Nobody Can Stop Them

Taiwan's Digital Democracy, Civic Hacking, and Lessons for East Asia

A Personal Research and Observation Report

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Based on fieldwork at the Asia Blockchain Summit (Taipei),

conversations with gov-affiliated researchers, and primary academic sources.

Abstract

This paper examines Taiwan's digital democracy ecosystem through three interconnected lenses: the g0v (gov-zero) civic hacker community, the 2014 Sunflower Movement, and the philosophical framework of Plurality as articulated by Glen Weyl and Audrey Tang. Drawing on Mei-chun Lee's ethnographic research, the Plurality book, and the author's firsthand experience at the Asia Blockchain Summit and conversations with Taiwanese civic technologists, this paper investigates how Taiwan has constructed a distinctive model of technology-mediated civic participation. It asks three central questions: How does g0v's "nobody" (meiyouren) ethos produce a decentralized form of digital activism that transforms citizens from passive spectators into active participants? What are the tensions between transparency and surveillance that emerged during the Sunflower Movement and continue to shape Taiwan's civic technology landscape? And what lessons does Taiwan's experience offer to other East Asian democracies—particularly South Korea—where civic hacking communities remain comparatively underdeveloped? The paper argues that Taiwan's digital democracy is neither a technological utopia nor a replicable template, but a context-specific, parasitic form of activism that constantly negotiates with the political realities it seeks to subvert.

1. Introduction: The Problem

Democracy worldwide is under strain. According to the V-Dem Institute's 2023 Democracy Report, authoritarian regimes now command nearly half of global GDP, and only about one billion people live under genuinely democratic systems, while more than two billion reside under authoritarian rule. Digital technologies, once heralded as instruments of liberation and participation, have increasingly become vectors for polarization, surveillance capitalism, and the spread of disinformation. Social media platforms optimize for engagement rather than deliberation; artificial intelligence concentrates power in the hands of a small number of corporations and engineers; and cryptocurrencies, despite their promises of decentralization, have largely fueled speculation and regulatory evasion. As Shoshana Zuboff has argued, surveillance capitalism represents a "coup from above," an overthrow of the people's sovereignty. From the opposite direction, Marc Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" dismisses such concerns as mere pessimism, insisting that technology is being unfairly blamed for problems it did not create. Both positions, as the Plurality book by Glen Weyl and Audrey Tang (2024) observes, miss the deeper problem: technology and democracy, once natural allies, have been set on a collision course.

Against this global backdrop, Taiwan presents a striking counter-narrative. A small island of twenty-three million people, situated at the geopolitical frontline between the United States and China, Taiwan has developed one of the world's most vibrant civic technology ecosystems. Its civic hacker community, g0v (pronounced "gov-zero"), has attracted thousands of participants and produced platforms that directly influence government policy. Its former Digital Minister, Audrey Tang—herself a g0v hacker before being appointed to office—became an international symbol of how digital tools can serve democratic governance rather than undermine it. And the Sunflower Movement of 2014, which occupied the Legislative Yuan for twenty-three days, demonstrated how digital technologies could be mobilized not merely for protest but for the construction of alternative democratic infrastructure.

I came to this subject not as a detached academic but as a participant-observer. At the Asia Blockchain Summit in Taipei, I co-organized a Fireside Discussion on AI and deliberative democracy, met with Professor Mei-chun Lee—whose ethnographic work on g0v is the most comprehensive available—and found myself drawn into conversations about why Taiwan's civic tech culture is so vibrant and what it might mean for my home country, South Korea. This paper is the product of those encounters. It is not a policy brief or a technical manual. It is an attempt to understand what makes Taiwan's digital democracy work, where it falls short, and what it can

teach us—not as a template to copy but as a mirror in which other democracies might see their own possibilities and limitations.

2. Historical Context: Why Taiwan?

2.1 Democracy and the Internet: A Parallel Birth

To understand why Taiwan became fertile ground for civic hacking, one must appreciate a historical coincidence that Audrey Tang has articulated with characteristic precision: "The Internet and democracy evolved together, spread together, and integrated with each other." Taiwan's democratization and its digital transformation occurred in tandem. After enduring Japanese colonization from 1895 to 1945 and four decades of martial law under the Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwanese people only regained the freedom to organize political parties and speak freely in 1987. Commercial use of the Internet was piloted in 1994. The first direct presidential election took place in 1996. The bulletin board system PTT, which became the island's most popular online forum for political debate, memes, and subculture, launched around the same time. As Lee (2020) documents in her dissertation, the Free and Open Source Software movement was also introduced to Taiwan during this period, seeding the technical communities from which g0v would eventually emerge.

This concurrent development created a generation for whom democratic participation and digital engagement were not separate activities but intertwined modes of being. Unlike countries where the Internet arrived into an established democratic framework, or where democracy was imposed upon a pre-existing technological infrastructure, Taiwan's political and digital identities co-evolved. The discourse of a free Taiwan became inseparable from the ideal of Internet freedom, and both served as ideological counterweights to the constant political threat from China.

2.2 The Lost Generation and the Soil for Revolt

Technological readiness alone does not produce activism. The immediate catalyst for Taiwan's civic hacking movement was a deep generational frustration. Lee describes the yanshidai—the "lost generation"—composed of Taiwanese born in the 1980s and 1990s. They grew up watching their parents build prosperity during the economic boom, enjoyed the political freedoms won by democratization movements, and then graduated into a society where jobs were scarce, housing was unaffordable, and low salaries forced them to work brutal hours to sustain even a basic standard of living. Taiwan's birth rate dropped to roughly one baby per woman—among the lowest in the world, even lower than China under the one-child policy. This was not apathy but despair.

Precarious life conditions produced a wave of social movements in the early 2010s, targeting everything from labor law reform to LGBTQ rights, environmental protection, media monopoly, military reform, and free trade agreements. As g0v co-founder Clkao told Lee in an interview, "Taiwan is never short of political controversies, and this gives g0v an environment to grow." The hackathon, in this context, became what Lee calls a "shelter" where resistance temporarily moved from the physical space to the digital space, accumulating power before returning to the streets. Hacking was both an emotional response to a corrupt government and a practical method of political intervention that the lost generation—digital natives with coding skills but no faith in traditional institutions—found uniquely suited to their circumstances.

2.3 China and the Paradox of Identity

No account of Taiwan's civic energy is complete without addressing the shadow of China. The People's Republic has never renounced its claim over Taiwan and never stopped its ambitions to bring the island under its control. This persistent existential threat shapes Taiwan's domestic politics, its international positioning, and—crucially—its civic culture in ways that became unexpectedly clear to me during a dinner conversation that I will describe in detail later in this paper. For now, it is sufficient to note that the geopolitical pressure from China serves, paradoxically, as both a source of anxiety and a powerful engine of civic solidarity. It creates a sense of urgency—a feeling that democratic institutions must be strengthened now, because they could be lost tomorrow—that drives citizens toward participation rather than resignation.

3. g0v: The "Nobody" Movement

3.1 Origins: Anger, a Bad Commercial, and a Hackathon

g0v was born from a moment of outrage. In 2012, the Taiwanese government released a forty-second television commercial for an upcoming economic initiative called the "Power-Up Plan for the Economy." The ad cost nearly five million New Taiwan Dollars and contained no substantive information whatsoever. It merely told viewers that the policy was too complicated to explain and asked for their trust. Clkao, Tkirby, and two friends were preparing a project for Yahoo's Open Hack Day, a twenty-four-hour hackathon contest, when they saw this commercial. Infuriated, they made a last-minute decision to scrap their original plan—an online window-shopping tool—and instead built an interactive visualization of the government's annual budget. Their tool translated budget items into relatable terms: the price of lunch boxes, bubble tea, even space travel, and invited citizens to review and rate government spending. The project won an honorable mention and a prize of fifty thousand New Taiwan Dollars, which Clkao and Tkirby used to host a hackathon focused on civic issues. That event, held in December 2012, became the first g0v hackathon.

3.2 The Meiyouren Philosophy

The name "g0v" replaces the letter "o" in "government" with the number zero, signifying both a digital identity rooted in binary code and a grassroots, bottom-up approach to governance. But the community's true philosophical core is captured in its motto: "Don't ask why meiyouren is doing this. You are the meiyouren." Meiyouren translates literally as "nobody." Lee illustrates this concept through an anecdote from her fieldwork. During one of her first meetings with a g0v participant named Nchild, he showed her a comic depicting the famous "Tank Man" of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. In the comic, a bystander flees and yells at Tank Man: "What are you doing? Nobody can stop them!" Tank Man stands fast and responds: "I'm NOBODY."

This scene encapsulates the g0v ethos. Meiyouren is not just a call to individual action; it is a conceptual framework. As Lee writes, meiyouren is "polysemous and equivocal—both one and many, noun and verb, actor and action, being and becoming." It carries within it the values of decentralization, openness, participation, and collaboration. It rejects the idea that political change requires formal organizations, charismatic leaders, or institutional authority. Anyone who acts is meiyouren. The very act of contributing—whether by writing code, designing

infographics, transcribing data, or simply showing up at a hackathon—constitutes political participation.

3.3 Hackathons as Political Rituals

Since its founding, g0v has held bimonthly hackathons that function as the community's central ritual. Unlike corporate or institutional hackathons, which are typically contests with assigned topics, teams, and prizes, g0v hackathons are non-competitive, open-ended, and self-organized. Participants pitch project ideas, seek collaborators, write code, exchange political thoughts, and share community gossip. By August 2020, g0v's Facebook group had over fourteen thousand members; more than eighty-three hundred hackers chatted on its Slack channel; over two hundred contributors pushed code to its GitHub repositories; and forty-one bimonthly hackathons had been held, each with around one hundred participants.

What makes these hackathons distinctive is their dual function. On one level, they are spaces where concrete tools are built: budget visualizations, air quality maps, voting guides, labor law calculators, campaign finance databases. On another level, they serve as what anthropologist Gabriella Coleman calls "rituals of confirmation, liberation, celebration, and especially reenchantment." The hackathon is where g0v's values are internalized and renewed. Newcomers are encouraged to present their work at the end of each event—a deliberate tactic to make them feel invested and encourage them to return. The hackathon is simultaneously a coding marathon, a political salon, and a community ceremony. It is where, in Lee's phrase, "hacking government" and "hacking governance" converge.

3.4 Two Targets: Government and Governance

g0v operates on two fronts simultaneously. The first is hacking the government: scraping, repurposing, and visualizing public data to promote transparency and civic engagement. Projects like the Council Voting Guide reveal legislators' sponsored bills and financial records. AirMap visualizes real-time PM2.5 pollution data. The Labor Law Calculator lets workers compare different draft legislation to see which version would benefit them most. The underlying premise is that citizens armed with sufficient information can make their own informed judgments.

The second target is hacking governance itself—that is, organizing the community in a way that embodies the values it advocates. g0v has no formal structure, no center of command, no membership roster. It is a platform on which self-initiated projects emerge, collaborate, and

dissolve. Its manifesto declares: "We are a polycentric community of self-organized contributors. There is no single center or representative of g0v." This radical decentralization is both g0v's greatest strength and its most persistent source of tension.

3.5 The Institutionalization Problem

As g0v grew, so did the pressure to institutionalize. The most dramatic turning point came in October 2016, when Audrey Tang, one of g0v's most prominent members, was appointed as Taiwan's first Digital Minister. Tang's appointment was, in one sense, a vindication of everything g0v stood for: a hacker had entered the halls of power. But it also raised difficult questions. Could g0v maintain its identity as a decentralized, anti-establishment collective while one of its own occupied a position of institutional authority? The tension between radical decentralization and the desire for sustainable, large-scale impact is a contradiction that g0v has never fully resolved.

Lee captures this dynamic in a phrase from her dissertation abstract that stayed with me long after I first read it: "Civic hacking is never a set method or ideology. It is a parasitic activity that constantly negotiates with the changing political realities it aims to subvert." When I later met Professor Lee in person and asked about this formulation, she elaborated: the essence of civic hacking is not any particular outcome or organizational form, but the simple fact that the hacking can continue. Sustainability—not revolution—is the point.

4. Campaign Finance Digitization: Data as Political Action

4.1 Freeing the Data from the Birdcage

Among g0v's many projects, Campaign Finance Digitization (CFD) stands out as a case study in how data can become a vehicle for political mobilization. In Taiwan, political candidates and parties are required by law to report their donations and campaign expenditures to Control Yuan, a government investigatory agency. But these reports were not released publicly. Citizens could only view them by visiting government offices in person and paying administrative fees to make physical copies. For all practical purposes, the data was locked away—or, as the CFD's slogan put it, imprisoned in a birdcage.

On April 19, 2014, during a g0v hackathon, a hacker named Ronnywang pitched the idea of opening up campaign finance data. Earlier that year, members of a civil society group called No Nuke had obtained a ten-gigabyte file of scanned campaign finance reports from Control Yuan and brought them to Ronnywang for help. The reports contained rich information but were too voluminous to process manually. Ronnywang and a small team of hackers built a crowdsourcing website that used CAPTCHA-style technology to divide the digitization task into tiny fragments: a single number, a character, a date. Each xiangmin (netizen) who visited the site was shown a scanned image and asked to type what they saw.

The response was staggering. Within twenty-four hours of launch, over ten thousand xiangmin had digitized three hundred thousand campaign finance records. The slogan "Free the data from the birdcage" went viral. Comments on the project's Facebook page captured the spirit: "The xiangmin government is way more efficient than the ROC government!"; "I cannot stop this typing game"; "Let's fight together! I won't sleep before I submit ten thousand answers."

4.2 Chopping Firewood with Clones

The CFD's design choices were as revealing as its outcomes. Ronnywang was asked during an invited talk why he had chosen not to use automated optical character recognition. He acknowledged that watermarks on the scanned documents made automatic recognition difficult, but he emphasized a deeper point: the goal was not efficiency but mass participation. Getting the job done was secondary to motivating as many citizens as possible to take action.

In g0v's internal vocabulary, this crowdsourcing technique is called fenshen fashu—literally, "chopping firewood with clones." Data are described as chai (firewood), a

metaphor that captures both the rawness of data and their potential to ignite action. A government website full of information is haochai (good firewood). Scraping data is kanchai (chopping firewood). When the volume is large, hackers organize a futou bang (axe gang) to collaborate. The CFD's mobilization also drew on popular culture: its Facebook posts imitated the tone and imagery of Attack on Titan, a manga in which brave soldiers fight giants hiding behind walls, recasting xiangmin as heroes and corrupt politicians as giants to be defeated.

4.3 Data as Process, Not Product

Lee's analysis of the CFD challenges conventional assumptions about data activism. The standard narrative would be that data was opened, facts were revealed, and accountability followed. But Lee argues that the political significance of CFD lay not in the facts produced from the data but in the collaborative practice of opening it. The act of ten thousand citizens sitting at their keyboards, transcribing numbers during their tea breaks, was itself the political movement. Data, in this framing, are not objects waiting to be discovered but processes that forge relationships, build communities, and constitute new forms of citizenship.

As Audrey Tang observed in an interview: "Data are like gravity. They exert an attractive force to people and form a community around them." The CFD proved this: the data pulled together hackers, xiangmin, journalists, and data scientists into an assemblage that would not have existed otherwise. The eventual legislative outcome—the Political Donations Act was amended in June 2018 to require online publication of campaign finance reports—was significant, but it was a downstream consequence of the movement, not its essence. Ronnywang, the project's main developer, later ran for legislator in 2020, having moved from hacking into government data to hacking into the political system itself.

5. The Sunflower Movement: Transparency and Its Shadows

5.1 Occupying the Black Box

The Sunflower Movement erupted on March 18, 2014, when approximately three hundred protesters broke into Taiwan's Legislative Yuan to oppose the Service Trade Agreement with China. The trade pact had been negotiated in secret and rushed through the legislative process without meaningful public consultation—a pattern that protesters denounced with the metaphor of the heixiang (black box). The agreement would have opened Taiwan's service sector, which accounted for roughly seventy percent of GDP and was dominated by small and medium-sized businesses, to Chinese corporate competition. Many feared that the deal would damage their livelihoods and erode Taiwan's media freedom, sovereignty, and cultural independence.

The occupation lasted twenty-three days and produced, on March 30, the biggest pro-democratic rally in Taiwan's history: half a million people in black shirts taking to the streets of Taipei and cities around the world. The movement's central demand was gongkai touming—open and transparent review of the trade pact. It was not merely a protest against a specific policy but a generational assertion that governance must be visible, accessible, and accountable.

5.2 Live Streaming as Counter-Narrative

What made the Sunflower Movement particularly significant for the study of digital democracy was the role of live streaming. An iPad positioned on the second floor of the Legislative Yuan began broadcasting from the very first moments of the occupation—it was the first medium to disseminate images of the event. Within days, dozens of cameras were set up at strategic points inside and around the building, supported by high-speed internet connections and sufficient power supplies to sustain nonstop filming.

Protesters turned to live streaming because they distrusted mainstream media, which had initially described them as rioters without presenting their motivations. Many of Lee's interlocutors recalled that television coverage bore no resemblance to what they had experienced on the ground. Enraged, some protesters placed stickers reading "Thank you for making fake news for my parents" on news vans. Others held signs behind correspondents that read "Please tell the truth." The more radical response was to become the media themselves, streaming counter-narratives through YouTube, Ustream, and social media.

5.3 The Illusion of Transparency

The belief underpinning this citizen journalism was that live streaming could deliver unedited, real-time truth. Taiwan has a popular phrase—meitu mei zhenxiang, or "no photo, no truth"—that expresses a deep faith in mechanical objectivity. Live streaming appeared to extend this logic: its real-time nature seemed to eliminate the possibility of post-production manipulation.

Lee's analysis complicates this belief. Live streaming, she argues, does not display transparent truth. Someone must decide when to start and stop broadcasting, where to position the camera, what to frame and what to exclude. Every broadcast undergoes a series of transcoding processes—selection, framing, encoding, transmission, reception—each of which transforms the reality it claims to represent. Mainstream media and citizen media competed for the power of representation, each claiming transparency while producing fundamentally different accounts of the same events.

5.4 The Panopticon Paradox

The most provocative dimension of Lee's analysis is her argument that transparency and surveillance were two sides of the same coin. The Legislative Yuan, occupied by both protesters and cameras, became a panopticon. The ever-present cameras empowered protesters to speak but also imprisoned them under the gaze of invisible spectators. To gain public sympathy, the movement presented itself as student-led and nonviolent; occupiers were expected to act as model students—recycling diligently, maintaining cleanliness, avoiding any behavior that could be used against them. Radical demands were moderated. Student leader Chen captured this dynamic in a poignant remark: "Imprisoned in the Legislative Yuan, I was like an actor in those days."

5.5 The Intestine Flower Forum

The tensions within the movement found their most vivid expression in the Intestine Flower Forum—a deliberate mockery of the Sunflower name—convened at midnight on the final days of the occupation. While the Sunflower Movement projected brightness and order, the Intestine Flower Forum embraced everything the main movement suppressed. Participants drank beer, used obscenities, stripped on camera, proclaimed Taiwan's independence, and voiced opposition not just to the trade pact's process but to the entire agreement. They criticized not only the government but their fellow protesters. They fought and then hugged each other.

The occupation ended with an irony Lee does not miss: the decision to evacuate was made behind closed doors by core organizers, without consulting the broader group. Many protesters felt betrayed. Some labeled the decision a black box—the very charge that had launched the movement. Transparency, it turned out, was easier to demand than to practice.

6. Plurality: A Philosophical Framework

6.1 Digital Is Plural

If gov represents the practice of Taiwan's digital democracy and the Sunflower Movement represents its dramatic test, the book Plurality, co-authored by Glen Weyl and Audrey Tang and published as an open-source collaborative project, represents its philosophical articulation. The book opens with an observation rooted in language: the Mandarin word for digital, 數位 (shùwèi), also means plural. "To be plural is to be digital," Weyl and Tang write. "To be digital is to be plural." This is not merely a linguistic coincidence but a programmatic statement: true digitalization should not homogenize or atomize society but enable its pluralism—the productive coexistence of diverse perspectives, identities, and forms of social organization.

6.2 A Third Way

The book identifies two dominant technological paradigms that both corrode democratic pluralism. The first is artificial intelligence in its centralizing form: large-scale models that concentrate informational power in a few corporations, normalize surveillance, and reduce the scope for citizens to shape their own lives. The second is the blockchain and cryptocurrency ecosystem in its atomizing form: a vision of radical individual sovereignty that fragments social bonds, fuels speculation, and undermines collective institutions. Citing Acemoglu and Robinson's thesis, Weyl and Tang argue that free democratic societies exist in a "narrow corridor" between authoritarianism and social collapse. Both paradigms are squeezing that corridor from opposite sides.

Plurality offers a third way: collaborative technologies designed to strengthen, not replace, the diverse social connections that Tocqueville identified as the lifeblood of democracy. This vision encompasses tools like Pol.is, vTaiwan, quadratic voting, collaborative fact-checking, and augmented deliberation—all tested, to varying degrees, in Taiwan.

6.3 Vitalik Buterin and the Evolution of Blockchain Governance

The connection between Plurality and blockchain governance became clear to me through Vitalik Buterin's work, which I explored during the ABS. Buterin has argued that the original cypherpunk movement—focused on freedom from external control—is necessary but insufficient for sustainable blockchain ecosystems. True sustainability requires internal governance: mechanisms for collective decision-making, investment in public goods like open-source software, and structures balancing individual freedom with cooperation. This is precisely the

territory Plurality occupies. The book itself embodies its principles: it is open-source, governed collaboratively, and closes with an invitation echoing gov: "Ask not 'why is nobody doing this?' You are the nobody."

7. AI and Deliberative Democracy: The Fireside Discussion

7.1 From Broadcasting to Broad Listening

At the Asia Blockchain Summit, I organized and prepared materials for a Fireside Discussion on AI and deliberative democracy. The session examined how AI-based platforms scale citizen participation beyond traditional public consultation. The central concept I introduced was the distinction between Broadcasting and Broad Listening. Broadcasting describes the traditional model: government agencies push information outward, and citizens respond through narrow channels—petitions, town halls, comment periods—that process only a small volume of input. Broad Listening uses AI to ingest, summarize, cluster, and synthesize thousands of citizen opinions, enabling policymakers to listen at previously impossible scale.

The platforms I analyzed included vTaiwan, which used Pol.is for public consultations on issues such as Uber regulation. Pol.is presents participants with statements they can agree or disagree with and uses machine learning to identify opinion clusters and surface bridging statements—areas of unexpected consensus. Talk to the City (TTTC), an evolution of the Pol.is approach, offers a Turbo model tested during the Tokyo gubernatorial election to organize candidate proposals and integrate citizen feedback.

7.2 Caveats and Conditions

I emphasized several critical caveats in the session. The digital divide means certain populations—the elderly, rural communities, those without reliable internet access—may be systematically excluded. Algorithmic bias can cause certain opinions to be overrepresented or misclassified. Data transparency is essential: if citizens cannot understand how their input is processed, the legitimacy of outcomes is compromised. Most fundamentally, AI can assist in analyzing opinions and identifying consensus, but it cannot substitute for human judgment. Decision-making legitimacy requires what I called people-centered participation: AI as a tool that supports deliberation, not one that replaces it.

The discussion reinforced a conclusion that runs through all of this paper's sources: technology is only as democratic as the process that governs it. The most sophisticated AI deliberation platform is worthless if deployed without attention to inclusion, bias, and political context.

8. The Taiwan–South Korea Comparison: A Personal Reflection

8.1 A Surprising Answer Over Dinner

During my time in Taipei, I had dinner with Peter, a Taiwanese collaborator from the ABS. Over the meal, I expressed a sentiment I had also shared with Ohyun Kwon, the leader of Code for Korea: envy. I told Peter how impressive I found Taiwan's civic hacking scene and asked why South Korea, a country with comparable technological sophistication and democratic maturity, had nothing like it.

Peter's response caught me completely off guard. "Taiwan looks at South Korea as its role model," he said. He explained something I had not considered. Taiwan's national identity is, in his words, very weak. The persistent threat from China—which claims Taiwan as its territory, deploys military pressure, and has never renounced forcible reunification—means the question of what it means to be Taiwanese is never settled. This identity crisis is addressed primarily at the governmental level. At the civic level, digital democracy and civic technology serve a different but related function: they are mechanisms for building social cohesion among citizens who cannot rely on a stable, uncontested national identity.

The implications struck me slowly. Because Taiwan's national identity is fragile, its civic culture is less focused on internal identity battles—which may partly explain Taiwan's greater openness on issues like LGBTQ rights. Conversely, South Korea's national identity is powerful and deeply consolidated. There is no existential external threat to Korean statehood comparable to China's claim over Taiwan. This strong identity means Koreans' political energies are directed inward, toward fierce internal conflicts: partisan polarization, generational culture wars, gender politics, regional rivalries.

8.2 No Perfect Country

This conversation reshaped my thinking. I came to Taiwan expecting to find a model Korea should imitate. I left understanding that no national characteristic is purely advantageous. Taiwan's weak national identity makes civic tech possible but also means that as cross-strait relations stabilize, the community's raison d'être may weaken. Korea's strong national identity creates robust belonging but channels political energy into division rather than collaboration. Every national trait can be read from multiple angles.

I shared this hypothesis with Ohyun Kwon at Code for Korea, arguing that if digital democracy is to take root in South Korea, it cannot be transplanted from the Taiwanese model. Korea must identify its own pain points—the specific frustrations and unmet needs of Korean citizens—and design civic technology that speaks directly to those concerns. The question is not "How do we become like Taiwan?" but "What do Korean citizens need that existing institutions are failing to provide, and how can technology help?"

8.3 Meeting Professor Lee

One of the most rewarding experiences of my time in Taiwan was a meeting with Professor Mei-chun Lee, whose work provides the empirical foundation for much of this paper. I had emailed her on a whim, not expecting a response, and was surprised when she invited me to her office. Our conversation yielded four insights I carry with me.

First, she confirmed my hypothesis about China's role as a unifying force. She noted, however, a paradox I had not fully appreciated: as cross-strait relations stabilize, the emotional urgency that drives civic participation may diminish. Peace, counterintuitively, can be the enemy of civic mobilization.

Second, she emphasized that government leadership matters enormously. Even the strongest civic community is subject to the vagaries of political power. After the Sunflower Movement, policymakers voluntarily attended g0v hackathons and actively sought citizen input. This sympathetic environment led to Audrey Tang's appointment as Digital Minister. But a change in government could reverse these gains. The relationship between civic technology and state power is never stable.

Third, when I asked what distinguishes g0v from more centralized civic hacking communities in South Korea and Japan, and which model is better, she reframed the question. The essence of civic hacking, she said, is not its organizational structure but the simple fact that the hacking can continue. As long as the activity persists, adapting to new circumstances and threats, it fulfills its purpose. This recalled the phrase from her dissertation: "It is a parasitic activity that constantly negotiates with the changing political realities it aims to subvert." I told her I was drawn to the word "parasitic" without fully understanding why. She smiled but offered no explanation. Perhaps that is part of the point: the concept resists easy resolution, just as civic hacking resists easy categorization.

Fourth, at the end of our conversation, I asked whether she had a guiding value or philosophy for her life. She was visibly taken aback—she told me she had never been asked such

a question and thanked me for posing it. I left her office thinking about the asymmetry between the questions we ask about communities, systems, and structures, and the questions we fail to ask about the individuals who sustain them.

9. Conclusion: What Kind of Democracy Do We Want?

Taiwan's digital democracy is not a silver bullet. It is messy, contested, and deeply embedded in the specific historical, geopolitical, and cultural conditions of a small island navigating between the world's two largest powers. The Sunflower Movement showed that transparency—the very ideal that animated the protesters—can empower and imprison simultaneously. g0v demonstrates that decentralized civic action is possible but constantly threatened by the centripetal forces of institutionalization and co-optation. The Plurality framework offers a compelling philosophical vision, but its realization depends entirely on local conditions: the strength of civil society, the openness of government, the literacy and access of citizens, and the specific historical traumas and aspirations that shape a nation's political culture.

For South Korea, and for other democracies grappling with the crisis of political participation, Taiwan's lesson is not a blueprint but a provocation. The question is not "How do we copy Taiwan?" but rather: What are the unique conditions, frustrations, and aspirations of our own citizens? What problems are our existing institutions failing to solve? Where is the frustration so acute that citizens would willingly devote their evenings and weekends to hacking solutions? And what kind of civic infrastructure—technological, organizational, cultural—would enable them to do so?

The Plurality book ends with an invitation that echoes g0v's founding motto: "Ask not 'why is nobody doing this?' You are the nobody." This refrain, appearing across decades of Taiwan's civic history, carries a simple truth: democracy is not a spectator sport. It is an activity—imperfect, iterative, sometimes absurd, occasionally heroic—that exists only to the extent that citizens choose to practice it.

Perhaps the most honest description of this activity comes from Lee's dissertation, in a sentence I have returned to many times: "It is a parasitic activity that constantly negotiates with the changing political realities it aims to subvert." Civic hacking does not promise revolution. It does not promise utopia. It does not even promise success. What it promises is persistence: the refusal to stop participating, the willingness to adapt to new threats and opportunities, and the stubborn insistence that citizens—ordinary, untitled, unelected nobodies—have the right and the capacity to shape the systems that govern their lives.

Nobody can stop them. Because they are nobody.

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