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# Nation branding in contemporary Taiwan: a grassroots perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, based on textual analysis and interviews, offers a complementary perspective of scholarly studies of nation branding which focus on the state and corporate elites involved in such undertakings. It places grassroots initiatives in branding Taiwan through tourist souvenirs and other video and graphic materials against the larger background of cultural policies and official branding campaigns, and shows grassroots actors' complex entanglement with official institutions, policies and discourses despite declared scepticism towards the latter and a low degree of direct collaboration. It compares official and grassroots messages and argues that the latter are more coherent; capture a local specificity and encourage a tourist gaze centred around the 'human touch' theme; distance themselves from China, the significant 'other' of Taiwanese nationalism; and markedly highlight an epistemological and representational strategy based on individual, sensorial experience, which may constitute a response to biased and untrustworthy state national narratives of the martial law era.

## 1. Introduction

The nation is an ever-changing narration constituted by stories that intersect or compete with each other (Berger, Eriksonas and Mycock 2008). This concept's inherent indeterminacy has been especially visible in Taiwan during the last decades. Mark Harrison speaks of Taiwanese identity as an incessant imperative and open-ended discursive process (2009: 58) expressed in a multitude of politically constitutive, partial and negotiated narratives. Hegemonic stories are formulated by academics who inscribe Taiwan within dominant epistemes (China or Western modernity), and taken over by polarised party politics that reproduces these structures of domination (Harrison 2015). The ideology-laden official public diplomacy reflects these divergent standpoints. Shifts in strategic agendas with each succession of ruling parties, combined with a lack of central coordination and consensus between various government departments, have constituted the main impediments to formulating a consistent brand image for Taiwan (Rawnsley 2014). However, the stories put forward by formal knowledge makers coexist with other meaningful, albeit marginal narratives that contest dominant structures, engage with memory and reflect people's

lived, everyday experiences of Taiwan's transformation and modernisation (Harrison 2015).

Such stories situated outside the state and authoritative political, intellectual or scholarly discourses constitute the main concern of this paper. While Berger, Eriksonas and Mycock's book investigates competing historical narratives from the viewpoint of national representation, my argument adopts a different theoretical framework – that of nation branding – which offers a set of concepts relevant for my case studies and a comparative perspective useful for delineating Taiwanese particularities. The exact meaning of nation branding has been hotly disputed, to the extent that it can be deemed 'an ideological construction of its practitioners and scholars'. However, its definitions consistently mention 'discourses and practices located at the intersection of economy, culture and politics' (Kaneva 2012: 4–5). Their aim is 'the creation and communication of national identity using tools, techniques, and expertise from the world of corporate brand management' (Aronczyk 2013: 16), in order to highlight a nation's unique character and increase its global competitiveness (Aronczyk 2009: 292). Critical scholars of nation branding (a trend with which this paper aligns itself) borrow Bourdieu's field theory and examine actors motivated by various interests, striving for desired positions and assets (Kaneva 2012: 15). Similarly, the actors central to my study formulate consistent definitions of Taiwanese-ness that interpellate local and international consumers. As active brand managers, they skilfully exploit new resources created by state cultural policies in order to broaden the circulation of their messages and ensure identification with them among the addressees.

Many researchers explore a region where nation branding has rapidly proliferated: Central and East European countries, faced with the need to (re)formulate themselves and gain global visibility as nations after the collapse of communist regimes, while also undergoing economic and political transition and coming to terms with a traumatic past. These factors caused 'a state of inadequacy' affecting both individual psychologies and political decisions (Kaneva 2012: 6–7). Under such circumstances, the crisis of national representation involved a transition of yet another kind, 'between a shameful and a desired identity' (Kaneva 2012: 7). The latter is interlinked with a long-standing ideological dichotomy between East and West. The revaluation of the West as a model to be emulated underlies these countries' readiness to import the 'gospel of nation branding' and to commission such projects to UK and US consultants (Kaneva 2012: 7–8). Given Taiwan's recent history, international status, quest for a local identity, and nation branding initiatives, the ideas above constitute a valuable frame of reference. Nevertheless, my study will not highlight resemblances but areas less exposed in existing research and elements that can be considered specific to Taiwan.

Nation branding scholars focus on the field of power and three categories of actors: state institutions commissioning branding projects to a 'transnational promotional class' (Aronczyk 2013: 39), and local dominant elites (technocrats and marketing professionals) conniving with the state in order to share in the profits (Surowiec 2012: 127). Their concerted efforts are aimed at constructing and promoting positive, coherent images abroad and ensuring allegiance for them at home. Unlike older countries, with national images well-established among audiences both at home and abroad, new nations struggle with significant challenges: alternative narratives circulated by global media (Saunders 2012; Bardan and Imre 2012), deeply-rooted earlier discourses (Graan 2016: 88), or strong domestic opposition (Graan 2016; Bardan and Imre 2012). Much

95 nation branding research emphasises elite hegemony and the exclusion of specific local groups or the general public from democratic participation in branding projects (Aronczyk 2009, 2013; Pamment 2015; Graan 2016). Official versions of national identity reproduce and commodify stereotypes for an external 'tourist gaze' while marginalising the lived experiences of actual national communities. Domestic campaigns position their addressees as 'cultural ambassadors' embodying brand-related values, thus seeking to regulate performances of national identity.

100 Paradoxically, critical studies tend to overlook grassroots agents as sources of branding messages. They mostly elaborate on elites associated with the field of state power and their practices of designing and implementing branding images or strategies. Accounts of disruptive narratives concern Western sources (Saunders 2012; Bardan and Imre 2012); studies of domestic publics focus on state regulation of brand performance (Graan 2016); voices of dissent are seen as antagonistic reactions triggered by state initiatives (Graan 2016; Bardan and Imre 2012). Similarly, works on cultural policies and nation branding in Taiwan favour state institutions and initiatives (Chang 2006) or top-level politicians (Hughes 2014, who refers to Taiwan's former president Ma Ying-jeou and Lung Ying-tai, former minister of culture). Publications on nation branding in Taiwan analyse texts produced by government agencies (Liao 2014), assess existing branding efforts and present survey-based theme proposals for tourism campaigns (Chen 2014; Zhang and Wang 2000). My article adopts a complementary perspective: it turns towards grassroots tourist souvenir designers as alternative narrators who contribute to constructing the brand 'Taiwan' in the sense of 'a cluster of strategic cultural ideas', of 'functional and emotional values' that guarantee a positive and unique experience and differentiate it from other entities (Dinnie 2008: 14). It will assess the extent of these actors' unruliness towards the branding regime and show that their relationship with the state cannot be reduced to simple antagonism.

120 My discussion of state and grassroots branding messages will refer to John Urry and Jonas Larsen's concept of the tourist gaze – a cultural practice that 'orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world', a socially acquired and conditioned way of seeing based on contrast with home spaces and everyday work (2011: 2–3). It implies the collection of signs representing a national character or local identity (2011: 15–16), and is determined by the media and tourism industries that construct 'visitor attractions'. The range of places with this status changes over time: the postmodern fusion of high and low culture has given rise to interest in vernacular architecture and work-related spaces or artefacts (2011: 98, 124, 139–141). I will argue that Taiwanese souvenir designers consistently employ mundane, vernacular sights and objects that usually go unnoticed, and de-naturalise them in order to define Taiwan-ness as object of the tourist gaze. Such elements of everyday life shape national identity as understood by Edensor (2002): a particular lifestyle and sense of belonging linked to a familiar environment. Edensor emphasises the performative character of national identity, which is enacted through culturally determined, unreflexive, shared codes and procedures, related to habitual actions performed in private and public spaces: styles of clothing, demeanour, daily routines (washing, eating, working, driving etc.). Urry and Larsen also highlight the bodily, multi-sensuous, affective and performative aspect of the tourist experience (2011: 189–190). Performativity and bodily involvement are salient elements of the strategies used for constructing a particular type of tourist gaze in the grassroots texts I analyse.

## 2. Cultural policies and nation branding in Taiwan

In post-World War II Taiwan, culture has constituted a key building block for national identity, and a significant stake in struggles for political power and legitimacy. Changes in dominant factions and ruling parties gave rise to new cultural policies, formulated as reactions against previous hegemonic frameworks. From the mid-1940s, the KMT government promoted Chinese culture in order to legitimise its claim to mainland China and counteract the effects of Japan's colonial assimilation policy. The 1960s' Cultural Renaissance Movement (a response to the Cultural Revolution) constructed Taiwan as the last bastion of traditional Chinese culture under destruction in the PRC. In the 1980s, Chiang Ching-kuo's political reforms inaugurated de-Sinicisation in favour of the hitherto marginalised indigenous culture. The Taiwanisation process intensified after the lifting of martial law (1987). During the 1990s, KMT chairman and ROC president Lee Teng-hui officially promoted local culture, thus replacing China with Taiwan as a homeland and symbolic centre of national identification (Chang 2006). Chen Shui-bian, the DPP president who came into power in 2000, continued his predecessor's policy of loyalty to Taiwan. Ma Ying-jeou's presidency (2008–2016) inaugurated a more conciliatory stance towards the PRC, manifested in strengthened cross-strait business ties and a return to the idea of Taiwan as preserver of classical Chinese culture. Ma's inclusion of the Taiwanese into a 'Chinese nation' (中華民族), his advocacy of Confucian ethics and the increased proportion of Classical Chinese (文言) and Chinese history in the high school curriculum triggered protests against 'de-Taiwanisation' (Hsiao 2012: 108, Hughes 2014: 123–124). By contrast, current president Tsai Ing-wen's culture-related programme emphatically reinstates the DPP's Taiwan-centered cultural policy (2015).

State endorsement for the local arts and cultural industries began in the 1990s. Upon its advent to power, the DPP distanced itself from KMT-supported high culture and time-honoured folklore. Instead, it promoted the cultural and creative industries and emphasised their economic potential (Lu 2002: 43–47; Chang 2006: 193). It was also during this period that tourism became an official priority (Chang 2006: 193–195) and the first nation branding projects were initiated. In 2002, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Council for Cultural Affairs and the Government Information Office were entrusted with developing the creative industries and constructing a modern, unique image of Taiwan for international promotion through branding and marketing techniques (2006: 195–197). Simultaneously, the Tourism Bureau launched a campaign with the slogan 'Taiwan, Touch Your Heart' accompanied by a logo featuring the island's map and the word 'Taiwan' in coloured letters whose shapes carried symbolic meanings. Despite official public diplomacy initiatives that downplayed Taiwan's local specificity, Ma Ying-jeou's presidency unvaryingly emphasised tourism, albeit with a shift towards PRC tourists and students. In 2011 the 'Taiwan, Touch Your Heart' campaign was revamped as 'Taiwan – The Heart of Asia', with a new logo designed by the London-based company Winkreative.

Given Taiwan's democratic culture, the state is not the only actor that engages in public diplomacy. It cannot effectively control non-state discourses, nor ensure uniformity among its own narratives, coming from sources with different agendas. Cultural policies may prove unable to influence ongoing trends in public opinion, such as the rise in declared Taiwanese (as opposed to Chinese) identity (Hughes 2014: 131). They may



also elicit unintended behaviour, such as positive interpretations of the KMT past enabled by the 'de-Chiang-Kai-shek-ification' movement since the 1990s (Taylor 2010: 189–190). Academic studies reveal dissatisfaction with government actions, suspicion or distrust towards state agencies, or prevalent scepticism with the KMT and DPP's ideologies, perceived as 'indistinguishable' by social and political activists (Ho 2014: 101; Hughes 2014: 130–131). Non-state actors enjoy more credibility and engage in public diplomacy outside the shifting dominant ideologies (Rawnsley 2014: 168–170). Chen Shui-bian's first inaugural speech assigned a key role to grassroots organisations in the construction of Taiwanese culture (Hughes 2014: 121). Tsai Ing-wen's programme also emphasises the need for democratic participation in cultural governance (2015). The branding actors discussed in this paper are wary of party politics, position themselves outside the state and participate in activities usually associated with the civil society. However, they cannot be included in the latter sphere. Instead, they can be seen as acting within an intermediary space – that of *minjian* (民間), explored by Chen (2010: 224–245).

### 3. Research method

Critical studies of nation branding investigate actors' interests, their struggle for desired positions and resources, their self-defined roles and actions, and the texts (slogans, logos or other visual elements) resulting from branding practices. My study shows grassroots actors' motivations for branding Taiwan, their connections to state policies, institutions and initiatives, their perception of Taiwan's specificity and the strategies they employ in conveying it to the audience through a specific form of 'tourist gaze'. It is informed by discourse analysis, which studies the social production of knowledge and its evolution within a broader economic, political and social context, as well as the dynamics of power and ideology involved in meaning-making processes (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Critical discourse analysis combines the study of discourses and texts with fieldwork and ethnography (Wodak 2001: 69); my empirical data consists of collected texts and interviews with their authors.

Tourism is one of the key spheres that nation branding involves, and the two major Taiwanese branding campaigns were initiated by the ROC Tourism Bureau. This study will also focus on tourism-related texts: souvenirs (postcards, refrigerator magnets, bookmarks, glass coasters etc.) collected between February and October 2014 in Taipei and New Taipei City. A significant share of the market was held by 'classical' souvenirs depicting motifs that Edensor (2002: 40) terms a 'national landscape ideology', i.e., natural or man-made iconic sites already imbued with national significance, cityscapes representing (national) modernity, or aboriginal folk culture. Many other objects featured everyday home or city sights. The latter category included nostalgia-tinted images from the Japanese colonial period, the 1960s and 1970s, and contemporary Taiwan. I chose to focus on souvenirs depicting present-day mundane sights, a sizeable and increasing market niche: follow-up fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 revealed numerous new producers. Despite the diversity of sources, such souvenirs convey a coherent message, reflected in their designers' other creative works and in texts by other authors (picture books, graphic novels etc.).

Between March and May 2017, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (in Chinese) with three souvenir designers and company owners, aimed at assessing their stances towards official cultural policies and nation branding projects, potential



collaboration with state institutions, creative principles, sales channels and customers. I complemented the interviews with materials available on these companies' websites and in other media. The three companies (6636 Advertising & Creativity, Miin Design Co. Ltd. and eyeDesign<sup>1</sup>) were established in 2005–2007 and are small-scale with two to ten employees, one designer (6636 and eyeDesign) or a designer team (Miin). Taiwan-themed souvenirs are central to Miin Design's activity; eyeDesign combines them with other Taiwan-related tasks, and they only constitute a sideline for 6636 Advertising & Creativity. All three companies also take up commissioned projects. Miin Design offers a large range of products (postcards, greeting cards, refrigerator magnets, bookmarks etc.) grouped into thematic and stylistic series and distributed throughout Taiwan through the Eslite network, souvenir shops at tourist locations and airports, small bookstores, and hotel stores. After several years of unsuccessful attempts to market his souvenirs (glass coasters, cups, shopping bags, backpacks, and others) at Taipei department stores, tourist sites and museum shops, Ariel (6636s owner) started a lasting collaboration with duty-free shops at Taoyuan and Songshan airports, and recently with Taipei 101. EyeDesign's Frog sells his postcards and wooden souvenirs at his store in a Taipei tourist area.

Despite their generational closeness (Ariel was born in the 1960s, Ben and Frog – in the early 1970s), my interviewees differ in appearance and personality. Ariel's casual dressing style and Mandarin interspersed with English embody Taiwan's cultural hybridity. Ben is always on the watch for international trends, searching for new forms of expression. Frog is a strong individualist and travel aficionado. Their works reach a diverse, foreign and local audience. Frog targets Taiwanese white-collar fans of mountain hiking and cycling, and Hong Kong tourists. Westerners and Japanese are the main target audience of Ben, Miin Design's owner, but his customers include Taiwanese people. Initially, Ariel did not consider specific addressees, but his souvenirs are now successful with Asian tourists (Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong). Significantly, none of them targets PRC tourists, who until recently visited Taiwan in package tours and were interested in other topics (Chiang Kai-shek's legacy and anti-communist propaganda). With three in-depth case studies, this paper offers a glance at the intricacies of grassroots nation branding in present-day Taiwan. Rather than confirming existing patterns, the overlapping areas between the chosen samples can open new paths for more extensive research.

#### 4. Motivation for branding Taiwan

All interviewed designers displayed strong personal engagement in promoting Taiwan and a sense of mission. Ben and Frog described experiences of travel shaping a salient Taiwanese identity that became a key incentive for their branding work. Three weeks spent in Barcelona in 2004 made Ben aware of resemblances between Catalonia and Taiwan – their ambiguous political status, pursuit of independence, and a tendency for external observers to overlook their local identities while incorporating them into culturally related, larger entities internationally recognised as states: Spain and China. Frog obtained knowledge on Taiwan's geography (marginalised during the martial law era) through an individual, empowering, first-hand method which he perceives to have been previously

<sup>1</sup>The company names and owners' pseudonyms are used with their permission.

disparaged by both state and family education. His round-the-island cycling trips (the first at 17, in 1989, and others in his 30s) ultimately inspired him to renounce his managerial job at a large IT company and focus on Taiwan-centred design. Ariel did not conceive his mission at a national level but on a smaller scale, as recording and disseminating collective memories of a vernacular city architecture menaced with gradual demise by ongoing modernisation.

The three designers insist on branding Taiwan on their own terms, with little regard for popularity and material success. Ariel's souvenir series was initially non-profitable and is still secondary to his advertising business. Nevertheless, he persistently uses himself as a model for his bags or other accessories, and incessantly seeks new sales channels. Moreover, he often 'smuggles' similar representational strategies into other forms of creative work. Ben's innovative approach to design and marketing strategies have made his souvenirs highly successful and central to his business. But rather than simply responding to market demands, he leads trends by consistently promoting a specific kind of tourist gaze and certain favourite themes, not all of which are bestsellers. Frog only accepts commissioned design projects that place Taiwan under the spotlight. The factors that make possible their uncompromising attitude and perseverance in what appears to be a risky endeavour will be provided later.

## 5. Relationship to state cultural policy and branding campaigns

Despite declared antagonism towards party politics, the state and political elites, my interviewees do express political stances, but emphatically restrict their scope to creative work and private life. Ariel protested against the Taipei Arena in 2015 and mayor Ko Wen-je's plans to do away with illegal extensions and low-rise apartment blocks. He did so personally and through a series of themed drawings posted online and shared with a tree protection foundation for concerted actions. Ben joined public protests against nuclear power, and privately advocates Taiwan's independence. Frog's company website and Facebook profile include slogans against nuclear power and supporting Taiwanese independence. He participated in the 2014 Sunflower Movement, which further strengthened his Taiwanese identity.

Their Taiwan-promoting activities are conducted without official sanction or involvement, and they explicitly assume a position outside or critical towards the state. However, their actual relation to state cultural policies and official branding discourses is one of entanglement, a term borrowed from Marita Sturken's reflections on cultural memory and the historical state apparatus (1997: 5). State policies favouring the cultural and creative industries have benefited these designers' work, although they criticised certain aspects related to actual policy implementation. While none of them actively seeks cooperation with the state, Ariel and Ben have made several small-scale contributions to official projects.

A large company entrusted with producing a promotional video for the 'Taiwan: Touch Your Heart' campaign commissioned Ariel to create the story board. The video was released in 2007 and featured boy band F4, whose members had starred in the 2003 TV drama *Meteor Garden*, successful throughout East and Southeast Asia. Ariel negatively assessed this collaboration: the combination of music stars and tourist sites was forced and the video was behind the times, as F4 had already split and each singer was shot

separately. The video failed to capture Taiwan's specificity. Instead of presenting a unique, original perspective, it assembled sights that may have been taken from 'an image bank':

[Y]ou've got to show them what's the really unique point ... [instead of] some boring visuals. If they can Google that, it means you do nothing. Like this, it's just too convenient; you have to bring up something that people cannot Google.

He also deplored the low remuneration for his contribution and constraints imposed on his creative freedom: the producer decided what tourist sites should be covered, and significantly altered his original story.

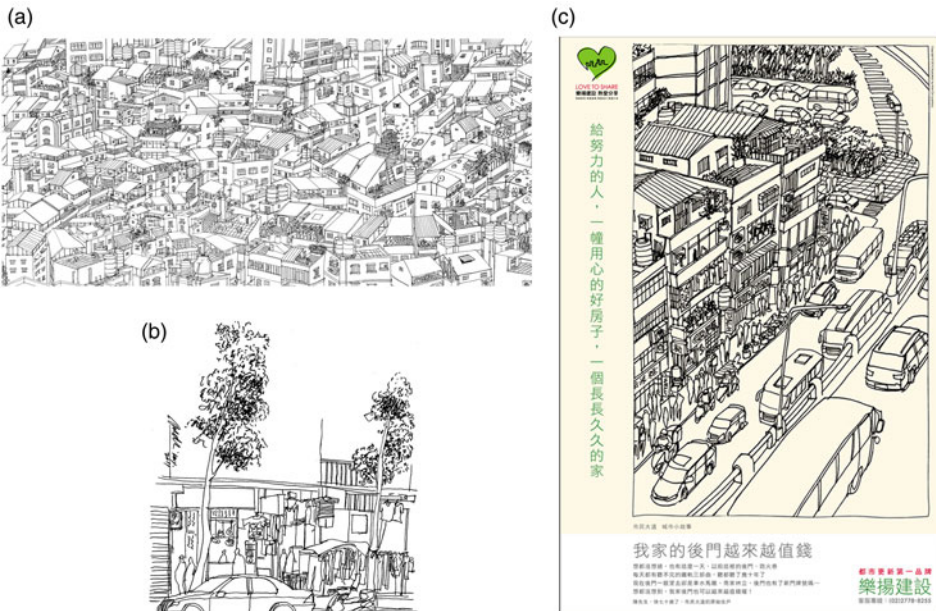
The Tourism Bureau under the Ministry of Transportation and Communications and the Taipei City Government's Department of Information and Tourism, already acquainted with Ben's work, approached him for designing a cycling scarf and a series of souvenir and stationery products. These projects did not generate much income for Ben's company (both were below the amount required for public bidding), but allowed him to bring in favourite topics and visual strategies. Ben deplored the difficulties currently encountered by individual designers and small companies competing for state funding, the lack of expertise displayed by civil servants who appoint evaluation committees, and lack of elasticity as to the awardees' use of funds. However, he praised the state's general orientation towards the cultural and creative industries for raising the status of graphic design and for creating a context that spurred the development of applied arts in Taiwan. He also positively evaluated the 'Heart of Asia' logos for the visual novelty they introduced: drawings instead of photographs, in a style he found affinity with. But although the campaign mobilised a diverse and comprehensive array of images to represent Taiwan, he found them superficial and repetitive.

Frog was strongly reluctant to seek involvement in state-led nation branding due to what he perceived as procedural problems: an emphasis on conformity with formal criteria, established values and images; reinforcement of these stereotypical representations by design companies bidding for state projects which strive to fulfil state expectations at the expense of originality; and a hierarchy-based evaluation process informed by non-specialist opinions. Nevertheless, he was familiar with official videos promoting Taiwan and employed them as a term of reference for alternative, similarly themed video advertisements.

## 6. Branding activity expanding beyond tourist products

These designers' activity is not limited to tourist souvenirs. It is interlinked with other fields, thus forming networks which ensure the presence of similar themes and representational techniques in products not related to the tourism industry, the promotion of these artists and their branding projects in Taiwan, and entanglement with official discourses in ways other than discussed above.

The interviewed designers seem to be well-known media figures. A large amount of information on their companies, creative work (tourist souvenirs and other kinds of products), target audience and marketing strategies, activities in other fields (public lectures, published books, charitable or volunteer work, social activism etc.), lifestyle and worldview has been circulated since around 2009 through many local media outlets catering for a Taiwanese audience and foreigners living in Taiwan, as well as for interested global audiences. These outlets include small-scale personal blogs and independent student media websites,



**Figure 1.** Similar images as different products: image serving as basis for Ariel's 'Rooftops' tourist souvenir series, his drawing for a community-building event, and his urban renewal newspaper advertisement. © 2017 6636 Advertising&Creativity.

portals dedicated to Taiwan and the creative industries, websites of companies that commissioned these designers' projects (in Chinese), as well as major daily newspapers: the Chinese-language *China Times* (中國時報) and *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報), and the English-language *Taipei Times*. These artists' media personas are built around their commitment to promoting Taiwan, which reinforces their position as nation branding agents. Some media channels are targeted at a niche audience or are maintained by actors with interests similar to my interviewees', but many of them are addressed to the general public. Hence it can be inferred that these designers' conspicuous media presence may be due to the widespread popularity of initiatives related to defining national identity, in an official context that encourages both this undertaking and a plurality of voices

**AQ3** joining in the identity discourse.

Despite moderate success with marketing his souvenirs, Ariel has found alternative dissemination channels for his black and white drawings of urban sights to highly receptive targets, thus making them visible in actual, virtual and media-related public spaces (Figure 1). He designed a series of products illustrated with trees in an old-style courtyard (large-format wallpapers, table mats, napkins and notebooks) which he donated to his mother's elderly care centre. Thus, without incurring any expense, the centre could bring familiar neighbourhood scenes to people unable to access such places on their own. Ariel also employed everyday urban sights for a project commissioned by a medical clinic. Its owner is a fan of Ariel's drawing style and entrusted him with designing the interior of each newly opened branch. His chaotically clustered, dilapidated, four-storey apartment blocks and views of narrow streets were published in 2011 and 2012 as a series of full-page newspaper ads, accompanied by stories of elderly people complaining about their

current living conditions and expressing their wish for modern facilities. The ads were commissioned by construction companies involved in urban renewal projects, aimed at replacing old buildings with new, safer ones while compensating home owners. The unconventional hand drawing form with its human, personal touch was appreciated by the advertisers and struck an emotional chord with their addressees. Ariel also participated in community-building projects.<sup>2</sup> He designed a series of highly appreciated giveaway products for an event promoting his Taipei neighbourhood organised by a well-known bank and sponsored by the city government's Department of Cultural Affairs. In 2011, he was contacted by the same institution (already familiar with his style) to take part in an event concerning the same neighbourhood, for which he authored a notebook illustrated with local sights, gave volunteer guided tours and lectures. Significantly, the foundation which co-organised that event displays one of his drawings on its website.

Frog's creative work reflects his hobbies of mountain climbing and around-the-island cycling trips, both strongly promoted by the state. He first circulated travel narratives and photographs in a book designed as a cycling diary, on Facebook and a personal webpage. Their popularity made Frog aware of a potentially large Taiwanese public interested in learning more about their country. Taking advantage of official support for such initiatives categorised as 'culture and creativity' (文創), he established two coffee shops intended as community-building spaces for travel-related photograph exhibitions and discussions. Later, he closed them down to focus on tourist souvenirs – postcards with photographs from his trips and wood products bearing adventure-inspiring slogans or conceived as educational games based on Taiwan's geography. He is also invited by corporations, schools or other institutions to give talks regarding his hobbies and career. He takes on commissioned projects, but carefully selects them according to his principles of creative freedom and commitment to defining Taiwan. Such cooperation has resulted in video advertisements that convey Taiwan's specificity, shot during travels on various locations. They were commissioned by a Taiwanese recording company, an apparel brand, and an international producer of electric home appliances wishing to localise its image. They mainly portray people whose unconventional life and career choices have recently become popular, and fall under the category of creativity understood as new, sustainable business models aimed at revitalising Taiwan's countryside<sup>3</sup>: young, well-educated urbanites who renounce high-income jobs for organic farming or volunteer work with aboriginal tribes. In an article published by a lifestyle magazine in 2016, Frog presents his own creative work as advertising that of such people. All of them contribute to a new model of tourism catering to customers interested in work- and culinary-based, first-hand travel experiences in small localities. Its marketing strategy is based on new media, which ensure fast information exchange within networks of similar entrepreneurs.

Finally, Ben's works enhance the visibility and profitability of Taiwanese traditional culture. He purchased reproduction rights for Li Tian-lu's famous glove puppetry scene,

<sup>2</sup>The 'community construction' movement (社區總體營造) was initiated in 1995 and is still thriving. It aims at encouraging people's involvement in building local communities closely knit with their architectural and natural environment (Chang 2006: 189–190).

<sup>3</sup>The link between farming, tourism and state promotion of the cultural and creative industries is explored at length by You (2013).



placed on one of his postcards. He also approached the Rixing Type Foundry, renowned for its most extant collection of traditional Chinese movable characters in the world, and commissioned lead types attached to another postcard series.

## 7. Coherence of official and grassroots branding messages

This section compares the interviewed designers' works with texts from the 'Heart of Asia' campaign: a series of heart-shaped logos, other graphic and video promotional materials available on the Tourism Bureau website<sup>4</sup>, 'Bravo!' and 'Welcome to Taiwan!' posters displayed on airports (Figure 2).

The visual materials available on the Tourism Bureau website feature many tourist sites listed in official surveys of popularity<sup>5</sup>. The 'Heart of Asia' logos contain many Chinese elements, which may reflect the official cultural policy during Ma Ying-jeou's presidency, when the campaign was launched: buildings resembling the Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen Memorial Halls, an imperial guardian lion, the Taipei 101 whose design includes many Chinese auspicious symbols, red lanterns, and tea. Tea is also highlighted on a 'Bravo!' poster, which incorporates Taiwan's history into that of China's opium wars by mentioning the 'Oriental Beauty variety said to be named after Queen Victoria'. Recurrent local foods and agricultural products (rice, pineapple, tea, bananas, watermelons, oranges etc.) reinforce Taiwan's stereotype as snack heaven. The heart logos also feature Taiwan's high-tech electronic products. The cultural and creative industries are represented by dancers in black clothes alluding to the Cloud Gate Dance Company, and Zhu Ming's taichi sculpture series. Picturesque nature constitutes yet another prominent topic. It is sometimes accompanied by aboriginal culture and often serves as background for cycling. Many videos promote the local bicycle brand Giant and official efforts at developing social awareness and infrastructure related to this sport. Although people are referred to as Taiwan's best tourist asset (in what has become a set expression), this theme is insufficiently developed: images of ordinary people are mostly absent.

The 'Heart of Asia' campaign reflects officially endorsed topics and an outsider's gaze upon Taiwan. Instead of building a unique identification, it reinforces activities and sites already popular with foreign tourists and displays the 'generic, clichéd quality of much nation branding messaging' (Graan 2016: 84) through commonly exploited themes: natural beauty, folk traditions, modernity or food. It does not propose an alternative for the Chinese identity upheld during the martial law era, but assimilates such national representations notwithstanding their perception among the Taiwanese public. In a study on ideas of stateness, state territory and national identity produced as a result of group tourism from mainland China to Taiwan, Ian Rowen (2014) shows that PRC tourists identified with local people as fellow Chinese nationals. They incorporated Taiwanese sites into China, as the tour packages they purchased reproduced patterns of travelling in the PRC. 'Scenic spots' (Sun Moon Lake, Alishan) feature water and mountains, a

<sup>4</sup>Taiwan.net.tw (accessed 27 June 2017).

<sup>5</sup>The '2015 Annual Survey Report on Visitors' Expenditure and Trends in Taiwan' (available online: [http://admin.taiwan.net.tw/upload/statistic\\_eng/20160810/746f0cac-3cfe-494e-8dd5-cf8e34477ce.pdf](http://admin.taiwan.net.tw/upload/statistic_eng/20160810/746f0cac-3cfe-494e-8dd5-cf8e34477ce.pdf); accessed 27 June 2017) lists the following ranking of sites popular with foreign tourists: (1) night markets; (2) Taipei 101; (3) the National Palace Museum; (4) the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall; (5) the Sun Moon Lake; (6) Kending National Park; (7) Jiufen; (8) Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall; (9) Tianxiang Recreation Area of Taroko National Park; (10) Taipei's Ximending (p. ix).



**Figure 2.** Logos for the 'Taiwan – The Heart of Asia' campaign. Provided by the Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, ROC. © 2016 Tourism Bureau, MOTC, Republic of China.

combination legitimised by a long tradition of landscape painting. A similar role was played by shows of aboriginal cultures, or sites commemorating figures and events significant both for PRC and Taiwan's history. By contrast, local people confronted with the presence of large PRC tour groups felt alienated from the above-mentioned areas and de-territorialised them as Taiwanese by deliberately avoiding them.

On the contrary, the interviewed grassroots actors re-territorialise Taiwan, so that the images they construct are locally relevant as well. According to Ben, Taiwan's cultural diversity makes it difficult to pinpoint a local specificity. Ariel spoke of Taiwan's hybrid, cosmopolitan culture and the impossibility of finding a local flavour either in its history (traditions) or in its modern art and fashion. As a solution to this dilemma, both pointed at 'the human touch' (人情味), upon which they based their definitions of Taiwanese-ness. Unlike the official 'Heart of Asia' campaign that only mentions the 'human factor', these designers' works develop this topic through a multitude of emotionally close, familiar elements related to personal life and memories. The following part will discuss three interrelated strategies they employ in both tourist souvenirs and other kinds of Taiwan-related works.<sup>6</sup>

Edensor (2002) speaks of everyday practices, mundane sights and objects recurrent across the nation, which shape a sense of national identity centred on a specific lifestyle. The first strategy consists in de-naturalising these usually 'unwaved, unsaluted and unnoticed ... mindless flags' (Billig 1995: 40) hidden in the banal routines of everyday life, and making them visible as Taiwan's specificity (Figure 3). Ben spoke at length of his wish to go beyond typical tourist attractions in his souvenirs and 'dig down towards the roots' defined as objects and practices always present in everyday life: 'We found out that it's those things we're most accustomed to that may be among Taiwan's local characteristics'; 'things we come across every day in our life', 'something you use every day and can get at any general store'. Ariel also pointed out the everyday stories embodying Taiwanese-ness: 'I often go and watch those very normal citizens. I like watching people in 7-11, old people with their Filipina maids. My life is full of stories that I could draw endlessly'. This strategy of turning Taiwan's mundaneness, even ugliness, into an extraordinary spectacle for the tourist gaze, allows the designers to create a national image that contrasts with the high-brow Chinese literati or imperial culture employed in identity discourses formulated by the KMT.

<sup>6</sup>Although the analysis below focuses only on works by the interviewed artists, they also apply to souvenirs by other designers (Zemanek 2017).





**Figure 3.** De-naturalising everyday objects and sights: Ben's 'Taiwan Goodies Magnet – Rice Cooker' and 'Colorful Taiwan – Taiwan Red' postcard. © 2017 Miin Design Co. Ltd.

Ariel focuses on urban sights from Taipei. His souvenir series features living quarters seen from above as they have developed over the years, with roofs crowded into each other, of various sizes due to added illegal extensions covered with iron sheets, pigeon cages, small temples or gardens. The realistic drawings emphasise the haphazard character of such areas through minute details of laundry hung out to dry, odd objects stored on

balconies, iron bars in windows, metal water reservoirs, TV aerials or air conditioners. Ariel's other works also depict vernacular architecture: similar buildings with street traffic below; street food stalls; narrow streets flanked by trees, parked cars and traffic signs. His newspaper ads advocating urban renewal combine such sights with modern high-rise apartment buildings (which, paradoxically, are to replace them<sup>7</sup>), or Taipei 101 towering over them in the background. Ben's souvenirs show city streets with busy traffic, the ubiquitous scooters, night market scenes with close-ups of food stalls and customers seated on plastic stools, or shop signs. Many depict individual objects to be found in the streets, in shops, restaurants, temples or homes all across Taiwan: plastic shopping bags, brooms, cooking utensils, human-sized traffic-directing dolls, or mail boxes. Frog's photograph postcards show various locations pinpointed on Taiwan's map placed on the reverse. They depict natural sceneries or ordinary sights: rice fields, ducklings in a pond, fish drying on wooden racks, or plastic flip-flops sold at street stalls. His video advertisement for a local recording company portrays Taiwan in everyday sights and sounds – a paddyfield in a sunny day with singing cicadas; city traffic around a flyover bridge; a small restaurant with customers chatting at outdoor tables and food stir-fried in a wok; an MRT station with the alert of closing doors and a view from inside with the sound of the train moving over the rails.

Such depictions of ordinariness instead of popular travel destinations or conventional images of history, modernity, 'traditional' culture or nature may reflect a worldwide, post-modern anti-auratic trend (Urry and Larsen 2011: 102–4). They may also overlap with an already existing Taiwan-related tourist gaze. Ben borrowed the themes of scooters, night markets and betelnut beauties from Western tour guides, and the Tatung rice cooker – from observations of Japanese tourists' consumer behaviour. However, these designers also bring forward new elements based on their own perceptions of Taiwanese-ness as grounded in shared everyday practices specific to their national community. Ariel underscored his own interests as sole source of inspiration for his works. Ben emphasised his role in de-naturalising the everyday environment and expanding the gaze to areas unavailable to the usual tourist:

At the beginning, we chose our topics according to those Taiwanese things that foreigners were interested in. After one or two years, we thought that we could actually start doing what we liked, too, and propose that to foreigners. What we like and what foreigners like don't always overlap. For instance, that series with the cow-shaped iron plate and the chopstick basket – those are things well-known to the Taiwanese, ... things you would see while living in Taiwan, you wouldn't see them if you don't live here. If you're a tourist, you'd forget about them immediately, and you won't find them in tourist guides.

Following the de-naturalisation of everyday life, the second strategy is that of employing immediate, individual, bodily experiences for epistemological and representational processes involving both designers and audiences. Frog's postcards and video ads record his personal travels, and convey those experiences to the audience through compelling images and everyday sounds. His wooden souvenirs (glass coasters with indented regional maps, or Taiwan's map made up of puzzle pieces) invite purchasers' participation in an epistemological game involving their sense of touch. Ariel's rooftop series resulted

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed critical stance on Ariel's contradictory behaviour related to Taipei's vernacular architecture and its representations, see Zemanek (forthcoming).

from personal observations from windows in his parents' house; his drawings for community-building events represent actual scenes, and are based on thorough knowledge of the environment: 'Because I know where I live, this is my home, so I'm very clear about every single blade of grass and tree growing there'. This sense of authenticity triggered recognition and emotional response from a local audience – elderly people who identified with the life stories and living spaces in his newspaper ads. Ben's souvenirs represent objects facilitating personal-level social contact: 'snacks are sold by street peddlers, the owner would get [to interact] face-to-face with the customers, so I think that this is where Taiwan lies'. Many are three-dimensional; they can function as substitutes for real-life objects and facilitate re-enacting Taiwan-related experiences (Figure 4). Ben's multi-purpose cards made of thick cardboard imitate animal-shaped cakes sold at street stalls. They are cut in actual cake shapes and come with a brown envelope copying actual packaging. A pair of bookmarks accurately reproduces blue-and-white plastic slippers. Two-sided refrigerator magnets imitate wooden moon blocks in temples and (as Ben pointed out) can be used for actual divination. Some postcards require the purchaser's participation in representing and re-experiencing Taiwan. By unfolding a paper lantern attached to a postcard, its addressee reproduces what people actually do before setting lighted lanterns into the sky. This strategy not only constructs a tourist gaze grounded in bodily practices, but also enables performances of national identity outside Taiwan. Ben reported that Taiwanese studying abroad regard his souvenirs as embodying a national specificity and offer them as gifts, use them for introducing Taiwanese culture, or sell them at university fairs.

The third strategy consists in constructing a vision of history grounded in personal experience and memories, which contrasts with China-centred nationalist discourses highlighting millennia-old traditions. Instead of focusing on 'cultural memory', i.e., 'fateful events of the past', stabilised and made accessible across centuries 'through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)' (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 129), these designers turn towards 'everyday memory' and its limited temporal horizon based on individual experience and communication (127). Such an approach to history does not exclude more remote periods. Instead, it integrates them into the present through their material vestiges (such as the above-mentioned moon blocks originating in China), which are readily accessible in an everyday environment.

'We hope that our products will emphasise that we are Taiwanese. The objects we depict are essential elements of our life. Maybe some of them, culture or religion, came from China, but in fact many of our things are mixed, they also contain elements of Japanese culture. Just like the *kanban* [shop signs, a bookmark set theme] I mentioned before – this name is actually a Japanese word which entered Hokkien' (Ben, interview).

Ben and Ariel employ the human lifespan as unit for defining Taiwanese-ness. Notwithstanding their origin, various objects or sights are Taiwanese due to their uninterrupted presence throughout an individual process of growing up, which makes them part of personal memories: 'this is the Taiwan I grew up in'; '[of rotating two-coloured columns in front of hair salons] Well, I don't know if they came from Japan, but such things were here when I was a child, so we turned them into [souvenir] products' (Ben); 'actually my motivation was not promoting Taiwan, I was only recording my memories from



**Figure 4.** Sensorial appeal and individual experience: Ben's '2D-Scene Postcard – Scooters on the Streets' and 'Sponge Cake Card' set. © 2017 Miin Design Co. Ltd.

when I was growing up' (Ariel). Ariel's choice of ordinary living quarters as topics for his works is motivated by the vernacular, community-binding history they embody. This short-term, social history differs from the concept involved in state-led heritage preservation:



Memory as I understand it is weak, their memory is antique, old, old architecture. My memory is of a rather social kind. [Such places are] natural! They're not artificial, not man-made, they're not that intentional, not as anyone wishes them to be. The government says, wow, that thing has four hundred years of history, we've got to protect it. What I draw is of the common people, it's not lofty, not that classic, you see it in ordinary life. My value is memory and nothing more, because everybody knows these memories.

This centrality of 'everyday memory' may be caused by distrust towards state-mediated knowledge. During my interviews, Frog markedly emphasised personal experience as epistemological method and expressed an aversion for books and school subjects: 'Many history books we used to read are all fake, they're not correct, we were inculcated with other histories'. Instead, he employs stories of actual, individual people to represent Taiwan.

## 8. Conclusions

According to critical scholars, nation branding serves elite interests and goes against the principles of plurality and democracy by excluding alternative narratives, limiting grassroots participation and failing to secure public consensus at home. My case studies suggest that these statements are not fully applicable to Taiwan. A constant 'state of inadequacy' makes Taiwan resemble Central and East European countries. It influences state actions and public diplomacy, but also has significant and manifold social reverberations. However, its key reason is not political, economic and social transition, but Taiwan's ambiguous status as sovereign nation. A strong, widespread imperative of formulating a 'desired identity' underlies both official and grassroots actors' branding efforts. The latter's personal stake in branding the nation reflects an individual quest for national identity.

Despite this common goal, the interviewed designers markedly position themselves outside the state. This can be explained by scepticism towards party politics and the government, an attitude widespread in Taiwan and also observed in Romania (Bardan and Imre 2012). However, their relationship with the state cannot be described as simple antagonism. Unlike the Polish 'new cultural intermediaries', whose desire for prestige causes complicity with state branding efforts (Surowiec 2012), my interviewees reject this kind of symbolic capital and persist in promoting their own definitions of Taiwanese-ness, apparently notwithstanding their lack of economic profitability. They criticise official policies regarding the cultural and creative industries as conducive to excessive commercialisation. But it is these policies, combined with the pervasive official and popular interest in defining Taiwan, which have created prestige and economic feasibility for their activities. Ben can support less profitable souvenirs with revenue from more successful ones. Ariel makes up for setbacks in selling souvenirs with other kinds of commissioned projects, and by 'smuggling' similar images into more profitable products (newspaper ads). Frog skilfully combines his Taiwan-branding activity with new business and tourism models shaped by the development of the cultural and creative industries and a general demand for definitions of Taiwan on the local market. As he stated in a 2016 magazine article, "Taiwan" is a topic that's really worth taking up' (「台灣」可以是一項值得經營的項目).

These designers' messages have less international impact than official branding campaigns. They only target small audiences (specific groups of foreign tourists) instead of

a community of nation-states, and are not present on internationally authoritative platforms such as the Tourism Bureau website. However, unlike the state, they create an 'inter-textual environment of citation and implication' through 'multiple, sequenced interventions' (Graan 2016: 86) ensuring reproduction and reinforcement of their Taiwan-related discourses for both a local and a foreign public. Although unrelated, these designers' images of Taiwan overlap. Moreover, apart from traditional souvenir sales channels, they actively develop alternative, highly efficient marketing networks with local individuals and institutions such as media outlets, Taiwanese students abroad, NGOs, companies or government organisations commissioning design projects. Motivated by various affinities with my interviewees' activity, these agents increase the circulation of their messages (expressed through souvenirs and in other forms). Their activity also intersects with state-endorsed issues: cycling, traditional culture or community-building.

In Taiwan, the state as nation branding actor is constrained by 'political palace struggling', highlighted by Kaneva (2012) in an East European context and confirmed by Rawnsley (2014). The necessity to avoid sensitive issues susceptible to challenging the cross-strait status quo results in images that incorporate rather than replace the previously hegemonic China-centred identity. The 'Heart of Asia' campaign imports the Western 'nation branding gospel' by outsourcing its visual design, a probable reason for its generalised, clichéd quality. By contrast, grassroots actors can freely decide on subject matters and styles. Far from displaying the Central and East European 'West complex', they draw inspiration from foreign sources, but develop their own, coherent identification for Taiwan and a unique tourist gaze based on 'the human touch' through the following strategies: de-naturalisation of everyday sights and objects; a personal, sensorial involvement in knowing, representing and re-enacting Taiwan; a vernacular view of history with the human lifespan as basic temporal unit, which draws attention to everyday social interaction and makes history available through material vestiges present in ordinary living spaces. As the 'human touch' theme is present in official materials, such definitions of Taiwan do not counteract, but complement the state campaign. Nevertheless, their persuasive potential is higher. As a category, familiar objects and spaces reproduced on souvenirs are likely to strike an emotional chord with foreign addressees. Additionally, they trigger instant recognition from local audiences.

Regardless of changes in ruling parties, the state in post-martial law era Taiwan does not suppress alternative national narratives. However, it fails to involve grassroots actors as active, prominent partners in major branding projects and seems to largely ignore their efforts. The evolution of official cultural policies may cause their messages to ultimately converge. Nevertheless, joining forces may prove to be a difficult task requiring a high degree of openness, flexibility and trust.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Adina Zemanek* is Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, where she obtained her PhD degree in cultural anthropology. Her previous research focuses on images of women in PRC fashion magazines and TV series; her current project concerns national identity in Taiwanese tourist souvenirs and graphic novels, and the *wunianji* generation as 'cultural intermediaries'. She has published a monograph and an edited book on topics related to media in the PRC; her articles have appeared in journals such as *Archiv Orientalní* and *China Perspectives*.

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