of great distrust among young people (Cabestan and Lepasant 2009: 82; Rigger 2011). During the interviews conducted over the period 2004–2010, the two camps were often turned against each other, criticised for their childish and sometimes violent behaviour in the assemblies, and for being corrupt or engaged in sterile struggles that belong to the past. In particular, young people denounced what they perceived as the instrumentalisation of history and ethnic divisions between “local [Taiwanese]” (*bendiren* 本地人) and “mainlanders” (*waishengren* 外省人) who arrived in Taiwan with the KMT between 1945 and 1950. Few people showed any interest in politics, which was then seen as “conflict-producing,” “boring,” or “chaotic.” The most common equation was: political parties are hateful, so politics is hateful.

Nevertheless, this period saw the establishment of a set of values and several red lines that were to become stronger during the 2010s. Combined, they give substance to what “being Taiwanese” means for this generation, constitute the driving force behind the student movements, and orient their voting. The fundamental elements that structure the behaviour and political choices of this generation, as I was able to highlight during my surveys, are identification with a sovereign and independent democratic society, limited to the territory of Taiwan and the islands attached to it; identification with an inclusive Taiwanese community of destiny in which the ethnic divisions inherited from history are no longer relevant and that cannot therefore be based on Hoklo-Taiwanese ethnonationalism; recognition of historical and cultural links with China that do not imply a feeling of belonging to a large Chinese nation; increasing rejection of any unification scenario with China; a marked adherence to

democratic values and generally more progressive positions than those of their parents and grandparents on issues at the heart of the public debate (gender equality, same-sex marriage, immigrant workers’ rights and racism, respect for and defence of minorities), with some exceptions (security measures, the death penalty).

Phase 2 – Extended politicisation: The 2010s

The data I have gathered converges with that of other research and opinion surveys carried out throughout the 2000s and 2010s. They show that the identity positions and values just presented remain largely shared by people born from the 1980s onwards as they progress through the life cycle, and that they are also shared, with greater salience, by those born in the 1990s (Rigger 2011, 2016: 84–8; Lin 2017: 28).⁶ All those born in the 1980s and 1990s can therefore be considered to form a single generation.

In the second phase, these representations will be politically activated by the formation of a generational consciousness around the feeling that the youth must “save Taiwan.” The years 2010–2013 are a pivotal period because they give rise to the sense of crisis that will animate an increasingly important section of the youth. First of all, for Grano (2015: 3), after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, 2011 is a key year for the awareness of the environmental risks Taiwan faces. In the following years, environmental issues have gradually formed a space of politicisation for youth outside the field of partisan confrontation, thus producing the conditions for a possible civic engagement for a generation that, as I discussed above, previously equated all politics with the negativity of party politics (Lepasant 2018: 113).

Next, while the development of economic relations with China was viewed favourably by a large majority of young people during Ma Ying-jeou’s first term (Lepasant 2012), the opacity of the negotiations leading up to the signing of the Cross-strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) in June 2013, and the potential dangers contained in this agreement, are generating growing concern about the political consequences of accelerating economic rapprochement with China. Allowing Chinese investment in publishing, media, and culture, but also opening up certain sectors of the local labour market to Chinese workers, the CSSTA raises the greatest fears about the dangers it could pose to Taiwanese sovereignty and democracy as well as to material living conditions (Hsieh and Skelton 2018: 107). Finally, this anxiety is fed by the perception of an authoritarian drift during Ma Ying-jeou’s second term (2012–2016), whose project of accelerated integration of the economies and societies of the two shores is supported by a powerful coalition bringing together the business community, a majority of the traditional media, certain academic circles, and the entire pro-unification camp (Beckershoff 2014: 217–8; Cole

6. See also: Special Feature “被出賣的世代” (*Bei chumai de shidai*, The betrayed generation), *Jin zhoukan* (今周刊), vol. 902, 3 April 2014, p. 86–111; Rebecca Lin, “Fissure Point Identified at 39 Years Old,” *CommonWealth Magazine* (天下雜誌), 6 January 2017, <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=598> (accessed on 6 February 2022); Lucy Chao, “Seeking Freedom, Living for the Moment,” *CommonWealth Magazine* (天下雜誌), 28 September 2017, <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=1677> (accessed on 6 February 2022); Rebecca Lin, “台灣vs.中華民國世代衝突, 更勝南北” (*Taiwan vs. Zhonghua minguo shidai chongtu, gengsheng nanbei*, Taiwan versus Republic of China, the generational conflict overcomes the South-North divide), *CommonWealth Magazine* (天下雜誌), No. 689, 31 December 2019, p. 96–9.

2017: 20-1; Fell 2017: 7).

The sense of crisis and urgency, that first arises within small groups of students has gradually become the catalyst for the deepening of the youth's civic consciousness and contributed to the strengthening of its political mobilisation in three stages. During the years 2011-2013, the first student movements, which brought together a few dozen or a few hundred professional activists, present on several fronts, saw their ranks grow and then spread to defend various causes throughout the country (Fell 2017). In addition to the strong antinuclear mobilisation, the successes of several movements renewed the image of political commitment by placing it on a terrain free of the suspicion of electoral manoeuvring or of collusion with the business world (Lepesant 2018: 115). Because of their multiplication and "cross-pollination" (Cole 2017: 21), these movements were also incubators of young charismatic leaders and showed young people that they have the skills and capacity to act in order to influence public affairs, which should not be monopolised by their elders (*ibid.*: 28-9).

In the second phase, the Sunflower Movement (*taiyanghua xueyun* 太陽花學運) against the CSSTA mobilised tens of thousands of people on a daily basis in March and April 2014, two-thirds of whom were born between 1985 and 1994 and were then aged between 20 and 29 (Chen and Huang 2015: 152). It gave widespread publicity to the leaders discussed above and greatly accelerated the development, largely online, of a "protest ecosystem"⁷ and a political sphere created by and for the youth, the latter itself a formidable vehicle for generational extension of deepening political consciousness. The intensive use of the possibilities offered by new technologies and social networks thus generates a citizen space of information, politicisation, and mobilisation outside the sphere of influence of traditional media and political parties (Gaffric and Heurtebise 2016; Lepesant 2018). The information field is no longer dominated by a small circle of institutional producers (administrations, traditional news media, publishing houses) but is animated by a myriad of actors, including a large number of young outsiders with innovative practices.

The resulting changes in political attitudes and behaviours are striking both among those I have been following for the longest time, and when one compares their positions in the mid-2000s with those of people of roughly the same age in the mid-2010s. These changes are characterised firstly by a much greater interest in political issues. As mentioned above, the interviews I conducted in the period 2004-2010 revealed a massive lack of interest in public affairs, which young people almost never discussed among themselves. The two interview extracts below summarise the changes that occurred in the following years quite well. In January 2020, informant No. 17 of my longitudinal study, who entered university in 2015, confided to me:

When I was in high school, my father always told me that I should not be interested in politics because it was dangerous and full of conflicts. Then when I started university, I realised that many of my peers were discussing political issues directly or on social networks. I started to think that politics

can't be that bad. And now I'm interested. I'm interested in a lot of things.

Informant No. 2, born in 1985, talks about the groping awakening of her political consciousness in an interview conducted in September 2019:

I didn't vote in 2008 or 2012. I wasn't interested in politics at that time. I used to see KMT and DPP people fussing on TV. It looked really lame to me. And I thought there was nothing I could do to change that. So it was a waste of time. And then around me, my friends, everybody, thought kind of the same. But during the Sunflower Movement, I started to ask myself questions. I started to think that democracy is fragile. I started to think that politics is also about that, not only about the parties that I still don't like very much. In 2016, I voted for Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文. But actually, I continue to be quite pessimistic. More than those younger than me, anyway. Like my little sister who has always been much more interested in politics.

This increase in civic awareness is also accompanied by a clear widening of the generation gap. This is primarily the result of a renewed, more positive and combative self-perception, based on the feeling that young people are the guardians of Taiwanese democracy in the face of leaders and elders who give in to the siren calls of authoritarianism or are deemed incompetent. This is reflected in particular in self-labelling designed to counteract stigmatising designations coined by the elders, such as with the phrase "bitter gourd generation" (*kuguazu* 苦瓜族) used to protest the difficulties young people have to endure (*chiku* 吃苦) to get ahead in life, due to what is denounced as generational injustice, with elders concentrating wealth, opportunities, and power in their hands.⁸ Young people also refer to themselves as hothouse flowers (*wenshi li de huaduo* 溫室裡的花朵), acknowledging that they have grown up in a protective family environment, but without necessarily the negative consequences implied by the assimilation to the fragility of strawberries, and with the idea that it is possible to get out of the greenhouse, whose atmosphere can be stifling.

Indeed, nine-tenths of the people I spoke to during the period 2014-2020 reported a more or less profound divergence from their parents in several of the following areas: choice of studies, professional career and lifestyle, definition of what constitutes a "successful life," freedom of control over one's body (tattoos, piercings), choice of spouse, the need to start a family, environmental issues, relations with China, and perception of the

7. Mark Harrison, "The Anti-media Monopoly Movement in Taiwan," *The China Story*, 20 December 2012, <https://archive.thechinastory.org/2012/12/the-anti-media-monopoly-movement> (accessed on 6 July 2021).

8. In Mandarin, "to bear hardships" is *chiku* (吃苦), which literally means "to eat something bitter." Bitter gourd (*kugua* 苦瓜) is therefore used as a symbol of a generation that considers its future obstructed by the economic situation in Taiwan (low wages, soaring real estate prices, and proliferation of unpaid overtime). Moreover, the character *zu* (族), which means "clan" or "ethnic group," is often used in Taiwan in an abusive way to speak of a "generational group" such as in the expression *caomeizu* (草莓族, "the generational group of strawberries") that the self-designation *kuguazu* seeks to counter.

Taiwanese political scene. In all these areas, parents and their relatives are considered too conservative, narrow-minded, or authoritarian, even among those already in their thirties. They are often accused of reducing life to "good grades, a good degree, a stable job and/or a good salary, a stable family."

Politically, this translates into a rupture that is less and less hushed up and takes the form of a demand for "generational justice" (*shidai zhengyi* 世代正義) in the face of the feeling that they do not have the same opportunities for success as previous generations. The interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020 thus show that young people, who had initially opted for conflict avoidance strategies, are increasingly taking the step of openly confronting their older family circle on political issues.

However, despite this assertive stance, the electoral participation of this generation remains low during this period. For the 2008, 2012, and 2016 national elections, post-election polls put the turnout rate for the under-forties in the 50-60% range, well below the 76.33%, 74.38%, and 66.27% national turnout.⁹

The situation did not improve in the 2018 local elections,¹⁰ but this poll can nevertheless be seen as the starting point of the third stage in the evolution of the new generation's civic awareness. It led to their strong mobilisation in the 2020 national elections, up by about 15 points (from 57% to 72%) among 20-34 year-olds, and 11 points (59% to 70%) among 35-39 year-olds, compared to 2016.¹¹ While there is an increase in turnout for the electorate as a whole (to 74.90%), there is a clear and steady decline in turnout with age among those born before 1980.

My interviews show that the results of the 2018 local elections and the referendums held on the same day have strongly reinforced the sense of a "generational confrontation" (*shidai zhi zheng* 世代之爭) in terms of values and defining Taiwan's future. This is not only due to the success of the referendums opposing the legalisation of homosexual marriage¹² but also to the propulsion to the forefront of the political and media scene of Han Kuo-yu 韓國瑜, elected mayor of Kaohsiung and then nominated as the KMT's presidential candidate. Han Kuo-yu quickly became the antithesis of youthful aspirations and the target of strong criticism: he was advocating for the opening of Taiwan to Chinese investment, he was clearly ignoring the events in Hong Kong, he was supported by the pro-Beijing media group WantWant China Times, and his many racist and sexist statements and "gaffes" revealed his incompetence;¹³ besides, he benefitted from the unconditional support of a large fringe of the over-fifties.¹⁴

The repression of the Hong Kong uprising, starting in June 2019, has only accentuated a generational self-perception linked to the feeling of having become the guardians of democracy in the face of elders who do not realise the imminence and extent of the danger. The following four interview excerpts illustrate this: "Our parents don't understand. They are blinded by Han Kuo-yu's promises, 'to make a lot of money' thanks to China, but look at what is happening in Hong Kong!" (student, 22); "We have to do something for Taiwan, we [young people] have to save Taiwan's democracy" (student, 24); "Tsai Ing-wen may not be the best leader you could hope for, but at least she is normal, she doesn't talk nonsense all the time, without thinking, and she tries to

defend democracy" (engineer, 25); "Before, I was not interested in politics, but you can't escape politics, political issues are everywhere, so you have to choose" (entrepreneur, 34). According to an estimate by Academia Sinica, 72% of under-forties may have voted for Tsai Ing-wen during the presidential elections in 2020.¹⁵

It is possible to think that the electoral mobilisation of young people is not only cyclical, linked to the personality of Han Kuo-yu and the events in Hong Kong, but also the product of a configurational evolution characterised by the strong extension of the political sphere "by the youth, for the youth" under the effect of a threefold dynamic: 1) the development of online programmes featuring charismatic young presenters who have become extremely popular for their informed and corrosive treatment of political news, for example the productions of Taiwan Bar Studio (*Taiwan ba* 臺灣吧), including Brian Tseng's 曾博恩 *The Night Night Show* (*Bo'en yeye xiu* 博恩夜夜秀); 2) the increased frequency of political interventions by young arts and entertainment personalities, such as the musician and Taiwan Bar Studio co-founder Hauer Hsieh 謝政豪, jack-of-all-trades YouTuber Holger Chen 陳之漢, and director Fu Yue 傅榆; 3) the increasing number of candidacies from young people with very different backgrounds, often from social movements, and who have become very media-friendly such as Huang Jie 黃捷, Miao Poya 苗博雅, Lin Ying-meng 林穎孟, Sabrina Lin 林亮君, and Justin Wu 吳崢 in 2018, and Lai Pin-yu 賴品妤, Chen Po-wei 陳柏惟, Kao Yu-ting 高鈺婷, and Wu Yi-nong 吳怡農 in 2020.

9. Hsu Chi-wei and Evelyn Kao, "Students Move to Boost Youth Voters Turnout," *Focus Taiwan*, 10 January 2016, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201601100012> (accessed on 14 February 2022); and Chen Chien-ming 陳建銘, "亡國感大噴發!" (*Wangguogan da penfa!*, The eruption of national crisis sentiment!), *Cheers*, 12 January 2020, <https://www.cheers.com.tw/article/article.action?id=5096064&page=2> (accessed on 5 July 2021).
10. Part of the "under 40" workforce has obviously changed over this period. The aim is mainly to show a general trend. For post-election surveys, see: Hsu Chi-wei and Evelyn Kao, "Students Move to Boost Youth Voters Turnout," *op. cit.*, and Chen Chien-ming 陳建銘, "亡國感大噴發!" (*Wangguogan da penfa!*, The eruption of national crisis sentiment!), *op. cit.*
11. Taiwan Central Election Commission Report, quoted in Nathan Batto, "The 2020 Surge in Youth Turnout," *Frozen Garlic*, 1 January 2021, <https://frozengarlic.wordpress.com/2021/01/01/the-2020-surge-in-youth-turnout/> (accessed on 5 July 2021).
12. Jens Damm, "How Will Conservative Backlash to Same-sex Marriage Impact Tsai Ing-wen's Chances for Re-election?" *Taiwan Insight*, 5 January 2020, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2020/01/05/how-will-conservative-backlash-to-same-sex-marriage-impact-tsai-ing-wens-chances-for-re-election/> (accessed on 6 July 2021); Wang Rath, "Taiwan's Youth Across All Spectrum Mobilizes to Increase Voter Turnout," *The News Lens*, 10 January 2020, <https://international.thenewslens.com/feature/taiwan2020/129897> (accessed on 6 July 2021).
13. Brian Hioe, "Han Kuo-yu Causes Controversy after Recent Strings of Gaffes," *New Bloom*, 29 October 2019, <https://newbloommag.net/2019/10/29/han-kuo-yu-gaffes/> (accessed on 12 July 2021).
14. Tangyu Lepasant, "Demand for Generational Justice and the 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election," *Taiwan Insight*, 31 July 2019, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2019/07/31/demand-for-generational-justice-and-the-2020-taiwan-presidential-election/> (accessed on 6 July 2021); Roger Yan 嚴文廷, "陳美華: 性別歧視歷年之最, 高雄市民對韓投下不信任票" (*Chen Meihua: Xingbie qishi linian zhi zui, Gaoxiong shimin dui Han touxia buxinrenpiao*, Chen Mei-hua: Facing unprecedented sexism, Kaohsiung electors' non-confidence vote against Han), *The Reporter* (報導者), 12 January 2020, <https://www.twreporter.org/a/2020-election-gender-and-generation-issues> (accessed on 12 July 2021).
15. Russel Hsiao, "Polls: DPP Party Identification Surges amid China's Intensifying Pressure," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 12 August 2020, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2020/08/vol-5-issue-16/#RusselHsiao08122020> (accessed on 23 February 2022).

Conclusion

The social heterogeneity and the large audience of these new political actors contribute to the normalisation of the relationship with politics among the under-forties, and to the feeling of having a role in protecting Taiwan's community of destiny, particularly in the face of pressure from Beijing. In 2020, they represented about a third of the voters. In the absence of a right-left divide and with the weakening of the structuring influence of ethnic divisions and local factions, the formation of an actual generation aware of its role in shaping Taiwan's future, and its mobilisation on the streets and at the ballot box, suggests that the generational dimension has become one of the keys to understanding current and future political developments. The growing weight of this generation and its gradual arrival in the leadership of Taiwan will have a determining influence not only on the internal democratic

debate, which some observers are already echoing,¹⁶ but also on the definition of relations with China.

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16. Gunter Schubert, "Quo Vadis, KMT?," *CommonWealth Magazine* (天下雜誌), 22 June 2020, <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=2743> (accessed on 6 July 2021).

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