

It is Not Time for Taiwan to Declare Independence

By Loh I-cheng

I have always had the highest respect for Lin Chuo-shui, who chose to resign from Taiwan's Legislative Yuan in November 2006 rather than obey Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) discipline to defend the indefensible behavior of President Chen Shui-bian and his immediate family, who were indicted by Taipei District Court prosecutors for graft and corruption earlier that month.

WHILE I CANNOT AGREE with Lin's passionate belief in Taiwan's independence, the DPP's chief political goal, I would defend his right to expound the opinion that every citizen of Taiwan, regardless of place of birth, dialect, religion, party affiliation or political leaning has a right to cast a vote to determine the future of their beloved island.

The seemingly unanswerable question posed by the title of this debate thus boils down to more manageable proportions: What exactly is meant by the term "Taiwanese?" Who are they and where do they come from? What are their views and aspirations on this question that directly affects their future? Who is entitled to speak for them? And finally, why should they be forced to make hasty decisions on their own fate and that of their children's children, now of all times?

A LOOK AT TAIWAN'S HISTORY

While lying just 100 miles off the coast of Fujian Province, Taiwan originally was inhabited by people of Malay or Polynesian stock. It is difficult to determine when large scale Chinese migration to Taiwan began, most likely early in the 15th century, when poor peasants attempted to escape natural disasters or chronic famine.

They came by junk across the choppy waters of the Taiwan Strait from Fujian, believing that they were blessed by *Matsu*, the Goddess of the Sea. They pushed the original inhabitants to the high mountains, the same way that Native Americans were chased out of the fertile plains by white settlers.

That was the first wave of immigration. In all, there have been seven large-scale movements of people over 500-odd years, to what used to be called "Ilha Formosa" by Spanish or Portuguese sailors.

The second wave began when the Dutch East India Company occupied present day Tainan in

1624, setting up Fort Zeelandia, and ruling the area until 1662. The Spanish came at about the same time, satisfying themselves with a supply base in northern Taiwan.

When the Manchu overran China in 1644 and established the Qing Dynasty, Cheng Cheng-kung (commonly known as *Koxinga*) swore allegiance to one of the defeated Ming princes and attempted to restore the Ming Dynasty. He got as far as Nanjing before realizing that it was an impossible task, so he turned around and headed for Taiwan, defeating the Dutch in 1662 and reclaiming Taiwan from western hands. Large groups of Ming loyalists followed him, laying the foundations of an agricultural society. That was the third migratory wave.

During the Qing Dynasty, Chinese immigrants came to Taiwan from southern Fujian and northeastern Guangdong. This fourth wave was marked by armed clashes between Fukien and Hakka-speakers, so much so that the two groups still do not mix well.

Japan annexed Taiwan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, and ruled the island for 50 years during the fifth wave. Although most Japanese were repatriated after 1945, they left an indelible imprint. Former Republic of China (ROC) President Lee Teng-hui, for example, adopted the Japanese name Iwazato Masao in his youth. His brother, Iwazato Masanori, died fighting for the Imperial Japanese Navy and his memorial name tablet still sits in Tokyo's sacred Yasukuni Shrine.

The sixth wave, of course, occurred after 1949 when the Kuomintang government of the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan in defeat. Millions who refused to live under communism followed, contributing to the economic miracle of the 1960's and 70's. Political liberalization finally took place in the 1980s, making the DPP the second largest party in the Legislative Yuan (Parliament), even after the party's recent defeat in the elections of January 2008.

Oddly, the seventh and latest wave of immigration was touched off after the ROC government lifted the ban on travel to China in 1988 and consisted of "imported brides" from

the Mainland, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries, making up a sizeable portion of the total population. In 2007, for example, 18 percent of all marriages registered in Taiwan involved brides — 24,700 in all — from outside the island.

A POLITICAL FOOTBALL

In Taiwan, all mayors, county chiefs, legislators and the president are popularly elected by direct ballot. It has been almost 60 years since the government moved its seat here, so most people under that age were born on the island, and speak Mandarin, southern Fukien and Hakka dialects fluently.

I have asked dozens of young men and women whether they choose the person with whom they date on the basis of family background. They invariably shake their heads in puzzlement, and asked me why I would ask such a silly question. The truth is that hardly anyone cares about where their prospective mate's family originally came from.

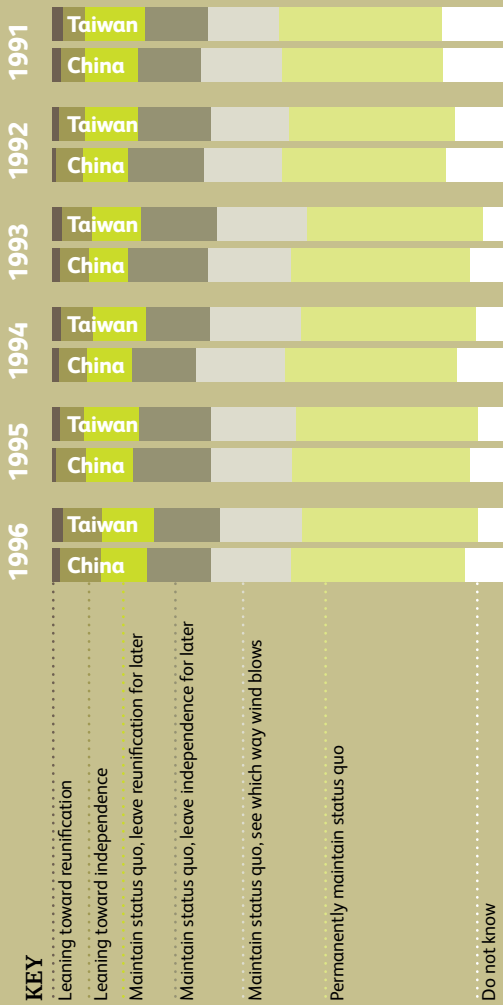
But whenever an election draws near, the DPP drags out "provincial origin" as its No. 1 campaign weapon. The tougher the campaign gets, the shriller the voices saying "elect a Taiwanese president" or "out with the Mainlanders" becomes. The current campaign for president, to culminate on March 22 this year, promises to be the ugliest of them all.

The reason is easy to see. As the *Washington Post* pointed out in an editorial in January, "Chen Shui-bian, the island's twice elected president, long ago wore out his welcome; during his eight years in office, economic growth has lagged and corruption has flourished, while Mr. Chen's aggressive and sometimes cynical promotion of Taiwanese independence has backfired."

Now let me turn to the heart of the question. Regardless of what politicians advocate, what do the 23 million people of democratic Taiwan think? Do they prefer independence from, or reunification with, mainland China?

The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), an agency directly under the cabinet, has for years been conducting public opinion surveys

HOW DO THE PEOPLE OF TAIWAN AND CHINA VIEW CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS?



Many issues remain between Taiwan and the Mainland that are unresolved. The two sides do not share a common belief in democracy and basic rights; and, most crucial of all, there is no fundamental trust to enable any consensus on the future.

on this question. The polling organizations include three national universities and three reputable firms, following very strict outlines. The survey always asks the same questions, dividing responses into six groups: 1. Leaning toward reunification; 2. Leaning toward independence; 3. Maintain status quo, leaving reunification for later; 4. Maintain status quo, leaving independence for later; 5. Maintain status quo, and see which way the wind blows; and 6. Permanently maintain status quo.

The graphs in the adjacent table are taken from the booklet “Important Documents of the Government’s Mainland Policy,” issued by the DPP-appointed MAC in November 2007. One can easily see that those who prefer the status quo far outnumber all other groups.

I belong to group “5. maintain status quo, and see which way the wind blows.” Many issues remain between Taiwan and the Mainland that are unresolved. The two sides do not share a common belief in democracy and basic rights; and, most crucial of all, there is no fundamental trust to enable any consensus on the future. We shall have to wait patiently, hoping that the time will come when these considerations will become satisfactory one way or another.

Loh I-cheng has had a long and distinguished diplomatic career in the government of Taiwan, and was named Ambassador-at-Large by former President Lee Teng-hui in 1998, before retiring in 2000. Loh contributes regularly to two of Taiwan’s leading newspapers, *The China Times* and the *United Daily News*.