

**Taiwanese Identity:
From Ethnonationalism to Civic Nationalism**

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Taiwan has evolved a unique identity and complex situation through the effects of colonization and the government-in-exile of the Republic of China. Like other nations in the Asian region, the birth of a Taiwanese identity was facilitated by the Japanese colonial administration of the island. However, another layer of complexity was created by the handover of administration to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists or Kuomintang government after the surrender of the Japanese in 1945 and then later by the migration of the party to effectively rule the Republic of China as a government-in-exile on the island after its defeat in the civil war in 1949. The presence of outsiders both during the colonial period and KMT's authoritarian period solidified a Taiwanese identity that competed with the official nationalism of the state. Taiwanese identity, however, was not a static concept after formation. It has changed and evolved over the course of decades due to the influences of government policy, external and domestic political situations, and how people view themselves within the framework of identity. Shelley Rigger's work on generational differences regarding the people's views on Taiwanese identity will be important in this discussion. Why are there differences between generations of Taiwanese about their identity? What made the new generations think and approach Taiwanese identity and nationalism differently than the earlier ones? This paper argues that the KMT's choices to implement Taiwanization policy and to democratize in the 1990s created a shift in the core of Taiwanese identity away from ethnolinguistic lines to a more inclusive identity based on shared democratic institutions for the new generations. The policies created a new type of conceptual space for newer Taiwanese that took the emphasis off of how different they were based on ethnicity or language but instead focused on democracy as a main value, culture and unifying factor of Taiwanese identity.

The Birth of Taiwanese Identity

Taiwanese identity did not form until the colonial period under the Japanese. Previous to Japanese administration starting in 1895, Taiwan was first left alone and then incorporated into the Chinese empire in 1683.¹ People during that period did not identify themselves as Taiwanese in the national identity sense since the concept of nationalism did not yet exist. However, the Japanese colonial period coincided with the spread of nationalism as a concept across the globe after the Westphalian model of nation-states, which did not exist in the 17th and 18th centuries. Similar to Benedict Anderson's work on the development of "imagined communities" in Southeast Asia during the colonial period due to the roles of education, census, and print-capitalism², Japan's education and census systems on Taiwan contributed to the formation of a Taiwanese consciousness, separate from Japanese identity. The Japanese built infrastructure and set up modern education system in Taiwan after colonization, and incorporated Taiwan as a geographical place into the Japanese empire. The modern education system granted the Taiwanese elites with skills and access to modern concepts like nationalism, but due to discriminatory policies enacted by the Japanese colonial state, the Taiwanese elites could not reach their full potential. They were barred from entering "imperial administrative office(s)" due to racial discrimination even though Taiwanese and Japanese were part of the same empire.³ Education system granted them the same type of education as Japanese but racial policies based on the census determined the limited fates of Taiwanese intelligentsia. The census delineated between Japanese and Taiwanese based on ethnicity and thus created an "other" despite the

1 June Teufel Dreyer, "The Evolution of Language Policies and National Identity in Taiwan," in *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, ed. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, 391 (London: MIT Press, 2003).

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), 120.

3 Shih-jung Tzeng, *From Honto Jin to Bensheng Ren: The Origin and Development of Taiwanese National Consciousness*, (Toronto: University Press of America, 2009), xxiv.

assimilation policies to make Taiwanese people into “Japanese”. The Japanese made it clear that Taiwanese and Japanese were different and this demarcation spurred the rhetoric of a distinct Taiwanese culture that was different and unique compared to Japanese culture. This contradiction from the colonial state created an opportunity for Taiwanese intelligentsia to conceptualize themselves with a “Taiwanese” identity in contrast to “Japanese” identity and the concept centered around the island based on the administrative situation of the colony. Wu Rwei-ren argued that the colonial space of Taiwan was turned into a national space in the minds of Taiwanese intelligentsia with nationalist discourse based on anti-colonialism in 1910s and 1920s.⁴ The colonial map was limited to Taiwan and did not include mainland China, thus the identity in the minds of Taiwanese stopped at the border of the island and not beyond. Therefore, the colonial period saw the creation of a Taiwanese identity that was not attached to mainland China with the “imagined community” of Taiwan limited to the island. The advent of a Taiwanese identity or consciousness competed with the official nationalism from the colonial state that promoted Japanese nationalism based on assimilation.

The Japanese were the first “other” that influenced Taiwanese identity and after World War II, the mainlanders (Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists) were the second group of “others” to exert impact on the evolution Taiwanese identity. After the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, Taiwan was given back to the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek's rule. Taiwan was reincorporated into the geography of China after the handover and in extension, back into the Chinese identity sphere that Chiang wanted to impose on Taiwan. Compared to the efficient Japanese, Chiang's troops were looked upon as insensitive, corrupt, and backwards⁵; Mainlanders were seen as the “pigs” that came after the “dogs” and while dogs protect the

4 Ibid, xxii.

5 Dreyer, 394.

property, pigs make a mess.⁶ They were seen as replacement colonizers after the Japanese because of the “other” or “outsider” status. The February 28 Incident in 1947, that exploded from KMT agents wounding an elderly woman who was selling illegal cigarettes, further solidified the gap between mainlanders and Taiwanese. Mainlanders are called *waishengren* or people from outside of the province and Taiwanese are *benshengren* or people from the province or Taiwan. The distinction in terminology based on a person's origins further demarcated the Taiwanese from the outsider mainlanders and created the rhetorical framework for identity politics and norms in Taiwan. The Incident therefore became a symbol of KMT oppression and a tool for a Taiwanese identity that is anti-KMT and thus anti-Chinese identity.⁷

The migration of Chiang, KMT, and mainlanders after their defeat from the Communists in 1949 created an environment where there were two competing identities and nationalisms: Chinese national identity and Taiwanese national identity. Chiang and KMT which still had claim to China as the “Republic of China” tried to Sinocize the island with their official nationalism based on China as the geographic unit and Taiwan as part of that space both geographically and conceptually. Sinocization was part of Chiang's nation building process and establishing Mandarin as the official language was a crucial component.⁸ The imposition of Mandarin as the official language on the island where majority (70%) of the people are Hoklo and speak Hokkien⁹ was very much the same as the Japanese imposing Japanese as the official language during colonial times. Due to official nationalism based on Chinese nationalism and identity under Chiang, the KMT ignored and rejected Hoklo and Hakka cultures and languages

6 Robert Edmonson, “The February 28 Incident and National Identity,” in *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, ed. Stéphane Corcuff, 27 (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

7 Edmonson, 28.

8 Dreyer, 395.

9 Ibid, 387.

which were part of local Taiwanese identity¹⁰, because there was no space for them in Chiang's nation building process. The KMT also imposed martial law after the February 28 Incident and the Incident became the Taiwanese locals' collective memory of KMT oppression.¹¹ The collective memory served as a unifying force, just like during anti-colonial periods in Southeast Asia, and the contrast between Taiwanese collective memory and KMT national history further separated the masses from the mainlander elites. It also served as an example of the usage of memory and the iconization of an event as a tool for cultivating a Taiwanese national identity that is anti-KMT and in extension separate from Chinese or mainlander because they are the “other”.

The presence of outsiders, the Japanese and the KMT and their official nationalisms and the contradictions helped facilitate the birth of a unique Taiwanese national identity or imagined community. The Taiwanese imagined community that ended at the border of the island competed with the Japanese imagined community that included Taiwan into the empire during colonial period and the Chinese imagined community that included Taiwan with mainland China during the postwar period. The historical account of the development of a Taiwanese identity that competed with the state-sponsored Chinese nationalism sets the background for discussions on Taiwanization and democratization and their effects on generational politics with regards to identity. Taiwanization policies and the democratization of Taiwan are closely related and interlaced, so they will be explained together.

Taiwanization and Democratization

The mainlanders were seen as outsiders and the KMT as the party that represented only

10 Edmonson, 30.

11 Ibid.

the interests of those mainland outsiders. The policies under Chiang Kai-shek reflected that idea because his main goal was to eventually retake the mainland and so he tailored Taiwan to fit the image of the Republic of China and not just Taiwan. However, domestic and external pressures caused the party to re-evaluate its policy on identity. Hoklo activism increased during the 1960s, culminating in the anti-KMT movement to coalesce into the “tangwai” movement since opposition parties were illegal.¹² Being anti-KMT was also anti-Chinese identity that the KMT supported and promoted. The Hoklo wanted their own culture to be recognized and used print capitalism to spread their nativist movement. Grassroots pressures for a unique Taiwanese identity and also for democratization pushed at the government's bottom-line. This pressure also coincided with what was happening on the international stage. In 1979, the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and dropped recognition of the Republic of China.¹³ The increasing trend of international powers to recognize the PRC instead of ROC was a serious blow to the KMT's legitimacy on Taiwan and as a party. The KMT's identity was tied to the ROC and to its claims over the mainland but the government lost that claim and thus, its position for Chinese nationalism on Taiwan grew more and more hollow for the *bensheng* Taiwanese. To the natives, if the persona or identity of the ROC for the island no longer held water in the international stage, then it was time for another identity that was separate from the mainland. The forces for democratization fed into the momentum for the recalibration of identity because the KMT had to worry about survival after it lost one of the centrepieces of its legitimacy. During the hard authoritarian period under Chiang Kai-shek, Chinese identity was imposed on them through education, use of history, and language. There was no political space within the KMT or official party political institutions to discuss

12 Ibid, 398.

13 Ibid.

alternatives since opposition parties were illegal. A critical juncture came in 1986 when Chiang Ching-kuo decided to liberalize and allow the formation of the Democratic Progressive Party as a formal opposition party.¹⁴ The advent of an opposition party created the political space within formal institutions to discuss a Taiwanese identity and gave the grassroots movement a formal voice and face. However, the existence of a real opposition party with organizational power (as opposed to “tangwai” candidates) and the norm of elections at the local level since the 1940s¹⁵ proved to be challenges to KMT's survival in the 1970s. The logic and priority for the party changed from concentrating its base to mainlanders or *waisheng* Taiwanese to recruiting more natives into the party, which reached 85% in the 1970s.¹⁶ In order to increase electability, the KMT wanted to have an identity as an indigeneous party, like the DPP.¹⁷ The introduction of democratic pressures changed the KMT internally to a Taiwanese majority party and provided the logic to pursue Taiwanization policies regarding identity. The effect of native recruitment was seen in Lee Teng-hui, the *bensheng* KMT president after Chiang Ching-kuo post-1988. President Lee pushed for Taiwanization because it was the inevitable result of democratization in a country where *bensheng* Taiwanese are a huge majority.¹⁸ Democratization was supported by Lee since he continued the liberalization started by Chiang Ching-kuo. In his book *The Road to Democracy: Taiwan's Pursuit of Identity*, democracy and Taiwanese identity were interrelated. He espoused the “new Taiwanese” identity that was based not on a person's ethnicity, which provided the tensions between *waisheng* and *bensheng* Taiwanese, but focused on a person's love for Taiwan.¹⁹ Lee's personal philosophy toward Taiwanese identity was a vision that is unifying

14 Ibid, 399.

15 Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18.

16 Dreyer, 397.

17 Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan*, 25.

18 Dreyer, 400.

19 Teng-hui Lee, *The Road to Democracy: Taiwan's Pursuit of Identity*, trans. Teresa Chang (Tokyo: PHP Institute, 1999) 200.

rather than divisive; his vision of the unifying components are “love Taiwan” and democracy.

The democratization of Taiwan was inevitable due to the domestic situation but rather than resist and impose hard authoritarianism, the KMT decided to implement democratic institutions on their terms when they knew they had power to win. While the act of democratizing was inevitable due to pressures, KMT was able to control the timing. Their decision was important because it showed the logic of the party to ensure survival in an environment for mass politics. The details of Taiwan's democratization are beyond this paper but the main point is that the KMT chose to democratize and was able to make that decision from the top because it was logical and beneficial for them. It was a calculated move as well as an ideological one as shown in Lee's writings: “A national identity—that 'we are Taiwanese'—will be born out of that participation and provide the basis for a democratic culture in Taiwan.”²⁰ The “new Taiwanese” identity thus shifted from an ethnolinguistic marker to the unifying force of shared democratic values and institutions. Instead of arguing about native cultures or Chinese culture, it is democratic culture that is being emphasized because any Taiwanese regardless of ethnicity or origins is able to participate in Taiwan's democracy.

The choices made by the Lee Teng-hui government on Taiwanization and democratization created a new type of national identity focused on democratic culture, values, and institutions that is not divisive but more inclusive of the groups on the island. This new form Taiwanese identity, which was implemented through policy from the top in the 1990s, affected the new generations that came of age during this period. Shelley Rigger's work *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and “Taiwanese Nationalism”* explores the generational differences in approaches to national identity. She found out that the experiences of a certain generation influence how they view their own identity. Rigger breaks down the generations into

²⁰ Ibid, 62.

four groups: 1st generation born by 1931, 2nd generation born between 1931 and 1953, 3rd generation born between 1954 and 1968, and 4th generation born after 1968.²¹ In terms of ethnic consciousness or identity, the data shows an increasing trend to identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese (1st: 32.8%, 2nd: 40.8%, 3rd: 48.4%, 4th: 51.5%) while the generation that identified the most with Taiwanese identity is 2nd generation that experienced the Japanese colonial regime, the migration of the KMT and mainlanders, and February 28 Incident.²² The 2nd generation's historical experiences and collective memory explain the data of most Taiwan-identified and pro-independence group.²³ The overall trend, however, actually decreases in percentage for 3rd and 4th generations which compared to the Both category, shows that as Rigger argues newer generations are more flexible with identity.²⁴

While Rigger's work focused on the independence movement and approaches to that along generational lines, the underlying analysis and trends are important to identity studies, too. 3rd generation mainlanders were born on the island and accepted Lee's "new Taiwanese" identity.²⁵ They encountered Taiwanization policies and democratization that bridged across ethnicities. The differences between the two groups, mainlanders and natives, were smaller their views about democracy were the same.²⁶ By the time the 4th generation grew up, democracy was already established as the only political system they knew and Taiwanization policies and "new Taiwanese" identity were already normalized. They learn Taiwanese history in school, read Taiwanese literature, and could speak both Mandarin and Hokkien. In the research, Rigger found that 4th generation participants did not care about language as a marker for identifying with

21 Shelley Rigger, *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and "Taiwanese Nationalism"* (Washington DC: East-West Center, 2006), 16.

22 Ibid, 24.

23 Ibid, 43.

24 Ibid, 44.

25 Ibid, 49.

26 Ibid, 50.

Taiwan, which “new Taiwanese” label de-emphasized in the 1990s.²⁷ The unity of the 4th generation that spans across groups make them less vulnerable to divisive identity politics and rhetoric and while they are apathetic to politics, they strongly value democracy.²⁸ The unity and attachment to democracy are the products of Taiwanization policies and democratization in the 1990s, which made new generations value democracy as part of a Taiwanese identity and de-emphasize the split between ethnolinguistic groups. The future of Taiwan is not more nationalistic chauvinism that creates tensions between groups in the country but rather more inclusive based on democratic values, culture, and institutions.

Implications for the Future

The civic identity based on democracy is the positive legacy of Taiwanization and democratization in the 1990s under Lee Teng-hui. Taiwanese identity has evolved many times since its birth but among the new generation, Taiwan's future seems to depart from the divisive type of identity politics that can create problems for the island domestically. The focus away from ethnic based identities also made Taiwanese young people more flexible with regards to the People's Republic of China. They are not anti-Chinese identity like the 2nd generation but rather, a large percentage identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese. They are less concerned about Chinese versus Taiwanese identity that could culminate into an independence movement, rather they care more about issues related to the short-term: economy, jobs, and other practical topics. Compared to the 2nd generation, the newer generations are not as ideologically-driven but are more rational with their approach to the PRC. The development of Taiwanese identity does not necessarily lead to a popular independence movement, especially with how generational politics

27 Ibid, 52.

28 Ibid, 53.

and views toward identity are playing out in Taiwan. Declaring independence is not inevitable because the future leaders will be from the 4th generation who are more practical.

In addition, Taiwan is an example of a multiethnic polity that can move away from ethnic-based forms of identity through policy and normalization of that policy to a more unifying civic nationalism based on democracy. It also keeps Taiwan's future vis-à-vis the PRC open due to the flexibility. The identity is shifting toward a civic or institution-based one that does not put a wall between Chinese and Taiwanese due to ethnicity. It does not close the door on the possibility that Taiwan can exist in the geographic and political space of China or vice versa because it does not block that possibility on a purely ethnic reason. An ethnic or cultural argument is weak when dealing with a multiethnic polity such as China. However, a democratic identity is a more compelling one that currently the PRC cannot compare. There is the possibility that should China democratizes, there could be an opening for unification. The feeling among people in Taiwan seems to be a question of time and institutions, rather than opposition based on ethnonationalism. Therefore, to keep harping on ethnic-based arguments and differences between “Chinese” and “Taiwanese” culture is unproductive when multiethnic “Chinese” can include “Taiwanese” or multiethnic “Taiwanese” can include “Chinese”. Not only is democratic nationalism or national identity more stable for domestic politics in that it is a shared experience that spans across different groups, it is also a better angle for cross-strait relations due to its flexibility.

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