Bureaucratic Speech: Language Choice and Democratic Identity in the Taipei Bureaucracy

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**Bureaucratic Speech:**
**Language Choice and Democratic Identity in the Taipei Bureaucracy**

**Anya Bernstein**

**Abstract**
This article illuminates the social nature of bureaucratic practice. Analyzing the everyday speech of bureaucrats in a polyglossic society reveals both their intensely interactive conduct and their recognition that the government they comprise is itself a participant in a social world of institutions and values. My ethnography shows how Taipei city government administrators mobilize ideologies associated with Taiwan’s two primary languages, and stereotypes associated with bureaucracy, to undermine both. Instead, they present themselves as a post-ethnonational and post-bureaucratic avant garde of their new democracy. In doing so, they draw on local values and tropes of legitimation, which place a premium on the personalistic relations and social imbrications of government actors—relations that democracy, for all its potential to spawn dangerous chaos, is seen to facilitate. They represent their government employer not by claiming a superordinate status for it, but by situating it as one participant within a complex of institutions, networks, and values. In illuminating both the internally and the externally social nature of government bureaucracy, I highlight the creative and progressive possibilities hidden within the drab government office.

**Keywords:** bureaucracy, democracy, code-switching, Taiwan

**Introduction**

“We rarely get so many community residents at a meeting,” said the administrator in charge to the packed room, “so we can tell that the residents are very earnest and concerned.” Leaders of the Dáli Street Cultural Association, a community activist group from a poor Taipei neighborhood, sat around the huge table with numerous city government department representatives.¹ The rest of us—around fifteen Cultural Association members—crammed into the narrow passages left around the table or hopped up onto the windowsills. We were there to discuss constructing a parking garage under a neighborhood park.

The administrator’s gentle speaking style and little smile struck me as a bit condescending—a pat on the head from an indulgent teacher. But it turned out I was the only one who felt so. Unlike me, other Cultural Association members already knew Mr. Wei from over a decade of activism, starting with their demand for that neighborhood park—no small request in one of the most densely
populated areas of one of the world’s most densely populated cities.² Their acquaintance continued with subsequent protests, ceremonies, celebrations, and projects, like this parking garage plan, which had already dragged on for five years.³ They had interacted with Mr. Wei at every step on his path to a high position in the Bureau of Urban Development. Every Cultural Association member I talked to afterward agreed: he was forthcoming and easy to get along with (hao xiangchu 好相除, good to encounter), and had great speaking and negotiation skills (koucai 口才, mouth talent). And after all, the point of having so many Cultural Association members there—the point of announcing it at the monthly meeting, of the reminder phone calls, of the group subway trip to City Hall—was to demonstrate the residents’ earnest concern.⁴ Mr. Wei was indicating that the point had been taken.

Not all administrators were so good to encounter. As the Association’s community planner—an urban designer working for minimal pay on government-funded contracts—informally presented his proposal, a young administrator noted in perfect bureaucratese that the planner’s fiscal estimates were idealistic. Insofar as no exact assessment of the projected expenditures necessitated by the parking lot had been provided, the young man’s department would be unable to comment on the proposal at this time. His speech used the sharp side of etiquette: formal, meticulously polite, cutting as a knife. The planner, face reddening, responded in less meticulous tones that parking lots were not his specialty; he was expecting the government’s assistance. The exchange continued for a few more rounds. The administrator got increasingly formal and convoluted; the planner raised his voice, leaning forward slightly as though about to lunge.

Finally, Mr. Wei intervened: “You just need to give us an estimate,” he said to the planner. Without disputing the need for fiscal forthrightness, he minimized the gravity of the situation. “Just call up your colleagues who built that parking lot for National Taiwan University.” Up to this point, the meeting had been entirely in Mandarin. Mr. Wei continued in Mandarin, “You just need to ask them”—and then switched into Taiwanese—“‘How much did it cost?’, that’s all.”⁵ The community planner straightened, lowered his voice, nodded; the younger administrator offered no more comments. Mr. Wei’s code-switching utterance had defused and reoriented the conversation.

Like Mr. Wei’s soft tone and slight smile, his code-switching intervention can inspire different interpretations. Was he expressing ethnic solidarity by slipping into dialect? Using a “strategy of condescension” to disingenuously stoop to the Cultural Association’s level (Bourdieu 1991, 68–69)? What roles and relations
did his code-switch invoke? How did it figure Mr. Wei and the government that employed him?

In this article, I use bilingual exchanges like Mr. Wei’s efficacious utterance as a springboard to explore the complex social life of a Taiwanese bureaucracy: both the internal sociality of its everyday life and its external situation within a wider sphere of institutions, values, and networks. I hope to show that utterances like Mr. Wei’s instantiate an authentic participation in the social networks in which Taiwanese government authority is embedded—a sociality that forms an integral part of the production of legitimated, democratic governance in this environment.

Creative language choices revealed the bureaucrats I worked with working out their new administrative roles and new relations with their publics. In this, I argue, they formed an unexpected avant garde of democratic identity. Indeed, not only interactions with the public, but ‘back-stage’ interactions among bureaucrats were characterized by creative language choices that presented administrators as post-dictatorial professionals at the vanguard of Taiwan’s developing democracy.

My informants’ creative language use illuminates a more human side to bureaucracy than anthropological narratives usually reveal, and hints at a progressive potential within the drab government office. Bureaucrats’ resourceful deployment of existing tropes to fashion new identities and interactional forms also suggests that government bureaucracy is a key site for understanding, as well as constructing, actually existing democracies.

**Bureaucracy, Democracy, and the Taipei Bureau of Urban Development**

Government bureaucracy is a somewhat unusual place to look for democratic vanguards. Bureaucracy has meant things to many people, but it has rarely meant anything good. For some of our most influential thinkers, bureaucracy instantiates the “abdication of [the] human initiative and judgment” necessary for real democratic politics (Pitkin 1998, 79). It dissipates the human ability to stand out into “a kind of no-man rule” (Arendt 1959, 37). On this view, bureaucracy’s “conflation of politics with administration” obviates the possibility of real political participation by subsuming potentially political action under a systematic rationality that precludes human creativity (Honig 1993, 2).

It is possible, however, that bureaucracies, like other social institutions, have no single, transhistorical nature. Rather, they may be products of their time and place—albeit ones that bear some organizational similarities across times and places. As other scholars have suggested, foundational beginnings, agonistic contestation, and the willful shaping of efficiencies and rationalities into political arguments can take place in office buildings as well as anywhere else (Markell
Bureaucracy, in other words, may be not a universally similar fact. Rather, it may be a loosely defined organizational form that, while bearing some similarities across times and places, is also locally integrated and culturally specific.

Much of that specificity rests on the fact that the bureaucratic “official has characteristics as a social being beyond those which the administrative code specifies” (Albrow 1970, 55). Going beyond the merely informal or corrupt, administrators’ unofficial practices can be patterned in ways that form “new elements of the organization” (Blau 1963, 2–3). In other words, the state apparatus “is both a semi-autonomous field and one in which the social properties of state officials and civil servants, which are determined partly outside the state field, play a key role” (Steinmetz 2015, 1).

Until recently much of the best-known anthropological work on bureaucracy did not directly address administrators’ practices or self-understandings. For instance, Michael Herzfeld’s well-known study of bureaucratic indifference draws its data not from actual bureaucrats, but from others’ representations of bureaucrats (1992). *Bureaucrat* appears as a category of person, much like an ethnicity, about which Herzfeld’s informants offer stereotypes. Similarly, Akhil Gupta “attempt[s] to do an ethnography of the state by examining…discourses of corruption,” rather than by examining the practices or self-conceptions of state actors (1995, 375). Bureaucracy is thus often presented as an object of (negative) social commentary, rather than a social field of its own.

The last decade, however, has seen a renewed interest in bureaucrats and their micropractices as objects of ethnographic study (Bernstein and Mertz 2011). Recent scholarship has looked at government policies as social forces that affect both their objects and their creators, and scholars have become increasingly interested in the interpenetration of government bureaucracies and the social worlds in which they function (Shore and Wright 2003; 1997). Studies have shown how documents, information, ideas, and people move through government organizations, creating networks, identities, and values in ways that go beyond Weber’s (1978) foundational ideal type of rational administration (Cabot 2012; Hull 2012; Hoag 2010; Latour 2010).

As Matthew Hull writes, understanding bureaucracy involves “understand[ing] collectivization and individuation as simultaneous functions of the same bureaucratic process, taking neither the agency of the individual nor the organization as given” (2003, 162–63). In a similar way, a bureaucratic agency itself is constituted both by its own internal social relations and by its external
relations to other institutions. These relations make bureaucracy both a particular, separate, field of social activity and integrate it into its social world. Moreover, as Jessica Greenberg notes, a newly democratized state apparatus can offer a site for particularly creative forms of political action (2014). As old political conventions and values are thrown into question with the advent of a new political system, participants may deploy existing tropes in new ways to “change the terms of politics” in ways that remain “socially resonant and historically meaningful” in their particular contexts (7). I build on such work to illuminate how administrators marshal cultural stereotypes to create something new: an agentive, individualized bureaucratic identity that embraces a particular local understanding of democratic legitimacy.

In doing so, I place bureaucracy squarely at the center of democracy—not because bureaucracy is necessarily democratic, of course, but because bureaucracy is necessary to any modern democracy. The Taipei Bureau of Urban Development, where I situate my ethnography, allows for an exploration of the social life of a democratic bureaucracy. As the city’s primary administrators of urban space, Bureau employees regularly interact with numerous publics, as well as with the city legislators who control their budget. They are the objects of public demands and imprecations. They initiate projects that require cooperation from private actors, consultants, and other government agents. And they ameliorate disputes between the City Council and the mayor—disputes that are themselves a recent epiphenomenon of multiparty, democratic elections. Many Bureau administrators are vocally aware of the tension between their popular image as power-hogging tyrants and their everyday practices as implementers of Taiwan’s new governmental system. For all these reasons, Urban Development administrators form an integral part of the development of a specifically Taiwanese democratic bureaucracy.

Of course, the image I present is particular, as any ethnographic image must be. First, the office I describe is located in a city government. Its administrators likely have more regular interaction with broader swaths of the public than those working in the central government, and may be more explicitly beholden to the legislature. At the same time, this city government is closely connected to the national one. Taipei is Taiwan’s political, economic, and population center. The Taipei mayoralty is seen as a stepping stone on the way to national political positions (the last two Presidents were first Taipei mayors), and the city bureaucracy is often a stop along a career path leading to the central government. This makes possible a level of integration beyond what one might expect in countries with a greater number of key cities. That means that the conduct and understandings of city government employees likely have implications beyond the
city government. And in a larger sense, of course, the Taipei municipal
administration forms—both conceptually and organizationally—one part of the
greater social structure that can be broadly described as “the state” (see Martin
2013, 617).

Second, many of the Bureau’s administrators would not claim to represent all
Taiwanese bureaucrats. On the contrary, they often describe themselves as
enthusiastic innovators, in contrast to other bureaucrats in other places and times.
In some sense, this very contrast enabled my ethnography: the fact that the Bureau
leadership allowed a foreign researcher to participate in everyday administrative
activities speaks to its openness. At the same time, given the regular personnel
flow to the central government, these bureaucrats are good candidates for high
status central positions later in their careers. In other words, while they may be
somewhat special, they are neither anomalous nor marginal.

Third, my ethnography reveals a way of bureaucratic being that is situated in the
specific history, culture, and social structure of Taiwan. I would not claim that all
bureaucracies are like the one I describe. But any theorization of bureaucracy
should be able to accommodate the kinds of social relations and values that my
ethnography reveals. I hope that my discussion illuminates some creative
possibilities within bureaucratic action that anthropological accounts often
overlook.

The Politics of Language Choice in Taiwanese Bureaucracies
Mr. Wei’s efficacious utterance, which starts off this article, combined Taiwan’s
two primary languages. Taiwanese, the island’s majority language, is a local
version of the Southern Min dialect spoken in China’s Fujian Province, from
which migrants came to Taiwan from the 17th century until Japan colonized the
island in 1895. After Japanese decolonization following World War II, the
Chinese Nationalist Party, or KMT (Guomindang 國民黨), took possession of the
island, making Mandarin Chinese its official language. With the Communist
victory in mainland China in 1949, an estimated 2 million people, many
associated with the KMT, fled to Taiwan.

Declaring the KMT the legitimate government of mainland China in temporary
exile, government discourse and practice largely ignored the island in favor of the
mainland. For instance, an average of 85% of national expenditures went to
national security in the first fifteen years of KMT rule, leaving little for non-
defensive development (Gold 1986, 69; Huang 2005). The bloody repression of a
1947 uprising, the 1949 institution of martial law, and years of intensive
persecution of local elites cemented an emerging distinction between Taiwanese
and Mainlanders, which continues to be the island’s most salient ethnicized difference (Kerr 1965; Phillips 2003). As state violence receded, the two groups retained different residential patterns and different routes to success, with Taiwanese joining the “traditional” middle class of small-scale entrepreneurs, Mainlanders forming a “new” middle class employed in government and larger businesses, often connected to the KMT (Gates 1981, 273–80; Kuo 2000). The KMT made Mandarin the language of the state and the public sphere, shutting the local population out of positions of power. Schools taught students about the mainland, not about the island (Chun 1996; Heylen 2001), and children were beaten for speaking Taiwanese in school.

The distribution of language and power in the public sphere led to enduring conceptual linkages. In local language ideologies, Mandarin was connected to formal interactions, public and official sites, power, and status; while Taiwanese was linked to intimacy, small business, the home, disempowerment, and lack of status (Berg 1982, 1988; Huang 1988; Kubler 1988, 1985; Young et al. 1992). These conceptual associations remain prevalent in both scholarship and everyday conversation, even as the distribution of both languages and power have changed dramatically.

State agencies started actively hiring Taiwanese people in the late 1970s. This “localization (bentuhua 本土化, this-land-ization)” was part of a long-term political transformation responding to both internal and external pressures. Domestically, the Taiwanese democracy movement became increasingly vocal in the late 1970s and 1980s. Internationally, the United Nations (in 1971) and United States (in 1978) officially recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This withdrawal of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan and the KMT’s claim to the legitimate governance of China put pressure on the KMT government to differentiate itself from the PRC and demonstrate its democratic bona fides. The KMT lifted martial law in 1986-1987. It instituted multiparty popular elections at all levels of government in 1994 and participated in its first peaceful transfer of power, to the previously oppositional Democratic Progressive Party (Minjindang 民進黨), in 2000.

Through all this, democracy activism maintained a significant ethnonationalist aspect. By framing democratization as an ethnonational awakening and a demand for specifically ethnic equality, the movement both built on, and helped solidify, the terms of identity politics (Huang 1995; Rigger 1999).
Members of the emerging opposition often pointedly spoke Taiwanese in public settings, strove to increase people’s awareness of Taiwanese (rather than Chinese) history and culture, and generally tried to reverse the KMT-imposed value hierarchy, which valorized indexes of the mainland, like Mandarin. In keeping with this push, increasing avenues for popular participation in state institutions have gone hand in hand with the promotion of localism as both a goal of, and a legitimating basis for, political action (Bernstein 2006; Chuang 2005; Huang 1995). The history of Taiwan is now taught in schools, and Taiwanese is allowed in all settings, sometimes taught in schools, and often used in political proceedings. Indeed, any politician worth her salt must now be able to give at least a snippet of a speech in Taiwanese, lest she be accused of harboring a martial law mentality or “not loving Taiwan (bu ai Taiwan 不愛台灣).”

Decades of intermarriage and cohabitation, common education, and the integration of Taiwanese language into popular culture and Taiwanese people into government have left most of the country effectively bilingual. In my fieldwork, even Mandarin speakers who described themselves as incapable of speaking Taiwanese could communicate in it when called upon to do so. While ethnic background once structured educational and career opportunities, my interlocutors increasingly connected each language to particular activities more than particular ethnicities.

Language ability was thus generally seen as fluid, something one could develop rather than something one was stuck with. For instance, a Mainlander friend who had spent her adult life working in a big company where she spoke only her native Mandarin started to learn Taiwanese when she left her job to open her own pub. She had joined the ranks of small entrepreneurs, which made speaking Taiwanese appropriate. In this sense, Mandarin and Taiwanese may be in the process of becoming registers rather than dialects (Irvine 2001)—connected to social roles more than to ethnic identities.

The democracy movement fought structural inequalities between Taiwanese and Mainlanders; its success largely eliminated them. The unequal, repressive situation that formed the backdrop to calls for ethnonational awakening and empowerment has largely disappeared, replaced by ongoing debate about origins, traditions, and political definitions that increasingly focuses not on ethnicized distinctions at home, but on Taiwan’s seemingly irresolvable relationship to mainland China. Linguistically, this process has given rise to an everyday life where people habitually utilize a range of expressive possibilities.
Anthropologists often look for what Susan Gal calls “unauthorized vernacular forms” that “enact values...[that] oppos[e] the dominant value” (1987, 638). But, in Taiwan’s case, rather than inverting the old value hierarchy and placing Taiwanese in an authoritative position over Mandarin, the country’s ongoing political transformation has resulted in a diffusion of authoritative values. That makes it difficult to assign languages clear positions in a political economy. Taiwan’s linguistic arena is now characterized by the absence of a clear hierarchy through which to define “unauthorized,” as against “dominant,” forms.

In the city government, for instance, functional bilingualism is both a widespread fact and effectively a job requirement. To pass the civil service exams and enter government employment, an applicant must have excellent Mandarin; Taiwanese is not technically required for government employment. But an inability to speak Taiwanese well is considered a professional impediment, because administrators are expected to accommodate the preferences of their non-governmental interlocutors with respect to Mandarin and Taiwanese.¹⁷

Some commentators have felt that Taiwan’s polyglossia “constantly creates the problem of what code to choose” (Berg 1988, 253). But my interlocutors seemed to see not problems, but opportunities, in the range of expressive options available to them (Gal 2011; Woolard 1999; Bakhtin 1982). The combination of universal bilingualism with a shared history of the politicization of language also made language choice a key site for the construction of political identity.¹⁸

Social Life in a Bureaucracy
Like other parts of Taipei City Hall, the Bureau of Urban Development is usually abuzz. Administrators gather around desks and lean over the low barrier that separates the walkway from the office area to chat. Other people butt in good-naturedly, calling out questions, information, and playful insults across the open office space. There is almost constant over-the-barrier and across-the-room chatter. Every few weeks a colleague comes around to distribute little cakes—customary presents given by people who just got engaged, are about to get married, or have recently had a child (Adrian 2003; Wolf 1968). Such people are invariably subjected to teasing on the subject of their good fortune, usually followed by discussions of party venues, daycare options, the changing role of the daughter-in-law in Taiwanese society, or other relevant topics.

Other factors enhance office social integration. Many administrators graduate from a small number of feeder schools.¹⁹ These graduates often know, or know of, one another long before they come to the city government. Common school background carries great significance in Taiwan, where graduates of the same
department refer to and sometimes even address one another with modified
kinship terms, and classmates are generally presumed to have close relations.
New hires enter a flurry of social activity as their sub-section head, section head, 
graduates of their university department, and other connected coworkers take
turns inviting them out for lunch with groups of colleagues.

Most administrators are, in other words, visible and audible; and they tend to
know one another’s business. Groups of current and former coworkers sing
karaoke together, go hiking together, know one another’s families, visit each other
on holidays. This is not exceptional. As my interlocutors across socio-economic
and educational groups confirmed, the interpenetration of social and professional
lives is both widespread and assumed in Taiwan. In other words, administrators
are not friends because they form an elite class, but because they are coworkers,
and coworkers, generally speaking, tend to be friends. The “backstage,” internal
social life of this bureaucracy was thus highly active.

In addition, administrators were visible and audible not just to one another, but
also to members of the general public who came to the office looking for help.
The Bureau of Urban Development was not designed for such interaction. It has
no general reception area; its secretaries do not look up inquiringly when someone
enters; there is no indication of which administrator works on which project. But
members of the public find their way there all the time, stopping someone in the
hall or sticking their heads over a barrier, calling out a question to whoever looks
up. Thus they go from answer to answer until they find someone with relevant
information, who will typically interrupt whatever he or she is doing to help them.

Social life in the Bureau of Urban Development, in other words, is packed.
Moreover, administrators actively participate in the society they regulate. They
are subject to the same trends, witness the same stereotypes, and hold the same
widely shared social values as their nongovernmental neighbors. Administrators
often took their constant interaction with one another and the public as
opportunities for creative self-presentation, using language tropes and the
stereotypes associated with them to fashion administrative identities that rejected
those very stereotypes. Such usages also drew on multiple, simultaneous arenas of
institutional belonging, presenting administrators as not only government actors
but as participants in a variety of social relations and institutions that endure over
time. Acknowledging, even valorizing, both their professional status and their
multiple institutional belonging was central to these administrators’ self-
construction as the nation’s new, democratic bureaucrats.

Post-Ethnonational Identities of Post-Bureaucratic Bureaucrats
The city administrators I worked with identified the return of popular mayoral elections to Taipei in 1994 as the turning point for their profession (Bernstein 2008, 944).23 As an appointed official, one section head explained, “you don’t care whether [the public] supports you,”24 but those who “depend on the public for votes…have to listen to it.”25

Mr. An, an administrator working on urban renewal in the Dali Street area, contrasted the two eras. Instead of staying in the office, Mr. An would stop by neighborhood gathering places—the benches around the local temple, the rice store, and the little triangle of trees next to the power station—to chat with people. This would not have been possible before elected mayors. “Before, the government decided for itself what people wanted: ‘The government has given you park, what else do you want?’ But we discovered that a lot of times, we’d put in a park and then nobody would use it. Because we hadn’t asked people . . . what they wanted from a park.” Although Mr. An was also the object of the Dali Street Cultural Association’s demands, both he and Cultural Association members told me that neighborhood residents went to his wedding,26 and that after he had a child, some Dali Street “community moms (shequ mama 社區媽媽)” made him youfan (油飯, oily rice), the traditional dish celebrating a son’s first month of life. Fellow administrators in the Bureau’s central office also spoke with admiration of Mr. An’s work: he was described as a key figure in the revitalization of the city’s old, poor, crowded core.

Note how the public’s relations with bureaucratic administration are figured in Mr. An’s description. While martial law separates state from society, democracy opens up the possibility of greater personal relations with the objects of regulation. Through this increasing interaction with specific publics, the administrator becomes implicated in new relationships that co-exist with his obligations and loyalty to the government.

Within some conceptions of democratic values, such close relationships between bureaucrats and regulated parties could be described as corruption or capture.27 But people I talked to in Taiwan—not just activists and administrators, but also teachers, entrepreneurs, academics, office workers, culture industry participants, and other acquaintances—never described these things in that way.28 The increased connection of administrators with administered was universally described in positive terms. It enhanced the government’s claim to legitimate power and ameliorated the potentially chaotic effects of democratic pluralism.29

As Jeffrey Martin has written, “Taiwan’s historical transition to democracy valorized the cultural trope of particularism”—that is, biographically specific
individual relations—“as a defining quality of legitimate force” (2012, 639). Rather than corrupting or capturing Mr. An, his close social relations with the people under his regulatory purview enhanced his ability to perform the Janus-faced role of every administrator: representing his government to its people and his people to their government.

Administrators were also attuned to the reputations they had to live down. My coworkers compared our department favorably to departments in other cities and other times, whose administrators were said to be more “bureaucratic (guanliao 官僚),” meaning lazy, obstructionist, and hierarchical; more “hard (ying 硬),” meaning nit-picky and legalistic; and more “traditional (chuantong 傳統),” meaning corrupt. The need to show the public that the department had moved beyond these martial-law era traits came up regularly in discussions of policy implementation, which was universally understood to require negotiation and consensus-creation (Bernstein 2008).

For instance, Mr. Ke, a section head, explained how he had convinced a particularly intransigent group of land-owners to negotiate about re-zoning their area: “Bureaucrats all used to take money, want to eat, want to drink,” he explained. When he and a subordinate first met with these landowners, “they invited us to eat—we ate simple lunch boxes. They invited us to drink—we drank water. Do you know how moved they were? They’d never seen bureaucrats like us. So after that they felt bad fighting with us.”

Choosing a brown-bag lunch with water over a banquet with alcohol differentiated these administrators from their martial law predecessors in ways that made negotiation, and therefore policy implementation, possible.

Stereotypes also fed the pool of inspiration for the office’s ubiquitous self-mocking humor. After shadowing one gregarious, devoted administrator for several days, I asked him how it felt to be free of me. “I’ve already cussed out a bunch of the public,” he replied gleefully, as though it were only my presence that had inhibited his normal bureaucratic arrogance. Another time, when I expressed surprise that my coworkers did not know the English word “bribe,” one administrator replied with mock-gravity, in English, “That is because when we take bribes, we do not speak English.” The negative attributes commonly attributed to bureaucrats were thus ever-present as a point of contrast: something to define oneself in opposition to, something to riff off in service of a joke.

Within this context, the universal availability of both languages, and the widely held language ideology linking Mandarin with officialness and Taiwanese with intimacy, gave administrators a flexible tool for nuanced self-expression through which to contrast themselves with undesirable stereotypes. It allowed for
moments of personal, interlocutor-specific footing in otherwise standard interactions, as when a senior official chairing a meeting called out to a late-comer in Taiwanese, “Come come come, sit here, sit here!” without appearing to interrupt a participant who was addressing her in Mandarin. This bilingual biplay (Goffman 1981)—side conversations not perceived to interrupt the primary goings-on—allowed her to simultaneously occupy a position of formality (with respect to the administrator speaking Mandarin) and of informality (with respect to the late-comer). Similarly, administrators often called others to shared office telephones using Taiwanese nicknames, acknowledging one another’s everyday selves even as they conducted government business.

Administrators also often used different languages to contrast causes or initial events with effects or subsequent events in ways that highlighted distinctions between the speaker and others. For instance, Ms. Gu, a mid-level administrator, delivered a diatribe to some coworkers about administrators from another department. It’s not that they had worse training, she explained in Mandarin, it’s just that they didn’t think broadly or comprehensively: “If you say one, they can’t say two.” They were used to simply doing what they are told. She started in Mandarin: “If the [supervisor] isn’t there, the project just…” then concluded in Taiwanese, “goes on by itself.” Back to Mandarin: “There’s no change, and then it just” concluding in Taiwanese, “dies.” In this typical codeswitch pattern, one language emphasized the results of conditions expressed in the other.

Ms. Gu was herself a native Taiwanese speaker who spoke a highly Taiwanese-inflected Mandarin. Yet in this example, she presented the undesired result—projects running rudderless into the ground—in Taiwanese. The Mandarin-Taiwanese contrast, in other words, did not express her sense of ethnic differentiation from the people she described. It expressed a professional distance between her breed of active, thoughtful bureaucrat and those who conformed to negative stereotypes. Ms. Gu wrapped up her diatribe by using this same resultative code-switch for a modest proposal that drew uproarious laughter: “First,” in formal, pretentiously correct Mandarin, “send out invitations and officially invite everyone to come [to a meeting], well and then...,” in Taiwanese, “kill them all.”

To similar effect, administrators used code switches to contrast their own narrated speech from that of others in the narration. For instance, Chuanzong, a low-level administrator tasked with ensuring that another department received some money that had mistakenly been sent to Urban Development, recounted his experience to colleagues. He began in Mandarin: “I contacted the accountant, asked how to fix (this),” Framing the accountant’s response in Mandarin, “Well the accountant
said,” Chuanzong then switched to Taiwanese to voice that response: “Well I don’t know.” He returned to Mandarin for indirect reported speech— “[The accountant] told me to contact the section head”— and again framed the speech in Mandarin, “Well the section head said,” but again gave the direct reported speech in Taiwanese, “Well I don’t know.” Chuanzong continued with this contrastive style throughout his narration of his long (and increasingly loud) telephone conversation, during which he had been transferred up and down a department whose employees seemed bafflingly uninterested in recovering its money. He used Mandarin for his own narrative and utterances; Taiwanese for the utterances of his interlocutors.

Chuanzong used the contrast between Mandarin and Taiwanese as a metapragmatic framing device, a quotation mark setting off others’ utterances from his own voice. Far from an iconic representation, this was a stylistic choice: in fact, his interlocutors had also spoken Mandarin. The contrast between the languages gave him an understood, but unstated, way to distinguish himself from the kind of bureaucrats he had found on the other end of the line: people who did not care about getting things done but only wanted to make complications go away. Chuanzong did not draw on associations of Mandarin with formality and Taiwanese with informality; his particular frustration did not revolve around that contrast. Rather, his language choice allowed for a lively narrative style that distinguished between different kinds of equally formal behavior, highlighting the absurdity of the situation in a way his chuckling audience clearly appreciated.

The availability of different languages and stereotypes gave administrators a way to enact differentiated personalities that exceeded their job descriptions, allowing them to occupy variegated social roles. For instance, one rather serious male administrator once asked his colleague a perfectly normal question: “When is your meeting?” But he did so using a sing-song voice, with a slow cadence and exaggerated tones, perfectly mimicking a style associated with children, cartoons, and *sajiao* 撒娇—a hyper-feminized, pouty affectation popular among young women speaking to intimates (example 1). His addressee, a jolly father of two, imitated his little-girl cuteness in response. The meeting set for that afternoon had been rescheduled for the following day. But to make the first line of his response rhyme with the first line of the question, he made it comically ungrammatical—though still perfectly comprehensible (example 2).

1. A-cho! A-cho!  
   [Taiwanese-derived nickname]  
   Li siammi sizun beh khuihoe?
You what time will meet?

“A-cho! A-cho! When is your meeting?”

2. E-bo! E-bo!
   Afternoon! Afternoon!

   Bo khuihoe ah, minachai chia u.
   no meet PERF, tomorrow only have.

“In the afternoon! In the afternoon!
There’s no meeting anymore, not until tomorrow.”

These speakers subtly manipulated everyday office interactions to show that they were youthful, lively, popularly-cultured guys, not reducible to interchangeable cogs in a bureaucratic machine. Administrators often slipped into this kind of play-acting, which drew on the (often televursively) idealized speech forms of children and intimate relationships and invoked the informality associated with Taiwanese. But more than that, it drew participants into a mutually constructed scene, an interlocutor-specific interactional alternative to the conventional information exchange that office life often necessitates. Administrators thus mobilized commonly recognized stereotypes to present themselves—and to recognize one another—as individuals who exceeded stereotypes.

In contrast to the monologic drone often attributed to government employees (Errington 1995), administrators in the Taipei city government creatively used language contrast and stereotypy as tools for constructing new ways of being appropriate to their new government. Popular language ideologies continue to associate Mandarin with formality and the state, Taiwanese with informality and the intimate. Administrators drew on these associations to inject formal, governmental situations with elements of intimacy and individuality, using the stereotypes of language ideology to undermine stereotypes of haughty, distant, and corrupt bureaucrats. Their use of expectations, jokes, biplay, and role play instantiated their common construction of what might be called a post-bureaucratic professional identity, which would balance their role in the bureaucracy with their membership in a democracy, and incorporate the densely social, intensely personal, nature of bureaucratic life.

**Language Choice and Multiple Network Construction**

The codeswitching styles described above valorized both administrators’ professionalism and their embeddedness in institutions, networks, and relations
that exceeded the city government. Such codeswitching intimacies, moreover, were not reserved for “back-stage” relations among administrators. They extended to “on-stage” interactions with the public. In this context, government action acknowledged as legitimate by both participants and broader publics did not eschew personalistic relations; it depended upon them. It was through developing long-term affective relations with residents that Mr. An gained the trust of local activists and urban administrators alike. It was by demonstrating his heartfelt earnestness and uprightness that Mr. Ke—the section head who refused banquets and alcohol—brought local landlords to the negotiating table. And it was in enacting multi-directional solidarity that Mr. Wei managed the conflict that started off this article.

I want to return to Mr. Wei’s codeswitch now, to consider the different interpretations it gives rise to and their implications for the position of city government bureaucrats within their larger social surround. Recall that Mr. Wei said in Mandarin, “You just need to give us an estimate. Just call up your colleagues who built that parking lot for National Taiwan University and ask them. You just need to ask them,” and here he switched into Taiwanese: “‘How much did it cost?’ that’s all.”

By describing the situation in Mandarin but giving an imaginary quotation in Taiwanese, Mr. Wei used the common trope, described above, of framing hypothetical speech in one language and then voicing it in another. He minimized the issue’s importance by using “just (zhi 只)” (“You just need to say to them”). And he summed up the situation with “soah soah khi (that’s all),” an expression that appears at the end of a suggestion to convey an easy finality to a potentially difficult decision. It has a similar emotional impact, though a different grammatical role, as American English “forget about it,” or “who cares.” Although not slang, it is usually used among familiars. In the typical codeswitching pattern described above, Mr. Wei might have used Taiwanese to report the community planner’s imagined speech, then expressed his own evaluation that this was not a big deal with the parallel Mandarin term “suanle 算了.” Instead, he stayed in Taiwanese, completing one of the very few non-Mandarin utterances used in the meeting.

One traditional way to explain the efficacy of Mr. Wei’s utterance looks to the ethnic associations of the languages at use. Local language ideologies continue to link Mandarin to Mainlanders, and Taiwanese language to ethnically Taiwanese people (Tu 1996). Perhaps Mr. Wei was expressing ethnic solidarity with his interlocutors. In reality, though, not only Mr. Wei and the community planner were ethnically Taiwanese native speakers of Taiwanese. So was almost everyone
other in the room, including most of the administrators. Mr. Wei’s intervention is thus difficult to read as invoking ethnicized groupness.

From another perspective, Mr. Wei’s dip into Taiwanese recalls Bourdieu’s dialect-speaking Béarnais mayor. In what Bourdieu calls a “strategy of condescension,” the mayor appears to temporarily abdicate his authoritative position by deigning to use the local dialect in a speech (1991, 68–69). Garnering public praise for using the dialect instead of standard French, the mayor sneakily enhances his position by appearing to degrade it: using the dialect, after all, does not change the fact of the mayor’s power or his role as representative of the very authority that renders French standard.

As Bourdieu notes, the efficaciousness of a strategy of condescension depends on institutional conditions: a strategy of condescension requires a position of superiority from which to condescend. This is, indeed, how the speech of government employees is often presented (Errington 1995): they animate government utterances unto their passively receiving, if resentful, populace. And if Mr. Wei’s speech primarily indexed participants’ relative positions within the bureaucracy, then his use of the non-official language in an official setting would fit the bill perfectly. Deputy Chief Engineer Wei had by far the highest bureaucratic status of anyone in the room. His codeswitch appeared to bring him closer to people outside—and implicitly below—the bureaucratic hierarchy, gracing them with the legitimation vested in him to convey while maintaining his authority over them, even sneakily enhancing it by enforcing a much-valued consensus.

Yet it is not obvious that these administrators held the kind of institutional power that would give them a secure place from which to condescend. My coworkers never talked about simply enforcing the law or implementing government policy. Through expressions of earnest concern, frequent social interactions, and practical demonstrations of solidarity, they put considerable effort into convincing people that the government they represented was worthy of their respect and cooperation (Bernstein 2008). This reciprocal dependence of government institutions and civil society groups is not unique: as Patchen Markell has written, the unidirectional flow of speech and recognition is one way that state institutions appear to set the terms of recognition in ways that obscure the state’s own reciprocal need for recognition from the people under its purview (2003, 30).

In Taiwan’s new democratic order, civil society groups do depend on the government for recognition and funding. But they also exert influence through things like organized demands bolstered by a decades-long rhetoric valorizing the
“local” (Chuang 2004, 2005; Huang 2005) and a vibrant, ongoing discussion of the nature of democracy, all bolstered by savvy media use. Moreover, as discussed above, long-term, affective, interpersonal relations lay at the heart of legitimated government authority. From this perspective, Mr. Wei’s speech indexed not a predictable institutional power over extra-institutional actors, but a larger social sphere that incorporates the state as one of a number of institutions striving for validation. In that sense, one might see Mr. Wei’s speech as a strategy, not of condescension, but of legitimation.

Moreover, the bureaucratic hierarchy in which Mr. Wei held a high position was not the only politically efficacious power in the room. The Dali Street Cultural Association had succeeded in pushing through many of its demands upon the city government. Part of this success came from the group’s ability to mobilize broad social networks. Despite their low socioeconomic status, residents—like many people—were closely tied to elected government officials. In Taiwan’s highly personalistic electoral system, individual voters are often connected to both municipal and national representatives by relatively short chains of personal relations often mediated through thiaw-ah kha, a Taiwanese word meaning “support post.” These vote gatherers use affective relations and skillful speech (as well as, sometimes, monetary incentives) to persuade others to vote for their candidates (Lin 1996; Moon 1998; Rigger 1999).

Several Cultural Association members had close relations with city and national legislators. At least one member acted as a vote gatherer for an active, well-known city councilor. By the logic of the power of the purse—the city council sets the city administration’s budget—this translated into a certain influence on the city government. Moreover, one of the country’s three main newspapers is headquartered in the neighborhood, giving the Cultural Association a reliable media platform.

Such social skills and ties, reminiscent of those required of small-scale entrepreneurs (Greenhalgh 1984, 1995; Hamilton and Kao 1990), are crucial for political activists in Taiwan’s highly personalized political world (Chuang 2004, 2005; Weller 1999). It is widely agreed both within and without the city government, for instance, that the Cultural Association played an important part in defeating then-mayor Chen Shui-bian’s reelection bid in 1998. The neighborhood leaned heavily toward Chen’s party, the DPP. But when the KMT candidate, Ma Ying-jeou, showed more interest in the Cultural Association’s plans, members encouraged other residents to vote for him instead, and he carried the otherwise reliably DPP neighborhood. As one Cultural Association member told me with a chuckle, “We’re very famous in the city government.”
Acknowledging these multiple paths to power opens another vantage on Mr. Wei’s Taiwanese codeswitch, which indexed his position in a social world populated by people with different forms of, and routes to, sociopolitical efficacy. As much as his use of Taiwanese may have served to enhance his power through condescension, it also acknowledged that his was not the only power in the room. Perhaps more than condescension, then, it was a strategy of concession.

This meeting, moreover, was merely one step in a long dance. Cultural Association members had gotten to know Mr. Wei over years of engagement with the city government. While his administrative position had changed several times, his personality was seen as stable. He was known as a sympathetic, helpful person in a cultural context where formal, rule-bound, standardized relationships are less valued than informal, customary, and particularized ones (Martin 2013; Winn 1994). Mr. Wei’s authority rested, then, partly on acquaintance, biographic background, and individual personality traits.

When Mr. Wei summed up his suggestion with the no-big-deal modal Taiwanese “soah soah khi (that’s all),” he negated the younger administrator’s suggestion that the discussion could not go forward, disrupting his unyielding (ying) and bureaucratic (guanliao) performance. He invoked instead an ethical universe with values focused not on legality or accuracy, but on mutual aid and its concomitant mutual obligation—sentiments seen as properly characterizing long-term relationships of all sorts in Taiwan (Martin 2007; Deglopper 1995). Making good on his positive reputation, Mr. Wei might be described as bolstering his ability to enact his individual self in a government-based interaction through a strategy of individuation.

Condescension, legitimation, concession, individuation: all are plausible readings of the import of Mr. Wei’s Taiwanese use. And they may all have a place in his single utterance. The complex matrix of interactive institutions, social values, and personal relationships within which Mr. Wei spoke undermines any claim to a single correct interpretation. As a city administrator, he represented the government charged with managing his interlocutors at the same time as he needed their cooperation, was subject to their power, and was embedded in long-term personal relationships with them. Mr. Wei’s utterance thus indexed multiple, related constellations of social roles and relationships. These included, at the least, the nexus of city administrative units charged with managing both the spaces of the city and the relations of the city’s people with its government; his own self-presentation as a helpful and approachable administrator; the widespread social
ideal of consensus; and his personal ongoing relations with Dali Street neighborhood residents.

In short, his utterance presented him not as a unidimensional bureaucrat but as a multidimensional individual embedded in numerous institutions and interpersonal relations at the same time. Far from imposing a single import on his words, his bureaucratic position implicated him in multiple subject positions that lend his speech an intrinsic multivalence. This multivalent, social, and affective self-presentation, I have argued, is a hallmark of Taipei administrators’ developing identity as democratic bureaucrats.

Conclusions and Implications
Using the lens of codeswitching and other forms of bureaucratic speech, I have presented Taipei administrators as self-consciously embedded in multiple sociopolitical institutions and networks. I show how they creatively invoke interpersonal relationships, longstanding values and loyalties, and cultural understandings and stereotypes to construct an emerging identity of a bureaucrat suited to a specifically Taiwanese democracy.

My interlocutors drew on language ideologies and common stereotypes, as well as a little noted local tendency to connect languages to situations rather than to ethnicities. They deployed these tools to distance themselves from common negative images of administrators as hard, bureaucratic, and traditional—that is, legalistic, hierarchical, and corrupt—presenting themselves instead as flexible, personable, and earnest. Language use and language choice, I have claimed, provides a particularly fruitful lens through which to view these processes because of the deep imbrication of political rule and political ideology with language use over Taiwan’s last century.

The way that community activists, landowners, and other sometimes contentious interlocutors reacted to such displays indicates that such self-presentation was often successful. Lacking the martial law-era ability to simply impose policy upon a passive public, these administrators were often effective at a more complex, democratic style of authority: they forged long-term interpersonal relations with the private parties under their purview, enticing and cajoling them into negotiating over local projects and government initiatives. Internally, they supported one another in constructing post-bureaucratic professional identities that reflected values they shared with their publics.

As I have suggested, the particular kind of bureaucratic identity I found in Taipei City Hall departed in important ways from the Weberian ideal-type and many
scholarly presentations. Neither government employees nor publics, for instance, viewed the proper role of administrators as defined by their job descriptions. Nor did anyone suggest that administrators were, or should be, interchangeable based on their institutional positions. On the contrary, personal characteristics and personalistic relationships were central aspects of how administrators were able to get things done; and they were explicitly valued by both bureaucrats and the people they administered.

Relatedly, the idea that administrators should owe exclusive loyalty to the government that employed them was discursively tied to a martial law-era approach to governance. Democratized city bureaucrats, in contrast, were assumed to be, and supposed to be, embedded in multiple social spheres that shared claims on their sense of obligation. In this sense, the Taipei bureaucrats I worked with were adjusting to emerging ideas of government legitimacy based squarely in Taiwan’s particular history of democratization.

In his synthesis of research on modernist knowledge production, James Scott (1998) explains how state bureaucracies often simplify the matters they oversee, making them more manageable in the short run by obscuring key factors that ultimately defeat management. By unpacking bureaucrats’ complex speech choices, I have tried to avoid simplifying bureaucracy itself. I treat government employees as complexly motivated individuals implicated in multiple institutional roles and social relations. I present their language choices as more than merely assertions of ethnic identity. Although ethnic identity is a highly salient form of institutional belonging, it does not suffice to explain the common linguistic choices of Taipei administrators: that requires a more complex description that is populated by more participants. Relatedly, bureaucratic speech is easy to present as a statement of governments’ superiority over other social institutions. Yet, again, this highly visible form of belonging does not explain administrators’ actual, complex and creative, language choices.

Instead of looking for one central synapse that would express governmental power and explain administrators’ language choices, I suggest that understanding the situations I present requires viewing these bureaucrats as self-consciously embedded in multiple, interacting, social spheres. This complicated, multi-perspectival view, I argue, has benefits for the study of bureaucracy. It allows for an analysis of government action that does not rely on categories created, or recognized, by that very government. For instance, it does not peg an understanding of language choice on politicized categories of ethnicized belonging. Rather, it allows us to see how these categories are mobilized at some times, undermined at others. And it encourages us remain attentive to the
situations where such categories recede in relevance or become fuzzy around the edges.

Relatedly, it presents government bureaucracy, much like other social institutions, as simultaneously a fully integrated part of society, and a recognizable sphere of action and relation that is somewhat distinct. In that sense, this multi-perspectival approach helps us situate bureaucracy as an always localized phenomenon: a loose organizational form that maintains certain similarities over times and places, but that is always also situated within, and reflective of, very particular sociocultural contexts and historical trajectories, with their attendant values, beliefs, and practices.

Perhaps most satisfyingly, my approach allows us to see, and relate to, bureaucrats as full participants in their society, illuminating the possibility of creative and progressive action even within the seemingly drabbest and dehumanized settings. I would not claim that all bureaucracies resemble the one I worked in. But I hope I have shown that a complete understanding of bureaucracy must be able to accommodate the patterns I describe as a potential, not anomalous, aspect of bureaucratic functioning.

Notes
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1 This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork. I spent roughly one year living in the Dali Street neighborhood and working, and socializing, with Dali Street Cultural Association members. I then spent roughly nine months working with administrators in the Taipei City Government Bureau of Urban Development. For the first three of those months, I undertook interviews and conversations with administrators at the Bureau’s urban renewal office outpost near Dali Street. I then spent six months in the Bureau’s central City Hall office, where I worked.
full-time, on a volunteer basis, as the department’s English language consultant. I spent my days interacting with administrators. I talked with them; sat in on their meetings with other government employees, consultants, and members of the public; and accompanied them on inspections, off-site meetings, lunch outings, weekend hikes, relaxed dinners, and other activities. I observed hundreds of meetings and less formal interactions, and had hundreds of conversations with administrators from across the Bureau, as well as from other departments. I also recorded roughly thirty hours of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with administrators at every level of the organization, from Bureau head to low-level functionary. Like many ethnographers, though, I found that my primary material came not from interviews, which record the stories people told when asked to tell stories. Rather, I got the most from the off-hand remarks, unreflective answers, and real-time commentaries—to me and to others—that characterize the Bureau’s lively social life. Except for an English language practice lunch I headed a few times, all these interactions took place in some combination of Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese. (Like other educated Taiwanese speakers, administrators also occasionally interject English words into Chinese speech.) I render Mandarin quotations in pinyin transliteration with Chinese characters; Taiwanese quotations in Missionary Romanization with no characters (Taiwanese does not have
standardized characters). Where I do not have exact wording, I give the gist of an utterance in English translation only. I use pseudonyms for my interlocutors.

2 Taipei’s official population density hovers above 9,500 people per square kilometer. (For comparison, New York City houses roughly 1,800 people per square kilometer). Because almost a third of the city’s area comprises a national park, and because many migrants do not change their official registration to Taipei when they move from other parts of Taiwan, the lived density is even higher.

3 For more on this neighborhood and its Cultural Association, see Bernstein (2006); Chen (2002); Chen (2000).

4 For more on the importance of earnest concern to political action in Taiwan, see Bernstein (2006); Martin (2007).

5 “Ni zhiyao gen ta jiang 你只要跟他講, ‘Ying guache chi?’, soahsoahkhi.”

6 For social etymologies that survey the term’s range of meanings, see Albrow (1970) and Kafka (2012). Another Kafka ([1925] 1998a; [1926] 1998b), of course, provides some of our most enduring images of bureaucracy.

mechanistic, predictable organization subsuming the characteristics of individuals.

8 For the importance of cooperation and consensus to political action in Taiwan, see Bernstein (2008). In a related vein, Jeffrey Martin describes one aspect of political legitimation in Taiwan as “self-consciously…organized by values of intimate solidarity defined in explicit opposition to abstract legal principles” (2013, 616). Martin found this intimate legitimation in the context of police authority; I found something similar among administrators.

9 This language is sometimes known as Taiyü 台語 or Taiwanhua 台灣話 (Taiwanese language), sometimes as Minnyü 閩南語 (Southern Min language). A speaker’s choice of what to call the language itself can suggest political opinions with respect to Taiwan’s relationship to mainland China. For instance, calling the local language Southern Min can signal the view that Taiwan is, politically or culturally, a part of China, while calling it Taiwanese can indicate the attribution of cultural uniqueness and independence to the island. Similarly, whether Taiwanese is a “language” or a “dialect” is a politically fraught issue. For more on Taiwan’s colonial history, see Ka (1995); Myers and Peattie (1984).

10 Mandarin is usually called Guoyü 國語 (national language), and sometimes Huayü 華語 (Chinese language). It is mutually incomprehensible with Taiwanese. Mandarin on Taiwan has some local characteristics, but it is very similar to
Mandarin on mainland China (Putonghua 普通話, common language), and the two are completely mutually comprehensible.

11 Those who came with the KMT and their descendants are often called “Mainlanders” in English, Waishengren 外省人 (outside-the-province people) in Mandarin. Descendants of pre-1895 migrants are often called “Taiwanese” in English, Benshengren 本省人 (this-province people) in Mandarin. The latter group comprise 84%-85.5% of the island’s population. This includes both people whose ancestors came from Fujian Province and the Hakka, a Chinese minority from provinces other than Fujian that is treated as a distinguishable subset of the “local (bentu 本土, this land),” non-Mainlander population. Hakka make up 10%-12% of the population; Mainlanders 13%-14%; and indigenous people 1.7%-2% (GIO 2003; Huang 1988).

12 Studies of language distribution and language ideology on Taiwan often suffer from what Judith Irvine has identified as a propensity to rely on concepts such as “social evaluation, attitudes, scales of prestige, …schemes of values, [and]…social identity…as if they could be taken as obvious… [and] needed no independent investigation” (2001, 24).

13 This process, seen as an effort to head off mass disaffection, did not prevent regime change, but probably contributed to the continuing legitimacy of the KMT after democratization (Chun 2000).
I should note that my fieldwork, and most of my time, was spent in Taipei, which is known to be a heavily Mandarin-speaking area. In the south, many more people speak Taiwanese as a primary language. But in my experience many such people, also, can function in Mandarin if they need to.

This equanimous attitude toward language acquisition fits with Taiwan’s generally multilingual culture. Many people are themselves functionally bilingual, and probably everyone knows some people who know more than two languages well—common options are English, Japanese, and Hakka. More people yet know some of these languages to some lesser extent. The Taiwanese internet, for instance, is chock full of puns involving various combinations of Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, and English, written in combinations of Chinese characters, Japanese syllables, Roman letters, Mandarin Phonetic Symbols, and numbers.

For more on the relation of internal and external identity in Taiwan, see Allen (2005); Corcuffe (2002); Chun (2000; 1996); Bosco (1994).

This expectation does not extend to Hakka or the surviving indigenous languages.

To be clear, I do not claim that codeswitching is a sign of democracy in itself. Rather, it provides an avenue for the construction of democratic identities in Taiwan’s particular sociopolitical trajectory. It is a tool available to people in Taiwan, which my interlocutors in the city government used in a particular way.
Many administrators are trained at National Taiwan University’s Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, known for Marxist theoretical innovation and qualitative analysis, or at National Cheng-Kung University’s Department of Urban Planning, known for rigorous practical training and quantitative approaches.

These terms combine the word for study, “xue 學,” with regular sibling terms, which specify gender and birth order, to indicate relative graduation order (e.g., “xuedi 學弟, younger brother in study”). Classmates are “tongxue 同學, together-students.”

For instance, my landlady got nervous when a “friend (pengyou 朋友)” planned to stay with me, but when I mentioned that this friend was a college “classmate (tongxue 同學),” she readily agreed—a classmate, she made clear, was a different story than a mere friend.

In contrast, the first floor of City Hall holds a series of desks staffed by employees from each city department who handle common administrative tasks.

Taipei had had elected mayors from 1947 until 1967, when the central government began appointing mayors after a non-KMT candidate won a second term (Rigger 1999, 2001).

“Ta zhibuzhichi ni buguan 他支不支持你不管.”

“kao minzhong de xuanpiao 靠民眾的選票…yao ting tade 要聽他的.”
Taiwanese weddings are huge affairs funded largely through monetary gifts from guests, and invitations are distributed broadly. Showing up is a way of supporting the couple’s their social status.

For an overview and critique of the concept of capture, see Novak (2013).

This attitude is likely not unique to Taiwan; Robert Kagan (2001) explains that the American view of cooperation and capture in the administrative state is anomalous (and inefficient).

Someone from every social group I came in contact with in Taiwan told me that Taiwan was “too democratic (tai minzhu 太民主).” When pressed, people would generally explain this statement with references to a loss of consensus (gongshi 共識) on public issues—a consensus those same people often admitted had been created through force under martial law—and a breakdown of social norms. As one activist put it when I asked her what she meant by it, “[People] even cuss out the President (Dou ma zongtong ah 都罵總統啊)!”

“Yiqian de guanyuan dou naqian, yao chi, yao he 以前的官員都拿錢, 要吃要喝….Tamen qing women chifan, women chi biandang 他們請我們吃飯我們吃便當. Tamen qing women he dongxi, women he kaishui 他們請我們喝東西我們喝開水. Ni zhidao tamen duome gandong 你知道他們多麼感動? Conglai meiyou kandao xiang women zheyangzi de guanyuan 從來沒有看到像我們這樣
他們也比較不好意思跟我們吵架。"

31 “Wo yijing male haojige minzhong 我已經罵了好幾個民眾。”

32 “Lai lai lai, che chia, che chia!”

33 Mandarin nicknames place “lao 老 (old)” or “xiao 小 (young)” before a family name; Taiwanese nicknames place the interjection “ah” before one syllable of a given name.

34 “Ni gen ta jiang yi, ta bu hui jiang er 你跟他講一，他不會講二。”

35 “Guzhang yi bu zai zhege anzi jiu 股長一不在這個案子就 dit-dit dit-dit kia，meiyou bianhua 沒有變化，ah ranhou jiu 然後 siki ah。”

36 “Xian fa gongwen zhengshi qing dajia lai 先發公文正式請大家來，ah ranhou 然後…ho in si。”

37 “Wo zhao kuaijishi wen, zenme chuli 我找會計師問怎麼處理。”

38 “Ah kuaijishi shuo 會計師說，ah gua m-chai oh。”

39 “Jiao wo zhao kezhang 叫我找科長。”

40 “Ah kezhang shuo 科長說，ah gua m-chai oh。”

41 Two of the Cultural Association leaders were Hakka, but spoke Taiwanese natively. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had enough interaction with most people in the room that day to know their ethnolinguistic heritage.
The success of the recent Sunflower Movement, in which student activists occupied the national legislature to protest the closed-door passage of a trade agreement with the PRC, exemplifies that conversation at the national level (Rowan 2015).

Such demands were often accompanied by widely publicized demonstrations as well as strategically organized festivals where public figures were put on the spot, asked to express support for local initiatives. For instance, the Cultural Association organized a yearly Sugarcane Festival to commemorate the area’s plantation history. During my fieldwork there, the President, Vice President, and mayor all appeared and made speeches at the festival.

Thiau-ah-kha “pull votes (lapiao 拉票)” for their preferred candidates by “chatting (tan 談)” with their plentiful acquaintances—“chat” being preferred over “convince (shuifu 說服)” for these conversations among social equals (cf. Moon 1998). Unlike their closest American parallel, the ward boss, thiau-ah-kha are not seen to control a voter’s employment prospects but to connect constituents to elected officials who can then distribute special favors. Such favors include things like pressuring city administrators to refrain from implementing city ordinances in ways that are disadvantageous for those constituents (something many of my coworkers mentioned), as well as pressuring them to accede to constituents’ affirmative demands for more services.
45 “Women zai shizhengfu hen youming 我們在市政府很有名.”
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