

## Taiwan is the First Taiwanese Democracy Not the First Chinese Democracy

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.  
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Many pundits in North America and Asia often talk about Taiwan being the first Chinese democracy in the world, but this way of phrasing it is not correct. What most journalists and opinion-shapers in the West have not yet woken up to is that an important paradigm shift and change of perspective has taken place in Asia, and it is this: Taiwan is not the first Chinese democracy; Taiwan is the first Taiwanese democracy. Give credit where it is due.

This may seem like word play to American readers, but behind it lies their continuing misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Taiwanese history. In that history, Taiwan or parts of the island have been ruled by various colonial powers, including the Dutch, the Spanish, the fleeing Ming diaspora, and the Manchu Qing, among others. Japan, it should be noted, was the first colonial power to rule and control the entire island of Taiwan; that was from 1895 to 1945.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (known as the "Kuomintang" in Mandarin, or KMT for short) is by many considered the last colonial power to rule Taiwan before it got its democracy and herein lies the rub. The KMT did not give democracy to Taiwan and the Taiwanese living there during its colonial one-party state rule. It forced the Taiwanese people to learn Mandarin (a different language than Taiwanese) and memorize all sorts of information and history about mainland China including rivers, mountains and lakes, just like the Japanese that ruled before the KMT had forced the Taiwanese to learn Japanese, take Japanese names, think of the Japanese Emperor as their lord and master and study Japanese history.

Americans should know that democracy in Taiwan was finally won by the Taiwanese who by blood, sweat and suffering forced the KMT to concede it after nearly 40 years of martial law. Too often it is forgotten that the Taiwanese had also forced the Japanese to grant them the right to elect their own representatives to the Japanese parliament after 40 years of colonial rule.

We do not call the U.S. the first British democracy, nor do we call any of the South American countries once ruled by Spain and which have the common Spanish language and cultural influence, the first, second or third Spanish democracies.

So stop calling Taiwan "the first Chinese democracy in the world." It is the first Taiwanese democracy ever.

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Unfortunately, this dangerous canard that says that there are Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait still exists abroad. But the reality is that there are Chinese on the continental side of the strait and Taiwanese on the other side of the strait. One China, one Taiwan.

It is time for the world to recognize this and start speaking in terms of this reality.

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