

The People Speak

I spoke with Dr. Jane Chen, a professor of sociology in Taoyuan, Taiwan, about how the people of Taiwan are reacting to the ongoing conflict with China that has been making headlines for months in the global media.

Cathren Housley (Motif): Do any of the people or political groups in Taiwan actually support reunification with China?

Dr. Jane Chen: There are some, though very few, people in Taiwan who support reunification. They tend to be older, mostly the first generation children of the mainlanders who came when Chiang Kai Shek and his government retreated to Taiwan from China. There's an active political party here that wanders around with Chinese flags and gets into fights with various anti-Chinese groups, but there are only a few dozen people in it and they're all over 60. Supporting reunification is definitely a fringe thing, and given that it's mostly old people, growing ever more fringe.

CH: How are the people living in Taiwan reacting to the recent military threats?

DJC: It's hard to say how many people see Chinese military drills as a real threat. Most people have a 'we've seen it all before' attitude, and don't take it seriously. Some are angry, some are indifferent, some are worried, but very few people see the threat of war as real.

CH: How do the main political parties in Taiwan view these acts of aggression?

DJC: The relationship with China is a huge political football. The ruling party of Taiwan, the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party, has a support base of people who hate China and the Chinese. The DPP was formed to fight against the KMT (Kuomintang) government in Taiwan, one of the oldest political parties in Asia. The DPP regards them as Chinese colonists who took everything from the people and this hatred extends to mainland China itself. The main support base of the DPP, maybe 10-15% of our population, are really Taiwanese ethnic nationalists. They jump through lots of historical and linguistic hoops to try and prove their culture is completely separate from that of China (which it isn't) and that they are not descended from the Chinese (which they are). They would love a war with China tomorrow, which the godlike Japanese, and less-godlike Americans would fight on their behalf, setting them free!

These are mostly older people too, but there's a small but significant movement among young people towards this 'Deep Green' political faction of the DPP. *[editor's note: the DPP's party color is Green and the KMT is represented by Blue]* Their opponents sometimes call them the Daluban, which is how you say 'Taliban' in Chinese, but substituting 'green' for the middle character. It's a play on words in Chinese, to indicate they are crazy fanatics. Crazy young Chinese patriotic fanatics are called 'Little Pinks' in Chinese, and these two groups often have spirited and pointless shouting matches on the internet - Little Pinks vs the Green Taliban.

The official DPP position for the Non-Deep Greens, whose support they need to win elections, is that they will protect Taiwan from China. They will be tough on national defense, get foreign politicians to group through Taiwan, and rally international support against the evil Chinese who are banging on the gate. The more of a threat the Chinese are perceived as, the stronger this argument, so they constantly try to get a rise out of the Chinese, which isn't hard. The current president, Tsai Ing-wen, owes her

reelection to this.

CH: So the increase in Chinese aggression has a silver lining?

DJC: Tsai Ing-wen's domestic political agenda was a huge shambles. She couldn't get any of the policies she'd promised during her campaign implemented in any meaningful way, and the people saw her as useless, the worst thing to be in Taiwanese politics. Then came the Hong Kong crackdown and she managed to ride the wave of anti-Chinese fear it caused here all the way to reelection.

That's the DPP's main game plan now: "The Evil Chinese are ever-more threatening! Only we can protect you from them! The KMT are traitors who will sell out Taiwan! Don't worry about stagnant salaries, crazy real estate prices, the fastest aging population in the world, the electricity shortage, air pollution from the biggest coal fired generator in the world, and all the other problems we promised to solve years ago - and the fact that all our government officials are getting suspiciously rich. It's the Evil Chinese!!!"

The KMT, whose main goal is for themselves to become the people getting suspiciously rich again, try to portray themselves as patriots who are also tough on China, but would go another route and talk to them to manage relations. They condemn Chinese military actions, stand firmly with the armed forces, reject one country / two systems etc., but say the DPP are causing trouble for their own political ends, and that they would manage things more calmly. It's a stance that didn't do well in the last presidential election - it did not help that their candidate was a bizarre idiot who was mysteriously popular for a while, then mysteriously unpopular, even though he was the same corrupt drunken idiot the whole way through. But their message seems to have some more resonance now. There are local elections coming up soon which will be a good test of how public opinion is shaping.

CH: How much faith does Taiwan have in its own military readiness?

DJC: All politicians express complete confidence in the heroic men and women of the Taiwanese armed forces! Some patriots are similarly supportive. Lots of people see our military as incompetent and pretty useless though. Most Taiwanese men have done some compulsory military service, and they generally tell you it was a huge waste of time. There's a general sense that the Chinese are stronger, and getting ever more stronger by the year. Taiwan could not resist them militarily by itself.

CH: How do people view America's commitment to Taiwan and these recent political visits? Do they see this as strengthening Taiwan's global standing as an independent country? Or do they see it as poking a sleeping tiger that they do not want to wake up?

DJC: The two main parties portray US visits according to their positions on China. For the DPP it's proof that it is their strong relationship with the US that keeps the Chinese at bay. For the KMT, the US visits are pointless provocations that annoy the Chinese for no concrete results. Among the population there's a general cynicism towards US relations. They believe that money is changing hands during these visits, and there are rumors that sleazy Mike Pompeo tried to pressure Taiwan into investing government funds in a company in which he is a partner, and that another Republican scumbag used a diplomatic visit to pressure Taiwanese airlines into buying planes from Boeing. However, these rumors remain unproven - and for the Deep Green faithful, the visits from US officials are amazing diplomatic achievements. Other Taiwanese aren't so sure. The phrase 'using Taiwan as a bargaining chip' is often used.

CH: Do the Taiwanese people get as heated about politics as we do in the US?

DJC: Elections always have pretty high turnouts but most Taiwanese are pretty cynical about politics and politicians. There are numerous attempts to create third parties because people, particularly young people, have no faith in either the DPP or KMT, but so far they have gained little traction. There's a new party now, the TPP (Taiwan People's Party), which was formed by the popular mayor of Taipei as a 'third force' in Taiwanese politics positioned between the other two parties on China, but it's hard to say how popular this will prove in the long run.

CH: Do young college kids have different views than the older population on the China situation?

DJC: My students and other young people are generally more "Taiwanese not Chinese" than the older Taiwanese. This includes the fanatics who want "war with China now!" - but most will feign bad backs that prevent them from actually fighting, should it happen. It also includes most younger Taiwanese in general who don't want a war, but definitely don't want to be part of China, and resent being classified as 'Chinese Taipei' at the Olympics; they want UN recognition as Taiwan.

CH: how do the Taiwanese people feel about the Chinese people?

DJC: In general, Taiwanese don't like Chinese. Or people from Hong Kong. Or Koreans. Or Singaporeans. Or Filipinos, Indonesians, Thais, Malaysians, etc. They see the Japanese as godlike beings who are almost the same as Taiwanese in every way, although I lived in Japan for 7 years and must confess I can't see this similarity at all.

The Taiwanese don't like any Asian countries that are richer than Taiwan, and look down on any that are poorer than Taiwan. But these are just general prejudices. They don't go around attacking these people or starting fights with them. There are many Chinese who live in Taiwan, and they generally get along OK. I'm sure there's some friction in daily life, particularly if they have strong northern Chinese accents and don't queue up in lines, but it's often said that long-term Chinese residents are often more accepted in Taiwanese society than those of other countries. Taiwanese in China are in a similar situation. They are different, and treated differently. But not as differently as other ethnicities. Tourists didn't seem to have any real problems in either country, back when there was tourism before COVID. There were no fights in the streets, or even people shouting at each other.

CH: How involved are your two countries with each other in business and financial investments?

DJC: The two economies are massively intertwined. Taiwan has a huge amount of money invested in China, and China is our biggest trading partner. Taiwan's economy is very dependent on exports - they're about 70% of GDP, as opposed to the US where exports are about 10% of GDP. Over 40% of Taiwan's exports go to China, and there's no market that can replace this. Trade with Taiwan is a smaller % of GDP for China, but they're mostly hi tech goods that Chinese companies need to make things and that they can't buy anywhere else. Without the Chinese market, Taiwan's economy would collapse. Without the hi tech imports from Taiwan, China's economy would collapse.

CH: so, would China be shooting itself in the foot if it invaded Taiwan?

DJC: A war between China and Taiwan would be disastrous for the world economy, a hundred times worse than the war in Ukraine. Every government knows this, so they want to avoid a war. It's in absolutely no one's interests. But it doesn't mean it can't happen. If anyone's planes or ships get

attacked, domestic politics would mean they would have to retaliate so as not to look weak. Then things can easily spiral out of control. This is the real danger of the current situation.

CH: Thank you, Dr. Chen.