

# Why Identity Politics Sometimes Fails? A Theory of Identity as Discourse of Value

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## Current Theoretical Dilemma on Identity

Past research tends to equate identity with a social category, a group's membership, or a group's reification idea.<sup>1</sup> The problem comes when this conceptualization also suggests this concept of group to be atomic, rigid, and irreducible. With this assumption, the approach implies that all group members should identify the group, that is, having firm belief in and possessing various emotional attachments toward the group. Research in this vein thus cannot explain "untypical identity patterns" or "counter-identity behaviors," which I use to describe the unconventional situation when people support a group or movement that conflicts with their background. Further, research of this conventional approach also fails to explain how an identity might change.

## Identity as Discourse of Value

With the analytical technique of grounded theory investigating the 110 interviews, my research identifies three influential discourses playing significant roles in contributing to the formulations of Taiwanese people's Chinese and Taiwanese identities. The first is "ethical narrative," a discourse that narrates a dualistic antagonism between the benevolent in-group and the malignant out-group. My research spots different ethical narratives that assist the formations of Chinese and Taiwanese identities in Taiwan. On the one side, two ethical narratives are often adopted in the construction and the consolidation of people's Chinese identity: the first is the story in which Western imperialists bully and oppress Easterners (i.e. Chinese people); the second is the story that the malignant Taiwan-independence supporters (usually represented by the members of the Democratic Progressive Party [DPP]) have tried hard to overwhelm the benevolent Kuomintang (KMT) party, and to eradicate the Republic of China (ROC) by establishing a new Taiwanese nation. On the other side, Taiwanese nationalists usually tell three kinds of antagonist narratives: (1) malignant *waishengren* (ethnic group) oppress benevolent *benshengren* (ethnic group) (2) the KMT elites exploit Taiwanese people; (3) the PRC oppresses and bullies Taiwan (ROC), particularly in international occasions. Unlike social identity theory, this research does not take the antagonism between in-group and out-group as the essential structure embedded in a group identity. An antagonist dualism is formed only when specific historic events or social contexts are intentionally summoned. For instance, there is no market for the antagonism between Taiwanese and Hong Kong, because there is no relevant historic or social context; the outdated struggle between Zhang immigrants and Quen immigrants in Taiwan is barely mentioned now, because the antagonism does not fit into the identity politics prevailing in the current society.

The second influential discourse is "cultural hierarchy," an evaluative system that endows identity-related objects and ideas (such as ethnic group, nation, language, etc.) with certain socio-cultural values. This comparative discourse usually draws people who very much care about their social images and status; such people tend to seek an identity with higher values. For instance, the research observes a cultural hierarchy in Taiwan that regards Mandarin and its speakers (most of them are *waishengren* group) as more cultured, civilized, and graceful than Taiyu (literally, Taiwanese language; also known as Hoklo and Minan language) and Minnan group. Because Chinese identity in Taiwan is often associated with Mandarin (Mandarin originates from northern China and was set to be the official language by the KMT

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the approach of identity theory and that of social identity theory usually take this theoretical assumption.

after the regime took over the island), this evaluative system of language attracts some Minnan participants to claim Chinese identity. Another cultural hierarchy is also frequently seen in Taiwan is the one that deems the PRC citizens less civilized and poorer mannered than Taiwanese people. Not surprisingly, this evaluative system drives some of my participants away from Chinese identity.

The third influential discourse is “political ideology,” which is defined, in Ball and Dagger’s notion, as “a fairly coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that explains and evaluates social conditions, helps people understand their place in society, and provides a program for social and political action” (2011: 4). The influence from political ideology upon one’s formation of Chinese and Taiwanese is indirectly mediated by one’s party image. For example, a conservative person can endow the KMT party with constant support because she or he believes the party is more conservative than the DPP. With this party affiliation, this person also bolsters the discourses that the KMT promotes, including Chinese nationalism and Chinese identity. In Taiwanese society, the KMT is generally associated with conservatism and neo-liberalism, not only because its long period of governance gives it the image of a capable ruling party, but also because Taiwan’s economy had a big boost in its administration in 1970s and 1980s. By contrast, the DPP is generally associated more with liberalism and socialism, because it has the image of challenging the KMT’s long dictatorship, and bringing democracy to the society.

By probing into the Chinese and Taiwanese identities in Taiwan, my research identifies three major types of influential discourses; by further comparing and analyzing these social discourses, there emerges a crucial element that shared by all types of discourses, that is, “value”. In the discourse of ethical narrative operates moral values. While forcedly making the division between the good and the bad, the dualistic antagonism indeed proposes a strong moral obligation for its audience to act and to support the good side. Second, the discourse of cultural hierarchy certainly has the most obvious characteristics of evaluation at the socio-cultural aspect. Political ideology, by its definition, involves not only the belief of but also the decision about what value should be prioritized as the main goal of the state: Conservatism puts primary emphasis on the maintenance of societal security, stability, and tradition; liberalism focuses on freedom and human rights; and socialism prioritizes social equality and redistribution. Value is the common theme of the three types of influential discourses, and therefore a crucial factor to re-theorize the concept of identity.

### **Conversations within Nepalese context**

This framework of treating identity as discourse of value thus has the potential to explain why some people support a group or movement that conflicts with or even disadvantages their background. More specifically, the framework explains why identity politics sometimes fails. Nepal has very diverse ethnic groups and very influential religious caste system. I was humbly wondering if this framework might possibly explain the current predicaments of political emancipation in Nepal, and am longing for exchanges and discussions.