# THE EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY IN TAIWAN

*[This is a useful nutshell history of Taiwan since WWII, helpful in understanding its tussle with Chicom China.]*

The problem of identity is the most important issue in Taiwanese politics, occupying the center stage for both presidential campaigns and cross-strait relations. In recent years, there has been a notable decline in Chinese identification in Taiwan.

This decline is the result of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s monopolization of Chinese identity since the 1970s. Beijing's goal is to use Chinese nationalism and cultural appeal to draw Taiwan closer to the mainland. However, it backfires by pushing Taiwan away; Taiwanese people are searching for an alternative identity to demonstrate their difference with the PRC.

Following its defeat in mainland China by Mao Tse-Tung's Communists, Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China (ROC) government relocated to Taiwan. However, the Kuomintang (KMT) retained its devotion as a party of Chinese nationalists (the literal translation of the party name). The KMT made "reconquering the mainland" the mission for everyone on Taiwan. The island was to become the bastion against communism and a base for the KMT's eventual return to the mainland.

Under this narrative, Taiwan is part of the ROC, and a separate Taiwanese state does not exist. Taiwan's sovereignty was returned to the ROC after Japan's surrender in 1945, recognized by the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations; prior to that, the island had been a colony of imperial Japan since 1895.

Another way to demonstrate Chinese nationalism was through cultural promotion and preservation.

During the retreat to Taiwan, the Nationalists brought national treasures from the Forbidden City in Beijing, including the original scripts of imperial dynastic histories, to Taipei and stored them in the Taipei Palace Museum. This gesture symbolized the KMT's efforts to claim that the ROC is the legitimate heir of Chinese dynasties.

More broadly, the ROC government enforced policies to promote Chinese culture in Taiwan to preserve its claim to be the legitimate government of the entire China. The government renamed streets in Taipei after Confucian virtues and places in the mainland. Mandarin was made the official language and the only language at school; students who did not speak Mandarin would face punishment.

Non-Mandarin radio and television programs were limited to a few hours a day. Students were required to learn every detail of Chinese history and geography at school, including train stations on railroad lines in the mainland.

The international recognition of the ROC rested on its claim to be the sole representative of China on the international stage. The ROC's international recognition and participation in the United Nations and other international organizations strengthened this claim.

Therefore, the Chiang Kai-shek government adopted the policy of "?????," a quote from the Three Kingdoms era (220-280 AD) that means "true Chinese and the rebel could not stand together."

Zhuge Liang, the premier of Shuhan, a kingdom in Sichuan built by the decadents of Han Dynasty imperial households, used this phrase to justify his policies of refusing to engage with the kingdom of Wei in Northern China and military invasions to reunify China.

Using this historical example as an allusion, the Chiang government claimed that the ROC was the only legitimate government of China, the mainland was under rebel control, and international engagement with China should only go through the ROC government. Under this policy, Taipei would cut relations with any country or organization that recognized the PRC government in Beijing.

The ROC's claim as China's sole representation suffered a major blow in 1971. The U.N. adopted General Assembly Resolution 2758 on October 25, 1971, which "to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it."

To avoid further humiliation, Chiang ordered the delegation to walk out of the United Nations. After walking out, the head of the ROC delegation declared that the ROC was a U.N. founding member after great sacrifices and contributions in World War II, and compared Resolution 2758 to the

appeasement policy in the Munich Agreement, which led to further Nazi aggression.

In Chiang's declaration after the ROC withdrew from the U.N., he continued to invoke the mainland-centric narrative and claim legitimacy to represent all of China. He referred to the PRC as the "Maoist-Communist bandit group," which purged millions of Chinese compatriots.

Chiang also stressed that the ROC government represented China to sign the U.N. Declaration after World War II. Therefore, the ROC should be the real representation of China and the 700 million Chinese people.

The retreat from the U.N. and the loss of recognition from the United States, Japan, and other Western countries shortly thereafter was a significant blow to the ROC's claim as the sole representation of China. Beijing launched an international offense to establish diplomatic relations with foreign countries and claimed the ROC's seat in international organizations.

By squeezing Taiwan's international space, the PRC aims to demonstrate the One China principle, which positions Beijing as the central government while Taipei is a local government. Beijing increasingly monopolized the meaning of being "Chinese" and equated it with PRC identity. Being Chinese, in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party, means supporting the PRC's political system and the party's ideology.

Those who disagree with the CCP's vision would be labeled "traitors" or "scum of the nation."

The 1979 "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan" was released the same day the PRC established a diplomatic relationship with the United States.

On the day the ROC lost its most important ally, the message served as Beijing's victory declaration, as it could deal with Taipei from a position of strength. The message was delivered on behalf of the entire Chinese nation, stating that "every Chinese, in Taiwan or on the mainland, has a compelling responsibility for the survival, growth, and prosperity of the Chinese nation."

Therefore, "The important task of reunifying our motherland …. is an issue no one can evade or should try to." Those who refuse unification would "go down in history as a traitor of the nation."

The message further declared, "The world in general recognizes only one China, with the government of the People's Republic of China as its sole legal government. The recent conclusion of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the normalization of relations between China and the United States show still more clearly that no one can stop this trend."

The international recognition of the PRC further supported Beijing's monopoly over Chinese identity.

While the ROC lost its international recognition to the PRC, it was also facing increasing domestic pressure for change. Since the KMT's arrival in 1945, the native Taiwanese (*benshengren,* ???) never trusted the ROC regime and mainlanders (*waishengren,* ???).

The 2-28 Incident of 1947 further aggravated this mutual distrust into mutual hatred after the heavy KMT crackdown on Taiwanese protests.

Reacting to the KMT's policy to forge a mainland-centric Chinese identity, the Taiwanese advocated nativization, which aimed to replace mainland themes with Taiwan themes. Authors depicted characters who spoke local dialects and wrote stories about their lives in Taiwan.

Taiwanese political activists also struggled for democratization under the banner of nativization and even independence.

The growing native identity in Taiwan and the PRC's monopoly over the Chinese identity put the KMT and the Waishengren in Taiwan in a dilemma. Second and third-generation waishengren were born and raised in Taiwan; mainland China was the place where their fathers and grandfathers came from. This generational change meant that young waishengren have less affection toward the mainland, a place many have never been to.

The KMT refused the Taiwan independence narrative and felt suspicious toward native Taiwanese identity. However, the PRC's definition of China was also alien; they refused to subscribe to the CCP's nationalistic visions. The PRC's increasing monopoly over the definition of China meant that people in Taiwan could not express their identity in line with how China is defined worldwide, which equates to the PRC.

Facing this dilemma, the KMT leaders sought to reshape their identity. Starting with Chiang Ching-kuo (1910-1988), Chiang Kai-shek's son and successor, the KMT selectively embraced elements of native Taiwanese identity to reinvigorate KMT's legitimacy.

Between 1973 and 1979, Taiwanese representation on the KMT central standing committee more than doubled. In 1982, Chiang Ching-kuo elevated Lee Teng-hui, a native Taiwanese technocrat, to vice president and later his successor. In addition, Chiang decided to lift martial law and revoked

bans on newspapers, other publications, and political parties, which granted Taiwanese more political power and representation.

When Lee Teng-hui became the first Taiwan-born KMT president, he faced a dilemma. He had to shape a collective identity for over 20 million Taiwanese people that was distinct from the PRC narrative, which was increasingly monopolizing Chinese identity, while maintaining the KMT's one China and national unification principles in his 1992 National Unification Guideline.

To square this impossible circle, Lee introduced the concept of New Taiwanese, which tried to bridge the gap between the ethnic differences among Taiwanese, waishengren, and Indigenous peoples. He defined New Taiwanese as anyone who "lives in and loves Taiwan." This definition allows waishengren to resolve their identity crisis and express their identity with this new concept.

In addition, following the democratization in Taiwan and the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, both waishengren and Taiwanese increasingly associated their identity with liberal democratic values. Democracy also reinforced this Taiwan-first identity because KMT must appeal to voters in Taiwan.

Since Lee, this value-based identity has become increasingly accepted by the Taiwanese public. Former President Ma Ying-Jeou of the KMT expressed that "liberal democracy" is the "historical pre-condition" for cross-strait peaceful development. He also stated that "democracy, liberty, human rights, and the rule of law" are the "core values of Taiwan"; Taiwan would be alienated if the PRC government cannot advance these values.

In 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed advocating Taiwanese nationalism in political opposition to the KMT.

Taiwan's two DPP presidents to date, Chen Shui-bian and Tsai Ing-wen, moved away from the traditional Taiwanese-focused ethno-nationalistic position of the DPP and accepted a value-based identity to unify the entire Taiwanese population.

Today, different identities remain at the front and center of cross-strait differences. The PRC must understand the evolution of identity in Taiwan to make a successful Taiwan policy.

The current Taiwanese identity is a rejection of the PRC's authoritarian political system rather than the rejection of China as a cultural entity; the crackdown on Hong Kong since 2019 further aggravated this rejection. Beijing's continued monopolization of Chinese identity only pushes

Taiwan society away and forces the Taiwan public to find an alternative way to express their identity.

Beijing must adopt an open approach in influencing the identity discussion in Taiwan. First, the PRC should engage with all political forces in Taiwan, including the DPP. Freezing the DPP out of conversations will not lead to any breakthrough in shaping identity politics in Taiwan.

Second, the PRC should disassociate the concept of China with the PRC's polity, and invite Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, Macauanese, and overseas Chinese to define China jointly.

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