

## 5) Historical Background of Taiwan

“Who are these Taiwanese people, who have been ruled by foreigners for 400 years?” asks Su Bing in his epic *Taiwan’s 400 Year History*. It’s an interesting question, but not, perhaps, in the way that Su intended. For it immediately draws our attention to two important facts.

The first of these is that 400 years before Su was writing, in the 1560s, Taiwan was very sparsely populated by the ancestors of today’s Aborigines, probably numbering about 50,000 in the plains areas and another 50,000 in the mountains.<sup>59</sup> Whilst some Aboriginal rights activist have tried to claim that “Taiwanese” as an adjective for a people, should be reserved to the Aborigines, this is simply not how the word is understood in Taiwan or the rest of the world, but rather the term is applied to Han Chinese settlers on Taiwan<sup>60</sup>. So, the first difficult truth that Su’s question raises is that 400 years ago, “these Taiwanese people” were not actually in Taiwan.

The second question is that, if it now makes sense to talk of “Taiwanese people,” when did these people, 96 percent of whose ancestors came immigrated from China in the last 350 years, start to see themselves as Taiwanese? When and how did the consciousness of membership of a Taiwanese nation develop? If, as Benedict Anderson has so memorably said all nations are “imagined communities” then how did that imagination work in Taiwan.

Quite when immigrants from China first began to settle in Taiwan is open to argument. It seems, however, that while the island was a resort of Chinese pirates in the 16th century and there were about 1,500 resident Chinese traders in aboriginal communities—themselves numbering about 50,000 on the plains and another 50,000 in the mountain areas,<sup>61</sup> on the island prior to the arrival of the Dutch in the 1620s<sup>62</sup>, large

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<sup>59</sup> Figures from Cabestan, Jean-Pierre (2005) “Specificities and Limits of Taiwanese Nationalism,” From <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/document2863.html>. Consulted 20 May 2009.

<sup>60</sup> I deliberately leave open the question of when they settled (although in Taiwan this plays a big role in arguments about “authenticity”). In terms of their otherness from the Austronesian Aborigines, the cultivator of 1625 is as alien as the refugee of 1949.

<sup>61</sup> Cabestan, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Shepherd, John Robert (1995) *Statecraft and Political Economy on the Taiwan Frontier 1600-1800*, Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc: p82.

scale immigration to Taiwan was, in fact, a function of Dutch rule: the Dutch needed grain for their garrison but the aborigines were reluctant to grow more than they needed, therefore the Dutch encouraged immigration of agriculturalists from China.

This immigration was given a huge impetus by the arrival of the forces of Cheng Cheng-gong and his 25,000-strong army in 1661. At the high point of the Cheng regime's 20-year rule, the Chinese population has been estimated to be between 60,000 and 120,000.<sup>63</sup>

The conquest of Taiwan by China's Qing regime in 1683 led to a reversal of the previous dynasty's prohibition on settling in Taiwan and a policy of controlled immigration from China. The Chinese policy of promoting immigration by males produced a peculiarly fractious and violent settler society—the "Wild East"—which only slowly became less so as the laxity of imperial restrictions allowed the gender balance to become more normal.

The immigrants to Taiwan belonged to two distinct ethnic (or sub-ethnic) groups, the Hakka, an interesting migratory group initially from northern China but, at the time, emigrating from Guangdong, and the Fujianese (who were also sub-divided according to which part of Fujian they hailed from). Whilst both groups are commonly thought of as Han Chinese, there were significant differences in their customs and way of life, and, most importantly for this study, they spoke mutually unintelligible languages (not, I hasten to add, *dialects*, the use of which term is an instrument on Chinese state policy, rather than a reflection of linguistic similarity and derivation.) Rivalry between these groups was to lead to a great deal of communal violence over the next two centuries.

I do not have space here to give a detailed history of Taiwan over 300 years. But a brief summary of the major points is important. Through most of the Qing dynasty rule, Taiwan remained not just geographically but also intellectually on the periphery of the Chinese empire, it was a faraway place with which the Qing administration bothered little, except when its civil strife, required intervention from the mainland. Emigration was sometimes encouraged, sometimes not, but went ahead anyway.

Taiwan become more significant to China as shipping around it increased. The Taiwan coast was a haunt of pirates preying on vessels in the Taiwan Strait, the number of

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p96.

which increased markedly in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century with the opening of Japan to foreign trade and the results of the Second Opium War and the Treaty of Tianjin in 1860. More foreign ships in Taiwan's waters meant more attack by pirates, and also more wrecks. Shipwrecked sailors on the eastern coast faced the very real possibility of being murdered by Aborigines. While such risks had always been run by Chinese seafarers, foreign governments were not as indifferent to the fate of their ships and their nationals and started pressuring the Beijing government to take action. At the time, Chinese settlers controlled the Western half of the island, while Aborigines controlled the rest. A number of maritime incidents put pressure on China to assert its authority over the whole island or—always a worry when surrounded by aggressively expansionist, well-armed imperial powers—run the risk of losing it altogether.

After a French attack on Northern Taiwan in 1884, the Qing government upgraded Taiwan from a county of Fujian province to a province in its own right and the reformist governor Liu Ming-chuan carried out extensive reforms. Liu's efforts were outwardly impressive but really superficial.

In 1894-5 Taiwan and China fought a war over Korea. China was defeated and as part of reparation paid to the Japanese it ceded Taiwan to Japan in the treaty of Shimonoseki. The Chinese on Taiwan promptly declared a republic, Asia's first, and prepared to resist a Japanese takeover. Dispute among the republicans as to the wisdom and efficacy of resistance weakened the republic, which collapsed shortly after the Japanese invaded. Armed rebellions continued after the establishment of Japanese government, which were suppressed with brutality (for example some 6,000 "Taiwanese" were killed in the Yunlin massacre in June 1896).

The Japanese set out to make Taiwan a model colony, an attempt to show European colonialists that they could do just as well. But the status of the Chinese inhabitants of Taiwan was to be a perpetual problem. Two years after the signing of the Shimonoseki treaty, those Chinese who remained on Taiwan were to become Japanese citizens. But as Japanese citizens, they should have been entitled to certain political rights, for example to be represented in the Diet, under the constitution of 1889. But the Japanese were unwilling to give them this, and to justify it continued a state of emergency first proclaimed in 1895 and subsequently known as Law 63, which gave the governor of

Taiwan special powers and suspended constitutional government<sup>64</sup>.

As Japan aggressively modernized Taiwan, completely transformed it, in fact, into one of the most advanced territories in Asia. But the Chinese inhabitants remained second-class citizens. This prompted a number of movements, including one in 1914 to obtain for them the constitutional rights of Japanese citizens supposedly theirs already, and from 1920 on a cultural movement, which attempted to mobilize “national consciousness” and which went hand in hand with a campaign for political autonomy. At the same time, an increasing nationalistic Japan sought to remake the Chinese in Taiwan as “Japanese” through an aggressive program of what Anderson would call “official nationalism,” involving the adoption of Japanese names, language and religious practices.

Japan’s defeat in World War II led to Taiwan’s being taken over by the Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) government of China in 1945, initially with some enthusiasm among Taiwan’s ethnic Chinese population.

When the KMT assumed control of Taiwan in 1945, it found a population that had been part of the Japanese empire for 50 years and subject to a vigorous acculturation program, especially since the launch of the *Kominka*<sup>65</sup> movement in 1937. As former Japanese subjects, the people of Taiwan were seen by the KMT as dubious, their Chineseness was questioned, as was their allegiance to their new government. Such was the KMT’s suspicions on the matter that in 1947 Taiwanese were specifically denied the protections of the new constitution — scheduled to go into effect later that year — because, as Taiwan Provincial Governor Chen Yi explained: after “long years of despotic Japanese rule, the Formosans were politically retarded and were not capable of carrying on self-government in an intelligent manner.”<sup>66</sup>

Chronic mismanagement and dishonesty, fuelled by a suspicion that “Taiwanese” were in some way suspect, too sympathetic toward Japan, led to a rebellion in Taiwan in February 1947 (the 228 Incident), which was crushed brutally, with much of the pre-1945 ethnic Chinese elite on the island being murdered by the new regime.

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<sup>64</sup> An almost identical policy, of suspending the constitution under a state of emergency, was followed by the Chinese Nationalist Party between 1949 and 1987.

<sup>65</sup> “Imperialization” movement: a vigorous attempt by the Japanese authorities to forcibly assimilate the Taiwanese by stamping out Chinese cultural practices.

<sup>66</sup> Kerr, George H. (1965) *Formosa Betrayed*, Boston Houghton Mifflin: p240.

As well as dubious loyalties, the Taiwanese also suffered, in the eyes of the KMT, from linguistic inadequacy, many of them being unable to speak the designated “national language” of Mandarin Chinese. When in 1946, as part of Taiwan Provincial Governor Chen Yi’s campaign to re-Sinicize Taiwan, speaking Mandarin became a sine qua non for obtaining a government job<sup>67</sup>, many of the Taiwanese elite found themselves classed as only semi-literate and denied a role in the administration of their homeland, which was filled immigrants from the mainland, a source of ethnic resentment which survives to this day.

When the Chiang Kai-shek government fled China in 1949 and set up on Taiwan, questions regarding Taiwan, which had been of only provincial significance in a province far from the government’s central concern, became of central importance. Since Taiwan was the bastion from which China was to be retaken, its people were the raw material with which this reconquest was to be enabled. What had previously been a campaign to remove Japanese cultural influences from among the inhabitants of Taiwan was reformulated as a campaign to make them into Chinese patriots, where “China” represented a lost Elysium the other side of the Taiwan Strait, which would eventually be recovered through arms *and* through the moral superiority of the KMT regime.

A crucial divide emerging in this period is that between *benshengren*, ethnic Chinese with ancestry on Taiwan before 1945, and *waishengren*, the incomers with the KMT takeover and subsequent flight from the mainland. *Benshengren* were effectively treated as second-class citizens, with the *waishengren* replacing the Japanese as new colonial elite. Until the late 1980s, the KMT ruled Taiwan in the manner of a colonial government. It set up an education system built on the transmission of its own values, it denigrated and repressed any culture except a version of a Mandarin-speaking high culture imported from China and largely alien to Taiwanese which it designated “Chinese culture,” and allowed no questioning of either its right to rule Taiwan or Taiwan’s status as a province of China. This was achieved with the use of much political repression and coercion.

Maurice Meisner wrote in the *China Quarterly* in 1963:

Eighteen years ago Formosa was liberated from half a century of Japanese

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<sup>67</sup> Government Information Office. A Brief History of Taiwan Chapter 7, which can be viewed at <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/history/tw08.html>.

colonial rule. When Kuomintang soldiers and administrators arrived to reassert Chinese sovereignty over the island province in October 1945 they were enthusiastically welcomed as liberators by the Formosans. Within a few months, however, the Kuomintang had succeeded in alienating virtually all segments of the native population by inaugurating a military regime that treated Formosa as a conquered territory rather than a liberated area. The mass pillaging, official corruption and political repression that marked the early period of Kuomintang rule in Formosa set in motion the tragic events that culminated in the revolt of February 1947 in the course of which at least 10,000 Formosans were massacred. The Kuomintang has since done little to heal the scars of 1947 and today most of the 10,000,000 Formosans look upon the nearly 2,000,000 Mainlanders who fled to Formosa with the collapse of Kuomintang rule as foreign overlords and describe the Chinese Nationalist regime as a colonial tyranny far more oppressive than the former Japanese rule.<sup>68</sup>

The KMT's zeal to turn the *benshengren* into Chinese patriots was only partially successful. Three weaknesses of KMT "official nationalism" are obvious:

1. The denigration and active suppression of the non-Mandarin speaking local cultures on Taiwan;
2. The obvious gap between the Chinese nationalist rhetoric of equality and the colonial-style government and education system (a disproportionate number of *waishengren* went on to further education at least until the late 1980s);
3. The just-as-obvious gap between the government's legitimizing ideology and its chances of success (the refusal to hold elections until the mainland was "recovered" looked increasingly flimsy as the chances of that happening became more remote).

That the KMT's colonial style government should produce *benshengren* resentment is hardly surprising. By the 1970s this had crystallized into a movement which it would be tempting to call "Taiwanese nationalist" in nature—as many academics do. Actually, I think such a label tends to be rather unhelpful, in that it obscures the confusion

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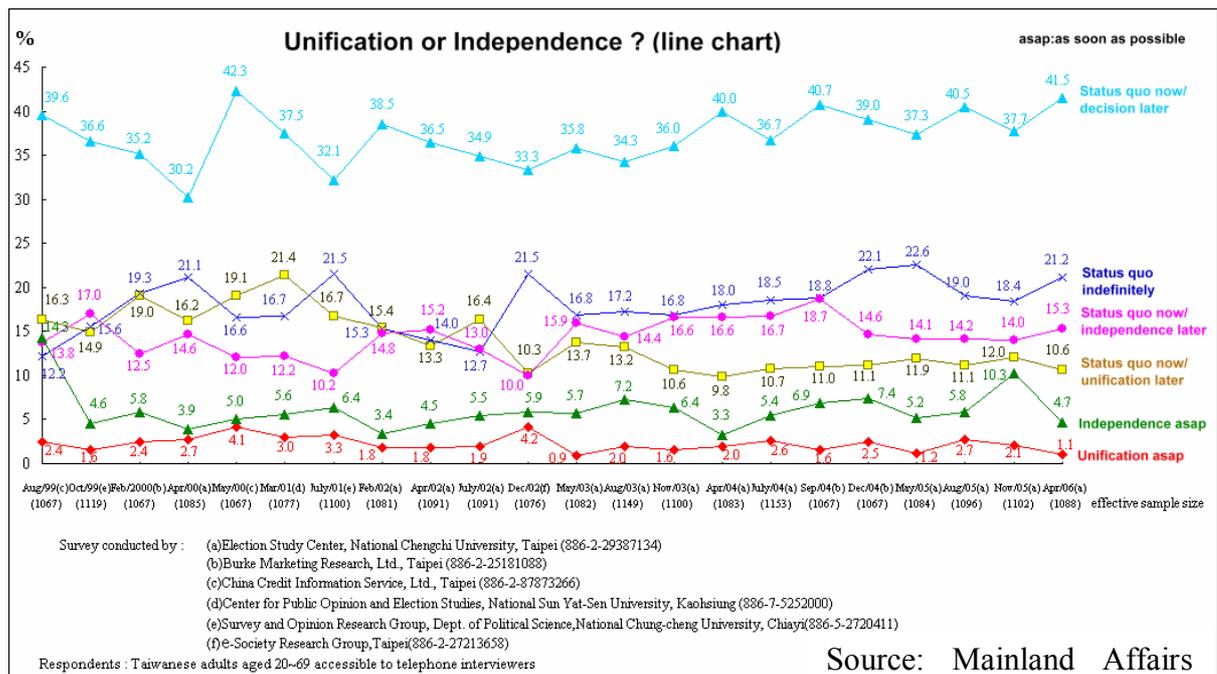
<sup>68</sup> Meisner, Maurice (1963) "The Development of Formosan Nationalism," *The China Quarterly*, (15): p91.

over aims and the various ethnic cleavages that characterized the emerging movement. A more accurate description of the movement might be as one demanding self-determination for Taiwan.

In some cases that merely amounted to wanting new elections for the Legislative Yuan and the National Assembly, representative bodies that, contributing as they did to the KMT's projection of itself as the government of all China, had been frozen in place since 1948 because China-wide elections were no longer possible. Some campaigners wanted Taiwan institutions elected by the residents of Taiwan. Some went further; they wanted the Taiwanization of the political institutions to be accompanied by an abjuration of any claim to China and a declaration of independence from China.

Both the agenda and tactics of the movement have changed over the years, both becoming more obviously nationalist, whilst at the same time embracing an idea of civic nationalism and cultural diversity which has moved it way from claims of ethnic grievance.

But does the movement command a majority of support among Taiwanese. It is quite surprisingly hard to say. In its most overt political form, i.e., support for political parties that sympathize with separatist aspiration, then no. The combined vote for Taiwan nationalist parties or presidential candidates has never been above 50 percent of the electorate, even when it has—in the presidential election of March, 2004—fractionally exceeded 50 percent of votes cast.



On the other hand, as the nationalists have pointed out, if the opposite of Taiwan nationalism is the wish to be reunified with China, then poll after poll, since polling began in the early 1990s, show no majority for such an action. The chart on the previous page shows just how ambiguous opinion is.

The Mainland Affairs Council polls support for six positions the unification-independence issue. But which camp, the Taiwan nationalist or antinationalist camps do these fall into? It seems fair to say that “status quo now/independence later” and “independence ASAP” represent Taiwanese nationalist positions, while unification ASAP and “status quo now, unification later” represent anti-Taiwan nationalist positions. But the “status quo now, decision later” and “status quo indefinitely” positions give no indication of pro- or anti-nationalist sentiment.

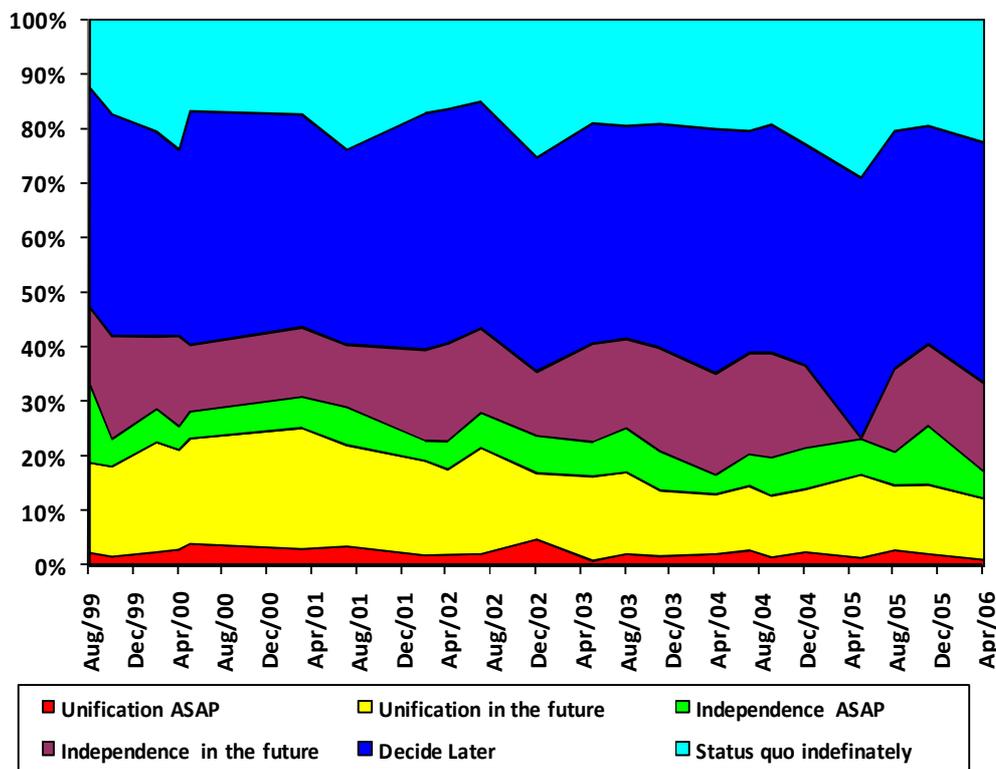


Chart 2, above, takes all the pro- or anti-unification, now or in the future opinion and compares it to the effective “don’t knows.” From this chart, which simply puts the data from the Mainland Affairs Council Chart into a stacked area graph showing the contribution of each category to the overall totals and their fluctuation over time, it can be quite clearly seen that those respondents with an opinion about Taiwan’s future, from which we might ascertain something of their views on Taiwan’s identity, are, during the

period in which the data were collected, invariably in a minority. I have said before that national consciousness does not necessarily mean support for a political nationalism. So a lack of support for separatism cannot be directly interpreted as a lack of national consciousness.

On the other hand, if we think back to Renan's remarks about the importance "of having, in the future, a shared program to put into effect" it seems that Taiwanese feel overwhelmingly ambiguous. And this would suggest that Taiwanese national consciousness is weak, that the idea of Taiwan's "nationhood" is seen as contingent upon future political arrangements. This is far from being the spiritual principle about which Renan speaks so eloquently.

Just as Australia's radical nationalist academics have long cherished an idea of Australia and Britain developing an inevitable tension which would have led to a republic were it not for betrayals motivated by class or capitalist interests, so Taiwan nationalist radicals such as Su have attempted to portray Taiwanese as a kind of Oriental Americans, a community of destiny built on the idea of seeking a better life, but, unlike the United States, too small to avoid becoming the plaything of the Great Powers, always having its destiny decided by forces outside the control of the Taiwanese, who really only long to be left alone. More than 40 years ago Meisner wrote:

For Formosan nationalists the history of Formosa has been a history of more than three centuries of colonial oppression. They argue that the settlers who began to arrive in Formosa from Fukien and Kwangtung provinces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were first subjected to the rule of Dutch and the Spanish overlords (from 1624-62), and then (from 1683) to the successive tyrannies of the foreign Manchu emperors, the Japanese imperialists, and finally the "colonial tyranny" of the Kuomintang.

Like other modern nationalists, the Formosan nationalist is inclined to look as far back into the past as possible for signs of a distinctive national existence. Thus a native revolt in 1652 against the Dutch is interpreted in Formosan nationalist writings as heralding "the awakening of the national consciousness of the Formosans." Since "the Formosans" in the mid-seventeenth century consisted almost entirely of peasants and numbered less than 100,000 recent migrants from the Chinese mainland, one may

doubt the existence of any type of “national consciousness” at this time much less the existence of a distinctively Taiwanese consciousness.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike the Australian radical nationalists’ view of their country’s history, this view of Taiwan has never received broad acceptance. Taiwanese nationalists would claim that this is simply because for almost a century the political and cultural hegemony in place suppressed such thinking. Certainly that suppression happened. But I do not think that it totally explains the ambiguity of Taiwanese about the future of Taiwan, and therefore about what exactly Taiwan is? In fact, as we shall see, that suppression has, at various times, strengthened a sense of Taiwanese national consciousness. The ambiguity of Taiwanese towards national consciousness comes from Taiwan’s origins as a settler state.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p92.

