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Honors Thesis

PARTISANSHIP, SECURITY, AND GLOBAL STATUS: ANATOMY OF TAIWAN'S MARCH
19 SHOOTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Department of International and Area Studies
Brigham Young University
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University Honors

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ABSTRACT

PARTISANSHIP, SECURITY, AND GLOBAL STATUS: ANATOMY OF TAIWAN'S MARCH 19 SHOOTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Previous research has shown how belief in particular conspiracy theories is subject to their salience to believers. Using the example of Taiwan's March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories, I show in this paper that salience is created by appealing to existing collective memory. Additionally, I show that conspiracy theory spreaders help to reinforce the elements of collective memory that make their conspiracy theories salient. Using evidence from primary sources and a representative survey sample, I demonstrate the relevance of three contextual elements in belief in conspiracy theories about the March 19 Shooting. These can be summarized as Partisanship, Security, and Global Status. Partisanship refers to antipathy toward the opposing political party. People who believe the opposing party is capable of acts they consider evil or illegal are more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory about them. Security refers to the securitization of Taiwanese election results. People who believe that a victory by the opposing party could threaten Taiwan's security are more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory about the election results that blames the opposing party. Global Status refers to a confluence of beliefs: that both Taiwan and major events occurring in Taiwan are being ignored. People who believe both to be true are more likely to hold a belief about the shooting that involves international affairs. I

demonstrate how these contextual elements are influenced by Taiwan's collective memory as a society and as two partisan camps, as well as how they are constructed and reinforced by conspiracy theory spreaders.

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A Note on Names and Romanization

English romanization of Chinese names has a long and complicated history which is fully represented in the styles of romanization used in Taiwan. Walk down city streets, especially in the south, and one can see Hanyu Pinyin, Tongyong Pinyin, Wade-Giles, and even Gwoyueu Romatzyh. Additionally, in Taiwan, it is not uncommon to encounter names from Indigenous languages or Sinitic languages besides Mandarin, particularly Hokkien and Hakka. For names of from Sinitic languages, this thesis will not choose a romanization standard. Instead, it will use the romanization most commonly used in Taiwanese English-language media. For people and organizations such as James Soong and the Democratic People's Party, which are usually known by an English name in English-language media, the English name will be used. If it is the first time the name has been introduced, it will be followed by the Chinese characters for the name. For names from other languages, Chinese characters will generally not be provided.

1.1 Introduction

In 2004, Taiwan's incumbent president, Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) 民進黨, was running for re-election, and it wasn't looking good. His rivals, Lien Chan 連戰 of the Kuomintang (KMT) 國民黨 and James Soong 宋楚瑜 of the People First Party (PFP) 親民黨, had spoiled the election for each other in 2000. In Taiwan's first-past-the-post system, presidential candidates only need a plurality of votes to win the election. As a result, when James Soong left the KMT to run his own presidential campaign after being passed over for the nomination, Chen Shui-bian was able to win his first election with only 39.40% of the vote. However, this time, because their approaches to relations with China were similar, they had formed what they called the Pan-Blue Alliance 泛藍聯盟. On their united ticket, Lien Chan acted as presidential nominee and James Soong as vice presidential nominee. Because their presidential campaigns had achieved a combined vote of about 60% in 2000, they were sure they would win. However, the Lien-Soong ticket had complications. The expulsion of the popular former president Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 from the KMT for promoting a Taiwan-centric identity pulled KMT support to the DPP, the traditionally Taiwan-centric party. Additionally, James Soong's support had dropped since 2000 because voters no longer felt indebted to him for his work as Provincial Governor.¹ By March, the month of the election, nonpartisan polls showed Chen within 3–7% margin of Lien.² Then, on March 19, one day before the election, Chen Shui-

¹ Jacobs, *Democratizing Taiwan*, 192–93.

² “台湾大选蓝绿阵营谁领先? .”

bian and his vice president, Annette Lu 呂秀蓮, were shot. This is what became known as the March 19 Shooting.³

Chen and Lu were quickly rushed to Chi Mei Hospital 奇美醫院 where they were quickly treated for flesh wounds. At the news of the shooting, the KMT suspended all campaigning,⁴ and the DPP followed suit shortly after.⁵ The following day, the DPP won the election with just 50.11% of the votes. Their winning margin was one-tenth the number of the invalid votes.⁶

Supporters of both the DPP ticket and the Pan-Blue ticket quickly alleged that a conspiracy had been involved in the shooting. For allies of Lien and Soong, the shooting was clearly instigated or faked by Chen's camp to gain sympathy votes. For allies of Chen and Lu, the shooting must have been performed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), possibly in collusion with the KMT. The police investigation, concluded more than a year later, said that the shooting was performed by a lone gunman, Chen Yi-hsiung 陳義雄, who killed himself soon after the shooting. The police claimed that Chen Yi-hsiung shot Chen Shui-bian out of frustration over his economic policies.⁷ Lien and Soong refused to accept the results of the police investigation,⁸ and in 2005, following their success in the 2004 legislative election, their parties set up a legislative commission to investigate the shooting themselves. Named the 3/19 Shooting Incident Special Investigation Commission 三一九槍擊事件真相調查特別委員會, its final report, issued in 2008, resoundingly supported the idea of a cover-up, saying that it "debunked

³ The March 19 Shooting is also known as the 319 shooting 三一九槍擊事件 in Chinese.

⁴ Lin Chieh-yu, "President Shot."

⁵ Wang, "Pan-Green Campaign Cancels Rallies after Attacks."

⁶ Yeh, "Controversial Victory for Chen."

⁷ Staff, "Prosecutors Close 3-19 Shooting Investigation."

⁸ Chiu, Huang, and Ko, "Chen, Lu Accept Results of Assassination Investigation."

the so-called ‘truth’ released by the government.”⁹ These conspiracy theories also remain popular. Annette Lu continues to call for a reopening of the March 19 Shooting case, and the 2024 KMT vice presidential candidate, Jaw Shao-kong 趙少康, publicly supported her call on national television as recently as March 2024.¹⁰

What accounts for the continued popularity of March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories? One popular explanation for conspiracy beliefs concerns a “conspiracy mindset.” This is a set of cognitive processes or beliefs about the world which tend toward conspiracy theory beliefs.¹¹ It has been proposed that empirical evidence for the conspiracy mindset shows that conspiracy beliefs are not rooted in any other belief. Some researchers have suggested that because of the conspiracy mindset, people who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in every conspiracy theory.¹² This is a highly normative concept which assumes that people believe in conspiracy theories solely because of a defective worldview that makes them unable to correctly evaluate information. This assumes that conspiracy theories are an inherently flawed and incorrect way to view the world and makes it more difficult to analyze belief in conspiracy theories because it subsumes the discussion into the question of objective truth. Additionally, it is not true that the conspiracy mindset is the sole, or even the predominant factor in determining whether a person believes in a particular conspiracy theory. Studies show that other elements are in play when conspiracy theories are examined at the individual level. For example, Enders et al. found that the strength and direction of the relationship between partisanship and conspiracy

⁹ 三一九槍擊事件真相調查特別委員會, 三一九槍擊事件: 總結報告, 2.

¹⁰ 陳水扁:該結案了. In this Jaw Shao-kong was out of step with his running mate, Hou Yu-ih 侯友宜, who was the lead police investigator on the shooting case.

¹¹ Definitions of the conspiracy mindset are not consistent. See Sutton and Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories and the Conspiracy Mindset” for a good overview.

¹² Murray et al., “A Moth to a Flame?,” 2.

beliefs was dependent on the characteristics of the conspiracy beliefs studied and the context in which they were considered.¹³ This means there are contextual elements of these conspiracy theories which make them attractive to a large portion of Taiwanese people.

In this paper, I will show that the determining contextual elements that make particular conspiracy theories attractive to believers are rooted in collective memory. Collective memory is the phenomenon by which a group remembers events that have happened to it. To some extent, all memory is subject to the social conditions under which it is retrieved.¹⁴ Thus, remembrance is subject to choice. Not only do we choose what to remember, we choose how to remember ourselves in that history.¹⁵ As Maurice Halbwachs wrote, “The memory of the same fact can be placed within many frameworks, which result from distinct collective memories.”¹⁶ The competing conspiracy theories about the March 19 Shooting are attempts both to appeal to existing collective memory and create a new collective memory that paints conspiracy believers’ political opponents in a bad light. Without appealing to existing collective memory, a conspiracy cannot become popular because it is not salient to people. However, conspiracy theory spreaders also seek to insert conspiracy theories into collective memory to reinforce the ideas that they believe to be most useful. I do not refute the idea that the conspiracy mindset exists and has an impact on conspiracy beliefs, nor do I attempt to. Rather, I show that people who have a conspiracy mindset are not simply more likely to believe in every conspiracy theory. Rather, the conspiracy mindset makes it more likely for people to believe *every conspiracy theory that is salient to them*.

¹³ Enders et al., “Are Republicans and Conservatives More Likely to Believe Conspiracy Theories?”

¹⁴ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 43.

¹⁵ Halbwachs, 50.

¹⁶ Halbwachs, 52.

To demonstrate this, I will first show the relevance of three contextual elements in belief in conspiracy theories about the March 19 Shooting. These can be summarized succinctly as Partisanship, Security, and Global Status. Partisanship refers to antipathy toward the opposing political party. People who believe that the opposing party is willing to perform acts they consider evil or illegal are more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory about the opposing party. Security refers to the securitization of Taiwanese election results. Those who believe that a victory by the opposing party could threaten Taiwan's security are more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory about the election results. Global Status refers to a confluence of fears: that both Taiwan and major events occurring in Taiwan are being ignored. People who believe both of these to be true are more likely to hold a conspiracy belief about the shooting which involves international affairs. I will demonstrate how these contextual elements are influenced by Taiwan's collective memory as a society and as two partisan camps.

While it can be important to recognize what beliefs are contributing to belief in particular conspiracy theories, this does not tell the full story. All three of these factors are also actively constructed by conspiracy theorists themselves. Conspiracy theories are not just useful narratives for fitting already-held beliefs with the world, they are also useful for strengthening those beliefs in *others*. Thus, in this paper, I will also demonstrate how conspiracy theory spreaders have used the March 19 Shooting to influence Taiwan's collective memory and reinforce the very elements which give rise to conspiracy theories.

1.2 *Why Study Conspiracy Theories in Taiwan?*

Conspiracy theories Taiwan presents a unique environment for studying conspiracy theories as a non-Western nation and as an unrecognized country. Its status as a prominent target of disinformation makes it a useful case study for how beliefs are spread for political purposes. Additionally, Taiwan's open, well-documented, and highly politicized environment allows researchers to examine conspiracy theories through both data and rhetoric.

Though Chinese conspiracy theories have gained more importance in the English-language literature,¹⁷ Taiwanese conspiracy theories have largely been ignored. This is not because the country is invulnerable to conspiracy theories; for example, in March 2023, former KMT legislator Alex Tsai 蔡正元 made headlines when he promoted a conspiracy theory that the US had secret plans to destroy Taiwan. The fact that the original source of this information was a poorly-landed joke from a US talk radio host's Twitter account seemed to be lost on the former legislator.¹⁸ Taiwan has sometimes been characterized as especially resistant to COVID-19 conspiracy theories,¹⁹ but this fails to explain why Taiwan is not resistant to some other types of conspiracy theory. This makes it more important to understand why some other conspiracy theories, such as the one mentioned above and the conspiracy theories about the March 19 Shooting, have been able to gain traction in Taiwan.

¹⁷ For an overview of a broad portion of the literature, see Martindale, "Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary China."

¹⁸ "Cognitive Warfare Is No Joke."

¹⁹ For example, COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Kuo, "Channeling Facts, Crouching Rumours" Note, however, that the author credits this to Taiwan's government response and that COVID-19 conspiracy theories eventually gained traction in Taiwan.

Taiwan as a subject of conspiracy theory studies presents an interesting case because its political situation is unique. The country is unrecognized in most international organizations, as the People's Republic of China wields its influence to prevent the recognition of Taiwan in order to preserve its "One China" foreign policy. At the same time, it maintains strong informal relations with its neighbors and many governments in the West. Marginalization has been shown to produce higher belief in conspiracy theories, but this has rarely been studied at the state level. Additionally, the country maintains vast trade ties to both China and the United States and is a focal point of tensions between the two countries. It is also the world's largest supplier of high-quality semiconductors, which have become a strategic resource due to their importance in the economy and in military technologies.²⁰ Because of its geopolitical position, it has become the largest target of disinformation in the world²¹ and thus presents a useful case study in studying how beliefs are spread by political actors. Taiwan also presents a unique opportunity to examine the spread of conspiracy theories in post-Leninist states²² using an example from outside the Soviet bloc. During the rule of the KMT dictatorship, politics infused every level of society. Local KMT organizations were created for professions and were present in both business and government structures.²³ The implications of this on conspiracy belief is that we can expect more things to be politicized and thus capable of taking a partisan bent that is amenable to conspiracy theories.

Finally, Taiwan is an open and well-documented country. This is ideal for studying conspiracy theories because it increases the tools available for use. Taiwan's open society

²⁰ Sullivan and Nachman, *Taiwan*, 119–22.

²¹ Yang and Hetherington, "Taiwan Most Affected by Disinformation."

²² For the Chiang regime as a Leninist state and the consequences for Taiwanese democracy, see Mattlin, *Politicized Society*.

²³ Mattlin, chaps. 2, 3.

enables both archival and survey research, both of which were critical for this study, to be performed with relative ease. This allows researchers to use survey data in conjunction with the historical and rhetorical context to analyze conspiracy theories. For those interested in studying post-Leninist states, the Sinophone world or even the non-Western world in general, Taiwan is one of the few countries in these categories that is both open and well-documented. This gives it high potential as a case study for conspiracy theory studies.

Conspiracy theories are a growing field of study in a wide range of fields, not just in social sciences like political science and psychology, but also in human fields such as history and philosophy. They are often seen as fringe, extreme beliefs that can lead to violence and the erosion of institutions. As a result, they are often studied solely as problems to be solved. However, they exist far beyond the social fringe and reflect a critical part of human culture: our fears.

Studying conspiracy theories can be difficult because the label is highly charged and has been applied to many different types of beliefs. Popular parlance has evolved a tendency to label any theory which is both implausible and unpopular as a conspiracy theory, whether a conspiracy is alleged or not.²⁴ This is partly because conspiracy theory studies arose from a literature which was dismissive of conspiracy beliefs. The term “conspiracy theory” was coined by Karl Popper in his 1945 essay, “The Conspiracy Theory of Society.”²⁵ Popper described conspiracy theories as quasi-theistic beliefs in hidden powers that run society. In his view, the only time when

²⁴ Walker, “What We Mean When We Say ‘Conspiracy Theory.’” I would add that this is not just true of those who look down on conspiracy theories. Many conspiracy theorists I have spoken with also use this term in the same way.

²⁵ Technically, earlier examples of the term exist, though they do not refer to a theory with the same all-encompassing, pseudoscientific nature as the “theories” Popper referred to. See Mackenzie-Mcharg, “Conspiracy Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of a Twentieth-Century Concept.”

societies truly work this way are when conspiracy theory believers came to power.²⁶ Conspiracy theory studies, particularly in the fields of history and political science, is heavily influenced by Richard Hofstadter's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."²⁷ Hofstadter explained that the term "paranoid style" was intended to be pejorative because it generally posed a threat to society.²⁸ These influential papers, while essential to the development of the field, have helped create an attitude that now tends to hold back understanding.

In the past, conspiracy theories have been studied because they represented a departure from the perceived norm of conspiracy theory researchers.²⁹ However, this ignores an important consideration when studying conspiracy theories: they are *not* an abnormal way to see the world, at least in the sense that they are only held by a minority of people. As Jesse Walker explained, lurid conspiracy theories about purported gang activity and massive terrorist plots are a part of contemporary mainstream American culture.³⁰ As recently as 2023, nearly half of Americans believed that SARS-CoV-2 was released on purpose.³¹ Conspiracy theories are not unique to the US. In fact, the strong, relatively stable states of the Western world are relatively insulated from conspiracy theories compared to most of the world.³² Despite this, the importance of Hofstadter's conception of conspiracy theories has had the effect of placing the entire field of conspiracy

²⁶ Popper, "The Conspiracy Theory of Society."

²⁷ Hofstadter did not explicitly use the term "conspiracy theory" in his essay, but this was one of the first works to describe the traits of what would now be termed the "conspiracy mentality" and as a result has been highly influential in the field.

²⁸ Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 5.

²⁹ This is evidenced in the explicitly pejorative language used toward conspiracy theories by those studying the phenomenon. Some authors have also said this explicitly. For example, McCauley and Jacques, "The Popularity of Conspiracy Theories of Presidential Assassination," 638: "It is the premise of this article that the continued popularity of conspiracy theories of the Kennedy assassination is a surprising social fact that is worthy of investigation."

³⁰ Walker, "What We Mean When We Say 'Conspiracy Theory,'" 55–58.

³¹ Sanders and Frankovic, "Two-Thirds of Americans Believe That the COVID-19 Virus Originated from a Lab in China."

³² Radnitz, "Why the Powerful (in Weak States) Prefer Conspiracy Theories."

theory studies within an extremely Western, and particularly American lens. This would seem to make it difficult to apply the American lens of conspiracy theory outside the United States, but this has so far not proven to be the case. Hofstadter himself attempted to combat this notion, stating that his American examples were chosen solely because it was his area of expertise and giving multiple European examples.³³ The notion of conspiracy theories as a type of knowledge has taken root in Europe and in Asia.³⁴

In the present study, I use Taiwanese conspiracy theories to demonstrate that conspiracy theories are best studied through their purpose. Researchers have not always agreed on a definition of conspiracy theories due to methodological considerations in between subfields. These include topics such the veracity of the claims made by conspiracy theories³⁵ and the inherent abnormality of conspiracy claims.³⁶ Additionally, some researchers, most prominently rumor psychologists, prefer to examine conspiracy theory studies as a subset of beliefs they are already familiar with.³⁷ However, these attempts to define conspiracy theories miss what is actually important about them: their purpose. Conspiracy theories are narratives created for the

³³ Hofstadter concurred with Popper in describing Nazi Germany as one of the few places where conspiracy theorists have gained full power. See Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 6–7.

³⁴ I have taken care to cite authors from across the world in this article. Represented countries include the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, and China. This type of representation is important because conspiracy theory studies as a field tends to assume that conspiracy theories are a universal phenomenon, as Hofstadter did.

³⁵ Some authors stipulate that conspiracy theories must be false. For example, Boudry, “Why We Should Be Suspicious of Conspiracy Theories”; DiFonzo, “Conspiracy Rumor Psychology,” 263–64. Hall, “Aligning Darkness with Conspiracy Theory,” 207. For criticisms of truth claims about conspiracy theory definitions, see Hagen, “Are ‘Conspiracy Theories’ So Unlikely to Be True?”; Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” 126. Jan-Williem van Prooijen takes a middle-ground approach which says that conspiracy theories are not false per se, but lack sufficient evidence. See Prooijen, *Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, 8. This closely matches the foundational thought of conspiracy theory studies. For example, Richard Hofstadter wrote of a “curious leap in imagination” which characterized what he called “the paranoid style.” That is, for him, a collection of facts becomes a conspiracy theory when a leap of logic is required to arrive at the conclusion. See Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” 37.

³⁶ Examples of those who believe an abnormal approach is required to understand conspiracy theories include Popper, “The Conspiracy Theory of Society”; Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”; Räikkä, “Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction”; Coady, *Conspiracy Theories*, 1–3. Examples of those who prefer a normalizing approach include Prooijen, *Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, 7; Pidgen, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?”; Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” 126.

³⁷ DiFonzo, “Conspiracy Rumor Psychology”; Kou et al., “Conspiracy Talk on Social Media.”

consumption of an ingroup that uses evidence of secret activity to show that a presently existing outgroup has evil or illicit goals, at least by the ingroup's standards. A conspiracy theory does not merely allege that an outgroup has done one evil thing in secret. The action alleged by the conspiracy theory must be connected with an overarching goal that believers think will be harmful to themselves or society at large. For example, histories that describe the how the KMT-led dictatorship secretly killed thousands of Taiwanese between 1949 and 1987³⁸ are not necessarily conspiracy theories. However, if the KMT's modern political rivals alleges that these historical events show that the modern KMT continues to operate clandestinely to subvert Taiwanese democracy, then this is a conspiracy theory. In defining conspiracy theories this way, I closely follow Karl Popper's description, which describes conspiracy theories as overarching narratives,³⁹ but unlike Popper, I remain agnostic about truth claims. In "The Conspiracy Theory of Society," Popper quipped that conspiracy theories are only true in societies where conspiracy theory believers have come to power. What he failed to note is that even by this strict standard there are few countries in the world where this excludes any possibility that conspiracy theories are true, nor is it a particularly useful observation. As a result, conspiracy theories are best studied through their ability to inculcate a particular worldview, without being bogged down by questions of truth or abnormality.

³⁸ For an overview of state terror under the KMT-led dictatorship, see Strauss, *State Formation in China and Taiwan*, chaps. 2 & 3.

³⁹ Popper, "The Conspiracy Theory of Society."

2. Hypotheses

In this section, I introduce the hypotheses described in 1.1 in greater depth.

2.1 Hypothesis 1: Partisanship

Partisanship refers to antipathy toward the opposing political party. People who believe the opposing party is capable of acts they consider evil or illegal are more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory about them.

Partisanship in conspiracy theory literature

In the conspiracy theory literature, it is well-known that partisanship is a contributor to belief in conspiracy theories. Political partisans are able to identify conspiracy theories which come from an opposing group and disbelieve them.⁴⁰ Collective narcissism, or the belief that one's ingroup is best, is a predictor of belief in conspiracy theories about outgroups.⁴¹ Additionally, political extremists are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.⁴² With these factors combined, people who identify more with a collective such as a political party should be more inclined toward drawing on the party's collective memory of ingroup innocence and outgroup corruption. Additionally, they should be able to identify conspiracy theories that support their own party while denouncing those that support the other party.

⁴⁰ Smallpage, Enders, and Uscinski, "The Partisan Contours of Conspiracy Theory Beliefs."

⁴¹ Cichocka et al., "Grandiose Delusions: Collective Narcissism, Secure in-Group Identification, and Belief in Conspiracies."

⁴² Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, "Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories."

As mentioned above, some authors have pointed to a conspiracy mentality which makes certain believers more susceptible to any conspiracy theory. However, partisanship itself does not make every conspiracy theory attractive. An individual conspiracy theory can only be attractive to a political partisan if it is politically salient to the believer. For example, conspiracy theories which blame the other side create salience by appealing to the partisan dislike of the other side. Thus, although some studies have suggested that particular political persuasions are more vulnerable to conspiracy thinking, these differences disappear once the content of the conspiracy theory has been accounted for.⁴³

It is important to identify political salience as a root of conspiracy theory belief, but it is not a satisfactory explanation by itself. A political partisan does not automatically believe that the other side is capable of perpetrating an evil conspiracy. Political salience must be constructed. Further explanation must be found in collective memory

Salience can be also created by the words and actions of influential political leaders. Political leaders can do this by drawing on existing features of collective memory and narrating a particular event to favor a conspiratorial interpretation of it. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese authorities drew on a collective memory struggle against the West to spread conspiracy theories that claimed SARS-CoV-2 was engineered the United States.⁴⁴ Chinese authorities created political salience for a conspiracy theory (which at the time was not popular) by appealing to existing collective memory.

⁴³ Enders et al., “Are Republicans and Conservatives More Likely to Believe Conspiracy Theories?”

⁴⁴ Cheng, Zhang, and Zhang, “Authority-Led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

Partisanship and collective memory

Collective memory is important for analyzing partisan factors in conspiracy belief because political partisans participate in separate collective memories. Remembrance is subject to choice. Not only do we choose what to remember, we choose how to remember ourselves in that history.⁴⁵ As Maurice Halbwachs wrote, “The memory of the same fact can be placed within many frameworks, which result from distinct collective memories.”⁴⁶ Sometimes this is because a rememberer participates in multiple, nesting collective memories. For example, an American participates in American society’s collective memory of the American Civil War. If their family tells stories of members who participated in the war, they also participate in their family’s collective memory of the war. Additionally, many Southern Americans participate in a separate collective memory of the Civil War from Americans outside the South. They ascribe the war to “Northern aggression” and claim they were fighting for state’s rights, while other Americans blame the South’s intractable attitude on slavery. This is an example of a split collective memory. Although both camps remember the same events and participate in their larger societal collective memory, they also participate in a parochial collective memory that emphasizes different events and explains them differently. This type of split collective memory can explain how partisans use the same events to create differing conspiracy theories.

In the context of partisan impacts on conspiracy theories, an event can take an equal, but opposite place in the collective memory of opposing partisans. For example, in the United States, the January 6th attack is remembered differently by Republicans and Democrats. Highly partisan Americans are more likely to remember false information about the attack that supports their

⁴⁵ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 50.

⁴⁶ Halbwachs, 52.

party.⁴⁷ For Republicans, conspiracy theories about the attack describe it as part of FBI-instigated riot that was part of a pattern of targeting Trump voters, while Democrats describe it as a Trump-instigated coup attempt that was part of a pattern of attacks on democracy.⁴⁸ The January 6th attack takes an equal place in these conspiracy narratives as a naked attempt by the conspiracy to harm people, but opposite in its effect.

Partisanship in the Taiwanese context

Taiwan is often described as a highly politicized country and has a long history of highly strung partisanship. The KMT, organized along Leninist lines, involved itself into all levels of civil society during the dictatorship period and still uses civil society organizations to mobilize voters today.⁴⁹ After regular elections to the Legislative Yuan 立法院 were established in the 1990s, the KMT, DPP, and later the PFP relied heavily on “local factions,” informal alliances of local elites who could mobilize voters and intimidate political enemies.⁵⁰ Although these alliances frequently shifted, the failure of local factions to mobilize voters constituted a loss of face to faction leaders, which turned elections into social as well as political phenomena.⁵¹ Politics itself is also highly strung. Legislative violence has been common since 1987.⁵² Controversial votes frequently result in physical fights between legislators. For example, in 2020, KMT legislators brawled with DPP legislators in an attempt to bar them from the

⁴⁷ Calvillo, Harris, and Hawkins, “Partisan Bias in False Memories for Misinformation about the 2021 U.S. Capitol Riot.”

⁴⁸ Weiner, Clement, and Guskin, “Republican Loyalty to Trump, Rioters Climbs in 3 Years after Jan. 6 Attack.”

⁴⁹ Mattlin, *Politicized Society*, 38–43, 64–65.

⁵⁰ For local factions and political mobilization and intimidation, see Chin, *Heijin*, chap. 5. For the decision-making logic behind local factions’ political decisions, see Mattlin, *Politicized Society*, chap. 3.

⁵¹ Kennedy, “The 2004 Taiwanese Legislative Elections,” 150–51.

⁵² Chin, *Heijin*, 141–43.

Legislature to prevent them from voting in a DPP member as Control Yuan 監察院 chief.⁵³ In 2024, DPP legislators battled with Taiwan People's Party 民衆黨 and KMT legislators who were attempting to pass a bill to expand the investigatory powers of the Legislative Yuan and grant it more oversight over the Executive Yuan 行政院.⁵⁴ One particularly memorable incident occurred in 2006 when DPP legislator Wang Shu-hui 王淑慧 ate a bill on cross-straits transport links to prevent it from passing—and it worked.⁵⁵ Physical conflicts do not just occur over politically fraught topics. Rather they seem universal to a highly-strung political class which uses violence to resolve differences. For example, the meteoric rise of the New Party 新黨, a splinter of the KMT, ultimately fizzled out after a 1997 food fight over personal differences.⁵⁶ The high politicization of Taiwanese society has likewise made it a highly partisan one.

In the Taiwanese context, partisanship is closely connected with ethnic identity. Taiwan has two primary ethnic identities: Taiwanese, or *benshengren* 本省人, and Mainlander, or *waishengren* 外省人. The Chinese terms for these identities mean “person of this province” and “person of another province.” These terms were instituted by the KMT in official identity documents,⁵⁷ and imply that Taiwanese and Mainlanders both come from provinces of China. The Taiwanese identity consists of the descendants of Hokkien- and Hakka-speaking settlers from Southern China. It can also include Indigenous Taiwanese or *yuanzhumin* 原住民, who lived in Taiwan for thousands of years before Chinese colonization and are the origin of the

⁵³ Aspinwall, “Taiwan Legislators Brawl Twice in 2 Weeks Over Government Watchdog Nomination.”

⁵⁴ Chen and Chung, “Legislators Brawl over Reform Proposals.”

⁵⁵ Huang, “Links Bill Nixed amid Legislative Chaos.”

⁵⁶ Jacobs, *Democratizing Taiwan*, 96–101; This was not the only politically-motivated food fight in Taiwanese history. “Taiwan Lawmakers in Food Fight over Arms Budget.”

⁵⁷ Corcuff, *Memories of the Future*, 170–71.

Austronesian language group.⁵⁸ However, as in many settler-colonial states, Indigenous people are often only included to emphasize Taiwan's uniqueness.⁵⁹ Taiwanese are generally associated with pan-Green politics. Named for the colors of the DPP, the pan-Greens assert a stronger Taiwan identity and are associated with the Taiwan Independence movement. The other major pan-Green party is the TSU, founded by associates of Lee Teng-hui after his departure from the KMT.

Mainlanders in Taiwan began arriving immediately after the Second Sino-Japanese War, when Taiwan was ceded to the Republic of China. The ancestors of most Mainlanders in Taiwan arrived with the ROC military as it retreated from mainland China in 1949.⁶⁰ Brutal crackdowns by the ROC in 1947 and 1949 created the initial resentment between Taiwanese and Mainlander communities.⁶¹ Meanwhile, residential segregation of Mainlander and Taiwanese communities,⁶² the exclusion of Taiwanese from higher KMT positions,⁶³ and the formation of ethnic youth gangs⁶⁴ also served to separate Taiwanese from Mainlanders Chinese at all levels of life. Because the KMT privileged Mainlander communities and focused their propaganda on them, opposition to the KMT was strongest among Taiwanese. After democratization, Mainlanders continued to vote overwhelmingly along ethnic lines, while other ethnic groups in Taiwan did so to a much lesser extent.⁶⁵ Mainlanders are associated strongly with pan-Blue politics. Named for the colors of the KMT, pan-Blues assert a stronger Chinese identity, and are associated with

⁵⁸ Mirabal et al., "Ascertaining the Role of Taiwan as a Source for the Austronesian Expansion."

⁵⁹ Simon, "Formosa's First Nations and the Japanese: From Colonial Rule to Postcolonial Resistance," 9.

⁶⁰ Corcuff, *Memories of the Future*, 172.

⁶¹ Sullivan and Nachman, *Taiwan*, 22–25.

⁶² Corcuff, *Memories of the Future*, 170.

⁶³ Mattlin, *Politicized Society*, 43.

⁶⁴ Chin, *Heijin*, 5–6.

⁶⁵ Jacobs, *Democratizing Taiwan*, 99.

conciliatory gestures toward China. Other pan-Blue parties include the PFP and the New Party, both of which split from the KMT.

The conspiracy theories about the March 19 Shooting had a clear partisan bent to them from the start. In all conspiracy theories, shooting was assumed to have been intended to produce a political effect. For both sides, the goal of the conspiracy was to win the election. Anti-DPP voices, including Lien Chan, claimed that the shooting had changed the election results by giving Chen and Lu just enough sympathy votes to win.⁶⁶ From this standpoint, it was not a huge leap for political partisans to claim that a conspiracy had tampered with Chen Shui-bian's medical records to fake the shooting incident.⁶⁷ If the shooting was intended as a powerplay, then every action taken after the shooting had to be a powerplay too. For the anti-DPP conspiracy believers, the National Security Mechanism activated by Chiou I-jen 邱義仁 was intended to keep soldiers, who generally voted KMT, at home in order to prevent them from voting.⁶⁸ James Soong additionally accused the DPP of miscounting votes in order to win.⁶⁹

Partisanship in the survey study

To test this hypothesis, survey respondents were asked about their political affiliation and asked to rate whether they agreed that the KMT or DPP was corrupt. Accusations of corruption are a very common expression of partisan hatred in Taiwan. This is not by any means unfounded. Corruption and criminal activity in Taiwan's government had been rampant for two decades. In

⁶⁶ Huang, "Lien Calls Election Unfair, Demands Recount"; 李建榮, 喬福正, and 偉修, 關鍵決策, 1.

⁶⁷ Su, "Chi Mei Administration Dismisses Conspiracy Theories."

⁶⁸ 三一九槍擊事件真相調查特別委員會, 三一九槍擊事件: 總結報告, 79.

⁶⁹ Huang, "Soong Says the Election Was Unjust and Invalid."

2003, over 60% of Taiwan's most important criminal organizations had elected deputies.⁷⁰ In some areas, the percentage of politicians with criminal connections reached as high as 90%.⁷¹ The corruption reached all levels of government. As mentioned above, Chen Shui-bian and much of his administration were convicted on corruption charges later into and after Chen's second term. In fact, a DPP vote captain was arrested in Taichung 臺中 for vote buying just after the 2004 election.⁷² Similarly, the pan-Blues had used criminal connections for much of the 90s and early 2000s to benefit themselves and win elections. James Soong had courted the support of a Taichung gangster leader in 2000 and Lien Chan had worked closely with Lo Fu-chu 羅福助,⁷³ the leader of the Celestial Alliance 天道盟, who was also notorious for being among the KMT's most violent national legislators.⁷⁴ Although criminal elements claimed that both sides were equally corrupt, both sides tended to blame the other for corruption in politics. Thus, accusations of corruption are a good analog for partisan hatred in Taiwanese politics.

2.2 Hypothesis 2: Security

The Security hypothesis posits that people who believe election results to be a security issue will be more likely to hold a conspiracy theory about the March 19 Shooting. They will also be more likely to hold a conspiracy theory which blames the opposing party.

⁷⁰ Chin, *Heijin*, 85–87.

⁷¹ Chin, 92.

⁷² Chuang, "Taichung Prosecutors Indict Chen Vote Captain."

⁷³ Chin, *Heijin*, 90.

⁷⁴ In addition to publicly assaulting fellow legislators he had disputes with, Lo Fu-chu would kidnap colleagues who particularly annoyed him and cage them in the street as an example to others. Neither party was willing to confront him because he controlled independent legislators who were key to passing votes. See Chin, 116–18, 142–43.

Much has been made of the impact of personal and national security concerns on belief in conspiracy theories. Insights from rumor psychology suggest that conspiracy theories flourish in uncertain circumstances where personal or group security is at risk and little information is available.⁷⁵ The modern world has given rise to a national security which seems to have great impact on our personal security, but which we have little ability to directly control. This creates feelings of powerlessness which are strongly connected with conspiracy belief.⁷⁶ Additionally, conspiracy beliefs themselves create feelings of powerlessness,⁷⁷ creating a vicious cycle. Thus, conspiracy theories are a powerful way to reinforce a collective memory of insecurity. Conspiracy theories are able to artificially perpetuate the uncertain conditions from which they developed through the act of remembering. This suggests that conspiracy theories both arise from and reinforce the securitization of events, people, and organizations.

In security studies, securitization is the process by which certain things are constructed as security threats. This lens of study argues that there are no “natural threats”—threats must be recognized and put into the public imagination by policy makers.⁷⁸ This is not to say that there are no real threats. After all, it is well known that Taiwan has a serious and precarious foreign security threat just across the Taiwan Strait in the form of the PRC, a large and nationalistic country which has frequently denied the ROC’s right to exist.⁷⁹ However, what threats are perceived and how threats are perceived is subject to social and political construction. This is

⁷⁵ DiFonzo, “Conspiracy Rumor Psychology.”

⁷⁶ Laine and Parakkal, “National Security, Personal Insecurity, and Political Conspiracies,” 23–24.

⁷⁷ Jolley and Douglas, “The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions.”

⁷⁸ Malji and Raza, “The Securitization of Love Jihad,” 2.

⁷⁹ Sullivan and Nachman, *Taiwan*, 58–59.

how both pan-Blues and pan-Greens can present the shooting as a security threat brought about by the other's actions regarding China.

Surprisingly, there is little research on *securitization* and conspiracy theories despite the obvious connection that might be made between the two issues. What research has been done has focused on the use of conspiracy theories as a means of securitization.⁸⁰ This research shows that, as suggested above, the anxiety created by conspiracy theories is a powerful tool of securitization.

Security and collective memory

The construction of terrorist threats has been observed to keep 9/11 conspiracy theories alive by perpetuating the trauma of the initial event.⁸¹ New terrorist threats repeat the event which spawned the conspiracy theories, reaffirming the construction of the event as a conspiracy theory, which ensures that it stays salient.

Memories of insecurity are easily weaponized into instruments of securitization. In the study mentioned in 2.1 on COVID-19 conspiracy theories spread by Chinese authorities, the authors found that Chinese authorities referred to the fight against COVID-19 as a “people’s war.”⁸² This framing not only securitizes COVID-19 as a threat requiring full-scale mobilization, but draws on a long history. “People’s war” was a military doctrine that originated during the early part of Mao’s career and remained important enough to the legitimacy of the military that

⁸⁰ For example: de Graaf and Zwierlein, “Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive”; Yilmaz and Shipoli, “Use of Past Collective Traumas, Fear and Conspiracy Theories for Securitization of the Opposition and Authoritarianisation”; Malji and Raza, “The Securitization of Love Jihad.”

⁸¹ Laine and Parakkal, “National Security, Personal Insecurity, and Political Conspiracies,” 23–24.

⁸² Cheng, Zhang, and Zhang, “Authority-Led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 1184–85.

massive changes to military doctrine were justified under its name.⁸³ Thus, authorities appropriate the collective memory of Chinese insecurity during which the “people’s war” concept was developed and use it in a new context to securitize that context.

Security in the Taiwanese context

Like recurring terrorist threats after 9/11, Taiwanese elections repeat the trauma of March 19 by reaffirming the construction between security and election results. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Even in Taiwan’s first free presidential election in 1996, New Party 新黨 candidate Lin Yang-kang 林洋港 and independent candidate Chen Li-an 陳履安 claimed that KMT candidate Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 risked war with China in his Taiwanization policies. DPP candidate Peng Ming-min 彭明敏 attacked Lee for selling out Taiwan to China, while Lee attacked Chen and Lin for the same reason. At the same time, Lin, Chen, and Lee all attacked the Taiwan Independence stance of the DPP as bringing an even greater risk of provoking war.⁸⁴ In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, Taiwan faced repeated threats from China, which attempted to interfere through shows of force and verbal persuasion.⁸⁵ Both times, Chinese interference only served to promote the candidate they disliked the most. In 2004, when China seemed reluctant to interfere a third time, Chen Shui-bian made security into an issue by holding a “defensive referendum” on cross-straits relations at the same time as the presidential election.⁸⁶ Taiwan’s security has predictably become a common theme in Taiwanese elections since 1996,

⁸³ Joffe, ““People’s War under Modern Conditions.””

⁸⁴ Jacobs, *Democratizing Taiwan*, 111–14.

⁸⁵ Jacobs, 118–24, 144, 148–49.

⁸⁶ Mattlin, “Referendums as a Form of Zaoshi: The Instrumental Domestic Political Functions of Taiwan’s Referendum Ploy.”

and was a central theme of the Sunflower Movement 太陽花學運 protests in 2014. Thus, the March 19 Shooting fits into an existing and repeatedly reinforced collective memory of security threats around elections.

For proponents of March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories, the attempted assassination was not just a danger to their partisan camp, or even just to Taiwanese democracy. It was an attack on the security of Taiwan as an independent country. James Soong, condemning the 2004 election results, described Taiwan's democracy as Taiwan's only "defensive weapon" against the Chinese Communist Party and warned that its destruction (wrought, in his view, by the DPP) would endanger the country.⁸⁷ This fear was echoed by the editor of a 2005 book on the shooting,⁸⁸ which ultimately portrays the DPP as endangering the peace brought about by KMT diplomacy.⁸⁹ Fears of Chinese interference via the shooting are also present on the DPP side; one DPP legislator, writing later in 2004, suspected that the shooting may have been a Chinese attempted "decapitation strike" on Taiwan.⁹⁰ Annette Lu presented a similar theory in her book, suggesting that China could have intended to stop the Taiwan Independence movement by assassinating her and Chen.⁹¹ The fear that election results will impact the safety of the country seems critical to belief in March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories; it is what justifies belief in these theories.

These conspiracy theories present a view of security which goes beyond what a foreigner would think of as security threats to Taiwan. Typical analyses of Taiwanese security in English-

⁸⁷ Huang, "Soong Says the Election Was Unjust and Invalid."

⁸⁸ 李建榮, 喬福正, and 偉修, 關鍵決策, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 158.SS

⁹⁰ 陳明澤, 誰槍擊了臺灣總統?, 133.

⁹¹ 呂秀蓮, 透視 319, 232.

language media examine the likelihood of invasion based on broad foreign policy decisions made at high levels in China, Taiwan, and the United States. However, these conspiracy theories credit things such as the state of Taiwan's democracy and the election results themselves as potential security risks. By repeating fears of security threats associated with the March 19 Shooting, conspiracy theory spreaders reinforced an existing collective memory of security threats surrounding elections.

Security in the survey study

To test this hypothesis, survey recipients were asked to rate whether they agreed with a statement that claimed that an election victory by either the KMT or DPP would threaten Taiwan's security. Strong agreement with either statement would indicate that the issue had been securitized for them.

2.3 Hypothesis 3: Global Status

Initially, I framed the Global Status hypothesis thus: People who believe that Taiwan is being ignored and that the March 19 Shooting itself is being ignored will be more likely to believe *any* conspiracy theory about the shooting. However, as will become clear in **3.2**, Taiwanese people who hold both of these beliefs are only more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that involve international affairs.

People have a fundamental need to associate major events with major causes. The more major the event, the more major the cause must be.⁹² For example, a 1979 study gave participants a description of an assassination attempt on a president. Participants were more likely to believe in a conspiracy when the president had been killed than when the president had not been killed.⁹³

Some studies have suggested that strong belief in the international prestige of one's own country increases belief in conspiracy beliefs.⁹⁴ This corresponds well with research on collective narcissism and conspiracy theories as mentioned in **2.1**. However, it is conceivable that for a country such as Taiwan, the opposite may be true: a person who believes that Taiwan is *not* recognized on the world stage may be more likely to believe a conspiracy theory. This is because Taiwan's global status has been securitized by both outside and internal actors. The PRC convinces countries which have official diplomatic relations with Taiwan to remove that recognition as an attempt to coerce Taiwan into following Chinese unification objectives. This has even been characterized as "diplomatic war" in foreign media.⁹⁵ During his administration, Chen Shui-bian characterized Taiwan's unofficial relations with Japan, the US, and China as security issues as well, most notoriously through the "defensive referendum" held during the 2004 election, which combined questions on military defense and diplomatic relations with China.⁹⁶ Taiwan's contested global status and security concerns conceivably create a toxic mix in which concerns about global status mean that problems must be explained by conspiracy theory.

⁹² Laine and Parakkal, "National Security, Personal Insecurity, and Political Conspiracies," 17.

⁹³ McCauley and Jacques, "The Popularity of Conspiracy Theories of Presidential Assassination."

⁹⁴ Mir and Siddiqui, "Nationalism, Status, and Conspiracy Theories."

⁹⁵ "Taiwan Is Losing Allies. What Should Taipei (and D.C.) Do?"

⁹⁶ Duchâtel, "Taiwan."

The effect of this on a particular conspiracy theory, like every other factor in conspiracy theory belief, would be moderated by the salience of the conspiracy theory to the collective memory of the believer. Thus, the belief that Taiwan is being ignored should only lead to a conspiracy theory about a particular event if the believer also believes that that event is both important to their collective memory and is being ignored.

Global Status and collective memory

Not much research has been done on how perceived international prestige interacts with collective memory. I propose that international prestige can interact with collective memory in one of two ways. First, it can enhance the remembered role of a nation in world events. In Russia and the United States, citizens' national pride enhances the remembered role of their own countries in fighting World War 2, often to the point of excluding other countries.⁹⁷ Alternatively, it can enhance remembered slights against one's own country. In China, the memory of the "Century of Humiliation," in which China was subjected to invasions and unfair treatment by colonial adversaries, enhances modern perceptions that China is being treated unfairly.⁹⁸

As mentioned above, people are more likely to believe a conspiracy theory about a major event, because psychologically, major events demand major causes. However, like security, the importance of an event is also constructed. The importance of an event is a function of its role in the collective memory of the rememberer. In order to become major, it must be recognized as

⁹⁷ Russian collective memory is particularly exclusionary of other countries from its memory of World War 2. See Abel et al., "Collective Memories across 11 Nations for World War II."

⁹⁸ The Chinese government uses the memory of past humiliation to demonstrate how Western countries are capable of anti-Chinese conspiracies today. See Cheng, Zhang, and Zhang, "Authority-Led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

major. One extreme case of this is in the collective memory of the Battle of Masada. Until the 1920s, the Battle of Masada was an insignificant, poorly-attested, and unremembered battle in the First Roman-Jewish War. However, when the cause of Jewish settlers in Palestine became salient, the Battle of Masada became an important part of their collective memory, in large part due to a poem commemorating the battle.⁹⁹ The Battle of Masada was not naturally a major event; it was constructed as one and inserted into collective memory via a major work of literature.

Global Status in the Taiwanese context

Taiwan's global status has long been threatened. Even before the KMT retreated from the Mainland, American policymakers had second thoughts about supporting the ROC, and only committed to Taiwan after the Korean War began.¹⁰⁰ Both the KMT and anti-KMT activists felt American recognition of the PRC as a betrayal.¹⁰¹ In fact, it created a crisis so serious that a state of emergency was declared and elections were cancelled.¹⁰² Since its ascension to the world stage, China has sought to keep Taiwanese representatives out of worldwide meetings and organizations, even when they have seemingly little to do with politics.¹⁰³ During his presidency, Chen Shui-bian sought to gain more recognition for Taiwan and touted the global connections he

⁹⁹ Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett, "The Recovery of Masada."

¹⁰⁰ Cohen, *America's Response to China*, 155–90.

¹⁰¹ "Twenty Years Ago Today The U.S. Betrayed Taiwan"; Cohen, *America's Response to China*, 223.

¹⁰² Lu and Esarey, *My Fight for a New Taiwan*, 94–97.

¹⁰³ Chinese officials kept Annette Lu out of the inaugural World Conference on Women. See Lu and Esarey, 65–66; China has also excluded Taiwan from attending the World Health Organization, which has profound global health implications. See "Taiwan Excluded from WHO Annual Assembly Following Chinese Opposition."

made¹⁰⁴ even as his aggressive policies alienated existing and potential partners.¹⁰⁵ As a result of the importance he placed on it, global status became both a salient issue and an issue under threat.

Authors on the March 19 Shooting have sought to construct the shooting as a major event not just of national proportions, but of world proportions. One way they achieve this is by comparing it to the JFK assassination. The JFK assassination is used because, for conspiracy theorists, it represents another shooting which has been misrepresented by the official story.¹⁰⁶ Multiple works compare the legislature's investigation of the shooting to the Warren Commission which investigated JFK's assassination.¹⁰⁷ Annette Lu makes several explicit comparisons between elements of the two shootings, such as the official perpetrator, alleged mysterious deaths, and the unbelievability of the lone gunman theory.¹⁰⁸ Taiwanese criminologist Henry Lee 李昌鈺, who studied the shooting, even described it as a more difficult case than the JFK assassination (which he also investigated).¹⁰⁹ To maintain this construction, conspiracy theorists attempt to spread the conspiracy theory abroad. One feature film about the shooting was uploaded to the internet by its creators in its entirety with English subtitles.¹¹⁰ Its plot implies that the March 19 Shooting was the product of international intrigue involving Lee Teng-hui and his Japanese friend, lending a further international flair to the event.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ The president's office produced a 239-page photo album, in Chinese and English, depicting Chen Shui-bian's foreign policy prowess. 陳其邁., 深耕臺灣迎向世界.

¹⁰⁵ Copper, "Taiwan's Failed President," 186–89.

¹⁰⁶ 李建榮, 喬福正, and 偉修, 關鍵決策, 94.

¹⁰⁷ 朱坤茂 Kung-Mao Chu, "三一九槍擊時間真相調查特別委員會條例和憲爭議之研究 [The Study on the Constitutional Issues of the Act of the Special Commission on the Investigation of the Truth in Respect of the 319 Incident]," 57–60; 袁紅冰 [Yuan Hongbing], *Bei Qiu Jin de Taiwan*, 94–95.

¹⁰⁸ 呂秀蓮, 透视 319, 235–38.

¹⁰⁹ 李昌鈺 et al., 重返 319 槍擊現場: *Cracking more cases*, 6–7.

¹¹⁰ 幻術: *The Shooting of 319*.

¹¹¹ 幻術: *The Shooting of 319*, 1:42–1:44.

Alternatively, conspiracy spreaders can construct the shooting as a part of world history through its impact on Taiwan's international status. Yuan Hongbing's 袁紅冰 book *Imprisoned Taiwan* 《被囚禁的台灣》 presents the shooting as part of a Chinese (both CCP and KMT) plot to suppress Taiwanese nationalism.¹¹² As mentioned above, DPP legislator writing on the shooting presented it as an attempted “decapitation strike” which would make Taiwan easier to conquer.¹¹³ On a smaller scale, the pan-Blue voices who claimed that Chen Shui-bian had orchestrated the shooting were concerned by Chen's re-election because they opposed what they saw as Chen's attempts to change the country's official status from the Republic of China to a Republic of Taiwan, such as adding the name “Taiwan” to passports.¹¹⁴ By using rhetoric and concerns like those described here, conspiracy theory spreaders suggest that the place of the March 19 Shooting is not in Taiwanese history, but in world history.

Outside of Taiwan, March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories are not very popular. One rare example appeared in the lead up to Malaysia's 2018 elections, Barisan Nasional legislator Chong Sin Woon 张盛闻 raised fears that Mahathir Mohamad would “stage a March 19 Shooting” to win that year's elections.¹¹⁵ However, this is the exception that proves the rule. Because the March 19 Shooting is not nearly as recognized outside of Taiwan as these authors portray it, it suggests a cognitive dissonance with the outside world. These authors seem to be concerned that Taiwan and the major events occurring in the country are not getting enough attention from the

¹¹² 袁紅冰 [Yuan Hongbing], *Bei Qiu Jin de Taiwan*.

¹¹³ 陳明澤, 誰槍擊了臺灣總統?, 133.

¹¹⁴ Chen Ro-jinn 陳柔縉, “Opposition to ‘Taiwan’ on Passport Ludicrous.”

¹¹⁵ “张盛闻：投票日前夕 慎防马哈迪上演‘319 枪击案’ [Chong Sin Woon: Beware of Mahathir staging a ‘319 shooting’ on the eve of election day].”

rest of the world. This could be adding to the uncertainty created by the securitization of Taiwan's elections.

Global Status in the survey study

To test this hypothesis, survey respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with a statement that other countries should pay more attention to Taiwan and a statement that more people should pay attention to the March 19 Shooting.

3.1 Survey Study

For the survey portion of this study, 2003 Taiwanese people were surveyed via the survey company Kantar using a representative sample of the population. I used evidence from primary source material to devise the survey questions. The survey questions were designed to discover Taiwanese people's beliefs about the shooting and examine possible factors that may have led to their beliefs. The survey was administered through the survey company Kantar. After asking about demographics and political leanings, the survey asked how respondents had voted in 2004. It then briefly described the March 19 Shooting and asked if respondents had heard about it.¹¹⁶ If they had not, they were deemed outside of the population being examined and the survey ended for them. 1810 survey respondents, or about 90%, had heard of the shooting. Those who hadn't heard of the shooting trended younger, including about 30% of those 18 - 25 years old and 10%

¹¹⁶ A list of survey questions with exact wording is available in the appendix.

of those 26 - 35 years old. This is expected for a demographic which was not of voting age at the time the shooting occurred.

The survey then displayed a list of people and organizations and asked remaining respondents who they believed was responsible for the March 19 Shooting. The list provided included the criminal underworld, Chen Yi-hsiung,¹¹⁷ the Chinese Communist Party, the Kuomintang, the DPP, Lien Chan and James Soong, Chen Shui-bian, and an “Other” option. Respondents could select as many or as few of these as they wanted. This allowed the survey to examine the confluence of conspiracy ideas. Some respondents may be open to many theories about the event but are not certain which one is true. Others may have complicated conspiracy beliefs that cannot be captured in a predefined statement. Because the survey did not force respondents to choose a particular belief, answers to this question should be interpreted as expressing *openness* to a theory, rather than expressing a particular theory.

Following this, the questions relating to each hypothesis were asked. As a reminder, the three factors and their identified were as follows:

Factor 1: Partisanship

- a) Antipathy toward the opposing party leads to the belief that they can participate in conspiracies.
- b) Hypothesis 1: Survey respondents who express more partisan antipathy toward the other side will be more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory about them. Conversely, they will be less likely to endorse one about their own side.

¹¹⁷ Chen Yi-hsiung was specified as the suspect in the police investigation. While there were concerns this could bias survey respondents toward choosing him, this was deemed necessary because it was possible that survey respondents would remember his role but not his name. This also helped to differentiate him from Chen Shui-bian.

Factor 2: Security

- a) Belief that an election loss will endanger Taiwan's security will make conspiracy theories about elections more attractive.
- b) Hypothesis 2: Survey respondents who express a stronger belief that an election win for the opposing party will endanger Taiwan will be more likely to endorse a conspiracy theory that blames the opposing party.

Factor 3: Global Status

- a) Belief that Taiwan and the important events that happen in it are being ignored will make conspiracy theories about those events more attractive.
- b) Hypothesis 3: Survey respondents who are *both* concerned that Taiwan is being ignored *and* believe that the March 19 Shooting is being ignored will be more likely to express *any* conspiracy theory about the shooting.

The culprit data is displayed below.

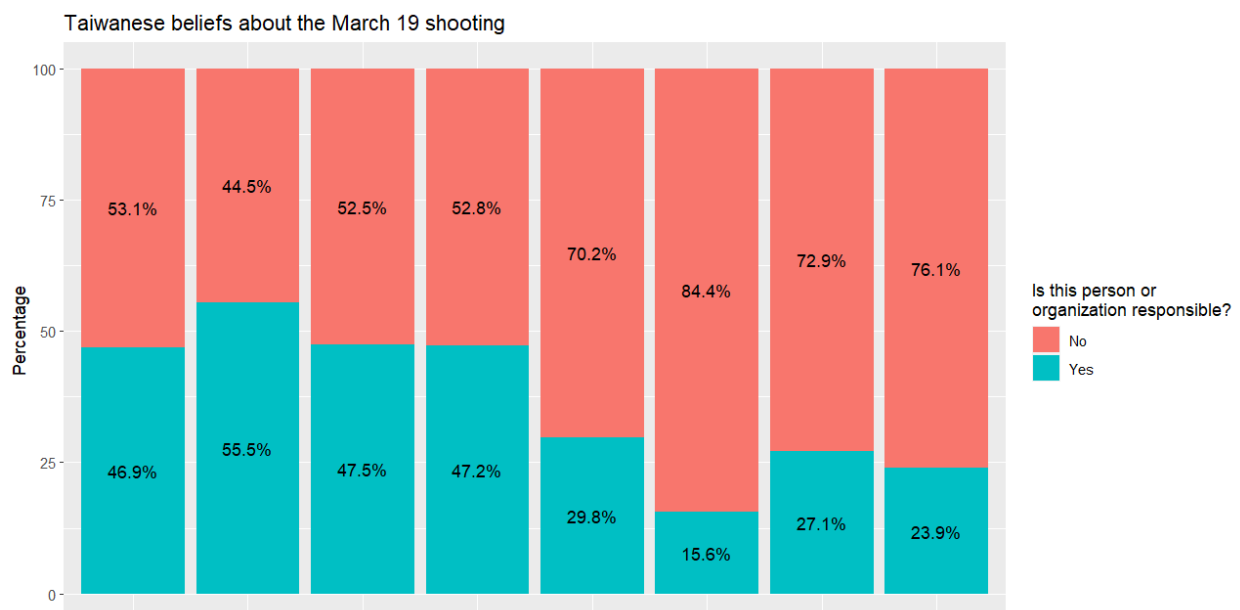


Figure 1: Taiwanese beliefs about the March 19 Shooting.

71% of respondents who had heard of the March 19 Shooting expressed openness to at least one conspiracy theory. However, 23% of these answered No to all, Yes to all, or only Other, which suggest that they were unsure of who to blame. This suggests considerable ambiguity in responses, but should not suggest that this 23% does not endorse a conspiracy explanation to the shooting. In fact, this reflects some authoritative conspiracy theory sources. For example, although Annette Lu has continually endorsed the idea that some kind of conspiracy was responsible for the shooting, her book about the shooting does not end by clearly blaming a specific culprit. Instead, she lists four possible conspiracies.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the 2008 report of the Legislature's 3/19 Shooting Incident Special Investigation Commission claims to debunk the "so-called truth" of the official police investigation, alleging a conspiracy and cover-up, but does not endorse a particular theory of the shooting.¹¹⁹

Overall, what these data indicate about the March 19 Shooting is that the primary way it has entered the collective memory is through the lens of conspiracy theory. For the large majority the 90% of Taiwanese who know about the shooting, conspiracy theories have some salience, which justifies further study.

¹¹⁸ 呂秀蓮, *透视 319*, 243.

¹¹⁹ 三一九槍擊事件真相調查特別委員會, *三一九槍擊事件: 總結報告*, 2.

Below is a heatmap of two-way combinations of culprits. Darker colors indicate a higher correlation. The trees above and to the side of the graph indicate clusters.

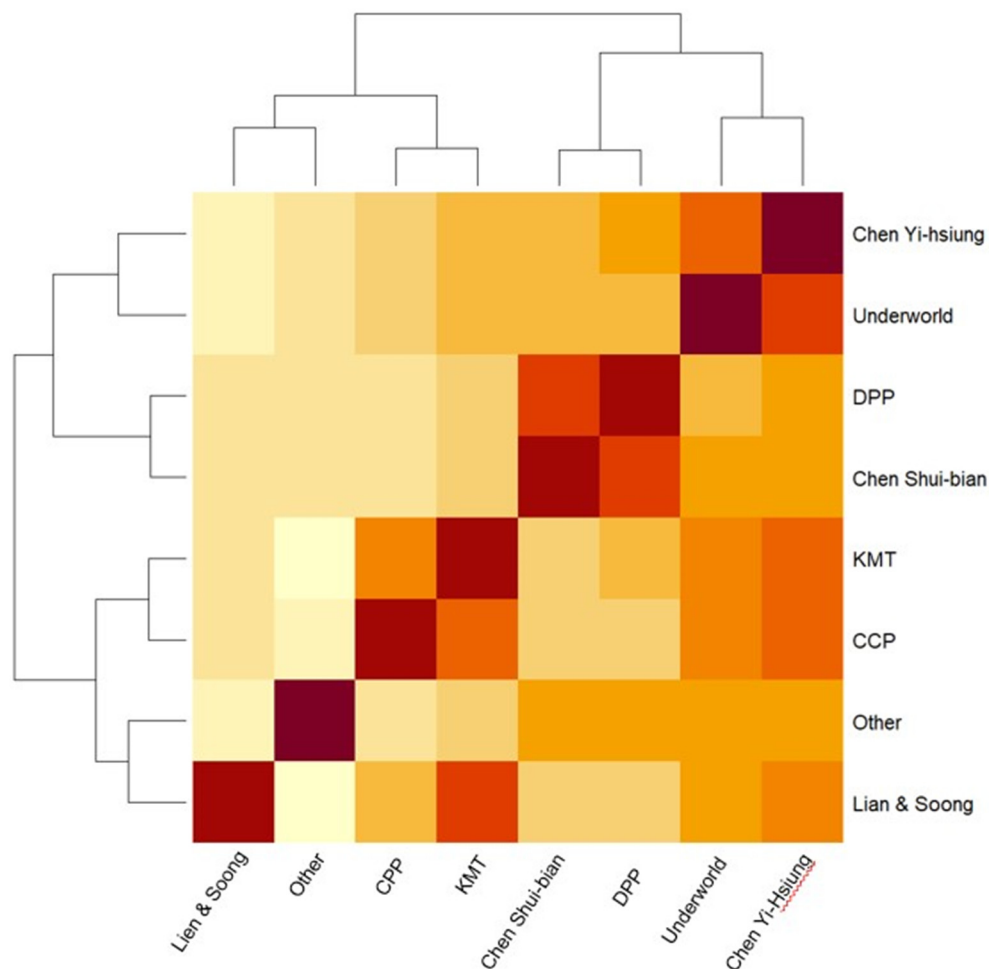


Figure 2: Heatmap of two-way combinations of culprits of the March 19 Shooting

The heatmap indicates that there seems to be two primary belief types:

- 1) Anti-DPP: This blames Chen Shui-bian and the DPP.
- 2) Anti-KMT: This blames the KMT, Lien and Soong, the CCP, the criminal underworld, and Chen Yi-hsiung.

The inclusion of the CCP in the anti-KMT culprits may be surprising, but is not atypical of anti-KMT conspiracy theories. For example, Yuan Hongbing's book on the March 19 Shooting claims that the CCP must have collaborated with the KMT in order to cover up the truth of the

shooting.¹²⁰ While the anti-DPP conspiracy theories are limited to a couple culprits, the anti-KMT conspiracy theories have a wide range of potential culprits. This may reflect a body of conspiracy theories which is not as well-defined as the anti-DPP conspiracy theories, likely because there are fewer authorities to define them.

3.2 Data Analysis

To analyze the relationship between each of the explanatory variables and conspiracy belief, I created a logistic regression model for each culprit in the survey.¹²¹ The answers for each question were coded to a number: Strongly disagree as 1, disagree as 2, don't know as 3,¹²² agree as 4, and strongly agree as 5. The variables were then used as continuous variables in the model.¹²³

¹²⁰ 袁紅冰 [Yuan Hongbing], *Bei Qiu Jin de Taiwan*.

¹²¹ Code and data for reproducing the analyses performed for this paper are available upon request. Contact william.j.martindale@outlook.com.

¹²² A “don't know” answer is not necessarily the same as a neutral answer. However, explanatory plots suggested that it was valid to model it as a middle ground between disagree and agree regardless.

¹²³ Ordinal variables cannot always be modeled as continuous predictors because there is no guarantee that the differences between each level are equal. However, in explanatory data analysis, all of the variables in the model were strongly linear with dependent variable. As a result, they can be treated like continuous variables. See Pasta, “Learning When to Be Discrete: Continuous vs. Categorical Predictors.”

At least one variable measuring partisanship was statistically significant at a $p < 0.005$ level¹²⁴ for every culprit except for the criminal underworld and Other. As observed above, these conspiracy theories are split into two camps.

These camps matched what was predicted from the heat map. Anti-DPP partisans are more likely to believe that the DPP and Chen Shui-bian were involved, and less likely to believe that the CCP, KMT, Lien & Soong, and Chen Yi-hsiung were involved. Anti-KMT partisans are more likely to believe that the CCP, KMT, Lien & Soong, and Chen Yi-hsiung were involved, and less likely to believe that the DPP and Chen Shui-bian were involved. This suggests that partisanship is, indeed, an important factor in conspiracy theory belief, and shows the effect of

| | Dependent variable: | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| | CCP (1) | KMT (2) | Lien and Soong (3) | Chen Yi-hsiung (4) | DPP (5) | Chen Shui-bian (6) | Criminal underworld (7) | Other (8) |
| DPP.security | -0.110* (0.061) | -0.080 (0.060) | 0.069 (0.072) | 0.087 (0.053) | 0.294*** (0.055) | 0.282*** (0.054) | 0.005 (0.052) | 0.018 (0.060) |
| DPP.corrupt | -0.180*** (0.061) | -0.246*** (0.061) | -0.215*** (0.072) | -0.232*** (0.055) | 0.430*** (0.058) | 0.354*** (0.057) | -0.073 (0.053) | 0.053 (0.061) |
| KMT.security | 0.464*** (0.058) | 0.403*** (0.056) | 0.333*** (0.068) | 0.143*** (0.048) | -0.194*** (0.052) | -0.153*** (0.051) | 0.176*** (0.048) | 0.104* (0.055) |
| KMT.corrupt | 0.124** (0.063) | 0.299*** (0.062) | 0.125* (0.074) | 0.142*** (0.050) | -0.085 (0.056) | -0.188*** (0.055) | -0.009 (0.049) | 0.091 (0.058) |
| attn.taiwan | -0.538*** (0.186) | -0.379** (0.192) | -0.651*** (0.214) | 0.017 (0.144) | -0.254 (0.159) | -0.320** (0.157) | 0.047 (0.146) | -0.245 (0.166) |
| attn.319 | -0.511* (0.272) | -0.265 (0.273) | -0.334 (0.295) | 0.011 (0.201) | -0.067 (0.224) | -0.091 (0.222) | 0.067 (0.203) | -0.176 (0.231) |
| attn.taiwan*attn.319 | 0.175*** (0.059) | 0.131** (0.060) | 0.158** (0.065) | 0.030 (0.045) | 0.072 (0.050) | 0.075 (0.049) | 0.021 (0.045) | 0.066 (0.051) |
| Constant | -0.469 (0.836) | -1.490* (0.866) | -1.121 (0.948) | -0.676 (0.646) | -1.493** (0.710) | -0.650 (0.699) | -1.105* (0.658) | -1.341* (0.746) |
| Observations | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 |
| Log Likelihood | -914.245 | -923.983 | -718.975 | -1,191.946 | -1,027.308 | -1,054.197 | -1,221.119 | -982.253 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,844.490 | 1,863.965 | 1,453.949 | 2,399.892 | 2,070.616 | 2,124.395 | 2,458.238 | 1,980.506 |

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Figure 3: Outputs for each full model by dependent variable.

¹²⁴ The Bonferroni correction would suggest that, using a rule-of-thumb alpha level of 0.05 for the whole study with eight different culprits, a good alpha level for an individual test would be 0.00625. I use 0.005 because it's a rounder number, though in this case it does not make a difference.

Taiwan's split collective memory. However, because pro-DPP and anti-KMT partisanship predicts belief that Chen Yi-hsiung was the culprit ($p < 0.005$ for both), it appears that partisanship does not only affect collective memory about conspiracy theories, but the official line as well.

At least one variable measuring securitization was statistically significant at a $p < 0.005$ level for every culprit except for Other. These were split into the same two camps as was observed with the Partisanship hypothesis, with the addition that anti-KMT partisans were more likely to believe that the criminal underworld was involved. The fact that the same camps are formed suggests that these two variables may be measuring the same thing. This is a natural danger when examining multiple variables that are correlated along a partisan line.

| | Dependent variable: | | | Dependent variable: | | | Dependent variable: | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | (1) | DPP (2) | (3) | (1) | CCP (2) | (3) | (1) | KMT (2) | (3) |
| DPP.security | 0.294*** (0.055) | 0.570*** (0.041) | | -0.110* (0.061) | -0.234*** (0.043) | | -0.080 (0.060) | -0.245*** (0.043) | |
| DPP.corrupt | 0.430*** (0.058) | | 0.683*** (0.043) | -0.180*** (0.061) | | -0.360*** (0.042) | -0.246*** (0.061) | | -0.394*** (0.042) |
| KMT.security | -0.194*** (0.052) | -0.245*** (0.042) | | 0.464*** (0.058) | 0.534*** (0.046) | | 0.403*** (0.056) | 0.564*** (0.045) | |
| KMT.corrupt | -0.085 (0.056) | | -0.265*** (0.044) | 0.124** (0.063) | | 0.453*** (0.049) | 0.299*** (0.062) | | 0.578*** (0.050) |
| attn.taiwan | -0.254 (0.159) | -0.277* (0.156) | -0.209 (0.156) | -0.538*** (0.186) | -0.490*** (0.185) | -0.515*** (0.181) | -0.379** (0.192) | -0.283 (0.189) | -0.367* (0.188) |
| attn.319 | -0.067 (0.224) | -0.101 (0.219) | 0.034 (0.220) | -0.511* (0.272) | -0.465* (0.271) | -0.595** (0.264) | -0.265 (0.273) | -0.178 (0.271) | -0.353 (0.267) |
| attn.taiwan*attn.319 | 0.072 (0.050) | 0.076 (0.049) | 0.055 (0.049) | 0.175*** (0.059) | 0.165*** (0.059) | 0.186*** (0.058) | 0.131** (0.060) | 0.112* (0.059) | 0.144** (0.058) |
| Constant | -1.493** (0.710) | -0.865 (0.692) | -1.663** (0.693) | -0.469 (0.836) | -0.699 (0.828) | 0.108 (0.812) | -1.490* (0.866) | -1.692** (0.853) | -0.929 (0.845) |
| Observations | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 | 1,810 |
| Log Likelihood | -1,027.308 | -1,055.730 | -1,049.876 | -914.245 | -919.377 | -950.867 | -923.983 | -939.853 | -952.633 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 2,070.616 | 2,123.460 | 2,111.752 | 1,844.490 | 1,850.754 | 1,913.733 | 1,863.965 | 1,891.705 | 1,917.266 |

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Figure 4: Outputs of three types of models (full, missing security, and missing corruption) for three possible culprits (DPP, CCP, and KMT)

To test whether this was the case, I used the Akaike Information Criterion to determine whether the full model with both Partisanship and Security variables was superior to models that dropped either of the sets of variables. For every culprit except the criminal underworld and Other, the full model was superior.¹²⁵ This proves that securitization is a factor in conspiracy theory belief outside of partisanship.

At least one of the Global Status variables were significant at a $p < 0.005$ level for the culprits CCP and Lien & Soong only. The beliefs that Taiwan was being ignored and that the March 19 Shooting was being ignored were individually negatively correlated with blaming these culprits. However, together, they were positively correlated. This suggests that, as predicted, the confluence of these beliefs is what relates to conspiracy belief, not the beliefs on their own.

However, because the Global Status factor was only connected with two culprits this suggests that Global Status is a factor in only one type of conspiracy belief. Given that the connection is strongest in connection with belief in CCP involvement, this suggests that the Global Status factor is connected most strongly to conspiracy theories involving international agents. Although this contradicted my initial hypothesis, in retrospect, this makes a lot of sense. The Global Status factor is connected with a collective memory of issues on the global stage. As mentioned above, China is directly responsible for the exclusion of Taiwan from world organizations, and this is a cause for bipartisan anxiety. Thus, unlike the other two factors, it is much less of a partisan matter. Lien & Soong, as the descendants of Mainlanders, are thus also

¹²⁵ For the sake of brevity, only three examples are provided.

suspect in this matter in a way that the modern KMT is not because they have much more direct ties to the mainland than most of the modern KMT.

4.1 Discussion

Some limiting factors of this paper should be addressed.

First, the study performed for this paper was a simple survey study, rather than an experimental study. Experimental studies of conspiracy theory beliefs, where researchers induced a particular feeling in a test subject and then tested their openness to conspiracy theories, have shown promising results.¹²⁶ Without an experimental element, only correlation between these factors has been empirically proven, not causation. That said, the primary source material does much to mitigate this weakness by providing examples of how conspiracy theory authorities have attempted to construct the narrative around the March 19 Shooting.

Another limiting factor of this study is that it does not account for the presence of a “conspiracy mindset.” Although the conspiracy mindset is not the only factor in belief in conspiracy theories, it is a significant one, and as a result belief in one conspiracy theory is correlated with belief in other conspiracy theories with similar salience.¹²⁷ One way to test this would have been to ask study participants about other conspiracy beliefs. However, because of the lack of literature on conspiracy theories in Taiwan, it was not feasible to choose one that was guaranteed to have enough salience to be a reasonable test.

¹²⁶ For example, Jolley and Douglas, “The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions” which was cited earlier.

¹²⁷ Laine and Parakkal, “National Security, Personal Insecurity, and Political Conspiracies.”

More research also needs to be done on conspiracy theories which arise out of securitization. So far, conspiracy theories have only been examined as a tool of securitization. However, as this paper shows, it is reasonable to believe that securitization is itself a factor in the popularization of conspiracy theories. Caution should be taken when choosing an object of study because in many cases, the securitization of a subject does not predate conspiracy theories about that subject.

4.2 Conclusion

March 19 Shooting conspiracy theories have remained so popular because they have salience to political partisans, as well as those concerned about Taiwan's security and global status. This salience is constructed by connecting the March 19 Shooting to existing collective memory concerning issues of partisan misbehavior, security threats around elections, and China's interference in Taiwan's international status. Additionally, these conspiracy theories attempt to reinforce these aspects of Taiwanese collective memory in favor of the ingroup that expresses them.

It is well known that partisanship and fears of insecurity drive conspiracy theories about events, especially if those events are very important. However, partisanship, security, and global status do not simply appear in a vacuum: they are subject to social construction. An event does not become salient to political partisans in a vacuum. A major event must be identified as a major event, and it must fit within the existing collective memory of major events for such identification to be broadly accepted.

James Soong's claim that the DPP conspiracy to win the election threatened Taiwanese security could only have been accepted if it fit within a broader collective memory of insecurity brought by the DPP. Similarly, the claims of some political figures that the shooting was a "decapitation strike" from the CCP aimed at destabilizing Taiwan could only have been accepted within a broader collective memory of military threat from the mainland. The allegations of illegal actions in the 2008 report of the 3/19 Shooting Incident Special Investigation Commission could only have been accepted within a broader collective memory of corruption in Taiwan. All of these authority figures participated in a wider attempt to memorialize the shooting as an important event in Taiwanese—and worldwide—political history.

The conspiracy theories surrounding the March 19 Shooting, therefore, are an exercise in both memory and the creation of memory. They are attractive because they fit into existing elements of Taiwanese collective memory, but the promotion of them has its own effect on reinforcing that memory and constructing new memory. They act as regular reminders of the danger that Taiwan faces, both externally and from opposing political parties, while creating a new element of memory—one in which the president and vice president are shot, and the nation is powerless to learn why.

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Appendix

Code and data used for the analysis is available upon request. For more information, email william.j.martindale@outlook.com. The Kantar survey was performed along with three other studies in collaboration with Professor Amy Liu at UT-Austin. Following are the survey questions provided for Kantar to translate and give to survey recipients in Taiwan.

Question 35

Who did you vote for in the 2004 Presidential Election?

- a. Chen Shui-bian
- b. Lien Chan
- c. Neither – I was not eligible to vote because I was too young to vote
- d. Neither – I was unable to return home to vote
- e. Neither – I did not like the two candidates
- f. Neither – For other reasons

On March 19, 2004, President Chen Shui-Bian and Vice President Annette Lu were shot during a campaign event. Later, this was called the 319 Shooting Incident. Have you heard of this incident?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Do you think the following individual/organization was responsible for the 319 Shooting Incident?

| | Yes | No (Not Mentioned) |
|-------------------------------------|-----|--------------------|
| _a: the criminal underworld | | |
| _b: Chen Yi-hsiung (police suspect) | | |
| _c: CCP (Beijing/China) | | |
| _d: Kuomintang | | |
| _e: DPP | | |
| _f: Lian Chan and James Soong | | |
| _g: Chen Shui-bian | | |
| _h: Other | | |

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

| | Strongly agree | Somewhat agree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know |
|--|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
| _a: The DPP is corrupt. | | | | | |
| _b: The KMT is corrupt. | | | | | |
| _c: If the DPP continued in government, it would endanger Taiwan's national security | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| _d: If the KMT entered government, it would endanger Taiwan's national security | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

| | Strongly agree | Somewhat agree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know |
|---|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
| _a: Every country needs to pay more attention to Taiwan's importance | | | | | |
| _b: More people should pay attention to the importance of the 319 Shooting Incident | | | | | |