

Political Packaging in Taiwan: The Case of Ko Wen-je (柯文哲)

In democracies, political competitions are not simply confrontations between different social and economic policy platforms, they are also contests over the power to shape public perception through acts of political image-building or political packaging which is 'an inherent part of politics today'. Taiwan, as a relatively young democracy, is no exception to this pattern and over the past decade, there has been a clear rise in the diversity of forms of political packaging in the electoral arena.

Arguably, at the centre of this political show has been Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), a surgeon-turned-political figure who has often been depicted as unconventional and even controversial. He ran unsuccessfully for president in January 2024, but he remains chair of the party he founded, the Taiwan People's Party (台灣民眾黨TPP) and the TPP remains the third largest party in Taiwan politics.

This article looks at important facets of Ko's political image-building and communication strategies during his political ascent. It also seeks to explore the underlying social and political dynamics in present-day Taiwan that have shaped these political packaging strategies.

Ko Wen-je began his political journey in 2014 by unexpectedly winning the Taipei mayoral election and has subsequently maintained an enduring presence in Taiwan politics. During his second, and final, term as Taipei Mayor (2018-2022), Ko expanded his influence in Taiwan politics in 2019 by forming the TPP. In Ko's decade-long career, political packaging has been a critical strategy used to promote his distinctive political identity and his political and social policies. Ko's example provides excellent material for understanding the image-building trend within the political landscape of Taiwan in the last decade.

Research on political packaging, also referred to as political marketing, can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s when several scholarly works, such as Stanley Kelley's *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (1956), 'noted the marketing character of political elections'. Since those early observations about the adoption of marketing approaches by politicians, studies of political packaging have undergone continuous development, extending their inquiries from historical campaign advertising to contemporary digital strategies. While continuing to evolve

and change, the political packaging approach fundamentally involves the strategic craft of image-making and presentation by political individuals or parties to influence a target audience; it involves the deliberate selection and emphasis of policies and images to enhance political appeal, as well as alignment of the politicians with historical or symbolic figures for the same purpose. By deftly weaving these different elements together, political packaging and image-making have today become widely acknowledged terms denoting the strategic application of publicity techniques to the shaping of political narratives.

As a skilled performer on the political packaging stage, Ko Wen-je displayed his mastery of image-making strategies from the very beginning of his political journey. An essential political label that Ko deployed in his initial march into politics was the assertion of his non-partisanship. Ko presented himself as a surgeon-turned-politician without political affiliation and an outsider in Taiwan's traditional political landscape. As observed today, these strategically cultivated images, acting as robust pillars, paved the way for Ko's early political successes. He claimed that he would prioritise the people's interests to bring an end to the enduring ideological and political debates between Taiwan's two major political factions referred to as Blue and Green, the core of the former being the Kuomintang (國民黨KMT) and the core of the latter being the *Democratic Progressive Party* (民主進步黨DPP). Ko said he would 'break down antagonisms between Blue and Green'. Through this packaging strategy, Ko sought to appeal to a broad spectrum of Taiwanese people at a time when Taiwanese society was becoming exhausted by the ongoing and aggressive disputes between Blue and Green, resulting in an increasing demand for alternatives from politically neutral-leaning electorates.

By packaging himself as a much-needed political alternative, Ko Wen-je seemed to have articulated a 'heuristic' strategy to further enhance his image. Heuristic approaches are used in complex political situations where 'political actors mainly design their strategies according to simple rules (heuristics) that rely on selective information'. In other words, heuristics reduces the complexity of politics 'by ignoring some of the available information and focusing on a selection of specific cues.'

What were and are the heuristic approaches used by Ko Wen-je, and what have been their potential political impacts or effects? Since entering politics, Ko has continued to cleverly highlight his identity as a surgeon, attempting to create a dual image of being both a medical expert and non-partisan. Many in Taiwan seem to have

embraced the component elements that comprise Ko's dual symbolic identity. In the first place, a surgeon is perceived positively as an intelligent and capable person who can efficiently remove diseased parts of a patient's body; this perception can inspire people's imagination with regard to what constitutes effective governance. Ko's widely publicised remarks that those who were involved in wrongdoing would be 'killed' without mercy have arguably further reinforced this perception: the surgeon-politician is cutting out diseased parts of the body politic. Furthermore, the surgeon-turned-non-partisan politician will almost inevitably be perceived as an outsider to traditional political circles, appealing to those who want a cleaner and more transparent form of politics. Ko's recurring assertion that Taiwan needed a 'new political culture' also contributed to the reinforcement of these heuristic elements, simplifying the public picture of the political landscape.

Arguably, Ko's approach not only strategically capitalised on the frustration of those who had no party allegiances, or only weak ones, as a result of Taiwan's political infighting, but also sought to develop those voters' awareness of his 'new politics' through skilfully selected symbolic images. Using this strategy, Ko endeavoured to create a memorable and compelling public narrative about his political objectives, aligning himself with the desire of non-politically aligned voters to break with Taiwan's established politics. By packaging himself as 'a rough-around-the-edges politician' who is not beholden to the two major parties, Ko's neither-Blue-nor-Green platform to 'prove hugely popular'. In the 2024 presidential election, he came in third place, winning 'more third-party votes than any candidate since 2000, when the KMT's James Soong ran as an independent.'

Ko Wen-je's non-partisan brand was indeed effective in his first political test in 2014's Taipei mayoral election. The non-partisan label however was eventually struck out by Ko Wen-je himself through his founding of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) in 2019. The establishment of the TPP, which was perhaps the most strategic action that Ko took during his second term as Taipei Mayor, reflected his willingness to pursue his political aspirations at the national level, aiming at the presidency. Ko's adoption and subsequent discarding of a non-partisan status, while revealing the short-term pragmatism of his political image-making endeavour, exemplified the discontinuous features and adaptable attributes of these political packaging strategies and how likely these strategies are to be 'manufactured and manipulated by political elites'.

As we shall see, Ko Wen-je in this manufactured and manipulated process of forming

a new party or, as it might more appropriately be described, this brand-changing action, moved the application of political image-making and political heuristic strategies to a higher level by invoking a prominent political legacy from Taiwan's modern history: that of Chiang Wei-shui (蔣渭水1890-1931), a physician and key figure in Taiwan's opposition to Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945). Chiang played a pivotal role in founding what is generally regarded as being Taiwan's first political party, the Taiwanese People's Party (台灣民眾黨), established in 1927. The website of the Taiwan Ministry of Culture declares that Chiang Wei-shui has been 'dubbed 'Taiwan's Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) [known as the Father of the Republic of China] for his role in Taiwan's cultural enlightenment and promotion of human rights.'

One crucial step Ko took in the strategic founding of the TPP was to make the party's Chinese name '台灣民眾黨' the same as that of the party Chiang Wei-shui helped to found. Ko's use of this naming strategy might be perceived by some as an attempt to promote the enduring legacy of Chiang Wei-shui in contemporary Taiwan. Different perspectives, however, also emerged, suggesting that Ko's decision was a strategic act aimed at highlighting the commonalities Ko had with Chiang Wei-shui in bridging the domain of medicine and politics. By doing so, Ko sought to utilise Chiang Wei-shui's legacy to enhance his own political standing and advance his party's agenda.

Among these diverse viewpoints, a key perspective came from one of the descendants of Chiang Wei-shui who boldly asked whether or not Ko had deployed Chiang's name as a facade to 'gild his image' for the purpose of advancing his presidential candidacy. On 1st August 2019, the Chiang Wei-shui Cultural Foundation, while maintaining a polite and discreet tone, issued a statement urging Ko to reconsider the name of his party. The Foundation also emphasised that the intention behind their request was to 'show respect for history and Mr. Wei-shui'. Not surprisingly, Ko has shown no willingness at all to change the Chinese name of his party.

Regardless of how Ko's forming and naming of his party have been perceived, it seems certain that, through these efforts, he has attempted to build for himself a more elevated and more iconic image. Ko's own words that 'he would 'inherit' Chiang's unfinished work' largely confirm this assertion. One may argue here that, in doing this, Ko seems to have sought to shelter himself behind an exalted symbol long revered in an abstract way in Taiwanese society, thereby reducing the possibility of Ko being subjected to serious scrutiny when confronted with complex political issues or detailed policy questions. This argument can to a certain extent be

supported by comments presented in *Focus Taiwan, CAN English News* which state that while Ko claimed to take on the challenges and strive to fulfil 'the goals Chiang Wei-shui was not able to achieve 100 years ago', he did not specify 'what those goals were'. Regardless of how effective Ko's upgraded packaging effort has been in the long run, there seems little doubt that, by undertaking this enhanced packaging endeavour, Ko sought to excite emotions connected to the community's shared memories, with people affected by these emotional appeals coming to 'base their decision exclusively on the party affiliation of the candidates instead of a thorough evaluation of proposed policies.'

Although in varying degrees leveraging the legacy of a political party founded nearly a century ago and frequently drawing parallels with Chiang Wei-shui, Ko's decade-long political endeavours seem to lack a meaningful connection to Taiwan's historical narrative. What remains apparent is the dynamic nature of Ko's relationships with current major political parties, particularly the DPP—a relationship that has undergone noticeable shifts since his victory in the Taipei mayoral election of 2014.

After the formation of the TPP, Ko Wen-je's political objectives continued to grow and in May 2023 he formally announced that he would run for the 2024 presidential election. As the election campaign intensified, Ko, at a media interview held on 2nd August 2023, issued an intense pathos-laden appeal, claiming that 'if I cannot win, Taiwan will be finished'. This wild assertion seemed to belong to the category of what scholar Ted Brader refers to as 'fear appeals', aiming to 'encourage reconsideration of choices'. Ko's heightened appeal has arguably taken his political packaging and heuristics strategies to a new extreme by radically positioning himself as the saviour of Taiwan.

It is widely acknowledged that Ko Wen-je admires Mao Zedong (1893-1976)—the leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1935 until his death in 1976—and has studied Mao's works. Intriguingly, when exploring Ko Wen-je's political path over the last decade, especially since the creation of the Taiwan People's Party in 2019, we can perhaps observe certain parallels in his political manipulation practices with those used by Mao Zedong. Although the potential influence of Ko's political actions on Taiwanese society cannot in any way be compared to the far-reaching effects of Mao's political actions during his autocratic rule in China, they are arguably similar, although only superficially, in their utilisation of political images.

In his well-known poem, 'Snow' (to the tune of Qin Yuan Chun, February 1936), Mao used the phrase 'people in the present' as an indirect reference to himself to draw a comparison between his intelligence and that of several prominent emperors in Chinese history—Qin Shihuang, the first emperor of China, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty and Genghis Khan—claimed that those emperors were all lacking in culture and they all belonged to the past. Mao ultimately asserted that people who were truly great and noble-hearted could only be found in the present, referring to himself, demonstrating 'enormous self-assurance'. We can suggest that the way Ko acted in taking an historically iconic figure in Taiwan's modern history as an analogue for himself resembles Mao's action, except that while Mao portrayed himself as not simply those emperors' 'equal but rather their superior', Ko could merely raise himself up by trying to acquire the standing of Chiang Wei-shui.

Ko's attempt to package and present himself as the potential saviour of Taiwan is also similar to that of Mao. The song 'The East Is Red' which resounded across China during Mao's time contains a powerful and recurring lyric that casts Mao as 'the great saviour of the people'. While Ko's self-presentation operates at a much lower level than Mao's in terms of political and social aggrandisement, his strategic political packaging methodology arguably is the same as that of Mao Zedong.

In addition, Ko has sought to associate himself with numerous other significant figures from China's historical dynasties and Taiwan's political landscape. His most recent efforts in this vein emerged at the close of 2023, asserting alignment between his work style and that of former President Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國1910-1988) and portraying himself as an evolved iteration of Taiwan's former Minister of Justice, Chen Ding-nan (陳定南1943-2006), a figure widely respected within Taiwan's political sphere. It is worth highlighting that while expressing his aspiration to be a political figure of considerable influence, Ko's strategic use of such associations appears to have become 'his habit of making controversial statements into a strength' to ensure 'he remains a household name' despite his 'often ambiguous policy views'.

This article does not aim to pass judgment on Ko Wen-je's endeavours in politics, as his political journey is still evolving with potential for future shifts. Instead, by looking into key facets of Ko's strategies of political operation, it argues that in Taiwan, with Ko's rise in politics, political packaging approaches have been employed more extensively by politicians to 'elicit emotions and thereby influence the political behavior of viewers'.

During the 2024 election campaign, for example, two key candidates emphatically claimed that they were true believers in the deity Guan Gong (Duke Guan), in a bid to gain support from local communities where Duke Guan is widely worshipped. This example arguably indicates that, among other factors, the prevalence of religious beliefs in Taiwanese society has created fertile ground and abundant resources for political packaging.

Overall, we can observe that in Taiwan, the art of political strategy has developed into an important instrument to influence and shape public perceptions. This should perhaps raise concerns about the potential oversimplification of crucial policy issues and diversion of people's attention away from policy substance because of the emotional responses stirred up by political packaging operations. This phenomenon is similar to what Brader observed with reference to other psychologists' points of view and may affect the extent to which people rely on 'existing beliefs instead of available information to make an evaluation'.

Given Taiwan's complex challenges on both domestic and international fronts, the wider implications of the use of this form of political strategy are very profound, potentially constricting space for crucial public policy dialogues. More significantly, it might ultimately overshadow the requirements of effective governance, eroding public trust in a government capable of serving the fundamental interests of all people across Taiwan. Understanding its ramifications is essential for developing a well-informed and engaged political community which will not be easily manipulated. More specifically, in the ongoing endeavour to consolidate the legitimacy of democratic practice across Taiwan, the public 'must ignore or not follow an emotional response when coming to a judgment' on policies that impact the future of Taiwan's population, no matter how much emotional appeals are used by politicians.

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Image: Ko Wen-Je (C), the chairman of the Taiwan People's Party, attending a function on June 27 in 2023. Credit: Jameson Wu/Flickr.