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Classing Ethnicity: Class, Ethnicity and the Mass Politics of Taiwan's Democratic Transition

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*“Classes without ethnicity are blind; ethnicity without class is empty.”*

- Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*

In the study of comparative politics the idea that the capitalist economy provides the material *raison d'être* for the political institutions of democracy is one of the field's most widely accepted and lasting propositions. Free-market economic development is said to foster the emergence of democracy by creating competing centers of economic power, highlighting the importance of rule of law (Sullivan, 1994), facilitating the free flow of information (Pei, 1994), and generally increasing social complexity to such a degree that democracy becomes the only effective form of political organization. A frequent corollary to the above thesis, particularly in the era of the Third Wave, holds democratization to be the “political mission” of the urban middle class – typically understood as the managers, professionals, entrepreneurs, as well as their supporting clerical staffs at the forefront of the modern capitalist economy. Members of this middle class are said to form the backbone of pro-democracy movements everywhere from East Asia (e.g. Lee, 2002), to the Arab World (e.g. Ibrahim, 1998), to much of Eastern Europe (Ekiert, 1991) and Latin America. The notion is so pervasive that even dissenters from the conventional wisdom despair of the prospects for democratization when they find the middle classes in the societies they study to be “anxious” and “dependent” (e.g. Jones, 1998).

That the existence of a relatively large, moderating middle stratum is conducive to the emergence of democracy is a proposition as old as Aristotle. What gives the idea its contemporary currency is the rapid expansion of a propertyless urban middle stratum characterizing modern capitalist development (Giddens, 1980: p.49). As the recent wave of political liberalizations had coincided with its growing prominence, “the middle class, as a rising and visible social force, is then given a ‘political mission’ to fulfill during this unprecedented political transition.” (Hsiao, 1993: p.13) It then becomes convenient to invoke venerable assumptions about the high correlation between educational attainment and income level on the one hand, and support for democracy on the other (e.g. Lipset, 1960; p.41), sometimes with a post-materialist brush-up. One updated variant of this thesis for example emphasizes the role of the middle class as the primary torch-bearers of revivalist nationalist movements – said to be a major impetus behind the fall of authoritarian regimes from the former Soviet Union to Taiwan.

The continuing fascination with the “historical mission” of one social class or another is perhaps a testament to the lasting impact of the Marxian legacy. But just

as the proletarians of the world have proven to be embarrassingly reluctant heroes, historically the pro-democratic credentials of the middle class have been far from unimpeachable. Fascism has been famously characterized as a form of “extremism of the center” (Lipset 1960); and as Huntington (1991; pp.66-8) acknowledged, the middle class was instrumental in the consolidation of authoritarian regimes from the Southern Cone to the Iberian Peninsula. Huntington attributed this ambivalence to the numerical weakness and political insecurity of middle-class groups in the early stages of capitalist development. Following a Downsian paradigm,<sup>1</sup> he argued that with advanced industrialization, the middle class would gradually increase in size relative to both urban labor and the peasantry, thus gaining greater confidence in its ability to defend its interests in electoral politics.

The trouble with this account is that in itself, it would merely provide one necessary condition for middle-class *acquiescence* to democratization. To explain *active support*, one must also assume that the new middle class is the social carrier of liberal, pro-democratic values, and that the subscription to such values would ultimately translate into consistent political action. But as Chang Mau-Kuei (1993) observed, many of the arguments about the role of the middle class were derived from the historical experience of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, where a relatively open public sphere afforded “civil society” a fair amount of autonomy and political influence. In developing countries where authoritarian regimes had long kept civil society under heavy statist thumbs, where the middle class had often been dependent on the State, it is not at all clear what role the new middle class could have played. Furthermore, that the “middle class” is an intermediate social structure with fluid boundaries and heterogeneous interests and beliefs has been one of the few points of agreement between neo-Weberian and Marxian social analyses (Parkin, 1979; Wright, 1978). And if the concept is fuzzy even in advanced capitalist societies with mature stratification structures, then in the developing societies affected by the Third Wave, the boundary issue is likely to be especially acute due to the rapidity and fluidity of socioeconomic transformations (Hsiao, 1993).

Any class-based account of regime transition, therefore, must rest upon two empirical research questions – the question of class boundaries, and the question of class positions. Class remains relevant because politics remains profoundly socially embedded – over the past few decades a wealth of empirical evidence has accumulated demonstrating the heavy influence exerted by community and family networks on individual political behavior (e.g. Orbell, 1970; MacKuen & Brown, 1987). But a politically relevant conceptualization of class must be able to capture these natural social networks between people, and lend itself to be the natural building bloc of collective political action. It is therefore the realities of practical politics that define for us the relevant conceptualization of class, defined along the dimensions of work, income, status, and lifestyle. “Class” in this sense is not a specific entity – the sort of bounded Schumpeterian “conveyance” with a publicly recognized identity collecting and discharging individual members with the regularity of a streetcar. Instead, class in this sense is defined by the commonality of lifestyles, values and closure of life chances as rooted in the family experience (Parkin, 1971; p.15). Class thus defined constitutes a “natural community” to the

extent that it is by definition made up of actors bound together by an (usually) unarticulated but implicit sense of mutual belonging (Weber, 1983; p.60). However, it bears emphasizing that class in this sense cannot be delineated a priori based on abstract theory; nor is its manifestation limited to associations of the workplace. An exclusive focus on traditional workplace organizations risks missing the significant class component underlying a great variety of political phenomena.

In this essay I offer a sharply revisionist account of Taiwan's transition to democracy, based upon an empirically derived neo-Weberian class-analytic framework. Among the newly democratized countries of the Third Wave Taiwan enjoys a widespread reputation as one of the purest examples of middle-class driven democratization. It was one of the few examples in which the transition took place at the height of economic prosperity. Unlike most cases in Latin America, Southern Europe or elsewhere in Asia, where powerful labor movements destabilized and delegitimized authoritarian rule (Collier, 1999), organized labor never broke free from State control in Taiwan and the few attempts at independent labor mobilization proved abject failures. Small wonder that Taiwan was referred to approvingly as "the best working example of the theory that economic progress should bring in its wake democratic inclinations and a healthy surge of pluralism" (Pye, 1985; p.233), a phenomenon largely credited to the rapid expansion of the middle class. Likewise Sam Huntington (1991; p.71) regarded Taiwan as a prime example of elite-led "transformation" spurred on by participatory demands from an activist middle class; while Doh C. Shin (1994) attributed Taiwan's transition to the spread of post-materialist values among the island's better-educated citizens.

My analysis reveals that the conventional accent on the middle class was largely misplaced. Instead, the true heroes in the struggle for democracy, even in prosperous, placid Taiwan, were the island's urban and rural working classes, although proper recognition of this fact requires us to look beyond the politics of the workplace. While the better-educated middle classes in fact displayed the highest normative affinity for democratic values, as the primary beneficiaries of the State they were also among the most politically conservative sectors in society. In contrast, working class support for the opposition was driven primarily by a generalized sense of disaffection with the existing social order, although its lack of a coherent agenda also proved consequential for the opposition's mobilizational strategy and policy orientation after the initial political opening.

In addition, the Taiwanese case illustrates how a variety of political phenomena seemingly unrelated to class are in fact undergirded by a fundamental class component. In an alternative line of interpretation Taiwan's transition is seen as the expression of a resurgent Taiwanese ethnic identity, said to either crosscut class divisions or carried primarily by the middle-class intelligentsia (e.g. Wachman, 1994; p.138). Although I do not dispute the importance of ethnic cleavages, one should bear in mind that by themselves ethnic divisions clearly cannot account for variations in regime support among the native Taiwanese who made up 85% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Instead, my findings clearly show that ethnic identity was in itself a class issue, as many of the grievances popularly understood in ethnic terms were essentially class-based grievances; while better educated, wealthier members of the

middle classes were far more successfully assimilated into the “national” high culture. Ethnic politics, after all, is seldom simply about the expression of ethnicity. Rather, ethnic articulations are made where it makes political sense for an opposition to claim to represent an excluded group against the present state. As noted by Breuilly (1982; pp.370-1) the appeal to ethnic identity is often a substitute for the failure to connect politics with significant social interests. Yet “[nationalist] appeals have little direct political impact in the absence of clear interests within the political community for supporting nationalist objectives and without some means of linking social interests to those objectives.” The extensive overlap between the appeals of ethnic and social discontent is by no means unique to Taiwan. From Finland to Georgia to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, ethnic/nationalist articulations have been taken up time and again by essentially class-based parties (Hobsbawm, 1992; p.124).

For the theory of democratization the key lessons from the Taiwanese experience are three-fold: First, class can be experienced and expressed in many ways and many places, therefore too narrow a focus on its manifestation within the relations of production can lead to serious misinterpretations of the complex dynamics of class politics; Second, to the extent that popular sector support for oppositionist political movements is frequently propelled by anti-establishment affective attitudes, it is essentially an expression of the struggle for inclusion, which can be compatible with a wide range of ideological articulations depending on the particular mode of mobilization adopted by the counter-elite; Third, underlying many political movements apparently driven by ethnic, nationalist or religious mobilization is a significant class component, all the more so where multiple social cleavages coincide, although class in this sense is defined by the social relations of power rather than the economic relations of production.

### **Taiwanese Society on the Eve of Transition**

Bearing in mind the theoretical observations outlined above, I now attempt a re-evaluation of the role of class in Taiwan’s transition to democracy. The Taiwanese case, of course, is of special interest to students of East Asia as a useful mirror for the political development of its neighbors, China in particular. But its significance for the theory of democratization lies in its unique character as one of the very few examples of transition in the midst of prosperity, where authoritarian rule retreated at the peak of unprecedented growth and apparent political stability. At the time the transition began in the mid-1980’s, the KuoMinTang (KMT) regime in Taiwan was a quasi-Leninist regime organized along Leninist lines with deep Party penetration into every segment of the government, the military and society, with the apex of the party-state dominated by a small elite of mainlanders who retreated to Taiwan some four decades earlier ruling over a population that was 85% native Taiwanese. The ideology of the regime rested on the triple pillars of anti-Communism, pro-Western developmentalism, and Chinese nationalism. Like other conquering émigré regimes, the KMT state systematically suppressed local Taiwanese dialects and folk culture while upholding the Mandarin traditions of the ruling elite as the “national” high culture. Standard Mandarin was imposed as the means for education, official

communications, as well as the mass media; while various penalties ranging from fines to spankings were prescribed for the use of Taiwanese dialects in schools (Chang & Wu, 2001; p.170). Thus both politically and ideologically Taiwanese society in the authoritarian era was characterized by the domination of the mainlander elite over the majority native Taiwanese, in what Donald Horowitz (2000) would describe as a “ranked ethnic system.”

Nonetheless, the Taiwanese did enjoy an equality of sorts under KMT rule. Although access to the highest circles of power was jealously guarded, there were ample opportunities for upward mobility for native Taiwanese, even the politically ambitious. Partly to bolster its standing in the camp of “Free Nations” the regime had held direct elections at the local level since the 1950's, even if the offices open to competition generally held little power. As characteristic of “ranked ethnic systems” (Horowitz 2000, pp.26-35), such mechanisms of local leadership selection were always carefully controlled to ensure that only those willing to accept the regime’s ideology were allowed into the halls of power. For dissidents unwilling to toe the party line, political persecution was also “equal”, without regard for provincial origins.

Meanwhile, the export-driven economic boom of the 1970s had given birth to a new commercial sector relatively independent of the party-state. As the regime avoided picking "national champions" the economy came to be dominated by small to medium-sized enterprises, with sufficient resources to maintain a significant level of autonomy yet numerous enough to avoid direct confrontation with the state. It is worth noting here that although economic resources were diffused, they were largely controlled by native Taiwanese. The conventional wisdom on the island was that while the mainlanders tended to have higher status government jobs, the Taiwanese had greater income and wealth. Thus an equilibrium of sorts was reached in which mainlanders dominated high politics while the Taiwanese took the lead in the economy (Cheng, 1989; p.481).

Against this backdrop, a new political opposition announced its arrival in the 1977 elections when candidates under the *Dang-wai* (literally ‘outside the Party’) banner captured 22 seats in the provincial assembly and won four executive races. Due to the ban on new parties, the opposition operated as a loose confederation based largely on personalities and local issues but drawn together by a common disaffection with the KMT. Although the opposition mainstream generally favored moderate parliamentarism, a radical minority never abandoned more militant tactics, even after an anti-government riot in 1979 resulted in the incarceration of almost the entire opposition leadership. Thus the Taiwanese political landscape in the early 80’s was one full of contradictions – brutal if highly selective repression against individual dissidents existed side-by-side with an unprecedented permissiveness which saw the growth of an increasingly savvy and vocal opposition, as well as various middle-class social movements (feminist, environmental etc.). Nonetheless, one should not underestimate the amount of popular support commanded by the KMT. There was genuine appreciation for the economic achievements of the regime; and discontent with authoritarian rule, though present, was limited to a

minority (Yang, 2005).<sup>3</sup> The KMT continued to enjoy considerable electoral success, winning 62 out of 71 open seats in the legislative elections of 1983.

The Rubicon of Taiwan's transition to democracy was crossed in 1986, when – ahead of yet another legislative election – President Chiang Ching-Kuo lifted the ban on opposition parties and brought some four decades of martial law rule to an end, paving the way for a series of further reforms that ultimately culminated in the direct elections of the national legislature and the presidency. At the time the growth rate of the Taiwanese economy just hit an all-time high of 12.7%, and politically the Chiang regime could rest easy in the 6-point assurance issued by the hawkish Reagan administration, essentially promising American support for the maintenance of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. Absent the economic disasters and military catastrophes that triggered regime collapses elsewhere, scholars seek explanation in cultural factors such as the growing prevalence of post-materialist values and democratic inclinations (e.g. Shin, 1994), as well as the resurgence of Taiwanese nationalist articulations. By and large the social carrier of these new consciousnesses is assumed to be the new urban middle class.

But as I argued earlier, any meaningful discussion of class positions must be predicated upon the answer to a logically prior question, that of class boundaries; and that is an empirical question specified by particularities peculiar to each concrete historical scenario. Consider for example the degree of differentiation between the urban working class from the so-called petty bourgeoisie. We know from countless case studies that in most transitional societies, the two are often no more than different phases within the same individual's career.<sup>4</sup> Wage labor is usually considered temporary and the two groups generally move in the same social circles. Similarly, although in Western societies low level white collar workers are often considered to be in the same class as industrial labor, in developing societies even the relatively modest educational credentials necessary for a clerical career tend to be in short supply, thus endowing low-level office workers with a status that they do not enjoy in Western societies (e.g. Gates, 1979).

To explore these and other questions requires a social classification scheme designed to maximize both intra-group homogeneity and inter-group differences. Adopting a familiar technique in empirical stratification research (e.g. Hong 1990) I employed cluster analysis<sup>5</sup> to analyze the class structure of Taiwanese society in the 1980's. Using data from Round 2.2 of the *Basic Survey of Social Transformation in Taiwan*, conducted between 1991 and 1992 by Academia Sinica, I analyzed the class structuration of Taiwan using three different models – a basic demographical model using income, education and subjective class identification as the clustering criteria; an occupational homogamy model measuring inter-marriage rates between different occupational categories; and an inter-generational closure model measuring occupational mobility across generations. Interested readers may refer to (\_\_\_\_, xxxx) for details of the analysis.

Although the demographic model produced the best-delineated clusters, some key findings are remarkably consistent across the models. In particular, I found that the self-employed were closely clustered with the industrial and service workers, while low-level white-collar employees belonged to a stratum quite distinct from the

working classes. In a sense the statistical exercise merely corroborates what numerous qualitative case studies have already revealed. As Hill Gates (1988; p.228, p.61) observed, “there is no real division between Taiwan’s industrious small-business people and its industrial workers,” and both identified strongly with the “poor” and “uneducated” in the social pecking order.

For our purposes Taiwanese society at the time of the transition could be clustered into six social classes: The bourgeoisie – which under my relatively generous definition includes all proprietors with 3 or more employees; the upper middle class, which includes professionals, managers, and educators; the lower middle class, which includes clerical employees and technicians; and the working or popular classes, which include industrial and service workers, as well as the bulk of the Marxian “petty bourgeoisie” – self-employed but for the most part having no employees of their own. Farmers – by and large small homesteaders – constitute a distinct social class due to their rural location and distinct mode of production. For

**Table 1: Class Composition of Taiwanese Society - 1986.**

strata	Taiwanese	Mainlander	Total
government	108 ( 9.1%)	63 (40.7%)	171 (12.8%)
bourgeoisie	78 ( 6.6)	6 ( 3.9)	84 ( 6.3)
upper middle	72 ( 6.1)	16 (10.3)	88 ( 6.6)
lower middle	127 (10.7)	30 (19.4)	157 (11.7)
worker	569 (48.1)	32 (20.7)	601 (44.9)
farmer	187 (15.8)	1 ( 0.7)	188 (14.1)
unknown	42 ( 3.6)	7 ( 4.5)	49 ( 3.7)
Total	1183 (100)	155 (100)	1338 (100)

Data Source: Electoral Survey on the 1986 Taiwan Parliamentary Elections,  
Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University

theoretical considerations a separate category can also be created for government personnel in light of their special relation to the state.

The class composition of Taiwanese society at the time of the transition is presented in Table 1. Considering the predominantly traditional character of the Taiwanese family structure during that period, I accepted certain basic assumptions of functionalist stratification theory which hold that individuals derive their status from the male heads of their households (Haller, 1981; p.778). Similarly, the ethnic identity of the individual is derived from the ethnic background of the father. The findings confirm that the prevailing perceptions of the ethnic division of labor were largely valid. While Mainlanders were over-represented in the skill-intensive sectors of the economy and were especially concentrated in state employment, the Taiwanese took the lead in business and commerce and also made up the bulk of the island’s popular sectors.

### **The Class Structure of Political Support**



Equipped with an empirically derived understanding of class we are now ready to re-examine one of the curious puzzles of Taiwanese democratization. By now the image of a heroic “new middle class”, imbued with modern democratic values, marching at the forefront of the political opposition has become so well entrenched in the popular imagination, that few seem to be able to recall a time just before the lifting of martial law when the ruling KMT routinely justified the glacial pace of political reforms in the name of the “middle class”. The mentality of the middle stratum was alleged to be “pragmatic”, even conservative; and the existence of a sizeable middle class was thus used to justify the government’s “middle-of-the-road”

**Table 2: Political Support by Social Class – Overall Population.**

Strata	KMT	Opposition ( <i>T'ang Wai</i> )	NR	Total
government	155 (86.6%)	12	12	179
bourgeoisie	55 (68.8%)	18	7	80
upper middle	99 (85.3%)	15	2	116
lower middle	124 (80.0%)	23	8	155
worker	270 (63.5%)	92	63	425
farmer	125 (60.1%)	31	52	208
Total	828 (71.2%)	191	144	1163

NR = No Response.

Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test: Pr = 0.000.

**a) 1983 National Legislative Elections**

Strata	KMT	Opposition (DPP)	NP	NR	Total
government	127 (81.9%)	12	8	8	155
bourgeoisie	34 (47.9%)	23	6	8	71
upper middle	55 (67.1%)	15	6	6	82
lower middle	93 (68.4%)	28	5	10	136
worker	273 (54.2%)	101	34	96	504
farmer	101 (55.2%)	15	11	56	183
Total	683 (60.4%)	194	70	184	1131

NP = Non-Partisan, NR = No Response.

Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test: Pr = 0.000.

**b) 1986 National Legislative Elections**

strategy emphasizing “progress through stability”. It was by no means mere rhetoric. In a series of 6 government surveys between 1978 and 1985, a persistent and significant relationship was found linking higher income, educational and occupational status to support for the ruling party. The author of the final government report had every confidence that “the KMT ... has won the endorsement of the majority of the middle class.” (Wei, 2003; pp.440-1)

Nor, for that matter, was the opposition particularly adept at ingratiating itself with the middle class. Although current conventional wisdom tends to see the political opposition and the various middle-class social movements that emerged during the 1980's as virtually indistinguishable (e.g. Wang, 1996), careful case studies reveal a very different picture. Far from being the initiatives of veteran opposition leaders, most of these movements were led by middle class activists who prided themselves as apolitical problem-solvers who usually preferred collaborating with regime figures with access to real power, not to mention government funds. A case

**Table 3: Political Support by Social Class – Taiwanese Only.**

strata	KMT	Tang-Wai	NR	Total
government	88 (82.2%)	10	9	107
bourgeoisie	53 (67.9%)	18	7	78
upper middle	80 (84.2%)	13	2	95
lower middle	98 (77.8%)	21	7	126
worker	224 (59.4%)	91	62	377
farmer	124 (60.8%)	31	49	204
Total	667 (67.6%)	184	136	987

NR = No Response.

Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test: Pr = 0.000.

**a) 1983 National Legislative Elections**

strata	KMT	DPP	NP	NR	Total
government	71 (73.2%)	11	7	8	97
bourgeoisie	31 (45.6%)	23	6	8	68
upper middle	41 (63.1%)	13	5	6	65
lower middle	69 (64.5%)	26	4	8	107
worker	253 (52.7%)	99	34	94	480
farmer	99 (55.0%)	15	11	55	180
Total	564 (56.6%)	187	67	179	997

NP = Non-Partisan, NR = No Response.

Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test: Pr = 0.000.

**b) 1986 National Legislative Elections**

in point is the environmental movement that erupted across the island in the 1980's (He, 1996). While leaders of the movement took pains to avoid any imputations of ulterior motives, the opposition did not help its cause by first ignoring the movement, and later – after its popular resonance has become apparent – attempting to seize control from the top in a number of notoriously ham-fisted episodes.

Who, then, were the real heroes of Taiwan's democratic transition? An answer to that question can be gleaned from two electoral surveys conducted on the eve of the transition, following island-wide legislative elections in 1983 and 1986. Table 2 presents tabulations of partisan support in those elections, broken down by social stratum. In light of the oft-repeated and generally correct assertion that ethnic

identity was a major cleavage of political support on the island (the opposition drew its support predominantly from native Taiwanese, as over 90% of mainlanders voted for the KMT in every election), separate tabulations are also provided exclusively for the Taiwanese segment of the population (Table 3), which shall be the focus of our investigation in the remainder of this essay.

The results reveal a fact once widely recognized by astute political watchers in Taiwan if now largely overlooked in Western academic discourse. Before the lifting of martial law the core support for the opposition came from the workers, farmers and small business owners of the island, whereas members of the new middle class – be it well-paid professionals or lowly “white collar proletarians” – proved nearly as conservative as government personnel. By no means can the phenomenon be attributed strictly to the over-representation of mainlanders in the new middle class, as the Taiwanese segment of the population exhibited almost identical patterns. The insight is certainly not lost on the opposition, and all of the veteran *Dang-wai* leaders interviewed by the author readily acknowledged that their earliest and most loyal supporters had been the “black hands” of the island, so-called because their hands are soiled from manual labor (e.g. He, 2004; Huang, 2004).

Herein lies the greatest strength of the opposition – for it could always depend upon a bedrock of support amongst the popular sectors of society, despite the array of seemingly insurmountable disadvantages facing it. Organizationally the movement was self-admittedly puny. At the end of 1986 when the regime lifted martial law, the movement, now renamed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), boasted only 3,000 members island-wide out of a population of 20 million (Pan, 1991). Party finances were practically non-existent. As recently as 1991 the party’s entire paid staff consisted of about 20 workers at its national headquarters (Peng, 1991), leaving individual candidates to fend for themselves. While the KMT lavished millions on its awesome vote-buying machine (e.g. Wang, 1997), opposition candidates financed shoestring campaigns with their personal savings, loans from friends and family, the sale of campaign material at election rallies, and whatever modest contributions they found in their collection boxes.<sup>6</sup> Outspent up to 100 times by their rivals, opposition candidates could often offer no more than free meals and cigarettes for their campaign staffs, yet there never seemed to be a shortage of “black hands” happy to help, sometimes merely for a meal but oftentimes out of personal loyalty and sympathy for the rebel cause.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, judging by the arrest records at the National Police Agency archives, it was also the “black hands” of the island who answered the call to battle as the opposition played a dangerous game at the “edge of violence” in the streets, marching time and again in open defiance of martial law (National Police Agency, 1986; Pan 1991, p.123). Their bravery was duly noted. Security officials took to ordering extended hours for local factories on dates of scheduled opposition events.

In all fairness, it should be noted that prior to 1986, opposition protests were sporadic affairs often involving no more than dozens of participants and at most, several thousand (e.g. Wu, 1990). While the numbers pale in comparison to the great “people power” movements of the Philippines and South Korea, their very emergence in normally placid Taiwan shocked the regime to the core, for once the

masses have come to realize their own strengths in direct confrontations in the streets, the regime's myth of invincibility is demolished and the potential for even greater turmoil ahead can hardly be fathomed. In the end, the opposition did not succeed because of its organizational capacity. It succeeded *despite* its organizational weakness. Ultimately it was the opposition's consistent and proven performance in the electoral arena that gave it credibility, which as Shelley Rigger (1999, p.10) pointed out became the single most important asset with which the opposition could extract concessions from the regime. In the end it was the opposition's mass support base, diffused but loyal, that protected the fledgling movement from the wrath of the ubiquitous party-state, for the regime simply did not have the stomach to risk a showdown against one third of its population.

### **Class Grievances and Opposition Responses**

Nevertheless, the patterns of political support discussed above should not overly surprise. The economic oligarchs and bureaucratic apparatchiks of the island could hardly be expected to cast their lot with the opposition, as they owed their livelihood to the party-state. Nor, for that matter, did the new middle class have much incentive to challenge the existing order, for they had been the prime beneficiaries of the developmental state and were looking to protect and augment their vested interests. Because a stable political and social order was the most compatible with their material interests, they were wont to denounce any destabilizing "social disturbances", not so much out of fondness for the regime as it was for their properties.

Thus the most likely sources of opposition support have to be located amongst the popular sectors, for they had borne the price of prosperity. The success of Taiwan's export-oriented development hinged upon a cheap and disciplined labor force, the only competitive advantage enjoyed by the resource-poor island. But while workers were incessantly exhorted to sacrifice short-term interests for the greater good, their long-term interests were consistently neglected by the state. Concurrent with the island's economic takeoff, real industrial wages had lagged behind productivity growth through the 1970's and remained much below those in Latin America. Nor was welfare spending sufficiently high to provide for adequate social compensation. In the early 1980's only 29% of the state budget was devoted to the social services, well below the 36% in Mexico, 47% in Argentina and 55% in Brazil. Although *household* income disparity appeared small by world standards, as Deyo (1987; p.197) observed the phenomenon may reflect not so much the equitable sharing in the fruits of economic growth as very high levels of labor extraction, accomplished through the massive entry of young women from low-income families into low-wage jobs and some of the longest work-hours in the world.

At any rate, since the late 1970's Taiwan's Gini coefficient had steadily increased, and as prospects of rags-to-riches glory grew ever more remote with the

**Table 4: Personal and Policy Satisfaction by Social Class**

Strata	% of Pop.	Average Personal Satisfaction	Avg. Policy Satisfaction - Economics	Avg. Policy Satisfaction - Law & Order
Government	2.6	3.90	4.03	2.75
Bourgeoisie	6.9	3.66	3.60	3.17
Upper Middle	8.5	3.88	3.84	2.59
Lower Middle	15.0	3.75	3.69	2.58
Workers	52.4	3.52	3.43	2.78
Farmers	14.6	3.55	3.56	3.23
Total (N = 2194):	100.0	3.61	3.55	2.82
<i>Pearson's <math>\chi^2</math> test:</i>		<i>Pr = 0.000</i>	<i>Pr = 0.000</i>	<i>Pr = 0.000</i>

Note: All satisfaction levels given on scales of 1 to 6, 6 being the highest level of satisfaction. Data is for native Taiwanese segment of the population only.

Source: Basic Survey of Social Transformations in Taiwan, 1984.

increasing maturity of the industrial economy, even modest increases in inequality may be deeply felt. As decades of psychological research attests people are notably oblivious of the Pareto Principle in making judgments of well-being: Relativity appears to be the key determinant of happiness and in study after study, subjects preferred the more equal payoff even if it implies inferior payments for themselves than under the more unequal one (e.g. Tversky & Griffin, 1991). Therefore despite undeniable improvements in standards of living, a 1984 island-wide survey found that roughly 45% of the working classes expressed dissatisfaction with their personal economic circumstances as well as the government's economic policies, compared to only a quarter of the professional middle class. Overall, urban workers registered the lowest levels of economic satisfaction of any social group (Table 4).<sup>8</sup>

It was also by far the most numerous. The government had good reasons to be wary of the mobilizational potential of labor. But despite a 30-year head-start the ruling KMT never developed a coherent labor policy. The state-sponsored unions were first and foremost instruments of political domination and only secondarily productionist organs designed more for the benefit of capital than labor. Structurally they were classic state corporatist arrangements (e.g. mandatory membership, single representation with no horizontal linkage etc.). But functionally they operated more like extensions of the party-state, with union officials down to the plant level handpicked by local KMT branches (Li, 1992; pp.120-1). The state-run unions became widely derided as "capon unions" and enrollment rates were persistently low. Nor was there much reason to enroll – a 1980 university survey of union members found that less than 10% expressed satisfaction with union cadres and nearly 90% believed that the unions were not capable of reflecting their opinions (Li, 1992; p.126).

Frustrated by their marginalization within the system, workers turned to the budding opposition in droves. To this day many labor leaders claim to have been ardent supporters of the *Dang-wai* since its street-fighting days, and not a few credited the opposition protests as the inspiration for their own activism (Lin, 2000). Especially in the heady days just before and after the lifting of martial law, workers mobbed the offices of DPP officials and flocked to legal seminars organized by opposition labor groups such as the Taiwan Labor Legal Assistance League. In 1986 a completely unknown DPP candidate defeated the KMT head of the national trade union for labor's functional representative seat in the Legislative Yuan (Chou & Nathan, 1987; p.293). As one labor activist explained, at the time workers "expected a lot from the DPP, or just about anyone with more of an anti-establishment stance."

Many of them would soon be disappointed. Even by the mid-1980's whatever pro-labor flavor the opposition used to have was already dissipating, and groups such as the Labor Legal Assistance League were "on the margins of margins". In 1978 seven of the twelve planks in the *Dang-wai* platform were targeted explicitly at working class concerns (collected in Zhou & Chen, 2000); but by 1986 these had largely disappeared from the opposition platform. Even as critics heckled the opposition leadership (in true Marxist fashion) for their "inability to shed their petit-bourgeois mindset", leftists and the leftist agenda were steadily forced off the main stage so that by the 1990s the party was virtually indistinguishable from the KMT on socio-economic issues. What took their place was an emotional and sometimes strident nationalism, focusing in particular on the promotion of a Taiwanese identity distinct from China and eventual Taiwanese independence.

Although subsequent events proved the strategy savvy, the outcome had been far from inexorable. The Taiwanese nativism of the pre-transition era was more nostalgic than revolutionary, more anti-modern than anti-Chinese.<sup>9</sup> The KMT regime's assimilationist policies had in fact been more successful than many would care to admit, and Mandarin was proudly spoken as a badge of social status by many a upwardly mobile Taiwanese (e.g. van den Berg, 1986). Observers at the time were often impressed by the seeming dissolution of linguistic and cultural barriers (e.g. Lin, 1998; p.270). Some even saw this as a basis of democratic transformation, as the growing homogeneity of the population was expected to undermine the mainlander elite's claim to political monopoly (Gold, 1986). One 1986 survey found 82% of the population to be China-oriented (Lin, 1988; p.156); more conservative estimates put the figure at about 65%, although only about 16% could be said to exhibit clear Taiwanese identification (Yang, 2005; Fig. 5). DPP leaders were certainly well aware of this. Zhang Jun-hong, arguably the intellectual guru of the *Dang-wai* movement and at one time its chief strategist, candidly admitted that before the lifting of martial law, popular support for Taiwanese independence was almost non-existent (Zhang 1989b). He regarded the issue as more of a KMT red herring than a serious opposition goal, a view shared by many foreign observers (e.g. Jacobs, 1981; p.23). Of the seven *Dang-wai* candidates surveyed in Huang's (1980) analysis of the 1978 campaign literature, the only person to make ethnicity a major issue was Annette Lu, who acknowledged that the nativist discourse of the opposition was based not on redefinitions of national identity, but rather popular

representation (Lu, 1991; p.428). As recently as 1989 debates were raging on within the top echelons of the DPP with regard to the party's future direction, with Zhang (1989a; p.80) the strategist insisting that the DPP should not play up the ethnic angle, as he believed the issue would have little mainstream resonance and would only splinter the movement.

In short, to the extent that a crisis of legitimacy existed on Taiwan in the late authoritarian era, it was a crisis of participation rather than identity. The DPP's subsequent embrace of the nationalist agenda should not be taken as the inexorable expression of a long-repressed "national will", but should instead be understood as a deliberate political strategy formulated to maximize the party's chances of electoral success. Why the party should mobilize along ethnic rather than class lines is a puzzle worthy of exploration. After all, as many scholars observed when ethnic and class divisions coincide more often than not mass political mobilization takes the form of social revolution (Hobsbawm 1992, p.124; Horowitz 2000, p.32). But to understand the rationale of the strategy we must first examine the specific social and institutional context of transition-era Taiwan – in particular, the intersection of ethnic identity and class, and the determinants of working class electoral support.

### **The Class Structure of Ethnic Identity**

The shape of the intersection between class structuration and the ethnic divide does not necessarily determine the class bases of Taiwanese ethnic identity. On the level of daily existence the reality of Taiwanese ethnicity – and its distance from the official "national" high culture – is no more distinctive than that of many other provincial identities in China. This is not to deny the uniqueness of Taiwan's historical experience or even to question the credibility of the Taiwanese claim to nationhood. But it is simply a historical reality that in its un-sublimated, "primordial" form whatever sense of Taiwanese ethnic identity could be subsumed within the framework of Greater Chinese nationalism as tirelessly promoted by the KMT. Once again, we can reasonably assume that identification with Taiwan (as distinct from and exclusive of China) was a predominantly native Taiwanese phenomenon, but beyond that the class distribution of this identity within the Taiwanese segment of the population is an empirical question that can only be answered with empirical data.

To investigate this issue I employed data from Round 2.2 of the *Basic Survey of Social Transformation in Taiwan* (the first nationwide survey to cover the identity issue in depth), conducted between late 1991 and early 1992. Although by the time of the survey the transition was well under way and discussions of Taiwanese Independence were no longer taboo, the ideological landscape had not yet drastically altered and the high profile confrontations with China (e.g. the 1996 Chinese missile tests around Taiwanese waters) were still in the future. Thus, based on these considerations as well as various other fragmentary evidences, we can be reasonably confident that the 91-92 findings were generally reflective of Taiwanese society of the previous decade.

As an indicator of Taiwanese ethnic identity, I used an item asking the respondent to select “the most suitable way to label yourself.” Respondents who chose to label themselves as exclusively “Taiwanese” are considered to exhibit Taiwanese identification, whereas those who called themselves “Chinese” or “both Taiwanese and Chinese” are considered to exhibit Chinese or mixed identification. Self label is generally considered a more reliable indicator of national identity over attitude toward independence because the latter may be more sensitive to external events and practical political considerations (Lin, 2001; p.224), whereas the former has been found to be the best predictor of support for independence in any event (Chang & Wu, 1997; p.178). Focusing again exclusively on the Taiwanese segment of the population, cross-tabulations were conducted against a number of socio-economic variables. The results are presented in the following pages.

Our findings clearly demonstrate the working-class basis of Taiwanese national identity. Once again, while members of the upper and lower middle classes were even less likely than government personnel to exhibit Taiwanese identification, workers and in particular farmers were comparatively the most likely to exhibit Taiwanese national identity (Figure 1). Likewise, only 12% of those with a junior college degree or above exhibited Taiwanese identity, compared to roughly 38% of those with an elementary school education or less (Figure 2). About 20% of those in the top quartile of the income range exhibited Taiwanese identity, compared to more than a third of those in the bottom 35% (Table 5). The Taiwanese-identified also scored significantly lower in media consumption (~40% never read newspapers compared to only 15% for the Chinese/mixed-identified), interest in politics (23% never followed political news compared to 9% for the others), or political knowledge (roughly 40% offered no opinion when asked to evaluate various aspects of government performance). Significantly, their average Mandarin fluency (4.0 on a 10-point scale) was substantially lower than that of other native Taiwanese (6.0). It is also worth noting that contrary to contemporary speculations, the Taiwanese-identified segment of the population did not exhibit especially robust democratic inclinations. Despite some misgivings about the regime, they were also more likely to agree (and less likely to disagree) that “as long as the government is taking care of public safety, traffic and the economy, whether it is democratic or not is not all that important.”



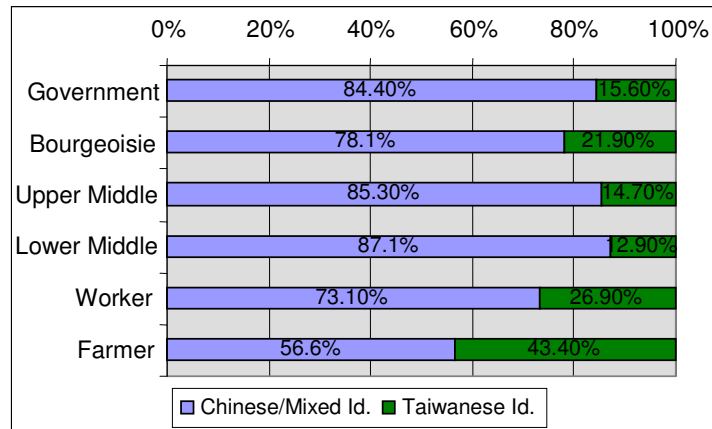


Figure 1. National Identity by Occupational Strata – Taiwanese Only

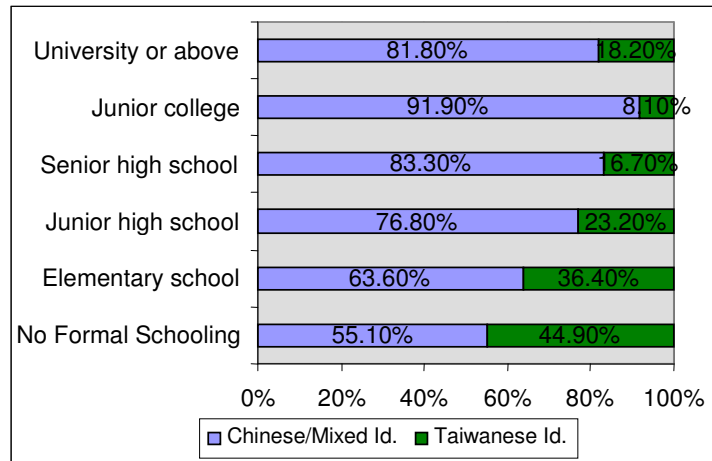


Figure 2. National Identity by Educational Level – Taiwanese Only

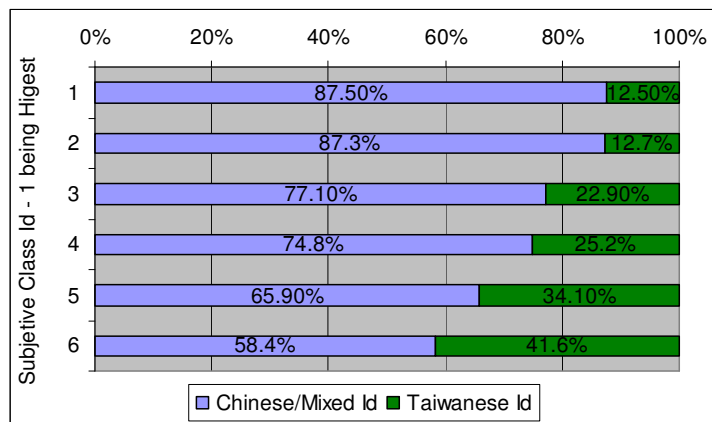


Figure 3. National Identity by Subjective Class Id. – Taiwanese Only

**Table 5. National Identity by Income – Taiwanese Only**

Monthly Income	Chinese/Mixed Identity		Taiwanese Identity		Total
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%	
< NT\$10,000	289	32.7%	143	45.3%	432
	66.9%		33.1%		100%
NT\$10,000–20,000	208	23.5%	80	25.3%	288
	72.2%		27.8%		100%
NT\$20,000–30,000	165	18.7%	34	10.8%	199
	82.9%		17.1%		100%
NT\$30,000–40,000	126	14.3%	28	8.9%	154
	81.8%		18.2%		100%
> NT\$40,000	96	10.9%	31	9.8%	127
	75.6%		24.4%		100%
Total	884	100.0%	316	100.0%	

Pearson's Chi-Squared: Pr = 0.003

**Table 6. National Identity by Political/Econ. Perceptions – Taiwanese Only**

	Chinese/Mixed Identity	Taiwanese Identity
Political Influence - Taiwanese Minnan	6.5	6.3
Taiwanese/Mainlander Difference	-0.4	-0.4
Economic Wellbeing - Taiwanese Minnan	6.5	6.0
Taiwanese/Mainlander Difference	-0.2	-0.9

\* All ratings given on scale of 1 to 9, 1 being the lowest, 9 being the highest.

**Table 7. National Identity by Dialect Spoken with Friends – Taiwanese Only**

Language (with Friends)	Chinese/Mixed Identity		Taiwanese Identity	
	FREQ	%	FREQ	%
Mandarin	219	24.1%	25	7.7%
Taiwanese	593	65.2%	275	84.9%
Hakka	65	7.2%	10	3.1%
Other	32	3.5%	14	4.3%
Total	909	100.0%	324	100.0%

Pearson's Chi-Squared: Pr = 0.000

**Table 8. Predictors of Taiwanese National Identity**

Logit estimates		Number of obs	=	1050
		LR chi2(3)	=	90.21
		Prob > chi2	=	0.0000
Log likelihood = -530.04762		Pseudo R2	=	0.0784
-----				
Taiwanese Id	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z
-----+-----				
Mandarin w/ Friends	-.622755	.2471577	-2.52	0.012
Mandarin Fluency	-.4877266	.0865856	-5.63	0.000
Mlder Econ Advtage	.3146462	.0829603	3.79	0.000
_cons	-1.209538	.0908085	-13.32	0.000
-----				

On the whole, perceptions of disadvantage appeared to have played an important role in the psychology of the Taiwanese-identified. Whatever wrinkles there were in the distribution of national identity by income and education disappeared when tabulated against subjective class identity. The proportion of respondents exhibiting Taiwanese identification decreased steadily from nearly 42% at the lowest level of self-identification to roughly one-eighth at the highest levels (Figure 3). Similarly, the Taiwanese-identified also tended to perceive less political influence and lower levels of economic well-being for native Taiwanese (Table 6). And while most respondents perceived moderate political disadvantages and essentially no economic disadvantages for the Minnan Taiwanese (the predominant native group) vis-à-vis mainlanders, the Taiwanese-identified perceived the same amount of political disadvantage but far greater economic disadvantages. Whether such perceptions can be justified is unclear. When asked about their perceptions of unfair treatment in employment and work, the Taiwanese-identified were similarly much more likely to perceive mainlander advantages. Yet when queried about *personal* experiences of unfair treatment, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups.

In fact, multiple regression analysis revealed that taken altogether, the best predictors of Taiwanese national identity were language and perceptions of economic disadvantages (Table 8). Those who did not speak Mandarin with their friends, were less fluent in Mandarin, and perceived greater Taiwanese economic disadvantages vis-à-vis mainlanders were more likely to exhibit an exclusive Taiwanese national identity. No other variable achieved statistical significance. Quite remarkably, there is *no* statistically significant relationship between national identity and having a mainlander in the immediate family, which at any rate is limited to less than 6% of the Taiwanese population.

### **The Logic and Emotions of Partisan Preferences**

If the sense of Taiwanese national identity was driven primarily by a generalized sense of alienation from the “national” high culture promoted by the mainlander elite,

**Table 9: Effects of Vote-Choice Determinants on KMT Support – 1983 Legislative Elections**

Strata	N	Affective Attitudes	Taiwanese Ethnicity	Campaign Issues	Candidate Qualifications	Political Relations
Government	107	-20.9%	18.3%	-3.6%	7.6%	10.8%
% citing		15.9%	2.8%	37.4%	67.3%	28.0%
Bourgeoisie	78	-13.2%	N.A.	-30.3%	-4.8%	21.8%
% citing		17.9%	0.0%	34.6%	73.1%	10.3%
Upper Middle	95	-2.3%	-52.5%	-12.4%	2.1%	10.0%
% citing		17.9%	3.2%	41.1%	75.8%	25.3%
Lower Middle	126	-23.4%	-39.3%	-6.3%	16.3%	2.9%
% citing		15.1%	4.0%	39.7%	74.6%	23.8%
Workers	380	-19.1%	-33.3%	-0.9%	8.3%	6.2%
% citing		21.8%	4.7%	25.5%	68.7%	17.1%
Farmers	206	-20.2%	4.9%	2.9%	17.1%	-7.3%
% citing		21.8%	8.3%	19.4%	63.6%	12.6%
Non-Labor Force	80	-25.6%	-35.5%	8.1%	27.2%	-12.6%
% citing		13.8%	3.8%	23.8%	58.8%	23.8%
Overall	1072	-19.8%	-21.5%	-1.1%	12.1%	6.6%
% citing		19.2%	4.6%	29.1%	68.5%	18.8%

Note: Data is for native Taiwanese segment of the population only.

working class support for the opposition was likewise motivated much more by an inchoate sense of disaffection with the established order than any ideological affinity for democracy or even any systematic issue orientation. Individual workers may seek out opposition politicians for assistance with specific grievances, and there is some evidence that workers dissatisfied with labor welfare or union cadres were more likely to support the DPP.<sup>10</sup> But overall, working class support for opposition and independent candidates was thought to be driven primarily by affective attitudes which were in turn determined by factors such as trust in the central government (Hong, 1995). In the early 1980's many leading Taiwan-watchers were similarly adamant that support for the *Dang-wai* should not be interpreted to imply endorsement of the opposition's ideological agenda but merely reflected resentment against local KMT party hacks and sympathy for the beleaguered opposition candidates (e.g. Chou & Nathan, 1987, p.282; Jacobs, 1981, p.28).

These interpretations are generally supported by survey data. Table 9 presents a tabulation of several major factors cited as determinants of vote choices in the 1983

**Table 10: Effects of Specific Campaign Issues on KMT Support – 1983 Legislative Elections**

Strata	N	Chinese Nationalism	Taiwanese Identity	Conservative Consolidation	Political Liberalization	Social Welfare
Government	107	-13.5%	-20.7%	12.9%	-13.8%	2.3%
% citing		9.3%	10.3%	14.0%	15.9%	23.4%
Bourgeoisie	78	7.4%	-39.1%	11.1%	-43.5%	-26.2%
% citing		5.1%	11.5%	11.5%	12.8%	16.7%
Upper Middle	95	17.7%	-13.8%	8.7%	-26.3%	-4.2%
% citing		10.5%	7.4%	23.2%	20.0%	22.1%
Lower Middle	126	8.9%	-29.7%	15.9%	-32.4%	-9.6%
% citing		11.1%	6.3%	17.5%	14.3%	30.2%
Working Class	380	30.6%	-12.2%	21.2%	-17.2%	0.7%
% citing		6.6%	7.1%	8.7%	11.3%	19.7%
Farmer	206	20.3%	-0.2%	31.3%	-4.9%	5.4%
% citing		2.4%	4.9%	4.9%	4.4%	16.5%
Non-Labor Force	80	35.6%	32.9%	35.1%	7.9%	8.8%
% citing		8.8%	1.3%	7.5%	5.0%	15.0%
Overall	1072	20.7%	-15.0%	22.1%	-16.8%	0.0%
% citing		7.0%	6.8%	10.9%	11.2%	20.3%

Note: Data is for native Taiwanese segment of the population only.

electoral survey, focusing once again on native Taiwanese voters. For each factor, the percentage of voters in each social stratum citing the factor as one of their top three considerations is reported. In addition, a percentage differential index of KMT support is given as the difference between the level of KMT support among those citing the factor and the level among those who did not.<sup>11</sup> The results clearly suggest that affective attitudes – which included “admiration for the candidate’s courage” as well as “sympathy for the candidate’s experiences” – were by far the most important factor behind opposition support. Voters citing affective attitudes were roughly 20% less likely to vote for the KMT and, significantly, working class voters were among the most likely to cite affective reasons. While considerations of Taiwanese ethnicity (on the part of the candidate) likewise reduced KMT support, less than 5% of respondents admitted to such considerations. In contrast, candidate qualifications (as measured by educational and professional credentials) and political relations were clearly the government’s strong suit. Membership in a monopolistic ruling party does have its privileges.

**Table 11: Average Democratic Orientation by Social Class**

Strata	1983 Electoral Survey			1986 Electoral Survey		
	Overall	KMT Voters	Non-KMT Voters	Overall	KMT Voters	Non-KMT Voters
Government	3.59	3.54	3.87	3.90	3.76	4.31
Bourgeoisie	3.57	3.35	3.75	4.05	3.96	4.15
Upper Middle	3.72	3.59	4.43	4.08	3.95	4.28
Lower Middle	3.55	3.54	3.74	4.13	3.99	4.44
Workers	3.50	3.47	3.59	3.90	3.81	3.96
Farmers	3.27	3.23	3.31	3.56	3.54	3.56
Overall	3.50	3.45	3.60	3.89	3.79	3.98
Pearson's $\chi^2$ :	<i>Pr</i> = .000	<i>Pr</i> = .054	<i>Pr</i> = .000	<i>Pr</i> = .000	<i>Pr</i> = .005	<i>Pr</i> = .000

Note: Democratic orientation score given on scale of 1-6, 6 being the most democratic. Data is for native Taiwanese segment of the population only.

Cumulatively about 30% of respondents cited specific campaign issues. By far the most oft-cited issues were those related to social welfare, a pattern especially pronounced among the workers and farmers (See Table 10). However, concerns about social welfare apparently had little impact on partisan support overall, and in fact slightly increased support for the ruling party (perfectly sensible if the objective was realistic hopes of affecting policies) among the popular sectors. Voters concerned with political liberalization and the promotion of Taiwanese identity, the twin pillars of the *Dang-wai* platform, were predictably less likely to vote for the KMT; although even among the native segment of the population conservative consolidation and greater Chinese nationalism attracted roughly as much support. More notably, there is scant evidence to suggest any particularly pro-democratic political consciousness on the part of the working classes. Compared to most other social groups workers and farmers were among the least likely to invoke political liberalization or even the abstract issues of promoting Taiwanese identity.

Indeed, with regard to the normative affinity for democratic values the conventional wisdom is generally correct: Using six items from the electoral surveys of 1983 and 1986 designed to measure the respondent's democratic orientation along six dimensions including popular sovereignty, pluralism, popular accountability, political equality, personal liberty and intra-governmental accountability, I constructed a six-point Democratic Orientation Index with six being the highest level of democratic orientation. Focusing again on the Taiwanese segment of the population, I found that members of the middle class – and in particular the well-educated upper-middle class – exhibited the highest level of democratic orientation (Table 11), a fact not inconsistent with their support for the ruling party given their preference for “progress through stability”. On the other hand members of the working class exhibited the lowest level of democratic orientation, and it is noteworthy that although non-KMT voters as a group were more democratically-

inclined than KMT supporters, working class non-KMT voters were no more democratically-oriented than upper middle class KMT supporters.

### **Class, Ethnicity, and the Calculus of Electoral Politics**

That mass support for the opposition was driven primarily by affective attitudes is entirely consistent with decades of voting behavior research. Scholars of the American voter such as Angus Campbell and Philip Converse were famously pessimistic about the public's grasp of policy issues, arguing instead that mass political support was determined largely by partisan identifications derived mainly from affective judgments (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). While the basis of partisanship in mature Western democracies continues to be debated, there is little doubt that Taiwanese politics in the authoritarian era was not conducive to issue-based contestation. As a catch-all party the KMT preferred to remain ambiguous on day-to-day issues so as to appear above the fray. And as a dictatorial ruling party the KMT did not have to attract support based on issues. Meanwhile, any promise made by the opposition on specific policy issues was congenitally empty.

Yet the working classes' lack of a coherent political agenda is fraught with consequences. As long as ordinary citizens render their support based on emotions and impressions rather than hard-headed political demands, the political elites have room to retain mass support through the adroit deployment of symbolic politics while gutting the policy agenda for their own ends. When I queried former DPP chairman Yao Jiawen about the opposition's curious silence on socio-economic issues of direct concern to its core supporters, he explained that since the opposition was not in a position to implement policies, it had to refrain from making specific promises lest the voters be disillusioned. Others pointed to the dispersion and high turnover rates of Taiwanese industry as major obstacles to labor mobilization. All these were legitimate concerns, but a more important consideration can be gleaned from the writings of Zhang Jun-hong, the DPP "party philosopher". Laying down a grand vision for the opposition's road to power in 1989, 11 years before the dramatic electoral upset that catapulted the DPP into the Presidential Palace, Zhang argued forcefully against the class politics of his left-wing comrades:

... The first question one must decide is this: Do we wish to organize a minor party in permanent opposition, or a major party with ambitions to take over the reins of power? If our ambition is to be satisfied with being in opposition, then we might as well be a single-class party, a party of moral purity. But if our ambition is to construct a democratic polity with regular transfers of power, or simply to be a powerful opposition, then we must construct a broad-based, inclusive party. Minor parties can afford to have a purity fetish, but major parties must be inclusive. Revolutionary organizations can be the former, but democratic parties must be the latter to be powerful. (Zhang, 1989c; p.6)

The mobilizational strategies of electoral parties, therefore, are always dictated by the cold calculus of electoral politics. Except at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, raw headcounts are no longer sufficient. As Zhang (1989c) reminded his comrades,

becoming a powerful opposition takes media outlets, and media outlets take a great deal of cash. Zhang estimated that setting up a newspaper would take at least NT\$300 million (~US\$8.5 million); a TV station NT\$10 billion. In 1989 the KMT allegedly raised NT\$2 billion from the financial sector alone, whereas the DPP's entire budget that year amounted to only NT\$20 million. Little wonder Zhang was appalled by the youngsters' fiery class rhetoric. In Zhang's mind there's little doubt as to the direction the road to power should take: The party's actions should never affect the capitalists directly; The party should ally with labor and farmers only strategically as to avoid creating a class-based coalition against all capitalists; When in office, the party should maintain class neutrality; When out of office, each party branch must make independent decisions with the "expansion of party power as the guiding principle for action". There was no place for "abstract, generalized stance on class politics." (Zhang, 1989a; pp.140-1)

This is the concrete political context in which the DPP's subsequent appeals to ethnic rhetoric must be understood. In the world of practical politics discourses of ethnicity and class never exist in an ideational vacuum untainted by the crass calculus of gladiatorial competition. In a hierarchical ethnic system where class and ethnicity are inextricably intertwined, ethnic rhetoric clearly afforded the affective leverage with which the party could retain its traditional blue-collar base even as it reinvented itself as the middle-class party *par excellence* for the island's more calculating economic elites. Ethnic mobilization was easier to sustain not because ethnicity is more real; but because, as David Laitin (1988: p.591) observed, its "organizational costs are low when common and powerful symbols are readily available and rules of exclusion easily formulated." It hardly mattered that the DPP's campaign slogans were vague and formulaic – in fact that was the very secret of their success – so long as they were delivered in perfectly accented Taiwanese. Conversely, plodding KMT ministers lugging armfuls of manila folders merely looked all the more buffoonish when they couldn't even understand simple questions from opposition legislators addressing them in the local dialect. What had been the badge of backwardness and shame was now the single most powerful weapon in the opposition's repertoire. The issue of the spoken tongue was thus as simple as it was profound. In the Taiwanese dialect the opposition had stumbled upon a powerful kinship symbol, whose raw emotional resonance was sufficient to keep the masses mesmerized even as the party was beginning to play a different tune.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years Taiwan's long quest for democracy had often been characterized as a quest for national self-determination (e.g. Wachman, 1994). In this view the crisis of legitimacy encountered by the KMT regime was first and foremost a crisis of national identity, and the struggle between the regime and its opponents was essentially a contest between competing nationalisms of an émigré elite from China and the natives of Taiwan. But while the 1990s had indeed witnessed a powerful upsurge of Taiwanese nationalism mobilized in no small part by the DPP, most discerning observers – including many deeply sympathetic to the nationalist cause – generally concur that democratization was the cause, rather than the result, of the dramatic rise in Taiwanese national consciousness (e.g. Lin 2001). In this regard the Taiwanese experience should be familiar to students of the Balkans and the former



Soviet republics – Once cracks began to appear in the authoritarian regime, nationalist issues quickly became the natural choice of the political opposition (or even the incumbents) for mass mobilization. In the absence of the sophisticated institutional and organizational apparatus needed for the aggregation of complex societal interests, nationalist appeals often represent the only low-cost, expeditious and effective instrument of mobilization available.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Class, Ethnicity and the Politics of Transition**

This essay offers a sharply revisionist interpretation of Taiwan's transition to democracy. In contrast to most existing accounts, which see democratization either as the political expression of the ascendancy of the urban middle class or the inexorable triumph of a resurgent Taiwanese national identity, this study emphasizes the contribution of the island's urban and rural working classes to Taiwan's democratization and seeks to locate ethnicity within an empirically constructed framework of class structuration. In so doing, this study aspires to draw lessons of universal relevance for the theory of democratization.

My analysis reveals the political stance of the middle class to be largely situational, calculated to preserve and advance its vested interests. Although the middle class has often acted as an ally of the popular sectors in the struggle for political democracy, it conceives of democracy largely in procedural terms and is therefore usually quick to retreat into the authoritarian embrace when popular demands turn to radical social redistribution. The importance of the middle class lies in its frequent role as the arbiter of regime outcomes (Kitschelt, 1992). Many times the defection of the middle class proved to be the straw that broke the junta's back. At other times – as it has been said about Taiwan – the continual support of the middle class helped ensure an acceptable outcome for the *ancien regime* and acted as an inducement for liberalization.

For Taiwan's budding opposition, popular support came primarily from the island's urban and rural working classes as well as the independent bourgeoisie. In retrospect support from the entrepreneurial sector was indeed crucial for it helped ensure the survival of the movement in a relentlessly hostile political environment. But as many old *Dang-wai* fighters readily admitted, with the KMT regularly outspending the opposition by up to 100 times, the battle for democracy was won at the ballot box, not the donation box. In this sense, it was the urban working class with its strength in numbers that was the bedrock of Taiwan's democratic transition.

While privileging class, this study does not dispute the saliency of ethnic cleavages or the importance of ethnic mobilization. Provincial origin has been, after all, the basic organizational principle of politics since the day the first KMT troops came ashore at Keelung. Yet by itself provincial origin tells only fifteen percent of the story, because among the native Taiwanese who made up 85% of the population, ethnicity was itself a class issue, a key marker of the "otherness" of the lower strata whereas the better-educated upper strata were far more successfully assimilated into the elite "national" culture. The phenomenon, of course, can be found everywhere

from São Paulo to Kerala or even Fujian Province on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

That the opposition chose to invoke ethnicity over class was primarily a product of the unique correlation between class, ethnicity and the distribution of political and economic resources in Taiwanese society. Oftentimes when multiple social cleavages coincide no identity is intrinsically more salient than another. Rather, there are circumstances when one or another identity may become the most appropriate basis for the political mobilization of one or another social group. In this sense having “a critical mass of people having a strong group identification” (Varshney, 2003) is still insufficient to explain the origins of ethnic mobilization. While value-rationality and the psychological microfoundations of ethnic identity are indeed important factors delimiting the realm of the politically feasible, ethnic mobilization as a *political strategy* is still governed by the calculus of instrumental rationality. This is clearly demonstrated by the Taiwanese example, where the ruling KMT enjoyed apparent ideological hegemony on issues of identity, and class-based grievances seemed – even to many veteran oppositionists – the natural rallying point of anti-regime mobilization. In the end ethnic articulations were employed because they were judged to be the most effective at maximizing the opposition’s electoral prospects. But that should not obscure the very reality of class or the equally real consequences of mode of mobilization chosen.

The conceptualization of class employed in this study, however, is one defined by the social relations of power rather than the economic relations of production, since an overly economic construction of class may be wholly inadequate for understanding the recent wave of democratization struggles in Asia (e.g. Slater, 2004). While most class-based treatments of democratization have followed the traditional focus on organized labor, anyone looking for evidence of trade union involvement in Taiwan would be disappointed. Yet the emphasis on organized labor can be misplaced, especially when unionized workers comprise no more than an elite minority within the working class enjoying a privileged status sustained through state largess. As noted by Bellin (2000) one can hardly expect such “aristocratic” labor unions to assume a leading role in the push for democratization.

More fundamentally, one should not presuppose that a movement consisting largely of “workers as individuals” is any less of a class phenomenon than one mobilized around the identities of the workplace. Many urban social movements based in poor neighborhoods, for instance, are likewise mobilized around class-related grievances, demands, and identities (Collier, 1999; p.110). Although unusually unarticulated, members of each class do share an awareness of the conditions of their station in life derived from lived experiences. This awareness may not be explicitly articulated in “class” terms, but it will involve “a conception of the differences and inequalities that divide one class from another and of the positions that they hold relative to each other.” (Scott, 2002) In other words class politics need not be restricted to the sphere of economic production nor even centered upon economic, instrumental concerns, because individuals do not identify themselves solely by their positions within the relations of production. Class can and does “happen” at the local temple, the neighborhood police station, or even

the corner karaoke parlor in addition to the workplace. And there is little reason to equate the politics of class with the politics of production unless we insist upon adhering to a strictly materialist interpretation of history which sees politics as a mere subsidiary form of the “contradictions between productive forces.”

As Weber observes, the flow of material and social rewards is fundamentally determined by the distribution of power within a community, and as such power is not an attribute but rather the very basis of social stratification (Parkin, 1971; p.46). In this sense the struggles of democratization are but one manifestation of the struggles of those social classes at the peripheries of the body politic against the dominant classes entrenched in the inner sanctum of state power, although as the Taiwanese case illustrates the mass base of the democratic movement need not be characterized by a particularly pro-democratic ideology. To the extent the masses are marginalized from the existing social order, members of the popular sectors lend their strengths to various anti-establishment causes promising greater equity and justice. But while all such movements are propelled by a generalized sense of disaffection and desire for greater inclusion, the precise ideological articulation of the struggle may be expressed in democratic, ethnic, Marxist or Peronist terms, depending on the mode of mobilization of the counter-elite.

Yet ultimately, the popular sectors remain the only proven guarantor for the endurance of democracy. Though not every popular movement had been a movement for democracy, almost every successful democracy had seen substantial popular sector mobilization in support of democratization. In those cases where the introduction of electoral politics was exclusionist and limited largely to privileged sectors, democracy did not take root and many years of tumultuous authoritarian rule awaited (e.g. Yashar, 1997; Collier, 1999). Thus if we are to embrace democracy as a normatively desirable form of political organization, we must recognize that its consolidation hinges upon the ability of the new regime to engage the popular sectors and address their pressing concerns, whether or not the initial mobilization had been carried out in class terms. In this we can hardly plead ignorance – we only have to learn from some 200 years of history.

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<sup>1</sup> The same paradigm also undergirds the great majority of formal models of electoral behavior.

<sup>2</sup> The “native Taiwanese” in our discussion refer to the descendants of Han Chinese migrants who colonized the island a few centuries earlier, mostly from Fujian Province on the mainland. Culturally and ethnically, they continue to have much in common with the people of southern Fujian.

<sup>3</sup> One island-wide 1984 survey found that only about 17% of respondents expressed any dissatisfaction with the country’s political institutions, roughly in line with electoral studies that reported only about 12% of the electorate considered political liberalization to be an important issue. The 1984 survey also found that individuals with authoritarian political values heavily outnumbered those with a pro-democratic bent. (Yang 2005, Figures 1 & 4.)

<sup>4</sup> An excellent account of these “part-time proletarians” in Taiwan is given by Hill Gates (1979, 1988), who found that the lifestyles of workers and small proprietors were almost indistinguishable. These findings are closely echoed by studies of working class communities in the rest of the developing world.

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<sup>5</sup> Cluster analysis is a statistical technique for measuring the similarities between research subjects.

<sup>6</sup> Most former Dang-wai candidates interviewed by the author emphasized that campaign contributions were of secondary importance, in part because their needs were so modest. Opposition candidates employed almost no media advertising, and relied heavily on mass rallies to spread their messages. The vast majority of contributions appear to have been quite small, often made in the form of bills and coins tossed into the back of the campaign truck. In poorer districts, donations often took the form of foodstuff and groceries. (Interviews with Zhang Junhong, Yao Jiawen, Huang Huangxiong etc., 2004)

<sup>7</sup> The author's sources were unanimous in indicating that their campaign workers in the pre-transition era came from the "grassroots", in part because they rarely paid salaries.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed explanations of the construction of these indices, the reader is referred to Yang, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Xiao (1999) for an analysis of the Xiang Tu Wen Xue (nativist literature) movement of the 1970's.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in a 1989 survey of union members Hong (1995) found that among workers "very satisfied" with labor welfare, 48% supported the KMT and only 1% supported the DPP. Among those "dissatisfied", the figures were 26% for the KMT and 19% for the DPP (p.275).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. a negative value would suggest voters citing that factor were less likely to vote for the KMT.

<sup>12</sup> For an insightful discussion on the biological basis of nationalist appeals, see Gary Johnson (1997).

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