"What Did You Say Taiwan Has Always Been?"

For Taiwanese, the most laughable and/or irritating statements are those of foreigners that begin with the words, “Well, Taiwan has always been . . .” One prime example is the current fabrication going around, “Well, Taiwan has always been a part of China.”

The Taiwanese have their own experience of what Taiwan has always been.

Taiwan was once a beautiful island. This was so, long before the Portuguese named it Ihla Formosa. Numerous aboriginal tribes inhabited the island; they enjoyed it as they competed for hunting grounds and territory, even doing a little head hunting on the side. Entrepreneurs, pirates, and traders, as well as farmers escaping poverty and taxes in China lived on the western side.

Then the Dutch came and planted their flag near Tainan. Taiwan was not really their first choice; they had tried to capture Macau from the Portuguese; then they fought with the Ming forces over Penghu (the Pescadores). Both sides compromised and the Dutch came to Taiwan in 1624. They built forts, they brought improvements, and they took aboriginal "wives"; but helping the island was not their main concern. What they really wanted was a base for their profitable trade with China and Japan. To do that, they sought to control and exploit the island; they also encouraged settlers to come from China to work under them. These settlers, mostly male, intermarried with the aborigines.

The Spanish came shortly after the Dutch; they planted their flag and settled in the north around Tamsui and Keelung. They brought their missionaries, and made some improvements; they also had aboriginal "wives". But what they really wanted was trade with China and Japan. To do that, they also had to control and exploit the island. They were driven out by their competitors, the Dutch.

The fleeing Ming loyalists came later led by Koxinga (Zheng Ch’eng-gong). After a 9-month siege they forced the Dutch to leave and they planted their flag in 1662. They did not come because they wanted to; they were running from the Manchus who were taking over Ming China. They needed a refuge from which they could hope to retake China. To do that, they also had to control and exploit the island. They only controlled a small part.

The Manchu Qing navies under Shi Lang followed the Ming. In a short time they took Penghu and forced the surrender of the Ming on Taiwan. They did not really care for the island; they stayed because they did not want any Ming supporters to return. To do that they needed to control the island, so they planted their flag in 1683 and garrisoned the western side, at times encouraging settlement and at other times discouraging it. Again, these settlers, mostly male, intermarried with aborigines.
While they were here, the French came and briefly planted their flag in the north in 1885. They really did not care for the island, but they were fighting with the Qing over Vietnam and they hoped to punish the Qing by punishing Taiwan. They had no time for improvements. They gained some advantage, made a treaty with the Qing and left.

The Qing stayed for over 200 years; their loving care for the island is seen in the fact that there were uprisings and rebellions every three to five years. Qing improvements were always too little, too late. Every time a new magistrate or governor promised to change things, he soon found an excuse to leave. While the Qing controlled and exploited the western half of the island, the aborigines held the central mountains and the eastern half. Then one day, all of the people of Taiwan found out from foreigners that they had been given to the Japanese in the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895).

Thus the Japanese came. The Taiwanese people, Hakka, Hoklo and aborigines, formed their own Republic of Taiwan. Their leaders quickly fled to China but the abandoned people opposed the Japanese. The Japanese armies were much too experienced and better equipped. Within six months they planted their flag and ruled. However, unlike the others, the Japanese had come to stay and they made lasting improvements to prove it. Taiwan was to be their showcase colony to the world. Yet with all their improvements, they too exploited the island.

In 1945, at the end of World War II, the Kuomintang (KMT) came. If those in the past had exploited the island, the KMT did it tenfold. Everything in Taiwan from iron to nuts and bolts to rice was taken to serve the KMT war effort on the mainland; but by 1949, the KMT too were running from the defeat. They could only stay and control the island with martial law until 1987. Then finally after long struggle, effort, and suffering the people achieved the right to directly and freely elect their own president in 1996. For the first time, the people of Taiwan and not outsiders could control their island. They could shape their own destiny and even try to restore the beauty of the island.

It doesn’t end there. Now another outsider, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), says it wants to come and control the island. Since the quality of life in Taiwan is so much better than that of the mainland, what exactly are they offering?

Conscious of their democracy the Taiwanese want to improve on that democracy and their island. The last thing Taiwan needs is another rapacious outsider.

And the Taiwan experience, do you need to ask?

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