

Comments on Taiwan's Identity
Remarks to a Conference on "Transpacific Taiwan"

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14 November, 2016, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island

Taiwan's location matters. It lies at the junction of two island arcs – the Ryukyu extension of the Japanese archipelago and the Philippines. Taiwan appears to have choices about where it fits in the world. It could look East to the Pacific or North to Japan or South to Southeast Asia or West to China and inner Asia. But it never gets to make these choices on its own.

Throughout history, Taiwan has wobbled between various international personalities, consolidating none of them. These include statuses defined in terms of the island's relationship to the Chinese mainland, Japan, Southeast Asia, and a series of Western great powers. Taiwan has itself selected none of these identities. All have been imposed on it by outside forces. In prehistoric times, as we have been reminded this morning, Taiwan had an organic, if distant, connection to Australasia and Polynesia, though this too is an identity imagined by outsiders and only recently. It would be hard to improve on Matt Matsuda's poetic evocation of this Pacific past.

As Tonio Andrade has pointed out in his wonderfully stimulating examination of various fights over the island's status and sovereignty, Taiwan entered history as various Western powers interested in trading with China – beginning with the Spanish and the Dutch – sought to make it an entrepôt:-- a sort of super Hong Kong.

Taiwan's place in the world has also reflected its potential as a base for blockading or invading



the China mainland and as a bridge between Southeast Asia and Japan. Japanese pirates and Zheng Chenggong [郑成功] clearly saw it in this light. So have many Americans.

In 1852 the American commissioner in China urged his government to occupy part of Taiwan. Commissioner Parker's plan had the sympathy and support of many Americans in East Asia at that time. In the words of an American merchant: "Formosa's eastern shore and southern point lie in the direct route of commerce between China and California and Japan, [and] should be protected by the United States of America."

Commodore Matthew Perry's investigations led him to support these schemes. His reasoning is worth quoting in some detail. He began by reviewing the position of American commerce in the Pacific in comparison with that of the superpower of the time.

"When we look at the possessions in the East of our great maritime rival, England, and of the constant and rapid increase of their fortified ports, we should be admonished of the necessity of prompt measures on our part.

"By reference to the map of the world it will be seen that Great Britain is already in possession of the most important places in the East India and China Seas; and especially with reference to the China Seas.

Perry continued, "Singapore commanding the southwestern, while Hong Kong covers the northeastern entrance, with the island of Labuan on the western coast of Borneo (an intermediate point), she will have the power of shutting up at will, and controlling the enormous trade of those seas.

"Fortunately the Japanese and many other islands of the Pacific are still untouched by this gigantic power, and as some of them lay in a route of commerce which is destined to become of great importance to the United States, no time shall be lost in adopting active measures to secure



a sufficient number of ports of refuge. . . . Commercial settlements in the China and Pacific seas will be found to be vitally necessary to the continued success of our commerce in these regions.”

Perry therefore supported the schemes of other Americans to annex Taiwan. His reasons for preferring Taiwan to other locations in the region are interesting. He said:

“The geographical position of Formosa renders it eminently suited as an entrepôt for American trade, from which communications might be established with China, Japan, Lew Chew [Ryukyu], Cochin China, Cambodia, Siam, the Philippines, and all the islands situated in the adjacent seas.

“. . . Another recommendation may be found in the advantages of its naval and military position, situated as it is in front of many of the principal commercial ports of China. It covers, and might be made with a sufficient naval force to command, not only those ports, but the northeastern entrance of the China seas, precisely as Cuba, in the hands of a powerful maritime nation, might command the American coast south of Cape Florida and the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico.”

Americans were not alone in our interest in Taiwan back then. The newly awakened Japanese empire soon resumed its traditional concern with the island. This interest was signaled by the installation of a special Taiwan department in the Tokyo government in January 1874. Japan then launched a military expedition and established a permanent base in Taidong (in southeastern Taiwan), where it exterminated the natives and remained until Chinese pressure and American mediation forced its withdrawal.

Japan's “Formosan Expedition” was more related to Japan’s complicated domestic politics than to any grand strategic vision. It was conceived as a diversionary action to placate expansionists after a Korean campaign had had to be called off. The decision to substitute a Taiwan expedition for the more dangerous Korean campaign was made on an ad hoc basis. Improvisation, which was such an outstanding characteristic of the economic and political growth of the Japanese



Empire, was the only consistent element in Japan's early foreign relations. But, the withdrawal of Japan's forces did not mean the end of Japanese interest in the island.

In 1884, during the Sino-French war, the French seized Keelung [Jilong -- 基隆], the port and gateway to Taipei. The Chinese governor of Taiwan Province, Liu Mingchuan [刘铭传] defeated the French forces in 1885, ending their attempt to link Taiwan to Indochina and impose a Franco-Vietnamese identity on it.

By the 1890s, the Japanese felt able to compete in East Asian political rivalries, and many of their leaders became anxious to find areas for Japan's expansion as a respectable colonial power. They found a pretext for war with China in 1894. It was a short war of several quick victories for Japan. When peace was negotiated in 1895, Japan insisted that Taiwan be ceded to it. In the last throes of defeat, China's concern that Japan would use Taiwan to invade the mainland led it to offer the island to England, apparently regarded as less dangerous than Japan. But the British refused. In 1895, the Japanese took formal control of the island.

The Japanese Navy, not the Army, ran the new colony. After many rebellions and the genocide of several indigenous Malayo-Polynesian tribes, Japan succeeded in a program of rapid assimilation of the local Han and tribal populations. (As late as 1970, my tutor in Taiwanese preferred to be called Keiko [Huizi -- 惠子]. Her parents had met in Tokyo in the late 1930s, when her mother placed first among women in an all-Japan elocution contest and her father second among men.) Taiwan had clearly been well on the way to acquiring a Japanese identity.

In the 1930s, Mao Zedong told Edgar Snow that, as far as he was concerned, Taiwan could be independent once Japan was defeated. As had been the case during the Ming - Qing transition, this indifference to the island's status changed in response to the course of events on the China mainland.. Chiang Kai-shek was pushed into using Taiwan as a bastion from which eventually to reverse his defeat on the mainland. A foreign power -- the United States -- intervened to preclude a final victory for the Communists in China's civil war. This perpetuated Taiwan's

separation from the rest of China. Everything about this was intolerable to Beijing.

As a rule, Chinese adamancy on the issue of Taiwan's status has been directly proportional to the degree of hostile foreign involvement in it. China has seen -- and continues to see -- Taiwan less as a potential strategic asset than as a present liability and, especially when linked to a foreign power, a threat to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Unlike Mao, Chiang Kai-shek was always adamant that Taiwan must be returned to China. The US-backed forces of the Republic of China recovered Taiwan for China on October 25, 1945. Four years later, in 1949, Chiang, his government, and much of what was left of his army fled to the island. The Chiang government began an intensive program of re-Sinicizing Taiwan. Taiwan's status as part of China became an essential element both in supporting its US-sponsored claim to be the home of the sole legitimate government of all of China, including Taiwan, and in U.S. hostility to the Communist regime in Beijing. It was politically incorrect, even illegal, to deny Taiwan's Chinese identity on the island, on the mainland, in Japan, in the United States, and in the United Nations.

But, as we all know, the question of identity remains open in the minds of many of the island's inhabitants. The multiple identities Taiwanese have had to assume over the centuries have left them perturbed about just who they are and what their relationship should be to neighboring societies, especially the newly dynamic one on the China mainland. All things being equal, they would like to be left along to decide their identity on their own.

Unfortunately for Taiwanese self-determination, there is absolutely no such confusion across the Taiwan Strait. For 1.4 billion Chinese, Taiwan is part of China, and that's that. There is no room for ambiguity on this point and Chinese will go to war rather than compromise it.

Taiwanese have now elected a government on the island that clearly prefers secession and independence to reunification under a negotiated version of the one-country, two-systems



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formula. This tests Beijing's willingness to tolerate Taipei's continuing *de facto* autonomy. For the first time, the People's Republic has a convincing capability to crush Taiwan and to frustrate American attempts to prevent that. The relationship between Washington, which continues to back Taiwan's right to define its own identity, and Beijing, is now openly hostile. This is due, in part, to the declining prospects for a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue between the Chinese on the two sides of the Strait.

There is now a greater danger than before that, if it is not handled with appropriate caution, Taiwan's unsettled identity will be determined not by peaceful means, as all interested parties would prefer, but through the use of force. Alas, for independence-minded Taiwanese, Taiwan cannot hope to reaffirm its Pacific identity except within the confines of a Greater Chinese Commonwealth that it joins in crafting.