

# Dealing With the Absence of Absentee Voting:

## Transnational Electoral Mobilisation in Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Elections

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**ABSTRACT:** Oriented within political transnationalism, this paper examines emigrants' participation in homeland elections in the context of the institutional absence of an external voting system. Deploying a case study in a Taiwanese community in Vienna (Austria) and a mixed-methods design, it tackles the processes, actors, and practices of transnational electoral mobilisation during the 2020 presidential elections in Taiwan. Shaped by identity politics, the local Taiwanese community's organisational landscape facilitates direct and indirect electoral mobilisation. Associations serve as important entry points for politicians, and as platforms for individuals to rally political support. A sizeable share decided to return to Taiwan, time and financial costs notwithstanding. Though only indicative, data suggests that the presidential candidates mobilised more overseas voters than in the 2016 elections.

**KEYWORDS:** Taiwan, Overseas Taiwanese, political transnationalism, electoral mobilisation, 2020 presidential elections.

### Introduction

As social relations extend across the borders of nation states in a globalising world, electorates are increasingly geographically dispersed and political mobilisation transnationalised (Adamson 2005; Gabrielli and Zapata-Barrero 2015; Peltoniemi 2018; Paarlberg 2019). Despite the rise of transnational lifestyles, many emigrants still face procedural and institutional obstacles to participation in homeland elections, including the approximately two million Taiwanese citizens who are scattered across the globe. The Presidential and Vice-Presidential Election and Recall Act (*zongtong fuzongtong xuanju bamianfa* 總統副總統選舉罷免法) and the Referendum Act (*gongmin toupiaofa* 公民投票法) stipulate that on election day, voters must cast their ballots in the designated polling stations of their registered domiciles in Taiwan. Nevertheless, many Taiwanese emigrants continue to invest substantial financial and temporal resources in order to participate in homeland elections.

While extant literature has unpacked the impact of Taiwan's changing political landscape on overseas policies and the relationships with emigrant communities (Damm 2012; Gong 2014; To 2014; Han 2019), empirical insights into contemporary Taiwanese

overseas political participation remain scarce (Lin 2006; Keng and Schubert 2010; Cheng 2017). What is more, there is a lacuna in the study of Taiwanese emigrant's electoral participation in homeland elections.

This research emerges from both a personal astonishment at Taiwanese emigrant voters' democratic commitment, and a theoretical interest in political transnationalism in the context of the institutional absence of extraterritorial voting. It raises three research questions: How were Taiwanese overseas voters in Vienna mobilised during the 2020 presidential elections? How did the specific sociopolitical characteristics of the local Taiwanese emigrant community inform transnational voter mobilisation? What effect did transnational voter mobilisation have on electoral participation? Deploying a case study on the Taiwanese community in Vienna (Austria) and drawing on a mixed methods design, this paper analyses electoral mobilisation as an example of transnational political practices during the 2020 presidential elections in Taiwan. Oriented within the literature of political transnationalism, the paper looks at both the meso (organisations) and the micro (individuals) level of emigrants' political participation.

The remainder of the paper introduces the study's theoretical

framework, delineates the specific sociopolitical space of the Taiwanese migrant community in Vienna in which transnational electoral mobilisation occurs, and analyses the actors, processes, and practices of voter mobilisation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and possible trajectories for future research.

### *Transnational electoral mobilisation and participation*

Classical political theory defines political participation as “actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics” (Milbrath and Madan 1977: 2). Applied to a migrant context, this definition begs a series of questions. Recently, sociologists and political scientists have started to turn their attention to migrants’ political integration into the politics of their destination countries and their ties and engagements in the politics of their countries of origin (Day and Shaw 2002; Bauböck, 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Adamson 2005; Janoschka 2008; Peltoniemi 2018; Fell, Cheng, and Momesso 2019; Mügge et al. 2019). To make sense of these practices in terms of patterns and durability, various scholars recommend analytically distinguishing between the scope, type, and frequency of transnational practices (Portes 1999; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Gabrielli and Zapata-Barrero 2015). What makes them transnational is that while political participation might be oriented to one specific political arena – the country of origin, country of settlement, or supranational/intergovernmental organisations (Gabrielli and Zapata-Barrero 2015: 9) – it involves multilevel processes, structures, and actors that cross borders of territorially bounded polities (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 760).

Voting is the most quintessential form of “conventional” (Gabrielli and Zapata-Barrero 2015: 9) or “narrow” (Portes 1999) transnational political participation. Studies show that factors that can promote migrants’ electoral participation in their countries of origin are diverse. Peltoniemi (2018) finds that rather than identification with the origin country, it is cumulative time spent living abroad, age and educational level, and the distance to the closest polling station that influence emigrant voter turnout. Mügge et al. (2019) confirm gender, age, and educational background as critical factors of electoral participation but show also that political trust in the homeland political system affects voter turnout. Mügge et al. (2019) and Kostelka (2017) regard homeland policies to include or exclude participation of citizens from abroad as critical for these citizens’ decision to participate in homeland elections, especially institutions and bureaucratic procedures. Voter registration and an extreme situation of “malinscription” (i.e., states condition the right to vote on a permanent address in the home country and electoral participation requires an international journey) affect emigrants’ propensity to vote (Kostelka 2017: 1063). Although Ahmadov and Sasse (2016: 79-80) do not deny the weight of demographic and socioeconomic factors, and other “homeland-related factors” that “predispose emigrants towards or against transnational engagement in home-country politics,” they contend that the three most critical factors that explain (varying degrees of) participation are assimilation in the host country, emigrant networks, and destination-country characteristics. Pioneer studies recognised voting as a “social act” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948), inferring that people can be convinced

or pressured to comply with this social norm (Green and Shachar 2000; Karp 2012). Research emphasising the importance of electoral mobilisation in bringing people to the ballot boxes mandates that a high degree of the migrant community’s geographical concentration and organisational density can facilitate both direct (i.e., political parties) and indirect (i.e., peers) electoral mobilisation for electoral participation in the country of origin (Kostelka 2017: 1065). However, Kostelka (ibid.: 1064) cautions that mobilisation’s effects on mobile individuals are substantially lower than on sessile peers at home, as they can easily escape mobilisation. Also, due to the high costs associated with direct mobilisation abroad and comparatively low impact on election outcomes, parties integrate direct transnational mobilisation into their campaigns provided that diasporas are sufficiently large to bring electoral advantage. In any case, both direct and indirect mobilisations reach only those emigrants who are well integrated into, or well connected with, the emigrant community in their host countries.

The Taiwanese community in Austria’s capital is small in size and characterised by high geographic concentration and dense community organisation, thus making it a perfect fit for an in-depth case study on transnational direct and indirect voter mobilisation of migrants whose only and closest polling station is 9,000 km away. Against the backdrop of ongoing protests in Hong Kong and China’s increasingly self-assertive attitude, including in relation to the Taiwan question, the 2020 presidential elections generated strong societal tensions. The rekindling of the notorious Taiwanese/Chinese divide over the issue of “unification/independence,” constituting the “key political cleavage” in contemporary Taiwanese society (Achen and Wang 2017: 11), likely affected voter mobilisation both at home and abroad. Mobilisation’s effects are manifested in increased voter turnout, which jumped almost ten percentage points from 66.27% in 2016 to 74.90% in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the elections provide an excellent lens to study a highly relevant – yet so far neglected – aspect of Taiwan’s contemporary political transnationalism.

### *Methods and data*

The findings of this article draw on multiple methods of data collection and analysis, including direct electoral observation between October 2019 and January 2020, a unique data set compiled with a multilingual survey questionnaire from a random sample of Taiwanese overseas residents in Austria, six semi-structured interviews with heads of Taiwanese overseas associations in Austria and Germany, several personal conversations with members of the local Taiwanese community, and social media data.

The theory-guided and multilingual questionnaire (Chinese and German) comprised questions regarding general demographic data, political participation, and electoral behaviour. To increase the engagement rate and avoid population bias as much as possible, I used multiple distribution channels, including social media (Facebook

1. Central Election Commission (CEC) 中央選舉委員會, 2020, “中選會公布第15任總統副總統及第10屆立法委員選舉選舉人人數” (*Zhongxuanhui gongbu di 15 ren zongtong fuzongtong ji di 10 jie lifa weiyuan xuanju xuanju ren renshu*, Number of eligible voters for the 15<sup>th</sup> presidential and vice-presidential elections and the 10<sup>th</sup> Legislative Yuan elections published by the Central Election Commission), 7 January 2020, <https://2020.cec.gov.tw/articleSingle.html?cate=C01&single=A0176&gsc.tab=0> (accessed 6 May 2021).

and LINE, an instant-messaging app widely used by Taiwanese), direct emails and visits, and personal networks. Nevertheless, the overall response rate was quite low (102 respondents), and the findings have both a gender (68 of the respondents were women) and age bias (76% of the respondents were between 21 and 45 years old). The total number of respondents who had the right to vote amounted to 88 people.

To gain an understanding of what role overseas organisations play in promoting voter participation and their linkages to political parties, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six incumbent heads of overseas associations and several informal conversations with friends, employees from the Taiwanese Representative Office, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Austria (Taipei Wirtschafts- und Kulturbüro in Österreich (TWKÖ), *zhu Aodili Taipei jingji he wenhua daibiaochu* 駐奧地利台北經濟和文化代表處), and new acquaintances whom I met during data collection.

Finally, as almost all associations maintain Facebook pages with plenty of followers, I searched these groups for posts and comments on the elections, particularly pertaining to the topic of “going home to vote” (*fanxiang toupiao* 返鄉投票). In doing so, I hoped to gain insight into how the elections were perceived and debated among internet users and follow the multi-level processes and actors involved in transnational voter mobilisation.

### The Taiwanese overseas electorate

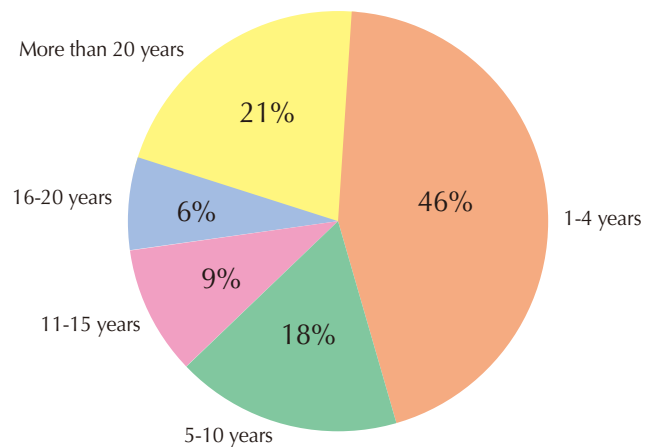
Taiwanese migrants belong to a minority of migrant communities and seldom draw the attention either of the wider public or of academics in their countries of residence. Official statistics on the population size of Taiwanese residing abroad are published by the Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC) (*Zhonghua minguo qiaowu weiyuanhui* 中華民國僑務委員會), a cabinet-level agency that addresses issues related to Taiwanese people residing abroad, relying on estimates it receives from local Taiwanese representative offices. These distinguish between overseas people of Chinese descent (*haiwai huaren* 海外華人) and overseas Taiwanese (*haiwai Taiwan qiaomin* 海外台灣僑民). The latter category pertains to migrants from the current de facto sovereign territory of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and their descendants who possess a permanent household registration in Taiwan and are, therefore, entitled to citizen rights, including access to health care, education in Taiwan, and the right to vote in home elections. In 2019, the number of overseas Taiwanese scattered across the globe reached 2.05 million.<sup>2</sup> As this number also includes citizens under the eligible voting age of 20, the effective share of the global Taiwanese overseas electorate rises to approximately 10% of the total voting population.<sup>3</sup>

Since the OCAC unfortunately does not publish numbers on Taiwanese people residing in Austria, this study relies primarily on census data compiled by the Austrian immigration authorities. According to these statistics, 1,579 Taiwanese people were registered residents in January 2020, and most of them resided in the capital, Vienna (966). Estimates from the local TWKÖ, however, put the number at 3,000.<sup>4</sup> Both the Austrian statistics and estimates from the TWKÖ are problematic for various reasons that cannot be explored here.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions about the exact size of the Taiwanese emigrant electorate residing in Austria. However, by

combining the Austrian census data with demographic information I amassed through my survey, it is possible to estimate the share of the Taiwanese emigrant electorate residing in Austria.

In terms of demographics, Taiwanese migrants have a high level of education on average, as 91% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. More than half are currently working (54%), and over one third are enrolled in Austrian universities and colleges (36%); 15% of the two groups work and study simultaneously. The occupational fields span diverse sectors, including research and education, commerce, IT and media, tourism, and others, and the two prevailing areas of study for currently enrolled students are music and arts, and science and technology. Almost half of the respondents declared education to be their primary migration motivation, while 17% moved to Austria for professional reasons, and only 19% because of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. Time lived in Austria



Source: author.

As Figure 1 shows, 66% of the migrant community are students and (probably) young professionals who have lived less than ten years in Austria. As this part of the population is less likely to renounce Taiwanese citizenship and the Austrian state requires migrants to reside at least ten years in Austria before allowing them to become naturalised citizens, it is safe to say that at least 66% (1,042) were eligible to vote during the 2020 elections. Also, as the likelihood of migrants taking up citizenship of the receiving country increases with length of stay, it is highly probable that 20% (316) of Taiwanese people who have lived in Austria for more than 20 years have already become naturalised Austrians and were therefore not entitled to

2. Overseas Community Affairs Council 中華民國僑務委員會, September 2019, “中華民國107年僑務統計年報” (*Zhonghua minguo 107 nian qiaowu tongji nianbao*, 2018 statistical yearbook of Overseas Community Affairs Council), p. 11.

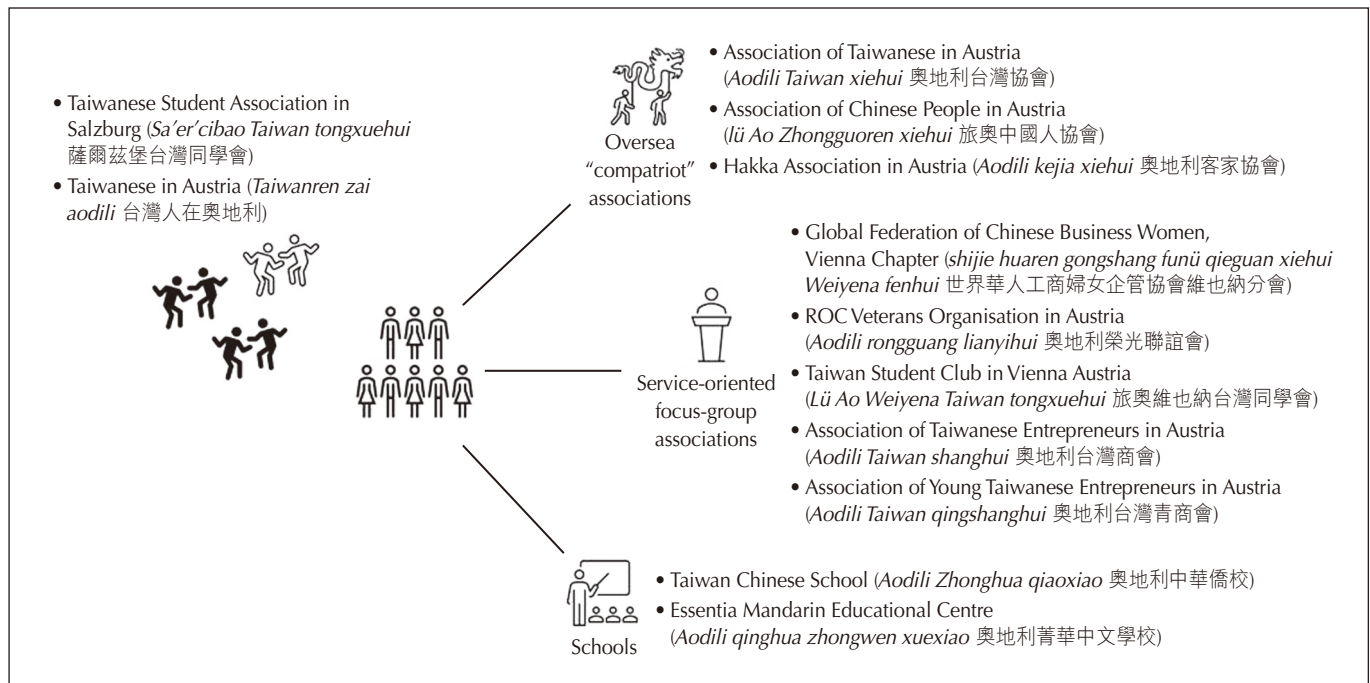
3. The total electorate in the 2020 presidential elections amounted to 19,312,105. See Central Election Commission, “中選會公布 (...)” (*Zhongxuanhui gongbu (...)*, Number of eligible voters (...)), op. cit.

4. Private conversations with diplomats from the TWKÖ in Vienna (May and October 2020).

5. Statistics do not reflect the complex composition of Taiwanese in terms of origin country, citizenship, and identity. For more information on political loyalty and identity see Christiansen (2005); on the impact of identity politics on overseas communities see Damm (2012) and Han (2019); on democratic institution building and citizenship rights see Low (2013).

6. Data drawn from the author's survey.

Figure 2. Taiwanese community structure in Austria



Source: author.

participate in the January elections.<sup>7</sup> The odds are equal for the remaining 15% (237). Having lived in Austria between 11 and 20 years, the possibility that they have retained Taiwanese citizenship is as likely as the possibility that they have assumed Austrian citizenship. Thus, the estimated size of the Taiwanese overseas electorate in Austria lies somewhere between 1,000 and 1,400.

### Overseas organisations and political attitudes

The Taiwanese community in Austria is organised into several formalised associations – most of them located in Vienna – that have direct relationships with Taiwanese authorities or government-affiliated organisations. The latter provide financial or other material support for events or educational purposes. These associations can be analytically distinguished by three types: overseas “compatriot” associations, service-oriented focus-group associations, and schools. Furthermore, several groups do not possess formal statutes, and members are only loosely connected via social media groups. Figure 2 offers an illustrative overview of the Taiwanese community’s organisational landscape.

In general, Taiwanese migrants are well-connected within their community, and some also participate in organisations with members derived from across the ethnically Chinese community, such as choirs, churches, and professional associations. Membership in Taiwanese associations tends to overlap, particularly between compatriot and service-oriented focus-group associations. Many join events of different associations to meet friends and interact with other community members;<sup>8</sup> still, the degree of participation in community life differs considerably across age groups. Most of my informants agree that while older cohorts tend to be much more connected through the (compatriot) associations and regularly engage in community life, younger cohorts, especially students,

prefer to stay in loose networks and do not necessarily watch out for other Taiwanese acquaintances; they do, however, connect via membership in different social media groups.<sup>9</sup> As will be shown, participation in community life and the online activity of Taiwanese migrants influenced decisions on mobilisation strategies during the 2020 elections.

Although the island of Taiwan acts as a strong, uniting identity-forming element – either in terms of citizenship, place of origin, or descent – the Austrian Taiwanese community is divided over the question of whether they belong to one or two “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). While some sympathise with the indigenisation movement advocating a Taiwan-centric identity that sees Taiwan as a political and cultural entity in its own right, others stress their belonging to the Republic of China as part of a greater Chinese sociocultural space, including the Mainland. In other words, Taiwanese people who migrate to Austria (and other places in the world) bring with them the cleavages that have shaped politics and society in Taiwan over the past decades (Mügge et al. 2019). By implication, identity politics at home have affected local community organisations abroad, translating into opposing political attitudes and partisan preferences across different organisations.

The Association of Taiwanese in Austria (Vereinigung der Taiwanesen in Österreich (VTÖ), *Aodili Taiwan xiehui* 奧地利台灣協會) is one of the two principal compatriot association that was established in 1970 as a local subsidiary of the supranational World Federation of Taiwanese Associations (WFTA) (*shijie Taiwan tongxianghui lianhehui* 世界台灣同鄉會聯合會), whose foundation

7. Austria follows a single-citizenship policy. By taking Austrian citizenship, migrants have to renounce that of their country of origin.

8. Interview with the current head of the VTÖ (Vienna, 21 July 2020).

9. Interview with an anonymous student (Vienna, 11 November 2020).



was part of Taiwan's growing opposition movement abroad in the early 1970s (Lin 2006; Cheng 2017).<sup>10</sup> For its specific historical background, the association traditionally endorses a Taiwan-centric identity; in recent history, it has aligned with the indigenisation movement, advocating a self-assertive Taiwanese identity and championing Taiwan's independence. One of the most direct expression of this political alignment was evident in the renaming of the Austrian association from the literally translated "Taiwanese Hometown Association" (*Taiwan tongxianghui* 台灣同鄉會) to its current name. However, while members' political attitudes towards Taiwan's rightful place in the international system are unanimous, partisan affiliations differ and range from the currently governing Democratic Progressive Party DPP, (*minjindang* 民進黨) to smaller parties from the so-called third political force (*disan shili* 第三勢力), such as New Power Party (*shidai liliang* 時代力量) and Taiwan Statebuilding Party (*jjjindang* 基進黨).

The Association of Chinese People in Austria (Chinesischer Verein in Österreich (CVÖ), *lü Ao Zhongguoren xiehui* 旅奧中國人協會) advocates an ethnicity-based identity that emphasises the common cultural roots of people from an imagined "Greater China." Although not all members necessarily espouse the idea of reunification with the Mainland, many still back the more China-friendly Chinese Nationalist Party (*guomindang* 國民黨, KMT) or support other parties from the blue camp, such as the Qinmin Party (*qinmindang* 親民黨) and the New Party (*xindang* 新黨).<sup>11</sup> This political orientation critically affects membership structures. As more and more young people struggle to identify with China, the associations remain the preserve of older cohorts of Taiwanese immigrants, especially first-generation immigrants. Some not only possess considerable authority within the local community, but also hold influential positions in supranational associations, such as the Council of Taiwanese Chambers of Commerce in Europe, CTCCE (*Ouzhou Taiwan shanghui lianhe zonghui* 歐洲台灣商會聯合總會).

Traditional and novel political cleavages across social and professional groups are also mirrored in other organisations, especially those that cater to the needs of circumscribed interest groups. The Association of Taiwanese Entrepreneurs in Austria (Verband taiwanesischer Unternehmer VTU, *Aodili Taiwan shanghui* 奧地利台灣商會) is the local chapter of CTCCE aiming to promote local and transnational business opportunities for Taiwanese entrepreneurs. Its current head explained that although Austrian politics are much more salient, since they directly impact Taiwanese businesses in Austria, migrant entrepreneurs are still very much concerned with developments in Taiwan and many members express this concern also through electoral participation. He estimates that 80% of the 60 members supported the KMT and its candidate in the 2020 elections.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, members of the Taiwan Student Club in Vienna/Austria (TSCVA) (*lü Ao Weiyena Taiwan tongxuehui* 旅奧維也納臺灣同學會), which serves as a receiving organisation for Taiwanese students during their short-term and long-term study sojourns in Austria, generally oppose the KMT and its ethnicity-centred identity that emphasises Chineseness and Taiwan as part of a "Greater China."<sup>13</sup> Similar to other associations, political attitudes of TSCVA members regarding Taiwan's sovereignty status, refusing reunification (*tong* 統). Nevertheless, their partisan preferences differ.

We all hope for independence, we just differ in the thinking of how to achieve this goal. Since different politicians propose different approaches, students support different politicians. (Interview with current head of TSCVA)

In sum, densely organised and geographically concentrated in Vienna, the structure of Austria's Taiwanese community is characterised by social divides and political cleavages caused by competing ideologies of belonging that originate in identity politics in Taiwan. Reproduced within the confines of the migrant community, ideologies of belonging have shaped the community's organisational landscape with associations assuming opposing political attitudes. According to migration studies, the geographical concentration and dense community organisation can facilitate direct and indirect mobilisation by politicians, political activists, and peers, although mobilisation effects are less profound than on their peers at home (Kostelka 2017: 1064). The next section will therefore delve deeper into this matter, exploring to what extent the political orientations of associations affected processes and practices of transnational electoral mobilisation.

### Associations as entry points and platforms

Historically, overseas communities have been instrumental for Taiwanese governments, especially during the Cold War period, when they provided legitimacy for the KMT's claim on the Mainland (Damm 2012: 220). However, democratisation and related constitutional reforms, the growing momentum of identity politics, and the prevailing institutional absence of an external voting system have considerably reduced overseas Taiwanese people's influence on homeland politics. Making up approximately 10% of the electorate, their impact is ambiguous, and reliable data to gauge their effect on election outcomes does not exist.

Given these historical reasons, but probably also because of the uncertainty of electoral advantage, Taiwanese politicians habitually solicit support from overseas Taiwanese, asking them to turn back to Taiwan and share in civic participation. This act is labelled as *fanxiang toupiao* literally meaning to "return to one's hometown to vote," or, in a modified version, 回去台灣投票 (*huiqu Taiwan toupiao*), meaning "go back to Taiwan to vote." The term 返鄉 (*fanxiang*) originally refers to a traditional practice of children returning to their parents' home for New Year's celebrations. Therefore, when politicians or other individuals solicit the overseas electorate's support and Taiwanese authorities promote overseas voter registration (*qiaobao fanguo xingshi xuanjuquan* 僑胞返國行使選舉權), they appeal to a deeply ingrained social value of loyalty, evoking a sense of duty and caring for the motherland.

10. The very first native place associations of emigrants deriving from "Formosa Island" can be traced back to the early period under Japanese control and were established in Japan, Southeast Asia, and China (Tang 2007).

11. Private conversations with some members of the Taiwanese community in Vienna (July and August 2020); interview with the current head of the VTÖ (21 July 2020); interview with the owners of the Taiwan Chinese School in Austria (22 July 2020).

12. Interview with the current head of the VTU (11 August 2021).

13. Interview with the current head of the VTÖ (21 July 2020); private conversation with a Taiwanese student (11 November 2020).

The 15<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in 2020 took place against the backdrop of mounting pressure from China and the months-long protests in Hong Kong, and so became a significant national political event. The candidates, their campaigns, and exit polls were omnipresent in national and overseas media. Tropes such as “historic turning point” (*shizilukou* 十字路口) and “battle of life or death” (*shengsizhan* 生死戰) dominated the public discourse, stimulating homeland nationalism across all political camps and rekindling the historical Taiwanese/Chinese divide.<sup>14</sup> Like their predecessors, presidential candidates appealed to the democratic esteem and loyalty of overseas Taiwanese, and activated transnational networks to mobilise their support. Assisted by a range of activists inside and outside the country and information and communication technologies, voter mobilisation transcended static territorial borders.

Analysts expected that young voters would support the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文, helping her to win the presidential race. This electorate stood in a perceived “contrast to the supposed apathy of their western counterparts” (Ho, Clark, and Tan 2017: 97), especially after the Sunflower Movement (*taiyanghua yundong* 太陽花學運) in 2014 and the presidential elections in 2016. Many young people and first-time voters were moved to vote for the DPP as they felt their political programme to be better aligned with young people’s interests (*ibid.*: 111). Consequently, they became a critical target of the DPP’s election campaign during the 2020 elections.

One campaign output was the video “2020 回家投票” (*2020 huijia toupiao*, Return home to vote in 2020), a collection of audiovisual statements from young Taiwanese people on their motivations to return to their registered domiciles to vote. At the end of December, six regional editions were posted on YouTube and social media (Taiwan, Europe, Japan, US, Canada, and the Asia Pacific). Each video lasted between one and three minutes, and its protagonists were students and professionals who spoke either Mandarin (*guoyu* 國語) or Taiwanese (*taiyu* 台語) – the use of Taiwan’s local dialect being a trademark of the indigenisation movement. The inputs concluded with an appeal to the audience to follow the contributor’s example: “2020 我回台灣投票, 你呢?” (*2020 wo hui Taiwan toupiao, ni ne?*, In 2020, I will return to Taiwan to vote, what about you?).

The European edition drew my attention since it had been posted on the Facebook pages of two Taiwanese associations in Austria, the VTÖ and TSCVA. More importantly, it contained the contributions of two Taiwanese women who lived in Vienna. One of them was Lin Fang-yu 林芳瑜, who is the wife of the acting head of the VTÖ, Yu Guan-ru 余冠儒. Tracing the processes of production and dissemination, I learned that the video campaign was an initiative of the DPP’s youth organisation (YDPP) (*minjindang qingnian dangbu* 民進黨青年黨部). To collect individual statements from overseas Taiwanese people from across the world, the organisation reached out to the head of the WFTA, Fuh Pey-Fen 傅佩芬, who lives in Germany. Having previously acted as head of the association’s regional chapter in Europe, the European Federation of Taiwanese Association (*Ouzhou Taiwan xiehui* 歐洲台灣協會), Fuh Pey-Fen is well-connected within Europe. Through the federation’s annual meetings and other activities, she knows most of the heads of the overseas associations personally that sympathize with the so-called pan-green movement,<sup>15</sup> including Yu Guan-ru and Lin Fang-yu.

In late November, Lin Fang-yu published the call for contributions

“Young Taiwanese around the world support Tsai” (*Quanjia Taiwan qingnian ting Ying jihua* 全球台灣青年挺英計畫), on the VTÖ’s Facebook page and in “Taiwanese in Austria” (Taiwanesen in Österreich TiÖ, *Taiwanren zai Aodili* 台灣人在奧地利), a Facebook group administered by Ian Hung 洪毅, the head of the TSCVA, and others. The statements were then collected and sent back to the YDPP, which undertook the professional cutting and producing. Upon completion, the videos were disseminated online and shared through numerous social media platforms.

When asked about her involvement both in the video and in the dissemination of the call for contribution, Lin Fang-yu tried not to overstate her role. She explained that she only filled in for her husband, who had been too busy to take care of this matter and emphasised that she did not consider herself to be a “very political person.” Still, she “cared deeply” for Taiwan and wanted to support her husband in his capacity as the head of the association.<sup>16</sup> Her statement in the video reflects this sense of political consciousness and “caring” for Taiwan’s political future:

I was born after martial law was abolished and grew up in a free and democratic Taiwan. The value of freedom should not be forgotten. In 2020, I will return home to vote.<sup>17</sup>

Although the VTÖ promotes the idea of a Taiwan-centric identity like that of the DPP, it did not officially support Tsai Ing-wen’s election campaign. To avoid internal conflicts, the association prefers not to be associated with any specific political party or candidate.<sup>18</sup> Yu Guan-ru elucidates:

We do not necessarily always back a specific candidate in the [presidential] elections. Yet, we know which candidate’s ideas and attitudes represent more or less those of our association, so, from that one can guess whom our association supports. But in order to avoid disputes, we do not engage in official political activities to support this candidate, as some of his/her proposals might be in conflict with some of our ideas.<sup>19</sup>

The association refers to itself as a political association (*zhengzhixing* 政治性) and primarily lobbies for Taiwan’s membership in the United Nations and the World Health Organisation.<sup>20</sup> To advance its advocacy whilst keeping political independence, the association levies financing through membership fees and event

14. Li Hsin-fang 李欣芳, “‘唯有堅定前行, 台灣才會更好’ 海外青年發聲明挺蔡英文” (*Weiyou jian ding qianxing, Taiwan cai hui geng hao* “haiwai qingnian fa shengming ting Tsai Ing-wen, “Only if we persistently keep striding, Taiwan can become a better place” young overseas Taiwanese send a declaration of support to Tsai Ing-wen), *Liberty Times* (自由時報), 4 January 2019, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2661972> (accessed on 2 February 2021).

15. Taiwan’s national political movements distinguish in two historically distinct approaches regarding Taiwan’s relationship with China, the more “China-friendly” and China-opposing approach. They are spearheaded by the two dominant political parties DPP and KMT and subsumed under the pan-blue and pan-green movements or parties.

16. Private conversation with Lin Fang-yu.

17. “2020 我回家投票, 你呢?” (*2020 wo hui jia toupiao, na ni ne?*, 2020, I will return home to vote, what about you?), 2020 Tsai Ing-wen Support Group, 22 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjoxavaAuBs> (accessed on 2 February 2021).

18. Interview with the current head of the VTÖ (21 July 2020).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

organisation.<sup>21</sup> According to Fuh Pey-Fen, this is a common policy shared by other associations under the umbrella organisation of the WFTA.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the above-outlined reservations, the federation and its local chapters decided to help YDPP collect and disseminate election appeals, thus engaging in indirect electoral mobilisation during the 2020 elections. A critical reason behind their support of the YDPP's transnational mobilisation campaign was that the video called upon Taiwanese people to exercise their civic rights rather than voting for Tsai Ing-wen.<sup>23</sup> However, this presumed neutral appeal did not conceal the originators of the video, an affiliated organisation of the DPP, and operated on the conviction that young people would not cast their ballots in favour for the candidate of the rival KMT. In this way, the federation struck a balance between political independence and advocacy. At the same time, the association's online visibility and networks provided the DPP and its affiliated organisations with an important political platform for directly mobilising the pan-green overseas electorate.

The afore-described process demonstrates that the VTÖ, as a subsidiary organisation of the WFTA, was a critical entry point for the DPP and its support groups to rally for electoral support within Austria's Taiwanese community. However, to reduce mobilisation to the co-optation of overseas associations and their leaders would be short-sighted and misleading, as engaging in indirect electoral mobilisation was a deliberate choice made by the association, which is in keeping with its advocacy mission. Further, rallying also originated from the individual agency of community members. In Germany, for example, a group of students rallied other students on Facebook and LINE in aid of purchasing group flight tickets (*tuangou* 團購). The announcement also found its way onto the Facebook pages of the VTÖ, TSCVA, and TVÖ through one of their subscribers. To what extent this undertaking was successful cannot be answered here. It shows, however, that the VTÖ was as much an entry point for political organisations to mobilise their electorates as it was a platform for individual efforts to convince peers to exercise their right to vote, this acting as indirect mobilisation.

While the VTÖ and their counterparts in other countries allowed for a targeted mobilisation of the globally dispersed pan-green electorate, overseas compatriot associations advocating a more ethnicity-centred identity enticed politicians from the blue camp to use their networks for direct electoral mobilisation. The most prominent example is Li Chia-fen 李佳芬, Han Kuo-yu's 韓國瑜 wife, who toured both in Southeast Asia and the United States. There, she visited local overseas communities to solicit support for her husband and the KMT.<sup>24</sup> To my knowledge – and no great surprise – the KMT did not undertake direct mobilisation in Austria. Given the community's small population and the comparatively high travel expenses, cost-benefit calculations were not favourable. Nevertheless, prominent members from the CVÖ took the lead in mobilising support for the KMT and its candidate Han Kuo-yu and established the support group Han Kuo-yu Support Group (*Han Kuo-yu houyuanhui* 韓國瑜後援會).

In contrast to the VTÖ, whose target group was mainly young voters, the CVÖ targeted older cohorts. While the former made extensive use of Internet and social media, the latter drew on more traditional practices to gather their networks. One of the outcomes

was a one-day excursion with a tour bus for about 50 people in late autumn 2019. The tour was organised by two renowned Taiwanese emigrants who own a big travel bus enterprise in Vienna. Monopolising Taiwanese group travel tourism in the region, they wield considerable authority in the VTU and within the community. Rumour also had it that the same or other members of the Taiwanese community collected donations for Han Kuo-yu and themselves donated no small amount of money for his election campaign.

Others, in turn, showed their support in the form of signature lists, which they sent to Taiwanese media or the OCAC.<sup>25</sup> Whether signature lists were a substitute for voting – either because signatories were naturalised Austrians and thus did not have the right to vote in Taiwan, or because they could not return to Taiwan to vote – or an additional way to express their concern for homeland politics and their support for Han Kuo-yu, cannot be answered here. Delving more deeply into this issue proved challenging, as many Taiwanese people who sympathised with the pan-blue camp were hesitant to engage in conversations on this topic.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, the findings presented here show that overseas associations were important entry points for politicians and political parties and provided platforms for individual members to rally support for their preferred candidates. The reproduction of identity politics abroad manifested in the community's organisational landscape facilitated direct and indirect mobilisation for social and political actors. This begs the question of the effectiveness of mobilisation.

## Mobilisation effects and voting behaviour

In the 2020 presidential and vice-presidential elections the DPP's running mates Tsai Ing-wen and William Lai 賴清德 won a landslide victory with a record of 8,170,231 votes (57.13%), leaving their contenders Han Kuo-yu and Simon Chang 張善政, James Soong 宋楚瑜 and Sandra Hsiang 余湘 far behind – 5,522,119 (38.61%) and 608,590 (4.26%) votes respectively. Official Taiwanese statistics registered a rebound of total voter turnout to 74.9%, after a sharp decline to 66.27% in the 2016 elections, albeit this failed to near the all-time high of 82.69% in 2000.<sup>27</sup>

21. Ibid.

22. Interview with the current head of the WFTA.

23. Interview with the current head of the WFTA.

24. Qian Meizhen 錢美臻 and Luo Shanji 洛衫磯, “兩千僑民歡迎李佳芬展現韓國瑜的高人氣” (*Liang qian qiaomin huanying Li Jiafen zhanxian Han Guoyu de gaoren qi*, 2000 overseas Taiwanese welcome Li Chia-fen demonstrating Han Kuo-yu's high popularity), *US News Express* (美國新聞速遞), 16 December 2019, <https://www.usnewsexpress.com/archives/100189> (accessed on 2 February 2021); “韓國瑜赴東亞多國家，為夫拉票爭取僑民支持” (*Han Guoyu fu dongya duo guojia, wei fu lapiao zhengqu qiaomin zhichi*, Han Kuo-yu's wife tours in Southeast Asia to rally support from overseas Taiwanese), *Dongwang* (東網), 25 November 2019, [https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/cnnews/20191125/bkn-20191125100519445-1125\\_00952\\_001.html](https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/cnnews/20191125/bkn-20191125100519445-1125_00952_001.html) (accessed on 2 February 2021).

25. Private conversations with members from the community; interview with the current head of the VTU.

26. This reluctance stood in stark contrast to younger community members, whom I could reach more easily (e.g., social media). Besides being responsive to my interview requests, they also showed a genuine interest in the topic of my research.

27. “數據看2020台灣大選系列之三：總統選舉結果” (*Shuju kan 2020 Taiwan daxuanju xilie zhi san: Zongtong xuanju jieguo*, Data on the third series of the general elections in 2020: Presidential election results), *The Initium* (端傳媒), 11 January 2020, <https://theinitium.com/article/20200112-taiwan-election-data-ntu/> (accessed 6 June 2021).



As Taiwan does not have an external voting system and opinion polls neglect residential absence as a routinely collected demographic variable (Tsai 2015: 40), determining the share of overseas votes and measuring mobilisation effects is challenging. One indicator that election campaigns of both political camps succeeded in bringing a larger share of overseas voters than in previous elections is the number of newly registered overseas voters. Citizens of the Republic of China, who have already had a registered domicile in Taiwan but upon emigration transferred it abroad, can apply for ballot cards with the Central Election Commission, CEC (*zhongyang xuanju weiyuanhui* 中央選舉委員會), an independent authority that presides over the management of national and local elections.<sup>28</sup> In the 2020 elections, the number of applications doubled from 2,420 in 2016 to 5,328 in 2020.<sup>29</sup>

Another set of alternative data to gauge overseas Taiwanese people's electoral participation are passenger statistics from Taiwan's largest international airport, Taoyuan international airport in Taipei. On election day, Taiwanese newspapers reported extensively on the entry-exit ratio of passengers from 10 and 11 January, determining that, since entries outweighed exits, a great number of overseas Taiwanese people flocked into the country for election purposes.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, by comparing passenger statistics between 7 and 11 January 2020 with the equivalent period in 2019, we observe a noticeable increase of entries and a parallel negative growth of exits (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Passenger statistics Taoyuan International Airport 7-11 January 2019 and 2020

	Incoming			Outgoing		
	2019	2020	Growth rate	2019	2020	Growth rate
7 January	52,973	57,616	8.76%	67,396	55,790	-17.22%
8 January	50,288	59,037	17.40%	55,628	52,746	-5.18%
9 January	48,337	69,738	44.27%	55,137	47,995	-12.95%
10 January	54,369	76,545	40.79%	58,976	56,277	-4.58%
11 January (election day 2020)	59,959	58,667	-2.15%	60,326	66,588	10.38%

Source: compiled by the author, data drawn from statistics published by Taoyuan international airport.

In order to measure whether higher voter turnout in the 2020 election also resulted in increased participation rates of overseas voters, I contrasted the above entry-exit growth rates against those for the 2016 elections. Table 2 shows that although the number of incoming passengers before Election Day was augmented compared to the previous non-election year, the growth rate was lower than in 2019 and 2020. Also, in contrast to the 2020 elections, the number of outgoing passengers under the 2016 election grew in parallel with incoming passenger. Hence, although overseas voter registration with the CEC and passenger statistics from Taoyuan

international airport are at best indicative, they still suggest that the presidential candidates were probably more effective in mobilising overseas voters in 2020 than in 2016.

**Table 2.** Passenger statistics Taoyuan International Airport 12-16 January 2015 and 2016

	Incoming			Outgoing		
	2015	2016	Growth rate	2015	2016	Growth rate
12 January	39,545	43,868	10.93%	46,657	45,423	-2.64%
13 January	37,238	44,722	20.10%	41,267	42,780	3.67%
14 January	38,205	49,776	30.29%	40,496	44,556	10.03%
15 January	40,656	55,293	36.00%	41,677	51,000	22.37%
16 January (election day 2016)	43,548	48,614	11.63%	45,405	58,472	28.78%

Source: compiled by the author, data drawn from statistics published by Taoyuan international airport.

To gain a better understanding of mobilisation effects in the Austrian Taiwanese community, I conducted a survey querying information about electoral participation and behaviour. Despite the limitations outlined in the methodological section of this paper, the dataset provides a glimpse into the effects of voter mobilisation and the implications of the absent external voting system for Taiwanese voters residing abroad.

According to my survey, 38% of overseas Taiwanese people residing in Austria cast their ballots in the 2020 presidential elections; 91% voted for the DPP.

Of those who did not return to Taiwan, 68% cited study or job-related reasons for failing to do so. Only 9% did not show an interest in voting, and 23% indicated other reasons, such as family obligations, prohibitive costs, or reluctance to go back specifically for the elections. Overall, the survey shows that the absence of external voting remains a critical obstacle to most emigrant voters' electoral participation. Through this lens, the previously mentioned initiative of purchasing group flight tickets assumes the role of a strategy to lower the (financial) costs of voting in an electoral system that does not allow its citizens to vote from abroad. My informants told me that most Taiwanese in Austria bought individual tickets, as the number of people would not have reached the minimum to obtain

28. Central Election Commission (CEC) 中央選舉委員會, "中華民國海外國民行使第15任總統副總統選舉權答客問" (*Zhonghua minguo haiwai guomin xingshi di 15 ren zongtong fuzongtong xuanjuquan dakewen*, Questions and answers from overseas nationals of the Republic of China on exercising their right to vote for the 15<sup>th</sup> presidential and vice-presidential elections), 12 September 2019, <https://2020.cec.gov.tw/articleList.html?cate=C07#gsc.tab=0> (accessed 23 March 2021).

29. Central Election Commission, "中選會公布 (...)" (*Zhongxuanhui gongbu (...)*, Number of eligible voters (...)), op. cit.

30. "返鄉投票熱! 桃機連返鄉投票熱!" (*Fanxiang toupiao re! Taoji lian fanxiang toupiao re!*, Returning home to vote! Voting frenzy at Taoyuan International Airport!), *United Daily News* (聯合報), 11 January 2020, <https://udn.com/news/story/7266/4280601> (accessed 27 May 2021).



a competitive group price for a roundtrip Vienna-Taipei-Vienna. As such, voting costs remained high in Austria, especially for young Taiwanese whose time and financial resources are restricted. While the age group between 21 and 60 had to use the short window around the election day in January, when prices for flight tickets are generally high due to the forthcoming New Year holidays, community members who were more advanced in age and did not have any work and family obligations could make use of ticket promotions during the low season in November and then stay in Taiwan until after the elections and New Year celebrations.<sup>31</sup> My survey's respondents spent 1,565 euros on average for their return journey. Against these high expenditures, the observation that 88% who travelled to Taiwan to vote were between 21 and 45 of age is astonishing. As an overwhelming majority of overseas Taiwanese people attach great importance to electoral participation, it is unsurprising that an equally significant share (83%) favours introducing a less costly option for casting their ballots.

## Conclusions

This paper outlined the paradox of emigrants' electoral participation in homeland elections in the context of the institutional absence of an external voting system. Departing from the general assumptions that voting is a social act and electoral mobilisation a critical driver of electoral participation (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Green and Shachar 2000; Karp 2012; Kostelka 2017), it tackled the processes, actors, and practices of transnational electoral mobilisation in the Taiwanese community in Vienna during the 2020 presidential elections. In doing so, the paper tried to address an important lacuna in the study of Taiwan's democracy and overseas Taiwanese.

While literature emphasises that geographical concentration and organisational density facilitate direct and indirect mobilisation (Kostelka 2017: 1064), my research reveals that the way in which political cleavages in the country of origin shape the structure of the sociopolitical context abroad may help political actors to better target their traditional and potential new electorates.

As in previous elections where China's behaviour affected voter decisions (Sheng and Liao 2017), the political circumstances in which the 2020 elections occurred unleashed a high degree of nationalism across all political camps. It prompted the political candidates and their affiliated organisations to devise campaigns for soliciting support from the overseas electorate, and a series of individuals to engage in indirect mobilisation. In Austria, two Taiwanese associations, the VTÖ and the CVÖ, became directly involved in rallying the support of the pan-green and pan-blue electorates. As their target groups differed in terms of age and level of participation in community life, actors resorted to different mobilisation techniques. While younger voters were primarily mobilised via the Internet, indirect mobilisation of older cohorts drew on traditional and offline forms of rallying. Whether transnational political practices, including campaigning and voting, were more pronounced in 2020 than in previous elections cannot be answered here, as similar practices have been observed in the 2016 elections.<sup>32</sup> However, although passenger data are at most indicative, they still suggest that the presidential candidates mobilised a higher share of overseas voters in 2020 than in 2016.

Data from passenger statistics and my survey suggest that transnational electoral mobilisation in 2020 was more effective in bringing overseas voters to the ballot boxes than in 2016. Nevertheless, the lack of an external voting system prevented over two-thirds of overseas voters in Austria from exercising their civic rights. Voting costs were unequally higher for young voters, who thus sought strategies to lower them, such as buying group flight tickets. However, for Taiwanese people residing in a small country such as Austria, purchasing group flight tickets at a more favourable price was not a viable option. Given the considerable time and financial costs, the finding that 33 of my survey's respondents (38%) returned to Taiwan to take a share in civic participation is astonishing, evincing their commitment and readiness to make sacrifices in return for the opportunity to influence or support government and politics. As other research has pointed out, Taiwan is a "single-issue society" (Achen and Wang 2017: 11). "No other topic or relationship plays so central a role in Taiwan's politics [than China]. It structures foreign policy; it structures the political party system; it structures much of how ordinary citizens orient themselves to politics" (ibid.: 2). Thus, we can infer that the decisions of Taiwanese emigrants and their descendants to engage in transnational political participation is critically affected by the "China factor."

Alan Gamlen (2015) identifies three kinds of impact of extraterritorial votes on New Zealand elections: overseas voters can "swing" election night results, cause "interregnums" distorting coalition negotiations, or have "feedback effects" "where the perceived importance of the extraterritorial votes drives political parties to engage increasing numbers of overseas voters." (ibid.: 1) Against the backdrop of recent migratory trends for young and educated Taiwanese people, the growing role of information and communications technology (ICT) in political representation, and the perceived success of overseas voter mobilisation during the 2020 elections (and maybe previous elections), it is likely that political parties will increasingly integrate transnational mobilisation strategies into their election campaigns in the future. The extent to which they use their funds for this purpose likely depends on their size, other structural factors (Paarlberg 2019), their ability to activate transnational actors, and their savvy to exploit the possibilities of ICT. In this manner, overseas associations will remain critical entry points to overseas communities where political parties compete for their influence at home. Future research therefore needs to be more sensitive to which factors determine these strategies and the effects on different groups of the electorate.

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31. Private conversation with an employee from a Taiwanese airline company based in Vienna.
32. Andrew Jacobs, "Taiwan Vote Lures Back Expatriates in China," *The New York Times*, 11 January 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/asia/taiwan-vote-lures-back-expatriates-in-china.html> (accessed on 27 May 2021).

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