

Taiwanese Students' Self-identity: "Is Taiwan Chinese? Perspectives from the Strawberry Generation of Taiwanese Youth



Dr. Nadeau presenting about self identity (left) while the audience is listening to the lecture

On Wednesday, February 18th, 2015, the East Asia Institute hosted a lecture about Taiwan and its social and political culture entitled "Taiwanese Students' Self-identity: "Is Taiwan Chinese? Perspectives from the Strawberry Generation of Taiwanese Youth". The lecture was presented by Dr. Randall Nadeau, Professor of Religion from Trinity University.

Dr. Randall received his master's degree in Religion at Princeton University in 1980. He went on to study at the University of British Columbia and received a Ph. D. in Asian studies, specializing in Chinese Religions in 1990. He has published research on many subjects including folk religion in both China and Japan, methodology in the study of Buddhist and popular religions, deity cults, and much more.

After spending a semester in Taiwan as a Fulbright visiting professor, Dr. Nadeau came to

share his research on three generations of Taiwanese citizens – from the Japanese period, the Martial Law period, and the period of Democratization under three presidents -- and how they view themselves as "Chinese" or "Taiwanese." The Japanese Colonial era ran from 1895 to 1945. During this period Japan exerted a great influence on Taiwan.

In 1949, Martial Law period was imposed by the Chinese Nationalist Government. This period ran for thirty-eight years, and was ended by the Nationalist government in 1987. In 1996, President Lee Teng-hui was elected president by a democratic vote, making this the first democratic election in Taiwan's history. Since then, Taiwan has remained in its Democratic period. These three generations, from 1895-1996, are the generations that Dr. Nadeau presented about.

While in Taiwan, Dr. Nadeau taught several classes where he was able to understand the viewpoints of the younger Taiwanese people. Taiwan has 71% of 20 year old citizens attending college while 25.1% of the people between the ages of 25 to 65 have a college degree. Both of these numbers are growing every year. Even though the majority of young people are attending colleges, most of them “have low expectations of future economic success”. This is caused by low starting salaries that have stayed the same for 15 years, being employed in jobs that have no use of a university degree, and high unemployment rates. The young Taiwanese people who see the value of a college education have been diminishing.

The “strawberry generation” is a name coined to the people born after the 1980’s. As not having had lived through martial law period which ended 1987. Like strawberries, they are “pretty to look at, but bruise easily,” meaning other generations see them as not being able to withstand social pressures or work hard, and are sheltered by their parents. They are viewed similarly as the millennials in western culture.

College students have accepted the fact that the future might not be so bright. There is a term called “Small Happiness” where young Taiwanese



people spend any disposable income on simple pleasures like shopping, parties, snack shops, and midnight strolls. This has become a new way to measure well being. More Taiwanese people have decided to be involved with the service industry since the economic environment is very competitive.

In the self identity class Dr. Nadeau taught, he gave a project to his Taiwanese students where the students had to interview their parents and grandparents about their childhood lives. Students had to come up with their own conclusion to see what their relatives think about the question, “Is Taiwan Chinese?”. According to Dr. Nadeau, the students concluded some members of their family had mixed answers. Some said yes while other said no or both Chinese and Taiwanese. He then asked the same question to his students where all the students answered no.

Taiwan has a history of being colonized by different peoples. The arrival of Taiwan’s aborigines is said to have occurred around 3000 B.C. In the 17th Century, Taiwan was colonized by the Dutch for the East India Company as port to trade with Japan and coastal areas of China. During this time the Spanish had also built a settlement in Northern Taiwan for a short period. This followed an influx of Han Chinese and the Hakka people. In 1662, Zheng Cheng-gong defeated the Dutch and took control of the area for a base of operations, but 20 years later in 1683, he was defeated by the Qing dynasty. Dr Nadeau discussed how from 1895-1945 Japan had occupied Taiwan until their defeat in WWII. Taiwan was first ruled by a one-party rule, the nationalist party of Chiang Kai-shek, who came from mainland China after defeat. They were after ruled by a two-party system of the KMT and the democratic progressive party. From 1945 to

the present Taiwan has been a sovereign state with an uneasy political relationship with Mainland China.

The past 3 generations have had different views of their association with countries. During the time of occupation or martial law, the Taiwanese people would learn the history of that particular country as assimilation into that society. The strawberry generation's grandparents, who lived through the Japanese colonization period, some of them still feel that they are very much Japanese themselves. While their children in turn, grew up through the martial law period under rule of China.

Dr. Nadeau went on to talk about the viewpoints of the martial law generation. During that time, schools heavily focused on educating children about all aspects of life concerning China. If anything related to Taiwan was mentioned in school, the student would be punished. While Chinese culture was being taught in school, students were taught Taiwanese culture at home. At the time this generation were convinced that they were both Chinese and Taiwanese. The strawberry generation views themselves as only Taiwanese, which is due to the switch in education of their cultural history, and not having had lived through these periods as they had ended in the 1980's.

There were over 50 people who attended the lecture. The audience was very attentive and thoroughly enjoyed the lecture. One student commented "It's refreshing to learn history through the perspective of people who lived it. It has helped me understand how Taiwanese people think of themselves". Another student remarked "Dr Nadeau was very informative in this lecture. His work shows he took time and effort to come up with his research and conclusion". After the lecture, students were

able to meet Dr. Randall Nadeau and ask questions about the lecture and his research.



(From left) Dr. Frank Chen, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, UTSA, Dr. Nadeau, Mimi Yu, Associate Director, UTSA East Asia Institute, Dr. Thomas Bellows, Professor of Political Science, UTSA



(Left) Students protest



(Right) Night market

The UTSA East Asia Institute's mission is to promote appreciation and understanding of East Asian societies and cultures both on campus and in the community through research, outreach, networking, education, student/faculty exchange, and business development and cooperation. The East Asia Institute organizes seminars, workshops, lectures, conferences, film festivals, visual art exhibitions as well as bringing in performing art groups from China, Japan, Korea, and other Asian nations. It also encourages faculty research collaborations both within UTSA and with participating East Asian university researchers. All events are free and open to the public.