Final Thesis

Degree in International Relations

BALANCING IDENTITY AND SOVEREIGNTY

The Dual Influence of Shared Origins and Political Divergence on Taiwan's Identity

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Abstract:

This thesis investigates the reciprocal relationship between Taiwan's national identity and its capacity for international agency, amid the enduring complexities of cross-strait relations. This complexity lies in the fact that Taiwanese identity has always been designed in relation to China, shaped as much by its differences as by its similarities with the neighbouring country.

On the one hand, the civil war that separated the two nations has caused Taiwanese to reject any association with Chinese ideology. They see reunification ambitions as a threat to their independence. On the other hand, their shared origin leads to cultural, religious, gastronomic and even recreational similarities, giving rise to an unbreakable economic relationship. Meanwhile, Taiwan's pivotal role in the global semiconductor supply chain further constrains any alteration of the status quo.

Grounded in the constructivist theory, this study employs a mixed-methods approach—combining historical analysis, survey data, interviews, and economic statistics—to trace how identity is continuously (re)constructed through three interconnected levels: official discourse, non-state actors and structural constraints.

The findings reveal a mutually reinforcing process: Taiwan's international manoeuvring both shapes and is shaped by its evolving sense of self. Ultimately, the island must balance two sides of the same coin: the facet of belonging to the Chinese nation with that of opposition to the Chinese state. Thus, the central question guiding this analysis is how Taiwan manages these dual pressures and what impact its evolving identity has on its international agency.

Keywords: national identity, agency; constructivism; cross-strait interdependence; status quo, ideology, reunification, independence, policies, Chinese nationhood.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Historical context and relevance of the topic

The Formosa Strait forms a stage where identity and ideology are intertwined in a continuous escalation and de-escalation of tensions. This fragment of sea has symbolised both a physical and ideological dividing line since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, when the Nationalist government withdrew to the island of Taiwan. The self-styled Republic of China, which at its inception held the ideal of "one China" unified under one legitimate government, gradually abandoned this conception in favour of an independent administration. With this independence also came the development of a new identity separate from its Chinese origins, which was initially repressed and is now encouraged. For its part, the People's Republic of China was developing on the mainland without abandoning its determination to rule over the island.

In the 1970s, as the UN resolution 2578 recognised the People's Republic to be the one-and-only China, Taiwan saw democratic, economic and technological development as the only way to regain its relevance on the international stage. This process not only nurtured a sense of self-identity but also gave the international community reason to see the island as a key commercial and political player.

This process of identity redefinition, stemming both from the rejection of Beijing's political influence and the strengthening of the island's own values, has marked a divergence in the perception of what it means to be Taiwanese as opposed to what it means to be Chinese. Thus, the younger generations have grown up with a perception of "Taiwanese" that is far removed from the roots that once linked them to the mainland.This identity complexity underlies Taiwan's choices, reflecting the tension between a shared cultural bond and the assertion of sovereignty. Taiwan's actions and policies are thus profoundly shaped by the need to manage a growing identity on the one hand, and an interdependence, that is as undeniable as it is inevitable, on the other.

Nevertheless, besides complex, the Taiwan-China relationship is one of the most strategically significant of the 21st century. Understanding Taiwan's stance is a matter of global significance, as the stability of the Taiwan Strait directly impacts international trade, security alliances, and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. In today's era of shifting geopolitical landscapes, Taiwan's struggle for recognition and autonomy remains an issue. At the heart of this dynamic lies a fundamental tension: while Taiwan

has increasingly asserted a distinct national identity separate from China, the constraints imposed by economic interdependence, historical ties, and global strategic interests have prevented the island from fully realising formal international recognition. This paradox raises crucial questions about Taiwan's ability to act independently in the international arena, regardless of its evolving identity. By addressing both the internal and external dimensions of Taiwan's identity and agency, this thesis seeks to provide a balanced perspective on the island's political reality.

1.2.   Objective, methodology and structure of the study

The central objective of this research is to explore the interplay between identity formation and structural constraints in shaping Taiwan's agency. This thesis assesses how government discourse, non-state actors and external pressures intersect, in order to understand how these dynamics are managed through the island's international positioning. Specifically, the study traces the evolution of Taiwanese identity from being historically linked to the Chinese, under the Kuomintang regime, to becoming a distinct and increasingly consolidated national consciousness. Furthermore, it investigates the factors that have driven this transformation, while also examining how economic dependencies, cultural links and diplomatic constraints limit Taiwan's ability to assert full sovereignty. Organised around three levels of analysis—discursive strategies, influential agents beyond the state, and material constraints—this study provides an integrated framework for understanding Taiwan's capacity to manoeuvre within its geopolitical environment.

To achieve these objectives, the research employs a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis. On the one hand, the historical framework allows to trace the evolution of Taiwanese identity, drawing upon existing academic literature, government policies, and media discourse. On the other hand, the empirical perspective is composed by survey data, economic reports, and trade statistics. Additionally, qualitative insights are incorporated through interviews conducted during a one-year research stay in Taiwan, providing firsthand perspectives on the island's reality. This survey was answered by a total of 18 individuals of a varied age range and different professional backgrounds. By integrating all these methodologies, this research offers a comprehensive assessment of Taiwan's identity and its implications for the island's agency.

The structure of this thesis is divided in four interconnected parts that mirror its three-level analytical framework. It begins by establishing the theoretical foundations, reviewing constructivist approaches to national identity and agency in international relations, identifying gaps in prior analyses of cross strait relations. It then examines the state-led identity-forming discourse and the concrete policy measures that both reflect and shape national self-perception. Next, it explores how non-state actors—the general population and TSMC—interact with and reinforce this evolving identity. The final section evaluates the structural constraints arising from economic interdependence with China, enduring cultural ties and global geopolitical stakes, demonstrating how these pressures condition the consolidation of a distinct Taiwanese identity. Through this multi-layered analysis, the study provides a detailed understanding of Taiwan's position in global affairs and the factors that shape its political trajectory.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Justification for Constructivism as the chosen approach

The selection of an appropriate theoretical framework is crucial to understanding Taiwan's evolving identity and its impact on cross-strait relations. A key turning point in this process was Kastner's (2018) study, "International Relations Theory and the Relationship across the Taiwan Strait", which applies different IR theories to analyse Taiwan–China relations. He finds that, while realist models can explain certain strategic decisions, they fail to capture the deeper ideological and identity-driven factors influencing Taiwan's stance. This traditional state-centric paradigm, focused on material power and sovereignty, soon proves insufficient to explain the evolving nature of Taiwan's agency, which is not solely dictated by military or economic strength. Constructivist scholars, on the other hand, do succeed in understanding that Taiwan's shifting sense of identity has played a decisive role in shaping both international diplomatic strategies and domestic policy debates (Kastner, 2018).

The constructivist theory is an approach in the social and educational sciences arguing that national identities and agency are social constructions that emerge through the interactions between state actors (Theys, 2018). Constructivism holds that these identities are neither fixed nor intrinsic, but that instead they are the result of a process of ever-negotiating between the "Self" (the state) and the "Others" (other actors). In this

framework, states shape their identity through repeating discourses that, over time, are internalised by both political elites and society. The main existing literature on the topic is based on Alexander Wendt´s theory (1999), which was the first to recognise that social structures shape state behaviour while also being shaped by it. Wendt's work introduced the idea that identity and interests are not fixed but constructed through interactions, offering a more dynamic framework that was soon backed by other authors. For instance, Pouliot (2004) explores the core of constructivism, emphasising the role of identity in shaping international behaviour. Meanwhile, Guzzini (2000) in "A reconstruction of constructivism in international relations" traces constructivism's evolution and demonstrating how it serves as an alternative to rationalist approaches in explaining international phenomena. Hopf (1998) advocated for the ability of this promising theory to integrate ideational factors like culture and identity into the analysis of international politics, thereby enriching the understanding of state behaviour and international outcomes. Lastly, Adler´s "Constructivism in international relations" (2013) offers an extensive overview of constructivism's contributions and debates, highlighting its role in bridging the gap between theory and practice in international relations. Together, these works give constructivism significance as a versatile tool for analysing global affairs.

All the above follow the lines of Wendt's constructivism. In other words, a strong focus on the state as the primary actor is kept. Even if initial constructivist perspectives amplify the scope from a strict focus on the state to also considering other actors, they still recognise the state as the main and central performer. Seeking a broader perspective, I turned to Braun et al. (2018), whose work takes constructivist agency to its furthest extent by arguing that states are neither the sole possessors of agency nor the main ones. Instead, they view agency as an emergent and contested phenomenon, constructed through social practices, performances, and networks that can sometimes have an even larger influence than states themselves. Their framework allows for a more inclusive analysis, recognising that corporations, transnational actors, and even societal narratives play crucial roles in shaping political realities (Braun et al., 2018).

After analysing all the above perspectives, I position my approach as an intermediate stance between Wendt and Braun. As both theories coexist within the larger constructivist framework, using this middle point as the foundation for the present study is not only coherent but also advantageous. This to say that, instead of providing a completely new and separate alternative, Braun et al. (2018) critiques the traditional

version of constructivism and seeks to complete the theory by broadening the relevance of other actors. The intermediate perspective used in the present thesis recognises that, while the state remains a pivotal actor in international agency, it does so within a field where agency is continuously shared and redefined by non-state entities that can sometimes have an even larger influence than the state itself. In the context of Taiwan's agency and identity, it is particularly evident how identity is not solely crafted through formal state mechanisms, but also through the mobilisation of societal narratives, economic initiatives, and trade dependence. Therefore, while the state remains a key actor in Taiwan's international agency, the growing influence of non-state entities—especially the Taiwanese population and major corporations like TSMC—cannot be overlooked. The interaction between these different levels of agency is essential to understanding Taiwan's evolving identity and its strategic manoeuvring in the international system. Thus, the constructivist perspective will guide the empirical analysis, demonstrating how Taiwan's identity has been continuously negotiated in response to its interactions with China and other global actors, while also being shaped internally by its own society and economic networks.

2.2. Previous use of the constructivist approach

For all the reasons explained above, the Constructivist theory is a particularly enabling framework when analysing international conflicts, particularly those involving states with shared histories. The goal of this section is to show how the theories discussed earlier have been applied in practice. For instance, many works use the constructivist lens in protracted conflicts. Feklyunina (2014) examines Russia's attempts to project a soft power identity in Ukraine through their shared historic roots. By leveraging these cultural and linguistic ties, Russia aims to construct a "Russkiy Mir" or "Russian World", in the narrative of their later invasion of Ukraine. Another significant contribution to the literature that uses the constructivist approach is written by Oktay and Rrapaj (2020), who analyse identity politics in post-independence Kosovo from a social constructivist perspective. The authors argue that the historical hostility between Albanians and Serbs is not inherent but rather socially constructed through the nation-building processes of both groups. Both examples can be taken as highly resonating to the Taiwan-China case, thus, demonstrating the use of the constructivist lens in similar scenarios.

Furthermore, we find works that also relate a country's foreign policy to its identity but in other contexts. For instance, "Europeanisation, Collective Identities and Public Discourses" by Thomas Risse and Michael Maier (2003) examines how the process of European integration has shaped the collective identity of EU member states, influencing their foreign policies. Although the case is technically opposite, as it refers to voluntary integration of different countries instead of to separation of similar ones, the research article is still of interest to the Taiwan-China scenario as it explains the influence of a recently acquired identity in a country's foreign policy. In the same way that Germany's sense of Europeanisation and collective identity is a new phenomena, Taiwan did not consider itself as a separate entity from the Chinese nation until fairly recently. Nevertheless, both discourses have shaped international politics in a decisive way.

Additionally, the work of Hanns W. Maull (1991), "Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers," illustrates how Germany and Japan, post-World War II, have embraced identities as "civilian powers". In other words, it argues that the self-perception of these nations from their actions during the World War shapes their actions on the international stage. In this aspect, it is similar to the topic of this paper, as it also examines the effect that citizen's self-identity has on the states´ foreign policies. More specifically, Japan's and Germany's sense of pride is stained by their shameful actions in the war and, consequently, they have pushed for a more pacifist approach to international affairs from then on. Meanwhile, Taiwan's perception of the Chinese threat just across the border, pushes the population's aspirations as a technological power that needs to be protected.

Finally, we find the work by Boon (2022) as a perfect example of the use of the constructivist theory to analyse identity formation: Boon explores how the Chinese government seeks to shape its international identity through repeated narratives in order to consolidate its global status and answer to the USA´s influence. Thus, this approach illustrates how identities solidify through continuous interactions among actors, revealing a settled dynamic. Boon uses mechanisms of self-categorisation, alter's casting, and role appraisal to explain Chinese identity formation, a process that can be applied in analysing Taiwan's identity in relation to that of its relevant "Other" (in this case, China).

Together, these examples demonstrate how constructivist approaches have been used in practice, highlighting the usefulness of constructivist theory for analysing national identity and agency in international relations. These studies show that constructivism is

not merely a theoretical framework but also offers practical tools for understanding complex international dynamics. In the case of Taiwan—where identity is continually reshaped by historical ties, cultural narratives, and political pressures—constructivist approaches provide a clear way to see how actors, both state and non-state, form and negotiate their roles over time.

2.3. Review of the literature on cross-strait relations

In regard to studies specifically about China and Taiwan, we find a substantial body of research on the topic. There are several studies that leverage international relations theories to unravel the complex cross-strait dynamics, within which constructivist frameworks are particularly popular. Thus, in the following lines we will review the literature that used the constructivist theory to analyse cross-strait relations in order to find room for further contributions.

Hambach (2017) in "Making Cross-Strait Relations: A Constructivist View" analyses how identity and cultural narratives shape the political dynamics between Taiwan and China, emphasising the evolving social constructs that influence their interactions. He applies the theory to examine how the Cross-Strait relationship is shaped and sustained by speech acts performed through key political agents in Taiwan, China, and the United States. One of the central contributions of the study is its exploration of how Taiwan's evolving identity—from being framed as an integral part of China to developing a distinct Taiwanese identity—has altered the political landscape. In other words, it puts the focus on the environment instead of on the identity in itself. This contrasts with more bottom-up constructivist perspectives, such as the one adopted in this thesis, where the opposite is analysed: how the political landscape has altered the Taiwanese identity.

Ismayilzada and Önsoy (2022) further expand on this in their article "A Constructivist Approach to Conflict Transformation: The Case of China-Taiwan Conflict", exploring the transformative potential of identity politics in altering conflicts. By examining the interplay between identity, politics, and structural shifts, their work provides valuable insights into how conflicts can be gradually reshaped. At the same time, it offers an understanding of Taiwan's evolving stance in relation to China. Therefore, Ismayilzada and Önsoy focus on the conflict, analysing how it can be shaped by the

identity – meanwhile, in this thesis we examine the other side of the coin: how does the conflict affect the evolution of Taiwanese identity.

Furthermore, Li (2014), in "Constructing Peace in the Taiwan Strait: A Constructivist Analysis of the Changing Dynamics of Identities and Nationalisms," traces how Taiwan's democratisation opened space for an alternative identity narrative. She shows that political reforms enabled both elites and the public to question long-held assumptions of Chinese nationalism and to construct a distinct Taiwanese self-conception. While Li demonstrates the importance of domestic political change and public debate in identity formation, this thesis expands that view by exploring how the ongoing conflict with China feeds back into identity, and how non-state actors—such as civil society groups and private companies—contribute to the process.

Similarly, Yuan (2012), in "Norm-Centred Constructivism and Cross Strait Relations: Theory and Practice," uses a norm-centred social constructivist perspective to analyse the dynamics between Taiwan and China. He argues that the "one China" rule persists through the repeated speech acts of political actors in Taiwan, China and the United States, treating cross strait relations themselves as a social construct. By showing how different political systems generate distinct social experiences, he explains why more Taiwanese increasingly identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. Yuan's focus on the power of norms clarifies why certain identity narratives remain dominant. This thesis builds on his insight by also examining how material constraints—economic interdependence, geopolitical pressures and cultural connections—actively reshape Taiwanese identity over time.

In "Changing Taiwanese Identity and Cross-Strait Relations: A Post 2016 Taiwan Presidential Election Analysis," Li and Zhang (2017) examine the impact of the Democratic Progressive Party's electoral victory on Taiwan's identity politics. They argue that the election outcome both reflected and reinforced a growing Taiwanese identity and triggered strategic reactions from Beijing. Their work underscores the link between elite level events and identity shifts. In contrast, this thesis offers a continuous account of identity change by connecting elite discourse to grassroots practices and structural pressures, showing identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a series of isolated events.

Wu and Chen (2020), in "Domestic Politics and Cross-Strait Relations: A Synthetic Perspective," highlight how shifts in domestic politics in both Taiwan and China—particularly the alternation between the DPP and the KMT—produce marked swings in cross strait policy and affect the stability of relations. By combining analysis of party politics on both sides of the strait, they underscore the central role of domestic power changes. This thesis builds on their insight while adopting an expanded constructivist perspective, drawn from Braun et al. (2018), to include the agency of non-state actors and to consider how structural constraints shape the range of possible identities.

After analysing the existing literature and context of the China-Taiwan case, we realise that the interplay between that growing identity and the ever-existing cross-strait relations has not yet been extensively covered by any study. Thus, even if previous studies have made certain inputs, the following necessity is identified: to determine how historical and, consequently, cultural and economic links with China, shapes the government's approach to a new growing self-identity separate from that of the mainland. To approach this necessity, this article puts the focus on the Taiwanese identity: how exactly has it changed overtime, what factors have influenced this change and what is the current situation. Besides, it adds a new layer by analysing the different agents that interact and the role they play in the formation of the Taiwanese identity. A third lens looks at the impact of external pressures across the strait. The combination of these three approaches allows to add a distinctive value to the existing literature, as it offers a comprehensive understanding of Taiwan's agency and its approach to its growing identity in a context of geopolitical complexity. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the academic discussion by bridging identity politics with international relations theory, particularly in the context of agency in global politics. While constructivist approaches have extensively explored identity formation, fewer studies have examined how this identity interacts with material constraints to shape a state's capacity for action. Thus, by integrating the concepts of agency and identity, the present thesis shows that the way Taiwan has defined itself is closely linked to the choices it makes on the international stage.

2.4. Line of Analysis

Substantially, the above argument shows that the constructivist approach helps better unveil the complexities of cross-strait relations and Taiwanese identity formation.

Ultimately, this approach has evidenced that identities are not fixed entities but are continuously constructed and contested through interactions among diverse actors (Wendt, 1999; Braun et al., 2018). That is why the present study echoes this theory through a multi-layered analytical framework that captures, not only state-driven narratives, but also the influences exerted by non-state agents and structural constraints. In the case of Taiwan, historical ties, cultural narratives, economic dependencies, and external geopolitical pressures all contribute to how identity is formed and reshaped over time. Thus, the following section will explain how the analysis is organised around three interconnected levels of agency: discourse, agents, and limitations.

The first level looks at the identity-forming discourse, which is to say the role of political discourse in shaping identity. Constructivist scholars argue that the way governments and leaders talk about identity plays a key role in defining how a nation sees itself. Official speeches, government policies, and media narratives don't just describe reality—they actively shape how people understand who they are. In Taiwan, political discourse has evolved over time, increasingly emphasising a unique Taiwanese identity rather than a shared Chinese heritage. By analysing these narratives, we can see how identity is being constructed at the governmental level.

The second level moves beyond government narratives and focuses on other important actors in Taiwan, such as the population and major businesses like TSMC. Recent studies in international relations (Braun et al., 2018; Latour, 2005) argue that states are not the only ones with agency—individuals, companies, and other organisations also shape identity through their actions and choices. In Taiwan, citizens express their identity through voting, protests, and cultural movements, while companies like TSMC play a role by strengthening Taiwan's global presence and reinforcing a sense of independence. This section will analyse how these different agents interact with and contribute to the development of Taiwanese identity.

The third level looks at the external and internal factors that limit or condition how identity is shaped. As explored in the previous sections, identity does not develop in isolation; it is shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures. While Taiwan has a strong national discourse and active agents shaping identity, there are also historical, economic, and geopolitical constraints. Cultural ties with China, economic dependence on trade, and pressure from international actors like the U.S. and the EU all shape how

Taiwan can present its identity to the world. By analysing these limitations, we can better understand the balance required to assert the island's unique identity in its political and economic reality.

By connecting these three levels—discourse, agents, and limitations—this thesis reflects the main theories discussed above, while providing a practical structure for the analysis to come. The constructivist approach lays the groundwork for understanding how the interplay between narrative, agency, and structural constraints contributes to the evolving Taiwanese identity. Thus, on the one hand, this section captures the complexity of identity formation, as envisioned by constructivist theories. But, on the other hand, this explanation serves as a bridge between the theoretical framework presented in Section 2 and the subsequent empirical analysis in Sections 3, 4 and 5.

3. IDENTITY-FORMING DISCOURSE

In this section, the focus is on the role of the government as an agent that forms Taiwan's national identity. The government is uniquely positioned to create a discourse through the implementation of concrete measures and policies. These measures were originally designed to promote a Chinese identity during the Chiang Kai-shek era, while they now foster a distinct Taiwanese identity. Nonetheless, in both cases they serve as a mean by which the state influences society's perceptions and behaviours. By establishing regulatory frameworks, reforming education, and supporting cultural initiatives, the government creates a discursive space that indirectly and directly communicates its vision for Taiwan. In this analysis, we will examine these measures to identify the underlying discourse that shapes national self-perception, using them as benchmarks to understand how the government successfully constructs and promotes its strategic identity narrative.

3.1. Origins anchored in Chinese heritage

In the early years after the civil war, the hope of returning to what they considered their homeland was still very much alive in those soldiers who had left everything behind to follow Chiang Kai-Shek (Copper, 2018). The Nationalist leader made great efforts to keep that flame alive and it was not until many years later that he gave up the military battle for the territory across the Formosa Strait (Roy, 2003).

However, giving up territory did not mean giving up Chinese identity. Thus, the Kuo Min Tang kept the focus on its traditional roots, investing in replicas of famous

temples, museums with pieces of millennial art or traditional writing (Wang, 2004). This mindset was established from the beginning: in 1948, anticipating the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-shek orchestrated the relocation of approximately 2,972 crates containing some of the most treasured artefacts from the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Central Museum in Nanjing. This collection included several invaluable items such as ancient bronzes, calligraphy, paintings, and rare books (Leung, 2023; South China Morning Post, 2015). These artefacts were initially stored in a sugar mill warehouse in Taichung and later became the foundation of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, established in 1965 and designed in traditional Chinese palace architecture (Maugüé, 2021). The museum now houses nearly 700,000 artefacts, encompassing over 8,000 years of Chinese history, and serves as a testament of the Republic of China's commitment to assert the continuity of Chinese civilisation (National Palace Museum, n.d.).

In regard to Chinese millennial calligraphy, there was also a focus on the preservation of the use of traditional Chinese characters and the Zhuyin (Bopomofo) writing system as part of its cultural heritage. In Taiwan, the continued use of traditional characters and Zhuyin has become a cornerstone of cultural identity. Thus, the Ministry of Education standardising 4,808 commonly used characters in 1982 to ensure consistency in educational materials (Ministry of Education, n.d). In contrast, the People's Republic of China initiated an extensive reform programme to increase literacy by simplifying characters and using Pinyin instead of Bopomofo. This initiative was part of a broader language reform aimed at unifying the nation's diverse linguistic landscape and promoting mass literacy. The simplification of Chinese characters was officially implemented in 1956, reducing the number of strokes in many characters to make them easier to learn and write. Subsequently, in 1958, the government introduced Hanyu Pinyin, a romanisation system using the Latin alphabet to represent Chinese sounds to improve literacy (Lam, 2005). This contrast between the simplified characters adopted by the PRC and the traditional script preserved in Taiwan was not merely linguistic—it also carried political and cultural symbolism. By maintaining the original forms of Chinese characters and traditional phonetic systems, Taiwan sought to present itself as the rightful guardian of authentic Chinese culture. This distinction reflected a commitment to historical and cultural continuity, becoming a strategic tool that allowed the Republic of China to claim continuity with pre-Communist China and position itself as the cultural

heir to the Chinese civilisation (Makeham & Hsiau, 2005). Thus, beyond its educational function, Zhuyin has evolved into a symbol of true Chinese identity, distinguishing it from mainland China's linguistic practices and reinforcing a sense of cultural uniqueness (Huang, 2020).

Nevertheless, the Kuo Min Tang's initiatives went far beyond cultural and artistic promotion. Simultaneously, they repressed everything foreign to this Chinese identity, even that which belonged to the indigenous culture of the island itself. These measures, that will be analysed in the following lines, were rooted in the belief that they were only temporarily separated from the homeland. Thus, they were not only a strategy to strengthen their political control, but also a deliberate attempt to suppress any emerging sense of Taiwanese identity. For the KMT, the project of reunification with the mainland was not just a political objective, but an ideological imperative that justified the imposition of Chinese culture in all aspects of daily life. This approach led to the marginalisation of local customs, languages, and traditions, as the regime sought to mold a homogenous national identity aligned with its vision of a unified China (Lee, 2020).

The education system was one of the most powerful tools for this purpose of forced assimilation of a unified identity under the Chinese mantle. For example, the "Movement to Speak Chinese"（說國語運動）was created with the intention of eradicating the use of local dialects by forcing the entire population to use Mandarin as the official language (Sandel, 2009). In schools, educational materials were inscribed with slogans such as "Be a good and happy student; be an honest and true Chinese", reflecting the message that was to be instilled in the minds of young people from an early age. Students were penalised for speaking their native tongues, and Mandarin was positioned as the sole language of instruction and public discourse. This linguistic policy aimed to unify the population under a single language, while delegitimising and suppressing the island's diverse linguistic heritage to erode their local identities (Cheng, 2009).

In addition to language policy, the KMT severely limited cultural activities that were not aligned with Chinese traditions, while investing in temples, art and forms of expression that reinforced the link with the mainland past. Public spaces were renamed to reflect Chinese heritage, and the history taught in schools emphasised China's ancient civilisation and the KMT's role in preserving it (Makeham & Hsiau, 2005). In practice, these policies not only reinforced the idea that Taiwan owed its allegiance to China but

also attempted to erase traces of the island's own identity. The suppression of local festivals, arts, and religious practices further alienated the native population, fostering a sense of cultural dislocation and resistance among those who sought to preserve their indigenous heritage (Cheng, 2009).

This forced assimilation was coupled with a policy of social segregation that distinguished between the "Waishengren"（外省人）, i.e. immigrants who had arrived from the mainland after the war, and the "Benshengren"（本省人）, those whose ancestors had inhabited the island before the arrival of the KMT. Although the Waishengren constituted only about 13% of the population, the KMT placed them in the highest positions in the government and military apparatus, relegating the Benshengren to an inferior status. The Waishengren often lived in separate communities, known as "juancun," and had preferential access to resources and opportunities, exacerbating tensions and fostering resentment among the native Taiwanese population (Cheng, 2009). This policy of institutionalised exclusion prevented integration by sowing deep internal divisions that made it difficult to form a common identity.

3.2. The shift from Chinese to Taiwanese

The result of the policies analysed in the previous section was an inevitably growing resentment among the indigenous Taiwanese. Institutional discrimination and corruption by the KMT government fuelled the unrest that culminated in the tragic "228 Incident " of 1947, a popular uprising that was brutally suppressed by the regime and left its mark on Taiwanese society for decades. The immediate trigger was a confrontation on February 27th, when agents of the State Monopoly Bureau assaulted a Taiwanese widow suspected of selling contraband cigarettes. The following day, as protests escalated, government forces opened fire on demonstrators, igniting widespread unrest across the island. George H. Kerr, an American diplomat stationed in Taipei at the time, provided a detailed account of the events in his book *Formosa Betrayed*. He described how the KMT's response involved indiscriminate violence, including mass executions and the targeting of Taiwanese intellectuals and community leaders. Kerr estimated that the death toll ranged from 10,000 to 20,000, noting that the exact number might never be known due to the chaos and lack of documentation. The massacre initiated a period known as the "White Terror," characterised by widespread political repression, censorship, and human rights abuses (Kerr, 1965). This prolonged period of KMT rule is reflected in the graph

below: the Neopatrimonialism Index remained near its maximum from 1950 through the early 1980s, reflecting the party's tight control over patronage networks, the military, and the bureaucracy (Coppedge et al., 2024). Electoral competitiveness was effectively zero, civil society was tolerated only in state-managed mass organisations, and citizen activism hovered near −1, indicating near complete suppression of dissent. During these decades, the KMT justified harsh measures as necessary to preserve "China proper" until reunification, while they crushed emergent Taiwanese identity.

Graph 1: Taiwan´s democracy index 1950-2025.
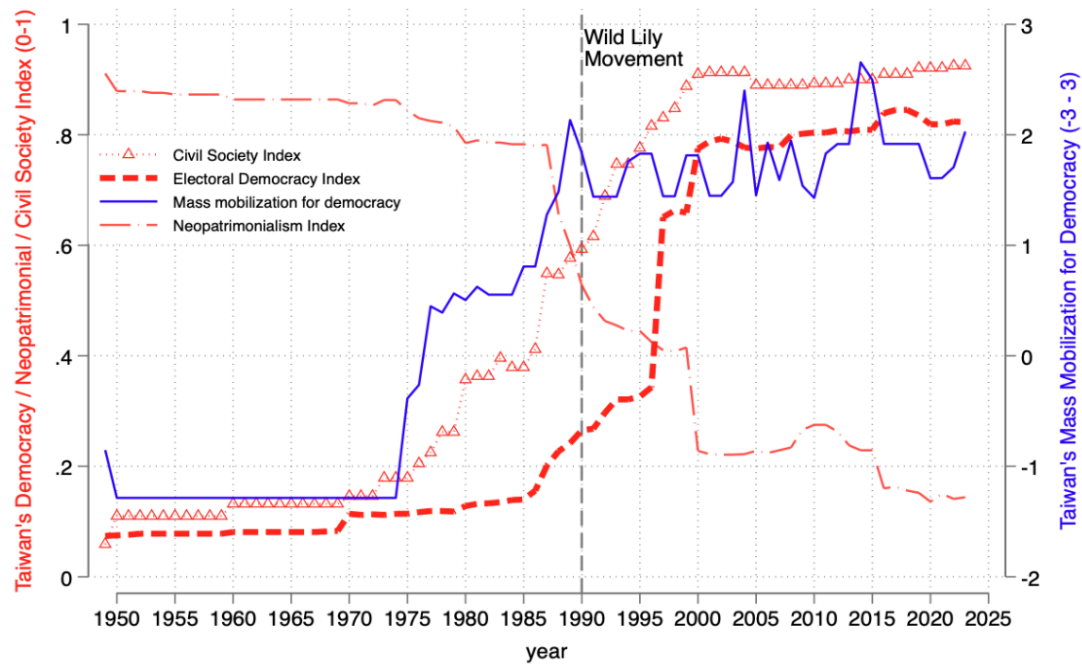
Data Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (2024, v. 14)

Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (2025, v.15).

Nevertheless, as hopes of regaining control of the mainland faded with the consolidation of Communist power in China, the KMT's rhetoric of reunification lost steam. By the 1970s a confluence of factors began to loosen these authoritarian grips. Rapid economic growth—averaging over 8% GDP per year between 1965 and 1980—fostered a rising middle class and expanded secondary and higher education, seeding new professional associations and student networks (Nathan & Gilley, 2003). Meanwhile, pressure from the United States and the global human rights movement made overt repression increasingly costly. On the graph above, the Mass Mobilization for Democracy index rises in 1985, and the Civil Society Index begins a modest upward turn. The decisive break came with Chiang Chingkuo's lifting of martial law on July 15, 1987. As the graph's vertical marker indicates, the post1987 era saw a sharp drop in

neopatrimonialism while mass mobilisation experienced steep rise. Electoral Democracy remained low until the first legislative byelections in 1989 but thereafter accelerated rapidly—by 1992 it had climbed from near zero to about 0.2, and by 1996 (Taiwan's first direct presidential vote) it reached 0.6 (Coppedge et al., 2024).

Decades later, repressive policies had not only failed to forge a unified Chinese identity on the island, but, paradoxically, had fuelled an identity assertion movement. With the lifting of martial law, Ching-Kuo finally opened the door to an unprecedented public debate on national identity and the relationship with the mainland (Harrison, 2017). The newly acquired freedom of speech and press soon allowed criticisms of the official narrative to emerge. This identity awakening found one of its most symbolic moments in the 1990 Wild Lily Movement (野百合學運), a demonstration in which approximately 22,000 students demanded direct elections. The demonstrators carried white lilies, a flower indigenous to Taiwan which is referred to in various traditional poems: For instance, the aboriginal poet Lin Yi-te's uses the lily to evoke the purity of spirit of Taiwan's indigenous peoples and to dramatise the tragedy of their decline (Smith, 2014). On the graph above, the Mass Mobilization spikes to its highest level and the Electoral Democracy line takes an upward kink, reflecting the Wild Lily Movement. These protests forced President Lee Tenghui to legalize opposition parties permanently, dismantle the Temporary Provisions, and schedule Taiwan's first popular presidential election in 1996 (Chen & Fu, 2017). Thus, 1990 marked the beginning of democracy and the subsequent effort to revalue Taiwanese identity, by distancing itself from the discourse imposed by the KMT.

In addition, the political opening allowed for the creation of new parties that could reflect this revaluation of identity, breaking the monopoly of the KMT. In this context, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emerged in 1986, advocating formal independence for the island to reflect the changed narrative. Although the KMT appealed to a base of supporters fearful of a direct confrontation with Beijing, the turning point finally came in 2000, when the DPP won the elections with 39% of the vote and ended half a century of uninterrupted KMT rule (Wilson Center, 2000). Since then, the political landscape in Taiwan has been defined by tension between the more conciliatory stance of the KMT, which advocates maintaining economic and diplomatic ties with China, and the firm stance of the DPP, which insists on the consolidation of Taiwanese autonomy and categorically rejects the idea of reunification under the principle of "one country, two

systems". Ultimately, divergent views on the relationship with China continue to shape the island's political course.

3.3. Building a Taiwanese identity

In historical terms, four decades represent a relatively short period for the consolidation of a national identity. However, in this case, the pace of global change and the measures taken during this time have profoundly shaped the collective perception of the island as a nation. There have been significant governmental measures that have transformed how Taiwanese view their past, present, and future as a people distinct from the mainland narrative. These strategies are detailed below, as well as their impact on the shaping of Taiwanese identity.

One of the areas where identity revaluation had the greatest impact was the education system. For decades, textbooks had been a crucial instrument for instilling a pan-Chinese vision in the population, relegating Taiwan's own history and culture to the background. However, after the democratic opening, a fundamental debate arose: how should history be taught in Taiwan? (Sangkasenakul, 2021). Finally, under the leadership of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president, reforms to "Taiwanise" education began. In 1999, new textbooks for the first time included a separate chapter on Taiwanese history, differentiating it from Chinese history (Corcuff, 2002). This change, though ostensibly academic, had profound implications for the self-perception of Taiwanese youth (Liu et al, 2023). Furthermore, these volumes also incorporated testimonies of 228 survivors and local social movements in a section named "Knowing Taiwan" (Hughes, 2009). Besides challenging the KMT-imposed narrative, these reforms helped to heal the internal divisions that had marked Taiwanese society. They did not avoid the darker parts of its recent history; on the contrary, the new textbooks included open criticism of the KMT's dictatorial regime, acknowledged abuses committed during the martial law era, and valued transitional justice processes. In this way, younger generations began to see their country's history not as an extension of the Chinese narrative, but as a testimony to their struggle for self-determination and democracy.

On the other hand, the TOCFL (Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language) was created in 2005, in contrast to the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi - Chinese Level Test), which was promoted by the Chinese government. Designed by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education, the TOCFL not only assesses proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, but also

incorporates elements of Taiwanese culture and emphasises the practical use of the language in the local context. Unlike the HSK, which prioritises a more standardised and neutral approach, the TOCFL places emphasis on the cultural and social aspects that are unique to Taiwan, making it a tool for projecting Taiwan's uniqueness on the global stage (TOCFL, n.d.).

In parallel, the Taiwanese government launched initiatives to revitalise local languages and traditions, challenging the hegemony of Mandarin that had been imposed for decades. Beginning in 1993, local governments were first permitted to offer mother-tongue electives in elementary schools, and by the year 2000 these pilot programmes were integrated into the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum, giving aboriginal languages a formal role in education (Wu, 2009). President Lee Teng-hui even declared in an official speech that Taiwanese culture was not a mere offshoot of Chinese culture, but an entity of its own with its own unique roots (Dupré, 2018). Although full implementation required further legislation, this discourse signalled an official embrace of Taiwan's multilingual heritage. Three years later, the draft of the Language Equality Law recognised fourteen "national languages", including Taiwanese Holo, Hakka, and ten Austronesian tongues. In an effort to protect and promote aboriginal languages and local dialects, they mandated government translation services and the training of civil servants in local languages (Shih, 2003). Although this draft was not passed in the Legislative Assembly, it did lay a strong foundation for further legislation. In 2007, the Council for Cultural Affairs took over the role of the MOE, drafting the "National Language Development Law" and changing the focus from officialization of local languages to the preservation and maintenance of linguistic diversity and equity in Taiwan. In 2017, explicit amendments to the Indigenous Languages Development Act designated all thirteen Austronesian languages as "national languages," and, in 2018, parallel amendments to the Hakka Basic Act did the same for Hakka. Finally, the Development of National Languages Act—effective in 2019—created a comprehensive framework that mandates cross-ministry cooperation to guarantee citizens the right to use any national language—with government-provided interpretation—in administrative, legislative, and judicial settings (Ministry of Culture, n.d.). Hence, as Taiwan progressively elevated its aboriginal tongues from locallysuppressed dialects to fully recognised "national languages,", the government affirmed a multicultural identity distinct from any singular "Chinese" narrative.

On a different level, strategic alliances in the diplomatic and military sphere could also be seen as part of Taiwan's effort to reinforce its national identity and differentiate itself from China. These alliances not only seek to ensure its security, but also to project Taiwan's image as an independent country in the international arena. While only 14 countries, mostly small states in Latin America and Oceania, officially recognise Taiwan as the 'Republic of China', the island has managed to establish a network of representative offices in most countries. These account to more than 60 offices and function as an alternative to traditional embassies, fostering trade and cultural ties (MOFA, n.d.).

Moreover, Taiwan's adoption of measures such as the Anti-Infiltration Act (2019) and various media literacy initiatives (TFC) strengthen its capacity to defend itself against Chinese threats to its self-perceived identity (Legislative Yuan, 2019). By empowering the citizens to identify and counter disinformation attempts, Taiwan fosters a narrative of its own that rejects China's authoritarian influence and asserts its position as a sovereign nation. In fact, the Taiwan FactCheck Center has reviewed over 12,000 claims since its founding in 2018—testimony to a civil society committed to truth seeking (TFC, n.d.).

In regard to soft power, the move to replace the term "Republic of China" with "Taiwan" has given rise to the need to create a new international image separate from its common past with mainland China. Taiwan has therefore adopted a series of soft power strategies that underline its cultural uniqueness. A prime example of this renewed projection is its commitment to gastro-diplomacy. Since 2010, the Taiwanese government has invested significantly in campaigns to promote its identity through cuisine, spending more than US$32 million on initiatives including events in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles. The international expansion of iconic restaurant chains, such as Din Tai Fung, night markets and bubble tea have become symbols of its distinct cultural identity. In fact, the latter even has events, such as the annual bubble tea festival in Maryland (USA), in a context of unofficial ties with the country (Wu, 2021). These initiatives not only celebrate the richness of its cuisine but also position Taiwan as an innovative and creative player on the global stage.

Finally, it is worth noting that no other country in the world conducts surveys on the identity of its citizens with the same frequency and intensity as Taiwan. Since 1992, the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University has annually monitored how Taiwanese identify themselves: as "Taiwanese", "Chinese" or a combination of both

(Election Study Center, 2024). This tool both reflects and influences the direction of the island's national identity, as media outlets, legislators, and NGOs regularly cite these figures to validate policy proposals and public campaigns. In a scenario where the legitimacy of its sovereignty is continuously challenged by China, the polls can be interpreted as a deliberate effort to highlight the existence and growth of an independent Taiwanese identity. In this way, the constant scrutiny of national identity becomes a political discourse in itself (Zhou, 2024).

In contrast, although of equal interest, there are certain measures that have contributed in an indirect way to the strengthening of Taiwanese identity. In other words, they are not policies designed and implemented with the specific aim of creating a collective memory that would increase national sentiment in opposition to China. However, in an unintended way, they have contributed to it. For instance, this would be the case of the policies for the management of Covid-19: even if it was not the initial objective, certain side effects can be seen on the Taiwanese perception. The government's successful handling of the pandemic demonstrated its ability to act independently, projecting an image of efficiency to the international community at a time when China was facing criticism for its initial response to the outbreak (O´Flaherty, 2020). Over the first sixteen months of the pandemic, Taiwan logged just 1,057 total cases and 11 deaths, maintaining one of the world's lowest case–fatality rates (Cheng, 2021) . Besides, Taiwan's COVID-19 mortality rate stood at 0.21 deaths per million inhabitants— compared to a global average of 54 per million (Our World in Data, 2022). These outcomes were achieved without full lockdowns, relying instead on rigorous contact tracing, digital quarantine monitoring, and transparent public communication that sustained high levels of citizen trust and compliance (O´Flaherty, 2020). Moreover, the international attention it received for its health response allowed Taiwan to highlight its commitment to public health, strengthening its soft power (Chang, 2020).

Similarly, Taiwan's advanced legislation in favour of LGTBIQ+ rights has highlighted the island as a model in the region. One of the main examples to highlight is that in May 2019 Taiwan became the first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage (Huang, 2019). The island has also implemented legal protection policies against employment discrimination and promoted inclusive education programmes in schools. Besides, it has supported visibility through events such as Taipei Pride, which happens to be one of the largest pride parades in Asia (Haynes, 2019). Although these policies were

not conceived with a nationalist goal in mind, their implementation has reinforced the image of a progressive Taiwan by raising its profile in the international arena and contrasting with the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government.

In addition, modern Taiwan has made the protection and promotion of its indigenous peoples a key strategy for consolidating its national identity and differentiating itself from China. On the one hand, the government has implemented policies that formally recognise the territorial, cultural and linguistic rights of these communities, including the establishment of the Council on Indigenous Affairs (CIP) in 1996 and the enactment of the Indigenous Peoples' Basic Rights Act in 2005 (Council of Indigenous Peoples, n.d.). These measures highlight Taiwan's plurality and, in turn, reinforce its narrative as a democratic and human rights-respecting nation, in stark contrast to reports of ethnic repression against minorities such as the Uighurs and Tibetans in China.

4.3. Approach to the discourse

All these measures ultimately embody a comprehensive discourse, since they serve as concrete benchmarks that reflect the government's evolving strategy for identity construction. Rather than being explicitly stated in a single document, the discourse is embedded in public policies and actions that reveal the government's intention. From the early efforts to maintain a Chinese identity under Chiang Kai-shek to the current policies aimed at promoting a distinctly Taiwanese identity, the discourse has evolved and, with it, society´s self-perception. By analysing these concrete measures, we find the direct and indirect ways in which the government's actions translate into a coherent discourse that builds a unique Taiwanese identity. This evolution is clearly rooted in the theoretical framework presented in Section 2, where constructivist thought has demonstrated that identities are continuously constructed through practices and interactions. By linking specific public policies, such as regulatory frameworks, educational reforms, and cultural initiatives, to the broader discursive space created by the government, we can see how these measures act as visible manifestations of the state's efforts to guide national self-perception.

Thus, the approach to the discourse not only captures the direct and indirect ways in which government measures solidify national identity but also reinforces the importance of constructivist theory as the analytical lens for this study. By treating these

policy measures as benchmarks for the government's discourse, we bridge the gap between theoretical insights and practical applications, demonstrating how identity is continuously remade through the active participation of state policy and its ongoing interaction with society.

4. OTHER INFLUENTIAL AGENTS THAT INTERACT IN THIS NEW IDENTITY

As previously established, this thesis adopts a three-level analytical framework—discourse, agents, and limitations—to understand the construction of Taiwanese identity. Having explored the first level through government-led discursive strategies, we now turn to the second level: the role of influential non-state actors. According to the constructivist theory that serves as the foundation of this work, states are not the only actors with the capacity to shape national identity. Thus, in this section, we explore other influential agents that play a key role in shaping Taiwan's new identity. Two groups stand out in this process: the population and strategic companies. While they do not hold formal political power, their actions, perceptions, and influence on both the domestic society and the international community contribute significantly to the construction of a distinct Taiwanese identity. The following lines explore how these actors interact with and influence identity formation, complementing the role of the state.

4.1. Population

Building on the theoretical framework discussed earlier, this section examines the role of the population in forming Taiwan's national identity. It analyses data and social phenomena that reflect a significant shift in self-identification in order to demonstrate how Taiwan's population both reflects and drives the island's emerging national identity.

The phenomenon under analysis is reflected in recent data from the Taiwan Election Study Center, which shows a significant increase in the percentage of people who identify themselves exclusively as Taiwanese: from 17.6% in 1992 to 64.3% today. In contrast, those who consider themselves exclusively Chinese have declined dramatically, from 25.5% to 3.6% (Election Study Center, 2024). This trajectory—illustrated in Graph 2—demonstrates that Taiwanese identity consolidation has been rapid and decisive.

Graph 2: Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese.

臺灣民眾臺灣人／中國人認同趨勢分佈 （1992～2024）
Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese
as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU(1992～2024)
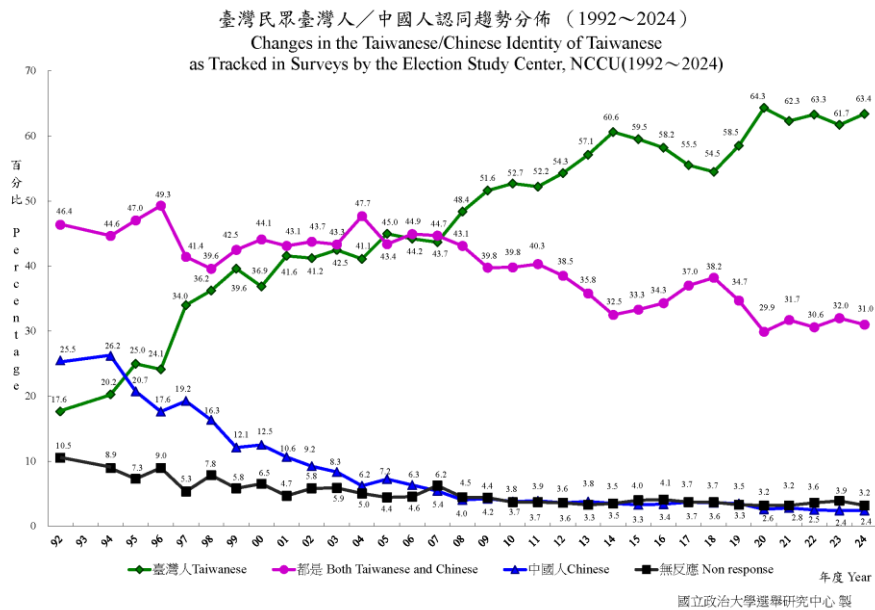
Source: NCCU Election Study Centre, 2024.

Beyond statistics, everyday acts of defiance capture this shift in popular consciousness. For instance, after Taiwan's baseball team won the WBSC Premier12 title in 2024, team captain Chen Chieh-hsien celebrated a decisive home run by pointing to the blank space on his "Chinese Taipei" jersey, where "Taiwan" should appear. Despite competing under the name "Chinese Taipei" due to external pressures, these gestures underline that Taiwanese identity is no longer just a construct imposed by political measures, but a reality deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the people. That moment went viral—widely shared by international outlets and civil groups—as a potent symbol that Taiwanese athletes, and by extension society, no longer accept externally imposed labels (Lee & Blanchard, 2024; Pan & Wen-shin, 2024).

Taiwan's identity transformation also resonates on the international stage through digital solidarity. Aside from governmental support, there are now trends that reflect the recognition of Taiwanese identity at the population level. For example, this is the case of the Milk Tea Alliance, a movement that originally emerged as a simple meme in response to the presence of Chinese nationalist commentators on social media. This trend rapidly evolved into a multinational initiative protesting Chinese hegemony in the region. Born in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Myanmar, the hashtag has also gained support in countries such as the Philippines, India and Malaysia. What used to be a meme-driven

"internet brawl", eventually grew into an informal democratic coalition that symbolised shared resistance. For Taiwan, this reinforced their image as part of a broader struggle for rights and recognition (Wang, 2021; Elemia, 2020). Thus, the Milk Tea Alliance not only fosters a collective unity in opposition to China but also consolidates Taiwanese identity as a grass-roots reality rather than a political construct.

All in all, although the period under analysis may seem short to define a consolidated collective identity, it is crucial to recognise that the Taiwanese society has undergone a radical transformation during this time. This is because Taiwan is experiencing a deep generational divide between those born before and after 1978. The former lived under authoritarian rule and often regard democracy as a secondary value, as one man interviewed for the study acknowledges: "I think the younger generation has taken democracy as a religion. At the end of the day democracy is just a system to elect one idiot among many idiots.... I may lose a little bit of freedom living under the dictatorial regime, but I can still live well". Whereas the so-called "Jieh Yan Shih Dai" (the generation after the end of martial law) have grown up in a democratic context and embrace human rights as fundamental values. This is why, in contrast, an 18-year-old student said, "I believe because of our education, my generation has considered human rights as a universal value" (Lee, 2020). This disparity in perspectives shows that, even if for the older generations the relationship with China is not perceived in such a confrontational way, it is the new generations the ones who will play a central role in future political discourse and, thus, be the driving force behind identity change.

In summary, the population level of analysis confirms that Taiwanese identity is not static but continually reconstructed through social interactions, historical processes, and cultural expressions. The empirical data and social examples discussed here provide clear evidence that the collective self-perception of Taiwan's people has significantly shifted in favour of a unique national identity, in line with the broader theoretical insights outlined in this study. Ultimately, this section demonstrates that the shift from Chinese to Taiwanese is not only a political construct but also lived in the day to day of society, who both influences and is influenced by the growing identity.

4.2. Companies

Following the population-level analysis, we now examine companies as second-degree agents in Taiwan's identity formation. Businesses can influence the island´s

identity through their economic performance, international reputation, and societal perception. Among Taiwanese companies, one stands out in both scale and impact—TSMC. This single company not only shapes Taiwan's economy, but to a large extent defines its identity. Thus, the following section will explore how this company, through its perceived indispensability and geopolitical relevance, plays a critical role in reinforcing a distinct Taiwanese identity.

Established in 1987, TSMC has become the world's leading chipmaker, accounting for over 92% of the world´s most advanced chip manufacturing (Jones et al, 2023). In this context, the perception of Taiwanese society is that TSMC represents the pinnacle of the country's technological development. Its success has been interpreted by the Taiwanese population as a triumph of homegrown ingenuity, a validation that the island can not only compete, but lead on the international stage (Chiu, 2024). Moreover, the Taiwanese are aware of their country's dependence on the technology company as a guarantee of their security against the Chinese threat, leading to the concept of the "Silicon Shield" (Tsang, 2022). In short, it could be said that the company does not simply manufacture semiconductors; it manufactures confidence and a geopolitical shielding that few other economic players can offer. However, there is no empirical evidence that the collective sense of Taiwanese identity has increased as a result of TSMC, which is why a series of 18 interviews have been conducted to verify this.

**Graph 3:** Interview question on industry popularity
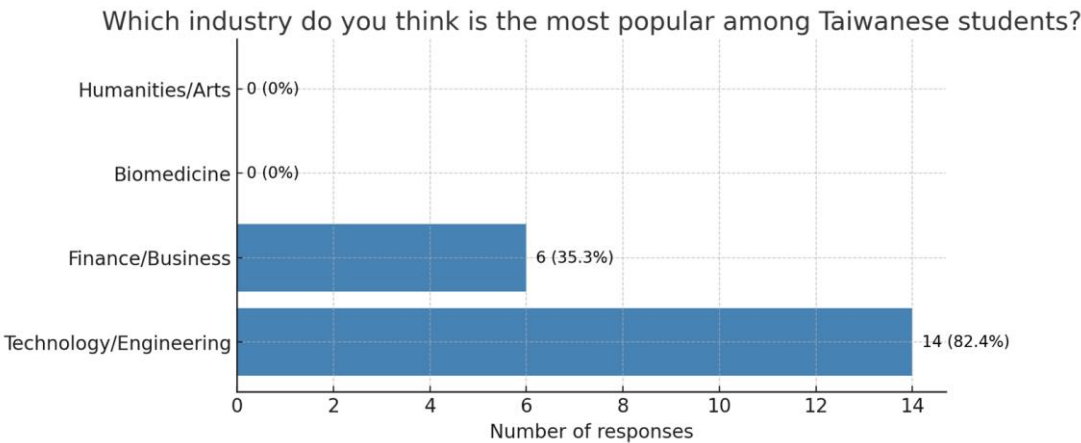
Source: Own elaboration with data collected through a survey.

First, it can be seen that the aspiration to get a job at TSMC is common among the Taiwanese population, as 82.4% of the respondents believe that the technology sector is the most popular and, out of those, 88% consider TSMC as the leader in that sector. In

addition, 75% rate the company's importance to the Taiwanese economy between 8 and 10. This popular perception of the company could derive, on the one hand, from the professional prestige it offers and, on the other hand, from the close connection with its national pride. To test this theory, I asked what they thought was the reasoning behind this association, to what 88.2% interviewed responded that TSMC was not only a source of employment, but a symbol of resilience and autonomy in the face of Chinese pressure.

Graph 4: Interview question on sector leadership.

Technology sector leader according to respondents
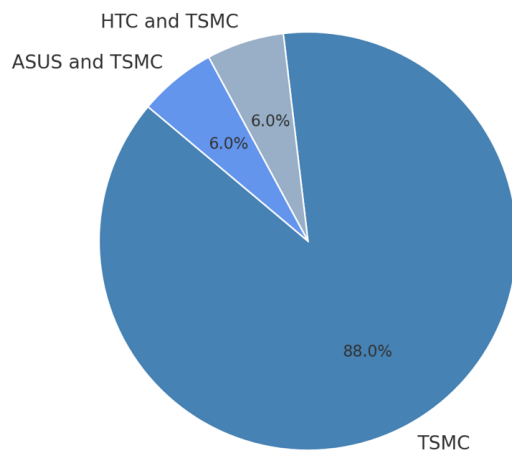
Source: Own elaboration with data collected through a survey.

In this context, the second part of the survey is devoted to the role they perceive TSMC has in national security in relation to China. 76.5% of respondents believe that the technology company contributes to the island's security. In fact, when asked how the international community's stance would change if Taiwan did not have TSMC, some responses were that "it will receive even less attention" or that "without TSMC, Taiwan is nothing". This perception reveals the extent to which the very existence of the company is understood as a protective shield, an element that forces the world to worry about Taiwan's future. This is why, when asked the next question, 78.6% responded that the government should prioritize and protect the company. In other words, the population is aware of TSMC`s role as an irreplaceable piece in the global supply chain that strengthens Taiwan's position on the geopolitical chessboard and gives it powerful allies, such as the United States. Thus, government protection of TSMC, such as investments in infrastructure, tax incentives and support for R&D projects, is interpreted not only as an economic strategy, but also as a reaffirmation of Taiwanese identity and the need to protect it as an independent nation on the global stage. In this sense, the company ceases

to be just an economic actor and becomes a fundamental pillar of the national survival strategy.

**Graph 5**: Interview question on TSMC´s role on national security.

In your opinion, does TSMC help strengthen Taiwan's national security?
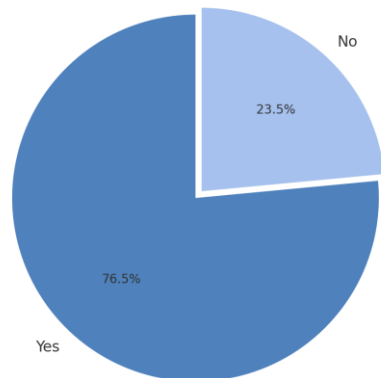
Source: Own elaboration with data collected through a survey.

Graph 6: Interview question on TSMC´s social perception.

Under the current international situation, do you regard TSMC as a symbol of Taiwan's resilience and autonomy under China's political and military pressure?
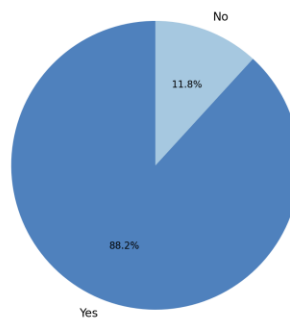
Source: Own elaboration with data collected through a survey.

   The TSMC case demonstrates that technology, identity and security are intertwined in Taiwan in a unique way. Although the company is seen primarily as a source of professional development and economic growth, its role as a guarantor of national security and its impact on foreign policy does not go unnoticed by the population and has made it a central player in the identity debate. Although its influence is not explicitly manifested in the definition of being Taiwanese, its existence reinforces an indisputable fact: without TSMC, the island would be much more vulnerable, less recognized and, consequently, less able to sustain its position as an autonomous country on the global stage.

5. FACTORS THAT CONDITION THE IDENTITY'S CONSOLIDATION

In addition to the influences of government discourse and other key agents, Taiwanese identity is also shaped by significant external and internal constraints. This final level of analysis focuses on the limitations that arise from managing Taiwan's interdependence with China. Building on the theoretical framework, which highlights that identity is continuously formed through the interplay of discourse and influential agents, this section examines the structural constraints that impact the development of a distinct Taiwanese identity. In particular, it analyses the economic, cultural, and geopolitical factors that stem from Taiwan's deep interdependence with China. These limitations are not only external pressures but also internal conditions that shape Taiwan's ability to fully assert its identity on the international stage. In this way, the discussion is completed in its three-level analysis—discourse, agents, and limitations—to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these factors collectively influence and sometimes restrict the formation of Taiwan's national self-identity.

5.1. Economic and commercial constraints

Economically, Taiwan and China have a complex relationship: although they are political rivals, their economies are deeply intertwined, creating a mutual dependence that makes a clean break difficult. On the one hand, China is an ideal destination for Taiwanese investment, taking advantage of production advantages and access to a vast market with similar products. Taiwan, in turn, is a key strategic partner for Chinese economic development because of its semiconductors (Martin et al, 2023). In addition, Taiwan offers China a highly skilled workforce with international expertise in key sectors such as technology and innovation, backed by strong state investment in research and development. Thus, while Taiwan benefits from China's resources and market, China also relies on Taiwan's innovative capacity and advanced infrastructure to further consolidate its economic growth (Campagnola, 2024).

Additionally, there is a political strategy on the part of China aimed at bringing Taiwan closer without the use of force (Lee & Knoerich, 2024). This strategy has been based on the creation of incentives to attract Taiwanese investment, including tax benefits, the establishment of special economic zones and the provision of legal protections for investors. As a result, China became Taiwan's largest export market,

reaching a peak of 43.9% in 2020 (Taiwan Ministry of Finance, 2020). In addition, a significant number of Taiwanese people work on the mainland, which has strengthened cross-strait economic and social ties (Nathan, 2022). This deep economic interconnectedness has been used by China as a tool to facilitate reunification, with Taiwan's economic dependence serving as a means to influence Taiwanese public opinion and foster greater identification with the mainland.

This situation has fuelled debate over the extent to which Taiwan should allow its economic ties with China to deepen without compromising its sovereignty and democratic values. Thus, mindful of Beijing's strategy of economic rapprochement, Taiwan has adopted protectionist policies that have allowed it to keep its imports from China at considerably low levels (Shen, 2024). As a result, bilateral trade has favoured Taiwan, with exports significantly exceeding its imports from China, as you can see in the graph below. This approach seeks to preserve a trade surplus while avoiding an economic dependence that would threaten Taiwan's autonomy (Taiwan Ministry of Finance, 2024).

Graph 7: Taiwan-China trade balance
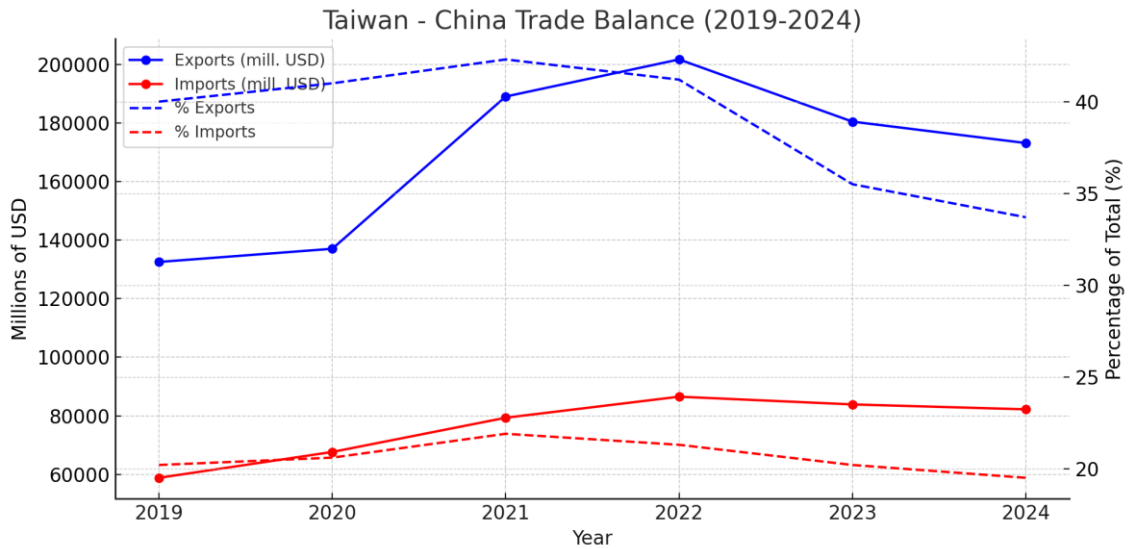
Source: Own graph based on data from Taiwan's Ministry of Finance.

Although the island has maintained a favourable trade surplus, it has recognised that this is not enough to mitigate the risks stemming from its high exposure to the Chinese economy. Taiwan's second key strategy to reduce its economic interdependence with China has therefore been to diversify its export markets. For years, China and Hong Kong accounted for a dominant share of Taiwanese exports, making Taiwan vulnerable to

changes in Beijing's economic policy and fluctuations in the bilateral relationship. To counter this dependence, Taiwan has pushed for a redistribution of its trade flows to other markets, progressively reducing the share of its exports going to China and strengthening its trade links with other economies (US Department of State, 2024).

In recent years, this diversification effort has yielded tangible results: In 2024, Taiwan's share of exports to China fell to 33.8%, from 43.9% in 2020, reflecting a significant reduction in its dependence on the Chinese market (Taiwan Ministry of Finance, 2024). Although bilateral trade remains significant, with year-on-year growth of 9.4% in 2024, the overall trend indicates less exposure to the Chinese economy. At the same time, Taiwanese investment in China has plummeted: in 2010 it accounted for 83.8% of Taiwan's total outward investment, but in 2023 it fell to 11%. At the same time, Taiwanese exports to the United States reached a record US$11.89 billion in 2024, up 78.5 per cent compared to the same month last year. Among major trading partners, exports soared to ASEAN countries (27.8%), South Korea (21.1%) and the US (16%). Investment in Southeast Asia reached US$5.5 billion, surpassing that to China for the first time (Taiwan Investment Commission, 2024).

Graph 8: Proportion of Taiwan's trade that is with China.
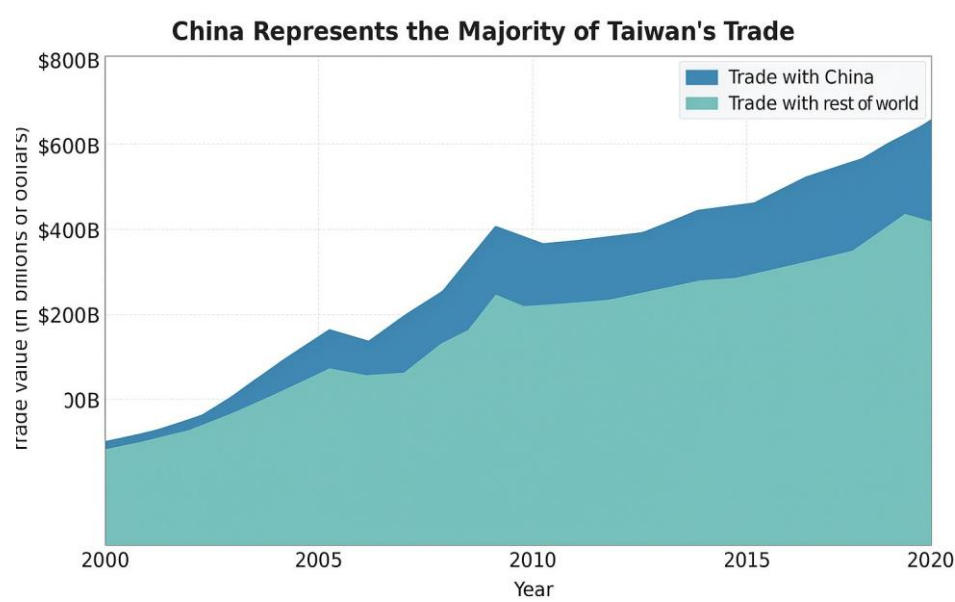
Source: Own graph based on data from the Taiwan International Trade Administration.

Graph 9: Taiwan's exports to China and the USA.
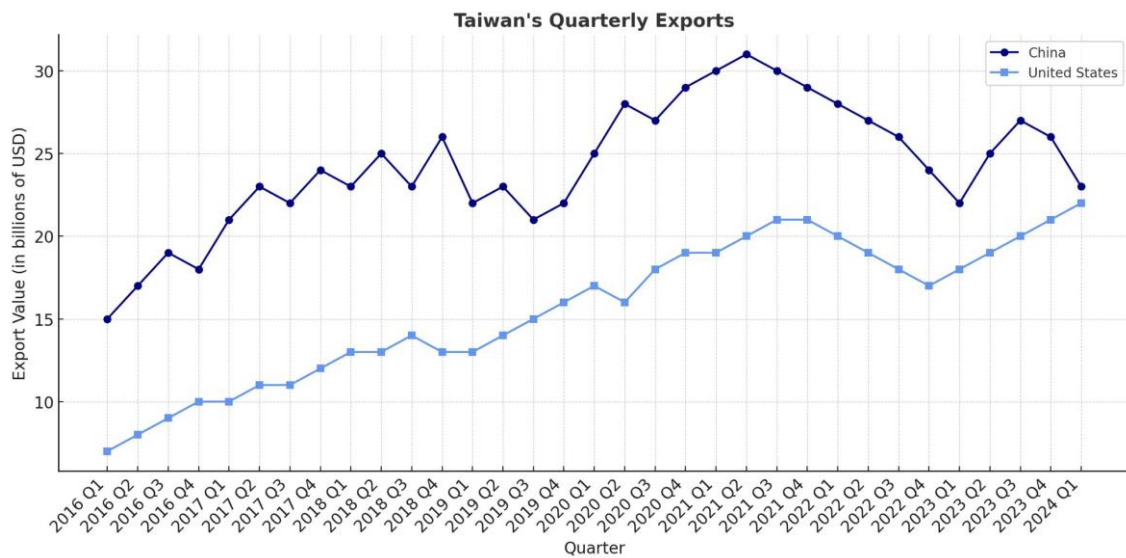
Source: Own graph based on data from the Taiwan International Trade Administration.

Despite this reduction in trade volumes, the relationship remains crucial for both economies, resulting in a balance between economic pragmatism and geopolitical strategies on both sides. Although Taiwan has sought to diversify its economic relations, especially in a context of increasing global rivalry, the historical closeness and economic ties remain strong enough to prevent a sharp break, maintaining an interdependence that is difficult to dissolve completely.

5.2. Cultural constraints

Although the political differences between Taiwan and China remain, the deep cultural ties stemming from a common historical origin between the two territories continue to play a key role in shaping their relationship. Although the Taiwanese government has promoted a distinct identity, the island's people maintain traditions, values and customs that reflect their shared heritage with the mainland (Huang et al, 2004). These similarities not only influence Taiwanese perceptions of identity but also act as a moderating element in the political and economic separation between the two actors. It is therefore interesting to mention a few examples of such cultural interconnectedness that can result in an unbreakable relationship despite political divergences.

First, language is an essential link in the cultural relationship between Taiwan and China. Standard Mandarin is the main official language in both territories, facilitating communication and mutual access to media, literature and education (Kwock-Ping,

2000). Despite the persistence of local dialects such as Hokkien in Taiwan or Cantonese in China, the predominance of Mandarin reinforces a common linguistic basis that maintains interconnectivity between the two societies.

Second, traditional festivities reflect significant cultural continuity. In both China and Taiwan, Chinese New Year is the most important celebration of the year, with family gatherings, traditional feasts and rituals symbolising prosperity and generational continuity (Hsieh, & Chou, 1981). Other festivities, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival, include similar practices of ancestor veneration, gift exchange and community events, which reinforce shared cultural identity (Saso, 1982).

Likewise, philosophical and religious currents in both territories are deeply rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These doctrines have shaped the social and ethical structure of both Taiwan and China, promoting values such as filial piety, social harmony and the importance of academic merit (Tang, 2016). Despite modernisation and political changes, these principles continue to influence daily life and family relations of both peoples.

Another key element is gastronomy, which is a tangible manifestation of the common cultural heritage. Taiwanese cuisine is directly influenced by the culinary traditions of China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces, with signature dishes such as dumplings, fried rice and noodle soups being commonly consumed in both regions (Tfau, 2017). This similarity not only translates into domestic consumption, but also into the popularity of Taiwanese cuisine in China and vice versa, maintaining a symbolic connection between the two peoples (RChen, 2010).

Finally, family and ancestral ties reinforce the cultural interdependence between Taiwan and China. 95% of the Taiwanese population is Han Chinese (My China Roots Website, n.d.) and many of the families still have roots on the mainland and maintain genealogical records that trace their lineage to Chinese provinces, especially Fujian and Guangdong (Meyer, 2012). This genealogical continuity and the importance of ancestor worship create a sense of shared identity that transcends political boundaries.

Thus, while Taiwan has developed a distinct identity of its own from China, cultural similarities continue to play a key role in shaping its bilateral relationship. The persistence of shared traditions, common linguistic structures and similar philosophical values reinforce a cultural interdependence that mitigates the impact of political differences. This

phenomenon partly explains why, despite Taiwan's efforts to reduce its economic and political dependence on China, the ties between the two societies remain strong.

5.3. Geopolitical constraints

Global dependence on Taiwanese semiconductors adds a layer of complexity to the question of the island's national identity. As previously mentioned, Taiwan today manufactures around 60 percent of the world's semiconductors and approximately 90 percent of the most advanced chips, making it a linchpin of the global technology supply chain (Lee & Moss, 2022). Thus, while the strengthening of a distinct Taiwanese identity is a palpable reality, the geopolitical and economic implications of a formal declaration of independence are significant. Any move in this direction could provoke a forceful response from China, with potentially devastating regional and global consequences.

From a geopolitical perspective, the "silicon dilemma" imposes strategic constraints on both China and the United States. Likewise, the United States faces its own strategic dilemma: American dependence on Taiwanese semiconductors means Washington cannot abandon Taipei without risking catastrophic supply-chain disruptions (Martin et al, 2022; CRS, 2023). U.S. policymakers have responded with export controls and the CHIPS Act to boost domestic production, yet these measures will take years to yield sufficient capacity—leaving U.S. firms and national security vulnerable in the near term (CFR, 2023; Congressional Research Service, 2024). On its part, Beijing understands that Taiwan's annexation would allow it to control global chip production, which would give it a structural advantage in its competition with the United States (Cronin, 2022). At the same time, an invasion would almost certainly destroy or disable Taiwan's semiconductor infrastructure—either through collateral damage or via a deliberate "scorched-earth" strategy by Taipei to deny China access to its fabs—thereby crippling global production (Swinhoe, 2022). U.S. Army War College scholars have proposed a "broken-nest" strategy in which Taiwan would pre-emptively disable its own semiconductor foundries upon confirmation of an invasion, thereby making occupation both less rewarding and more damaging to Chinese strategic interests (Yadav & Reason, 2023). These dual constraints—the economic imperative to keep TSMC operational and the military imperative to deny them to an invader—have solidified the *status quo*. China's calculus must weigh the short-term gains of annexation against the long-term loss of technological power.

Beyond the direct confrontation between China and the US, the conflict over Taiwan has global ramifications. The European Union, Japan, South Korea and other key players in the world economy depend on Taiwanese semiconductors to keep their technology industries competitive. The EU Chips Act notes that, in 2022, more than 60% of the chips used by European companies came from Taiwan (European Parliament, 2022). Meanwhile, Japan and South Korea rely on the island to supply their automotive and telecommunications sectors. Japan sources nearly 60 percent of its semiconductor imports from Taiwan Province of China, particularly for its vital automotive industry (AMRO, 2025). South Korea's automobile and electronics manufacturers have similarly forged partnerships with Taiwanese foundries to secure chip supplies (KATI, 2021). Given this scenario, most international powers have a strong incentive to avoid an escalation of the conflict and preserve stability in the Taiwan Strait. The European Union, while expressing support for Taiwanese democracy, has avoided adopting a confrontational stance with China, prioritising trade and economic stability (Haeck & Kijeski, 2022). Japan, for its part, has strengthened its defence cooperation with the US while seeking to maintain a balance that does not provoke economic retaliation from China, its largest trading partner (Nussey, 2024).

In sum, while a growing Taiwanese identity asserts political autonomy, TSMC`s indispensable role in the global semiconductor ecosystem constrains any shift toward formal independence. As analysed in the graph below, any outright move risks triggering crippling economic fallout worldwide: compared to other recent shocks, such as the 2009 financial crisis or the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, a war in Taiwan threatens a much larger collapse of the global GDP. Consequently, no major power—whether the U.S., China, the EU, South Korea, or Japan among others —wants a war over Taiwan's self-determination. They all prefer to uphold the existing status quo rather than risk conflict by pushing any irreversible change in Taiwan's political status or identity.

Graph 10: Impact in GDP of a possible war in Taiwan.
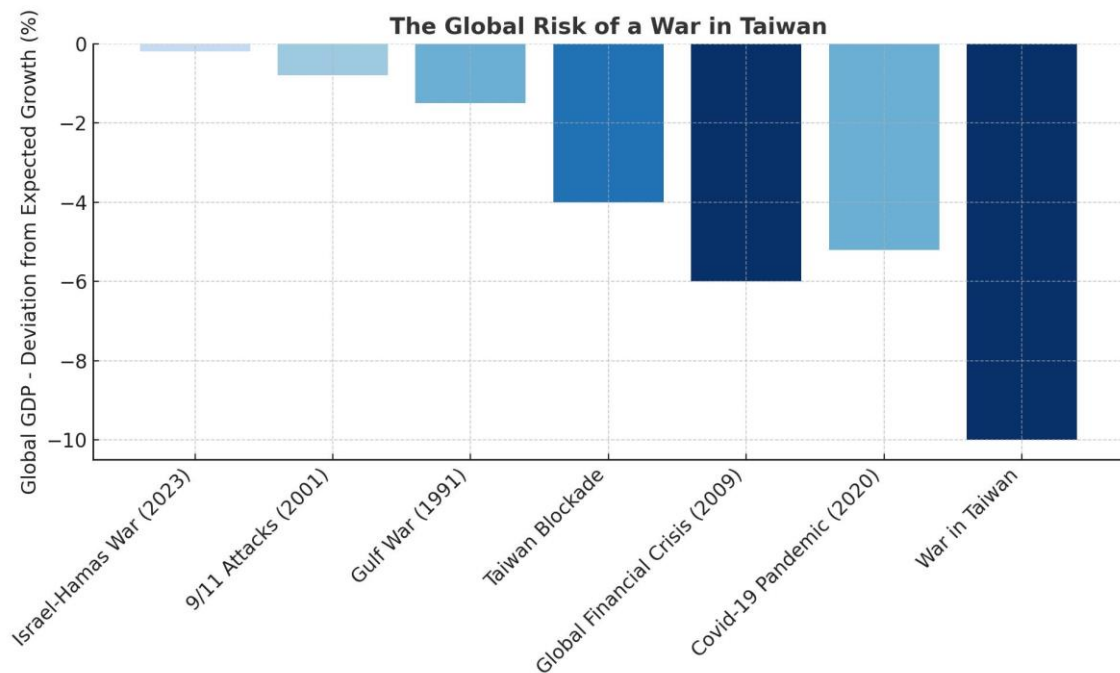
Source: Own graph based on data from Bloomberg Economics, IMF.

In this context, not only have international actors opted for caution, but the Taiwanese people themselves are also overwhelmingly in favour of preserving the status quo. This preference is due to a combination of factors, including an awareness of the risks associated with a formal declaration of independence. Unlike foreign powers, whose interests in Taiwan are driven by geopolitical and economic calculations, the Taiwanese population experiences firsthand the potential consequences of an escalation of the conflict. A confrontation with China would not only pose an existential challenge to the island but also jeopardise the economic prosperity and stability of the region.

Graph 11: Changes in the Unification-Independence Stances of Taiwanese.

臺灣民眾統獨立場趨勢分佈（1994～2024）
Changes in the Unification - Independence Stances of Taiwanese
as Tracked in Surveys by Election Study Center, NCCU（1994～2024）
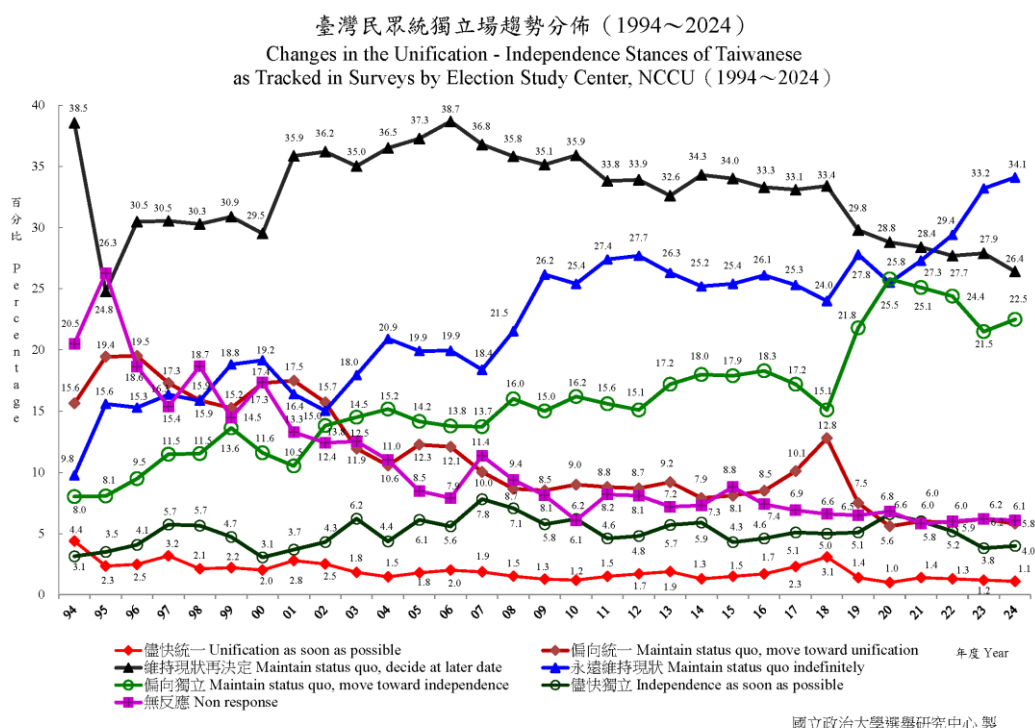
Source: Chengchi University - Election Study Center.

According to the latest National Chengchi University poll, a significant part of the island's citizens prefers to avoid drastic decisions that could trigger a large-scale crisis. The option of "maintaining the status quo indefinitely" has been the fastest growing option in opinion polls, ranging from 18 to 34.1 per cent over the past two decades, with the latter peaking in 2024. Complementarily, the position of "maintain the status quo and decide later", which used to be the most popular, has been decreasing in recent years to represent 26.4% in 2024. Finally, the option of "maintain the status quo, but on the road to independence", although it has remained the third option throughout the years analysed, has experienced a peak in the last 6 years, reaching the current 22.5%. Taken together, these figures indicate that currently more than 80% of Taiwanese opt for a wait-and-see strategy, aware of the risks that an abrupt change in their political status would entail (Election Study Center, 2024).

In contrast, support for more extreme positions remains in the minority. The "independence as soon as possible" option barely reaches 4%, while "immediate unification" with China remains at even lower levels, at 1% in 2024. Over the past three decades, both positions have shown relative stability, with no significant increase in

support. Although immediate independence experienced a slight increase at specific moments, such as in 2018, it has never exceeded 8 per cent, while support for unification has remained consistently low, evidencing the lack of popular support for drastic solutions that could trigger an irreversible crisis (Election Study Center, 2024).

Another relevant aspect that reinforces this trend is the steady decline in the percentage of respondents who chose not to answer. Whereas in 1994 this option accounted for 24.8%, its share has declined steadily over the decades, standing at just 6.2% in 2024. This change suggests a greater degree of political involvement of the Taiwanese population, as well as a growing awareness of the importance of their geopolitical situation and the consequences of any disruption of the status quo. Indeed, given that the extreme positions have remained relatively stable, it is reasonable to infer that many of those who previously refrained from responding have come to take an active stance in favour of the status quo. This would indicate that, as Taiwanese have become more informed about the strategic risks of a confrontation with China, they have tended to opt for a stance that prioritises the island's stability and security (Election Study Center, 2024).

In short, the evolution of these data reinforces the hypothesis that the maintenance of the status quo is not only due to external factors, but also to a conscious decision by citizens to avoid a conflict scenario that could be devastating for their future. Thus, the development of a Taiwanese identity of its own comes up against geopolitical barriers that reduce its room for manoeuvre.

Ultimately, the development of a Taiwanese identity of its own comes up against geopolitical barriers that reduce its room for manoeuvre. Maintaining the status quo becomes the least risky option for all actors involved. For China, Taiwan's annexation is a matter of political legitimacy, but the cost of an invasion, both in economic and diplomatic terms, remains too high. For the US and its allies, securing the island without provoking open war is a strategic challenge that requires military deterrence combined with careful management of relations with Beijing. Finally, for Taiwan itself, the current situation allows it to strengthen its identity and autonomy without triggering a direct confrontation that could prove catastrophic.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has achieved its main objective of exploring how Taiwanese identity is formed and consolidated in a context marked by complex geopolitical, cultural, and economic constraints. It has also examined the mechanisms through which this identity—built from state-led discourse, non-state actions, and broader structural factors—shapes the nation's agency to act on the international stage.

The analysis began with the examination of identity-forming discourse and government measures. These policies, ranging from educational reforms to cultural initiatives, play a crucial role in promoting a distinct Taiwanese identity. Yet, this top-down approach is only one side of the story. The study further highlighted the significant contribution of non-state agents—such as the general public and key companies like TSMC—in reinforcing this evolving identity through their everyday actions and collective behaviours. Additionally, the research detailed the factors that condition the consolidation of Taiwanese identity. It showed that economic interdependence, cultural legacies, and international power dynamics restrict the full expression of an independent self-conception. However, these same constraints also create a context in which Taiwan continuously negotiates and redefines its identity. In this interplay, a state's capacity for action—its agency—emerges as both a reflection of its self-perception and a response to external pressures.

A particularly important aspect of this study is its geopolitical analysis. By linking identity formation to Taiwan's strategic responses in an increasingly competitive international environment, the research demonstrates that the nation's identity and its ability to act are deeply shaped by global power dynamics. This line of inquiry is central to understanding Taiwan's current situation, while also offering a valuable foundation for future research: exploring how geopolitical pressures interact with cultural and economic factors will continue to provide crucial insights into the evolution of national identities.

Lastly, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its conclusions. First, the number of interviews conducted was limited, and most participants were located in Taipei. This may not fully represent the views of people from southern Taiwan, where cultural differences are pronounced. Consequently, the findings might not capture the full range of perspectives across the island. Second, measuring an

abstract concept like identity and understanding the underlying discourse poses significant challenges. Identity is a complex, evolving construct that is difficult to quantify and define. Similarly, the analysis of discourse is based on available evidence, such as public policies and government speeches, which can only provide a partial view of the deeper meaning behind the narratives. This thesis´ interpretation of the discourse is based on this evidence, but it cannot fully access the internal thought processes of those who produce it. As a result, the analysis remains a subjective perspective that relies on assumptions. These limitations highlight the need for caution in interpreting the results and open avenues for future research to use broader samples and more direct methods of capturing the discourse.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to academic debates by showing that identity and agency are mutually reinforcing. It provides evidence that Taiwanese identity, shaped by both official measures and everyday practices, is continuously changed by material constraints. Moreover, the emphasised geopolitical perspective offers a promising direction for further investigation, one that could deepen understanding of how global dynamics influence national identity in today's complex international arena.

7. AI DECLARATION

Declaración de Uso de Herramientas de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa en Trabajos Fin de Grado
ADVERTENCIA: Desde la Universidad consideramos que ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares son herramientas muy útiles en la vida académica, aunque su uso queda siempre bajo la responsabilidad del alumno, puesto que las respuestas que proporciona pueden no ser veraces. En este sentido, NO está permitido su uso en la elaboración del Trabajo fin de Grado para generar código porque estas herramientas no son fiables en esa tarea. Aunque el código funcione, no hay garantías de que metodológicamente sea correcto, y es altamente probable que no lo sea.

Por la presente, yo, María Herrero Martínez, estudiante de Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado "Balancing Sovereignity and Identity", declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación:

1. **Brainstorming de ideas de investigación:** Utilizado para idear y esbozar posibles áreas de investigación.

2. **Crítico:** Para encontrar contra-argumentos a una tesis específica que pretendo defender.

3. **Referencias:** Usado conjuntamente con otras herramientas, como Science, para identificar referencias preliminares que luego he contrastado y validado.

4. **Metodólogo:** Para descubrir métodos aplicables a problemas específicos de investigación.

6. **Estudios multidisciplinares:** Para comprender perspectivas de otras comunidades sobre temas de naturaleza multidisciplinar.

7. **Constructor de plantillas:** Para diseñar formatos específicos para secciones del trabajo.

8. **Corrector de estilo literario y de lenguaje:** Para mejorar la calidad lingüística y estilística del texto.

9. **Generador de diagramas de flujo y gráficos:** Para esbozar diagramas, gráficos y figuras que reflejen los datos proporcionados.

10. **Sintetizador y divulgador de libros complicados:** Para resumir y comprender literatura compleja.

11. **Generador de datos sintéticos de prueba:** Para la creación de conjuntos de datos ficticios.

12. **Generador de problemas de ejemplo:** Para ilustrar conceptos y técnicas.

13. **Revisor:** Para recibir sugerencias sobre cómo mejorar y perfeccionar el trabajo con diferentes niveles de exigencia.

14. **Generador de encuestas:** Para diseñar cuestionarios preliminares.

15. **Traductor:** Para traducir textos de un lenguaje a otro.

Afirmo que toda la información y contenido presentados en este trabajo son producto de mi investigación y esfuerzo individual, excepto donde se ha indicado lo contrario y se han dado los créditos correspondientes (he incluido las referencias adecuadas en el TFG y he explicitado para que se ha usado ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares). Soy consciente de las implicaciones académicas y éticas de presentar un trabajo no original y acepto las consecuencias de cualquier violación a esta declaración.

Fecha: 30/04/2025

Firma: _____

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