

Lee Teng-hui's lasting soft power

Written by Lin Shiou-jeng and Peter Chow 林錫榮、陳彼得

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Few nations that transitioned during the world's third wave of democratization have experienced a quiet revolution like Taiwan.

Under former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), Taiwan established a unique model of democratic transition, coinciding with a global trend.

We need an academic and cultural foundation dedicated to research on Lee's democratic reforms, because he made it possible for Taiwanese to break free from a total surveillance society, and go forward to a new age of freedom and democracy.

From a Taiwanese as well as a Chinese point of view, it was a great and unprecedented transformation, so Taiwan's ruling and opposition parties should research it thoroughly.

This would enable them to spot warning signs and take pre-emptive action, and enable future generations to learn from the past.

Such a foundation would have to be sufficiently funded to do long-term research and share Taiwan's experience with the international community.

What significance does the quiet revolution of democracy and freedom have for Taiwanese? It was a relief from oppression and created a new situation.

In the 1950s, everyone in Taiwan, including ethnic Taiwanese and Mainlanders, found themselves in a 1984 situation created by former presidents Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國).

The novel 1984 by British author George Orwell was published in 1949. In the book, Orwell imagined the world in 1984, when everything people said and did would be subjected to total

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surveillance by the state.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) achieved a similar effect through an intricate network of intelligence agencies. Through slogans such as “Watch out — spies are right beside you,” it ensured that people believed that KMT informers, otherwise known as “backscratchers,” were watching over them wherever they went.

Everyone had no choice but to obey the Chiangs' commands. Everyone was forced to devote their efforts to Chiang Kai-shek's dream of “counterattacking the mainland” and “annihilating the evil communist bandits.” Anyone who did not act accordingly or raised dissenting opinions was persecuted.

This was especially true for ethnic Taiwanese who grew up under Japanese rule. They could not continue living the lives they had lived and speaking the languages they had spoken before 1945, and had to speak halting Mandarin instead.

To avoid persecution, they had to live in servile fashion under the orders of the president.

The only dream that ordinary Mainlanders had in common with Chiang Kai-shek might have been to return to China.

However, those among the Mainlanders who longed for their home provinces and families, tried to send letters to China, sang songs from their home provinces, or read old Chinese books and newspapers were at risk of being arrested and killed on accusations of consorting with the “communist bandits.”

They had to be loyal to whatever Chiang Kai-shek said. Only then would they have a chance of being promoted. It might also have been their only assurance of staying alive.

The true thoughts of first-generation Mainlanders, for example on the terror of fleeing in panic

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from the communists and even the humble wish to settle down, had to be kept hidden deep in their hearts and were often taken with them to their graves.

Those born during the post-war baby boom grew up in the fictitious world created by the Chiangs. All they knew about the other side of the Taiwan Strait was from geography lessons that showed China shaped like a begonia leaf. They knew about China's long-bygone history, but little about then-present China.

This was Chiang Kai-shek's dream, and it was all that people were allowed to know about history and geography.

Lee's revolution ushered them out of the Chiangs' version of 1984, which was on the brink of collapse.

Ethnic Taiwanese identified with Lee's "sorrow of being Taiwanese" and followed him out of the spiritual prison cell.

Mainlanders, without having to fear prosecution, followed the Mainlander elites to face the things they had gone through themselves.

The children of the post-war baby boom came to understand themselves through the political struggles they had fought, while singing songs like On the Songhua River that harked back to places in China.

Lee established direct presidential elections and consolidated the kind of system that he wanted. He created a new situation and aligned Taiwan with the rest of the world.

The former KMT system was a right-wing communist system. The political and social phenomena that occurred in Taiwan between 1949 and 1988 all had their equivalents in China. Any differences between them were only a matter of degree.

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Political dictatorship, human rights violations, restriction of the freedoms of thought and expression, among others: The rule of the KMT and that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had all these things in common.

Lee's quiet revolution overthrew the KMT's party-state and insured that the kinds of policies now being promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) could never emerge again in Taiwan.

These days, many Taiwanese tend to mock China because Taiwan's social development has caught up with modern countries, making it distinct from China.

More than a century of efforts have taken us onto the right path of historical development: abandoning feudalism, escaping from colonialism, scrapping dictatorship, establishing democracy and enjoying freedom.

People born since the 1990s account for 32.1 percent of Taiwanese. Many of the students who participated in the Sunflower movement of 2014 call themselves "naturally pro-independence," but what does that mean?

The citizens of an independent country are naturally pro-independence, as they do not want to be ruled by anyone else.

The process of planning to "counterattack the mainland" and the struggle between pro-unification and pro-independence tendencies to being "naturally pro-independence" proves that Taiwan's history has turned a new page.

This is the "new and independent country" created and established by a host of talented and heroic people in the Lee era.

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This era is analogous to the efforts and experience of all those who directly or indirectly took part in the process of the quiet revolution.

Lee's academic and cultural foundation aims to research the gains and losses of the political, economic, social and cultural developments that took place in that period. It aims to tell everyone about the efforts of that generation so that they can be kept as models to study and learn from.

It also hopes, through cooperation with foreign researchers and with their assistance, to create a political soft power to support the progress of democracy and freedom worldwide.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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