

Sunflower Occupy Movement (Taiwan)

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The Sunflower Occupy movement was a transformative protest event that delivered a severe blow to Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) government, interrupted its cooperation with the People's Republic of China, crystalized a change in public perception of Chinese influence, and created a new political generation.

On 18 March 2014, several hundred students and social movement activists stormed into Taiwan's Parliament, the Legislative Yuan, occupying the chamber for 24 days and motivating further nationwide protests. This "Sunflower Occupy movement" was intended to disrupt the KMT's forceful ratification of the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement with China, which had caused concerns regarding undemocratic manipulation and its effects on national security. News of the occupation spread swiftly through social media and TV. Within hours, thousands of citizens had rushed to the scene, surrounding Parliament to "defend the students," while NGO activists set up logistical support outside. The Legislative Yuan's speaker, Wang Jin-pyng, decided not to summon police to eject the protestors, but President Ma Ying-jeou refused to retract the agreement. On 23 March, some militant protestors, impatient with the stalemate and angry at Ma's intransigence, escalated matters by occupying the Executive Yuan, a move which met with a violent crackdown. Images of police beating unarmed protestors enraged the public and triggered a mass demonstration in front of the Presidential Palace on 30 March. At this stage, the campaign enjoyed overwhelming approval in opinion polls. The occupation continued, while President Ma remained uncompromising, and both sides competed for public support while seeking exit strategies. On 6 April, Wang announced that the Legislative Yuan would delay ratification of the agreement until an oversight law had been enacted, amounting to an indefinite suspension. The occupation ended on 10 April.

The Sunflower movement was unprecedented in being the first time that protestors had occupied Taiwan's Parliament. It scuppered a trade agreement between Taiwan and China. More significantly, KMT-CCP cooperation faltered. Following its 1949 defeat by the communists on the mainland, the KMT had ruled Taiwan until 2000. It had become a political ally of China in 2005, playing a collaborative role in ushering in Chinese influence and benefiting from cooperation. Beijing now utilized economic ties to leverage its operations, motivating Taiwanese businesspeople to push its political agenda. With China's "united front work" penetrating every corner of Taiwanese society, the increasingly ubiquitous "China factor" was of great concern. In retrospect, the Sunflower movement was the culmination of anti-China push-back (see Figure 1) and embodied a new Taiwanese national identity for younger generations. According to polls (by the China Impact Studies Group at Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica), support for Taiwanese independence increased from 43 percent in 2011 to 56 percent in 2015 for those aged 20 to 34 years, with no similar change seen in other age groups. The movement gave birth to a rejuvenated independence cause.

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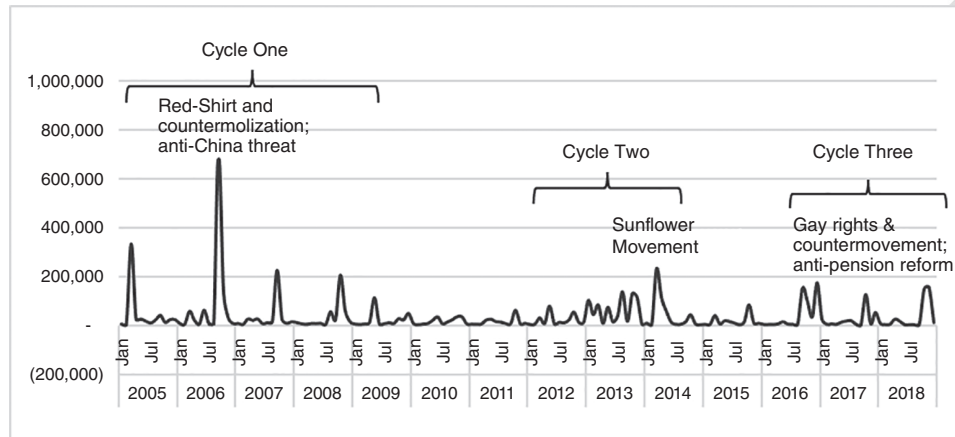


Figure 1 Trend of protest mobilization in Taiwan, January 2005–December 2018 (persons, monthly data).

Source: The author's Collective Protest Research Team at Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.

Three large cycles of collective protest emerged post-2000. In all three, political-issue mobilization stands out in terms of scale, but each cycle featured different collective actors, causes, and framings. A brief comparison will demonstrate the importance of the Sunflower movement.

Cycle One overlapped with the first Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government (2000–2008) and the first year of KMT government (2008–2016). The crest of this cycle was the 2006 “Red-Shirt movement,” led by the “pan-blue camp” (KMT and other pro-China parties), protesting against DPP president Chen Shui-bian. Four smaller peaks represented waves of anti-China campaigns, organized primarily by the DPP and traditional Taiwanese independence groups. They tended to be discrete, framed in older political language, and mobilized by long-standing democracy proponents. DPP electoral defeat in 2008 and KMT crackdowns ushered in a period of abeyance until pushback against Chinese influence regained momentum in 2012.

Cycle Two was different. Veteran democrats and pro-independence groups continued to participate, but youth increasingly took to the streets and led anti-China protests. Many large campaigns were initiated by younger organizations, such as a wave of protests against a major pro-China media group (2012), mass demonstrations commemorating the death of a conscripted soldier (2013), and opposition to land grabs (2013). The impact was reflected in participatory quantity and quality, with strong pro-democracy and pro-Taiwan enthusiasm evident among the youth. Momentum toward the Sunflower movement's outbreak grew, based on a broad civil alliance framed as defending democracy and resisting Chinese influence. During the 24-day occupation, 152 protest incidents documented nationwide involved 222,929 participants. This cycle, unlike the first, saw an intensive, continuous mobilization led by youth activists: this “Sunflower generation” represented youthful power, social solidarity, and a new civic-national sentiment. This mobilization carried fresh dynamics and ideas into the political sphere as younger activists joined the DPP and emerging parties, helping them regain power.

Cycle Three was a natural development: the DPP was back in power mainly due to the Sunflower movement, and President Tsai Ing-wen's mandate was to reform the establishment and reframe its China policy. Several agendas challenged the old order: civil-service pension reforms became a cause for pro-KMT constituents; proposed gay marriage legislation

engendered a broad alliance against gay rights, which produced several waves of mobilization and countermobilization; an incremental working-hour reduction policy estranged some labor unions and activists; a no-nuclear policy alienated those embracing nuclear energy. Tsai's government created opportunities for adversarial groups from all walks of society and often found itself besieged by dissatisfied former allies and old rivals alike. Beijing's sharp power and information warfare grew fiercer, but the government joined forces with civic groups to mount a pushback.

From a broader perspective, geopolitics is a key explanatory variable. The Sunflower movement responded to a geopolitical shift in which a rising China attempted to alter the region's balance of power. The movement, in turn, safeguarded Taiwan's geopolitical status by frustrating Chinese irredentism. Beijing had long sponsored pro-China groups in Taiwan to counter resistance campaigns; these Beijing clients intimidated protestors during the Sunflower occupation. Pushback mobilization against China occurred simultaneously in Taiwan and Hong Kong, triggered by China's aggressive intervention in both. The China factor brought together both civil societies and helped create a networked social movement field. From 2012, students and activists from both polities increased the exchange of visits, ideas, and tactics, which subsequently developed a form of isomorphism in their framing and discourse.

Situated within the global Occupy wave of the 2010s, the Sunflower movement, characterized as it was by a combined repertoire (break-in and peaceful occupation), hybrid organization (vertical core leadership, and followers' spontaneous improvisation), and strategic ending (negotiated exit, with relatively successful attainment of goals), makes it a significant case for social movement studies.

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ABSTRACT

The Sunflower Occupy movement was a transformative protest event that delivered a severe blow to Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) government, interrupted its cooperation with the People's Republic of China, crystalized a change in public perception of Chinese influence, and created a new political generation.

KEYWORDS

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