

Chinese identity was short-lived

Written by Sebo Koh 柯世波

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In 1992, only 17.6 percent of Taiwanese considered themselves “Taiwanese,” but in last year’s survey by National Chengchi University (NCCU), less than 4 percent of Taiwanese considered themselves exclusively “Chinese.”

Taiwanese identity has waxed and waned over the past few centuries, influenced by various internal and external forces.

Humans have lived on the island of Taiwan for at least 10,000 years and civilization here might go as far back as 30,000 years, long before any nation-state existed. Taiwanese Aborigines are the descendants of Austronesian people who landed on Taiwan, probably from Southeast Asia and/or the Southeast Asian landmass — today’s Southern China — more than 5,000 years ago.

They lived in more or less isolated tribes and developed different languages from the same root. Although there was a supratribal alliance in the central west plains called the Kingdom of Middag in the 17th century, it controlled only about 27 towns at its peak.

Taiwan was roughly divided into Middag, Dutch (in the south, southwest and southeast) and Spanish (in the north) areas in that period. Still, a large part of central mountainous Taiwan and the narrow east coast plains were isolated tribal areas. Each population group had its own identity.

Since the early 17th century, Taiwan’s inhabitants have come under various economic, political and cultural influences, most of which were forced upon them by various colonizing newcomers, each of which left their footprint.

With increased migration from China during the 18th and the 19th centuries, Han people began to dominate the Taiwanese population.

Taiwan, like China, was a colony of the Qing Empire from the late 17th century. Although the

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Qing established Taiwan Prefecture and later designated Taiwan as a province, they never took control of the whole island.

During the 200 years or so of Qing rule, Han people and culture began to overtake the tribal areas in the western plains, and plains Aboriginal tribes disappeared and merged into Han society.

It is said that there were only Tangshan (唐山) grandfathers, but no Tangshan grandmothers (Tangshan meant the “China proper” areas of the Qing Empire), because the Han immigrants were mostly men, who then married Aboriginal women. At the time, Aborigines had their own identity, while Han immigrants continued to identify with the Han in the southern Qing.

In 1895, the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan after being defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese ruled Taiwan with an apartheid system that tended to enhance and perpetuate Han Taiwanese identity as being Chinese, but Japan also began massive infrastructure construction, established unified health and education systems and implemented the rule of law.

All these not only connected different Taiwanese groups in different areas, but also changed the culture of Taiwanese society, which continued to develop along a very different path from that of “compatriots” in China.

However, because of the isolation from China, people in Taiwan were not aware of these gradual, but cumulative changes leading to significant differences and they continued to identify themselves as Han Chinese. I call this period the “incubation period” of Taiwanese identity.

The shock came when Japan surrendered Taiwan to the representative of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), who brought in his Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) military and bureaucrats.

Although uncertain, Taiwanese first welcomed them, but were shocked to see the Nationalist

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soldiers wearing straw slippers, carrying umbrellas, pots and pans, and acting like bullies with guns.

The Nationalist Chinese bureaucrats were arrogant and corrupt. They behaved very differently from the polite and orderly society in Taiwan, and they even looked somewhat different from Taiwanese. The 228 Massacre in 1947 confirmed the initial impression, followed by the imposition of martial law.

Taiwanese realized that they were very different from Chinese. This was the first awakening of Taiwanese identity.

Chiang's Nationalist Chinese were also alarmed that Taiwanese were so different from them and even had an appreciably unique identity. The Nationalists looked at this unique identity as the result of Taiwanese being "imperialized" by Japan. They began a wholesale conversion of Taiwanese into Chinese.

Patriotic education and propaganda were everywhere. Speaking ill of the KMT government resulted in long prison sentences. Thus a perfect environment for the development of a Stockholm syndrome was put in place.

These methods of what could be called cultural genocide were very successful, and the postwar baby boomer generation became Sinicized and had a Chinese identity with nationalist characteristics. Taiwanese identity waned.

Then, in the 1980s, stimulated by the overseas independence movements, democratization began in earnest in Taiwan.

Millennials and "generation Z" were born into a free society. With the free flow of information, members of these younger generations were "naturally independent" or "genetically independent."

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The NCCU poll showed that 55.3 percent of respondents deemed themselves exclusively Taiwanese. More than one-third of respondents, or 37.3 percent, said they were both Taiwanese and Chinese, and less than 4 percent identified themselves as Chinese only. Ninety-four percent said that living in a democratic country is “important” or “very important.”

This is the second reawakening of Taiwanese identity. Not only did a majority identify themselves as Taiwanese, it appears that Taiwanese have incorporated the values of democracy and freedom into their newest identity constructs.

Identity can be a fragile thing, depending on changes in the political and economic environments. Risk aversion also plays a significant role. A recent small, but significant drop in Taiwanese identification might be due to a sluggish domestic economy, better job opportunities in China and increased military threats from China. However, the desire to defend democracy and freedom remains strong.

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