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## Ma Ying-jeou's Trip to China Further Illustrates the CCP's United Front Cultivation of Taiwan Youth

By: John Dotson

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On April 1, former Republic of China (ROC) President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) [departed for an 11-day trip](#) to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Ma was leading a delegation of 20 university-age students on the trip, with a planned itinerary that included meetings with PRC officials, sightseeing, and goodwill exchanges with student counterparts in the PRC. Upon his departure from Taiwan's Taoyuan Airport, the former president described the visit to China as "a trip of peace and a trip of friendship." This theme was picked up by much of the international media—with, for example, the German state news agency *Deutsche Welle* issuing the headline "[Taiwan Ex-President in China to Promote Peace](#)."

Although Ma has been out of office since 2016 and currently holds no government position, he remains an [influential powerbroker](#) within the opposition Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨). Accordingly, his actions and comments garner significant media attention. Over the past year, Ma has emerged as a more outspoken and controversial figure in Taiwan politics, including a public (and ultimately unsuccessful) role in attempting to [broker a unity presidential ticket](#) between the KMT and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 民眾黨). Ma also generated controversy with a [January interview](#) in which he advocated for Taiwan's unification with China, as well as for placing "trust" in PRC leader Xi Jinping (習近平)—comments that prompted his own party to distance itself from Ma in the immediate lead-up to the January 13 presidential and legislative elections.

Outwardly, much about this recent [trip has seemed similar to a trip that Ma took to the PRC in March-April 2023](#)—which was the first such trip made by any current or former ROC president since 1949—which Ma proclaimed to be both a goodwill trip, and a private journey for the sake of visiting ancestral gravesites and locations associated with the history of the KMT. However, as with last year's event—which was also accompanied by a student delegation—Ma's April 2024 trip had much more going on behind the scenes than merely a private goodwill journey. Much of the international press coverage of Ma's visit focused on

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his higher-level political meetings, especially the audience with Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) General Secretary Xi Jinping on April 10 (*see further below*). However, the press coverage of such meetings fails to capture the real, underlying significance of the early April trip. Ma's trip represents a propaganda junket hosted by the CCP to promote its preferred narratives about Taiwan. However, even more than this, the trip should be understood as part of the CCP United Front Work Department's (UFWD, 統一戰線工作部) ongoing programs aimed at cultivating and recruiting young adults in Taiwan.



*Image: Ma Ying-jeou reading a statement at ceremonies held on April 4 at the Tomb of the Yellow Emperor in Shaanxi Province, in which he called upon Taiwan's young people to "feel pride as descendants of the Yellow Emperor." (Image source: [China News Service](#), April 4)*

### **Delegation Activities in the PRC**

During the course of its 11-day trip, Ma's delegation conducted a range of sightseeing activities and institutional tours in three regions: Guangdong Province (southern China), Shaanxi Province (north-central China), and the capital region of Beijing. Most of the places visited were either sites of historical and cultural interest, or else company tours intended to showcase high-technology industries. There were also a handful of meetings with CCP political leaders that were publicly reported. Taken together, the delegation activities strongly emphasized the theme of reinforcing Chinese cultural identity—a message that was touted, without subtlety, in PRC media coverage. Selected events included:

- **April 1 (Guangdong Province, Shenzhen):** Ma and his delegation [met with Song Tao \(宋濤\)](#), the director of the CCP Taiwan Office. As reported in PRC media, themes from the meeting included agreement on the need to uphold the "92 Consensus" (九二共識), and to maintain staunch opposition to "Taiwan independence separatism and interfer-

ence by foreign forces" (堅決反對 "台獨" 分裂和外部勢力干涉). Song continued to accompany the delegation through parts of its subsequent itinerary, such as the visit to the Tomb of the Yellow Emperor (*see below*).

- **April 3 (Guangdong Province, Guangzhou):** Ma's delegation [visited Zhongshan University \(中山大學\)](#) for the sake of "promoting cross-strait student exchanges" (推動兩岸學生交流), which Ma described as "my most important goal, for which I will make great effort."
- **April 4 (Shaanxi Province, Yan'An):** The group made a visit to [attend ceremonies at the Tomb of the Yellow Emperor](#)—the mythical culture hero and progenitor of the Chinese race—on the occasion of the Ching-Ming Festival (清明節). In [prepared remarks](#) for the press, Ma stated that: "I also hope that our young people from Taiwan will take this rare opportunity, and keep firmly in mind the origins of Chinese culture and the Chinese people, and feel pride as the descendants of the Yellow Emperor."
- **April 6 (Shaanxi Province, Xian):** The delegation made a visit to the [terra cotta warriors museum](#) and archaeological site. During the visit, Ma stated to an escorting guide that "We will start to encourage everyone to return to the past" (我們開始鼓勵大家復古). While this was perhaps a bland statement of enthusiasm for archaeology (or perhaps a psychologically revealing comment?), it was very much in keeping with the trip's overall theme of encouraging Taiwan's young people to cherish a sense of Chinese identity.
- **April 8 (Beijing):** Ma held a [meeting with Yin Li \(尹力\)](#), secretary of the Beijing CCP committee. The messaging from the meeting once again emphasized the need to revive the "92 Consensus" and cross-strait negotiations, with Ma opining that "During my tenure [as president], the two sides clinched 23 agreements and realized direct links, benefiting the people on both sides."
- **April 8 (Beijing):** Ma and the student delegation conducted a [visit to the Great Wall](#) outside Beijing, to include a media event involving the group singing "The Great Wall Ballad" (長城謠), a patriotic song from World War II.
- **April 10 (Beijing):** Ma was received for an [audience with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping](#) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Ma, adopting the role of peacemaker, was quoted as stating that "If there is a war between the two sides, it will be unbearable for the Chinese people [...] Chinese on both sides of the strait absolutely have enough wisdom to

handle all disputes peacefully and avoid heading into conflict.” Predictably, [PRC official press coverage](#) focused overwhelmingly on Xi, including his assertion that “It is an objective fact that both sides of the Strait belong to one country, one people (一個國家、一個民族). Foreign interference cannot stop the historical trend of national reunion.”



Image: Ma Ying-jeou (center) and the “Big Nine Academy” student delegation sing the “Great Wall Ballad” during a visit to the Great Wall outside Beijing, April 9. (Image source: [China News](#))

### Background of the CCP’s United Front Youth Outreach

The concept of conducting outreach efforts directed toward young adults in Taiwan is a central pillar of the CCP’s “people-to-people exchanges” (or “among the people exchanges,” 民間交流), which are intended to pursue united front cooptation of selected groups in Taiwan, while eschewing any negotiations with Taiwan’s current “separatist” Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) administration. [1] Such outreach efforts have been particularly focused on the concept of encouraging [“cross-Strait youth entrepreneurs”](#) (兩岸青年企業家) to live and work in the PRC. However, it has also embraced a host of other activities, including the [cultivation of online influencers](#), [orchestrated disinformation campaigns](#) involving Taiwanese young adults as front persons, and [sponsored travel delegations](#) such as the ones accompanying Ma on his trips to the PRC.

The [students traveling in Ma’s delegation](#) are part of the [“Big Nine Academy”](#) (大九學堂), an initiative sponsored by the Taiwan-based Ma Ying-jeou Foundation (MYJF, 馬英九基金會). The “Academy” is a professional development and exchange program for undergraduate and master’s degree students under the age of thirty who “identify with the Republic of China, and have a passion for public service.” The students participating in the program are by no means monolithic, but many appear to

be of mainlander (外省人) family backgrounds. For example, in an [interview conducted on board the plane](#) en route to the PRC, Ping Hao (馮灝), a student in the English Department of Tamshui University (淡江大學), described a previous trip to visit locations associated with his family’s ancestry in northern Anhui Province.

While the CCP’s united front activities directed at young Taiwan adults hit upon a handful of recurring propaganda themes—such as the [economic opportunities](#) available for those who come to work in the PRC—the clear and overriding theme of Ma’s April trip was that of reinforcing the Chinese identity and cultural heritage of Taiwan. As Ma [declared](#) in the course of the sightseeing excursions in Beijing, when he extolled the “common feeling” on both sides of the Strait, “Any efforts to decouple Chinese culture from Taiwan will not succeed.”

CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping—who has previously [lent his name directly to cooptation efforts](#) directed at Taiwanese young people—also emphasized the role of “cross-Strait youth” during his meeting with Ma on April 10. As quoted in [PRC state media](#), Xi stated that “Youth are the hope of the country, the future of the nation. Only when cross-Strait youth are well, can the future of both sides of the Strait be well. Cross-Strait youth should strengthen their aspirations, spirit, and confidence in being Chinese, and together create long-lasting well-being for the Chinese people, continuing to write new glories in the history of the Chinese people.”

### Conclusions

Ma’s April 2024 trip to the PRC, the second in what may be emerging as an annual tradition of pilgrimages made during the springtime Ching-Ming Festival, shared much in common with the first one in March-April 2023. However, there was a noteworthy shift in tone. The 2023 trip was [ostensibly personal](#), with Ma’s itinerary focused on visiting the tombs of ancestors in Hunan Province, as well as visiting historical sites associated with the history of the KMT. While the political undercurrents of that visit were clearly present, they were relatively subdued. By contrast, this year’s propaganda junket was more overt in its political messaging—both in terms of meetings with high-level CCP officials to promote the moribund “92 Consensus,” as well as the pervasive narratives regarding the Chinese cultural identity of Taiwan.

On the latter point, Ma seemed like a man in a hurry—intent to drive home a sense of Chinese identity that he clearly feels deeply, but that is [fading among many of his fellow citizens of Taiwan](#). His CCP hosts, eager as ever to exploit Ma as a propa-

ganda tool to push the narrative that most Taiwanese are eager for “reunification” with the PRC, are also clearly hopeful to advance such a sense of identity among at least a selected number of young adults in Taiwan. For the CCP, that narrative of identity is inherently political, and inextricably linked with the CCP’s ultimate goal: to annex Taiwan under conditions of full CCP political control. That goal, and the CCP’s larger efforts to coopt a selected number of “cross-strait youth” for its own purposes, are the factors to bear in mind when considering these and other “people-to-people exchanges” organized by the CCP’s united front system.

**The main point:** In April, former ROC President Ma Ying-jeou led a student delegation on an 11-day trip to China to conduct sightseeing visits to prominent historical and cultural sites, and to hold meetings with high-level CCP officials. This trip should be understood as a propaganda junket that serves as a component of a much broader effort by the CCP united front system to cultivate and co-opt selected young adults in Taiwan.

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[1] The four specified sub-categories of the party’s “people-to-people exchanges” are: “youth exchanges” (青年交流), “grassroots exchanges” (基層交流), “cultural exchanges” (文化交流), and “economic exchanges” (經濟交流). See: “Expanding People-to-People Exchanges, Deepening Integrated Development” [擴大民間交流 深化融合發展], *People’s Daily*, July 15, 2022, <http://tw.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2022/0715/c14657-32475917.html>.

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## Where Does Kinmen’s Political Future Lie?

By: Uma Baron

*Uma Baron is a Spring 2024 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute.*

Despite their relatively small size and population, Taiwan’s Kinmen Islands (金門島) have historically featured a complex, dynamic political environment that outsiders—whether from the Taiwanese mainland or from further afield—have struggled to understand. Since even before 1960, when John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon discussed Kinmen (or as it was then commonly referred to abroad, “Quemoy”) during a presidential debate, journalists from across the world have flocked to the archipelago to capture its seemingly paradoxical existence. With its war-trodden history and unique geopolitical position, Kinmen

has long been a breeding ground of support for small political parties operating outside of the mainstream two-party political system that dominates at the national level. Whether Kinmen’s support for smaller political parties stems from its military history or its distance from the Taiwanese mainland, Kinmen’s internal politics are certainly worth investigating.

### *Historical Background of Kinmen*

Since the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) established its base on the island of Taiwan in 1949, the Kinmen Islands have been on the frontlines of cross-strait relations. During the [Cold War](#), the island and its people were subjected to physical and psychological warfare from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and vice versa, with the Taiwanese launching their own campaigns against the PRC from the small islands. As Cold War tensions waxed and waned, Kinmen became intensely militarized, with military personnel eclipsing the number of civilians. As a result, it became an internationally lauded bastion in the confrontation with communism.

As Taiwan experienced its democratic transition in the late 1980s, Kinmen underwent its own—and somewhat delayed—transformation, transitioning from a militarized fortress to a tourist destination famous for its tanks and other military materiel littering the beaches. In the early 2000s, [the “Small Three Links”](#) (小三通) connected Kinmen with the neighboring Chinese city of Xiamen through direct people-to-people, trade, and postal links. This program, which Kinmen’s people fiercely advocated for, radically transformed Kinmen into a melting pot of Chinese and Taiwanese citizens, with ideas and technology flowing freely between them. However, in late 2019 / early 2020 the majority of these linkages were [severed amid the imposition of COVID-19 prevention measures](#), and the current prospects of their reinstatement are dim. When relations between Taiwan and the PRC are good, tourism, trade, and people-to-people exchanges between Kinmen and the PRC thrive. However, when relations are tense—as they have been throughout the past five years—the island becomes a highly scrutinized arena for cross-strait posturing, and Kinmen’s people suffer from whiplash-like effects.

### *Politics and Political Parties in Kinmen*

The Kinmen Islands have traditionally been a KMT electoral stronghold, with its voting patterns in presidential elections consistently being overwhelmingly “blue” (the color of the KMT and allied parties in Taiwan’s political spectrum). Since 1992, when Kinmen held its first direct elections for the Legislative Yuan (LY, 中華民國立法院), 8 out of 10 of the islands’ elected legislators

have been from the KMT. This remains true for Kinmen's current LY representative, [Chen Yu-jen \(陳玉珍\)](#), who comes from a local political dynasty in Kinmen and is currently serving her second term in the LY.

Similarly, Kinmen's county magistrates have ordinarily come from the KMT—or sometimes from the offshoot New Party (NP, 新黨) (*see further below*). Despite some inconsistency in terms of the party identification of county magistrates—the current office holder, Chen Fu-hai (陳福海), previously ran as a member of the KMT, but later registered as independent before joining the Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 民眾黨)—Kinmen has been historically been, and remains, a KMT stronghold.

This fact is so well-established that the Democratic People's Party (DPP, 民進黨) has not run an official candidate in Kinmen for the positions of either Legislative Yuan representative or county magistrate in the previous three elections. At the local level, among the 19 seats of [Kinmen's county council](#), there are currently 12 independents, seven KMT members, and one DPP member. Despite independents dominating the county council, the chairman and deputy chairman are both KMT members.

Among Kinmen residents, the New Party (新黨), a far-right offshoot of the KMT that [strongly advocates for Taiwan's unification with the PRC](#), gained political success in Kinmen in the 2001 legislative elections, despite failing to secure a seat anywhere else in Taiwan. The party's electoral success peaked in the 2005/2006 municipal elections, with the bulk of its political victories occurring in Kinmen, before the party faded into political obscurity. [1] Similarly, prior to its emergence into more mainstream popularity at the national level, the TPP secured Kinmen's county magistrate seat in 2022.

As evidenced by the New Party's success in the early 2000s, pro-unification parties have long had a disproportionate presence in Kinmen's local politics, with many concentrating their efforts on garnering support for unification in Kinmen. [2] For instance, the For Public Good Party (中華民族致公黨), [one of the few Taiwanese political factions](#) actively recognized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨), was [Kinmen's second-biggest political party](#) at the local level in 2019. In Kinmen, they have [actively courted](#) local groups and political parties to build support for a "Cross-Strait Peace Experimental Zone." Similarly, the far-right Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨), [according to a source interviewed by Amber Lin](#), was tasked by the CCP with cultivating positive views of Kinmen as a potential base for a "one party two systems" experimental zone.

These parties, often considered puppets of the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD, 統戰部) and its efforts in Taiwan, exploit Kinmen's distance from the Taiwanese mainland to propagate pro-unification policies that hinge on support in Kinmen—such as building a Kinmen-Xiamen bridge (金廈大橋) and turning Kinmen into an experimental "peace zone." Despite their best efforts, however, neither of these parties currently have elected officials serving in Kinmen's county council, and have seemingly faded into the background of Kinmen's local politics without gaining much traction among the Kinmen people. Evidence of their lackluster impact can be seen in the policy platforms of current council members (2022-2026), of whom [less than half](#) cite support for the Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge project or a "Cross Strait Peace Experimental Zone."

### **2024 Election Results in Kinmen**

The 2024 presidential and LY elections presented an opportunity for fresh perspectives on the issues facing the Kinmen Islands, with the KMT, TPP and DPP each sending its chosen presidential candidates to Kinmen to curry favor. Broadly speaking, those that focused on local Kinmen issues found greater success—as opposed to those who presented muted commentary focused on cross-Strait relations, and performed poorly.

Chen Yu-jen, a KMT member who was [elected three times](#) to Kinmen's county council, and who was re-elected in 2024 for her second term serving as Kinmen's representative in the LY, is known across Taiwan for her firebrand style of politics. As [Shun-te Wang points out](#), Chen's consistent opposition to the DPP's handling of cross-Strait relations—which she has branded as harmful to Kinmen—has made her very popular among her constituents. In the 2024 Legislative Yuan elections, Chen reportedly [won 65 percent of the vote](#).

In the presidential election, while the KMT's Hou You-yi (侯友宜) [won the 61.40 percent](#) of the vote in Kinmen, he faced fierce competition during the campaign from the TPP's Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), who successfully courted some of Kinmen's residents away from their traditional KMT loyalties, winning the support of [28.58 percent](#) of Kinmen's electorate. Ko successfully cut into KMT support in Kinmen by promoting himself as "[Kinmen first](#)" candidate. He worked to convince Kinmen's residents that the problems of both Taiwan and the PRC should be put to one side, and [that the two main political parties do not care about the interests of Kinmen](#), even as he advocated for controversial cross-Strait policies.

Walking the streets of Kinmen with the TPP's candidate for the LY, Ko seized on political apathy with the main parties in Kin-

men, who have in the past [made promises for development projects](#) that seem to disappear after the election. Ko did not shy away from his [previous comments](#) outright supporting the building of a Kinmen-Xiamen bridge, even [outlining his plan for the bridge](#) and highlighting its economic benefits. He also noted the bridge's potential as a precursor to the creation of a special medical zone in Kinmen to increase local access to medical care, an issue of significance for the people of Kinmen. Ko [boisterously dismissed](#) any potential issues regarding the bridge as a potentially compromise of national security—a consideration that has been [cited in the past](#) by the government's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC, 大陸委員會) following the concept's [introduction in 2019](#) by Xi Jinping (習近平) as part of his “New Four Links” (新四通) model for cross-Strait relations. Ko, known for his non-traditional, populist style of politics, also called on the DPP's Lai Ching-te (賴清德) and Hou You-yi to give their opinions on the bridge project, placing his opponents in tortuously difficult positions and raising the “Kinmen-first” credentials of the TPP.

While Hou, like Ko, has long been in favor of having a referendum on the issue of a Kinmen-Xiamen bridge, his support of the project was not as well received. When he visited Kinmen in 2023, Hou outlined [a six point policy plan](#) for the islands that focused on expanding and deepening connections with the PRC by constructing a cross-Strait logistics hub, developing tourism, instituting a cross-Strait medical zone, and building a Kinmen-Xiamen bridge. However, Hou's position on the bridge did [appear to be conditional](#) on the state of cross-Strait relations, a rather vague statement aimed at safeguarding national security.

By contrast, Lai, aware of the DPP's lack of popularity in Kinmen, preferred to follow the stance of his DPP predecessors in [evading the question](#). However, it is well known that the DPP is wary of the PRC using cross-Strait projects between the Kinmen Islands and Xiamen to exert influence. In particular, the 2019 passage of the “Anti-Infiltration Act” (反滲透法) in the DPP-controlled Legislative Yuan [earned particular ire](#) from Chen Yu-jen, who argued that the effects on Kinmen's economy would be devastating. While Lai's rhetoric on cross-Strait policies seems to be a continuation of Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文), Lai still lost a significant proportion of the DPP's limited voting base on Kinmen. (By contrast, Tsai was able to increase the DPP's vote share between [2016](#) and [2020](#).) Overall, it appears that the KMT and DPP's track record in Kinmen of only showing up when cross-Strait tensions flare seems to have caught up with them in the voting polls—thereby allowing the TPP, unspoiled by actual time in office, to exploit this sentiment on the island.

Ko's success in Kinmen, while partly due to his populist style of politics, is also reflective of the success of his engagement on local Kinmen issues. In Kinmen, Hou lost [almost 15 percent](#) of the KMT's vote share compared to the [2020 presidential election](#), while Lai lost [more than 10 percent](#) of the DPP's previous share. While Ko was far from winning the majority of the island, he still garnered the support of [just over 28 percent](#) of Kinmen's voters, partially disrupting an established KMT political stronghold. While the KMT still holds Kinmen's seat in the LY, the TPP success in securing the county magistrate seat and almost 30 percent of the vote in the presidential election shows that Ko's strategy was a success.

By positioning himself as a candidate who would put Kinmen's needs first by advocating for Kinmen's healthcare and economic needs, Ko was able to distinguish himself from his mainstream counterparts. While Ko pushed for the Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge—among other cross Strait projects—when campaigning on Kinmen, his popularity on the island does not seem to correlate with actual majority support for these projects at the local level. Nevertheless, while Ko was able to appeal to some of Kinmen's voters, Hou was still able to secure the majority on the islands with his more cautious stance toward cross-Strait policies.

### ***Where Does Kinmen's Future Lie?***

Kinmen has long been portrayed in international media as being defined by its uneasy existence as a Taiwanese territory situated in the shadow of the PRC. Despite the presence of unabashedly pro-unification parties complicating the political field in Kinmen, the islands' residents seem to be exercising their votes by denying such parties local council seats. Popular support for increased cross-Strait cooperation through projects such as the Kinmen-Xiamen bridge does seem to be inflated, with less than half of Kinmen's local councilors including it in their political platforms—thereby making the possibility of its future implementation questionable. Relying on election results alone is insufficient to gain deep insight into the true feelings of Kinmen's residents, and unbiased polling should be conducted in Kinmen to gauge local views more accurately on proposed cross-Strait projects.

Overall, it seems that party affiliation is becoming less important than personality and message to Kinmen's voters, with both Lai and Hou securing significantly less of the vote share in Kinmen than their respective predecessors. With twelve independents serving on the local council, a KMT legislator in the LY, and almost 30 percent of Kinmen's voters voting for the TPP's Ko in the presidential election, Kinmen's electorate is representative

of a vibrant, multi-faceted democracy navigating a challenging local and national climate.

**The main point:** In elections from the 1990s to the present, Kinmen has traditionally been a stronghold of the KMT and associated pan-Blue parties. However, in recent years, local Kinmen politics have seen the emergence of more independent elected officials, and in the 2024 elections the Taiwan People's Party saw a significant increase in support, at the expense of both the KMT and the DPP.

[1] The New Party continues a marginal existence as a fringe party, operating primarily as a propaganda proxy for the PRC government. For examples, see: John Dotson, *Chinese Information Operations against Taiwan: The "Abandoned Chess Piece" and "America Skepticism Theory,"* Global Taiwan Institute (August 2023), pp. 6, 14-15. [https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/OR\\_ASTAW0807FINAL.pdf](https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/OR_ASTAW0807FINAL.pdf).

[2] Author's interview with Amber Lin. In 2020, Lin conducted interviews with Kinmen residents on local politics, in which she identified the For Public Good Party (中華民族致公黨) and the Chinese Unification Promotion Party's (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨) consistent efforts to influence Kinmen's local politics. Lin did also note that some local sources have said that as of 2024, these parties do not seem to still be active.

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## Whose Story Is It? Funding and Representation in Taiwan's Documentary Film Industry

By: Diana Chiawen Lee

*Diana Chiawen Lee is an independent filmmaker whose work focuses on human rights and social justice issues in Asia.*

I recently watched [American Fiction](#), and a line from the film deeply resonated with me: "I'm black and it's my book." This was the frustrated response of the main character, novelist Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, when informed that publishers (essentially "[mainstream](#)" American white gatekeepers) wanted books that were more "black" for the marketplace. I'm certain that this frustration is often experienced by filmmakers or storytellers of the "other," when told by gatekeepers to adhere to a specific perspective, or else that their specific perspective is not "mainstream" enough. In a world where identity (gender, politics, race, etc.)—not the message we want to convey, nor

the creative endeavor we've put in—is used as a tool to attract or repel audiences, who has the right to tell our stories, and who is funding our stories?

### *The Issue of Identity*

In Taiwan, [where two-thirds of adults identify as Taiwanese](#), the struggle with identity—and how to capitalize on it—persists. This is evident in Taiwan's government [funding schemes for films](#), which often condition support on arbitrary mandates like the inclusion of "Taiwanese elements," or the requirement that the majority of "[above the line](#)" positions be filled by [Taiwanese citizens](#).

On the one hand, the government can argue that it is being fiscally and politically responsible in ensuring that taxpayers' dollars are put towards Taiwan-made projects. However, promoting Taiwanese elements or identity, regardless of whether the storyline calls for it, can be perceived as propaganda. And again, what constitutes "Taiwanese elements" or "Taiwanese identity"—and who determines that? Additionally, regardless of their origin, are filmmakers responsible for representing and highlighting their country's nationhood or identity?

Isn't it sufficient that documentary filmmakers who reside and work in Taiwan are considered Taiwanese? Shouldn't documenting Taiwanese individuals, experiences, struggles, hopes, and dreams, meet the requirement for being "Taiwanese?" As a documentary filmmaker and producer living in and documenting Taiwan, I feel Monk's [exasperation](#) daily.

The successful Taiwan-born filmmaker Ang Lee (李安) is often touted as an example of a successful Taiwanese filmmaker, and is considered the "[glory of Taiwan](#)." However, throughout his illustrious career, most of Lee's films have been made in the United States. His earlier films—the "[Father Knows Best](#)" trilogy, which included [Pushing Hands](#), [The Wedding Banquet](#), and [Eat Drink Man Woman](#)—did highlight a changing and modernizing Taiwanese society, where [waishengren](#) (外省人) (and their offspring) struggled with fading traditional Chinese/Confucian values.

However, both *Pushing Hands* and *The Wedding Banquet* were shot entirely on location in New York; Lee's only film shot entirely in Taiwan was *Eat Drink Man Woman*. All three films were co-produced by Lee's US production companies, Ang Lee Productions and Good Machine, in collaboration with Taiwan's [Central Motion Picture Corporation](#) (CMPC, 中影股份有限公司, operated by the government until 2005).

The Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨)-controlled CMPC funded and co-produced Lee's first three films. However, many of his above-the-line staff were Americans, and only one film was shot in Taiwan. Would he have gotten funding from Taiwan's Ministry of Culture (MoC, 文化部), with today's funding requirements and political climate? Would his projects be "Taiwanese" enough by today's standards? After all, Lee was born into a *waishengren* family, with a *waishengren* identity, upbringing, and sensibilities.

### ***Island in Between***

Fast forward to 2024, as Taiwan continues to struggle with its identity and international recognition. The MoC and the Taiwanese press have [bestowed](#) the title of "台灣之光" (glory of Taiwan) on a new filmmaker, this time for the Oscar-nominated short documentary [Island in Between](#), by Taiwanese-American filmmaker [S. Leo Chiang](#) (江松長).

[In a recent interview](#), Chiang admitted that his relationship with Taiwan was "stunted," but has since "evolved" after moving back to Taiwan during the pandemic. [Chiang also admitted that he doesn't have a strong connection to Kinmen](#), the location where his documentary *Island in Between* takes place, and the film title's Chinese namesake. Instead, he stated that he "heard about this place" all of his life, and believed it to be a "mythical place out in the middle of the water somewhere." Despite his admitted lack of knowledge or connection to Kinmen, and to a larger extent Taiwan, Chiang's film— at just under 20 minutes—is now "representing" Taiwan and its cross-Strait relations challenges, to the delight of the Taiwanese government.

It should be made clear that the nominated short documentaries for the Academy's Best Short Documentary category are [not submitted by](#) any country, nor are they intended to represent their countries of origin. This is in contrast with the [International Feature Film Award](#), in which the submissions must be made by—and represent—the country of its production.

So, does *Island in Between* qualify as a "Taiwanese" film? In evaluating a funding proposal for this film, how would Taiwan's funding bodies like Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA, 文化內容策進院) or the Ministry of Culture weigh factors such as the composition of the filmmaking team (diasporic Taiwanese), [their motivations](#), and the artistic or cultural value of *Island in Between*? What criteria does this film fulfill for Taiwanese gatekeepers?

### ***Unclear Criteria***

Taiwanese nationalism lacks self-assurance and often seeks vali-

ation from external sources. "The glory of Taiwan" has become a common phrase in contemporary Taiwan media coverage. Taiwan appears desperate to prove its existence and worth—often at the expense of its own creatives—by establishing arbitrary yet ambiguous policies that stifle creativity while reflecting the neuroses and anxieties of Taiwanese national identity.

Would a filmmaker like Chiang, who has openly discussed his limited ties to Taiwan, meet the government's criteria of a "Taiwanese" filmmaker? Would such a filmmaker be more likely to receive funding, support, resources, and access than a filmmaker like Fu Yue (傅榆)? Known for her critical examination and exploration of the Taiwanese identity in several films, Fu has faded from the industry despite winning a [Golden Horse award for her documentary \*Our Youth In Taiwan\*](#) and taking a solid stance and claim on Taiwan's identity.

Similarly, would a filmmaker like [Chun-hsiu Hung](#) (洪淳修)—who extensively documented Kinmen and made two feature-length films about this "mythical place"—[be celebrated](#) in the same manner as a Taiwanese-American filmmaker who views Kinmen through a diasporic and exoticized lens? Although Hung's films were not submitted to the Academy, he has successfully screened them [internationally](#) without requiring "cultural translations."

Must creatives, storytellers, and filmmakers pander to the "mainstream" to receive validation or recognition for contributing to the fabric of Taiwan's culture, history, and identity? And must the Taiwanese government reduce filmmakers to a [singular identity](#)?

Another scene from *American Fiction* comes to mind, in which Monk serves on a literary award judging panel alongside three white writers and another black writer. A book authored by Monk under a pseudonym is up for consideration. The other black writer perceives it as pandering to white audiences. This sparks a discussion between Monk and the other black writer—who had previously published a similarly "pandering" book—about authenticity and the dynamics of storytelling within the black community, including who has the authority to narrate different types of stories.

We should celebrate when Taiwanese or Taiwanese diaspora filmmakers do well, gain domestic or international recognition, and when their stories reach wider audiences and have long-lasting impact. However, we must also critically reexamine and reflect on *how* we are investing in and celebrating Taiwan's filmmaking industry—specifically and especially for documentary films, which receive very little funding and overall support



from MoC in comparison to feature films or series. We must update and improve on the criteria for defining “Taiwanese” filmmakers, the recognition they receive, and consider factors such as thematic focus, training, access to resources, documentary film distribution and dissemination vehicles, international exposure, and what the government’s role and priorities are.

### **Updating Government Policy**

For quite some time, Taiwan’s cultural policies and funding criteria have been reductive, stifling creativity, diversity, and innovation, and have relegated artists and storytellers to the role of government surrogate. Whenever there is an election, filmmakers must worry whether the definition of “Taiwanese elements” will change with the next administration.

When the government uses financial incentives or [diplomatic quid pro quos](#) in exchange for production and content creation memoranda of understanding (MOUs), it hinders the development of an independent and creative film and media industry. The Taiwanese government must stop gatekeeping and respect the filmmaking industry and storytellers’ domain. For a vibrant, mature, and thriving film and media industry to function, the government must stop dictating narratives, or how resources are used.

The role of the government should be to establish policies that provide training, tools, and resources for artists to create, compete, and thrive independently. Additionally, the government should support functioning, independent civil society organizations to assist in the promotion, perpetuation, and dissemination of such works. MoC film/television funding and programming officers should be arts administrators with experience in filmmaking and TV production. They should possess the ability to evaluate production budgets and treatments, and provide constructive feedback on pitch decks and proposals to enhance quality and address production challenges.

Government-funded film, arts, and culture organizations, such as the National Culture and Arts Foundation (財團法人國家文化藝術基金會), the Golden Horse Film Festival, or regional film institutions, should be allowed to conduct independent fundraising to secure donations and other financial resources. Independent governing bodies, comprised of individuals from civil society with relevant arts administration experience, should be appointed to alleviate and separate political party influence, ensuring that the organizations are not beholden to any particular political interests.

Funding policies should prioritize and encourage artistry, inno-

vation, technology, unique or diverse perspectives, voices that challenge or reexamine the status quo, local and international collaborations, pay equity, and intended impact on societies. Government funding should also be allocated to create education programs in media studies, critical media and film theory, film industry management, and building sustainable careers in film.

To ensure the sustainability and growth of the ecosystem, from creators to consumers to disseminators of film, the government must encourage philanthropic donations and investment in cultural creation and dissemination. This will foster a sense of societal ownership and engagement in the advancement of Taiwanese culture, rather than relying solely on one funding source that inevitably dictates the definition of Taiwanese identity or culture.

In conclusion, despite Taiwan’s appearance of freedom and democracy, documentary filmmakers in Taiwan have long found themselves subject to the directives of the Ministry of Culture and the ruling political party. Due to their reliance on a single funding source, Taiwanese filmmakers must tread carefully, balancing the promotion of Taiwan while avoiding provocations, or reflecting negatively on the government. Therefore, it is imperative to diversify funding sources and establish independent bodies capable of creating, promoting, preserving, and perpetuating Taiwanese films.

**The main point:** By monopolizing funding for Taiwanese films and imposing unclear mandates, Taiwan’s government has effectively stifled the development of a diverse and productive arts ecosystem. Accordingly, the government should diversify funding sources and reduce its restrictions on the types of films it funds.

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## **The Kuomintang’s Uncertain Path to Reform**

By: Yaokun Shen

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For the past eight years, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) has dominated Taiwanese politics, leading many in the opposition Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) to express concerns about their party’s diminishing significance and repeated failures to regain the presidency. Despite a

concerted effort during the 2024 national elections by the KMT to [form a unity presidential ticket](#) among opposition parties to force “the DPP stepping down [from power] (下架民進黨),” the party fell short once again. Even though the KMT managed to gain a [plurality of seats in the Legislative Yuan](#) (LY, 中華民國立法院), the party did not succeed in forming a majority caucus to secure dominance in the legislative process.

It would be an exaggeration to describe the KMT’s outcomes in the 2024 elections as an absolute defeat, but the results were far below the party’s expectations. While various “Pan-Blue” (i.e., pro-KMT) supporters have called on the party’s top leadership to be [held accountable for the party’s repeated failures](#), KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) has defended the party’s decision-making under his leadership. Moreover, Chu has criticized Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) and his Taiwan People’s Party (TPP, 民眾黨). Nevertheless, many observers have speculated as to why the KMT still underperformed in appealing to “young, independent, and southern [Taiwan] voters” (年輕、中間、南部選民), even as the party has nominated a number of younger, more exciting politicians to run for various offices—including the 2024 presidential nominee, Hou You-yi (侯友宜).

### **The KMT’s Structural Issues**

The nomination of Hou is emblematic of how far behind the KMT is in reforming its internal democratic practices, as the party chairman has almost sole discretion to select nominees, with limited accountability. The KMT’s lack of checks and balances has had a variety of consequences, including the nomination process itself. The party did not conduct primaries during its nomination process for the most recent presidential election cycle (likely a response to party primaries in [2015](#) and [2019](#), which produced presidential candidates judged likely to perform poorly in a general election). Instead, in 2023 the KMT chose to [nominate by appointment \(徵召\)](#). As a result, both the nomination process and the nominee were regarded by many as lacking legitimacy, leading to questions from Pan-Blue constituent groups regarding the [KMT’s breach of institutional and democratic practices](#).

It was reasonable to nominate Hou as the party’s candidate, regardless of the flaws in the process. After the 2022 local elections, multiple [polls](#) revealed that [Hou was the candidate who received the most support](#), leading by double digits. It was widely believed that the KMT nominated Hou as its presidential candidate at this time in an effort to take advantage of Hou’s strong support and to secure the loyalty of the Pan-Blue camp—effectively freeing them up to focus on other aspects of the

election. However, despite his strong reputation in municipal administration, Hou quickly proved [unknowledgeable](#) about cross-strait relations and international affairs. For instance, he was unable to even [accurately name the Three Principles of People \(三民主義\)](#), the KMT’s governing ideological framework.

While Hou repeatedly demonstrated his [lack of preparedness](#) for the responsibilities of the presidency before the nomination, the party believed that his high popularity as New Taipei City mayor would be enough to defeat the vulnerable DPP, which was mired in multiple scandals after eight years of rule. However, it seems that the KMT’s decision to sidestep democratic institutions to nominate candidates by party chairman appointments significantly affected the KMT’s profile among Taiwan’s public—especially with independent voters, many of whom were wary of the party’s perceived return to its previous, autocratic tendencies.



*Image: KMT Chairman Eric Chu (center left) poses for a photograph with members of the KMT caucus in the Legislative Yuan, March 13. (Image source: [Official KMT website](#))*

### **Policy Indecision**

Besides its institutional choices, the KMT’s loss in 2024 was to a large degree a result of its failure to propose a coherent policy agenda. Hou remained [vague and ambiguous](#) throughout the campaign, in part to his lack of experience in foreign and national-level affairs—but also due to a reluctance to take a clear policy stance out of fear that a direct announcement might trigger controversy and hinder his campaign further.

Pan-Blue supporters were disappointed about Hou’s lack of attention to issues they were concerned about most. For instance, Hou was questioned for not proposing a proactive nuclear policy, even when Pan-Blue voters were strongly supportive of increased nuclear energy use. In December 2021, Hou publicly denounced the referendum on restarting construction on Taiwan’s fourth nuclear power plant (核四公投), arguing that it had

“[polarized the society](#) (撕裂社會).” Many Pan-Blue supporters viewed Hou’s remarks as antagonistic, and refused to accept a [KMT nominee who was perceived to have betrayed them](#). Hou has also been questioned for [not demonstrating support for the “92 Consensus,”](#) the essential pillar of the KMT’s approach to cross-strait relations.

Additionally, a [media interview](#) with former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) just prior to the January election sparked an intense discussion about the party’s ties with China. Despite Ma’s defense of the KMT’s official stance, which called for peace and negotiations across the Taiwan Strait, Hou was eager to distance himself from Ma and [excluded him from the KMT’s election night rally](#)—an ironic decision given the KMT’s vision of an “unprecedented united campaign.”

### **What Comes Next?**

Hou’s failures reflect significant flaws in the KMT’s policy approach, in that it has gradually lost its ability to keep up with Taiwan’s evolving political discourse. The KMT has always been aware of its failures in attracting new voters, especially being negatively viewed by younger generations. The KMT’s loss of ability to sway younger voters comes from its [dysfunctional institutions and vague agenda](#), which are interrelated. The party’s power structure is highly centralized, giving the party chairman disproportionate authority and influence over decision-making without accountability. While the KMT has made efforts in the past to reform its structure, the [party](#) has never been considered fully democratic. These institutional failures came to a head during this election, when the party leadership was determined to nominate Hou without an open process, [suppressing dissent within the party](#). Furthermore, the party repeatedly demonstrated its [arrogance as an “established party”](#) through its efforts to force Ko Wen-je into a subordinate status as Hou’s vice presidential candidate. Those unscrupulous practices were viewed as [outdated and pedantic](#) by young and independent voters, and a sign that the KMT has only marginally evolved since the end of the authoritarian era.

Another impediment that makes the KMT unattractive is its lack of a clear vision. Thanks to the DPP’s struggles to handle both its internal affairs and growing tensions across the strait, the KMT experienced a [dramatic victory](#) in the 2022 local elections. The KMT believed that the 2024 election would be a similarly easy win for the party. However, even though [60 percent of voters chose not to support the DPP presidential candidate](#), the KMT was not able to fully capitalize on voter dissatisfaction—in part because the party was unable and unwilling to elaborate on its

policy agenda.

One example is the KMT’s stance on China. Throughout the election, the party maintained a vague, noncommittal approach to cross-strait relations, showing little intention to either elaborate on its China policy or [reinterpret the “92 Consensus.”](#) Instead, KMT officials only mechanically accused the DPP of [breaching the peaceful status quo.](#) As the election demonstrated, the public would not turn to the KMT solely because of their disappointment with the DPP. Despite promising to solve the [problems](#) of low incomes, unaffordable housing, high costs of living, and other issues that the younger generations care most about, the KMT did not put forth feasible solutions. Meanwhile, Hou’s vice presidential candidate, Jaw Shaw-kong (趙少康), repeatedly [oversimplified the hardships of Taiwan’s youth](#), further reinforcing the stereotype of the KMT as “the party of egotistical elites” among young voters.

The KMT lost the 2024 presidential election because it failed to adapt to changing demographic, economic, and social circumstances. After the election, numerous internal criticisms emerged, [calling for institutionalization and democratization within the party](#), with many condemning Eric Chu for his misjudgments. Chu, however, fought back, arguing that the KMT leadership [ought not to be the target of censure](#), but that blame should rather be placed upon the unfavorable political atmosphere. Chu also asserted that the KMT is “on the track that [is] heading to the direction of reform and we have been witnessing the outcomes.” Despite claiming that he would be held accountable for the loss, Chu refused to step down as the party chairman, and soon a consensus within the party emerged to support Chu throughout his remaining term.

Indeed, the KMT did secure some [noteworthy gains in the 2024 elections](#). It successfully derailed the DPP’s bid to form a majority government, becoming the largest party in the Legislative Yuan in the process. Although it did not gain the majority of seats, it gained a plurality that allowed it to install Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) (the KMT’s 2020 presidential candidate) as the new speaker. Han has built up a considerable social network while serving in various positions before, and has [connections with both DPP and KMT members](#) in the LY. Even though Han’s bombastic demeanors—as demonstrated in recent years—have affected his popularity, his characteristics and personal network may contribute to negotiation among the three parties.

Although gaining the speakership may be vital for the KMT to play a critical role in Taiwan’s politics during the next four years, the party’s lack of a majority will likely complicate chances for

the three parties to reach consensus. Taiwan's self-defense and security could be affected if political divisions in the legislature become more intense, and China may see it as an opportunity to increase its influence. For the KMT, 2024 will not be the end of its challenges. If the party is still not able to convince voters that it will adapt its institutions to be more inclusive and responsive—and will not trade Taiwan's freedom and democracy for expanded ties with China—it will continue to flounder. If the party does not move quickly, the real crisis is yet to come.

**The main point:** Despite declining electoral support for the ruling DPP, the KMT failed to regain the presidency in the 2024 elections, largely due to institutional failures and an incoherent policy platform. If the party is to succeed in future elections, it will need to act decisively to address these concerns.