THE TAIWAN ISSUE

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INTRODUCTION

On January 30th 1995, Jiang Zemin, the president of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), put his stamp on Beijing’s Taiwan policy. In a speech to welcome in the lunar New Year, he quoted the words of the ‘National Father’ of China, Dr Sun Yat-sen:

Unification is the wish of the whole body of Chinese citizens. If there is unification then the whole people will be fortunate; if there is no unification then there will be suffering.1

Taiwan is an island of twenty-one million people that lies some 100 miles off the Chinese coast and has only been ruled by a mainland Chinese government for four years this century. It possesses all the characteristics of a state and plays an important role in the world economy. Despite this, the government in Beijing claims that Taiwan is a part of China, and is prepared to go to war if any major international actor recognizes the island as a state. To make matters more confusing, although the government in Taipei claims that the island is a part of the Chinese ‘nation’, it is not clear whether it claims that the island is a separate state or not. When one attempts to unravel the relationship between Taiwan and China, it is perhaps tempting to accept the conclusion that if Taiwan were a person, it would be in the hands of a psychiatrist. Perhaps the nearest it is possible to submitting a state to psychoanalysis is to look at its history. When looking at Taiwan’s history, concentrating on its relationship with the mainland, one notices how the attitudes towards Taiwan changed dramatically in 1949, when Mao Zedong proclaimed the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and Taiwan was not included. It was not included because it did not belong to the PRC, but rather to Mao’s rival in the Chinese civil war, Chiang-Kai shek. Chiang-Kai shek and his defeated KMT party abdicated to Taiwan, establishing a government that claimed legitimacy over Mainland China. Since then opposition on Taiwan has evolved from one between the Communists and the Nationalists into a basic opposition between mainland China’s efforts toward unification, and the Taiwanese drive toward independence.

Understanding the situation, and analyzing the Chinese viewpoint, is the main focus of this paper. Why is re-unification with Taiwan so important while Taiwanese independence totally unacceptable? Why does an independent Taiwan threaten the more powerful PRC? Is Taiwan a historically important piece of China?

The need for Chinese unification with Taiwan is not based on a strong historically connection with the island. Rather, following the 1949 retreat of the KMT to Taiwan, the

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1 Hughes, Christopher. Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, National identity and status in international society, Rutledge, New York, 1997, p.2
situation of national division made Taiwan and the one-China policy a central criterion of PRC legitimacy to rule.

An independent Taiwan contradicts the “one China” principle, something that is important in both ancient and modern Chinese history, thus threatening the PRC’s legitimacy to be the lone ruler of the Chinese nation.

Today many people wrongly assume Taiwan was an important part of Chinese territory for most of its history, and that it rightly belongs to the mainland. Historically, Taiwan was not an important part of China, and was considered a fringe colony for most of its history. Chiang-Kai shek’s escape to the island made it important because it directly opposed the PRC’s legitimacy and this threat continues today.

Throughout Chinese history, uniting China and achieving the Mandate of Heaven was a harbinger for success. The great dynasties of the Ming and Qing united the nation through war and diplomacy, and were rewarded with centuries of prosperous rule. For the PRC, Taiwan represents the last piece to a united China. A symbol that is important for the PRC’s legitimacy and continued stability.

Because Taiwan has been and remains the major issue in Sino-U.S relations, the literature on the situation is extensive. There are numerous views concerning the reasons behind the Chinese attitude, and what the future holds for the island.

CONTRASTING VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Understanding the Chinese view of Taiwan is complicated and historians have offered many different opinions. The first of these is simply that Taiwan belongs to China, and has historically been Chinese territory. The official version of the claim to Taiwan as made by the PRC asserts that Taiwan has belonged to China “since ancient times”. This is then used as the basis to insist that the island should be part of the Chinese State. Chu Shulong writes that the Chinese people are “conscious of their history of several millennia, are fully aware that Taiwan has been a part of China, if not for the past thousand years, then at least for a couple of hundred years” Taiwan officially became a part of China during the Qing dynasty in 1661, and remained so for over 200 years ending with China handing the island to Japan in 1895.

Chinese claim to Taiwan is also based on the ethnic makeup of the island. Chen Qimao argues that the majority of the Taiwanese population are ethnically Chinese, resulting from over eight hundred years of Chinese emigration. Ninety percent of Taiwan’s population is of Chinese descent, the rest having descended from the aboriginal people who inhabited the island prior to Chinese emigration. Qimao fails to mention that the Taiwanese people have their own national identity despite being ethnically Chinese, and that the island is autonomous and has governed itself successfully for most of its history.

Parris H. Chang offers a counter argument using the Ethically Chinese Republic of Singapore: “If China can recognize and accept Singapore, why can it not recognize

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2 Hughes, Christopher. Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, p.2
and accept Taiwan?" Chang compares the emigration from China to Taiwan to that of Europe and America. In both cases, the emigrants left their native country because of persecution, poverty, and a search for a better life. The migrants brought the traditions and culture of their homeland, yet formed a personal bond and original identity with their new home. Historians argue about whether Taiwan was ever considered a part of the Chinese "motherland" or whether the communist government created this need for reunification with an island that has been autonomous for most of its history.

A major topic of debate is the security threat Taiwan presents to China. Taiwan being only one hundred miles off China’s coast, it can be used, as it has been in the past, as a base for an invasion of China. This security threat is a viable one, based on the geographic location of the island, which is similar to the distance between the United States and Cuba. Andrew Nathan argues that national security is the major Chinese concern, and China must rein in the autonomy of the island, which has been and could be used as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier.” He continues to argue that the Chinese must gain enough control over Taiwan to deny those who rule the ability to become an ally to a potential enemy, mainly the United States and Japan. Nathan compares Taiwan to other Chinese territories including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, which act as defensive buffers between India, Russia, and central Asian nations. Taiwan represents the buffer against the United States, and that control of Taiwan is essential for Chinese defense of the mainland.

Parris Chang argues that Nathan’s view is a China-centered perspective and he provides an exaggerated view of China’s perception of threat across the Taiwan Strait:

It takes a rather one sided perspective in interpreting China’s security interests as if the People’s republic of China is a hegemonic power which has a right to impose its will on Taiwan and the world.

It is unrealistic to assume Taiwan would align itself with China’s enemies and act as a base for Chinese invasion unless there was a highly organized political force in Taiwan that favored such a course of action. Chang writes that the PRC refuses to acknowledge Taiwan for what it is and continues to pursue a policy of military intimidation intended to isolate Taiwan internationally and force capitulation. By taking this course of action China is giving Taiwan a reason to arm itself and seek friends: “Chinese fears of an unfriendly Taiwan and its possible alignment with nations hostile to the PRC could prove self-fulfilling.

The question of security is closely linked with the role of the United States in Taiwanese affairs. The United States has protected Taiwan from China in the past, used its military leverage as a deterrent against Chinese military aggression, and has supplied Taiwan with massive amounts of both military and civilian aid. On two occasions the United States has sent direct military support to Taiwan for its protection against Chinese...

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6 Ibid. P 104
9 Nathan, Andrew. China’s Goals, p.89
10 Chang, Beijing’s Tune, p.103
11 Ibid, p.104
aggression. The first occurred during the Korean War in the 1950’s. Mao Zedong was planning an invasion of the island and the United States sent the U.S Seventh fleet to the Taiwan Strait to prevent it. In 1996, a series of missile tests and military maneuvers by the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in and around the Taiwan Strait, led to standoff with the biggest U.S naval force in East Asia since the Vietnam War. Add to these incidents the fact that the U.S has supplied Taiwan with most of its military technology and diplomatic support; it is not difficult to see that the United States has a vested interest in the island and its autonomy.

The involvement of the United States does not only present a security threat, but also invokes painful memories for the Chinese. Gabe T. Wang argues the point that losing Taiwan to the Japanese in 1895 was “the most humiliating experience ever endured” and that getting Taiwan back is the most fundamental task for the Chinese to “wash out their historical indignity”. He continues to say that that Taiwan issue “has been the most fundamental obstacle in the path of China’s development” and that to the Chinese taking back Taiwan is imperative and reunifying with the island is the most fundamental task of the nation.

Chu Shulong echoes the theme of Chinese humiliation over Taiwan in his article concerning Chinese sovereignty. Taiwan is a living example of Chinese humiliation over the past century and a half, “when almost all imperialist countries, large or small, invaded and bull lied China, taking Chinese land one piece after another.” Shulong’s article presents the bitterness many Chinese have towards the darker part of their history:

It is not just a question of having better food to eat and better clothes to wear, but also of no longer being bullied and humiliated by foreigners. If a modernized country cannot prevent its territory from being taken away, then what is the use of modernization?

The article brings to light the Chinese xenophobia of foreign influence, something that is important when discussing Taiwan.

The history and perception of being bullied by foreign nations does play a major role in the Taiwan issue. Deng Xiaoping made it clear when he met Margaret Thatcher in 1982 that any leader who failed on the issue of national unification would have to step down after being condemned by the Chinese people as another Li Hongzhang, the statesmen who signed the ‘unequal treaties’ ceding Qing territory, including Taiwan, to the powers. While this painful history does put some pressure on PRC leadership to retain Taiwan, the effect is overstated. Fear of foreign influence in China is used by the PRC, as it was my Mao during the Korean War, to rally support behind questionable government policies, and possible war over the island. The PRC cannot accept an independent Taiwan because its “one China” policy is critical to its legitimacy. Analyzing China’s historical connection with Taiwan shows that the mainland showed

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12 Hughes, Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, P.20
14 Ibid. P 216
15 Ibid. P216
16 Shulong, Chu. National Unity, p.99
17 Ibid. P.99
18 Hughes, Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, P.157
little interest in the island for the majority of its history, and that Taiwan became
prominent in Chinese politics following the KMT escape to the island.

**TAIWAN: INTEGRAL PIECE OR FRINGE COLONY?**

Chinese leaders and historians alike have reiterated the fact that restoring and
protecting “national unity and sovereignty” is the major reason for the Chinese stance
on Taiwan. What was the historical relationship between the mainland and the island?
Was Taiwan an important piece of Chinese identity and territory? When did the island
become a focal point for Chinese politics? By looking at Taiwan’s historical connection
with China, it seems that Taiwan was not an important piece of China for most of its
history, and was rather a land of turmoil, revolt, and neglect from the mainland. Far from
being a part of Chinas “national unity” and identity, Taiwan was considered a
dangerous island that was outside the reach of Chinese culture. This changed once the
KMT fled to the island.

Prior to the collapse of the Ming dynasty, the rulers of China had by and large
ignored Taiwan. While Chinese emigration to Taiwan had begun in the Tang dynasty
(618 to 907), no claim to the island was ever registered and Taiwan was still referred to
as an area “outside the pale of Chinese civilization”. There is little Chinese information
on the island before 1430, when the great explorer Zheng He was shipwrecked there and
reported it to the emperor. While Taiwan was not mentioned till 1430, Chinese
emigration to the island had been happening for centuries. Many Hakka Chinese from
Fujian and Guangdong provinces fled to Taiwan in the thirteenth century to escape the
advance of the Mongol armies. Chinese from Fujian province continued to migrate to
Taiwan during the Ming Dynasty, with a major surge after the fall of the Ming in 1644.
While the immigrants did bring Chinese culture and customs to the island, most who
emigrated did so because of poverty and political conditions. Like the Europeans who
flocked to the New World, most Chinese immigrants in Taiwan severed ties with their
homeland. During this period, emigration to Taiwan was illegal and punishable by death,
summing up the governments view that Taiwan was not a part of China.

In 1623, the Dutch had built a naval base on the Pescadore islands, which lie
between China and Taiwan, and were having continued clashes with Chinese vessels on
the Mainland coast. The governor-general of Fujian province offered the Dutch a trading
post in Taiwan in order to rid themselves of the foreign nuisance. The Dutch thought they
were being handed a bigger and better Macao, the Chinese imagined they were disposing
of the Dutch problem by directing them to a “remote and disease-ridden haunt of
pirates.” The Chinese had given away Taiwan, although they did not have a claim to the
island, to rid themselves of a minor Dutch annoyance off their southern coast. This move
again affirmed that Taiwan played no role in China’s “national unity”, and that the
island was considered expendable.

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19 Ibid. P.222
20 Ibid. P 222
22 Ibid. p.18
23 Ibid. p.18
24 Ibid. P.6
Thus, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the Chinese had no claim to Taiwan. Taiwan was an outpost and in no way incorporated into the Chinese polity. Only after the fall of the Ming dynasty and forty years of conflict would Taiwan become an official part of China. In 1684 when the Qing Emperor Kangxi defeated the Ming loyalist Koxinga, who had taken control of Taiwan from the Dutch. The Qing dynasty regularized its status by making it a prefecture of Fujian province. Taiwan, although not becoming a full province, was nevertheless finally a part of China. While the island was now a part of the Qing administration it was still treated like and considered a remote, lawless island.

Between 1714 and 1833, the island experienced three “great rebellions” against the Qing and dozens of smaller outbreaks of resistance. Taiwan was a place where “there was a minor revolt every three years, and a major one every five years.” Even the long-standing examination system was not implemented in Taiwan, as it was seen as no place to train an official. The imperial regime had two main interests in the island: keeping down insurrection, and importing rice, sugar and other products. Taiwan was an independent colony that was considered a part of the Qing while it was run by the numerous clans and secret societies on the island.

Towards the end of the 19th century, more attention was paid to Taiwan because of its military advantages in a time when the lack of maritime security had crippled China. Imperial officials were sent to the island with the aim to modernize and reform. In 1875 the ban on emigration to the island was lifted. In 1885 the status of Taiwan had been upgraded from a prefecture of Fujian to the twentieth province of China. The mainland was finally investing in Taiwan, modernizing the island and bolstering their relationship. Unfortunately, China’s newly formed kinship with its estranged neighbor was cut short by the rise of the new force in Asia, Japan.

In 1895 Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese war and Taiwan was one of the victims of this humiliating defeat. Taiwan was offered to Japan as one of China’s many concessions. The brief period of Chinese attention was over, China had once again given away Taiwan, and the island resumed its familiar role as a colony, Japan’s first. Although the gentry and merchants of Taiwan expressed their desire to deny Japanese claims and remain loyal to the Qing court by establishing a Taiwan Republic on 25 May 1895, the court refused even to acknowledge the republic’s existence or communicate with its leaders.

Taiwan remained property of Japan until 1945, when the allies in World War II defeated Japan. All of Japan’s “stolen” territories would be returned; during the Cairo conference in 1943 Chiang-Kai shek requested that Taiwan be included in the deal. Despite objections from the British delegation that the declaration should insist only on Japan giving up Taiwan, rather than it being ceded to China, Roosevelt’s sympathy and his keenness to ensure Chinese participation in the war enabled the ROC to claim Taiwan. As always in Taiwan’s history, its fate was decided not by its people, but rather

25 Long, Chinas Last Frontier, p.14
26 Ibid. P 14
27 Ibid. P 16
28 Ibid. P 16
29 Ibid. P.20
30 Hughes, Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, P.4
31 Ibid, p.22
by distant statesmen. In 1949, Taiwan’s importance and place in the world changed again. On October 1st, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China from the gate of the Forbidden City. The KMT and China’s recognized leader, Chiang Kai-shek, had moved their headquarters to Taipei. Taiwan became the home of the proclaimed rightful rulers of China.

Suddenly Taiwan was under the spotlight. Its value had exponentially increased because it was now home to Chiang-Kai-shek and a government that directly opposed the Communists, China was divided. The crisis had begun; Taiwan had been transformed from a minor piece of Chinese territory to an island of great importance. Mao Zedong feelings on Taiwan prior to 1949 emphasize the lack of interest in the island prior to the escape:

It is the immediate task of China to regain all our lost territories, not merely to defend out sovereignty south of the Great Wall. This means Manchuria must be regained. We do not, however, include Korea, formally a Chinese colony, but when we have re-established the independence of the lost territories of China, and if the Koreans wish to break away from the chains of Japanese imperialism, we will extend to them our enthusiastic help in their struggle for independence. The same thing applies for Taiwan. As for Inner Mongolia, which is populated by both Chinese and Mongolians, we will struggle to drive Japan from there and help Inner Mongolia to establish an autonomous state.

What comes out clearly from this statement is that Mao divided the territories formerly linked with the Qing Empire into at least two categories. On the one hand were those like Inner Mongolia, where the large number of ethnic Chinese meant they should have “autonomous” status. On the other hand were those such as Korea and Taiwan which were not peopled by Chinese, and whose opposition to the Japanese imperialism thus constituted independence movements.

Taiwan had formally been part of China for over two hundred years, but a full province for less than a decade. For most of those two hundred years, Taiwan had been neglected by Beijing. They, in turn, were resented and perpetually resisted by both the aboriginal and the immigrant Chinese community on the island. Taiwan was never a fully integrated part of the Chinese mainland. During the end of the 19th century, the relationship between the two was changing for the better, but the connection was severed by the Sino-Japanese War. The emigration ban is important to consider when thinking about the Chinese view of the island prior to 1875. If Taiwan was a part of the Chinese national identity and motherland, then why ban people from traveling there? Looking at Taiwan’s history one comes to the conclusion that the island has always had a strong sense of national identity and independence. The Chinese need for national reunification is based on other factors, and not on a strong historical connection.

THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE CHINA

32 Ibid, p 30
33 Long, Last Frontier, p.117
The belief and importance of there being only “one China” resonates from the unique aspects of Chinese history and the Chinese world order. Historically the Chinese worldview consisted of the Chinese civilization being at the center, surrounded by “barbarians” or civilizations that were not Chinese. The name China or Zhongguo means the middle kingdom, and this Sino-centric world order was rooted in Chinese thought and culture. Central to this was the belief that all legitimate power originated from the Emperor, or Son of Heaven. The Mandate of Heaven bestowed this power, and was legitimate so long as the emperor performed certain rituals prescribed by Confucian culture. As there could only be one superior culture, it followed that there could only be one Son of Heaven, whose legitimate rule ought to extend to “all under heaven”. Proving one had the Mandate of Heaven was essential for a ruler’s legitimacy and his dynasty’s survival. Uniting the country and ruling over “all under heaven” was the first step towards claiming the Mandate.

The Qing dynasty set a historical precedent for this process, and provides an excellent example. The invading Manchus from the north established the Qing dynasty in 1644. The Manchu’s, who were of Jurchen descent, were not part of the Han majority in China. Because a minority had replaced the ethnically Han Ming dynasty, their legitimacy to rule was in question. Ming loyalists put up a fierce resistance against the fledgling Qing government, and the eradication of the Ming resistance was vital for the Qing’s survival. Fighting a civil war that lasted over thirty years, the Qing finally removed the final bastion of Ming resistance, ironically located on Taiwan, and had united the country under one Emperor, claiming the Mandate of Heaven. While the Sino-centric world order changed with the foreign incursions into China during the 19th and 20th century, the idea of there being only “one China” is still important. Chinese history has set a precedent for the current Chinese government to unite the country, and Taiwanese unification represents the final piece towards this goal. The inability of the PRC to unite China is a bad omen. Historically, division is synonym for decline.

In 1949, The KMT’s establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) effectively divided China. Two rival governments existed, the PRC on the mainland and the ROC on Taiwan, both claiming exclusive sovereignty over one nation, China. The United States, along with most of the international community, recognized the ROC as the legitimate government of the Chinese nation. So long as the U.S recognized the ROC and continued to support it as such in international organizations, especially the UN, the regime’s claim was given a degree of credibility. Conversely, as only one Chinese government could be recognized, this implied the illegitimacy of the PRC. This situation began to be reversed with the realignment of power in East Asia signaled by the PRC-U.S rapprochement of the 1970’s. In 1971, the ROC withdrew from the United Nations and the majority of states began to recognize the PRC government as the representative of China. From that point onwards a subtle shift occurred so that the argument is no longer concerned with

34 Ibid. P. 5
35 Ibid. P. 3
36 Ibid. P.3
37 Long, Taiwan, P.11
38 Hughes, Christopher. Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism, National identity and status in international society, Rutledge, New York, 1997, p.17
the right of the PRC to represent China in international society. It is now about the right of the PRC to represent the whole of the Chinese nation, of which Taiwan is a part.

The idea of there being “one China”\(^\text{39}\) and the PRC representing this China is threatened by an independent Taiwan. First, the idea that there is only one China is argued by the Taiwanese National Unification Council, which attempts to define the meaning of “China”:

Both sides of the Taiwan Straits agree that there is only one China. However, the two sides of the Straits have different opinions as to the meaning of ‘one China’. To Beijing, ‘one China’ means ‘the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’, with Taiwan to become a ‘Special Administrative Region’ after unification. Taipei, on the other hand, considers ‘one China’ to mean the Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1991 and with de jure sovereignty over all of China. The ROC, however, currently has jurisdiction only over Taiwan, Pengiu, Kinmen, and Matsu. Taiwan is a part of China, and the Chinese mainland is part of China as well.\(^\text{40}\)

The Council goes on to argue that China is, in fact, politically divided, but that this need not militate against its ultimate future oneness because this division is only a temporary historical phenomenon:

Since 1949, China has been temporarily divided, and each side of the Taiwan Straits is administered by a separate political entity. This is an objective reality that no proposal for China’s unification can overlook.\(^\text{41}\)

This idea that China can be divided into distinct “political entities”\(^\text{42}\) vehemently contrasts with the view of the PRC, emphasized by its State Council:

There is only one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and the seat of China’s central government is in Beijing. This is a universally recognized fact as well as the premise for a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question.\(^\text{43}\)

Re-uniting with Taiwan is important for the PRC’s legitimacy because its leaders have continually re-iterated the importance of the issue. When Deng Xiaoping set out his program for the 1980’s he made the return of Taiwan one of the three major tasks of the decade, along with opposing international hegemonism and stepping up economic construction.\(^\text{44}\) The nationalistic sentiment of unification rallies the people behind the

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\(^{39}\) Ibid. P.101
\(^{40}\) Ibid. P. 101
\(^{41}\) Ibid. P.102
\(^{42}\) Ibid. P. 102
\(^{43}\) Ibid. P. 102
\(^{44}\) Ibid. P 15
PRC, and allowing Taiwan to become an independent state would severely damage its image and legitimacy.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

As long as the ongoing development of the Taiwan problem is intimately tied up with the legitimacy of the PRC state, the problem arises of how Taiwan can interact with an international society that has never resolved the conflict between the contradictory principles of state sovereignty and national self-determination. The overall result of the tug-of-war over Chinese national identity and the concept of ‘China’ have stirred up debate over both. What is the concept of ‘China’ and will it change? Does the PRC need to reevaluate its position on Taiwan in an effort to shape a new Chinese world order?

During a speech by president Lee Teng-hui in 1995, he coined a new slogan of ‘manage great Taiwan, establish a new central plains’. This statement is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, when Lee talks about the ‘Central Plains’ he is alluding to the mythology that Chinese culture emerged from central China 5,000 years ago. Lee’s ‘new central plains’ is Taiwan, which he sees as having successfully resolved the enigmatic problem of combining Chinese tradition with western modernity, and thus providing a model for the rest of China. Lee’s ‘new central plains’ might best be translated as a ‘new Sino centrism’, with Taiwan as the center. The battle lines are drawn, and the outcome is uncertain. So long as the link between Chinese unification and legitimacy remains as close as ever, the clock is ticking towards confrontation.

45 Ibid. P.130