

‘New Bloom’: A rare leftist media voice in Taiwan

Saturday 18 November 2023, by [HIOE Brian](#), [NOUBEL Filip](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2023).

The primary split in Taiwanese politics is between independence and unification with China

In January 2024, Taiwan will hold [presidential](#) and [legislative](#) elections in a deeply polarized society where most media also align closely with one of the two dominant parties: the Kuomintang and the DPP ([the Democratic Progressive Party](#)). Very few media operate outside this dichotomy, but one of the few is [New Bloom Magazine](#). Global Voices interviewed Brian Hioe, one of its founders, over email after numerous conversations in Taipei.

New Bloom Magazine is a bilingual English-Chinese online publication based out of Taiwan, which also runs a community space. It was founded in 2014 in the aftermath of the [Sunflower Movement](#), a student protest movement that opposed closer economic ties with China. It covers current affairs, sociopolitical topics, and cultural issues in Taiwan. Hioe has been involved in writing on Taiwanese politics and social issues since the Sunflower Movement.

Filip Noubel (FN) You have been running a bilingual magazine that offers a “radical” or “leftist” perspective on Taiwan. In which way is this outlet radical?

Brian Hioe (BH): New Bloom’s members broadly see themselves as part of the political left, drawing from Marxism, anarchism, feminism, and queer theory. There is no specific political line to the publication, but there is a general commitment to a sense of radical politics that questions the fundamental structural inequalities of society and calls for a vision of social transformation that goes to the roots of society.

FN: What is the meaning of leftist in the context of Taiwan? Who are the main actors in Taiwan in media, culture, and civil society?

BH: Historically, Taiwan has not had a strong political left. For one, the KMT [the [Kuomintang party](#) that monopolized Taiwanese politics from 1945–2004] historically targeted leftists during the authoritarian period, under the auspices of anti-communism. China’s claim to be a leftist polity also casts a shadow over the political left in Taiwan, though there is also a history of pro-independence leftists. Much of the political left in Taiwan today is heavily influenced by the leftist theory in western academic contexts, as a result of individuals who studied abroad and picked up such ideas before returning to Taiwan.

Part of the challenge of being a leftist in Taiwan has to do with the significant focus on electoralism in Taiwan, as well as the dominance of the two-party system. As third parties could split the vote, resulting in a win for the pro-unification, center-right KMT, this has proven an obstacle to former alternatives to the center-left and historically pro-independence DPP [[the Democratic Progressive Party](#)].

Consequently, it is the two main parties that tend to dominate, and civil society faces the challenge of navigating between the two. This also affects media, insofar as media tends to be highly polarized between political forces closer to the KMT and DPP.

Specifically, the primary split in Taiwanese politics between the two parties is between independence and unification [with China], rather than left and right, which is viewed as an existential struggle for Taiwan's future. And so conversations about politics that are more oriented around a left versus right basis are more difficult. As such, carving out a space for that continues to be a challenge.

FN: You have also witnessed a growing interest in Ukraine here in Taiwan. What is driving it, and what kind of knowledge about Ukraine is mostly missing in Taiwanese media?

BH: The military invasion of Ukraine by Russia captured the attention of the Taiwanese because of the sharp parallels that this offers to Taiwan. Taiwan could potentially suffer a similar fate if China invades. And there are strong parallels between Russia's claim that Ukraine has no independent history, culture, or language of its own and China's own cultural claims over Taiwan.

Consequently, it is a form of emotional projection that drives Taiwanese interest in Ukraine. This is not unlike how the 2019 protests in Hong Kong also served as [a mobilizing issue that crystallized anxieties](#) about the threat from China that long existed. But while cultural and linguistic ties between Taiwan and Hong Kong have been longstanding, as fellow parts of the Sinophone world, this is not the case with Ukraine.

As such, there is not as much understanding of Ukraine in and of itself, and this has been capitalized on by pro-China sources to disseminate disinformation about potential outcomes for Taiwan using [the claim that this happening](#) with Ukraine. This has particularly been the case regarding how other geopolitical actors would react to a military invasion of Taiwan by China. In this sense, there is much to learn from Ukraine, and while there has been greater space to hold what should be necessary dialogues, this takes place under continuously fraught conditions, and there is still a significant perception gap on the Taiwanese side. At the same time, I suspect it is the same likewise, with regards to Ukrainian understandings of Taiwan.

FN: You also run a café associated with your magazine that hosts films, events, and debates. How do you combine and manage so many activities, and in which way do they reinforce each other?

BH: It's only possible with a team that is committed enough to work long hours on a volunteer basis, seeing as none of it is financially sustainable. It's a question for us how to link together the events in the space and the publication as well, the two share the same staff, but the conversations that occur can sometimes become a bit disconnected. That being said, certainly, we do draw from people we meet through the space to build ties or solicit articles.

We felt after so many years that only having an online publication made it difficult to know who we were connecting with, so a physical space could be the way to form stronger connections. Even if Taiwan was shielded from the worst of it after the COVID-19 pandemic, this seems to show how such spaces are more important than ever. In the future, we hope to widen the forms of media that we engage in and synch that together with our space in order that the two sides can reinforce each other more strongly.

Filip Noubel
Brian Hioe

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