

Making Taiwanese count in the US

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Wednesday, 14 August 2019 04:50

As the 2020 US census approaches, the push for Taiwanese-Americans to specify “Taiwanese” as their ethnicity is well under way.

The Taiwanese American Citizens League launched its “Write-in Taiwanese Census 2020 Campaign” earlier this year, and earlier this month the Taiwan Center Foundation of Greater Los Angeles held the annual Miss Taiwanese-American pageant, which was established in 2000 specifically to promote the issue.

Since 1997, groups have been asking the US Census Bureau to include a box for Taiwanese under the race category, but that is not likely to happen, of course due to Chinese pressure — the US Department of State deemed the request “inappropriate,” noting that doing so would “inevitably raise sensitive political questions because it could be misinterpreted as official US recognition of Taiwanese as a racial category that is separate from Chinese.”

Politics aside, the form contains only boxes for “Asian Indian,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” “Japanese,” “Korean,” “Vietnamese” or “other Asian” — with space to specify the “other.”

In addition, Taiwanese immigration to the US started relatively late and until recent decades Taiwanese immigrants were taught in school to identify as Chinese.

It still matters symbolically to keep making the demand for a Taiwanese box, but it is becoming increasingly important to be counted as Taiwanese as Beijing intensifies its efforts to undermine Taiwan’s sovereignty and convince the world that the nation does not exist.

China can force international companies to list Taiwan as a province of China, lure away Taipei’s allies and use other petty tactics to sabotage Taiwan’s international endeavors, but it cannot control what people write on the US census forms.

Ben Ling (林本), a former president of the Taiwanese American Citizens League, told the Taipei Times last month that being counted “pretty much legitimizes our identity” in the world where

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Taiwanese are often not recognized.

A more practical issue is that the population numbers shown in the 2010 census indicate how many people bothered to write Taiwanese in the “Other Asian” box — and spelled it correctly — or answered the question at all.

There is a significant discrepancy between the census numbers and US Department of Homeland Security data, meaning that it is not clear how many Taiwanese there really are in the US.

The huge increase in the Taiwanese-American population between 2000 and 2010 might be due to the success of the write in “Taiwanese” campaigns.

A general sense of Taiwanese nationality did not develop until the past 20 years or so, but it has grown stronger in recent years.

Once shunned by Taiwan’s government and considered vulgar, Taiwanese culture is now in vogue, and is becoming repopularized through mass entertainment such as video games and television dramas. This focus on local culture will also likely make more people proud to write down Taiwanese in the census.

Finally, due to the stark difference in how Taiwan and China are run, as well as their contrasting histories, accuracy of the vital statistics and needs of their immigrants is crucial, since the census data affect US government policies.

For example, the US Office of Minority Health Web site’s Asian-American Profile page states that “Taiwanese had the highest percentage of bachelor’s degree attainment at 77 percent,” while 73.2 percent Taiwanese were employed in high-skilled and managerial sectors.

This kind of data can be crucial to influencing policy decisions, making it even more important to be counted.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2019/08/14](#)