

# NEPCAP POLICY BRIEF

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Taiwan Citizen Diplomacy



## Northern England Policy Centre for the Asia Pacific (NEPCAP)

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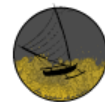
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The Northern England Policy Centre for the Asia Pacific (NEPCAP) was launched in June 2018. Its aim is to play the role of maximising research impact into policy and practice, in various fields of studies related to the issues in the Asia Pacific region.

NEPCAP will produce a regular policy brief series, built upon our research papers, about up-to-date policy issues of domestic politics, international relations, security, society and development cooperation.



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## Foreword

### Dr. Adina Zemanek

The recent years revealed the power of ordinary individuals aided by new media technologies to impact governments and general publics across the world. Among them are: Greta Thunberg, who raised global awareness to the impending climate crisis; Michał Rogalski, the Polish teenager who initiated an online volunteer community that built a comprehensive, nationwide database of information related to Covid-19, which has become a key resource for experts and politicians; or Taiwanese hackers and computer-literate citizens dedicated to civil engagement, whose many initiatives have gained official attention and blended into collaborative projects with the government. Therefore, it is both timely and meaningful to explore citizen activism, its impact, and its potential to complement and become interlinked with official initiatives.

Citizen diplomacy can be defined as ordinary citizens' participation in transnational forums for global promotion of a country's image (Samuel-Azran, Ilovici, Zari and Geduld, 2019: 38), or as alternative problem-solving strategies employed by non-state actors to mitigate difficulties in inter-state relations or to resolve deep-rooted conflicts that cannot be effectively addressed by political leaders (Fulda, 2019: 189). Such non-governmental actors who help to bring about change and solve conflicts between nations or groups within a nation may include institutions (religious, humanitarian, think tanks) or influential individuals (academics, former government officials, entrepreneurs). Since the turn of the 21st century, their contribution has gained increasing recognition from international relations experts and policymakers. However, citizen diplomacy (especially grassroots-led initiatives) has not been granted significant attention in academic studies. It is even more so in the case of countries that do not enjoy high international visibility or have an existing positive image.

Taiwan's ambiguous international status and tension-laden relationship with the People's Republic of China fuel a need for fully-fledged global visibility in an era of worldwide communication.

However, these factors make it difficult for ROC state institutions to brand Taiwan as an independent national entity and push them towards less visible diplomacy (Pelaggi, 2019: 103-104). Moreover, research into Taiwan's public diplomacy to date revealed government projects as deficient in focus, coherence and creativity, slow to detach from a China-centred narrative and unable to effectively integrate the activities of disparate institutions (Rawnsley, 2014). Another problem is polarized party politics; changes in ruling parties cause disruptions in Taiwan's nation-building discourse targeting both local and international publics.

Given these challenges, it is both interesting and significant to consider whether grassroots actors with their on-site contacts abroad are better equipped for promoting Taiwan's image in innovative and immediate ways. This was the starting point for a project led by the Northern Institute of Taiwan Studies at the University of Central Lancashire (Adina Zemanek, Lara Momesso, Tihan Chang) in collaboration with Taiwan Corner, a civil society association promoting Taiwan in Denmark. We took into account individual persons and grassroots associations based in Europe (both natives of European countries and ROC citizens residing in Europe), who work towards enhancing popular knowledge and spurring public debates related to Taiwan, or promote exchange and cooperation with Taiwan through channels such as: cultural events, media outlets, discussions on current social and political affairs, political lobbying etc.

The pilot stage for this study took place in 2020 under a grant awarded by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. It concluded with an online workshop held on 4 November, which brought together nine representatives of very diverse citizen associations.

In his opening keynote address, Michael Danielsen (our project partner and chairman of Taiwan Corner) emphasized the importance of promoting Taiwan in Europe, the role played by civil society groups, and the significance of collaboration between these grassroots actors. His address was followed by brief introductions of the remaining participants - their organizations and the activities they conduct.

Subsequently, the participants were asked to contribute thoughts on various aspects of their work: the most rewarding elements, problems they encountered, or the sustainability of citizen diplomacy. A heated debate emerged around the most appropriate terms that can be used to define the nature of such activities, with most participants embracing the idea of citizen diplomacy over activism. The workshop's final section was dedicated to discussing existing and potential collaboration between civil society organizations in Europe.

The two policy briefs showcased in the present NEPCAP special issue were kindly contributed by two workshop participants: Michael Danielsen of Taiwan Corner and Bo-Yi Lee of Formosa Salon. We hope that they will pave the way for many other such text to be published in the future, as further stages of our project unfold.

## References

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*Adina Zemanek is a Lecturer in Asia Pacific Studies at the University of Central Lancashire and an executive board member of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (since 2016). Her teaching at UCLan has covered topics such as East Asian popular culture, the cultural and creative industries in East Asia, East Asian philosophy and research methods. Her research interests include: nation branding in Taiwan and Taiwan's citizen diplomacy in Europe; banal and everyday nationalism in Taiwanese visual culture; history and memory in Taiwanese graphic narratives and tourist souvenirs; Confucianism, gender and power in Chinese and Taiwanese TV dramas.*

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## Why Promote Taiwan through Civil Society

Michael Danielsen

Taiwan's political influence in Europe is hampered by one major factor: the country and the true story of its society and situation are not well known among Europeans. This weakness could be addressed in a simple manner - Taiwan needs to reach into more, and more diverse, corners of European society. This is possible by working with a broad spectrum of independent civil society groups. These groups can improve knowledge about Taiwan among ordinary citizens, journalists and politicians who subsequently may be more willing to engage with the island and talk about it. In the long term, this will further strengthen Taiwan's political influence in Europe.

### Civil society groups

Civil society groups already promoting Taiwan in Europe take many forms. They range from closed discussion groups to people working in the arts, in cinema, religion, media and politics.

It is important to agree on what kind of groups we are referring to and thus how we define them. Academic literature appears to define civil society groups in different ways. My own working definition of civil society groups promoting Taiwan, based on my own practical experience working in, and with, groups is as follows: groups of people who work on a volunteer basis, who have an interest in Taiwan, or an idea thereof, or display a certain purpose to promote Taiwan. The volunteer aspect is essential because this makes for a membership based on interest and consensus rather than any legal or civic status. This provides a basis for the passion and originality characteristic of civil society groups. All members are able to work and talk freely without the risk of losing an income or a job.

These groups can be stable and professional in their work and can moderate their level of activities up and down. They can pop up quickly and disappear with equal speed. This is a characteristic that needs to be accepted and understood. Benefits can be gained from all these types of groups. Similar challenges appear in the internal dynamics. In such groups, engagement competes with full-time jobs, studies, family and friends, and many other activities. It would be an interesting research area to determine the reasons behind the different performances and the contributions from each group.

The term "civil activist" is often used about the members of civil society groups. This seldom describes accurately the members of most civil society groups promoting Taiwan. While activism in the streets can be one way of promoting Taiwan, it is far from the dominant means of promoting Taiwan among European-based civil society groups. Instead, they work through politics, media, art, publications and in religious groups, for example. A better term, perhaps, would be "citizen diplomats". Such a description has the advantage of implying a connection to local "host communities" in many ways.

### What is the motivation for promoting Taiwan?

The motivation behind these groups and its members is not fully understood. Not much research has so far been done in this area, but we can point to some general motivations. Some of the motivation can be related to:

- Taiwan's special international status
- Taiwan's culture, religion, food, art, theatre, and nature
- Business

### Public influencers - the fifth estate

As mentioned, the promotion of Taiwan is challenged by the limited knowledge that most members of the public have about the island state. This applies to journalists, cultural workers, politicians, businesspeople and to normal citizens. Also, misunderstandings about Taiwan abound - sometimes through simple lack of knowledge, but also through deliberate misinformation.

This makes the promotion of Taiwan even more important because knowledge and dialogue can influence and move people in new directions politically, businesswise, and in opening new perspectives.

The importance of promoting Taiwan may be appreciated even more if we imagine that we who know Taiwan were to stop promoting Taiwan. This will allow other storytellers to flourish and define Taiwan, in particular Chinese tellers of a different Taiwanese story.

It does not make promotion easier that people's attention easily goes in many directions. Consequently, there is an inescapable need to use multiple channels of communication to promote Taiwan. Traditional diplomatic channels and official connections have to be complemented by discussion on social media, activities in sports clubs, at cultural and street food events, among religious groups and in many more situations. So, the promotion of Taiwan needs many voices and many communication channels. Unfortunately, Taiwan's representative offices in Europe tend to continue to emphasise "high diplomacy", using traditional patterns of diplomacy that fail to embrace the diversity of Europeans' interest in Taiwan. In this way Taiwan misses opportunities and loses influence.

Civil society groups may be described as a "fifth estate" in society. The reason being that by having dialogue and organising events, civil society groups can influence society. Even if progress is slow, and it will be, civil society groups can increase the influence of Taiwan through the groups' abilities to argue or have dialogues in public and in the areas of interest.

## Cooperation

The most successful groups are those who can work across borders with other groups or with wider society, including the corridors of politics, culture, everyday citizens, and religions. Such groups create networks and are less inward-looking. This requires connections to local communities or both local and international communities. Closed groups obtain fewer results because no influence comes out from closed group discussions among, say, Taiwanese in Europe without connection to the wider society.

Taiwan representative offices can benefit from these groups by promoting cooperation with them. They can use their own ideas or the ideas coming out of the civil society groups themselves, and the passion and group dynamics of their members. This will allow independent actors to tell stories about Taiwan.

Cooperation between civil society groups and Taiwan's representative offices can be hindered by a diplomat's perceived need to be in control, and the civil society groups' insistence on independence. Both sides need to make concessions. Most of the time something good will come out of cooperation.

At the end of the day, promoting Taiwan is important because otherwise other storytellers will pop up and we may not like the stories that they tell.

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## Civic Diplomacy and Deepening Taiwan's Democracy: Lessons learned from Formosa Salon

Bo-Yi Lee

To invoke changes towards higher standards, civic diplomacy relies on collaborative networks, led by civic society, to envision sustainable futures and generate knowledge to solve specific problems (Yi and Hayes, 2015). One of the positive changes we expect is deepening democracy. To achieve such a goal, it is vital to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues. This article will introduce how Formosa Salon, a group of (mainly) Taiwanese people in the United Kingdom, has strived to create a safe and inclusive space for people to understand and further engage in a wide variety of social issues, including social movements and democracy outside Taiwan.

The establishment of Formosa Salon can be dated back to the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan in 2014. Several people (mainly Taiwanese students) protested in central London to demand that the Taiwanese government rescind and renegotiate the Cross-Strait Agreement on Trade in Services in March 2014. After the demonstration, these people continued to hold events (such as workshops, seminars and study groups) under the name Formosa Salon to discuss public issues. They have organised over 120 events so far. The topics included, but were not limited to, issues surrounding the Sunflower Movement and its related concepts (such as neoliberalism and free trade agreements), Taiwanese history (such as the 228 incident and white terror), Taiwanese culture (such as indigenous music and cultures), social welfare (including national health insurance and homelessness), environmental protection (such as climate change), labour rights, and gender equality, etc.

Topics related to social movements and democracy in different contexts (such as Hong Kong and China) have also been discussed. These events are opportunities for participants, not only Taiwanese students or workers but also people from various backgrounds, to learn from each other and further build up networks to support each other on an international scale. They invited Dr Petula Ho Sik-ying to talk about the research project "The Young Girls' Heart" which addresses gender issues during and after the Umbrella Movement. They also invited Brian Hioe, an editor of New Bloom Magazine, to share his reporting experience in Hong Kong.

Around one hundred participants, many of them overseas Chinese, came to listen to and further challenge Mr Wang Dang's perspective of the relationships between Taiwan, China and the United States. Researchers focusing on the history and theology of Hong Kong were also invited to share their studies.

Although Formosa Salon, generally, does not record the number of participants in each activity, it is still reasonable to say that it has encouraged people in public discussions around social issues. The online Facebook group for Formosa Salon, its primary platform to promote activities, now has over 2,300 members. Based on my four-year engagement in Formosa Salon, its promotion has been quite successful because we have seen 30 people participate in each activity on average. On some occasions, the number of participants has been much higher. For example, about 80 to 100 participants registered with Formosa Salon to attend London Pride each year from 2016 to 2019.

This kind of group, for people to meet and exchange ideas around social issues, is critical. It facilitates mutual learning and fosters collaborative networks to strive for long-term sustainability, such as deepening democracy, among participants from various backgrounds in terms of expertise and nationality, in a bottom-up approach. Based on my interviews with those who have participated in the activities held by Formosa Salon, participants say that they acquire new knowledge in each activity, broadening their horizons thanks to the diversity of the topics covered. They enjoy the sense of openness - everyone is welcome to listen to and further express opinions on any particular public issue. One interviewee told me that through attending these events, he "satisfies his eagerness to learn". Another interviewee stated that "I learn new thoughts, practices, or concepts throughout the processes [of discussion and engagement]".

However, Formosa Salon has been faced with several obstacles. The first is how to attract more people to engage in such discussions. Those who have been taking part, or organising, Formosa Salon activities, are likely to be those who care about social issues already.

Furthermore, some interviewees told me that they only invite those who have previously shown an interest in social issues in their peer groups to participate in the activities held by Formosa Salon. However, this strategy may not reach people who show little or no interest in public issues. Hence, this strategy may risk failing to achieve the goal of Formosa Salon, to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues.

Besides, organisers must choose topics for public discussions from the perspectives of potential participants. It does not mean that organisers have to self-censor by avoiding the potentially "sensitive" subjects. Nevertheless, topics should not only be interesting to organisers themselves. One interviewee told me that one of her friends found the topics "not interesting at all" when she tried to promote Formosa Salon to her friends (she failed to talk this friend into showing up). Organisers must come up with a feasible strategy to persuade those who have not engaged in social issues to exchange their time and efforts to engage in public discussions. This could be done by identifying the values that appeal to the people they want to involve in public discussion.

Although Formosa Salon has some obstacles to overcome, I believe that their experience and achievements still have implications for those who also aim to enhance civic awareness and public engagement in social issues. Moreover, they have initiated and nurtured collaborative networks among researchers and activities interested in social issues not only in Taiwan but also in areas which include Hong Kong and China. Creating such a safe and inclusive space for mutual learning and support is critical, and Formosa Salon has strived to do so for nearly seven years without a leader, command structure, formalised membership, or steady financial resources. Their long-term efforts and future possibilities should not be overlooked.

#### Reference

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*Bo-Yi Lee. PhD candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant at King's Business School, King's College London. His research interests include human resource management, Asian business systems, the future of work, and social marketing. He is an active member of Formosa Salon, and he occasionally writes comments on Taiwanese politics and social issues for Taiwanese media.*

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