

What is Taiwan's identity? What does it mean to be Taiwanese? At a recent conference in Taiwan, "Democracy Building in Interesting Times" a speaker spoke accordingly, "Here we don't have the issue of one China, two systems; we have the problem of one China and two Taiwans." Mixing humor with reality he succinctly presented the current challenge of Taiwan's identity between its growing pro-independence minded democrats and the leftover unificationists of its one-party state days.

To understand the shaping of Taiwan's identity, one must examine and incorporate concepts such as creolization and hybridization in viewing Taiwan's many waves of immigration. From the 1600s on Taiwan suffered successive colonization by the Netherlands, Spain, fleeing Ming loyalists, Manchu conquerors, Japan and (as interpreted by some) the fleeing Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). First its indigenous people and then each subsequent wave of settlers reacted with a Hegelian dialectic of resistance to each new colonizer. The end result has been Taiwan's present democratic identity, which dates to the first free nationwide election of legislators (1992) and its president (1996). Taiwan's democracy was not a gift from the KMT but hard won by those willing to go to jail and shed their blood for it.

Taiwan has had mixed reactions from outside countries. As a nation it ranked 16th in both imports and exports (2010). As regards trade, visas, monetary exchange etc. Taiwan is treated independently by other nations, but few of them officially recognize it as such. In population, Taiwan (23 million) is larger than 75 percent of the countries in the United Nations. Europeans with their plethora of smaller states next to larger ones should understand best Taiwan's desire to maintain a separate identity. No one asks Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Baltic States etc., why they don't join France, Germany or Russia whatever their past histories and cultural relationships.

This author visited seven European capitals (Brussels, Paris, Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and London) with four other academics in 2007. Speaking with local legislators, think-tank members, academics and media, they advocated Taiwan's need for international space. Is it any surprise that Prague, Budapest and Warsaw representing countries that had suffered loss of freedom and human rights under Russian rule gave a more balanced and different reception from those whose vision was clouded by material profits promised through trade with China?

What does Taiwan feel about Taiwan's official name, the Republic of China (ROC) and its 100 year celebration in 2011? Taiwan was a part of Japan in 1911. It has no history with the

Taiwan, Understanding an Identity in Process, Part I

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stillborn revolution of the ROC. Taiwan's identity comes more from its own long and separate history, its first free public elections of its legislators and its first free election of its president in the Consensus of 1996

Since Taiwan's full achievement of democracy (1996) and its shaking off the White Terror and propaganda mentality of the KMT's past one-party state days, successive opinion polls show an ever increasing majority of Taiwanese identify only with Taiwan. They see themselves as only Taiwanese or as Taiwanese with a Chinese background.

Source:

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