

Shifts in Unification/Independence Preferences in the Wake of the Sunflower Student Movement

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Every other month, Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT) conducts a public opinion poll on national identity, unification/independence leanings and cross-strait ties. In the wake of the Sunflower student movement of March and April this year, the latest TBT opinion poll conducted in August produced results that indicate new trends with regard to national identity and unification/independence leanings.

First, 60.4 percent of the respondents describe themselves as “Taiwanese,” while 4.5 percent regard themselves as “Chinese,” and 32.6 percent as “both.” If forced to choose between the two options “Taiwanese” and “Chinese,” as many as 88.2 percent of respondents declare themselves to be “Taiwanese,” compared to 8.3 percent who view themselves as “Chinese.” These results are more or less the same than in previous surveys, which means that the national identity of the people in Taiwan is quite stable. Nevertheless, it deserves our attention that among the 20-29-year-olds 97.2 percent view themselves as “Taiwanese,” as well as 90.8 percent among the 30-39-year-olds. The share of those describing themselves as “Taiwanese” among adults under 40 is significantly higher than for the average Taiwanese citizen. This shows that among the younger generations identification with Taiwan is extremely strong.

Second, on the unification/independence front, the share of those who prefer unification with China continued to decline from 7.8 percent in June to 6.8 percent in August. The share of those who lean toward independence also fell from 28.3 percent in June to 25.4 percent in

August. However, among the 20-29-year-olds preference for independence has soared from 31.8 percent before the student movement to 40.8 percent in June and 44.1 percent in August. Not only is that share far higher than for other age groups, but also it continues to increase. These results indicate that the student movement bolstered the independence leanings of young adults. Moreover, in the June poll, 69.7 percent of respondents in this age group picked China as the country they most dislike. Taiwan’s political parties should keep this important factor in mind when formulating their policies toward China and, vice versa, China when deciding its respective policies toward Taiwan.

Third, when asked which option they would prefer “reunifying with China” or “becoming an independent country” if it were not possible to maintain the status quo, 66.5 percent of respondents opt for independence compared to 20.5 percent who chose unification. Both figures are largely the same as in previous surveys. However, in the wake of the Sunflower student movement, support for “unifying with China” has markedly dropped by 6.5 percentage points (18.9% → 12.4%) among young adults between 20 and 29, whereas support for “becoming an independent country” has increased even more by 12.4 percentage points (71.1% → 83.5%) in that age group. This means that the student movement has strengthened support for “becoming an independent country” among young adults. We should keep an eye on this trend to see whether it will spill over to other age groups in the future.

Furthermore, still more than half (52 percent)

of the respondents agree with the statement that Taiwan and China should establish equal and friendly relations as “brotherly nations.” However, this is clearly a smaller share than in June 2013, when this topic was included in the survey for the first time and 63.4 percent agreed with it. The share of those who disagree with the said statement increased from 28.4 percent to 38.6 percent during the same period. Clearly, resentment toward China has increased over the past year or so. The Chinese government should give some deep thought to this point. How come that the Taiwan people become more and more estranged from China despite Beijing’s intensified overtures toward the island? The ruling Kuomintang should also examine what is wrong with its “mainland policy” after all.

Past TBT polls show that support for independence has always far outstripped support for unification. Faced with the scenario that the status quo cannot be maintained, support for Taiwan becoming an independent country soars to 66.5 percent. Even among pan-blue voters, who support the KMT, only a minority of 13.4 percent want to unify with China. Nevertheless, due to the confrontation between the blue and green camps in Taiwanese politics, citizens who oppose unification still vote for “pro-unification” political parties. This important factor has helped the KMT to maintain its grip on power. The question is now whether the Sunflower student movement has been able to change “blue-green confrontation” into a unification-independence duel, or a standoff between different classes of society, and whether it will transform Taiwan’s political landscape.

On the other hand, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) blamed its defeat in the 2012 presidential elections entirely on its “policy toward China.” Although the DPP did not change its stance in its Huashan Meeting Minutes [on

the 2014 China Policy Review] and the Central Executive Committee also shelved the proposal to freeze the pro-independence party platform, the DPP has definitely engineered a “China policy transformation” over the past two years based on the precondition of cultivating goodwill and exchanges with China. Yet the anti-China, anti-unification sentiment that arose in the wake of the student movement runs counter to the accommodating stance on China that the DPP tried to propose previously. Could this deal a blow to the DPP? How will the DPP react?

In short, the Sunflower student movement that the service trade agreement triggered constitutes an anti-Ma Ying-jeou and anti-China trend. Very naturally, this has resulted in “anti-unification” sentiment. Young people care even more about politics and Taiwan’s future. They have now become confident and outspoken. We should pay attention whether these developments will influence Taiwan’s future political realignment. 

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