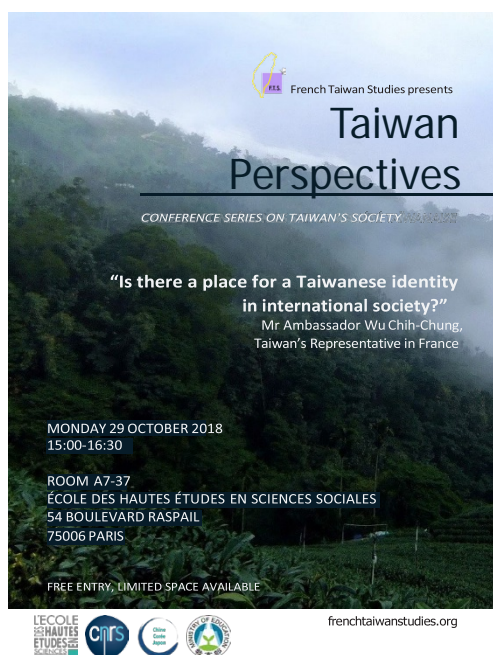


Is There a Place for a Taiwanese Identity in International Society? (29 October 2018)

Summary by Corentin Ludwig, translated by Aurélia Martin



A meeting with Taipei’s representative in France, **Mr François Chih-Chung Wu**, took place on 29 October 2018 at the EHESS, organized by the French Taiwan Studies project as part of its conference series “Taiwan Perspectives.” Mr Wu studied in France and defended his thesis in political science at Pantheon-Sorbonne University. He was president of the Alliance Française of Taiwan and was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China from May 2016 to July 2018, under the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen. His presentation focused on the following question: **“Is there a place for a Taiwanese identity in international society?”**.

Mr Wu started by giving some statistics on Taiwan: its population, its gross domestic product, its rank in economic relations with Germany. For him, these statistics are an argument for defining Taiwan as a state, although this assertion is not accepted in international diplomatic relations. He dismissed the issue of independence, which he stressed the current ruling party, the DDP, does not support, and added that

Taiwan’s situation cannot be compared to New Caledonia – scheduled to vote a referendum on self-determination the following Sunday – nor Catalonia, Tibet or Hong Kong. What sets Taiwan apart from these places is the fact that it has the ability to govern itself already, independently from the power claiming it, the People’s Republic of China.

Because of this lack of recognition from most states in the world, Taiwanese diplomats have a great deal of difficulty taking action: they are denied access to the major international organizations such as the UN or the WHO and have great difficulty travelling to foreign countries.

The diplomat follows up with the issue of Taiwanese identity and calls on history to answer the question: “Taiwan is a nation of immigration” that has known colonization, first by the Portuguese, then the Spanish in the 17th century. The first Chinese immigrants officially came over during the Empire of the Ming dynasty in 1662, then the Qing dynasty in 1684. Taipei’s representative in France emphasizes that none of these occupations extended to the whole island of Taiwan due to the difficult geography of Formosa. France also took an interest in the island between 1883 and 1884 and wanted to take control of the current Penghu islands and the northern territory around present-day Keelung. It was Japan, however, that claimed the entire island in 1895, after the First Sino-Japanese War and the Shimonoseki Treaty. According to Mr Wu, Japan was the first nation to occupy the entire island until 1945 when it was handed over to the Republic of China, led by Chiang Kai-shek.

Mr Wu then explains that the problem of Taiwanese identity originated in the events of 28 February 1947 when thousands of Taiwanese were killed following uprisings against Chinese corruption. According to him, for many at that time the Chinese were worse than the Japanese. However, he pointed out that Chiang Kai-shek did successfully develop Taiwan economically and sought to work with the international community for recognition. Since the ‘70s, Taiwanese identity has gone hand in hand with the country’s continuing and irreversible democratization.

Through all these elements, the diplomat highlighted the fact that there is no consensus around this Taiwanese identity, not in Taiwan and not abroad, since the People’s Republic of China does not recognize its existence. He tried to find an idea for this consensus by raising the possibility of calling oneself Chinese-Taiwanese. However, he insisted that Taiwan is an independent state named Republic of China and that it does not need to declare it for it to be so because it is already true. He went on to speak of his optimism regarding diplomacy, giving the example of messages from foreign leaders such as Shinzo Abe who uses the word Taiwan or Donald Trump who called Tsai Ing-wen to congratulate her on winning the presidential election. These examples are, in his eyes, signs of encouragement to the Taiwanese.

He ended his presentation with a warning regarding Beijing’s interference in Taiwan’s democratic process: on the diplomatic front, Mr Wu says that Beijing is very aggressive in its attitude towards Taiwan. However, this attitude seems to be shifting from a policy of “attack Taiwan” to “buy Taiwan,” especially by spreading false information in order to cause chaos within the country.



Then followed a discussion on the representations of Taiwanese identity and how it is experienced and especially the reasons for the existence of labels when the Taiwanese define themselves. Why do they define themselves by what they are not – “we are not Chinese” – rather than what they are, which would better express a Taiwanese identity? The representative answered that these labels come from the People’s Republic of China, which wishes to impose an identity and therefore prove that this identity allows Taiwan to be included in the designation of Chinese. He also has the impression the international community falls back on self-censorship on this topic and that Western media has a pessimistic outlook.

Furthermore, Mr Wu acknowledged the existence of several ways of seeing Taiwanese identity, summing them up to those appearing in surveys, in three categories: a “Chinese” identity, a “Taiwanese” identity, and a “Chinese and Taiwanese” identity. Stressing that currently only a minority identify themselves as “Chinese”, Mr Wu expressed his desire that the Taiwanese define themselves not as a nation or a race, but as a value, democracy.

Another question was asked about Taiwan’s relationship with Hong Kong, and if the Taiwanese support the independence movement in Hong Kong. Mr Wu recalled that Hong Kong was first seen as the role model in the Chinese-speaking world. But the 1997 retrocession completely transformed representations in the region and today Taiwan is the role model for democracy – a leader for universal values – in the Chinese-speaking world. In this context, many Taiwanese citizens support the independence movement in Hong Kong.

To conclude, Mr Wu reiterated that a dialogue with China is needed and that it is already happening informally. But this dialogue is also needed in a formal setting, provided it does not take place in a framework of conditions set by Beijing.