

Taiwanese-Americans want to be counted

Written by Peter Chen 陳彼得

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On Aug. 2, 1790, a year after the inauguration of the first US president, George Washington, the US held a census under the general direction of then-US secretary of state Thomas Jefferson. It was the first US population count, and the census now takes place every 10 years. There have been 22 federal US censuses.

Taiwanese-Americans started immigrating to the US as early as the 1950s and have been arriving steadily ever since. However, nobody knows — not even the US Census Bureau — how many Taiwanese-Americans there are in the US. Estimates range from 250,000 to 1 million.

Why is this number unknown? It is due to international political considerations and restrictions the US imposed on itself.

The Formosan Association for Public Affairs (FAPA) is a non-profit organization that — among other activities — promotes the welfare of Taiwanese-Americans. FAPA, together with other Taiwanese-American organizations, is petitioning the census bureau to include a check box for “Taiwanese” under the race question on the next US census in 2020.

FAPA has been campaigning for such a check box since 1997. In 1998, then-FAPA president Chen Wen-yen (陳文彥) appeared as a witness at a meeting of the Subcommittee on the Census to testify on the matter.

Chen stated: “In the 1990 census, about 80,000 respondents identified themselves as Taiwanese under the race question. One hundred and ninety-three thousand marked Taiwanese as their ancestry. This discrepancy is caused by the fact that on the 1990 census form, Taiwanese was not listed as a separate category under the race question, while it was explicitly listed as an example under the ancestry question.”

In a 1997 memorandum, the US Department of State informed the census bureau that the “listing of Taiwanese as a race in a census questionnaire would inevitably raise sensitive political questions ... contrary to the US government policy and US national interest.”

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FAPA believes that the constitutionally mandated US Census is and must be a purely internal US affair, and should not fall victim to international politics and/or pressure.

In 2010, a write-in campaign was taken up instructing Taiwanese-Americans to write “Taiwanese” under the race question.

Nevertheless, the 2010 census demonstrated large discrepancies in the count of Taiwanese-Americans between US federal agencies. According to the 2010 census, there were 230,382 Taiwanese-Americans, while the 2014 Homeland Security data on Lawful Permanent Residents showed that the Taiwanese-American population in 2010 was 450,673.

Add this huge discrepancy in the count of Taiwanese-Americans to international political interference and Taiwanese-American indignation is understandable.

In 1994 the US House of Representatives and the US Senate passed legislation enabling Taiwanese-Americans to list “Taiwan” as their place of birth on their US passports, instead of “China.” Since then, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service — and since 2003 the US Citizenship and Immigration Services — have maintained separate quotas for Taiwanese-Americans and Chinese-Americans. If one federal agency can do it, why not the census bureau?

It is high time that the census bureau lifted this self-imposed restriction and included a Taiwanese check box on the census form in 2020. The US Congress is set to convene a census subcommittee next year. So the time for Taiwanese-Americans to speak out is now.

There is a need for accurate data on how many Taiwanese-Americans there are today.

We want to be counted!

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