

Western Misreading of Diaspora and Taiwanese Identity in the Taiwan Strait

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.

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In much of Western thinking and commentary about the "Taiwan problem" and peace in the Taiwan Strait, is based on a gross misunderstanding of the root of this problem. Leave aside for now the hegemonic ambitions of China that by possessing Taiwan it will have blue water access for its submarines and be able to control the flow of traffic between the East and South China Seas. Further, leave aside the mistaken canard that in the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895); the Manchu Qing surrendered all of Taiwan to Japan. The Qing could only legitimately grant the western half of Taiwan that it controlled. Japan by conquest of the indigenous people on the "free;" eastern side became the first nation to both control and rule the whole island of Taiwan. Go beyond this; the real root of the problem in the Taiwan Strait is a misunderstanding and misreading of the complex dynamics of multiple, changing and conflicting diasporas.

The Treaty of San Francisco did not state to whom Taiwan should be given. And while obvious options could have been the Republic of China (ROC) or the People's Republic of China (PRC), there is also the alternative that self-determination could be granted to the Taiwanese people. Regardless, the first clue of Western misunderstanding is seen in the post WWII years of the USA particularly in the Nixon/Kissinger years when they speak of their hope that the Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait will be able to work out a peaceful resolution to their problems. Put simply, there are not Chinese on both sides of the Strait. There are Chinese on the continental side and Taiwanese on Taiwan. To be sure, Chinese on the run did come with Chiang Kai-shek (1945--1949) and they imposed Martial Law and White Terror on the resident Taiwanese. Herein is the beginning of the complexity and dynamics of diaspora on Taiwan and their identity.

First, however, examine the characteristics of diaspora, the Greek word for "scattering." William Safran, Professor Emeritus of the University of Colorado at Boulder, speaks of the fact that though diaspora or their ancestors have been dispersed from an original center, they retain a collective memory or myth of that original homeland; they feel not fully accepted by the land they are in; and they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and wish to return to it. This certainly fits the first generation Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) members who came with Chiang Kai-shek and are often mis-referenced as waishengren.

What then about the Taiwanese already on Taiwan? Aside from the indigenous people, they too were once diaspora, but for different reasons and in different eras. Robert Cohen, another scholar on diaspora, lists several causes of diaspora; these include those that were victims driven into exile, those that were colonials, and those that left for financial gain such as workers or traders etc. Taiwan in its history saw the wide range of the above with the various colonial powers that came to the island. Taiwan's different past eras include that of the Dutch, the Spanish, fleeing Ming loyalists, Qing, French, and lastly of course the Japanese. Many of those

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who came in these various eras intermarried with indigenous people and became what are called mestizos as evidenced of their shared DNA.

However, it was when the Japanese took command of the whole island that the present Taiwanese identity began to solidify and when these past diaspora began to consider that Taiwan and not a distant land was their homeland. During the first two years of their rule, the Japanese gave all this choice. They could return to wherever they came from or they could remain and become Japanese subjects. The majority remained. Nonetheless, in the ensuing years, though these learned Japanese and often took Japanese names, they further realized that as Japanese they were still second class citizens. Taiwan began to be seen as their real home, and in the 1920s, they began to petition the Japanese government for the right to elect their own Taiwanese representatives to the Japanese Diet. Their sense of history grew increasingly different from that of China's history. They wanted self-rule. This desire for self determination and self-rule would continue in their opposition to the upcoming KMT's martial law, indoctrination, forced Mandarin and attempts to make them become Chinese citizens.

Herein is the irony and cause of the current split imagined community on Taiwan. The minority KMT, as a fleeing diaspora with military power, created a one party state. They in turn drove many Taiwanese overseas and created a new diaspora, a Taiwanese diaspora that saw Taiwan as their motherland. Many of the Taiwanese diaspora were blacklisted from returning to Taiwan until 1992. Of those that remained on Taiwan, some were brainwashed by the KMT but others remaining on the island developed a simmering hatred and mistrust of the KMT. That hatred had first exploded in the 2/28 incident, which was put down with a killing of Taiwanese elite. Afterwards, it continued to be fed throughout the ensuing KMT Martial Law and White Terror ending in 1987. This is the reality of the development of Taiwan's democracy. It was not a gift of the KMT, but rather it was something wrenched from the KMT's hands.

Westerners who have often only heard the KMT side of this history have been ignorant of this dynamic as well as the dynamic that diaspora can adapt, change and identify with their new land. The multi-faceted British colonial diaspora that came to America became the Americans of today; the Spanish colonial diaspora that populated Central and Southern America became citizens of their respective Central and South American countries. The multiple diasporas on Taiwan became Taiwanese, creating the reality that there are Chinese on one side of the Taiwan Strait and Taiwanese on the other. Unfortunately, some remaining KMT still see themselves as diaspora of China. These few want to negate Taiwan's hard-won democracy of 1996 when the nation's president was elected by all the people and want to only negotiate with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of China on a party to party and Chinese to Chinese basis. On the other hand, the growing majority of Taiwanese no longer see themselves as Chinese and want to negotiate from that standpoint. This is the reality that many Western and even Eastern commentators have yet to grasp.

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