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Exposing a Clear Ambivalence: The 1992 Consensus in the 2024 Taiwan Presidential Elections

Expondo uma Ambivalência Clara: O Consenso de 1992 nas Eleições Presidenciais de Taiwan em 2024

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RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o impacto do Consenso de 1992 nas campanhas presidenciais de Taiwan em 2024. Argumentamos que o termo tem permanecido ambíguo desde a sua criação e evoluiu para um significante vazio. Através de uma análise crítica multimodal do discurso dos três candidatos presidenciais de 2024, de abril a julho de 2023, este estudo revela que Hou Yu-ih, do Kuomintang (KMT), apoiou o termo para manter a identidade sinificada de Taiwan, enquanto Lai Ching-te, do Partido Progressista Democrático (DPP), o rejeitou para promover uma identidade taiwanesa, embora

existam ambiguidades na sua interpretação. Ko Wen-je, do Partido Popular de Taiwan (TPP), rejeitou o Consenso pela sua ambivalência. A eleição resultou na vitória de Lai e na continuação da liderança do DPP. Após tomar posse, Lai rejeitou completamente o Consenso. Porém, o estudo conclui que o Consenso de 1992 provavelmente continuará a ser uma palavra-chave nas relações através do Estreito de Taiwan devido à insistência de Pequim.

Palavras-chave: Consenso de 1992, Identidade Taiwanesa, Relações através do Estreito, Ambivalência Política

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of the 1992 Consensus on Taiwan's 2024 presidential campaigns. It argues that the term has remained ambiguous since its inception and has evolved into an empty signifier. By conducting a multimodal critical discourse analysis of interviews and electoral campaigns of the three 2024 presidential candidates from April to July 2023, this study reveals that Hou Yu-ih of the Kuomintang (KMT) endorsed the term to maintain Taiwan's Sinified identity, while Lai Ching-te from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) rejected it to promote a Taiwanese identity, though ambiguities persisted in his interpretation. Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) rejected the Consensus for its ambivalence. The election resulted in Lai's victory and continued DPP leadership. After taking office, Lai rejected completely the 1992 Consensus. Despite this, the study concludes that the 1992 Consensus will likely remain a key issue in cross-strait relations due to Beijing's insistence.

Keywords: 1992 Consensus, Taiwanese Identity, Cross-Strait Relations, Political Ambivalence

1. Introduction: Taiwan's Ambivalent National Identity

The national identity of Taiwan has always been problematic and full of ambiguity. Stuart Hall (1990) states that cultural identity is not a static concept but rather a dynamic and fluid process shaped by diverse cultural influences. Benedict Anderson (2006, pp.6 & 12) emphasizes the importance of shared symbols, rituals, and a sense of belonging in the formation of nations. According to Anderson, a nation is an imagined political community which is inherently limited and sovereign. Anthony Smith's definition of a nation as "a named social group, with common historical memories and mass culture, occupying a historic territory or homeland, and possessing a single division of labour and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1999, p.189) is also evident in the process of constructing the national identity of the Taiwanese people. The development of the modern national identity of Taiwan is a dynamic and complex process that cannot be fully explained by modernist theories of nationalism alone, it also encompasses various ethno-symbolic factors.

The historical presence of modern humans on the island of Taiwan dates back to approximately 30,000 years (Zhang, 2017, pp. 33-34). The original inhabitants of the island were Austronesian people known as “Yuanzhumin原住民” or “aboriginals” in contemporary Taiwanese society. Before the arrival of Portuguese and Spanish explorers, Chinese people living in the coastal region started to migrate to the island of Penghu (Pescadores) since the 12th century and maintained commercial relations with China (Wu, Chen, Chen & Wang, 2023, p.34). In the 17th century, Spanish and Dutch colonizers reached the island and established their rule respectively in the northern and southern parts of the island. The Dutch eventually expelled the Spanish and set up an outpost of the Dutch East Indies Company in Taiwan (Mao, 2008, p.586). During the Dutch colonial period, a significant number of Chinese individuals were employed in plantations. This migration flow promoted intercultural communication and marriages among the diverse ethnic groups residing on the island (Wu et al., 2023, p.35).

In 1662, Zheng Chenggong (also known as Koxinga, 1624-1662), the son of a Chinese pirate, defeated the Dutch and established the first Chinese Han regime in the southern part of the island, therefore starting the first wave of Taiwan’s Sinification. Subsequently, the Zheng regime was defeated by the Manchu Qing army, and Taiwan was formally incorporated as a Chinese territory in 1684 (Wu et al., 2023, p.36). In 1885, following the Qing Dynasty’s defeat in the Sino-French War, the Manchu government acknowledged the strategic importance of the island and granted it provincial status (Joy, 2023, p.42).

After the first Sino-Japanese War and the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, Taiwan and Penghu were ceded to imperial Japan. However, in the same year, a short-lived Taiwan Republic was established by local residents, who attempted to resist Japanese occupation and preserve their cultural identity (Lamley, 1968). The ephemeral republic lasted for approximately five months before Taiwan became a Japanese colony for the subsequent fifty years. Meanwhile, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown in 1911, and the Republic of China (ROC) was founded in 1912. Nevertheless, despite Japanese attempts to eliminate the Chinese identity in Taiwan, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movements gradually led to the development of a distinct Taiwanese national identity.

In 1914, the “Tonghua Hui同化會” or “Assimilation Society” was established in Taiwan. Its members advocated for assimilationism in order to eliminate differential treatment between the native Taiwanese and the Japanese. However, suspicions from the colonial government led to the dissolution of the Society. Following World War I, Taiwanese intellectuals, inspired by the March

First Movement in Korea and the May Fourth Movement in China, founded the “Xinmin Hui 新民會” or “New People Society” in 1920. In contrast to assimilationism, this movement aimed to enlighten the people and seek autonomy to preserve the cultural identity of Taiwan (Wu et al., 2023, p.81). In 1945, Japan was defeated in World War II. The Republic of China took over the administration of Taiwan. The lack of efficiency and discriminative policies of the newly appointed governor of Taiwan and other mainland officials led to an armed conflict known as the 2-28 Incident between the mainlander officials and the local people in 1947 (Mao, 2008, p.587).

Following the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations and the signing of the San Francisco Treaty in 1951, Japan renounced all rights, titles, and claims to Taiwan and Penghu Islands. However, signed under the circumstances of the Cold War and the ongoing Korean War, the articles of the Treaty regarding territorial disputes were written in an oversimplified and highly ambivalent manner. The ambiguity surrounding Taiwan’s sovereignty was further complicated by the unresolved second Chinese Civil War, with the Chinese Communist Party and its People’s Republic of China (PRC), and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) and the Republic of China government on opposite sides of the Taiwan Strait. Consequently, the Treaty of San Francisco was signed in the absence of both Chinese governments (Hara, 2012, pp.2-4).

Facing pressure from the communists in the second Chinese Civil War, the ROC government declared a state of national emergency and imposed martial law in Taiwan on May 20, 1949, which persisted until 1987. This period marked the second wave of Sinification in Taiwan under the name of “decolonization” (Mao, 2008, p.589). The democratization process in Taiwan since the late 1980s has posed challenges to its Sinified national identity. Today, even though the island is under the rule of the Republic of China, the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society has been trying to seek a new national identity without been associated with any one of the Chinas. The national identity struggle has caused several political crises on the both sides of the Taiwan Strait. At the heart of this national identity crises lies a profoundly ambiguous concept known as the “1992 Consensus”, which has been a key issue for cross-strait relations since the beginning of the 21st century.

Academic discussions frequently revolve around the 1992 Consensus due to its significance and ambiguity. It’s often labelled “controversial” (Joy, 2023, p.41; Chen & Cohen, 2019, p.1) and sometimes termed a “non-consensus consensus” (Wang, Yeh, Wu & Chen, 2021). These studies reveal the ambiguous nature, varied interpretations, and disputed origins of the term, and highlight its importance in Taiwan’s relations with the mainland regime. However, few

studies have examined how the recent debates surrounding the 1992 Consensus influenced the 2024 presidential electoral campaigns in Taiwan, particularly in light of Lai Ching-te's victory. How ambivalent is the definition of the 1992 Consensus for each party in the contemporary Taiwanese society? How has the 1992 Consensus been used by the three leading candidates of the 2024 presidential elections in Taiwan to gain the voters' support? Are we witnessing new approaches or evolving interpretations of this concept in Taiwan's political discourse? How might the DPP's victory and rejection of the 1992 Consensus influence cross-strait relations moving forward, especially under Lai's administration?

2. An Escalating Ambivalence: The 1992 Consensus and Cross-Strait Relations

In 1979, the PRC adjusted its approach to cross-strait relations following the release of the Joint Communiqué between the USA and the PRC. On January 1st, 1979, the Ministry of Defense of the PRC ceased the shelling of several islands controlled by the ROC government. On the same day, the official journal *People's Daily* published an open letter titled [Message to Compatriots in Taiwan] advocating for increased cross-strait exchanges and the peaceful resolution of military confrontations (Jiang, 2015). Responding to internal and international pressures, the KMT regime, under Chiang Ching-kuo, lifted the martial law in 1987, allowing KMT officials to visit mainland China. The gradual opening for exchanges on both sides of the strait necessitated increased collaboration between the two governments. Consequently, in November 1990 and December 1991, the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) were respectively established as "non-governmental" organizations. This move facilitated Beijing and Taipei governments to negotiate and sign cross-strait agreements without engaging in "official" contact with each other (Chen & Cohen, 2019, p.9).

In October 1992, semiofficial representatives from the ARATS and the SEF held a meeting in Hong Kong over the unresolved Chinese civil war and deal with their bilateral relations in a peaceful agenda. The meeting and several dialogues which followed between the two parties resulted in some agreements on cross-strait documents authentication and non-governmental exchanges (Chen, 2017, pp.80-100). Amidst the "One China" disputes during the negotiations, an ambivalent oral agreement was reached between SEF and ARATS which was described as "One China with respective interpretations" by the KMT. This interpretation was also recognized by the ARATS, which affirmed that it represents an acknowledgment accepted by both sides of the

Taiwan Strait and the global community. (Tung & Chen, 2004, p.34). While referred to as a “consensus”, the interpretation of its meaning differs significantly between the two parties. The Chinese communist government exclusively acknowledges the “one China” aspect, asserting the existence of only one China, namely the PRC. Conversely, the ROC government concentrates on the “respective interpretations”, which provides the Taiwan government with leeway on the international stage to represent the “Republic of China”.

Since its creation, the term’s actual meaning and acceptance have continually evolved for both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The term’s ambiguous nature and the insistence of the communist government on its adoption as the guiding principle for bilateral relations have sparked numerous identity and political crises in Taiwan. The fluid and dynamic national identity has rendered the recognition of the term difficult, especially for those who advocate for a de-Sinified identity of Taiwan.

As Taiwan started its process of democratization and de-Sinification since the late 1980s, the pro-independence forces in Taiwan have been increasing. One of the leading forces of this campaign is the DPP, which rejects and negates the existence of a “1992 Consensus” on the unresolved identity of the de facto self-ruled island. The negation of the term has caused strong protests from mainland China, especially during president Chen Shui-bian’s two terms (2000-2004; 2004-2008) (Tung & Chen, 2004, p.34). As the first president elected from the DPP, Chen Shui-bian unequivocally rejects the “1992 Consensus” and the Chinese identity of Taiwan. Instead, he actively endeavors to promote its de jure independence.

After the defeat of the DPP and the victory of the KMT in the 2008 presidential elections, Ma Ying-jeou assumed office and remained in power until 2016. During his mandate, Ma recognized the KMT’s interpretation of the 1992 Consensus of “one China with respective interpretations”. While Beijing maintained its insistence on the “one China principle”, it expressed a willingness to cooperate with Ma’s administration. Consequently, a bilateral free trade agreement named the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) was signed (Chen, 2017, pp.56-57). However, the close relationship with the PRC regime raised the suspicions of the Taiwanese people. The DPP openly opposed ECFA when stating that they were “against the ‘one-China market’ concept” and that “Taiwan’s companies and labor market will be hurt by cheap Chinese goods. (Sung, 2010)”. The dissatisfaction of the Taiwanese people with the deepening relationship between Taipei and Beijing culminated in the 2014 Sunflower Movement and contributed to the Kuomintang’s defeat in the 2016 presidential elections (Chen & Cohen, 2019).

In her inaugural address as the 14th President of the Republic of China (ROC) in 2016, Tsai Ing-wen omitted the term “1992 Consensus”. Instead, she acknowledged the historical fact of “the 1992 talks between the two institutions representing each side across the Strait (SEF & ARATS), when there was joint acknowledgment of setting aside differences to seek common ground.”^[1] Despite the adoption of a moderate stance on her cross-strait relations strategy, Tsai’s omission of the term 1992 Consensus caused dissatisfaction from Beijing. Responding to Tsai’s inaugural speech, the spokesman of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of the PRC issued an announcement expressing concern over the ambiguous stance taken on the fundamental issue of cross-strait relations. The announcement highlighted the absence of explicit recognition of the 1992 Consensus and its core implications, as well as the lack of specific measures proposed to ensure the peaceful and stable development of cross-strait relations, calling it an “incomplete response”.^[2]

Despite the inherent ambiguity of the 1992 Consensus, the communist regime blamed Tsai’s stance and subsequently suspended diplomatic contacts with Taiwan (Perlez, 2016). Since then, the 1992 Consensus has become a focal point in cross-strait relations. Its importance has increased significantly for both regimes. In 2019, during his speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, the PRC President Xi Jinping clarified his definition of the 1992 Consensus, stating that it means to reunify Taiwan into the PRC. Considering the existing political and social differences between the two regimes, Xi proposed the application of the “one country, two systems” policy.^[3] This speech was interpreted by the DPP government as equating the “1992 Consensus” with the “one country two systems” policy. Consequently, as the president of the ROC, Tsai Ing-wen responded the statement on Twitter by declaring that they have never accepted the 1992 Consensus.^[4]

The importance of the 1992 Consensus in the Taiwan Strait crisis has culminated in 2023, not only because of the electoral campaigns for the 2024 presidential elections, but especially because of the unofficial visit of Ma Ying-jeou to mainland China between March 27 and April 7, 2023. Ma Ying-jeou became the first ROC leader to visit mainland China since the KMT’s retreat to Taiwan

1. Original speech available at: <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/4893>, accessed on 30-11-2023.

2. Original speech available at: http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201605/t20160520_11463128.htm, accessed on 30-11-2023.

3. See more about the policy in WONG, Y. C. (Ed.) (2004). *“One Country, Two Systems” in Crisis: Hong Kong’s Transformation since the Handover*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

4. Original statement available at: <https://twitter.com/iingwen/status/1080424117583540225/photo/1>, accessed on 30-11-2023.

in 1949. During his visit, Ma declared his interpretation of the 1992 Consensus when he delivered a speech at Hunan University on April 2nd which stated that “Our country has been divided into two parts, one of them is Taiwan, and the other one is the mainland. Both of them belong to the ROC, both are China.”^[5] This stance has been criticized by the ruling DPP and was used by its 2024 presidential candidate Lai Ching-te to attack the KMT in the elections.^[6]

3. Research Design

The present study analyzes the interpretation of the 1992 Consensus in the electoral campaign of Taiwan’s 2024 presidential elections. It aims to reveal the diverse strategies employed by the presidential candidates and their parties—the KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih, the DPP candidate Lai Ching-te, and Ko Wen-je, candidate from the newly founded Taiwan People’s Party (TPP, 2019-present). I adopt the multimodal critical discourse analysis methodology for the study, which combines multimodal analysis with critical discourse analysis. Multimodal analysis involves examining texts that incorporate two or more semiotic resources, or ‘modes’ of communication. These diverse resources encompass paralinguistic elements like intonation, sound, font, and font size, alongside non-verbal behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture. Additionally, multimodal analysis encompasses various forms of representation like painting, music, film, and photography (Feng, 2019, p.66). The core focus of multimodal discourse analysis lies in delving into the ability of different communication modes and media to generate meaning, examining their usage, and understanding their interplay within the sociocultural context in which they operate (Djonov & Zhao, 2014, p.1).

This method differs from critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on the relationships between language and power and the social differences constructed by media discourses (Wodak, 2001, pp.2-3). However, despite the differences, the two analysis methods share two perspectives on human communication, namely, both assume that communication is always multimodal and social. Furthermore, both methods evolve through disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological diversity, providing a solid foundation for explicitly aligning their agendas (Djonov and Zhao, 2014, p.1).

The research corpus is constituted of video excerpts of public interviews and electoral campaigns of the three candidates since March 2023 to July 2023, in which the 1992 Consensus is mentioned.

5. Quoted from: <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20230403edio08/>, accessed on 28-09-2023.

6. See more in: <https://www.dpp.org.tw/media/contents/10161>, accessed on 29-09-2023.

One of the selected interviews features Hou Yu-ih, the Kuomintang candidate, on the Pan-KMT channel TVBS's political commentary program, TVBS Situation Room, broadcast on July 3, 2023.^[7] This program is hosted by Chao Shao-kang, a former member of the Legislative Yuan, who, as of November 24, 2023, was officially running as the KMT's vice-presidential candidate alongside Hou (Liu G., 2023). This interview is particularly significant as it marked the first time that Hou Yu-ih publicly accepted the 1992 Consensus and provided his interpretation of it, thus I regard it as a key moment in the KMT's campaign narrative.

I choose two public campaign events of DPP candidate and now President of the ROC, Lai Ching-te, held on May 13, 2023, in Pingtung County, and June 17, 2023, in Hualien County. These events were documented and shared by the pan-DPP media outlet SETNews and its sister channel SETiNews as YouTube Shorts.^[8] In both instances, Lai addresses the 1992 Consensus and the future of Taiwan in front of his supporters, which provide a clear reflection of his stance on this topic.

Ko Wen-je and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) actively reject the notion of a well-defined 1992 Consensus. Notably, the TPP's official website provides no information on the term, and cross-strait relations policy is absent from the section introducing the party's core values and objectives.^[9] For the purpose of this study, I select an excerpt from a public interview available on Ko Wen-je's official YouTube channel. This video is a part of his public visit to Johns Hopkins University on April 19th, 2023, and was released on April 25th, 2023. Titled 'Each person's interpretation of the 1992 Consensus is different; Ko Wen-je: Both Taiwan and the mainland should abandon insistence,' the video distinctly conveys Ko's stance on the 1992 Consensus.^[10]

I examine the videos based on the following criteria:

1. Characters and Contexts: This criterion involves observing the candidates' presence in the video, including the settings and characters accompanying them. It aims to understand the relationships between the candidates and other figures, providing insights into the contextual elements of their narratives.

7. The full program is available on TVBS Situation Room's official channel on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQfZlnIGU_o, accessed on 01-12-2023.

8. Both videos are available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/vxXOZkDahHo> and <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/KsUHgPCzk6o>, accessed on 01-12-2023.

9. See more on TPP's website: <https://www.tpp.org.tw/about>, accessed on 01-12-2023.

10. Original video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmGoy8lgzOc>, accessed on 01-12-2023.

- 2. Language Use and Sound Effects: This criterion analyzes the linguistic aspects of the videos, focusing on the languages employed by the candidates. Additionally, it assesses the presence of sound effects that may modify the candidates’ original voices, providing an insight on the communicative strategies used.
- 3. Information and Framing: This analysis focuses on visual elements such as captions, titles, and frame size within each video. Capturing the most significant information conveyed to the audience, it also considers the size of the frame to measure the social distance between the audience and the candidates (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, pp.143-144).
- 4. Rhetorical Techniques: This criterion explores how candidates and other narrative elements employ persuasive techniques. The analysis aims to uncover strategies used to persuade the audience to adopt the candidates’ viewpoints on the 1992 Consensus and to foster belief in the correctness of these interpretations.

4. KMT’s “Constitutional Interpretation” of the 1992 Consensus

Table 1 presents key information about the interview of Hou Yu-ih.

TABLE 1
Information about the interview of Hou Yu-ih

Date of Airing/ Title of Video and Translation	Program Name and Media Channel	Characters in the Video	Duration of the Video (the part concerning the 1992 Consensus)
03-07-2023/ #獨家專訪 侯友宜 兩岸主戰場不讓民進黨見縫插針 侯友宜採納憲法92共識?(Exclusive Interview with Hou Yu-ih: Securing Both Sides of the Taiwan Strait, Preventing the DPP from Seizing Opportunities. Does Hou Yu-ih Adopt the Constitutional 1992 Consensus?)	TVBS Situation Room	Hou Yu-ih and Chao Shao-kang	27min 4sec (00min 30sec - 3min 29sec)

This video is the second part of the exclusive interview featuring Hou Yu-ih, hosted on the Pan-KMT channel TVBS. It begins with a significant focus on the 1992 Consensus, positioning it as the opening topic of the interview following a brief introduction by Chao Shao-kang. The interview is conducted in Mandarin Chinese, even though Hou Yu-ih has a relatively strong Hokkien accent, which shows his origin from a native Taiwanese family. The discussion regarding the 1992 Consensus is initiated by Chao, who begins by referring to Hou's Mainland Policy. This policy positions Hou against Taiwan's independence, rejects the 'one country, two systems' approach, and steadfastly supports the ROC's constitution. The program introduces these policies by featuring a close-up of a cardboard displaying Hou's photo against the backdrop of both the ROC and the PRC national flags. The quoted Mainland Policy is highlighted in blue and red, representing the two colors of the ROC national flag (Figure 1). This background image shows clearly Hou's opposition to Taiwan's de-Sinification.

FIGURE 1

Screenshot of the cardboard featuring Hou's photo



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQfZlnlGU_o

Chao proceeds to address why Hou has not explicitly expressed support for the 1992 Consensus in public and attributes this restraint to the DPP's stigmatization of the concept. Chao further criticizes the DPP, contending that the 1992 Consensus was "originally a good idea" and that despite seven years in office, the DPP has failed to propose a viable alternative to the 1992 Consensus.

In the initial part, Hou Yu-ih is portrayed as a listener, with the camera maintaining a distanced gaze from a medium to long shot and frontal angle. When Chao asks Hou to provide a clear stance and explanation on the 1992 Consensus, the angle shifts to a close-up frontal view, portraying Hou gazing at the viewer (Figure 2). This change in perspective signifies a closer and more demanding relationship with the audience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p.143). Hou then articulates his stance on the 1992 Consensus, stating, “I accept the 1992 Consensus which is in accordance with the constitution of the ROC. I reject the 1992 Consensus of ‘one country, two systems,’ and I steadfastly reject the 1992 Consensus stigmatized by Tsai Ing-wen.”

FIGURE 2

Screenshot of Hou Yu-ih stating that he is against the 1992 Consensus of “one China two systems”



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQfZlnlGU_o

Hou continues to explain the constitutional 1992 Consensus in a close-up shot but shifts his gaze to Chao Shao-kang, which can be interpreted as offering a new idea (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p.143):

The meaning of the 1992 Consensus, in accordance with the ROC's constitution that I mentioned, is that both sides of the Taiwan Strait do not recognize each other's sovereignty, do not deny each other's governing authority, which is very clear. We will do everything in accordance with the constitution of the ROC.

Hou’s clear explanation of the 1992 Consensus was reiterated twice later, which shows the KMT’s need to emphasize its clear stance and the consensus’s significance for cross-strait relations. Since Hou was nominated as the presidential candidate of the KMT in May 2023, he had faced pressure to articulate a clear stance on the 1992 Consensus. In the subsequent months, Hou’s initial ambivalent attitude toward the term was perceived by some as a contributing factor to the KMT’s decline to the third position in the polls (Liu, J. 2023). This likely elucidates the heightened importance given to this subject in the program, with its clear definition repeated three times within the three minutes of discussion on this topic.

5. DPP’s “Bombarding” Rejection to the 1992 Consensus

The basic information of the two selected video of Lai Ching-te’s view on the 1992 Consensus is provided in Table 2:

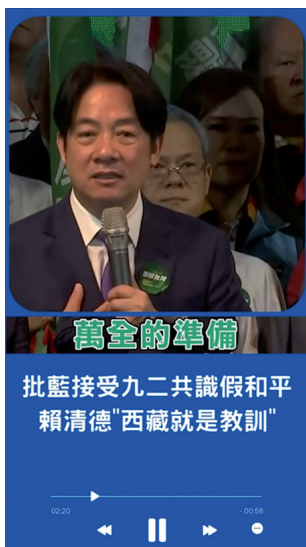
TABLE 2
Information about the videos of Lai Ching-te’s speech on the 1992 Consensus

Date of Airing/ Title of Video and Translation	Program Name and Media Channel	Characters in the Video	Duration of the Video (the part concerning the 1992 Consensus)
13-05-2023/沒有主權的和平不是真正的和平! 賴清德批國民黨接受九二共識假和平噏“西藏就是教訓”(Peace without Sovereignty is not Genuine Peace! Lai Ching-te Criticizes Kuomintang for Accepting the 1992 Consensus as False Peace, Smacks ‘Tibet Serves as a Lesson’)	SETiNews YouTube Shorts	Lai Ching-te and his supporters from Pingtung	53 sec (53 sec)
17-06-2023/賴清德喊“接受九二共識等於走向統一”! 轟: 接受九二共識的人“不值得信賴”(Lai Ching-te Shouts “Accepting the 1992 Consensus Equals Moving Toward Unification”! Bombards: Those Who Accept the 1992 Consensus Are “Not Worthy of Trust”)	SETNews YouTube Shorts	Lai Ching-te and his supporters from Hualien	57 sec (57 sec)

The titles of both videos employ dramatic language, which reflects a clear and provocative stance against the 1992 Consensus. The use of the words 噏 (to talk smack), 喊 (to shout), and 轟 (to bombard) signifies a strong rejection of the term. Both videos share similar framing and visual design. They feature a vertical layout divided into two sections. The upper part displays images of Lai engaged in public campaigning with supporters in the background, while the lower part features subtitles and captions. The subtitles are presented in green, symbolizing the color associated with the DPP in Taiwan (known as the “green camp”). In contrast, the captions, critical of the KMT (known as the “blue camp” in Taiwan), are written in blue or with a blue background. The caption of the first video reads “Criticizing the Blue for False Peace with Acceptance of the 1992 Consensus, Lai Ching-te: ‘Tibet Serves as a Lesson’ (Figure 3)”. The caption of the second video states “Calling for Safeguarding the Constitutional System in Taiwan, Lai: Accepting the 1992 Consensus is Equivalent to Moving Toward Unification. (Figure 4)”.

FIGURE 3

Screenshot of Lai Ching-te’s speech in Pingtung



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/vxXOZk-DahH0>

FIGURE 4

Screenshot of Lai Ching-te’s speech in Hualien



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/KsUHg-PCzk60>

In the first video, Lai Ching-te didn't speak Mandarin Chinese. Instead, he spoke in Hokkien, which is the language of the majority of the population. Studies indicate that the largest ethnic group in Taiwan comprises Hokkien people, constituting approximately 70%-73% of the population, while minorities include the Hakkas (around 12%-15%), mainlanders (approximately 13%-15%), and Taiwanese aboriginals (approximately 1.7%) (Shyu, 2008, p.132). These ethnic groups distinguish themselves by their languages, that's why the language employed in electoral campaigns is an issue of significant importance.

During the Martial Law period enforced by the KMT's dictatorship, there was a mandate known as the "speaking Mandarin only policy", which forced locals to exclusively use Mandarin Chinese. This policy played a pivotal role in triggering the democratic movement in Taiwan and the subsequent process of de-Sinification (Mao, 2008, p.589). In the post-democratization era, presidential candidates have strategically emphasized and spoken various local languages in Taiwan (Yang, 2004). Chen Shui-bian, the first DPP-elected president, actively promoted the use of local languages, particularly Hokkien, as a strategic move to combat political crises and declining poll results. This approach, termed by Copper (2008, p.180) as playing "ethnic cards", involved Chen Shui-bian's efforts to divide Taiwanese society along ethnic/linguistic lines by labeling mainlanders as "traitors" and by attempting to generate animosity towards the minority mainland group (Deutsche Welle, 2004). As the DPP's presidential candidate, Lai Ching-te's multilingual communication aligns with his party's broader political ideology of de-Sinification in Taiwan.

In the first video, Lai Ching-te initially pointed out that China has not renounced the option of using armed forces to conquer Taiwan, thereby posing a direct threat to Taiwan's sovereignty. Subsequently, he criticized the opposition party (KMT) for endorsing the 1992 Consensus and advocating for a peace treaty with the mainland, characterizing such a stance as a "regressive step". The central theme of his speech, encapsulated in the video title, asserts that "peace without sovereignty is not genuine peace". The video concludes with Lai Ching-te citing Tibet as a pertinent illustration of his argument.^[11]

Within this speech, Lai Ching-te posits that accepting the 1992 Consensus equates to a relinquishment of Taiwan's sovereignty. Thus, he presents a starkly contrasting interpretation to the KMT's explanation of the 1992 Consensus. According to the KMT's stance, both sides of the Taiwan Strait do not recognize each other's sovereignty. This implies that by accepting the 1992 Consensus, the ROC maintains its position, representing the "China" as ar-

11. See more about the Tibet issue in: Powers, J. (2004). *History As Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People's Republic of China*. New York: Oxford University Press.

ticated in its constitution. Once again, despite the unequivocal positions of the two parties on the 1992 Consensus, the inherent ambiguity of the term contributes to the multifaceted and unclear nature of its meaning.

The second campaign is conducted in Mandarin Chinese. It begins with Lai Ching-te affirming that “those who endorse the 1992 Consensus are those who accept that, in the future, we will gradually be united”. Following this statement, he made a rejecting gesture by waving his hand and simultaneously stating, “which we will absolutely not accept. Does everyone agree with me?” The public responded with supportive voices and applause, which shows Lai’s popularity and the perceived correctness of his stance. After criticizing those who accept the 1992 Consensus as untrustworthy individuals, Lai made two promises. The first was his commitment to defending the country’s sovereignty. He emphasized that “Taiwan is not part of the PRC” and that “the ROC and the PRC do not belong to each other”. The second is his steadfast defense of Taiwan’s democratic and free constitutional system. Ironically, despite Lai’s efforts to distinguish himself from KMT’s politics, the two promises he made align closely with what the KMT also defends, constituting the KMT’s interpretation of the meaning of the 1992 Consensus according to the constitution of the ROC.

6. TPP’s New Approach to Abandon the 1992 Consensus

Table 3 presents the information of Ko Wen-je’s video analyzed in this study:

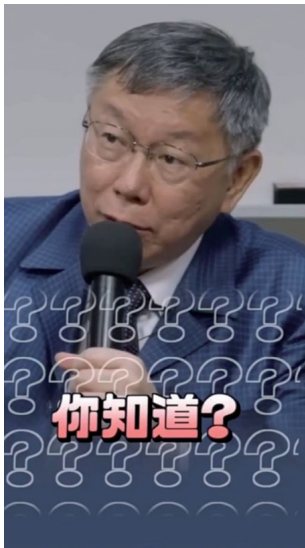
TABLE 3
Information of the video of Ko Wen-je’s interview

Date of Airing/ Title of Video and Translation	Program Name and Media Channel	Characters in the Video	Duration of the Video (the part concerning the 1992 Consensus)
25-04-2023/ 每個人的九二共識都不一樣，柯文哲:台灣跟大陸都該放棄堅持? (Each person’s interpretation of the 1992 Consensus is different; Ko Wen-je: Both Taiwan and the mainland should abandon insistence?)	Ko Wen-je’s Official YouTube Channel	Ko Wen-je and a Chinese Student from the PRC among the public.	1 min (1min)

The one-minute excerpt from Ko's public interview at Johns Hopkins University begins with a question made by a Chinese student from the mainland in Mandarin Chinese: "From the Chinese perspective, in cross-strait communication, emphasis is placed on the 1992 Consensus. If not the 1992 Consensus, on what political foundation will you base cross-strait communications?" In response, Ko starts by questioning in Taiwan Mandarin whether the student knows the content of the 1992 Consensus, accompanied by an even closer-up shot of Ko with subtitles reading "You know it? (Figure 5)" followed by lines of continuous question marks. Ko humorously declares, "Nobody in Taiwan knows its content!" with an intermittent exclamation mark in the subtitle (Figure 6). This creates an "amusing" effect which is further enhanced by a laser beam sound effect and laughter. The student responds by providing the standard explanation of the PRC and the KMT's interpretation of the Consensus.

FIGURE 5

Screenshot of Ko Wen-je asking the student "You know it?"



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tm-Goy8lgzOc>

FIGURE 6

Screenshot of Ko stating: "Nobody in Taiwan knows its content!"



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tm-Goy8lgzOc>

Ko interjects with another "amusing" question. He asks whether the student plans to return to China. This provokes laughter from the audience. Then Ko argues that "No body thinks that there are two Chinas in the world." Ko empha-

sized that the explanation of the 1992 Consensus that the Beijing government wants should be “there is only one China globally, and the People’s Republic of China is its sole legal representation, with Taiwan being a part of China”. When stating this, Ko’s voice is edited with an animation-like sound effect and accelerated. This suggests his disagreement and distance from this perspective.

Then Ko’s voice returns to normal as he begins to “suggest” that “China should also not insist on the 1992 Consensus because it is stigmatized in Taiwan and challenging to promote”. Subsequently, Ko introduces an analogy, stating: “For example, this is like poop. You tell me poop smells great and is beautiful (Figure 7). But the problem is, it is still poop!” This remark is perceived as a joke by Ko and the audience, who laughs. Ko concludes by urging the Beijing government to provide a clear explanation of the Consensus. He then articulates his demand in English: “You must tell me first what it is before I pay for it. Now, you ask me to pay for it, then you tell me what it is. I’m not so stupid! (Figure 8)” The final sentence is visually enhanced with burning flames around the words, conveying a provocative stance toward the Beijing government.

FIGURE 7

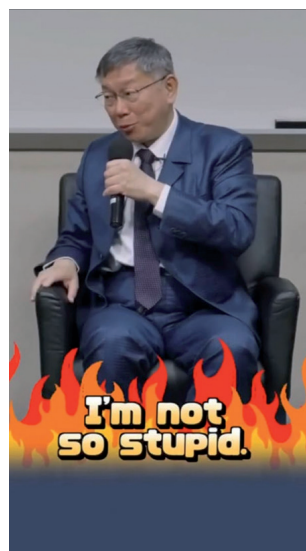
Screenshot of Ko Wen-je comparing the PRC’s 1992 Consensus with poop



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tm-Goy8lgzOc>

FIGURE 8

Screenshot of Ko Wen-je commenting on Beijing’s demand to recognize the 1992 Consensus



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tm-Goy8lgzOc>

The style and choice of words in Ko's public interview reflect his electoral audience, which primarily comprises young and undecided individuals, especially men under 40 years old (BBC, 2023). Ko deliberately rejects all interpretations of the 1992 Consensus and opts not to clarify the term's ambivalence. This strategic choice aims to distinguish Ko and the TPP from the traditional positions of the KMT and the DPP, which can potentially attract votes from those dissatisfied with the long and ambivalent debate on the 1992 Consensus between Beijing and Taipei.

By exposing the ambivalent nature of the term and contrasting it with the unequivocal positions of other parties, Ko Wen-je's rejection of a definitive consensus proposes an alternative strategy for handling cross-strait relations. However, this approach may encounter significant challenges from the PRC, especially with Beijing's insistence on the term and the KMT's endorsement of the constitutional version of the 1992 Consensus. The differing strategies and interpretations surrounding the Consensus set the stage for potential complexities and obstacles in Ko's relation with the mainland.

The rejection of the existence of a clear 1992 Consensus and the deliberate downplaying of its significance on the TPP's official website, particularly in comparison to the other two major parties, could be seen as a strategic move by the TPP to appeal to its target demographic group—the younger generations. According to a news report (United Daily News, 2023), the young voters are less sharply divided along traditional party lines. The report suggests that voters in their 20s and 30s are tired of Taiwan's geopolitical issues and are urging politicians to shift their focus to addressing domestic concerns such as low wages, inflation, and housing crises. Therefore, the TPP's strategic decision to distance itself from the 1992 Consensus aligns with the desire of younger voters for a more concentrated focus on critical domestic issues.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that, as used in the 2024 Taiwan presidential elections, the term 1992 Consensus is full of ambivalence. The interpretations offered by the three candidates vividly demonstrate the use of this term as what Ernesto Laclau defines as an "empty signifier" (Laclau, 2005): a term without a fixed or inherent meaning, reliant on the social and political context in which it is applied. The different approaches and interpretations of the Consensus adopted by the three candidates have pragmatic and ideological reasons that aim to garner the votes of different groups.

The KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih steadfastly upholds Taiwan's Sinified identity and regards the ROC as its sovereign government. His endorsement of

the 1992 Consensus, albeit with distinct interpretations from the mainland's version, may appeal to the mainlander voters and to those concerned about potential conflicts with Beijing. For the DPP and Lai Ching-te, the stance on the 1992 Consensus also seems not to be ambiguous at first sight. Despite the DPP's goal of promoting a de-Sinified Taiwanese identity, the political reality of "two Chinas" persists due to the difficulty of amending the ROC's constitution and dealing with the pressure and threats from the PRC. As Lai Ching-te was running for the presidency of the Republic of China, it would be illogical not to admit the legitimacy of the regime. Probably for the reasons above, Lai's rejection of the Consensus aligned with his independent Taiwan policy. Yet, his promised to the voters echo the KMT's interpretation of the 1992 Consensus and expose a less visible ambiguity in his stance. Ko Wen-je adopts a brand-new strategy. He categorizes the 1992 Consensus as an ambivalent term and rejects it precisely due to its lack of fixed meaning. This approach, while innovative, risks provoking Beijing and may generate potential conflicts. However, it may resonate with younger voters less focused on geopolitical issues.

Taking a more detailed look at their proposed policies related to the cross-strait relations, the three candidates shared commonalities and differences. All three parties seemed to aim to maintain the *status quo* with the mainland regime. None of them planned to officially declare the *de jure* independence of Taiwan or establish a new regime to replace the ROC. Similarly, they did not advocate the One China policy and the union with the PRC. This contrasted with all of their interpretations of the 1992 Consensus, as analyzed above.

In hindsight, Lai Ching-te's personal victory and the DPP's third consecutive win in the presidential elections reflect Taiwan's ambivalent yet evolving national identity. During his inaugural address on May 20, 2024, Lai notably omitted the 1992 Consensus, which once again shows ambivalence in his mainland policy. While emphasizing that his administration would "pursue the ideal of peace" and "neither yield nor provoke [Beijing]," Lai also accused China of political and military intimidation and attempts at infiltration. He further emphasized the importance of international cooperation, stating, "There is already a strong international consensus that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are indispensable to global security and prosperity."^[12]

On the same day, Beijing immediately reacted and reprimanded Lai and the DPP government, accusing them of "aggressively promoting separatist fallacies" and inciting cross-strait confrontation, alleging that they were attempting to "seek independence with external support" and pursue independ-

12. The complete transcription of the address is available at: <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6726>, accessed on 09-10-2024.

ence “through military means.”^[13] Although Lai Ching-te has seemingly abandoned the 1992 Consensus and promoted new discourses and a new consensus on cross-strait relations, Beijing continues to insist on the One China policy and adherence to the 1992 Consensus. As Beijing maintains its steadfast position, it is likely that despite Lai’s and many Taiwanese people’s rejection of the term, the 1992 Consensus will continue to be a focal point in the evolving conflicts of the Taiwan Strait.

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