

Identifying Resilient Communities: A Democratic Inquiry into Taiwan's Regional Revitalization Practices and Contestations

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Abstract

This research revisits and examines the politics of regional revitalization (RR) processes (地方創生) within the context of democratic progression in Taiwan. It identifies the phenomena of state capture in RR policy and explores contestations over the meanings of “community” and “place” as articulated by local residents in Taiwanese democratic society. On the one hand, bureaucratic officials emphasize the national security challenges facing Taiwanese society — namely, an aging population and the decline of younger generations. The state’s policy orientation marks a clear departure from earlier community-building efforts, being neoliberal in essence and technocratic in nature. On the other hand, local residents’ agendas for RR are more fluid — a continuation of previous community-building principles — and vary in focus, ranging from economic and local industrial development, to the resilience needed to sustain local cultures and histories. This research raises an inquiry: how resilient are local community groups in negotiating with the bureaucratic state regime for leverage in advancing their own agendas, if any?

Keywords

regional revitalization, resilience community, community-building

Introduction

This research revisits and identifies the politics of regional revitalization (RR) processes (地方創生) within the context of democratic progression in Taiwan. Malaysia, as a nation-state, has faced many political crises since its independence, with the most momentous occurring in 2020, during the pandemic. Diseases or pandemics have been exploited as an excuse by political rivals to seize power from the people and strip away the rights of their elected government (Azmil and Por, 2021). There was widespread despair and frustration over whether Malaysia could continue on its democratic path, despite the recurring hope for a regime change from authoritarian rule to democratic governance.

Within this political context, Malaysia was riding the wave of the democratic recession that has been taking place since 2015 in Western societies (Plattner, 2015, 2020; Chu, Lagos, Mattes, and Huang, 2020; Mounk and Fao, 2017; Howe, 2017; Przeworski, 2020; Rosanvallon, 2012; Svoboda, 2019; Taylor, 2019). Initially, the *Journal of Democracy*, in its twenty-fifth anniversary issue titled “Is Democracy in Decline?” (Plattner, 2015), argued that democracy was not in decline. However, by its thirtieth anniversary in 2020, the journal’s position had changed, acknowledging that democracy is facing a crisis. “Liberal democracy....is under threat today than at any time since the Second World War.” (Plattner, 2020: 5) Beyond academia, in the realm of realpolitik, we have observed the rise of figures such as Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte, who were democratically and constitutionally elected by their respective nation-states. In light of these political developments, both globally and locally, I reinvigorated my research to gain insights into the sustainability of democracy and its capacity to empower the people.

As such, I applied for a fellowship from the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, hoping it would allow me to explore a democratic society with experience in democratic consolidation, to compare and contrast with Malaysia. I conducted a four-month research project in Taiwan from September to December 2024. The research identifies the bureaucratic state’s narratives in RR policy and the contestations surrounding “community” and “place” as articulated by local residents in Taiwan’s democratic society. In other words, this research examines how government units, as part of the bureaucracy, construct narratives and discourses in policy within their

institutional orientation and preferences. It also explores how resilient local community groups are in contesting the bureaucratic state regime to gain leverage in advancing their desired agendas. My intention is clear: How consolidated is Taiwan's democracy for the people of Taiwan? This research note will begin with a brief discussion of my field research— how I started, struggled, and made sense of my research inquiries in the Taiwanese context. It will then present my preliminary observations and conclusions from this four-month fieldwork.

Approaches

To most Chinese speaking Malaysians, Taiwan is not an unfamiliar place. However, this familiarity does not necessarily extend to a deep understanding of its political changes, economic development, modernization, or its historical trajectory within East Asian regional politics. Most Chinese speaking Malaysians are well-versed in Hokkien (福建話), which is quite similar to Taiwanese (閩南語). Many are also familiar with the Overseas Youth Vocational Training Program (海青班) under the auspices of the Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC, 中華民國僑務委員會),¹ the Mazu (媽祖) religious practices, the Golden Bell Awards, and Taiwan's popular Mandarin pop culture, among others. Yet, there are notable differences between Taiwan and Malaysia. One is the seemingly mono-cultural and mono-lingual society of Taiwan, where most of the population speaks Mandarin and Taiwanese, in contrast to Malaysia's multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. Another is the democratic structure of Taiwan's polity. Despite ongoing challenges, Taiwan scored 94 out of 100 in the 2024 Freedom in the World report (Freedom House, 2024). My research has always centered on understanding local politics. This has been my research interest since joining the academe— community empowerment, further democratization, the defense of human rights, and social protest against authoritarian rule. In Taiwan, I explored the development of community building, its historical context, and the 2019 Regional Revitalization Plan, officially known as the "National Strategic Plan for Regional Revitalization" (地方創生國家戰略計畫). The topic connects closely to my research in 2023 and 2024, during which I engaged with local communities in Penang, particularly the fishing

1 Please see the Overseas Community Affairs Council (中華民國僑務委員會) official Website. in <https://www.ocac.gov.tw/OCAC/Pages/VDetail.aspx?nodeid=6492&pid=59299434>. Latest updated 2 January 2025.

communities struggling against the controversial land reclamation and the Penang South Reclamation Project (Soon, 2024b). Although Taiwan and Malaysia differ in political structures and cultures, both societies share common experiences of ordinary people facing the encroachments of neoliberalism, bureaucratic power over production relations, environmental challenges, and —most crucially— the struggle for autonomy.

Upon arrival in Taiwan and after a few interviews and literature reviews, I decided to focus on case studies of Taiwan for several practical reasons. One reason is that I considered myself to have limited knowledge of the complexity of Taiwanese identity politics, democratization progression, and political factions at the local level. It was more practical to utilize the four-month period to gather as much knowledge, observations, and information as I could. Another reason is that I had the luxury of time, space, locale, and network in Taiwan to conduct field research without being disturbed by work commitments, allowing me to engage in face-to-face, first-hand conversations with relevant stakeholders.

I must admit that this luxury did not allow me to conduct a conventional ethnography in this research, unlike my PhD dissertation in rural Philippines. Instead, I resorted to other research methods, such as participant observation and interviews, along with some informal conversations. Although these methods form a large part of ethnography, in this fieldwork, I did not live with the community on a daily basis. The conventional ethnographic approach requires the researcher to stay at least one year at the field site to observe recurring events. Ethnographers are expected to “experience and understand in a holistic manner the mundane-ness of everyday life in the field site” (Soon, 2024a: 79).

There are two methods I used in my fieldwork data collection. One is through university contacts, particularly colleagues from Chung Cheng University, who connected me with academics knowledgeable about RR and community building development. The second is the snowball method, where I expanded my network from social media and journals, or seminars and events. I shall focus my discussion on the latter.

There are two incidents that led me to my case studies (described below) during the four-month period in Chiayi, Taiwan. I was based in Chiayi, where Chung Cheng University is located. These two incidents guided my further research on RR and formed the basis of my two case studies for this project.

The first encounter, which later developed into a research site, stemmed from my experience searching for accommodation. I obtained the contact information of a house owner and arranged a meeting to view the property. During our first meeting, out of curiosity, Chiang — a former lecturer at a local college who eventually became a key interlocutor connecting me to Fang and field sites visits in Chiayi — asked about my purpose in Taiwan. I explained my research topic on RR to him. Rather than proceeding with the rental, we scheduled a second meeting for an informal interview about his involvement in an RR project. During that second meeting, held in Chung Cheng University, Chiang introduced me to Fang, a former colleague from Datong Technical College, where they had both participated in a community revitalization project in Tai Xing village. The college eventually closed due to a lack of students.

The second encounter occurred when I attended a meeting of the “Open the Second Link” (OSL, 打開二通) project. This OSL meeting was introduced to me by Fang. Under the city government’s “Old City Regeneration” initiative — one of the ten flagship projects — the Chiayi Cultural Affairs Bureau launched the OSL to help the public understand the city’s 320-year evolution. The bureau used Zhongzheng Road (中正路) and its surrounding streets as an extended exhibition space for the “City Museum”. During the Japanese occupation, the “Second Link” was a street populated by Taiwanese businesses, clinics, and residences, while the “First Link” was primarily occupied by Japanese residents. At the first OSL meeting I attended, I met a local sculptor who had “migrated” to Chiayi in search of a place to showcase her artwork. We began discussing RR, and she introduced me to her former classmates from the National Taiwan University of Arts, one of whom was involved in a festival project aimed at revitalizing the arts scene in Yunlin, an adjacent county next to Chiayi. Subsequently, I managed to interview two of the organizers of the festival, called the Fuli Festival (伏流祭).²

My research schedule began on 10 September and ended on 10 December 2024. This period was used to interview stakeholders, conduct fieldwork observations, and participate in local community events. These activities included attending revitalization programs in Chiayi City, the annual tea poetry event organized by a local community group, visiting tourist sites, and

2 Aside from that, I attended several other events, including visits to a village head and a tea plantation owner, as well as seminars on RR. In this research note, I will focus on two programs.

attending lectures, seminars, and book launches. The scope of my research mainly covered Chiayi City and County, as well as Yunlin County. Among the interviewees were the village head of Taiping Village, the organizer of the annual tea poetry event, co-organizers of the “Yulin 100 ways of Living” project, a tea plantation owner in Taixing Village, lecturers from Chung Cheng University, a manager of the National Development Council’s Regional Revitalization projects, members of local non-governmental organizations, and others.³ Most of my interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ permission. In addition to participant observation and interviews, I also relied on secondary resources such as books, journal articles, official government reports. Another important resource of information came from public seminars, forums, and classes conducted by various organizations. Some of these public seminars were available online, while others required physical attendance. A final key resource was the publicly accessible content published by these organizations on their websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels. These platforms provided regularly updated and comprehensive information.

My reason for discussing the research method at length is that, as a neophyte researcher exploring Taiwan’s political economy and socio-economic structures, the snowballing sampling method proved useful for expanding research sites and networks for data collection. It even allows a researcher to participate in events and experience everyday activities first hand — in my case, community engagement and building with Fang. In addition, the process exposed me to a wide range of potential research topics in Taiwan, particularly in comparison with Malaysia. I was able to further explore a spectrum of issues, including civic education and engagement, place-making and participatory politics, the resilience of local factions, and the construction of memory as political movement. However, after the four months of observation, interviews, constant conversations, and extensive readings on Taiwan’s democratic history, I decided to focus on the theme of “resilient community” in the making, using RR programs as case studies to identify Taiwanese democracy.

The Making of Regional Revitalization and Bureaucratic Narratives

To explore this topic, I analyse the state’s governmentality — borrowing

3 Note that some names of interviewees and certain locations are pseudonyms.

from Michel Foucault's work (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991) — in Taiwan's RR programs. Governmentality refers to a set of assemblages, constructed by modern state institutions such as the bureaucracy, to govern the population (including civil society, family households, and groups incorporated under state administration). These assemblages take the form of discursive discourses that direct, narrate, control and regulate the speech, language, symbolic representation, and the ways of knowing and categorizing the world. This study focuses on how the bureaucracy constructs the RR initiatives and manages the challenges posed by communities to the governmental ethos behind RR. My preliminary observation is that Taiwanese concept of RR contains neoliberal ideas, particularly in its emphasis on the marketability of local products as “the ideal model for sustainable community development”. It encourages the use of local resources to stimulate industrial growth and often serves as a form of political tokenism for legitimacy. Although the RR policy is framed as a response to national security concerns, such as an aging society and the decline of the younger population, its implementation tends to focus on achieving the so-called KPIs, a desire for tangible hardware outcomes, and the delivery of results in terms of industrial development. In practice, “revitalization” prioritizes economic development over the preservation and empowerment of local community cultures.

According to the *National Strategic Plan for Regional Revitalization* (地方創生國家戰略計畫), the focus is on overcoming three key issues: population decline, an aging population and low birth rate, and the over-concentration of population in metropolitan areas, which leads to unbalanced urban-rural development. In pursuit of “Balancing Taiwan” (均衡臺灣), the plan emphasizes the development of local industries rooted in regional characteristics, aiming to encourage people, especially younger generations, to return to their hometowns. This, in turn, seeks to address demographic challenges and promote “regional revitalization” (地方創生).

According to a manager of the National Development Council's Regional Revitalization programs, the first thirty years of community building efforts (prior to the current regional revitalization focus) mainly aimed at fostering connections (連結) among people and between people and their communities (地方情感). The vision at the time was not focused on revitalization, but rather on addressing local community issues through rural regeneration

(農鄉再生)。Over time, these efforts gradually evolved into a transformation (轉型) stage, incorporating programs with cultural content. The establishment of RR marks another stage in the development of community building, aimed at addressing national security concerns through revitalizing local areas with an emphasis on industry (產業), ensuring access to stable employment, educational opportunities, and industrial growth (就學、就業) (Interview with Yu, 11 September 2024).

A closer look at the operative principles of RR reveals that the state relinquishes some of its social responsibilities to the stakeholders, particularly local communities. While centralizing its role as a distributor of resources, the state outsources managerial and planning structures to other working agencies to construct a “community” (Gilbert, 2013; Haque, 2008). RR addresses issues such as an aging population and population decline; its scope of concern extends beyond community creation and requires the participation of cross-disciplinary talents (謝秋吟、彭光輝, 2020:4). These cross-disciplinary talents are developed under the operating principle of “systematic” industrial development, aimed at promoting sustainability and preventing over-reliance on government resources (林怡恩, 2019). Local communities, universities, and enterprises are brought in to assist with project planning.⁴

The National Development Council’s Regional Revitalization Information Sharing and Exchange Platform (國家發展委員會地方創生資訊共享交流平臺) or NDCRR addresses this gap. It is a creation of the bureaucratic state established to run RR programs — an additional agency to outsource government tasks involved in implementing revitalization programs (Interview with Yu, 11 September 2024). The NDCRR provides a range of resources and assistances, collaborating with relevant government agencies and ministries to support regional governments in identifying their “local DNA” — the unique potential and advantages of each region. Its goal is to help regions develop new economic models and foster innovative regional industrial development.⁵ It also provides consultation services to local community organizations on their proposals and projects, and monitors and evaluates their progress by attending meetings and asking questions.

4 As of 2021, one hundred twenty RR plans had been submitted, of which fifty-five plans have since been approved and implemented (國家發展委員會, 2021: 102).

5 See 國家發展委員會。2019。《地方創生國家戰略計畫(核定本)》5、13。

The NDCRR avoids projecting an image of a “watch-dog” over local communities. Instead, it presents itself as an agency that “walks with the communities” (陪伴一起走) (Interview Yu, 11 September 2024). It plays a mediating role between the government and local communities to align initiatives with the principles of RR and subsequently secure funding. It follows a collaborative working formula: central ministries provide funding and resources, universities (Liu, 2022) and private enterprises contribute knowledge and technical support to develop innovative products. In the bureaucratic state’s narrative, the term “community” refers not only to the participation of local communities per se, but also to stakeholders beyond the physical boundaries of the designated communities. The focus and priority of RR success lie on the development of local products. The question then is: what are the contestations between the state’s narrative of place-making and that of the local communities?

The Contestations: Resilient Communities in the Making

While recognizing that social actors can creatively regenerate within bounded spaces under cultural and political pressures, as observed by anthropologists, linguists, and cultural theorists (Stewart, 2005), this research adopts the concept of resilience as a method to comprehend the politics of regional revitalization. The concept of resilience and its related studies typically refer to communities destroyed by natural disasters or crises, examining the subsequent processes of reconstruction and recovery as showcases of the resilient nature of such communities (Hodgson et al., 2015). The case studies presented in this research paper examine communities or individuals who persist and resist—rather than regenerate—in response to political interventions, financial hindrances, and organizational limitations. Their aim is to revitalize or rebuild an alternative place (place-making) grounded in diverse conceptualizations of community. Soon Chuan Yean Often, these individuals or groups of stakeholders are motivated by their emotional attachment to place (home), — whether to re-memorialize a community once built by their ancestors, to rebuild communitarianism in their home places, or to construct an alternative community in opposition (as an antithesis) to the bureaucratic state’s definition of community and place making. The following sections explore how such community revitalization efforts emerge from the bottom-up.

Transmission of Memory: The Assertion of Resilient into The Public Sphere

In a dinner conversation between Fang and students from Chiayi University,⁶ the students expressed their frustration to Fang about the difficulties of revitalization projects. Fang took a deep breath and asserted that one must persist and remain resilient in holding on the original intention. If one simply relies on government funding to continue the projects, one will be defeated. When engaging in regional revitalization, one must be independent and creative.

In my interviews with her, Fang explained that to make a revitalization project truly representative, she has to work beyond dependence on government funding. Government aid can support the budget and accompany the process, but ultimately, the community must be independent. Once government support runs out, those who are not independent will collapse (Interview with Fang, 20 September 2024).

Fang has been involved in several revitalization projects. One of these is the “Old Hospital Project”. Initially, the project was an initiative of the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Chiayi City Government to explore the urban memory and culture of Chiayi City.⁷ When the city government exhausted its efforts, Fang continued the project and further revitalized it through another government-initiated regional revitalization program, namely the “Open the Second Links(OSL)” (打開二通) project. Using the funding, Fang created a map to recollect the history of medical centers on Zhongzheng Street and the role of doctors in cultural movements, particularly in poetry chanting. To further revitalize the historical significance of the street and her family clinic, Fang connected the OSL project with another of her initiatives, the “Xun Oushe Society” (尋鷗吟社), to re-memorialize Chiayi’s local history and the traditions of Taiwanese poetry recitals and tea culture, as exemplified by the medical doctors such as her grandfather.

There are several components to Fang’s community-building efforts. One is revitalization of local history and its extension into various memorial sites.

6 Dinner gathering on 7 December 2024 at Chiayi town.

7 It entrusted the Taiwan Library Cultural Association to launch the “2018 Reading Chiayi City Old Medical Center Project” (閱讀嘉義市老醫館計畫). Through data collection and field investigation, the project had documented sixty old medical centers (盧怡君編, 2020).

Under the Huoquan Humanities Center (活泉人文館), Fang has transformed the clinic into an exhibition space. A chronology of the Fang family's history is permanently displayed at the front of the clinic, along with an interactive tea poetry board visible as one walks into the narrow alley of the clinic building. With funding from the OSL project, Fang further enhanced the "Old Hospital Project" by adding a medical museum navigation map in the rear section of the clinic, exploring the journey and history of local medical centers. The Hongren Clinic now serves as a site for recollecting memories of old hospitals and their connection to the community. The clinic has been transformed into a museum space to further revitalize memories of the doctors' love for poetry chanting and their active participation in community services.

This resilience is clearly manifested in her annual "Xunou Poetry Singing Competition". The original intention of the event was to promote tea culture within Chiayi community. Now in its sixth year, the event integrates the promotion of tea culture with the local histories of old hospitals, bringing these elements into the public domain. In examining the politics of the burial of Ferdinand Marcos, Martin describes memory as "procedural, travelling, palimpsestic, discursive, and 'unbounded'" (Martin, 2019: 426), where the memory of Marcos's legacy is transmitted and "routed" into the present (Martin, 2019: 427). In Fang's politics of memory, local memory of the place is further transmitted into the public park beyond the clinic alley site. From the "Hongren Clinic" to the annual event of "Xun Oushe Society" (尋鷗吟社), the legacy of poetry chanting among medical doctors is preserved and revitalized through an annual poetry singing competition, re-memorializing the past in the present.

The "Xunou Poetry Singing Competition" has been held six times, with the most recent event taking place in 2024. This event combines a series of activities aimed at revitalizing Chiayi City's tea culture, poetry traditions, the legacy of old medical centers, and other forms of local knowledge and cultural characteristics within the community (文化局觀光新聞處, 2024). The revitalization of local histories is expressed through classical poetry and literati tunes, as well as new poetic song compositions from diverse social groups, capturing the cultural pulse of Zhuluo (諸羅, old name for Chiayi). It deepens local knowledge of Zhuluo and highlights the Taiwanese poetry tradition as a renewed cultural brilliance within the Chiayi community.

Fang intentionally selected Chiayi Zhongzheng Park — the original site of the 1934 “Island-wide Congress of Poets” (全島詩人聯吟大會) — as the venue for the event, transmitting the memory of this past event into the present.⁸ (Interview with Fang, 20 September 2024). She also utilized the alley beside her clinic as a space for participants to practice tea serving through the “Wuwo Tea Gathering” (無我茶會), in preparation for the “Sixth Xunou Poetry Award: Taiwanese Classical Poetry and Modern Poetry Singing Selection Competition” on 10 November 2024.⁹ In this setting, ordinary community members could register as participants, serving tea to the audience. Everyone made tea, served tea, and recited poetry, promoting Zhuluo’s tea-poetry culture. The tea performance was revived on the historical site of the 1934 event, expanding the domain of community and creating a space for participatory place-making.

The Critique on Industrial Development & KPIs in RR

In my conversation with one of the organizers of RR projects on Matsu Island, he asserted that a key commonality shared by many Taiwanese RR communities is a focus on industrial development.¹⁰ In the context of regional revitalization, the success of a project is often measured by its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which tend to prioritize local industry building. This result is quantified through metrics such as production output, revenue generated, and the number of people benefited — in short, industrial development (Interview with Sandra, 22 November 2024).

When the Council for Cultural Affairs introduced the concept of a “shared community” (社區共同體) in 1993 through cultural strategies, the aim was to reconstruct community awareness and ethics via the development of “local cultural industries”. On the one hand, the initiative sought to continue efforts in community building and empowerment. On the other hand, it aimed to consolidate diverse local cultural traditions and resources

8 In 2019, she visited the park and learned about the history. That year marked the 100th anniversary of the “Xunou Yin She” (尋鷗吟社). She then decided to organize the first “Xunou Poetry Singing Competition” (江寶釵、謝崇耀, 2013).

9 The “Wuwo Tea Gathering” (無我茶會) initially began as a volunteer group that hosted book reading sessions for people to communicate and exchange ideas. It was a fully self-initiated and self-funded (自足自辦) activity without any external funding or donations (沒有摳摳或捐款, 自費的). (Interview with Fang, 20 September 2024)

10 Conversation during a book launch in Chiayi City on 9 November 2024. Note that different RR projects operate according to their own principles.

to revitalize local economies, in alignment with the Domestic Tourism Development Plan (國內旅遊發展方案) (劉立偉, 2008 : 317). However, this initiative has also created vicious competition for resources among various community actors, including township offices, village offices, community development associations, and social construction groups (謝秋吟、彭光輝, 2020). 劉立偉 (2008 : 322), for instance, has expressed skepticism about whether the economic emphasis in community development (地方發展) can genuinely lead to developmental advantages in rural areas. This doubt about local industrial development, promoted in RR as a foundation for building sustainable communities, is shared by Sandra and the team.

Sandra, a co-organizer of the Fuli Festival, is critical of the way the state measures achievement in RR. In one of Sandra's RR projects, she asserts that some projects failed to build cohesive communities simply because the government's narrative of successful community building focuses on achieving KPIs — often measured by the production of local products. For instance, one member of the Yunlin 100 team runs a locally produced soy sauce business that preserves traditional techniques. However, due to this preservation-focused model, their production cannot meet market demand at the level expected by the government's KPIs, which aim to establish business models that generate “local DNA” industrial development.

From the perspective of the funder, Sandra understands that funder-cum-politicians often seek result-oriented outcomes for the sake of legitimacy. Her view is that in RR, a project cannot mature from start to finish — such as by producing a final product — within a short period of time or a single project cycle. RR and community building are risk-taking businesses: they are unpredictable and complex. As such, RR must allow for mistakes and include fault tolerance (容錯容許) (Interview with Sandra, 22 November 2024). In addition, there is an ongoing tension between quantity (資化) and quality (量化). Sandra argues that KPIs should shift away from quantifiable measurements and instead focus more on quality, assessed through Social Return on Investment (SROI, 社會投資報酬率). The “software” of SROI includes the number of people impacted by a project and how effectively a project engages participants in the life of the community. To Mei Mei, another co-organizer of the Festival, the RR agenda of developing industry as a foundation for community revitalization is not necessarily an effective way to achieve that goal. More important, she argues, is the product development that

connects to the community's (hi)stories and generates a sense of emotional attachment to place (Interview with Mei Mei, 30 October 2024). Equally important is that a business model embodies the memory of the local place (地方生活記憶) to foster a shared identity within its community.¹¹

Community building is a practice of local knowledge. Borrowing from Scott's (1998, 313) concept of *mētis* or "cunning intelligence", it refers to "a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment." With the practical knowledge that community stakeholders like Sandra and Mei Mei have acquired through their work experience, they resist the simplification of the state's programmatic solutions and evaluation tools, such as KPIs framework. This is because community building and place-making — domains in which they live and work — are so complex and unpredictable that formal procedures and programs based on industrial rationale are impossible to implement and control. As such, the technocratic quantification embedded in KPIs becomes a hindrance rather than a help in building a cohesive community.

The Saliency of Political Factions in Local Communities

One major obstacle to community building is the presence of local factions (地方派系). These factions often consist of local government units at the community level and political families (地方家族政治) at the county level. Political tensions frequently arise between community development associations (社區發展協會) and village offices (村里辦公室), especially when the community is divided between different factions represented by district chiefs (里長) and village heads (村長) (Interview with Mei Mei, 30 October 2024). According to Sandra, although Yunlin is traditionally a political territory of KMT, it is the political families that truly control the political and economic domains in the region. She recounts her experiences working on a RR project in many villages. In one area called "Di Hua" (迪化), people joked that the main activity of the Di Hua Farmers' Association

11 Even though government officials and judges of RR are aware of this, they are unable to intervene, as it reflects the direction of the era (大時代方向). This means that even if procedures such as budgeting are transparent, it must still demonstrate results. It causes trouble for politicians if the expected results are not delivered. For Sandra, the way forward is to make careful trade-offs (取捨), find balance, engage in continuous communication, and recognize one's own limitations — avoiding actions that exceed their capacity to execute. (Interview with Sandra, 22 November 2024)

was running elections (not the RR project), because it was operated by a political family. Another example is the villages in “Wan Hua” (萬華) area, where around three-quarters of the community organizations were engaged in fierce competition for RR resources among different factions.¹²

“We Work Within Our Capacity” & Resisting Interference for Autonomy

To be autonomous, one must resist politics. By resisting politics, it connotes the nuance of rejecting patronage politics and avoiding developing any ties with local officials and politicians. The Fuli Festival operates within its own capacity and budget. This working principle, adopted by Yunlin 100 in its community-building efforts, derives from a concern about losing autonomy to politicians. Yunlin 100 has developed its own fundraising brand (募資品牌) and engages in product sales. It uses an online platform called “Foodchill”, which it leverages to facilitate fundraising. This mode of operation puts less pressure on Yunlin 100. Once the targeted fundraising amount is reached, they pause the fundraising.

Yunlin 100 has a clear understanding of its organizational capacity, including limitations in human resources, infrastructure, and workspace. When applying for funding, it observed that many community organizations struggle to meet the government's KPI requirements.¹³ From the outset, Yunlin 100 has been intentional in aligning its vision with the categories of government projects from the beginning. One such category is the Support Plan (扶持計畫), which outlines a clear direction for the projects without requiring the development of finalized products.¹⁴ Another is the Incentive Program (獎勵計畫), which provides government funding to encourage communities to develop products based on their projects. By maintaining clarity about its objectives, Yunlin 100 avoids becoming dependent on government funding and reduces the potential risk of political intervention.

During its first Fuli Festival in 2022, Yunlin 100 encountered local government intervention. By “intervention”, this refers to efforts by local authorities, political factions, and groups to offer assistance as a way to insert their political agenda and build their public reputation through the

12 The names of the areas are pseudonyms.

13 The government budget for RR since 2019 has been abundant and allocated widely across Taiwan. However, some community organizations applied for the funding primarily to gain access to resources, and many lack the capacity to meet government's KPI requirements.

14 The main objective of the Fuli Festival is to create a local space for community gathering (地方集點).

festival. The year 2022 also coincided with local elections, and the Yunlin County Government was especially eager to support the festival. To avoid potential political interference, Yunlin 100 declined most offers and accepted government support only for transportation (bringing passengers from the train station to the event site). Their concern was that accepting broader support could compromise their autonomy and freedom to operate the festival, making it difficult to defend themselves if any conflict arose. As the saying goes, the organizers would become “short-handed” (手短) and lose their impartiality. As a result, during the festival’s opening, no government officials – including village heads, district officers, county officials, or even the Minister of National Development Council (despite the Council providing funding) — were invited to give speeches on stage.

Despite their efforts, Yunlin 100 could not completely avoid political intervention — or even sabotage. At the last minute, the organizers were informed that a TV program would be produced to showcase the festival. However, they were not given any script or details in advance. The TV show ended up serving as an advertisement for a local politician, using community building as its theme. This experience served as a warning to the Yunlin 100 team: never accept support from authorities, as it could lead to exploitation in the future.

Under the rubric of this political scenario and landscape, both Mei Mei and Sandra (and by extension, their teams) insist that rejecting political involvement is essential for building cohesiveness and gaining autonomy. The foundation of community building and revitalization for Yunlin 100 is not merely about constructing or developing an industrial base within the community (Interview with Sandra, 22 November 2024). More importantly, it lies in fostering community cohesiveness among local residents and developing the “software” components of a place. When a community prioritises resource acquisition through political connections, it creates a vicious circle (惡性循環) that undermines community cohesion. Community building, at its core, is about developing cohesion (凝聚力) and reciprocity (相生力) within an autonomous community (Interview with Mei Mei, 30 October 2024).¹⁵

15 Mei Mei is referring to the community’s ability to solve problems independently, starting from cleanliness of broader issues such as an aging society.

Discussion & Tentative Conclusions: Regional Revitalization and Taiwan's Democracy

Amidst Taiwan's competitive democratic landscape, participatory democracy remains a significant challenge. Based on the case studies of regional revitalization practices, my preliminary observation is that Taiwan's democracy is still in a transition stage. This is not the place to outline a full set of democratic criteria. However, my observation aligns with the argument made by 周婉窋 (2022), who suggests that Taiwanese democracy remains in transition due to unresolved human rights issues related to the 228 incident and the continued lack of public access to documents concerning human rights violations during the Chiang Kai-shek administration.

Another key observation relates to institutional weaknesses, particularly the effects of partisan politics between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) (Templeman, 2022: 18-20). I further argue that Taiwan's democracy is transitioning toward a more mature participatory form, particularly in rural areas, or in places where local factions remain influential in governance. Throughout my research, I have observed a deepening of factional politics in Taiwan, especially outside the six major municipalities (六都), where these factions continue to play a significant role in local politics. As a result, the decentralization of power at the local level remains limited due to the persistent intervention of local factions, akin to those observed in post-New Order Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh (Lund and Saito-Jensen, 2013; Vedi, 2003; Warren and Visser, 2016; Waheduzzaman, As-Saber and Hamid, 2018; Abinales, 2008; Ostwald, 2017).

The preliminary conclusion of this research is that regional revitalization (RR) projects, as framed by the bureaucratic state and certain community organizations applying for funding, reflect a contestation of differing principles and perspectives. On the one hand, bureaucratic state officials emphasize national security concerns facing Taiwanese society, namely an aging population and the decline of younger generations. The state's policy orientation marks a clear departure from earlier community development efforts, being neoliberal in essence and technocratic in nature. On the other hand, local residents' agendas for RR are more fluid, extending from earlier community-building principles, and vary in focus, ranging from economic and local industrial development to cultural resilience, historical preservation,

and community empowerment.

Under a democratic regime, the bureaucratic state does not dominate or overpower civil society to secure its legitimacy. Instead, it operates within a neo-liberal framework, particularly through the “outsourcing” of resources and public institutional responsibilities to sub-national entities. The bureaucratic state simply exerts its influence by aligning RR initiatives with KPIs, such as local industrial development. As for civil society, community organizations navigate the sources made available in public domain, such as RR funding distributed through various sub-national entities. These organizations frequently operate beyond the domains of policy and economics, demonstrating resilience in constructing a vision of community that differs from the state’s narratives. A politics of place-making is emerging, wherein revitalization efforts imbue a sense of historical memory, foster local knowledge embedded in languages (e.g. Taiwanese), culture, and traditions (such as tea culture and poetry chanting), and create an alternative place by constructing a cohesive community. In this context, this research paper identifies the notion of a “resilient community” as an antithesis to democracy in the making under a neoliberal state such as Taiwan.

My observations on the topic of RR are twofold. First, RR is a policy that relates to its predecessor — community-building development launched over the past thirty years since the lifting of Martial Law. The revitalization of places and communities has long been embedded in the daily lives of many Taiwanese people, whether consciously or unconsciously. There exists a spectrum of perspectives on RR: some stakeholders are critical of it; others exploit RR resources for the benefit of local factions; some are pro-RR; many utilize RR resources out of convenience when engaging in community-building development; and others are genuinely committed to revitalization without necessarily relying on state support. Across these positions, there are collaboration, negotiation, and contestation — both in principle and practice.

This research does not romanticize the idea of synergy between the state and civil society, nor do the stakeholders involved. It is precisely this spectrum of views and approaches among stakeholders that makes regional revitalization a space for politically engaged place-making. One example is the use of museums as platforms and mechanisms for propaganda by political parties (Vickers, 2010). As demonstrated in this research, both the state and community are aware of the political landscape and the politicking involved

in project implementation, funding allocation, expectation setting, and the use of leverage to assert legitimacy. Despite the varied responses from actors within the polity toward RR, one consistent theme emerges: Taiwan's public sphere is free from political intimidation or threats from authorities, and its democracy remains competitive. Based on these preliminary observations, I conclude that "resilient communities" are emerging — ones that potentially serve as an antithesis to democracy in the making under a neoliberal state such as Taiwan.

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辨識韌性社群：臺灣地方創生實踐 與爭議的民主性探討

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摘要

這項研究重新檢視臺灣民主進程背景下的地方創生（regional revitalization, RR）政治過程。研究揭示了國家（the state）在 RR 政策中的俘虜現象以及臺灣民主社會中當地人對「社區」和「地方」的爭論。一方面，官僚官員強調臺灣社會面臨的國家安全問題，即老化社會和（年輕）人口下降。該政策取向與前任在社區建設發展努力上的政策取向明顯不同，本質上是新自由主義和技術官僚主義。另一方面，當地人對 RR 的議程相對比加靈活，是以前社區建設原則的連續體，並且願望各不相同，從經濟和當地工業發展到維持當地文化和歷史的彈性。這項研究調查了當地社區團體在與官僚國家政權競爭以獲取他們想要的議程的影響力。

關鍵字

地方創生、韌性社區、社區營造
