

Self-Image as a Factor in the China-Taiwan Stand-Off¹

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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished members of the Ming Chuan University faculty, researchers and students,

Many thanks for your kind invitation and the opportunity for me to give this talk to a high-calibre audience! I must say that I feel a bit uneasy to speak about Taiwan at a Taiwanese university. But, if anything, it might be of interest to you to hear a view on Taiwan from remote Europe.

Let me start from the very topic of this talk – what does self-image have to do with cross-strait relations? I suppose I owe you a brief explanation.

In 2017, the BBC World Service commissioned a thought-provoking global country poll on views of major international players. It asked respondents to rate various countries, including the U.S. and China, and their influence in the world. The most intriguing – and amusing – aspect of this survey had to do with the gap between “image” and “self-image”. For instance, 71% of the Americans polled believed that their country played a positive role in international affairs, but the rest of the world thought otherwise – less than half that, a mere 34% of respondents in other countries, shared this view. Chinese citizens surveyed were convinced to an even larger extent, 88%, of their country’s positive influence on the planet. Alas, once again, the world had a different opinion – less than half that, 41%, found China’s role positive.

That survey got me thinking and since then I have been toying with the idea of the gap between image and self-image. In 2019, I published an article on the U.S. - China competition as a “clash of self-images”, which was a half-serious and half tongue-in-cheek attempt at diving into the psychological aspects of their relations.

If you ask psychologists, they will tell you that there is a subtle difference between self-image and self-concept. But, in general, the two notions are similar and largely interchangeable. Notably, self-images do not always align with reality – think of the gap between images and self-images. Just as importantly, self-images are anything but static – they evolve over time and are not easy to change.

A much more difficult and debatable question is whether these notions can be used as credible tools in political science and international relations? The thing is that nations or ethnic groups are large collective entities with very different and oftentimes conflicting views. But for the sake of argument, here I am taking self-image as a set of dominant or prominent perceptions in society that are likely to condition political choices and behaviour.

Relations between the PRC and Taiwan are routinely seen as an equation based on an extremely complex, but fundamentally rational, strategic calculus through a double prism: (A) Beijing’s national integration vision and pursuit to absorb Taiwan; and (B) the great power competition

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between China and the U.S. The key point I am trying to make is that there may well be an additional – and less rational - layer of factors that relates to the way the PRC and Taiwan view themselves and make their choices.

Hence the key question I'm posing in my current research: To what extent are the PRC and Taiwan's self-images likely to play a role in their respective strategies? To what extent do they stand in the way of cool-headed assessments and a rational calculus? And could the self-images of the two sides exacerbate the stand-off?

I think that a reasonable starting point in this debate would be the ethnic and cultural background of the two parties.

In mainland China, official sources point to an overwhelming Han majority, to the tune of 92% of the total population. There are 56 registered ethnic minorities - Tibetans, Mongols and Uyghurs being the biggest distinct communities. There have been many reports about repression of ethnic minorities that I needn't focus on, as I am sure you know this very well. I will simply highlight the fact that the policy of assimilation of ethnic minorities in China is in line with the CCP's social engineering philosophy aiming at the construction of a homogeneous nation, with the least possible deviations from what the authorities consider to be the correct norms of behaviour and lifestyle.

Things are quite different in Taiwan, with four main communities recognised between 1987 and 1993: Hoklo (*Benshengren*) at roughly 70% of the total, Hakka at approximately 15%, Mainlanders (*Waishengren*) around 12% and 16 tribes of Aborigines up to 3%. I would say that, given the infinitely smaller scale of Taiwan and the absence of a dominant ethnic community, its society is actually more fragmented than China's. And this plays a part in terms of its self-image.

But let's have a look at the self-images of the two sides. Since independent public-opinion polling in China is out of the question, it is very difficult to know what ordinary Chinese people think of themselves. In fact, it is the government that seeks to cultivate a specific self-image of the Chinese nation through the social credit system or education within a very strict conceptual and regulatory framework.

I would single out the following features of mainland China's self-image:

- The PRC's self-image is based on the country's millennia-long history, and a glorious civilisation that offers mankind a wealth of "Chinese wisdom", as is often touted by Beijing. In fact, China is increasingly portraying itself as a "civilisation state". This may explain its strong sense of exceptionalism, which – by comparison – is far less prominent in Taiwan. And the PRC does indeed have reasons to consider itself an exceptional case.
- Until recently, it was the most populous nation in the world, even though it has now been overtaken by India and its population is dramatically ageing. Still, the demographic size of the country is one of the sources of national confidence and a strong argument why China should be a leading global power.
- It is also true that China is right to take pride in its spectacular socio-economic development since 1980. Its rise over the past four decades or so is a fascinating story, even though its development model has long been exhausted and China is finding it difficult to move on to an entirely different paradigm.

- The PRC is undoubtedly wielding an enormous economic power and has a growing political weight on a global scale, as the second biggest economy in the world and a permanent member of the UN Security Council.
- Hence China's objective to come back as a global superpower. This is based on what Beijing sees as a self-evident entitlement to global leadership. China views itself as a superpower on a par with only one state in the world, the U.S. And not only that, but it is the CCP's steadily pronounced strategic objective to turn China into the most advanced nation in the world by 2049.
- Just as importantly, the PRC government maintains that the "century of humiliation" ended when the CCP won the Chinese civil war and established itself as the ruling regime. However, there are several remaining vestiges of that period that, in the minds of CCP leaders, must be rectified before China's comeback is considered complete. The most important of these vestiges is the return of Taiwan to the mainland – just like the return of Hong Kong and Macao at the close of the 20th century. In Beijing's perception, bringing Taiwan back into the fold is a top priority, which would be a key milestone on the way to "national rejuvenation".

But speaking of China's self-image, let me tell you a short story. Back in 2019, during my last trip to China, I had to deliver a series of seminars on China's image on the international scene. At one point, I showed the audience the cover page of a report on China's image in Greece, which we had released a year earlier. It shows a beautiful 18th-century painting, which depicts a Chinese lady looking at her image in a mirror. I love this painting and am proud of the choice we made for the cover page.



China's Image in Greece 2008-2018



Plamen Tonchev (ed.)
Angelos Bentsis, Caroline Carulas,
Chris Mihalaris and George Papoutsas

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But my Chinese interlocutors were not impressed – actually, they were disappointed and even frustrated. Some of them told me “Really, is this how you see us in Greece, as an underdeveloped medieval nation? Why not show an image that has to do with modern China, with its remarkable economic and technological achievements?”.

We had a discussion and it took me a few minutes to realise that we were talking about two different things. I was speaking about the way China is seen in Greece. Rightly or wrongly, in Greece we view China as a nation with a long history and, of course, an ever-growing economic and political power, but also as a remote and somewhat exotic country that we know relatively

little about. My Chinese interlocutors were talking about their self-image and the way they would like others to see them.

So, let me show you one of the pictures that the Chinese wished we had chosen for the cover page of our report - the skyline of Shanghai. And this is one of the ways they see themselves: as an advanced and modern nation, while drawing on several millennia of Chinese civilisation.



Now, let's look at the other side of the Taiwan strait. There's no shortage of surveys in Taiwan and I have studied a lot of them, though I don't have the time to present them in detail now. While the PRC's self-image is largely engineered and based on the projection of a centralised government-steered narrative, Taiwan's self-image is harder to pin down for two main reasons:

- First, Taiwan's is a diverse society, very different from the homogeneous social construct pursued by authorities in mainland China.
- Second, Taiwan has a vibrant multi-party democracy, which recognises the cultural differences between its various communities, and their rights are duly protected. Or, in any case, there's a broad consensus on upholding their rights.

These communities are not compact constituencies – in fact, there are a number of sub-constituencies, which have different perceptions of themselves. Therefore, there are various – and oft-conflicting generators – of self-image, and it may be more accurate to speak of a set of self-images in Taiwan, self-images in the plural.

What definitely differentiates Taiwan from the People's Republic of China is its democratic form of governance. Outgoing president Tsai has stated repeatedly that "Democracy is the core of the Taiwanese identity". As the sole democracy in the Chinese cultural sphere, Taiwan stands as a challenge to Beijing's narrative that democracy is an alien construct unsuitable for the Chinese civilisation.

Beijing understands full well that it would have to accommodate Taiwan's democratic form of governance, hence the "one country, two systems" proposition. But will this fly? It is amply recorded in surveys that the riots in Hong Kong in 2019 and its subjugation to Beijing's writ have had a tangible impact on the stance of Taiwanese voters, as reflected in Tsai's reelection a few

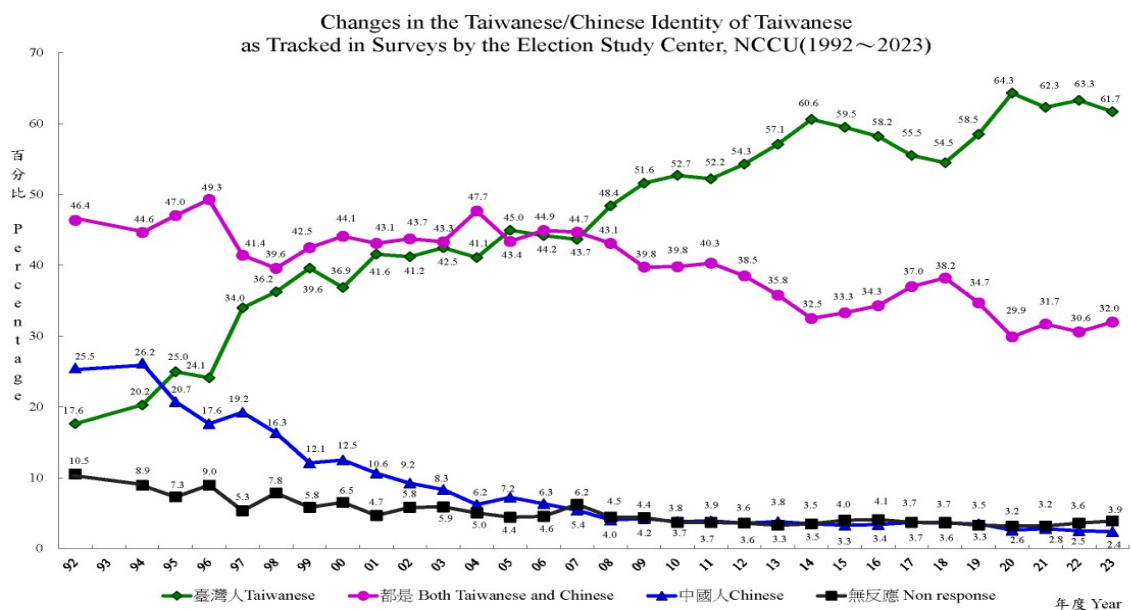
months later, in January 2020. And it is fairly safe to say that in the case of Taiwan the prospects of the “one country, two systems” formula are questionable, at best.

Yet another feature of Taiwan’s self-image is a model that brings together democracy and freedom, on the one hand, and a successful economy and high living standards on the other hand. It is a democracy that delivers to a satisfactory degree and, no wonder, this is seen as a source of confidence and self-esteem by many citizens of Taiwan.

Most Taiwanese acknowledge their ethnic kinship with mainland China and that’s not a controversial issue. In fact, more than 50% of respondents state that their culture is similar to the culture of mainland Chinese people. However, the majority of respondents in surveys, including many KMT voters, opt for Taiwan’s autonomy – the status quo, that is. There is very limited appetite for unification with the PRC.

So, is ethnic and cultural kinship sufficient to make a case for the unification of the PRC and Taiwan? Obviously, proclaiming Taiwan’s independence would have grave consequences and even DPP stalwarts are cautious not to cross Beijing’s red line. But it would be interesting, for the sake of academic discussion, to consider Austria’s example. It is a small country at the heart of Europe, with strong cultural and linguistic links to a much bigger Germany next door – and, yet, Austria is an independent nation. Therefore, while Austria and Taiwan have followed very different historical paths, this analogy suggests that the kinship argument alone may not be compelling enough to affect the self-image of the majority of Taiwanese citizens.

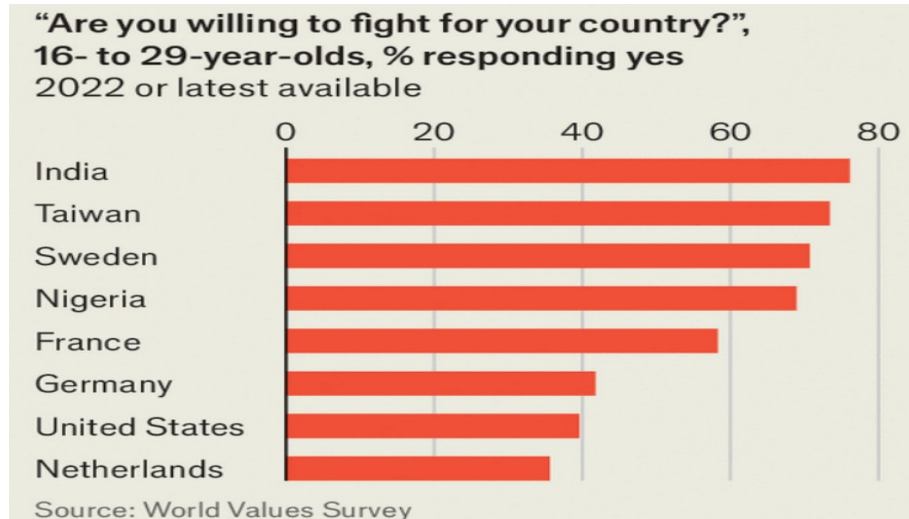
As a result of all the above features of Taiwan’s self-image, there is a growing appeal of the Taiwanese identity – one that cuts across communities and is not limited to the DPP constituency. Many surveys point to the gradual formation of a “Taiwanese identity”, different from the “Chinese”. Here’s a chart that you will have seen many times. It is a fact that an ever-growing chunk of Taiwan’s society determines itself as a separate nation, different from China’s.



A fairly plausible explanation for this trend is that, as time goes by, the number of mainlanders who came to Taiwan around 1949 is shrinking and related historical memories are fading away.

Findings from numerous surveys suggest that the younger generation in particular exhibits signs of indigenisation and is much more likely to define the Taiwanese identity by residency, while the older generation defines it by historical incidents and ethnicity.

But – and this is a big but - if push comes to shove and there is an armed conflict between the two sides, is Taiwan's society ready to fight for its freedom? As is only to be expected, DPP supporters display a markedly higher level of willingness for self-defense than supporters of the KMT. And what about Taiwan's youth?



As you see, over 70% of Taiwan's youth, up to the age of 29, state that they are ready to fight. I think that this is a very interesting finding, though I don't know if it should be taken at face value. It reflects answers to a hypothetical question about a conflict that everybody wishes away and hopes will never occur. At the same time, this finding does point to a significant trend, confirmed by a number of other surveys. Namely, that with the passage of time younger generations display an ever-stronger psychological bond to their Taiwanese identity and commitment to Taiwan as their birthplace and residence.

Let me wrap up by offering some tentative conclusions at the end of my talk.

- It's clear that mainland China and Taiwan display two totally incompatible self-images based on irreconcilable narratives. This, of course, is not conducive to a peaceful dispute settlement.
- I fully understand that self-image is merely one factor, alongside a long list of economic/geoeconomic, political/geopolitical and military considerations to be taken into account.
- To name but a few of these considerations, the mood in Taiwan will depend to a large extent on the outcome of the presidential election in the U.S. next November. Incumbent president Joe Biden has on several occasions stated that the U.S. stands ready to support Taiwan in case of an armed conflict, though the modalities of this support can be anybody's guess. Conversely, some of Donald Trump's comments indicate that U.S. commitment to Taiwan could wane if he returns to the White House and this may drive segments of the Taiwanese population to view rapprochement with China as a safer and more reasonable option.
- Yet another factor to be reckoned with in the equation of cross-strait relations is China's economic slowdown and Beijing's conspicuous shift towards a nationalist agenda and aggressive rhetoric. This is a cause for concern, as the current predicament of China's economy is not just cyclical, but structural in its nature and is unlikely to go away. For decades on end there's been an unwritten social contract between the CCP and society – basically, a trade-off between rising living

standards and the political legitimacy of the party-state. Faced with a slowing economy, the PRC leadership definitely needs a new narrative and this is where the discourse about “Taiwan’s return to the fold” comes in handy.

In addition, there are two more compelling arguments along the rational way of thinking that relate to Taiwan’s weight as a high-tech powerhouse on a global scale and its geopolitical significance.

- Two obvious examples are, of course, TSMC as a global leader in the production of advanced chips, and Foxconn as a key supplier of components for Apple’s iPhones. And there’s a host of other Taiwanese high-tech companies, deeply integrated in global supply chains. So, we all understand what disruption could be caused by an armed conflict around Taiwan.

- In terms of military considerations, there is obviously the geopolitical significance of Taiwan as part of the First-Island Chain and with a view to China’s access to the Western Pacific. Furthermore, tension is running high in the South China Sea as well, with the military build-up in the area and all the warning signs of a potential flare-up.

Again, I am duly acknowledging these geopolitical and military parameters of the overall equation. Yet, I would argue that politics is not only about rational considerations and cold-blooded calculus – to a large extent, psychology needs to be factored in as well. The dominance of economic arguments, military concerns and geopolitical imperatives risks downplaying key societal features on both sides of the Taiwan strait. These attributes are not mere footnotes in the debate about the state of the global economy or the narrative of great power competition – the psychological dimension is also part of the overall equation.

This is why it would be expedient to gauge the psychological underpinnings and implications of self-image, too. I do think that, alongside the economic, military or diplomatic aspects of what is an extremely complicated issue, we should also experiment with tools from the realm of social and political psychology, if we are to fully grasp the stand-off across the Taiwan strait as one of the most dangerous flash points in the world.

It is also clear that time is not on China’s side. Taiwan has been a self-ruled entity for 75 years, three quarters of a century. There’s a profound transformation under way in Taiwanese society and decision-makers in Beijing understand this very well. Which begs the question: Can the combination of Taiwan’s evolving self-image as an autonomous entity and the increasingly jingoistic overtones in Beijing’s rhetoric speed up the decision for an assault on the island?

Hence the heated debate about the possible timing of an armed clash around Taiwan, which is a trillion-dollar question. No doubt, the decision for an attack on Taiwan will be a function of a comprehensive assessment based on the international balance of power, but also domestic developments in the PRC, the U.S. and Taiwan itself.

Finally, it is abundantly clear to me that at this stage the questions posed are more than the answers offered, which is indicative of the complexity of the China-Taiwan stand-off. I do not aspire to making you any wiser with this talk. But I do hope that the notion of self-image could be included in the discourse on and related research into cross-strait relations. And I am very much looking forward to your feedback on these thoughts. Thank you very much!