

**Track Two Dialogue on
EU-China-Relations and the Taiwan Question
Wujiang, 23-24 June 2011**

A workshop jointly organised by German Institute for International and Security Affairs / Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), Shanghai, with the friendly support of the Robert Bosch Foundation, Stuttgart.

Discussion Paper
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**The Impact of Public Opinion Surveys in Taiwan
on its Internal Politics and Cross-Straits Relations**

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Shao Zong-hai, a well-known scholar in Taiwan, said at a seminar in March that it is confusing that the improvement of cross-straits relations is not necessarily reflected in the polls. Cross-straits relations are improving, but the polls indicate a kind of increasing estrangement. Both of the rates of those who think that they are Taiwanese and those who support secession are rising.¹ Polls published by institutions in Taiwan cover not only cross-straits issues but also its internal political agendas, and they especially have surprising or predictions on election affairs. For the coming election of January 2012, various institutions published polls with huge differences, and even the same institution could have quite different results on the same group of competitors within half a month. The difference could be about 20 points. It's no wonder that the general public feels puzzled.

The Impact of Polls on Taiwan's Internal Politics

Polls in Taiwan used to be important sources of reference for mainland scholars to understand its internal political, economic and social changes. Some polls can accurately predict the results of elections, which are really worth of special regard. However, in recent years, we have found that the polls have been more and more used as instruments for political purposes, as “fabricating public opinion” has become the primary task of some institutions. Taiwan's polls have implications not only for the directions and results of public debates but also the outcomes of various elections and important policies. The election of the year 2000 provided a classical example for how the polls had been employed to influence the election. The DPP, by publishing polls timely, encouraged James Soong to resolutely break away from the KMT to participate in the election on his own, and for that purpose, they also made his followers believe that he will surely win the election. While the traditional constituents of the KMT began to talk about “abandoning Lien for securing Soong” shortly before the election, the DPP's institutions once more published another timely poll claiming that “Lien and Soong were close competitors”. The DPP's manipulation had greatly decentralized the ballots of the blue camp, thus paving the way for Chen Shui-bian's success with a small margin. Currently, publishing polls is still an important means that Taiwan's major parties employ for choosing candidates. For instance, it is just through publishing polls that the DPP finally solved the problem of candidacy of 2012 election, and Su Tseng-chang was ousted with very small disadvantage.

In March 2008, Ma Ying-jeou was able to win the election with a high turnout, but his approval rate decreased below 20% within less than three months. It is

¹ <http://www.chinareviewnews.com>, March 8, 2011.

believed that poll institutions have played a critical role in the sharp change. One of the explanations might be that a certain group of people behind the polls do have opinions to express, or it might be true that Ma Ying-jeou has failed to satisfy the needs of some specific interest groups, or possibly that he has not been able to take care of the interests of the majority. However, it is certainly too early to make a judgment about a political leader only two months after his inauguration, and the polls would most probably be distorted. All through the three years, Ma Ying-jeou has been trapped by “such public opinions”. Judging by this, the saying quoted by Taiwan media that “polls create confusion in Taiwan” is not without reason.

A research fellow of Taiwan’s “National Policy Foundation”, after studying the polls published by five Taiwan media before March 2000 election, claims that while representing the true public opinions, polls actually also have many mechanisms producing public opinions, that is, the polls themselves produce and construct our cognition of public opinions.² It is true that investigation of public opinions does play the roles of creating and shaping public cognition.

And polls, as means to acknowledge and reflect public opinions, should be advanced since they are conducive for the stability of political systems, and significant for political and social progress. However, when we realize that Taiwan’s polls might “cause confusions” because they “create public opinions”, we should be further aware whether Taiwan’s polls might “cause confusions in cross-straits relations”.

The impact of polls on cross-straits relations

It is not the impression left by one single poll institution that “cross-straits relations are getting better and better while Taiwan’s people are more and more estranged from the mainland”. We noticed that in the past 20 years, the rate of those who think “they are both Taiwanese and Chinese” has been obviously declining. It is even more obvious that the rate of those who “think they are Taiwanese” is greatly increasing while those who “think they are Chinese” is decreasing.

Such figures have been available in most of the polls conducted by institutions in Taiwan, (and have produced an effect on opinions of the public on both sides—added by the translator). Besides Professor Shao’s puzzle, there are also vehement discussions among mainland netizens. A netizen named “Capsule (*jiaonang*)” complained that such a phenomenon indicates that the mainland’s policy served to promote the development of a secessionist movement”; another netizen named “Ding” pointed out that if things continue like this, solutions of (cross-straits

² Liu Nianxia: “Minyi diaocha yu minyi chanzhi” [Polls and Creation of public opinion], *Guozheng yanjiu baogao / Report of Research on National Politics*, August 2, 2001.

problems) will only be available by non-military means. The publication of the above mentioned polls have either strengthened or changed the political attitudes of those who receive the information, and even have aroused the “vigilance” of the officials in charge of Taiwan issues on the mainland side. Therefore, we have reason to worry that such “public opinions” will cause instability in cross-straits relations.

According to my personal understanding, Taiwan’s polls are not only restricted by “investigation techniques” but also by its political culture. Actually, many concepts have been given a narrow understanding like “China”, “Taiwan”, “Chinese”, “Taiwanese”, “nation”, “government”, “regime”, “sovereignty”, “administrative power”, “representation”, and even “reunification” and “independence”. It is no more than a kind of “political deception” to conduct polls on identity within such specific cultural background since the outcome has already been available before the investigation.

Let me ask a question. Is it normal that people living in Taiwan do not identify with Taiwan? We know by common sense that at least 99.99% percent of those interviewees who live and have registered residence in Taiwan should identify themselves as Taiwanese. However, only 72% of the interviewees think that they are Taiwanese while 16% of them claim they are not. Judging by such facts, Taiwan’s political culture should not be normal. Then why do those who live on rice grown in Taiwan not identify themselves as Taiwanese? This is not the full story.

Another question: some polls claim that “as many as 90% of those living in Taiwan identified themselves as Chinese”, but is the figure true? If it is true, then we should further ask what “China” means at that time. Is it the PRC or “the ROC”? If those interviewees refer to the PRC, then the mainland should feel comfortable about its huge achievements in dealing with Taiwan affairs. Actually, those highly overlapping political symbols like China, “the ROC” and the PRC have already been intentionally obscured by opportunistic politicians.

A third question: what is the rate of those who identify themselves as “citizens of the ROC”? Why do so many polling institutions not ask interviewees questions in this way? In Taiwan, is identifying with “the ROC” different from identifying with China? Some might say that identifying with “the ROC” does not equal identifying China. But we all know that the constitutions of both “the ROC” and the PRC prescribe that both Taiwan and the mainland belong to a single sovereign territory. And both “the ROC” and the PRC are simplified as China. The dichotomy of the survey cannot deny the subordinating relationship between “being Taiwanese” and “being Chinese”, just like I am both of Fujian identity and Chinese identity.

Quite a number of people who identify with “the ROC” do not have the courage to choose to be “Chinese”. They worry that such a choice might change them into

a citizen of the PRC. We understand their concerns, and I would like to seriously propose that we should not simply equate the concept of China with that of the PRC. Mr. Wang Daohan also expressed a similar argument, and the mainland side also officially stated that “Taiwan and the mainland belong to a single China”. It is a political fact that cross-straits political confrontation has not been ended, and that the two opposite authorities exist on China’s territory respectively in the name of the PRC and “the ROC”. However, different titles are no more than identification with different authorities, but do not mean different nations. Taiwanese currently do not identify with the PRC, but that does not mean that they do not identify with China. But this issue is too complicated for ordinary people.

Conclusion

Taiwan’s 2012 election is around the corner, and forecasts about the election outcomes will be released one by one. Just like before, polls, as election instruments, will not be neglected. Besides observation, we should be rational and calm, and should not be cheated by the figures fabricated by politicians.

We should not feel depressed with the changes of the identity status of people in Taiwan. The changes of political culture usually lag behind the developments of economy and society. The better cross-straits relations are the more Taiwanese will accept the mainland. What’s more, to demonstrate goodwill is only one of the factors the mainland is doing to change the narrow-minded image the people in Taiwan have about it.

We noticed that Ma Ying-jeou has already requested that public servants in Taiwan should be aware of the differences between the two concepts of “Chinese mainland” and “China”. That is responsible. Chinese mainland has also done something. Its official policy has become more detailed, and no longer simply equates “the PRC” with “China”. If those polling institutions do communicate these messages, and will not release confusing polls, “China” and “Chinese” will become the symbols of identity that people in Taiwan will accept willingly, and cross-straits relations will become more healthy and stable.