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Article:

Cheng, H. (2026) From structural resistance to the performance of crisis. European Journal of East Asian Studies. ISSN: 1568-0584

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700615-bja10001>

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From Structural Resistance to the Performance of Crisis

Imaginary Anti-authoritarianism in Taiwan's Populism

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Received 16 April 2025 | Accepted 1 March 2026 |
Published online 5 March 2026

Abstract

Although literature on Taiwanese populism often characterises it as a bottom-up civic movement, this paper argues it has evolved into a top-down political communication strategy employed by political actors. Drawing on Moffitt's populism as a political style, this paper introduces the novel concept of 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism' to characterise Taiwan's latest populist dynamics. This concept explains how these actors manipulate the spectre of authoritarianism to perform a crisis, constructing opponents as threats to the liberal democracy of 'the people'. This paper operationalises the concept into two modes. Externally, it constructs a populist antagonism between the democratic life of 'the people' and 'authoritarianism' to counter the China factor. Internally, it weaponises authoritarian labels to engage in partisan competition. Consequently, this paper argues that Taiwan's populism has shifted from a historical necessity of structural resistance to a strategic performance of imaginary struggle.

Keywords

populism – Taiwan – authoritarianism – resistance

1 Introduction

Although studies on populism frequently begin by defining the concept (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018), scholars continue to debate its key components and associated phenomena (Moffitt 2020). Hence, it is necessary to first establish an appropriate analytical approach for the case of Taiwan. Much of the comparative literature relies on the 'ideational' perspective, which views populism as a Manichean antagonism between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004). However, this approach does not fully capture the strategic flexibility of Taiwan's political dynamics. In contrast, this paper adopts the perspective of populism as a 'political style' (Moffitt 2016). This framework defines populism as a mode of performance, particularly the performance of crisis, aimed at constructing antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'excluded others'. Ultimately, this stylistic approach shifts the analytical focus from rigid ideologies to the specific ways political actors and parties produce and disseminate populist antagonism, making it particularly effective for analysing the strategic campaigns of Taiwan's political parties.

Unlike populism in Europe and the Americas, which is traditionally rooted in nativism aimed at excluding immigrants or in socio-economic attempts to integrate marginalised groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012), Taiwan's populism is grounded in partisan opposition, specifically between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT), and factors related to Mainland China (Cheng 2025). For instance, both the DPP and KMT invoke the name of 'the people' to construct their own legitimacy and engage in polarised attacks against their rivals (Shyu 2008). In the Taiwanese context, this populist phenomenon is frequently intertwined with discourses of authoritarianism (Wu and Chu 2021). Notable examples include the 2014 Sunflower Movement, which opposed the KMT's perceived authoritarian handling of cross-strait agreements (Hsu 2024), and the 2018 'Han Kuo-yu phenomenon', which portrayed the DPP government as authoritarian (Krumbein 2023). However, different conceptualisations of authoritarianism exist between Europe/Americas and Taiwan. In Western literature, the term typically describes the characteristics of leaders who exhibit both populist and authoritarian tendencies. For example, Norris and Inglehart (2019) have characterised authoritarian populists as actors who utilise populist rhetoric to undermine democratic checks and balances, thereby paving the way for executive expansion and abuse. By contrast, while Taiwan has historically seen leaders with authoritarian populist traits such as Lee Teng-hui (Klein et al. 2025), in contemporary practice, the concept of authoritarianism functions primarily as a rhetorical weapon. It is used by political parties and actors to frame opponents as the antithesis of 'the

people' and label them as authoritarian. This specific dynamic represents a significant research gap: existing literature has yet to fully explain how political parties and actors strategically deploy the 'authoritarian' label within populist communication in a consolidated democratic system.

To bridge this gap, this paper adopts Moffitt's (2016) framework of populism as a 'political style' to introduce the concept of 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism'. This concept refers to a localised form of crisis performance, where political actors performatively construct their opponents as authoritarian forces antithetical to 'the people'. To establish a theoretical foundation, the paper first utilises the case of the KMT's party assets. This case serves to analytically distinguish 'genuine' anti-authoritarianism from 'imaginary' anti-authoritarianism, thereby clarifying the precise nature of the 'imaginary' construction.

To operationalise this concept, this paper examines how political actors employ this strategy through two distinctive modes. The first mode is externalisation, which focuses on China factors. This is analysed through two dimensions: the anti-China narrative, exemplified by Lai Ching-te's 2020 and 2024 presidential campaigns; and the anti-'fifth column' narrative, illustrated by the Wild Strawberries and Sunflower Student Movements. These cases provide evidence of how 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism' is constructed by negatively portraying Mainland China's influence and pro-China political parties.

The second mode is internalisation, which targets partisan rivalry between Taiwan's major political parties, including the DPP, KMT, and Taiwan People's Party (TPP). The analysis begins with the TPP by examining its 2025 anti-government rally as a performance of mobilisation against a perceived authoritarian ruling party. In parallel, this paper investigates the KMT's strategy through Han Kuo-yu's 2018 populist campaign, which portrayed the DPP government as disregarding 'the people' and authoritarian. Finally, the focus shifts to the DPP, analysing Lai Ching-te's 2024 anti-KMT slogans as a re-contextualisation of past authoritarian trauma.

However, such performances cannot be understood in isolation. Their persuasiveness relies on particular historical symbol systems and traumatic experiences. Hence, before discussing these populist constructions, it is necessary to establish their empirical foundation. The next section traces the trajectory of Taiwan's resistance movements to identify the historical roots that enable these modern populist performances.

By bridging these historical roots with theoretical construction, this paper makes two key contributions. First, empirically, it identifies the historical origins of Taiwan's populism, an area often overlooked in existing literature on Taiwan's populism, and updates the field by outlining its latest evolutionary characteristics. Second, theoretically, it extends the discussion of the 'perfor-

mative turn' in European and American populism (Moffitt 2016) to an East Asian perspective by demonstrating how historical memory and trauma act as a performative repertoire for 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism'. This provides a novel perspective for understanding populist antagonism in Taiwan.

2 Resistance as the Root of Populism in Taiwan

Taiwan's socio-political context provides fertile ground for the rise of populist movements, discourse, and identity (Hsu 2009). Within this context, this paper argues that the core of Taiwan's social structure is defined by previous persistent resistance of the native Taiwanese people against external forces. This history of resistance has fostered a deep-seated populist antagonism between the native Taiwanese people and 'external elites', as well as the 'excluded others' who remain complicit with these elites. This trajectory of resistance unfolds across three distinct historical periods: the colonial legacy, the authoritarian trauma, and the transitional resistance.

2.1 *Resistance in Colonial Period*

The first documented wave of resistance traces back to the period of Japanese colonisation. Following the defeat of the Qing dynasty in the First Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki (馬關條約) in 1895, Taiwan came under Japanese rule. This colonial status lasted until Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, when control was transferred back to the Republic of China (ROC) in accordance with the Cairo and Potsdam Agreements (Ching 2001). Over these five decades, indigenous languages, customs, and identities were systematically marginalised and suppressed by external forces (Fell 2006). A prominent example of this assimilation policy was the mandatory instruction of the Japanese language, a legacy that has left many Taiwanese elders proficient in Japanese to this day (Ka 2018).

This colonial period established the early structural foundation for populist-style cleavages in Taiwan. The imposition of Japanese culture and identity created a sharp boundary between the 'privileged external elite' and the 'deprived native people'. In this context, although local resistance was persistent, it rarely achieved substantial breakthroughs due to the overwhelming suppression by the colonial power. The Musha Incident (or Wushe Rebellion, 霧社事件) of 1930 serves as a critical example. Triggered by the oppression of Japanese authorities, the indigenous Seediq people launched an attack on a local school, resulting in significant Japanese casualties and subsequent brutal retaliatory massacres by colonial forces (Chou 2016). Viewed through the lens of populist

antagonism (Mudde 2004), this uprising was not merely a spontaneous struggle against 'colonial elites'; it represented an early practice of constructing a moral community of 'the people', defined by a shared experience of oppression and marginalisation.

2.2 *Resistance in Authoritarian Period*

The second phase of resistance began in 1945, following the transfer of control from Japan to the Kuomintang (KMT). During this period, the locus of populist antagonism shifted from 'deprived native people vs. Japanese colonisers' to 'the native Taiwanese people vs. the external authoritarian KMT regime'.

Before the abolition of the Statutes for the Detection and Eradication of Spies During the Period of Communist Rebellion Act (戡亂時期檢肅匪諜條例) in 1991, KMT rule subjected Taiwanese society to the 'White Terror' (白色恐怖). This era was characterised by systematic political persecution under Martial Law, creating a pervasive climate of fear (Edmondson 2015). These authoritarian traumas became institutionalised within the social structure, causing the KMT's party image to be a symbol of authoritarianism, a sentiment perpetuating anti-KMT attitudes in contemporary society.

Two defining events marked the onset of this authoritarian era: the February 28 Incident (二二八慘案) in 1947 and the imposition of Martial Law from 1949 to 1987. First, the February 28 Incident arose directly from authoritarian repression, sparking collective resistance. Specifically, the violent beating of cigarette vendors by police triggered public outrage and spontaneous protests, which were met with indiscriminate military fire (Hillenbrand 2005). The conflict rapidly spread across the island. While ostensibly engaging in negotiations, the provincial government requested reinforcements from the central government in Mainland China to execute a brutal crackdown, resulting in mass casualties and disappearances (Edmondson 2015). This tragedy became a profound event in subsequent anti-authoritarian movements, providing the foundational symbolic and performative material for the populist framework of 'the people' versus 'authoritarianism'.

Second, following its defeat in the Chinese Civil War (1945–1950), the KMT retreated to Taiwan and enacted Martial Law to counter communist infiltration and maintain social stability (Chao and Myers 2000). Over the thirty-eight years of Martial Law, four structural factors exacerbated public discontent and fostered early anti-establishment populism: monopoly, segregation, corruption, and the loss of international legitimacy. 'Monopoly' involved Mainlanders, a minority in local society, dominating high positions in the military, government, and education (Fell 2006). 'Segregation' created a political divide where Mainlanders controlled the central government, while native Taiwanese were

largely restricted to local elections (Fell 2006). 'Corruption' manifested through the KMT's clientelist networks with local factions to secure grassroots support (Fell 2005). Finally, the 'loss of international legitimacy' stemmed from UN Resolution 2758, which recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole representative of China, expelling the ROC. These factors fused anti-KMT sentiment with a rejection of the Chinese identity the party represented.

In response, the Taiwanese people organised various spontaneous resistance movements, collectively known as the Tangwai movement (黨外運動), literally 'outside the party', which advocated for democracy and freedom during the 1970s and 1980s (Fell 2006). To suppress these challenges, Chiang Ching-kuo, the KMT leader at the time, deployed military force to arrest and try key activists following the Human Rights Day protest in 1979, an event known as the Kaohsiung Incident (or Meilidao Incident, 美麗島事件). Ultimately, key dissident leaders founded the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on 28 September 1986. This event signified the formal institutionalisation of native consciousness in Taiwan's political landscape (Templeman 2024). It laid the groundwork for the fierce rivalry between the KMT and DPP, thereby entrenching anti-authoritarianism within the Taiwanese context and consolidating an early populist framework that dichotomised 'the resisting people' against 'authoritarian political forces'.

2.3 *Resistance in Transitional Period*

The third period of resistance began in 1987, marked by Chiang Ching-kuo's lifting of Martial Law and the subsequent localisation reforms under Lee Teng-hui. This era provided political opportunities to legitimise and institutionalise the narrative of resisting the KMT's Mainlander faction and its authoritarian legacies.

To adjust cross-strait relations (Copper 1988) and ease the tension arising from social movements and the reunification-independence debate (Fell 2006), Chiang Ching-kuo lifted Martial Law on 15 July 1987. Following Chiang's passing, his successor Lee Teng-hui assumed office in 1988, initiating a twelve-year period of political reform that lasted until the DPP's rise to power in 2000.

Although Lee Teng-hui is widely known as 'Mr. Democracy', his reforms were, to some extent, driven by intra-party rivalry against the KMT's Mainlander faction (WaiShengRen, 外省人). To consolidate his personal influence and control within the party, Lee, representing the native Taiwanese (BenShengRen, 本省人), who were historically marginalised within the KMT power structure, adopted a dual strategy. On one hand, he promoted more native Taiwanese into the party hierarchy to expand his power base; on the other, he supported native social movements advocating for pro-Taiwan independence and political par-

ticipation (Fell 2006). Consequently, Lee fostered both democratic development and pro-independence sentiments. For instance, the Taiwan Solidarity Party (TSP), founded in 2001 as a Pan-Green (泛綠) party, comprised members of Lee's native faction and the DPP's radical independence wing. This party, which advocates for state normalisation and localisation, continues to regard Lee as its spiritual leader (Rigger 2014).

This fierce factional rivalry and polarisation within the ruling party inevitably spilled over into civil society. Populist sentiment against the incumbent evolved into frequent street protests characterised by a low tolerance for political dissidents and representative institutions (Fu and Chu 1996). A prime example is the Wild Lily Movement of 1990. This movement mobilised university students across Taiwan to advocate for comprehensive democratic reforms, ultimately leading to the abolition of life tenure for National Assembly members in 1991 and the introduction of direct presidential elections in 1996 (Ho 2010). The Wild Lily Movement embodied the populist sentiments of the majority: a deep distrust of the parliament and disenchantment with the incumbent (Fu and Chu 1996). By challenging the 'Eternal Parliament' (萬年國會), a political symbol of the 1947 Mainland legitimacy, this movement fundamentally undermined the ruling elite's reliance on outdated legitimacy to sustain minority rule. This grassroots resistance not only exposed widespread discontent with the rigidity of an imported system but also compelled the incumbent government to resolve the legitimacy crisis arising from the localisation of authoritarian rule.

However, public scepticism toward authoritarianism extended beyond the KMT's Mainlander faction to encompass challenges to Lee Teng-hui's own populist authoritarian tendencies. Lee exhibited a duality within the populist spectrum: he was portrayed simultaneously as the voice of 'the people' and as a 'morally corrupt elite'. To his supporters, Lee strategically leveraged 'popular demand' to shape public opinion through partisan media, indirectly advancing his reform agenda against party conservatives (Fu and Chu 1996). Conversely, critics highlighted his authoritarian tendencies in promoting independence and his tolerance of the KMT's association with gangs and bribery, a phenomenon known as 'black gold politics' (黑金政治). This fostered public hostility toward the KMT's perceived corruption and collusion with plutocracy, a party image that remained largely unchanged throughout the 1990s (Shyu 2008). Furthermore, internal factions such as the New Kuomintang Alliance (新國民黨連線, formed in 1989) publicly opposed Lee, criticising his exclusion of dissenters (Mainlanders), his populist tactic of bypassing institutional channels to appeal directly to the public, and his trajectory toward de-Sinicisation. These factions eventually split from the KMT to establish the New Party (NP) in

1993, capturing a significant portion of the KMT's legislative seats in subsequent elections (Fell 2006). Thus, anti-authoritarianism became a political consensus reached both within and outside the KMT, while the accumulated history of resistance provided a rich repertoire for future populist crisis performances.

In summary, these three periods of resistance have shaped a distinct 'resistance-oriented populist style' within Taiwan's social structure. This historical trajectory not only documents anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian struggles but also solidifies a populist framework of dichotomous antagonism, where the conflict between 'the deprived people' and 'colonial or authoritarian elites' is continuously re-enacted. Consequently, a rich repertoire of traumas, encompassing memories of colonial humiliation, the White Terror, and resistance against authoritarianism, has been brought onto the political stage. Even as democracy has consolidated, political parties and actors continue to actively mobilise these historical memories, sustaining the populist antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites'. This transformation lays the groundwork for the following section, which explains the concept of 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism', a phenomenon where the historical reality of resistance shifts into a contemporary populist crisis performance.

3 Imaginary Anti-authoritarian Construction as the New Core of Taiwan's Populism

3.1 *Defining Imaginary Anti-authoritarianism*

This paper defines 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism' as a political communication strategy employed by political parties and actors. This strategy is embodied in a performance of crisis. Specifically, this performance is manifested through rhetoric that constructs political opponents as 'elites with authoritarian tendencies' threatening democracy and the interests of 'the people', a narrative built by projecting the logic of historical resistance and authoritarian trauma onto contemporary partisan competition.

'Imaginary anti-authoritarianism' emerged primarily after 2000. While pinpointing the precise end of authoritarianism is challenging given the gradual nature of Taiwan's democratic transition (Fell 2018), this paper identifies the 2000 election, the first peaceful transfer of power, as the pivotal watershed. Before 2000, the KMT's control over the bureaucracy provided empirical grounds for anti-authoritarian discourse. The DPP's victory in 2000 fundamentally transformed this landscape. With former resistance fighters assuming office, the continuation of anti-authoritarian discourse no longer represented a struggle against a monopolistic power but evolved into strategic rhetoric within

partisan competition. Thus, anti-authoritarianism transformed from a historical inevitability into an 'imaginary' construct or performance.

This phenomenon parallels observations by Popescu and Vesalon (2023) in post-communist Romania. As the far-right populist political party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) constructed a 'new communist' enemy long after the regime's collapse, Taiwanese political actors revisit past authoritarian traumas to attack contemporary opponents. In both contexts, the 'authoritarian other' ceases to be an actual power and transforms into a structural vehicle for electoral mobilisation. The goal is to construct a populist antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite who trigger the re-appearance of traumatic memories'.

Notably, post-2000 Taiwan has not entirely shaken off the shadow of authoritarianism. The KMT retained significant party assets and media influence well into the 2000s (Fell 2006), constituting a form of unfair competition. However, viewed through the lens of 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism', the core issue is not the mere existence of these party assets, but rather their strategic labelling, weaponisation, ideologisation, and amplification by opponents. A key example is the KMT's disposal of its holdings in the Central Film Corporation, China Television Corporation, and China Broadcasting Corporation in 2005 and 2006. The DPP Chen Shui-bian administration (2000–2008) and civil society groups, such as the 2012 Anti-Media Monopoly Movement, portrayed these issues not merely as corruption, but as evidence of an incomplete democratic transition and a resurgence of authoritarianism (Ebsworth 2017). This narrative of populist resistance between 'the people' and 'potential authoritarianism' persisted even after the change of government.

Therefore, viewing the above through Moffitt's (2016) lens of populist crisis performance, political actors and parties (such as the DPP) strategically elevated the party assets issue from the legal dimension of transitional justice and the economic dimension of asset recovery to the crisis narrative/performance level of an impending 'authoritarian revival'. By invoking historical trauma, they have successfully labelled a powerful and wealthy competitor within the democratic system, such as the KMT, as an 'authoritarian elite' opposed to 'the people'. This 'imaginary' aspect lies in a discursive leap: equating the KMT's economic advantages under democracy with the violent oppression of the authoritarian era. By projecting the trauma of the White Terror onto contemporary electoral contests, populists constructed a performative framework. Within this framework, voting against the KMT, despite fundamental changes in the political system, continues to be portrayed as ongoing anti-authoritarian resistance. Consequently, the KMT (or other political opponents) is cast as the 'enemy of the people' on the political stage.

Based on the above lens of populist crisis performance (Moffitt 2016), the imaginary anti-authoritarian performance in contemporary Taiwan can be categorised into two modes: the externalization of performance against China factors, and the internalization of performance against partisan polarisation. The following sub-sections will detail these two categories.

3.2 *The Externalisation of Imaginary Authoritarianism*

The externalisation of imaginary authoritarianism refers to the process of simplifying, polarising, and stigmatising 'China factors', thereby constructing them into an absolute, imaginary 'authoritarian enemy' of 'the people'. This performative strategy is primarily employed by the DPP-led Pan-Green coalition, driven by their pro-independence and anti-China stances. On one hand, they utilize a form of transnational populism, a political style that appeals to a transnational 'people' against 'elites' through the creation of crises or threats (Moffitt 2017), to portray all China factors as an external authoritarian force that persists even after Taiwan's political transformation. On the other hand, they employ populist-style conspiracy theories to construct political opponents as a 'fifth column' complicit with Beijing.

First, the China factor has consistently played a negative role in Taiwan's electoral politics (Shyu 2008). In this context, the Pan-Green coalition tends to frame Mainland China and the influence of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as the primary 'enemy' or 'authoritarian obstacle' to Taiwanese democracy (Wu and Chu 2021; Yoshiyuki 2024). Consequently, this populist-style negativity expands to encompass any government policy or social practice that accommodates Mainland China's demands for resolving cross-strait social, economic, and political disputes (Shyu 2008). Such accommodations are prone to being labelled as 'betraying Taiwan' and acting against 'the people' (Shyu 2008). Within this framework, a common mobilisation strategy involves accusing political opponents of 'colluding with Mainland China' (Wu and Chu 2021), thereby portraying them as the antithesis of 'the people'. As native Taiwanese parties, the DPP and its allies gain a strategic advantage by positioning themselves as the vanguard of the Taiwanese people (Shyu 2008). They expand the imaginary anti-authoritarian crisis performance to involve any potential influence from the Mainland, simplifying and absolutising it to construct an external adversary that perpetually threatens the democracy and freedom of 'the people'. For example, during the 2020 election, Lai Ching-te claimed that, 'The 2020 election is not about blue versus green, but about protecting Taiwan versus moving toward China, democracy versus authoritarian dictatorship. We must uphold sovereignty and safeguard democracy and freedom' (Central News Agency 2019). Similarly, in the 2024 election, Lai Ching-te claimed

that, 'Taiwan tells the world that between democracy and authoritarianism, we choose to stand on the side of democracy' (Central News Agency 2024). In these narratives, Mainland China is portrayed as 'an external force whose intervention Taiwanese people have successfully resisted through their actions' (Central News Agency 2024), maintaining the continuity of historical narratives of populist resistance. Viewed through Moffitt's (2017) lens of transnational populism, these campaign texts strive to position Lai as a vanguard of Taiwanese democracy and a model for global democracy. Simultaneously, they construct a binary opposition between 'the people' and 'external forces' linked to China factors, casting the latter as the authoritarian antithesis of global democratic values. Thus, Lai employs an exaggerated, stigmatised, and polarised imaginary anti-authoritarian strategy rooted in anti-Mainland narratives to consolidate his populist crisis performance, participating in the global discourse of 'the people resisting authoritarianism'.

Second, the externalisation of imaginary authoritarianism manifests in some civil society groups' anxiety regarding increasing influence of the Mainland/CPC. This influence is negatively perceived as an infiltration into Taiwan's democracy and freedom, which is often suspected to be facilitated by the complicity of specific political parties, such as the New Party (NP) and the KMT (Wu and Chu 2021). This deep-seated distrust intensified during the KMT administration of Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), fuelling a wave of student-led protests targeting both the KMT government and rising influence from the Mainland. Notable examples include the Wild Strawberries Movement in 2008 and the Sunflower Student Movement in 2014 (Fell 2017).

Specifically, the Wild Strawberries Movement erupted in response to the visit of Chen Yunlin, chairman of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS). Activists were outraged by strict police control during the protests, which they viewed as a violation of Taiwan's dignity (Fell 2017). This resentment against cross-strait cooperation gradually evolved into a populist antagonism rooted in the fear that innocent Taiwanese people were being oppressed by a 'corrupt' KMT government and 'authoritarian' Beijing. This sentiment ultimately led to the Sunflower Student Movement, where students occupied the Legislative Yuan to oppose the forced passage of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). This agreement involved economic cooperation in financial and non-financial sectors (Ho 2015). By framing any potential or existing China factors and the alleged cross-strait clientelism between Beijing, the KMT, and Taiwanese businessmen as the enemy of 'the people' (Wu and Chu 2021), these civil society groups and political appeals converged into a populist wave (Hsu 2024). In this wave, opponents viewed the agreement as damaging to Taiwan's economy and reinforcing Beijing's political influence

(Fell 2017). Consequently, political parties favouring positive cross-strait relations, such as the KMT, were labelled as authoritarian proxies or ‘fellow travellers of the CPC’ (中共同路人) standing in opposition to ‘the people’ of Taiwan (Wu and Chu 2021).

The following sub-section shifts focus to the internalised performance of imaginary authoritarianism. It examines how opposition parties construct the ruling party as an embodiment of ‘Green Terror’ or authoritarianism, creating a populist crisis performance where ‘the people’ resist a new authoritarian government. Conversely, the ruling party utilises a similar strategy to attack the alleged authoritarian tendencies of the opposition parties.

3.3 *The Internalisation of Imaginary Authoritarianism*

The second form of populist-style imaginary anti-authoritarianism targets the internal political landscape. Specifically, it involves the discursive re-construction of a corrupt elite or government image, likened to the authoritarian KMT rule prior to 2000. This process re-contextualises the historical anti-KMT resistance of the Martial Law era into contemporary party rivalry among the KMT-led Pan-Blue coalition, the ‘Third Force’ (such as the TPP), and the DPP-led Pan-Green coalition. These political parties attack one another in a typically populist manner, mutually accusing political opponents of harbouring potential or apparent authoritarian tendencies that exploit the interests of ‘the people’.

Taking the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) as a case study, on 22 February 2025, party leader Huang Kuo-chang organised a mobilisation rally titled ‘defend democracy, oppose authoritarianism’ to protest against the DPP administration. He labelled its governance as ‘green authoritarianism’ (Green Terror), accusing the DPP of dragging Taiwan back toward one-party rule and depriving ‘the people’ of their democracy (Cheng 2025). This TPP-led media spectacle demonstrated a clear populist crisis performance. By invoking the historical trauma of authoritarianism caused by the KMT before 1987, the TPP presupposed the resurgence of an (imaginary) authoritarian threat. This strategy successfully constructed a populist antagonism between ‘the deprived people’ and ‘the culprit responsible for this (imaginary) authoritarian resurgence’.

The KMT distinguishes itself through its positive stance on cross-strait relations. Contrary to Wu and Chu’s (2021) assertion that Taiwan’s populism stems largely from fears over the close economic ties across the Taiwan Strait, it is rather a compound expression of discrete positive and negative sentiments. For instance, the ‘Han Kuo-yu phenomenon’ in 2018 local and 2020 general elections represents a populist appeal based on positive cross-strait economic engagement, positioned against the DPP Tsai Ing-wen government’s ‘authori-

tarian' rejection of the 1992 Consensus. The 1992 Consensus, a tacit agreement reached between representatives from Taiwan and the Mainland, long served as the political cornerstone for cross-strait peace and economic exchange (Wei 2016). However, the explicit rejection of this consensus by the DPP Tsai Ing-wen administration led to a suspension of dialogue, significantly deteriorating relations and fostering a volatile atmosphere of imminent conflict (Wang et al. 2021). In this context, Han Kuo-yu employed anti-elitist and anti-establishment populist discourse in the 2018 Kaohsiung election to argue that such tension, driven by the DPP's full-scale polarisation and ideologisation, directly undermined the economic interests of 'the people', particularly the rural and working classes who rely on the Mainland market (Batto 2021). Thus, the DPP was framed as an authoritarian elite detached from 'the people' and sacrificing the welfare of 'the people'.

Conversely, the ruling DPP also produced and disseminated similar populist crisis performances to attack opposition parties. A prominent example is Lai Ching-te's 2024 election slogan, which framed the election as 'a choice between democracy and authoritarianism' (Yoshiyuki 2024). This slogan presented voters' choice between the DPP and the KMT not merely as a partisan preference, but as a selection between the continuity of democracy or a resurgence to Taiwan's authoritarian past (Yoshiyuki 2024). As a party rooted in the Tang-wai movement, which fought against KMT authoritarianism during the Martial Law era, the DPP closely ties its identity to Taiwan's democratic development (Fell 2006). To distinguish itself from the KMT, the incumbent DPP employed anti-authoritarian discourse to re-contextualise the KMT's history, framing the modern KMT as a symbol of past trauma. This narrative aligns with civil society groups' lingering resistance against the KMT's perceived un-eradicated authoritarian legacy (Wu and Chu 2021), characterising the opposition as a threat to the democracy and interests of 'the people'. This strategy marks a continuity of anti-KMT/anti-authoritarian discourse in Taiwan's elections, spanning the DPP administrations of Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), Tsai Ing-wen (2016–2024), and continuing into the Lai Ching-te era (2024–2028).

4 Conclusion

This paper introduces the concept of 'imaginary anti-authoritarianism' to explain the core characteristic of Taiwan's contemporary populism. This concept refers to a strategic performance in which political parties and actors manipulate the spectre of authoritarianism to stigmatise their opponents, creating a populist antagonism between 'the people' and 'elites portrayed as

authoritarian threats'. The root of this antagonism lies in the structural and spontaneous resistance against Japanese colonisation and KMT authoritarianism during the 20th century. However, after the consolidation of democracy around 2000, this anti-authoritarianism transformed into a political style or performance. As characterised by Moffitt (2016), this style performs a crisis, suggesting that the previous authoritarianism was never fully eradicated and is returning. Consequently, it appeals to 'the people' to perpetuate resistance against these imaginary authoritarian tendencies. In other words, the 'imaginary' aspect means projecting the logic of historical populist resistance onto today's democratic competition, specifically by labelling, weaponising, amplifying, and ideologising political opponents as authoritarian threats.

This paper identifies and operationalises two specific forms of this imaginary anti-authoritarian strategy, namely externalisation and internalisation. Externalisation targets 'China factors'. The DPP-led Pan-Green coalition uses transnational populism to convert anti-China narratives into a dualistic antagonism of 'democracy versus authoritarianism'. Simultaneously, it employs populist conspiracy theories to frame political opponents who favour cross-strait relations as a 'fifth column' acting against 'the people'. By contrast, internalisation targets partisan rivalry. Regardless of whether they are the incumbent DPP or the opposition KMT and TPP, political parties weaponise the label of imaginary authoritarianism. They mutually attack opponents by framing them as a 'new authoritarianism' that threatens 'the people'.

These findings confirm that Taiwan's populism has evolved into a top-down elite strategy. Political parties and actors actively invoke imaginary authoritarianism to perform crises, collapses, and threats that undermine the freedom and democracy of 'the people'. This conclusion challenges the argument by Wu and Chu (2021), who characterised Taiwan's populism primarily as bottom-up spontaneous citizen protests. Instead, this paper provides a comprehensive update on how the practice of populism in Taiwan has changed. Furthermore, this phenomenon confirms and expands the applicability of Moffitt's (2016) theory of populism as a political style or performance within the East Asian context.

Despite introducing a novel theoretical perspective, this paper has limitations. It does not provide a detailed analysis of how different political parties vary in their linguistic and discursive construction of this authoritarianism in populist messages. Besides, as the generation born after 2000, who did not experience actual authoritarian rule, gradually becomes a key voting bloc, it remains to be seen whether re-contextualising historical trauma will continue to effectively influence their voting behaviour. Addressing these substantive gaps calls for future empirical investigation grounded in large-scale data.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give special thanks to Dr Dani Madrid-Morales and Dr Jingrong Tong for their revision suggestions and great support. Also, I would like to thank the two external reviewers and the editor for their detailed and helpful suggestions and support for this paper.

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