Reflections on Chen Shui-bian’s Inauguration

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It was May 20\textsuperscript{th}, the inauguration day of President Chen Shui-bian, and Taipei was drenched with rain. As I arrived before the Presidential Palace and looked for my seat, Hemingway’s \textit{A Farewell to Arms} came to mind. In that novel the protagonist makes a “separate peace” with the conflicting, swirling demands of his world; almost everything takes place “in the rain.”

Still it was a momentous day--the swearing in and the subsequent inaugural address of the Republic of China’s (ROC) eleventh president, the third one to be directly elected by the people.

Chen Shui-bian faced a serious challenge in giving his address. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) had threatened the use severe force if Chen even hinted at independence from their unsubstantiated, expansionist claims to Taiwan. The United States gave warnings against rocking the boat and upsetting the balance of power in the region. Members of the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) wanted Chen to be strong against the PRC; some in his own party wanted a definite statement of independence. Members of opposition parties protested nearby.

When it was all over, the response was near predictable. The United States was pleased; Chen had avoided any provocative statements. The TSU felt he was too soft on the PRC. Some of his party praised his balanced statements and others wished he had said more. The PRC true to form insisted he was the greatest threat to stability in the region and that they could never trust his words in negotiations but only his actions.

The PRC’s own words had ironic overload considering their sense of honor in negotiations and their subsequent actions. In Tiananmen Square, gunfire and the deaths of thousands followed their negotiations with the students on democratic reforms. Their “negotiations” with world health organizations on SARS were followed by a continued cover up until hundreds of deaths made that impossible. Their negotiations with the Falun Gong always ended with imprisonment and beatings and their negotiations with Hong Kong, again on democratic reform, ended with Hong Kong losing more freedoms.

Inauguration addresses, nevertheless, are not meant for negotiations or to spell out specific policies; they aim to give a vision, to inspire and to provide direction for the country. What then did Chen say that Taiwanese could take away for the next four years?
First Chen said, democracy does not come ready-made; Taiwan would have to work at it one step at a time. Taiwan’s national identity has now been vested in the people; the people are the ones who can state their sovereignty and shape their destiny.

Chen focused on self-reflection; Taiwan is a place of disparate histories with the bensheng (locals) and waisheng (outsiders) just being part of that; his challenge would be to unite all these disparate elements of Taiwan and reach social harmony.

The Constitution is outdated; it had been created in the past when one party monopolized everything and the world was different. The Constitution had to be updated to better express the needs of democracy, human rights and peace.

Chen hit the hypocrisy of the world where Taiwan is the 15th largest trading nation in the world; and yet it was 144th to be belatedly allowed to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO). It is still denied access to the World Health Organization (WHO).

As for cross-strait relations, Chen stressed how the PRC must recognize that history has given rise to two very different political systems on either side of the strait. He is open to negotiations and any solution as long as the twenty-three million people of Taiwan consent to it.

Rain can be interpreted in many ways; it can be nourishing; it can be depressing; it can be cleansing. In Hemingway’s novel it generally has a somber feeling; but at one moment, when the protagonist and his girl reach Switzerland and freedom from wartorn Italy, he states, “Isn’t the rain fine? They never had rain like this in Italy. It’s cheerful rain.”

I sat there in the rain with over 200,000 loyal sons and daughters of Taiwan; I had experienced a President walk a tightrope of conflicting demands and expectations in his address. Without compromising and without provoking he still gave a believable direction to his country. I sat there in the rain and felt good.

This piece was written at the request of Taiwan Ho. http://www.taiwanho.com
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