

**Strawberry Jam:
National Identity, Cross-Strait Relations and Taiwan's Youth**

**Shelley Rigger¹
Davidson College**

Abstract

Taiwanese in their teens and twenties have been dubbed the “Strawberry Tribe.” They are reputed to be well-groomed and well-educated, but less resilient and hard-working than previous generations of Taiwanese. They are often criticized for their disengagement from politics. Their low rate of participation in partisan politics is interpreted as evidence that the youth take Taiwan’s hard-won democracy for granted, and their willingness to work and study in mainland China makes some older Taiwanese question their loyalty to Taiwan. This paper uses evidence collected in focus groups and surveys to evaluate these criticisms. It concludes that the Strawberries are not so much disinterested in politics as they are alienated from Taiwan’s current political scene. An important source of their alienation is a lack of coherence between the ideologies and programs of Taiwan’s political parties and the interests and preferences of young people. In particular, Taiwanese youth identify strongly with Taiwan, but they are not hostile to mainland China.

Introduction

Ask how young Taiwanese feel about politics, and the answer is likely to include the word “apathetic” (冷漠). Young people themselves are just as willing as older folks to make this characterization, and there is plenty of evidence to support the stereotype. A 2004 survey of Taiwanese between 19 and 30 years of age found that 89 percent of the respondents felt they had little or no “power or opportunity to change or improve the current political, economic and social situations in Taiwan.” More than half cited economic and job-related matters as the issue of greatest concern to them personally; only seven percent mentioned politics, a smaller percentage than mentioned health (14%), family (12%) or schoolwork (10%). Asked to name the aspect of Taiwan’s political, economic and social conditions was most in need of improvement, the most popular answer was “political disorder” (29%) Fewer than ten percent of the young respondents chose cross-Strait relations or Taiwan’s future, responses that would imply strong political engagement, as the area most in need of improvement.²

Further evidence of young people’s apathy toward politics can be found in their disengagement from political parties. According to the 2005 Taiwan National Security Survey, a Taiwanese in his or her twenties was more likely to reject all political parties than to support any party.³ The percentage of respondents giving the answer “I do not support any party” is inversely related to age, but only the youngest voters choose this option more often than any other. Moreover, what partisanship there is among Taiwanese youth is hard to explain. According to a 1999 study by Wu Nai-teh, none of the standard predictors of party identification in Taiwan – democratic values, preference on the independence-unification issue or ethnic consciousness – was a statistically significant

predictor of party identification among Taiwanese born after 1965. The only variable that did achieve significance was the respondent's father's party identification. Wu concluded, "parental transmission is the sole significant factor explaining the formation of party ID among young voters."⁴

This disengagement from politics among Taiwan's youth is difficult to explain, especially when we consider that today's young generation is the first in history to enjoy unfettered political participation. How is it possible that today's young people, who have never known the terror of political repression or the pressure of a single-party system, are less interested and engaged in politics than Taiwanese who grew up believing, with good justification, that politics is a risky business?

Certainly, the poor performance of Taiwan's political leaders in recent years has undermined many islanders' confidence in political parties. However, the attitudes of youth require an additional explanation, since young people are even more alienated than other age groups. One explanation holds that growing up in a democratic Taiwan allows young people take politics for granted. As political scientist Hsu Yung-ming has said, "As far as the new generation is concerned, politics seems to have become something fun. This is different from the idealistic, aspirational, emotional political participation of the past. Because this new generation is not under any pressure, politics can become a kind of consumption, a kind of entertainment with politicians as the raw material."⁵

Other observers – especially political activists – look to changing values to explain declining participation. As former DPP Youth Affairs director Jou Yi-cheng put it, "When it comes to politics, the new generation has adopted 'relativism.' They have attitudes, but not positions. In the past, students participated in politics based on fairness,

justice or democratic governance, but these sorts of demands were gradually realized, so the new generation's participation in politics is determined more by individual preferences. It's simply a matter of likes and dislikes; it's hard to see any particular reasons. And they don't necessarily care about parties; if the candidate is good, that's enough ... This generation of young people is also quite pragmatic. In the past, politics was a matter of virtue, but now it is a matter of interests. For example, regarding the choice of Taiwan's future, the new generation seems not to consider mission or ideals, but only practical interests".⁶

Each of these explanations undoubtedly has merit, but I want to argue for a third explanation: Taiwan's current political configuration does not accommodate the preferences of young people; there is a lack of coherence between the needs and desires of youth and the programs and ideologies of Taiwan's political parties.

Since the beginning of the democratization process, Taiwan's central political cleavage has regarded the fundamental nature of the island state, including its relationship with China. This cleavage is most often characterized in the political science literature as a split over "national identity." The most extreme expression of the split is the controversy over independence and unification, but the cleavage is manifested in lesser ways, too. To summarize the two sides very broadly, we can say Taiwan politics is divided between those who prioritize the development of Taiwan's self-hood (or subjectivity) and those who believe cultivating good relations with China is more important than pushing forward a comprehensive Taiwan-first agenda. Generally speaking, the Green parties (DPP and TSU) are on the Taiwan-first side of the cleavage; the Blue parties (KMT, NP and PFP) are on the cultivating-China side.

With national identity as its fundamental cleavage, Taiwan politics is permeated by norms that seem to require citizens to choose between “Taiwan” and “China.” The idea that a person could both treasure Taiwan and value his Chinese cultural heritage does not fit easily into this configuration, since the Taiwan subjectivity movement defines Taiwan largely in opposition to “China.” Nor is there a comfortable political fit for a person who views Taiwan as her homeland, but would like to build a career in mainland China, or for a person who wants Taiwan to remain politically independent, but believes that its economic future rests on ever-deepening engagement with the mainland.

These are precisely the dilemmas many young Taiwanese face. Their ambivalence about the mainland makes it hard for them to identify with any political camp. Rather than taking sides in the national identity debate, they stand aside. And in many cases, young people criticize political elites who do take sides, because they believe these politicians are ignoring serious problems in order to prolong a conflict that is increasingly irrelevant. In addition, young Taiwanese feel powerless to change the political situation, and they have little confidence in political leaders. As if this were not enough, young Taiwanese are stigmatized and stereotyped as a weak and useless “Strawberry Tribe,” a label that reinforces their alienation from the institutions created by previous generations. The result? The Strawberries are in a jam.

“The Strawberry Tribe”

Everyone likes to eat strawberries, but in Taiwan, at least, no one wants to be one. “Strawberry” has become an insult, especially for Taiwanese in their 20s, because in the eyes of many Taiwanese over forty, young people are, like the fruit, beautiful to look at, but easily damaged – and quick to rot. Every society has generation gaps and derisive

stereotypes (e.g., gen-Xers, slackers); Taiwan is hardly unique in this regard. But the Strawberry Tribe discourse deserves our attention, because it reflects – albeit in a distorted way – real generational differences. Young Taiwanese are not weak or rotten, but their attitudes differ from those of their parents and grandparents in meaningful ways. Disparaging the “Strawberries” allows older Taiwanese to evade the challenging questions youngsters are raising; by constructing the Strawberries’ doubts and fears as evidence of personal and moral weakness, older Taiwanese manage to sidestep important debates about Taiwan’s future.

Taiwan’s business press first used the term “Strawberry Tribe” (草莓族) in the 1990s to describe a wave of new entrants into the workforce whose approach to jobs and companies unsettled traditional employment patterns. In 1993, *Career* magazine’s Weng Ching-yu wrote that young workers, like strawberries, “grew up in a hothouse, cannot endure exposure to the weather, cannot be squeezed, and cannot be pinched.”⁷ To Weng, the “Strawberry Tribe” meant Taiwanese born after 1960, at the tail end of the post-war baby boom – a group also known by the more neutral label, “fifth graders.” As workers, the fifth graders were condemned as fickle, ambitious and disloyal. According to a 1995 article in *Economics Daily*, coping with the influx of Strawberries into the workforce would require new management techniques. No longer would it be enough to issue instructions or give orders; the new generation of workers expected managers to listen to them, too!⁸

Within a decade, the fifth graders were managing the generations behind them, the sixth and seventh graders. Not surprisingly, they found these younger workers lacking, and they turned the “Strawberry Tribe” epithet against the newcomers. In 2003, *Career*

magazine editor Zang Shengyuan observed, “I often see managers in my fifth grade age group using the Strawberry Tribe concept to rebuke sixth and seventh graders, forgetting that we are in fact the first generation of the Strawberry Tribe. Using this concept to find fault with the sixth and seventh graders, how can you fail to notice that you’ve been here before? Weren’t the fourth graders using this same language to scold you?”⁹

The fact that the Strawberry label could be transferred so neatly from one generation to the next might suggest that it has little content. In fact, many Taiwanese maintain that it is merely a mass media invention. But as mass media buzzwords go, this one has long legs. Google the phrase and you will find hundreds of blogs, web journals, bulletin board postings, poems and song lyrics written by Taiwanese youth struggling with their “strawberry-ness.” Mention the term to a group of young Taiwanese, and the frustration is palpable.

Wikipedia, the Internet-based “people’s encyclopaedia” defines the term this way: “The Strawberry Tribe” is a negative label Taiwan society gives to the generation born after 1981 ... Taiwan society typically uses the following stereotypes to describe the Strawberry Tribe: low resistance to pressure, low resilience in the face of obstacles, instability, high education but low capacity for action, superficiality, materialism, hedonism, excessive individualism.”¹⁰ As the Wikipedia definition suggests, “Strawberry Tribe” is now associated mainly with the seventh graders – people in their teens and early 20s – and the qualities attributed to them are no longer limited to their poor work ethic.

The logic behind the Strawberry Tribe discourse holds that Taiwanese born after 1970, and especially those born in the 1980s, have known only wealth and comfort. Their indulgent parents – seeking to spare them the privations of their own childhoods –

showered them with material things and shielded them from hard work. The result is a generation of youths who are not only immature and materialistic, but also take Taiwan's freedom and prosperity for granted. They are not interested in sacrificing for others, or for the nation as a whole.

Politically, the Tribe is accused of lacking idealism. According to KMT legislator Chiang Chi-wen (江綺雯), the mass media stereotype of the seventh graders is of a “selfish, money-grubbing, lazy, non-idealistic ‘Strawberry Tribe.’”¹¹ Some accuse the young of caring more about making money than defending Taiwan. For example, the Tribe is often characterized as uniquely reluctant to perform compulsory military service. A foreign commentator on military affairs captured the tone and content of this criticism when he wrote, “Taiwan's military is rife with lethargic and ineffectual troops just begging for their 20-month tour of duty to end so they can go back to their girlfriends and jobs. Many call Taiwan's youth, including its young soldiers, the “strawberry generation” because they are soft and spoiled by the good life.”¹²

Not everyone (not even everyone over forty) accepts the Strawberry Tribe discourse. Some commentators take a more critical view, pointing out that the behavior of young Taiwanese – regardless of their generation – is shaped by the realities of their time. According to *Career Magazine's* Zang, the job-hopping behavior of the first generation Strawberries (the fifth graders) was motivated by very different factors than that of the current Tribe. When the fifth graders entered the job market, the supply of jobs exceeded the demand; loyalty to company was replaced by opportunistic job-switching. But for the sixth and seventh graders, he says, both the quantity and quality of jobs have declined. Many are unable to find jobs in their chosen fields; working conditions are

deteriorating, wages are stagnant. It is not surprising, then, that young workers are less excited about their jobs, and less loyal to their employers, than previous generations.¹³ Nor is it surprising, given the weak job market in Taiwan, that young people entering the work force are open-minded about other opportunities outside the island – including mainland China.

A more comprehensive critique of the Strawberry Tribe discourse appeared in the on-line magazine *Nanfang Dianzi Bao* (*Southern E-News*) in 2003:

The main reason that the Strawberry Tribe's all-encompassing suspicion toward the workplace, military service, and schooling has been twisted into “immorality” by the mainstream ideology of the “Pre-Strawberry Tribe” is that the “Pre-Strawberry Tribe,” for the most part, are people who enjoy the benefits of the existing economy and power structure. Coming from a growth-only mindset, imprisoned in an escape-proof labor ideology, their understanding of what is “inappropriate” can only be expressed in ways that do not challenge the capitalists or the state. As for their understanding of “public,” they can only think of it in the context of the impoverished discourses of independence versus unification, and developmentalism. Therefore, they misconstrue young people's reasonable pursuit of workplace rights as “inability to endure suffering.” They see the dissatisfaction created by military conscription in the context of an incoherent discourse about national security as “draft dodging.” They see the unemployment and financial problems that result from state policies that cater to business as the work of good-for-nothing individuals. And

they see the problems created by structural inequalities in education as bad study habits. This individualization and moralization of structural problems is the true genesis of the “Strawberry Tribe discourse.”¹⁴

The negative, condemnatory tone of the Strawberry Tribe discourse is suspiciously familiar. Criticizing the young as weak and soft is one of humankind’s more unattractive habits. Nonetheless, there is a kernel of truth in this discourse, if only in the sense that a generation gap exists. It may not be that the Strawberries are inferior to previous generations, but it is true that they are different. While much of the Strawberry Tribe discourse focuses on the sixth and seventh graders’ economic attitudes and work habits, what is even more interesting to political scientists is their outlook on politics, including cross-Strait relations. Does the Tribe lack idealism? Are the Strawberries indifferent to politics? What issues *do* they care about? Do they identify with Taiwan? And how do they view mainland China? Understanding young Taiwanese deeply requires more than stereotyping and condemnation; it requires asking and listening.

Data and Methodology

One way of finding out what young people think about politics and cross-Strait relations is to conduct public opinion surveys. Published survey data provides a broad picture of trends in opinion among different age groups. In particular, it shows how the youngest age group – those under 30 – compare to older age groups in their views on key political questions. The argument in this paper is informed by this data.

Surveys are important and useful for identifying large-scale trends. However, it is often difficult to interpret the deep significance of their results. One methodology that allows us to explore the deeper meaning underlying the findings of large-scale public

opinion surveys is focus group research; this type of research is the basis of this paper. Between August and December of 2005 I conducted 16 focus groups, averaging between eight and ten participants. Participants included graduate and undergraduate students and working adults. The focus groups lasted from one hour to over two hours. The participants were between 18 and 30 years of age. To ensure regional balance, I held focus groups in Taipei City, Hsinchu City, Taichung City, Kaohsiung City, Kaohsiung County and Hualien County.

Each focus group responded to a set of questions regarding mainland China, generational politics, politics and identity. The purpose of the focus groups was to elaborate the insights provided by public opinion surveys, and to probe respondents for complex views that cannot easily be captured in a survey format. Surveys ask respondents to choose among answers; they rarely allow respondents to craft their own answers, nor do they tell us anything about the salience of the questions being asked. Nor can surveys follow up on answers to explore the logic and emotion underlying them. Engaging in extended conversation with respondents allows us to move beyond closed-ended questions to understand responses more deeply and interpret them in a more sophisticated way.

As we have seen, there is no consensus on exactly what age groups should be included in the Tribe, so any definition is arbitrary. Everyone who writes about the Strawberries includes the seventh graders, and some also include the sixth and even fifth graders. In this study, I define the Strawberries as Taiwanese under thirty (as of late 2005), which means that all seventh graders are included, as well as some sixth graders.¹⁵ I have excluded sixth graders over thirty because most have completed their education

and have been in the workforce for several years. The target of the Strawberry Tribe discourse has always been youth, especially those still in school or just beginning their careers.

Findings

Strawberries ♥ Taiwan

It is surprisingly difficult to get young Taiwanese to say they love Taiwan. This is not because they don't, but because the phrase "love Taiwan" has become so politicized that they are reluctant to use it. Rather than embracing the rhetoric, focus group participants tended to take offence at the very suggestion that their love for the island could be questioned. One participant described the dilemma in detail, relating the story of a friend who detests the phrase "Love Taiwan," because she thinks it has become a Green political slogan. Hearing this view, others in the group nodded their agreement, and one observed that each Taiwanese should be able to love Taiwan in his or her own way. For these youths, "loving Taiwan" is not the exclusive province of any political party, yet it often seems as if it is, leaving them at a loss for how to articulate their feelings for their homeland. An even stronger statement of this view appears in the documentary film "Sisyphus: Formosa," (薛西佛斯之福爾摩沙) in which a young musician excoriates politicians, saying "It's disgusting to say you love Taiwan and then put it into troubles."¹⁶

A second obstacle the Strawberries face in talking about their feelings for Taiwan is the idea that embracing Taiwan means rejecting "China." Asked about identity, the lion's share of participants said their identity contained both Chinese and Taiwanese elements – but an even larger number expressed reservations about the question itself. Many commented that the choice of "Taiwanese, Chinese or both" is too politicized, or

too poorly-defined, to be meaningful. One participant, a third-generation Mainlander,¹⁷ said this question is especially loaded for her, because it asks her to choose between loyalty to herself and her peers and loyalty to her parents and grandparents. Another observed, “It might depend on who’s asking me. If it’s a Taiwanese who’s asking, if I say I’m Chinese, I’ll be written off. So I don’t think there’s any way the answer can really reveal a person’s values.”

One focus group participant emphasized the complexity of the identity issue: “I wouldn’t deny that we are partly Chinese. Like in the blood lines, I’m genetically Chinese. I wouldn’t deny that, although I’m also partly of aboriginal heritage. It’s too much blended together. But I think it’s quite clear that people think they are Taiwanese. But for me, I think when they identify themselves as Taiwanese, they are referring to where they were brought up, this culture that they identify themselves to. There’s a difference between genetically Chinese and socially or politically Taiwanese.” A participant who described herself as an independence zealot (極獨) chimed in: “For me, it’s very clear-cut. Ethnically I am Chinese. Nationally I am Taiwanese.”

Many studies have found that national identity is the main cleavage in Taiwan politics, but for the Strawberry Tribe, national identity is a side issue, not a central concern. Focus group participants denied that ethnicity is a source of division among people in their generation; out of fifteen specific comments about ethnicity (i.e., the Taiwanese-Mainlander split), only two characterized ethnicity as important or meaningful. The rest either dismissed the issue or attacked the whole idea of dividing Taiwan into these groups. A participant who asserted that the DPP had created the categories “Taiwanese” (本省人) and “Mainlander” (外省人) to advance its political agenda – an

astonishing misstatement of historical fact – elicited nods of approval from her co-participants. As one of the youths interviewed in the documentary *Sisyphus: Formosa* put it, “Our generation doesn’t have an ethnic problem or a party problem. Our only problem is our life.”

Many focus group participants perceive a generational difference on the identity issue; not a single participant in any the focus groups challenged the idea that a generation gap exists. As one participant put it, “If you’re talking about ethnic consciousness (民族認同), the older generation are all really extreme; if they don’t want independence, they want unification. Young people figure we’re all one ethnicity (民族), but we wouldn’t strongly advocate that we are one country (國家). We don’t have any special feeling about that.”

The difficulty of interpreting answers to the question “are you Taiwanese, Chinese or both?” is underscored by another type of data collected for this study. In the fall of 2005, I collected 891 questionnaires from university students around Taiwan. The questionnaires do not represent a scientific sample; they contain only university students and southerners are heavily overrepresented. Nonetheless, they do provide some intriguing findings. The questionnaires included this question:

When you choose “Taiwanese, Chinese or both,”¹⁸ which of the following conditions are you considering: where you were born and grew up; your historical and cultural background; citizenship; political preference; other. Please rank the answers in order of importance.

The first-choice responses to this question were almost evenly divided between the first two options: 42 percent said they were primarily thinking about “where I was

born and grew up” when choosing their response, while 38 percent said their first consideration was “historical and cultural background” (11 percent said “citizenship” and 4 percent said “political preference”). This suggests, first, that different respondents interpret the identity question differently. There is no consensus view among these respondents about what the choice of an identity label signifies. Further, the finding suggests that a plurality of young people choose “Taiwanese” identity for a relatively superficial reason: it is “where they are from.”

Table 1 shows another interesting finding from this data: there appears to be a relationship between the choice of identity and the way a respondent interpreted the question. A large percentage of the respondents who chose “Taiwanese” as their identity said they based that decision on where they were born and grew up, while those who choose “Chinese” or “both” tended to base their choice on their historical and cultural background.

[Table 1 here]

While many young Taiwanese embrace a mixed Taiwanese and Chinese identity, the evidence from my study suggests that nearly all view Taiwan as their homeland. It was common in the focus groups for participants to explicitly identify Taiwan as their homeland, and there was a near consensus among the participants that going to the mainland constitutes “going abroad” (出國).¹⁹ One of the few ideas that enjoyed even stronger support was the opinion that mainland Chinese are *different*.

Mainland China: “an opportunity full of threats”

If Strawberries have a hard time explaining their feelings about Taiwan, they are at least as ambivalent about mainland China. In one focus group when I asked “What do

you think of the mainland?” responses tumbled out: “contradictory; fast-changing; very old; both love and hate it; close relations with us, but something of an enemy.” A participant in another group summed up many participants’ feelings perfectly. Asked whether China represents an opportunity or a threat to Taiwan he replied, “It’s an opportunity full of threats, and it’s a threat full of opportunities.”

Overall, the total number of negative and positive comments about China and Chinese people were roughly even, but the content of those comments is revealing: the positive comments tended to focus on practical issues, especially economics, while the negative comments emphasized values, lifestyles and political relations. If young Taiwanese are interested in the mainland, it is usually because they feel they have something to gain by becoming engaged. As one put it, “I don’t think most youth today have a clear political viewpoint. At the political level, they may not have the same antagonistic feelings as in the past – they just hope to pursue a peaceful future. Speaking about economics, in the past few years the PRC’s development has been good, and fast. As far as Taiwan’s young people are concerned, the mainland is full of opportunities, it’s a huge market.” In the focus groups, there were almost twice as many comments alluding to China as an opportunity as there were references to it as a threat, but respondents clearly recognized both aspects; the characterization of the mainland as a “necessity” (which has both positive and negative implications) was almost as common as its characterization as a threat.

On the positive side, participants said they admire the PRC’s fast economic growth and its hard-working, single-minded people; many said they believe mainland youth to be vastly more focused and competent than Taiwan’s Strawberries. Many

participants expressed deep anxiety about whether Taiwan (and Taiwanese) will be able to compete successfully with Chinese workers on the global market; such comments outnumbered expressions of confidence in Taiwan's competitiveness two to one.²⁰

While many participants said they admired China's economic accomplishments, they tended to have mixed feelings about going to the mainland to "develop" (發展). Just over half said they were willing or even eager to work or study in the mainland, but the rest were quite reluctant.²¹ This result is typical. A 2004 survey of 18 to 35 year olds by *Winner Magazine* found that ten percent were willing to go to the mainland to work, while another 41 percent said they could accept, and would not rule out, employment on the mainland.²² In other words, most young Taiwanese are not itching to go to the PRC to live and work, but a slight majority say they would go if the right opportunity came along.

The most common negative descriptions of China expressed in the focus groups were "different," "backward" and "hostile." Describing interactions between Taiwanese and PRC students in a British university, one participant said it was easier to become casual friends with Chinese than British students, but "when you take the relationship to a deeper level, you find that we are different." One young professional observed, "My grandparents are Mainlanders, but based on my experience in business, I think the interactions between Taiwanese and mainland people are like our interactions with foreigners and Hong Kong people. Just because we speak the same language doesn't mean we have a close feeling (親切感)." For some young Taiwanese, the PRC is not only different, it is actively hostile:

I have a friend who went to the mainland, and they had a local tour guide.

The tour guide said that when mainlanders go to a movie, if it's a good

movie, and a lot of people are in line, if someone cuts in line, the people in the back will yell, ‘What are you doing? It’s not like we’re on our way to attack Taiwan!’ He said this is just a kind of common slang – it seems very appropriate to them. But we can understand from this just how narrow their education about the Taiwan problem really is.

Another participant told the story of a friend who moved to China, expecting to stay indefinitely, but returned after three days when she discovered that every website with a .tw address was blocked. Despite her friend’s experience, however, the focus group participant is not convinced China is a bad place. She said, “A lot of students talk about these problems all the time, but I think everyone’s thinking is being misled by the media. Even though the media report a lot, I think some things are not very accurate. The last time I visited the mainland I thought it was pretty special.”

Despite their uneasy and ambivalent feelings, focus group participants were reluctant to cast the PRC as an enemy. As one put it, “Although when we were young, the feeling of enmity (敵我意識) was emphasized, the feeling of enmity between us and the other side is no longer strong, like it was for the generations before us. We very rarely feel that animosity now, so we don’t much care (我們無所謂).” Said another:

I think it’s like this. My grandfather really hates mainland China, but he has very positive feelings toward the US – he feels it was the US that helped during the early period, when things were very difficult, giving him flour and all that. So he has always strongly believed that if the mainland attacks Taiwan someday, the US will help us. In contrast, my parents are more uncertain. Whoever treats them well is good, whoever treats them

poorly is bad. They all have gone through some fixed experiences. But people in our generation are too far away from the realities of war, so we can't really relate to their feelings.

“Politics Makes You Sick”

Lest one conclude that ambivalence is a defining quality of the Strawberry Tribe, it is important to note that there is at least one area of life toward which they have *very* firm feelings, and that is the state of Taiwan's body politic. On this topic, their criticisms are articulate and withering, and summed up by the participant who said, “The current politics is ridiculous. It makes you sick.” They think young people who *do* participate in politics are a little strange. Several used the word “brainwashed” to describe people who are politically active, and one described her younger sister, a devoted DPP follower, this way: “Her ass makes up her mind (屁股決定腦袋).”

For many focus group participants, frustration with politics overwhelmed other emotions. They found it difficult to express positive views of Taiwan because they are so distressed by its political chaos. A number of participants made comments similar to this one: “Taiwan is a great country, but of course, our politics is a mess.” They were stunningly cynical about politics. Not a single participant said he or she had confidence in the island's political leaders. Nearly all said they were frustrated by what they see as the excessive emphasis on politics – including issues related to cross-Straits relations – which they believe are crowding out more important issues like education and economics.²³ The mass media is also a target of much scorn. Nonetheless, the focus group participants were positive about democracy. When one student said that Taiwan's most valuable quality is its economy, another interrupted:

If you're talking about democracy versus economics, I think the most practical level is economics; it influences whether you're going to eat well at your next meal, whether your children's tuition will be paid, so the influence of economics is the most direct. But I believe democracy has already taken root among us. We've already voted so many times; we think we'll always have the right to vote. Also, you don't have to go vote every day to prove that you have democracy; democracy is already in your heart. Democracy and economics are like air and water, respectively. Of course you'll choose water, because you're too used to having air – you don't even notice its existence.

The strong dissatisfaction with politics that the focus group participants exhibited is consistent with the survey results reported above, but in the focus groups it was possible to probe participants for explanations of why they are frustrated and dissatisfied. Two reasons emerged especially strongly. First, focus group participants believed that politicians are ignoring important problems while they argue over issues that are fundamentally irrelevant or too intractable to be worth discussing. Also, they repeatedly asserted that the social and political conflicts that divide Taiwan's society were manufactured by politicians for political gain.

According to focus group participants, the debates that animate Taiwan's vicious partisan conflict have little relevance to the real problems facing their society today. As one participant put it, "The so-called independence-unification problem – actually, you can't touch it...Everyone says this is a problem that can't be solved right now, so why do you want to constantly talk about this problem that can't be solved now? I think this is a

huge problem, but ordinary people like me have no interest in talking about this kind of problem.” Even the few participants who held strong views on the independence-unification issue tended to emphasize non-ideological reasons for their preference. For example, the self-described independence zealot quoted above justified her support for independence in the same pragmatic terms that others used to justify their disinterest in the topic. She said the reason independence is needed is so that Taiwan can resolve its ambiguous status and get to work on solving its *real* problems:

We just need to move beyond the independence and reunification issue and get down with reality, real life; truly focus on important bills, not just get everything tangled up with independence and unification...I’m an independence zealot, but independence zealotry is just a means, a process, to concentrate on the real issues. It’s just a means, not the result.

Asked what issues *are* important to them, members of the Strawberry Tribe overwhelmingly cited economics, employment and education, and they attributed current problems in these areas to the failure of political elites to address the issues. In many cases, the discussion jumped seamlessly from Taiwan’s economic problems to criticisms of the current government’s handling of cross-Strait relations. This exchange, which took place in a focus group made up of young professionals, was typical:

“I’m worried Taiwan will turn into the Philippines. Having talented people isn’t enough.”

“Yeah – a lot of the people who come from the Philippines to work as maids here are college graduates. But because their country is a mess, they can’t work there.”

“But we already have that situation here.”

“I don’t think China is the central problem. It’s our own government that’s the real problem, because it has a closed attitude. Like refusing to open the three links – I know there are national security implications, but a closed market? China is a huge market for the whole world, and you’re right next to it. If you have a closed market, what good does that do? ... Why did Taiwan have an economic miracle? Because it was globalized; it was a factory for the world. At that time the big markets were Europe and America. But now the economic center has shifted to China. I don’t think we should be so scared. The changes are not because of China, it’s happening because of globalization.”

A Taichung-based graduate student made a similar point. Asked whether Taiwan’s political leaders are capable of solving its economic problems he replied with an anecdote:

A while ago, President A-bian came to the Taichung Science Park. Taiwan has a very big flat panel manufacturer, AU Optronics. AU Optronics, together with ChiMei Optoelectronics and Korea’s Sanxing provide all of the mainland’s flat panels, so it’s a very important driver. A-bian said, in the science park, to the Taiwanese people, ‘Why do we want to go to the mainland? Actually, we have lots of products ourselves to be proud of. We just need to be willing, to work hard, and we can all be like AU Optronics.’ But what A-bian didn’t pay attention to is that AU Optronics makes panels, adding value in Taiwan, but afterwards

they're sent abroad. Lots of AU Optronics's workers are from the mainland, and Taiwan's important flat panel market is in mainland China, so the competitiveness that Taiwan is so proud of is built on the foundation of this subcontracting relationship with the mainland and on connections to the mainland market. So whether or not Taiwan is competitive actually isn't a question of will, it's a question of whether you're going to move with the trend, or fight against the trend.

Conclusion

In April of 2004, *The Journalist* magazine published essays by three young writers on the theme "imagining China." The first essayist, Lee Tuo-tzu, used an extended metaphor to describe his ambivalent feelings toward Taiwan and China. Lee wrote that while the refrigerator in his parents' house is large and well-stocked, he feels a special affection for the tiny cooler in his apartment, despite its small size and its tendency to spill water on the floor. He wrote:

If Taiwan is the little cooler, China is the big refrigerator. The items in the big refrigerator are abundant, but I'm not so willing to take things out of it, because they're no longer my things. What's more, I don't need a big refrigerator. And I'm certainly not going to tell people that the little cooler in my room is actually a big refrigerator, or that the little cooler isn't anything much, because the refrigerator in my old house was so big, and had so much stuff in it. I know my parents think of their home as *our* home, but after I'd been living independently for several years, that house inevitably became, over time, my parents' house.²⁴

Lee's heartfelt reflections capture the complex emotions many young Taiwanese bring to the political choices facing them. Lee acknowledges that Taiwan and China share an important historical relationship, but he relishes the autonomy Taiwan has earned by existing independently for many years, and he does not long to be part of something larger or more "glorious." Little Taiwan, with all its flaws, is good enough for him. Nonetheless, he recognizes his links to China, and he would like to be free to visit his "parents' house."

Of course, even if the Strawberry generation wanted to divorce itself from China completely, it could not. Ye Guohao, another of the young writers in *The Journalist* captured a central truth that Taiwan's youth can neither evade nor disregard: "China is a reality; it is right next to us. When it comes to Taiwan's future development – whether it's politics, economics, society and culture, even international relations – the so-called "China factor" is something we cannot ignore."²⁵ Many members of the Strawberry Tribe share the values of these young writers. They love their homeland of Taiwan, and they accept the reality of a rising China. But fitting these values into the framework of a political system divided along a "national identity" cleavage is nearly impossible. The result is a generation deeply alienated from politics.

Table 1: Identity Choice and Identity Definition

	Taiwanese	Chinese	Both	Total
born/grew up	59	28	26	42
History/culture	21	45	58	39
citizenship	13	13	8	11
political pref.	4	5	3	4

Chi-square $p < .001$

Source: Questionnaires completed by 891 Taiwanese university students.

¹ Research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation. Additional support was provided by the Institute for International Relations at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan.

² Eric Lin, "Sketches of Dreams amid Generational Change," *Sinorama* 29:1 (2004): pp. 13-15.

³ Data from the Cross-Strait Relations and Taiwan's National Security Survey, sponsored by the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University, and carried out by the Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University, on May 27-31, 2005. The total sample size was 1,221.

⁴ Wu Nai-teh, "Jiating shehuihua he yishixingtai: Taiwan xuanmin zhengdang rentong de shidai chayi" ("Family socialization and ideology: Generational differences in Taiwan voters' party identification"), *Taiwan shehui yanjiu (Taiwan Social Research)*, Volume 3 (1999), p. 53.

⁵ Quoted in Tseng Yan-ch'ing, "E-shidai ba Abian songshang zongtong baozuo" ("Generation E sends A-Bian to the presidential throne"), *Caixun (Wealth Magazine)*, 6, (2000), p. 219.

⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

⁷ Quoted in Yu Youmei, "Caomeizu zhi zhuzhong waibiao, neihan ze lingren dashang wenhao" ("'Strawberry Tribe' refers only to appearances; its content leaves one with a question mark"), *Jingji Ribao (Economic Daily)*, August 9, 1995.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zang Shengyuan, "Liu, qi nianjisheng, ni weihe bu shengqi? Zhichang qishi + gongzuo tiaojian ehua zui kumen yu cuozhe de shidai" ("Sixth and seventh graders, why aren't you angry? The generation of of maximum workplace discrimination, deteriorating working conditions, depression and setbacks"), *Jiuye qingbao (Career)*, 330 (2003). Accessed online at:

http://media.career.com.tw/Careerbook/magshort.asp?CA_NO=330p056

¹⁰ <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%8D%89%E8%8E%93%E6%97%8F>

¹¹ Quoted in Lai Huiwen, "Qinianjisheng nuhou, buyao jiaowo 'Caomeizu'!" (Seventh graders roar: Don't call us 'Strawberry Tribe!'), *Huaxia Daobao (China Report, a publication of the Chinese Culture University)*, (2004). Accessed at: <http://epaper.pccu.edu.tw/index.asp?NewsNo=4177>.

¹² Wendell Minnick, "The Year to Fear for Taiwan: 2006," *Asia Times Online*, (April 10 2004). Accessed at: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FD10Ad02.html>.

¹³ Zang, "Liu, qi nianji sheng ..."

¹⁴ "Caomeizu lun" ("On the 'Strawberry Tribe'"), *Nanfang dianzibao (Southern E-News)*, August 18, 2003. Available at: <http://iwebs.edirect168.com/main/html/south/782.shtml>.

¹⁵ As for the minimum age, the surveys include respondents as young as 19 or 20; my focus groups included a handful of students as young as 18.

¹⁶ *Sisyphus: Formosa*, (2004), dir. Kuo Shu-feng.

¹⁷ A third-generation mainlander is a Taiwan-born person whose parents were also born in Taiwan, but whose grandparents emigrated to Taiwan from the mainland after World War II.

¹⁸ 49% of the respondents identified themselves as "Taiwanese," 44% as "Both" and 7% as "Chinese."

¹⁹ There were more than seven times as many “abroad” responses as “not abroad” in the focus groups.

²⁰ It is interesting that the focus group participants who had been exposed to Chinese workers were *more* confident about Taiwan’s competitiveness than those who had never worked with Chinese, while those who had interacted with PRC students tended to be *less* confident.

²¹ The university students who submitted questionnaires also were evenly divided between those who were willing to go, or wanted to go, and those who were not willing to go to the mainland.

²² Li Shuliang, “Taiwan qingnian shidai xinxiang Zhongguo?” (“What does Taiwan’s young generation think of China?”), *Shengjia (Winner)*. (November 1, 2004), pp. 76-80.

²³ There were forty times as many comments to the effect that politics is not important as there were comments that politics *is* important, and more than three times as many comments to the effect that cross-strait relations is unimportant as comments that it *is* important.

²⁴ Lee Tuo-tzu, “Wode xiao xianlu yu tamen de da bingxiang,” (“My littler cooler and their big fridge”), *Xin Xinwen (The Journalist)*, 891 (2004), p. 84.

²⁵ Ye Guohao, “Xunzhao qita xiangxiang Zhongguo de fangfa,” (“In search of a new way to imagine China”), *Xin Xinwen (The Journalist)*, 891 (2004), p. 85.