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Taiwan's Civil Society and Student Movements

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Conference paper presented at American Association for Chinese Studies 60th
Annual Meeting, October 5-7, 2018. Baltimore

NOTE:

Taiwan's students have played an important role in Taiwan's pursuit for political freedom in the entire postwar era, and yet their activism and influences waxed and waned in cyclic patterns. Student movement is here defined as the protest participation of high school and university students with the objective to promote and resist a social change. The issues at question can be directly related to students' interest or not, but what is important is that their participation comes with a distinctive group consciousness that separates them from other societal members.

Originally I intended to present a study on four postwar student activism waves in order to compare their diverse origins, trajectories and outcomes. Four waves are as follows:

(1) The clandestine anti-regime student activism emerged in the wake of the February 28 Incident of 1947, culminating in the April 4 Incident of 1949. A stream of student activists later joined the communist-related clandestine insurgency, who were purged in the heyday of White-terror rule in the early 1950s.

(2) The second wave initiated with the Diaoyutai dispute in 1970-1971 and evolved into an intellectual awakening focusing the pressing needs for social and political reforms. In this wave, KMT student activists, including Ma Ying-jeou were later absorbed into the regime, while others withdrew from the public scene.

(3) The third wave started with the dissident students in the mid-1980s and culminated in the 1990 Wild Lily Student Movement. With liberalized political environment, this student movement played an important in promoting Taiwan's democratization.

(4) While the third wave was primarily preoccupied with domestic reforms, the fourth cycle emerged as a resistance against the encroaching "China factor", and reached the climax with the 2014 Sunflower Movement.

However, due to my ill-planned time budgeting, I can only present my observation on the last wave. The following is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

The Lessons of the Wild Strawberry Movement

Taiwan's Wild Strawberry Movement took place in November 2008 to protest the excessive policing that ensued as the newly installed KMT government was rolling out the red carpet to welcome China's envoy. Protesters demanded an official apology, the resignation of responsible officials, and the revision of regulations on demonstrations, which failed to elicit positive responses from the authorities. Student sit-in protest in Taipei's Liberty Square dragged on for two months and finally collapsed in exhaustion. Despite its ostensible failure, the Wild Strawberry Movement was significant in many ways. First, it marked a new beginning of student intervention in national-level politics that had gradually subsided after the 1990 Wild Lily Movement (Ho 2001: 74). Afterwards, student activism had contracted to some niche issues, such as the preservation movement for Lo-Sheng Sanatorium from 2004, and participants developed into a close-knit community that shunned involvement in partisan politics (Chang 2015). Due to the prolonged decline of student activism, the Wild Strawberry Movement had a unique origin in the Internet only because of the absence of prior student organizations (Hsiao 2017: 48). Secondly, although the movement raised the issues of human rights and a possible authoritarian comeback, it was also the first time that students voiced their demands concerning cross-strait politics, reflecting the growing impacts of Beijing on Taiwan. Finally, students had taken a serious lesson from their failure and decided to go back to their campuses in order to build new organizational bases for the purpose of continuing and broadening their activism. Since the students' sit-in protests were not only limited to Taipei but also took place in Hsinchu, Taichung, Chiayi, Tainan, and Kaohsiung, a nation-wide wave of campus organizing was immediately under way.

In many universities a proliferation of movement-oriented clubs emerged. In the schools where there was weak or no previous student activism, new clubs were organized, for example the Protest Club (*lingershe*) in National Cheng Kung University (Tainan), the Radical Notes (*jijin biji*) in National Tsing Hua University (Hsinchu), the Letting-Dogs-Out Club (*fanggoushe*) in National Sun Yat-sen University (Kaohsiung), and the Movement Club (*mufumen*) in National Chung Cheng University (Chiayi). In other places, dissident students revived movement clubs that had long be dormant, such as the Black Forest (*heisenlin*) in National Chung Hsing University and the Humanity Workshop (*renjian gongzuofang*) in Tunghai University, both in Taichung. Student initiatives were facilitated by their ex-movement activist professors, who took part in the 1990 Wild Lily Movement and expectedly held sympathetic attitudes toward this new wave of campus activism. A study found that of 69 active movement clubs scattered across the nation's 48

universities and with an average of 10 members, the great majority of them emerging after the Wild Strawberry Movement (Jhuang 2015: 53, 59).

In the attempt to raise the consciousness of their fellow students, these Wild Strawberry activists experimented with a wide variety of mobilizing strategies. Some sought to bring outside political issues to campus. The Protest Club, for example, gained “notoriety” by staging graffiti protests on Chiang Kai-shek statues each year on 28 February, while the Radical Notes activists devoted their attention to environmental protests. Others focused on daily grievances around campus in the hopes that more students would be willing to become involved with public issues. For instance, the Letting-Dogs-Out Club started with the issue of motorcycle parking, and the Movement Club led a protest over the regulations on course requirements. The National Taiwan University (NTU) Student Association leaders provide another example of this student rights strategy. In 2009 they launched a series of protests against the university leadership’s pursuit for academic excellence at the expense of student rights, which successfully raised the concern of students. To oppose a cut to teaching assistants’ wages, these student activists organized a labor union of graduate students in 2011, the first in Taiwan’s higher education (interview #TW54).

In short, on the eve of the Sunflower Movement, Taiwan’s universities were brimming with protest activism. One Sunflower activist, whose undergraduate and graduate student years spanned from 2007 to 2015, described his personal observation:

“There was a discussion forum in 2007 about the issue of whether the DPP government should rename the Chiang Kei-shek Memorial, which attracted around 80 participants. It was so exciting then, but later I found everyone was staging a forum. There were not so many activities to attend in Taipei back then, and the participants were few. But later on, such events became so frequent that they sometimes took place at the same time. For example, at school, the Student Association held one event, and our club staged another, not counting those that happened outside the campus. In the past, we used to coordinate our events to avoid time conflicts for the fear that participants might be diverted; afterwards, such worry was no longer necessary” (interview #TW59).

Inter-campus Networks

These activist students were also conscious of the need to rebuild inter-campus connections. As an activist revealed, “the Wild Strawberry movement linked us like a bunch of rice dumplings” (rouzong) so that student leaders in different localities all came to know each other (interview #47). With this foundation, the inter-campus or inter-regional network emerged in many ways. Sometimes networks expanded

because activists changed schools. Two biographical stories of the 1980s generation, Lin Fei-fan (born in 1988) and Chen Wei-ting (born in 1990), the twin figureheads of the Sunflower Movement, suffice here. From 2008 to 2011, Lin was studying as an undergraduate in Tainan's National Cheng Kung University, where he co-founded the Protest Club. After 2011, he became a master degree student in Taipei's NTU and served as the president of its Graduate Student Association from 2012 to 2013. With his move, Lin emerged as one of the nodal points linking students in Taipei and in southern Taiwan. Chen Wei-ting was still a high school student during the Wild Strawberry Movement. Because of the intensive participation, he became well known by Taipei-based activist students. Chen began to study in National Tsing Hua University in 2009, playing an important role in the Radical Notes club and thereby expanding his personal networks in Hsinchu.

These activist students also formed a nationwide network by launching joint campaigns. In 2010, a University Student Rights Investigation and Evaluation Team (daxue xuesheng quanli diaocha pingjian xiaozu) came about to protest an incident in which students' freedom of speech was violated. This organization evolved into a watchdog organization with its annual reports until 2013. Student activists in southern Taiwan were particularly aware of their marginal status, and thus more willing to collaborate across schools. In 2011, they founded a quarterly magazine *Praxis in the South* (xingnan), and held rock concerts and evening forums, which lasted until the outbreak of Sunflower Movement. As a matter of fact, the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement came into being largely thanks to the reactivation of student activist networks that were built after 2008 (Wang 2015: 133).

There were also occasions for mutual exchanges among activist students. The first event took place in 2011 as more than 30 students joined a three-day workshop held in Taichung (Wei 2016: 89). In the beginning such exchanges were informal, small-scale, and limited to invited activists only; however, as news of such events traveled through social media, more students indicated their eagerness to join. As such, these events became more frequent and involved more participants (interview #TW59). In January 2014, two months before the Sunflower Movement, a five-day youth empowerment camp called *Amateurs' Riot* (shuren zhiluan) was held with the participation of over 200 students. As one organizer revealed, the networks formed in that camp played an important role in the subsequent occupation of the legislature (interview #TW46). Increasing participation and networking also brought sophistication: Before the legislature occupation, a group of activists had finished the manuscript of a manual to share the basic know-how in organizing a protest, which was put into print afterwards (Chang, Huang, and Yu 2014).

Networking with NGOs and the DPP

The reemergence of student movements attracted the attention of NGOs and opposition politicians, who intended to build a close relationship with these new student activists. Despite their differing purposes and motivations, the result was that student activist networks extended beyond their own category. The Taiwan Rural Front was among the first to encourage and recruit student participants. From 2009, the Taiwan Rural Front held an annual summer camp that attracted hundreds of students (Wei 2016: 116-23). While the NGOs intended to draw new blood from the emerging student activists, students also found it easier to access resources from the former. A group of students associated with the NTU Chuoshui River Club (zhushuishishe) began to undertake an oral history project of Su Beng (a Taiwan independence movement veteran) in 2009, and held an annual music festival on 28 February each year beginning in 2013 (Chuoshui River Club Editorial Team 2016: 54). These efforts emerged due to sponsorship from a number of pro-independence NGOs. Similarly, the Kaohsiung-based Praxis in the South forums and events were also made possible with monetary support of local NGOs (interview #TW50).

The opposition party attempted to harness the new student activism. Tsai Ing-wen, who led the DPP for six years of its eight years in opposition (2008-2016), was originally a trade negotiation expert hired by Lee Teng-hui's government. With her technocratic backgrounds, she was perceived as less of a typical DPP politician and thus more acceptable to younger generation activists. Under Tsai's leadership, the DPP declared 2009 as the "the year of social movements" and reestablished the department for social movements in its party headquarters – a symbolic gesture to woo movement activists. After her failed presidential campaign in 2012, Tsai established the Thinking Taiwan Foundation, which recruited some young activists and operated an online forum for their writings.

Other DPP politicians also set eyes on these younger generation activists. People Rule Movement (renmin zuozhu yundong), a campaign launched by Lin Yi-hsiung in 2009, hired some ex-Wild Strawberry participants. As a result, when students mobilized to oppose media monopoly, they often had meetings in its office (interview #TW 60). The Youth Synergy Taiwan Foundation founded in 2010 by Cheng Li-chiun, who became Minister of Culture under Tsai's administration, functioned as an important channel in this regard. In 2011, it sponsored ten NGOs all over Taiwan by subsidizing the salaries of their staff. All these efforts deepened the links between young activists and the DPP.

The Role of Social Media

The expansion of Taiwanese movement network took place in a period when social media rapidly evolved, resulting a radical reconfiguration of interpersonal relationship. Facebook launched its traditional Chinese platform in June 2008, and soon emerged as the most popular social networking service in both societies. Together with the global advent of iPhones in 2007, which marked the beginning of mobile online connection, protest-making in the digital era has assumed a new contour.

As said above, the student involvement in the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement started with one of Chen Wei-ting's Facebook posts that was threatened with the libel lawsuit from a pro-Beijing media tycoon. Hence it was no surprise that the following student protests relied heavily on the social media. Youth Alliance against Media Monster campaigners made creative use of Facebook by sending out powerful memes to broader netizens (Wong 2016: 173). An episode suffices here to illustrate the progress of digitally-enabled activism in pre-Sunflower Taiwan. On 18 August, 2013, a rally took place in front of the Presidential Office to protest the Tapu land expropriation, which later involved into an overnight "occupy the Ministry of the Interior," arguably a dress rehearsal of the Sunflower Movement seven months later. There I encountered Shih-Jung Hsu, an activist scholar who led the Taiwan Rural Front, the event's main organizer. According to his on-the-spot estimate, the event attracted around ten thousand attendants and eighty per cent of them came without being mobilized by the sponsor organization.

As the Internet became more widespread, interactive, and mobile, it was not a surprise that the development of Taiwan's activist networks was greatly facilitated by the digital technology. Nevertheless, the significance of social media is easily overstated to the extent that it is seen as the most important, if not the deterministic, factor for contributing the surge of protests, which is not supported by a realistic look at what happened in Taiwan. The rise of student activism was accompanied with the proliferation or resuscitation of campus-based organizations as well as the intensification of their face-to-face exchange and collaboration. Due to its advantages in low cost and speed, digital connectiveness expedited the growth and thickening of activist networks without substituting the off-line efforts in organizing.

Social media is not a panacea for the problems inherent in collective action, and such understanding was widely shared among Taiwanese. In preparing to launch their surprise sit-in protests in Legislative Yuan, Taiwanese activists deliberately refrained from using mobile phones to recruit participants because they suspected the online communication was closely monitored by the police.