

The X Generation Arrives in Taipei

Written by Lily Kuo for the Asian Sentinel. (copyright 2006-2008 by the Asian Sentinel, included on www.Rotary7690.org by permission of John Berthelsen, editor.)

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Taiwan's yuppies have other things to do than follow politics the way their elders did

Last Friday, 28-year-old Taipei resident Silvia Chen decided to take the national Double Ten holiday, Taiwan's birthday, to chat on MSN and work on her personal blog. While parents and children came out for the celebration alongside Kuomintang leaders, and a group urging President Ma Ying-Jieu to accelerate money-laundering investigations of former president Chen Shui-

bian, Silvia Chen let the ceremony play on the flat screen of her newly-renovated apartment in one of the city's suburbs.

She and her husband, Tsao Chin, are members of a kind of new Taiwanese Generation-X social class – aware but apathetic, non-participatory in the political furnace that has characterized Taiwan's heated atmosphere for decades. The couple voted this year for Ma, and even though Chin works as an aide to a Taiwanese lawmaker, he is just as disinterested in debating national affairs or attending political events.

"It was just boring government stuff," she said of the national day celebration, and instead directed me to the link on her site with updated pictures of her honeymoon in [Eastern Europe](#). Chen teaches piano and manages the investments that she and her husband made this year after marrying.

"We've seen [Taiwan's leaders] performance and we're disappointed," Tsao Chin said. "More and more, we lose interest and a desire to participate."

When it comes to politics, their elders are "hot-hearted," a common Chinese term that describes the 70 percent or higher voter turn-out, the brawls in the legislature or divisions between friends based on their party color (green for the pro-independence DPP and blue for the China-friendly nationalist Kuomintang). Those in the south typically identify with the DPP and are considered Taiwanese, the island's largest ethnic group, which has lived on the island centuries before the Kuomintang's arrival in the wake of their drubbing by the Communists in 1949. Residents in the north, often first and second generations of families who came over from China with the KMT, are still called waisheng ren or foreign-born. Politicians in Taiwan recently have used identity politics to drum up the differences between the two groups to rally support.

As with the rest of Asia, the young in Taiwan are having premarital sex more, and -- dangerously -- not using condoms as much as they used to and not as much as they should. They are moderate, or what in much of the rest of Asia would be termed conservative. They are material and while their fashion sense is sometimes as adventurous as the Japanese they are not as suave by streets. They don't drive BMWs or Mercedes because those are the established gangster cars in Taiwan. Most of Taiwan's wealthy opt for the safer, more conservative Lexus to avoid any association.

By and large, Taiwan's generation of young professionals and college students seem impervious to appeals to national or ethnic sentiment. Their priorities are more in line with Ma's professed main concern: a better economy. Ma has been heralded by some for easing relations with China and prioritizing ways for Taiwan to profit off of China's development through tourism and more open trade, and criticized by others for selling out Taiwan or reversing years of democratic progress. To the young, there are more important things than politics.

"Politics is not what gets you a job," Chin said. "It doesn't give you food to eat every day."

Younger generations also demonstrate a less divisive perspective of national and ethnic identity. Long-time Taiwan analyst Shelley Rigger's 2006 study, "Taiwan's Rising Nationalism: Generations, Politics and 'Taiwanese Nationalism,'" found the fourth generation of Taiwanese -- those born after 1968 -- more pragmatic and flexible than their parents and grandparents. Rigger used generational studies, surveys and focus groups, and found that Taiwanese youths generally do not see any contradiction in loving their country and seeking economic opportunity by way of China.

"For me, I'm really simple," says Jessica Wang, a 29-year-old Taipei native. "If you ask me if I support Taiwan going under China's wing, I would say yes because this would bring the economy, the future back to Taiwan." Wang had been working at the Grand Hyatt Taipei before moving to Beijing before the Olympics to take a post as public relations manager at a Hong Kong-owned boutique hotel on a popular bar street. "Here in China there is much more opportunity to develop my career. In Taipei, there's not much happening."

Wang says that because of Taiwan's high level of education -- 70.73 percent of high school graduates opt for university -- and the use of a common language, moving to China is a smart step for professionals who are finding it increasingly difficult to enter Taiwan's work force. With new development in China, opportunity for advancement comes faster. Wang described Taiwan's overflow of universities, the saturated job market and a slower rate of development. She said, "In Taiwan I would have had to wait five, six years to reach a management position."

While in Beijing, locals have asked Wang if she calls herself a Taiwanese or a Chinese and to make them happy, Wang says that she's Chinese all the way. She said, "But if you really ask me, I'll say that I'm Taiwanese and that they are different things. When it comes to whether or not China and Taiwan come together or not, I don't really care. I just want to see Taiwan growing and doing well."

In her study, Rigger describes the four generations that make up Taiwan's population and says that "ethnic consciousness may not mean the same to all age groups." The first generation are those that grew up during the Japanese occupation, which lasted through the end of World War II, and the second is made of those socialized at the height of the nationalist single-party authoritarianism that ended in the late 1970s.

Political consciousness also differs from the first two generations to the third and fourth. Peter and Judy Chen live in central Taiwan in Taichung, the country's third largest city, and count as part of the second generation. Peter teaches at Tunghai University and has two sons, one 32 and the other 28. The 28-year-old lives in southern Taiwan and spends his days surfing, Judy said.

"Young people today don't have the same sense of urgency that we had," she says. She laments Taiwan's lack of international status, a country recognized by only 23 states, many of which are poor African nations basically bought off with Taiwanese government money. "[Young people] completely don't understand. They say they want a good economy. But to have that, you first have to have status."

But perhaps the misunderstanding and difference between generations is a sign of progress. Peter says that his parents witnessed the notorious 2-28 uprising of ethnic Taiwanese in 1947 which was violently suppressed by the Kuomintang and kicked off what became known as the White Terror period, in which thousands of ethnic Taiwanese were killed, imprisoned or simply vanished. They never spoke of politics, he said.

"We are different from our parents who teach us about these events for fear that we would let something slip and disappear as well," he said. "Our parents didn't talk about politics at all. They were just concerned with how to live."

Because of education and their youth culture—Taiwan's younger generation is less likely to buy into identity and partisan politics. The youth today are more highly-educated; they move from all around Taiwan to attend universities throughout the island's different regions and almost all speak Taiwanese as well as Mandarin, having learned important phrases from talk shows, music and slang.

Moreover, the youth in Taiwan have grown up taking democracy for granted. That explains the apathy but also indicates a chance for objective, critical and individual thinking. To Tsao Chin, this lack of political participation does not indicate a regression from the country's democracy but actually an improvement. "The less crazy people are, the more they can look at issues and at the person."