

The Evolution of the "One China" Concept in the Process of Taiwan's Democratization

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**The Evolution of the “One China” Concept
in the Process of Taiwan’s Democratization**

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Abstract: This paper investigates how Taiwan’s “one China” concept evolved during the democratization process that occurred under the leadership of former President Lee Teng-hui. The author argues that there was a crucial evolution of the “one China” concept and that the transformation of the concept resulted from changes in Taiwan’s internal political circumstances. The evolution of the concept creates a real possibility that the “status quo” sought by the ROC in the Taiwan Strait both during and after the Cold War might be destroyed. In addition, any further evolution of the “one China” concept will surely make the “status quo” of Taiwan untenable, in that it would induce Taiwan to seek *de jure* instead of *de facto* independence, possibly initiating a conflict between the PRC and the ROC. To prevent such a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the international community must persuade the ROC not to go beyond the “status quo” and to stay within the framework of *de facto* independence. At the same time, both the PRC and the ROC should be urged to maintain an open conduit of communication for productive talks on the reunification of China.

Keywords: One China, PRC, ROC, Taiwan, Democratization, Lee Teng-hui

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the “one China” concept of the Republic of China (ROC) evolved during the process of Taiwanese democratization from the middle of the 1980s to the 1990s. Ever since 1949, the ROC has in theory sought to realize a “one China” situation by recovering mainland China from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and reunifying all of the mainland under the government of the ROC. For its part, the PRC maintains that “the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government of China, and Taiwan is a part of China.”¹

In this article, I will examine how Taiwan’s position on the “one China” issue has progressed by examining related official documents and speeches concerning the democratization of Taiwan, especially under the leadership of former President Lee Teng-hui. The question I address here is whether there was a crucial evolution of the “one China” concept immediately after Lee took over the reins of government. I will also investigate how this evolving “one China” view may be affected by the coming to power of the new president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian. By employing these approaches, the paper aims to clarify Taiwan’s attitude toward the realization of reunification under the concept of “one China”.

II. Differences between the ROC and the PRC over the “One China” Concept

After 1949, the Chiang Kai-shek administration sought to recover mainland China and thereby establish “one China” through reunification under the government of the ROC.² This political goal was in principle inherited by the son of Chiang Kai-shek and later president Chiang Ching-kuo, while leaving open the question as to how seriously Taiwan’s leaders took the goal of reunification.

¹ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter*, bk. 2, GPO, 1979, pp. 2264-66.

² Donald J. Senese and Diane D. Pikcunas, *Can the Two Chinas Become One?* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Social and Economic Studies, 1989), p.193.

By contrast, the PRC has taken the position that there is only “one China,” which is the People’s Republic of China. For the PRC, the “liberation of Taiwan” was a crucial political goal after its establishment in 1949. When diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC were normalized in 1979, the PRC, under the leadership of Deng Xiao-ping, revised its policy towards Taiwan and altered the political slogan symbolizing its Taiwan policy from “liberation” to “unification.” Moreover, the PRC decided to stop its bombardment targeted at the off-shore islands in the Taiwan Strait, which had continued since the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958, and called for cross-strait contact and dialogue for purposes of reunification. On January 1, 1979, the PRC issued a statement, “PRC’s New Year’s Message to Compatriots in Taiwan,” which contained the following:-

Unification of China now fits in with the direction of popular feeling and the general trend of development. The world in general recognizes only one China, with the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government.

...The Chinese Government has ordered the People’s Liberation Army [PLA] to stop the bombardment of Quemoy and other islands as of today. A state of military confrontation between the two sides still exists along the Taiwan Strait. This can only create artificial tension. We hold that first of all this military confrontation should be ended through discussion between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Taiwan authorities so as to create the necessary prerequisites and a secure environment for the two sides to make contacts and exchanges in whatever field...³

As far as “one China” is concerned, the PRC declared in its message,

We place great hopes on the 17 million people on Taiwan and also

³ “Text of NPC Standing Committee Message to Taiwan Compatriots,” *New China News Agency*, December 31, 1978, in *FBIS*, January 2, 1979.

on the Taiwan authorities. The Taiwan authorities have always taken a firm stand on one China and have opposed an independent Taiwan. This is our common stand and the basis for our cooperation.⁴

As the PRC pointed out in this message, “the Taiwan authorities have always taken a firm stand on one China,” so in purely logical terms, the PRC and the ROC shared a common position at that time. Of course, the “one China” concepts that they held differed diametrically. As discussed in the following section, this gap between the PRC and ROC over the “one China” concept has widened further during the democratization process in Taiwan.

III. Evolution of the “One China” Concept under the Lee Administration

1. President Lee’s Efforts transcending the “Political Fiction” of the ROC’s Sovereignty

In January 1988, following the death of Chiang Ching-kuo, vice president Lee Teng-hui was inaugurated as president of Taiwan. Although Lee was a successor of the Chiangs, he was not related to them by blood. He was in fact the first native “Taiwanese” (as opposed to “mainlander”) to become the president of his country. Immediately after his inauguration, he faced a political conflict with the conservatives in the Kuomintang (KMT) who had served Madame Soong Mayling and others.⁵ These conservatives sought to prevent President Lee from becoming the Chairman of the KMT. However, Lee managed to survive the incident and assumed the KMT chairmanship.⁶

⁴ *New China News Agency, in FBIS, ibid.*

⁵ Soong Mayling is also known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek; she held a number of political and extra political positions and had considerable political influence in the KMT government, both during her husband’s life and after. In 1988, after the death of her son, President Chiang Ching-kuo, she sided with those who sought to prevent Lee Teng-hui from gaining leadership of the KMT.

⁶ Later, in 1993, a faction of conservatives in the KMT left the party and formed the New Party.

On July 7, 1988, the KMT opened its 13th Party Congress, at which Lee Teng-hui was elected to the post of party chairman. The new Party platform, which would provide the government's policy guidelines for the next four years, emphasized the continuation of the democratization and liberation processes in the realms of politics and the economy. These guidelines included the KMT's policy toward the PRC.⁷ The KMT declared its intention to continue its "Three No's Policy"⁸ (no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise) toward the PRC and to promote the "reunification of China" in line with its traditional official ideology, the "Three People's Principles." Written by Sun Yat-sen,⁹ these comprised the protection of nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people. Of course, under the authoritarian system of the KMT, democracy in Taiwanese society was still limited and the principles were only nominal.

The reason why there was nothing special in Taiwan's policy toward the PRC as articulated in the guidelines of the new administration was that Lee Teng-hui's political power was not yet established within the KMT. Considering in particular the strength of the conservatives in the KMT, attachment to the ROC's traditional policy was crucial for him at the start of his new administration.. Later, as an extension of this conventional position, "Taiwan's Guidelines for National Unification" were adopted by the National Unification Council on February 23, 1991, and by the Executive Yuan (the cabinet) on March 14, 1991. The guidelines stated:-

[The aim of unification is] to establish a democratic, free, and equitably prosperous China. ...It should be achieved in gradual phases under the principles of reason, peace, parity and reciprocity. ...[In the short term,] to enhance understanding through exchanges between the two sides of the

⁷ "Quanhui Tongguo Xianduanjie Daluzhengce" (KMT Congress Adapts New "Platform"), *Zhongyangribao*, July 13, 1988.

⁸ The policy of no contact, no negotiation, no compromise, was enunciated by Chiang Ching-kuo at the 12th KMT Party Congress in 1981 in response to "PRC's New Year's Message to Compatriots in Taiwan" by the PRC.

⁹ Sun Yat-sen is known as the father of the Republic of China and the founder of the KMT.

Strait and eliminate hostility through reciprocity.¹⁰

“Unification” was emphasized in these guidelines so as to placate conservatives who were suspicious of the constitutional governmental reforms that were being introduced under the leadership of President Lee. Conservatives in the KMT were anxious lest that the hidden motive underlying Lee’s reforms was promotion of the independence of Taiwan. Therefore, the new administration had to officially confirm that it had no intention of declaring the independence of Taiwan and that it would continue to seek the unification of China. As far as the “one China” concept is concerned, these guidelines asserted the principle of “one China” and declared that the mainland and Taiwan belong to “China.” However, this definition of “one China” was controversial at that time, as it remained unclear whether “one China” meant “the Republic of China,” or “a new China” following the reunification of the ROC and the PRC.

Meanwhile, the Lee administration gradually began to change its actual interpretation of the phrase “one China.” The first indication that President Lee intended to alter the government’s direction came in his speech at the Second Plenum of the 13th KMT Central Committee on June 3, 1989. At the opening ceremony, President Lee stated, “We should seek ‘one China’ and hope for the reunification of China. However, today, we have to recognize that the ROC’s sovereignty is limited temporarily.”¹¹ Although he gave no exact definition of “one China” in this speech, President Lee was probably trying to say that people in Taiwan at the very least should look at the reality that the ROC’s sovereignty no longer extended over mainland China.

¹⁰ Text published in: Mainland Affairs Council, Executive Yuan, Republic of China, “Consensus Formed at the National Development Conference on Cross-Strait Relations,” February 1997.

¹¹ As to the Chinese version, see “Lee Zhuxi Zai Er Zhong Quanhui Yanzheng Xuanya”(Lee Teng-hui seeking to build unified China and freedom of democracy), *Zhongyangribao*, July 3, 1989. According to the Japanese translation, the word “temporarily” was supposedly used by Lee. However, this word cannot be found in the Chinese version. For the Japanese version, see *Chukashuho*, Vol.1428.

When the constitution of the Republic of China was promulgated on January 1, 1947, the ROC defined mainland China as comprising thirty-five provinces. In fact, after Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan in 1949, the ROC's actual sovereignty extended only to Taiwan province and a part of Fujian province. However, the ROC kept alive the political fiction that the ROC's sovereignty embraced mainland China. It appears that the Lee administration gradually tried to go beyond this entrenched "political fiction" of the ROC's sovereignty.

2. Terminating the "Temporary Provision" and the Meaning of "One China"

On May 1, 1991, the Lee administration declared its intention to terminate the "Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion", commonly known as the "Temporary Provisions", which had been promulgated by the KMT government on May 10, 1948, during the Chinese Civil War. This termination of the Temporary Provisions signified a change in the ROC's attitude toward the PRC.¹² By terminating the provisions, the ROC ceased to regard rule by the PRC as a "Communist Rebellion," the term that was officially announced at the end of civil war against the Chinese Communists, and recognized the political authority of the PRC in mainland China. The ROC's acknowledgement of the PRC as a political entity whose sovereignty covered mainland China indirectly implied that the ROC itself was a viable political entity that ruled only Taiwan and some other islands as well.

The Temporary Provisions were symbolic of the earlier authoritarian character of the KMT, and by upholding them, the president was justified in exercising absolute political power beyond the ROC constitution. The Temporary Provisions expanded the emergency powers given to the president in Articles 39 and 43 of the constitution, permitted the president to exceed the constitutionally limited two terms in office, and authorized the president to appoint members to the three elected bodies of the government. However, critics of the Temporary Provisions had long considered

¹² John W. Garver, *Face off: China, the United States, and Taiwan's Democratization* (University of Washington Press, 1997), p.27.

them overdue for repeal and saw them as an obstruction to constitutionalism and democracy.

In a series of constitutional governmental reforms, and by abolishing the Temporary Provisions, the Lee administration tried to put an end to pervasive authoritarianism and aimed to reinforce the cabinet system in the ROC. Originally, the conservatives within the KMT were sceptical of Lee's reforms. However, since they preferred Lee Teng-hui to be less powerful as a president, they therefore supported the abolition of the Temporary Provisions.

The abolition of the Temporary Provisions also implied reform of the National Assembly whose roles were regulated by the provisions. Historically, the National Assembly's representation had been based on the claim that the ROC government represented "all of China" and the Assembly contained representatives who had remained members from the 1947 election onwards. The termination of the Temporary Provisions meant that these "perpetual" representatives, elected from the provinces of mainland China, could be retired, and new members to the National Assembly reelected. Except for those from Taiwan province, virtually all of those representatives of the National Assembly who represented "all of China," were ousted from the National Assembly.

On August 1, 1992, the Mainland Affairs Council of the Executive Yuan officially announced the definition of "one China" in a text entitled "Taiwan on the Meaning of 'One China.'" This states:

Both sides of the Taiwan Strait agree that there is only one China. However, the two sides of the Strait have different opinions as to the meaning of "one China." To Peking, "one China" means the "People's Republic of China (PRC)," with Taiwan to become a "Special Administration Region" after unification. Taipei, on the other hand, considers "one China" to mean the Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1911 and with *de jure* sovereignty over all of China. The ROC, however, currently has jurisdiction only over Taiwan, the Pescadores, Kinmen, and Matsu. Taiwan is part of China, and the

Chinese mainland is part of China as well.¹³

This announcement could be viewed as the culmination of the events that resulted from the termination of the Temporary Provisions that had governed the “one China” issue. The definition recognized the PRC’s jurisdiction over mainland China and the ROC’s jurisdiction over Taiwan, the Pescadores, Kinmen, and Matsu. Later, in December 1998, the Taiwan Provincial Government, which had been named one of the provincial governments in addition to the thirty-five provinces of mainland China, was eradicated as part of an administrative reform, and its governor, James Soong, resigned. This event was widely seen as not much more than a political conflict within the KMT between President Lee and Governor James Soong over the issue of the abolition of the Taiwan Provincial Government. However, it can also be regarded as part of a sequence of events leading to the change of the “one China” concept in Taiwan.

The new “one China” definition is based on two subtle assumptions. First, the PRC and the ROC are different political entities, and “Taiwan is part of China, and the Chinese mainland is part of China as well.” Second, there is no “one China” in existence now, and the ROC seeks reunification for “one China.” The “one China” that the ROC seeks is neither the “one Republic of China” nor the “one People’s Republic of China.” The “one China” could be called an “unknown China,” as President Lee later mentioned that “there is no ‘one China’ now.”¹⁴

VI. Conclusion

1. Evolution of the “One China” Concept in Taiwan

¹³ “Consensus Formed at the National Development Conference on Cross-Strait Relations,” *op.cit.*,. “Taiwan on the Meaning of ‘One China’” was adopted by the National Unification Council.

¹⁴ Lee Teng-hui, “U.S. Can’t Ignore Taiwan,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 1998. Lee made this statement immediately after President Clinton’s announcement on the “Three No’s” on June 30, 1998.

During the Chiang Kai-shek administration, reunification of China, that is, the realization of “one China” by the Republic of China, was the fundamental political goal of the Chinese nationalist administration in Taiwan. The ROC’s position is that it represents China, and that Taiwan is a part of China. Meanwhile for its part, the PRC holds the view that there is only “one China” in the world, and that is the People’s Republic of China.

Immediately after normalization of relations with the United States, the PRC announced that “the Taiwan authorities have always taken a firm stand on one China and have opposed an independent Taiwan.” Of course, while the PRC and the ROC could at least share a common concept, both sides tacitly understood that each held a distinct concept of “one China.” However, as democratization in Taiwan made progress toward the end of the 1980s, the implications of “one China” for Taiwan gradually changed. This changing of the “one China” concept in Taiwan was not induced by external factors, such as a threat from the PRC, but rather came mainly from internal factors brought about by the changing political situation within Taiwan.

Immediately after his inauguration as president in 1988, Lee Teng-hui appeared to support the ROC’s traditional “one China” line that “one China” would mean the reunification of all of mainland China and Taiwan under the government of the ROC. At that time, Lee did not make drastic changes in the “one China” policy probably because his political power was not yet properly established. However, in the process of democratization in the early 1990s, the Lee administration gradually sought to go beyond the “political fiction” that the territory legitimately ruled by the ROC consisted of the whole of mainland China as well as Taiwan.

As discussed above, the 1992 document, “Taiwan on the Meaning of ‘One China,’” shows that the ROC still considers “one China” to mean the Republic of China, founded in 1911 and with sovereignty over all of China including mainland China, Taiwan and the other islands. The ROC has never officially changed its position regarding this definition of “one China.” However, the implications of “one China” for the ROC have in fact changed because of internal factors and the events that occurred in the early 1990s.

2. Implications for Today's Taiwan's Position of "One China"

On May 20, 2000, Chen Shui-bian, who was a leader of the opposition party, the Democratic Progress Party (DPP), was inaugurated as the tenth president of the Republic of China. The KMT had been in office for over a half century – in other words for the entire period since the ROC government under Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan following its defeat by Communist China on the mainland in 1949. However, as a result of Chen's electoral victory in 2000, KMT rule came to an end and the DPP took over the reins of government.

In his inauguration speech of May 20, 2000, President Chen stated, "We believe that the leaders on both sides possess enough wisdom and creativity to jointly deal with the question of a future 'one China.'"¹⁵ Although President Chen has never provided an official interpretation of the expression "a future 'one China' " used in his speech, "a future 'one China' " means an "unknown China."

This change in the "one China" concept caused the ROC's policy toward the PRC to change as well.¹⁶ On November 26, 2000, the new Chen administration proposed that the ROC and the PRC should follow an agreement reached in the autumn of 1992, between the Taiwan Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF: the ROC side) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS: the PRC side). On November 3, 1992, the SEF sent a letter to the ARATS, formally proposing that each side should make respective statements through verbal announcements. The ARATS fully respected and accepted the SEF's suggestion:-¹⁷

¹⁵ *Zhongyanguanribao*, May 21, 2000.

¹⁶ *Asahi Shinbun*, Tokyo, November 30, 2000.

¹⁷ *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), Beijing, November 6, 1992. Also, at a press conference on October 18, after Politburo Member and Vice Premier Qian Qichen met with visiting SEF Chairman Koo Chen-fu, Tang Shubei, the ARATS executive vice chairman, cited the letter sent from ARATS to SEF on November 16, 1992. Tang repeated what ARATS said: "Both sides of the strait stick to the 'one China' principle and will strive to pursue national unification. However, negotiations on routine matters across the strait do not involve the political meaning of one China." *Xinhua Hong Kong Service*, October 18, 1998, translated in *FBIS*.

The PRC has agreed to a Taipei proposal that both sides “orally state” their respective “one China” positions. ...Though both sides of the Taiwan Strait insist on the “one China” principle in the process of joining efforts to pursue national unification, they have a different recognition about the contents of “one China.”...¹⁸

However, this flexible interpretation toward “one China” by the PRC did not last long, for changes in the PRC’s attitude in the autumn of 1992 signified another political purpose: the PRC strongly hoped to realize the first China-Taiwan dialogue which was scheduled in the summer of 1993.

In recent years, the conceptual gap over “one China” between the PRC and ROC has widened. On November 30, 2000, the PRC officially announced a rejection of the agreement made in 1992. While the ROC’s concept of “one China,” and even its policy toward the PRC changed, the PRC has persistently asserted the realization of “one China” by its government.

The evolution of the “one China” concept in Taiwan creates a real possibility that the “status quo” sought by the ROC in the Taiwan Strait both during and after the Cold War might be destroyed.¹⁹ The “status quo” that the ROC seeks is neither reunification with the PRC nor *de jure* independence from China.²⁰ However, any further evolution of the “one China” concept will surely make the “status quo” of Taiwan untenable, in that it would induce Taiwan to seek *de jure* instead of *de facto* independence.

Evolution of the “one China” concept may possibly incur some type of conflict between the PRC and the ROC, and it will certainly threaten stability in the Asia-Pacific region. To prevent such a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the international

¹⁸ “Straits Group Agrees to State Positions ‘Orally’,” *Central News Agency*, Taipei, November 18, 1992, in *FBIS*.

¹⁹ Haruka Matsumoto, “Analysis of Current Taiwan Affairs,” *Asia Pacific Security*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 1999, p.59.

²⁰ “Beijing’s ‘one-China’ dogma haunts Chen,” *Daily Yomiuri*, December 4, 2000.

community must persuade the ROC not to go beyond the “status quo” and to stay within a framework of *de facto* independence. At the same time, both the PRC and the ROC should be urged to have an open conduit of communication for productive talks on the reunification of China, even though China and Taiwan are pursuing quite different objectives when it comes to the realization of “one China”.

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