

Taiwanese identity

Island spirit rising

by A-chin Hsiau

Over the past dozen years, Taiwan's economy has become deeply integrated with China's, and the recent stirrings of political rapprochement mean those economic ties are likely to grow closer. Yet the threat of war will continue to hang over the Taiwan Strait so long as China's claim to sovereignty is incompatible with the wishes of the majority of the Taiwanese people, who feel Taiwanese rather than Chinese and believe that Taiwan should maintain its *de facto* independence. This view is intimately connected with the politics of national identity in Taiwan, which is centered on the issue of political and cultural "indigenization" (*bentuhua*).

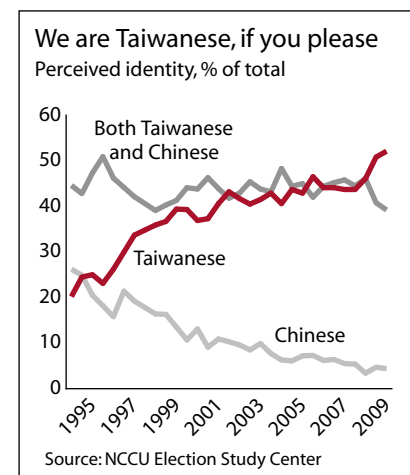
Taiwan's identity politics emerge from the fault line between "native" residents of Taiwan (*benshengren*) and post-1945 immigrant "mainlanders" from China (*waishengren*). That fissure broadly survives to this day in the split between supporters of indigenization – the so-called "pan-green" camp, led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – and proponents of eventual reunification with China – the "pan-blue" camp, headed by the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT). Attempts to indigenize Taiwanese culture and politics began in the early 1970s, when a "native soil" (*xiangtu*) trend in literature helped spawn a political movement opposed to the mainlander-dominated KMT government. Widespread debates on Taiwan consciousness in the early 1980s fostered a popular tide of Taiwanese nationalism that finally swept the pro-independence DPP to power in 2000 after 55 years of KMT rule. But the pendulum swung back from green to blue in 2008, when the KMT regained power.

Succession of masters

For thousands of years, aborigines speaking Malayo-Polynesian languages lived on Taiwan. The first Chinese settlers did not arrive until 1624, when the Dutch East India Company occupied the southwest of the island. In 1683 the Qing dynasty claimed sovereignty, but treated Taiwan as little more than a deserted frontier for exiles, criminals and pirates. Over the 200 years of Qing rule, however, thousands of settlers arrived voluntarily, mainly Fujianese from across the Taiwan Strait. By the end of the 19th century, the southern Fujian dialect – Minnan – had become Taiwan's lingua franca.

In 1895, the Qing dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Common opposition to the Japanese gradually created a sense of shared identity among the Chinese settlers on the island, who came to think of themselves as Taiwanese. During the first 25 years of colonial rule, there were frequent armed revolts. In the early 1920s, Taiwanese intellectuals began a series of non-violent resistance activities – worker

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and farmer movements, literary creation, and appeals to the colonial authorities for increased representation and self-government. But in the 1930s, the authorities cracked down on this incipient nationalism and undertook a campaign of *Kominka* – “imperialization” – to involve the Taiwanese people in the war effort against China and the Allies.

In 1945, General MacArthur ordered Japanese forces in China and Taiwan to surrender to Chinese president Chiang Kai-shek, who declared Taiwan a province of the Republic of China. The seeds of Taiwan's modern indigenization movement were sown by the uneven distribution of political and cultural power between mainlanders and local Taiwanese under the authoritarian KMT state. In 1947 local anger at the rampant corruption and economic failure of the KMT government exploded into an indigenous uprising, violently suppressed by Chiang's troops. The “February 28th Incident” marked the start of a 40-year period of “White Terror” in which thousands of Taiwanese were killed or imprisoned. Following the end of the civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, Taiwan harbored the defeated KMT regime, along with more than 1m refugees. By 1956 these outsiders, together with those mainland Chinese who had immigrated to Taiwan during 1945-49, comprised about 10% of the population.

Taiwan in the 1950s-60s was shaped by the KMT government, which basically viewed the island as a springboard for returning to China. Political institutions, cultural policy, school education and social propaganda were imbued with the government's exilic mentality. The main thrust of KMT rule was to “Sinicize” Taiwan, which the displaced regime believed had been poisoned by Japanese colonialism. Typically, historical memories and cultural traditions peculiar to local Taiwanese were discredited. Until the 1970s, the brutal grip of the KMT's Leninist Party-state prevented outright opposition to its policies. But when the KMT was forced to initiate political reform in the 1970s, following China's replacement of Taiwan in the United Nations, the indigenization movement started to blossom.

The idea of Taiwan

Taiwan's cultural elite were the first force to begin molding an independent Taiwanese identity

The process of molding an independent Taiwanese identity began with the local cultural elite, who attempted to revive Taiwan's forgotten cultural legacy by promoting nativist writing and rediscovering local literature written under Japanese occupation. In an effort to build a sense of collective identity among local Taiwanese, they also related the neglected history of Taiwanese resistance to Japanese colonialism. The flowering of Taiwanese nationalism over the past 20 years is based on this constructed collective memory, which emphasizes the uniqueness of Taiwanese society, culture and history.

This cultural revival was taken up by political dissidents, referred to as *dangwai* (“outside the Party,” ie outside the KMT), who demanded social and political reforms based on the reality that the Republic of China consisted only of Taiwan. They argued that Taiwan should establish itself as a democracy and secure international recognition as a sovereign state. The

dangwai opposition set in motion a political movement centered on three related demands: that local Taiwanese enjoy equal political rights with the mainlander elite; that local Taiwanese be allowed to stand in democratic elections; and that Taiwan should seek an independent national identity. The DPP's electoral victories in 2000 and 2004 marked the successful culmination of this process of political indigenization.

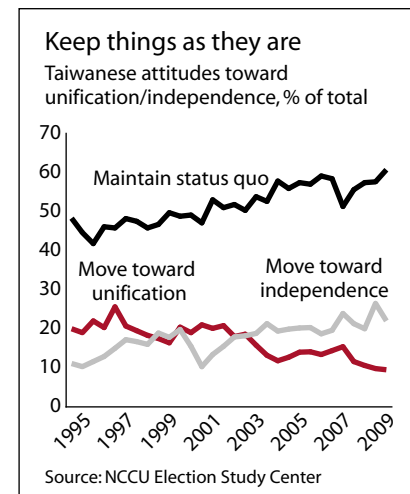
Some of the most striking differences between Taiwan and China today are found in popular attitudes to Japan. Anti-Japanese resentment in China, rooted in the traumatic memory of war against Japanese invasion in 1937-45, remains widespread and intense. In contrast, a significant proportion of Taiwanese – most of whom have no historical memory of war-time atrocities perpetrated by Japanese in China – appreciate Japan's colonial legacy. Nostalgia for the years of Japanese rule is not limited to the pre-war generation that grew up in the colonial period. Rather, the post-war generations have rewritten a Taiwanese history in which the Japanese colonial period forms a central part.

A good example is the phenomenal success of *Cape No. 7* (*Haijiao qihao*), which since its release in 2008 has become the best-selling movie in Taiwan's history. The film pairs two love stories, each with a Japanese interest, set in the south of the island. The first story recounts the failed romance between a Taiwanese woman and a Japanese elementary school teacher forced to leave Taiwan at the end of colonial rule. The second, set in the 2000s, depicts the emerging romance between a young Taiwanese singer and a Japanese model. The film, which creatively integrates a yearning for the colonial past and a strong sense of local belonging, does not directly invoke the idea of Taiwanese political independence. But it speaks volumes for the popular indigenization of the Taiwanese national imagination.

The shadow across the water

Since the late 1990s, China has become increasingly strident in its criticisms of “independent Taiwanese culture” (*wenhua taidu*), which challenges the China-centric viewpoint first adopted by the ruling KMT elite and still pushed by Beijing. The attempt to project an indigenous identity reflects, in part, popular resistance in the face of China's growing international power and continued claim to sovereignty over Taiwan. Thanks to international pressure from Beijing, Taiwanese statehood is only recognized by 23 small countries around the world. Gaining acceptance to international organizations comprised of independent nation states requires demonstrating Taiwan's historical and cultural particularity. By rediscovering and remolding elements of the past to create a new national identity, supporters of Taiwanese independence are following a well-worn path in postcolonial societies.

Yet there is also much domestic discontent about the trend toward indigenization. Taiwan's “mainlanders,” especially, fear political and cultural marginalization. The rapid progress of democratization in the 1990s, and the political conflict following the DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian's sudden victory over the KMT candidate Lien Chan in 2000, polarized Taiwan



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into two camps – blue and green. From 2000-08, the DPP government instituted moderate policies of “de-Sinicization” or Taiwanization. But the election of Ma Ying-jeou, a second-generation mainlander committed to reunifying Taiwan with China, has basically brought such policies to an end for the time being. While the national cultural debates and political struggles are ongoing, Ma is seeking rapprochement with China.

The blue-green split – which draws its momentum from the old Taiwanese-mainlander tension, even if the division does not correspond exactly to the old cultural distinction – is in no immediate danger of dissolving. Surveys show a growing number of Taiwanese identifying themselves as purely Taiwanese, and there is a clear trend towards a greater sense of national independence. This includes a growing number of third-generation “mainlanders,” who are more likely than their elders to feel Taiwanese rather than Chinese. On the other hand, China’s growing might cannot be ignored. Taiwan cannot risk losing its biggest trading partner. But the virulent public criticism meted out to both Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou in itself shows that a full rapprochement cannot come without political change on the mainland. Democracy is now an essential element of Taiwanese identity.