Mr. Democracy: Lee Teng-hui – through the eye of an overseas Taiwanese

By Chung-Chih Li

It was 1995 on an exceptionally hot summer day of Ithaca, New York. Taiwanese community made a peculiar scene in one corner of the campus of Cornell University to "welcome" their president, Lee Teng-hui, on his visit to the University where the president got his Ph.D. degree in 1968.

The crowd was clearly divided into two groups by the color of flags their members waved. The two groups set in the scene peacefully but still were separated in distant by the security.

Members in one group were waving red-based flags. The flag is the national flag of Taiwan, and the red color symbolized the blood shed in the revolution that took place in China and led to the birth of the Republic of China in 1912. Taiwan then was a part of Japan and paid little attention to this new born Republic until the end of the World War II.

No matter what, for many Taiwanese, Lee Teng-hui was their president who should be treated and respected as a president by the government of the United States when he visited this country. But he did not receive any official welcome simply because the Clinton administration followed Chinese orders for no good reason. Taiwanese therefore should stay together to welcome their president on their own.

Meanwhile, members in the other group were waving green-based flags. The color was selected by political dissidents in the late 1980s right before the dawn of democracy of Taiwan. Green, the color of magnificent mountains in Taiwan, symbolized peace and implied that the future of Taiwan should be detached from the Chinese Civil War that was literally ended after the Republic of China was defeated by Chinese Communists in 1949.

To them, the red flag is just a totem of a vanished taboo, the Republic of China, and Lee Teng-hui was no more than another dictator selected by the father and son, Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo, who ruled Taiwan with guns and jails for forty years. To them, the Republic of China was simply a formal simulacrum of the invader who later dragged Taiwan into its own endless civil war. No one was better than its president to hear the will of Taiwanese all around the world at this opportunity.

It would not be easy to explain to Americans why the seemingly democratized Taiwan would have people to welcome and protest their own president in two ways. Neither was it easy for many Taiwanese to select a group among the two to join.

During the speech he gave in Cornell, the only public activity he was allowed to conduct by the Clinton administration, Lee Teng-hui was queried by some hostile overseas Taiwanese along the lines of the wish to establish an independent country in the name of Taiwan. However, he only promised democracy.

Without many American politicians waving goodbye, the president went back to Tawian. He had toiled to firm the foundation of the democracy of Taiwan. He dismissed the forty-year-old war declaration against China. He changed the infrastructure of the Republic. He canceled the hierarchy in which Taiwan was just a province of China. He removed Chinese representatives from the Congress and let the Congress represent only the people of Taiwan.

Most importantly, he held a popular presidential election and himself became the first leader in our history who was selected by the people directly in 1996 under China's war threat with aggressive missile maneuvers. Although he failed to help his party to stay in the

office in the Taiwanese presidential election in year 2000, he stood firm to smooth the power transition. Again, this was the first time ever in our history that a dissident could become the president of the country without a gruesome revolution. Finally, he blessed the new government and left the office.

With these credentials, we now call him Mr. Democracy.

It has been six years since President Lee Teng-hui visited Cornell last time. He came back again as a civilian last week. Many overseas Taiwanese got together again to welcome this man. This time, there was only one group. People waving green flags and red flags stood side by side. When the former President of Taiwan walked out from his limo, the emotion of the crowd lighted up. Some still called him President Lee and some called him in his nickname – Ar-hui-ar.

No one would doubt that he is now truly loved by Taiwanese, not because he was once the most powerful man in Taiwan, but because we gradually realize that he is the man who truly loves Taiwan by way of giving a correct direction for Taiwan to move on – democracy, and democracy solidifies Taiwanese together.

As I saw the rally mobilized by the government of China to protest against Mr. Lee, I somehow understood why Chinese were so afraid of this man. Their anxious is not inexplicable, for that democracy is the only knife to cut the tangled knot between Taiwan and China, and this man, Mr. Democracy, has given us the knife. Without a doubt, we Taiwanese shall sharpen it together. [1]

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[1] I myself have double feeling on this article of my own. I thus hesitated a little bit to recommend it here at first. It was published in our local newspaper with a big picture of LTH taken by the newspaper's own cameraman last week. My original motivation is just to balance the newspaper and the media they had covered Chinese protest against LTH way more than his supporters' welcome.

I'm really not sure how much LTH can help Abian; in fact, I'm very skeptical about the room left for LTH to play if the TI camp embraces him too much.

However, on my second thought, we don't have to be too utilitarian on every move. Thus, I gave him my praises.

Your comments are welcome.