

A snapshot of Taiwan's Sunflower movement ten years later

An interview with journalist Brian Hioe

Sunday 7 April 2024, by [HIOE Brian](#), [NOUBEL Filip](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2024).

In the spring of 2014, Taiwan experienced an unprecedented youth protest known as the Sunflower Movement that altered local politics and relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). But what is its legacy ten years later, as relations between the two countries remain a source of tension?

To unpack the movement that occupied governmental institutions as a reaction to a proposed deeper economic integration with the PRC, Global Voices interviewed Taipei-based journalist and activist Brian Hioe, one of the founders of leftist and bilingual initiative [New Bloom Magazine](#), an online publication that covers activism, politics, and youth culture in Taiwan. The publication was founded in 2014 after the Sunflower Movement. The activists maintaining the project also run [DAYBREAK](#), a community space for talks, panels, and other gatherings in Taipei's Wanhua district.

The interview was conducted over email and edited for style and brevity, after regular meetings at the New Bloom community café Daybreak in Taipei.

Filip Noubel (FN): Can you describe your involvement in the Sunflower Movement and what motivated you to join in 2014?

Brian Hioe (BH) I was a ground-level participant in the Sunflower Movement, as one of the many students who were part of the movement. I was part of the charge to the legislature on the first night, on March 18th, 2014, though I was not one of the first wave of students that initially kicked off the occupation, as well as later events such as the attempted occupation of [Taiwan's executive](#) branch of government that took place on the night of March 23th, 2014. I was just someone who charged when told to, or who drifted in between the different groups that were all part of the occupation. It was only in the wake of the movement that New Bloom was founded and I became known as a journalist.

In many ways, I became drawn into the movement because those around me were. Most of my participation was with a student activist group at [National Yang Ming University](#), the Meaningful Society, a number of members of which became among the founders of New Bloom later on. Though I wasn't actually a student at that university, this was my friend group, and so I became drawn into the movement with them.

This reflects how the movement was a generational moment, in attracting young people who saw the movement as a moment in which Taiwan's fate was on the line. This was probably true of myself, though as with many others, it was suddenly being thrust into an unexpected set of political circumstances. As I grew up in New York before returning to Taiwan, I had more experience of large-scale social movements than many others,

however, having participated in [Occupy Wall Street](#) in 2011.

FN: What would you describe as its main achievements back then?

BH: The movement was successful in stopping the [Cross-Strait Services in Trade Agreement](#) (CSSTA) that the then ruling [Kuomintang](#) (KMT) party's [Ma Ying-jeou](#) administration intended to pass, even if it is true that the CSSTA has resurfaced as a political idea a decade later. To this extent, the political administration of Tsai Ing-wen of the [Democratic Progressive Party](#) (DPP) is sometimes seen as riding into power on the basis of momentum after the movement in 2016. There were also a number of third parties that emerged in the wake of the movement, as part of attempts to develop political alternatives to both the DPP and KMT alike, including the [New Power Party](#), Social Democratic Party, and others.

Yet I think the most significant achievements of the movement are not narrowly electoral. In particular, the movement shifted the social verdict on young people. While young people were previously derided as a soft and weak "strawberry generation," unlike their boomer parents, after the movement, views of young people shifted to see them as willing to take risks for what they believed in. This led to a wave of young people running for office or taking up roles in politics and social activism. As such, Taiwanese young people have increasingly been able to shape our political destiny since the movement.

FN: What about its legacy a decade later? Are young Taiwanese politically mobilized? If so, what are the drivers of political interest or involvement in 2024?

BH: While the movement had a powerful impact on Millennials, Gen Z may not be as politically engaged, as the success of former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je and his [Taiwan People's Party](#) attests to, they may perhaps vote for China-friendly political actors.

In particular, the next generation has come of age with the DPP having held political power for all of their adult life. By contrast, there may not be a sense of threat from the KMT, which has been unable to win presidential elections for the last decade. Similarly, while Millennials such as myself may remember a time before the political and economic rise of China, members of Gen Z may not.

As the incumbent, the DPP is seeing blowback over its failure to address longstanding issues of socioeconomic inequality in Taiwan during its eight years in office. This may be what has led to members of Gen Z supporting Ko or other politicians that seem to represent anti-establishment alternatives, even if the KMT continues to struggle with outreach to young people. Still, just as those of us of the Sunflower Generation were previously politically derided by our elders as a "strawberry generation", I don't think it does for Millennials to deride members of Gen Z either. The political stances of Ko or other political actors are likely to be thrown into sharp relief in the future, just as many participants in the Sunflower Movement themselves were disillusioned former supporters of Ma Ying-jeou.

FN: You just created a [great online resource](#) about the history of the movement. How you would like people to use it.

BH: The [Daybreak Project](#) was conceived at a moment in which the Sunflower Movement seemed to have flown under the radar of the international world—despite that it represents a generation in Taiwan expressing their views of what they hoped Taiwan’s relation with China should be. There was more coverage of the disappearance of [Malaysian Airlines Flight 370](#) the month that the movement occurred, for example.

As such, the Daybreak Project intended to serve as “thick description” for the movement, in showing its breadth and the diversity of perspectives in the movement. This is why I interviewed around a hundred participants to make an oral history archive, ranging from key movement leaders to regular participants, which is in itself still only a narrow slice of the movement.

Likewise, I organized a timeline of the movement, map of the occupation site, translations of key documents, and tried to sum up the political context, to provide an explainer for the movement. Furthermore, I organized the artwork in the occupation space to create a dictionary of terms frequently used in the movement, to show how youth activism came to comprise something of a subculture in Taiwan in those years—activism was something that was “cool” among young people.

I hope the movement can be a resource for those seeking to learn about the movement, as well as about this generation of Taiwanese young people and what their outlook on the world is. In this sense, I hope it can be a useful document for future research into the movement, or for activists in the region and beyond to perhaps draw on, use as a resource, or to take inspiration from.

Brian Hioe

Filip Noubel

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

Global Voices

<https://globalvoices.org/2024/03/20/a-snapshot-of-taiwans-sunflower-movement-ten-years-later/>