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## The Chinese Dream

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The Chinese Dream:  
Democratization in Taiwan

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# THE CHINESE DREAM: DEMOCRATIZATION IN TAIWAN

by

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June, 1996

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be invited to speak at your esteemed university today. First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all of you for your very warm welcome.

As you know, the Republic of China on March 23 held its presidential election. You might also know that this election bore great significance to the Chinese people--it was the first time in China's 5,000-year history that the national leader was elected by direct, popular vote. The incumbent President Dr. Lee Teng-hui and Premier Dr. Lien Chan, the ticket representing the ruling Nationalist Party or Kuomintang, won the election by garnering 54 percent of the total votes. In fact, the March 23 election of my country had been a focus of world attention prior to election day. The world was concerned whether Taiwan's democracy would suffer a setback under Beijing's military threat or whether the voting in Taiwan would be affected as a result of Communist intimidation.

As you have already seen, my countrypeople were by no means scared by Beijing's military exercises and missile tests. The ROC government decided to proceed with the election as scheduled, and the people calmly, rationally, but enthusiastically participated in this epoch-making democratic process. When the election results came out, political commentators concluded that the biggest loser was Beijing because the victory of President Lee defeated Beijing's purpose to provoke a crisis across the Taiwan Straits. After passing this severe test, Taiwans' democracy has grown even more mature. Indeed, the Chinese

on Taiwan once again proved to the world that MIT (made-in-Taiwan) products are durable. MIT democracy is equally impressive.

### **The Chinese Dream**

Ladies and gentlemen, the United States has for decades been playing a leading role in world affairs and serving as a model for emerging democracies. As President Abraham Lincoln said, "Our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Pursuing freedom and equality and establishing a democratic union have since formed the core of "The American Dream." Today, as the Americans are still enjoying freedom, democracy and equality, the connotation of the American Dream may have changed. To many Americans, particularly the younger generation, to have a comfortable, affluent life and to take vacations abroad have become their dream. In spite of this, freedom, democracy and equality remain the most important values the American Dream holds.

What then is the dream the Chinese people have? I would like to offer you my observation. When Dr. Sun Yat-sen, founding father of the Republic of China, overthrew the imperial Manchu court in 1911, his dream was to establish a republic of the people, by the people and for the people. Unfortunately, throughout the period when the national government was on the Chinese mainland before 1949, internal problems and foreign invasions prevented China from developing a democratic system in a secure, peaceful environment. But democracy had stricken its roots deep down into the heart of our people.

Ever since the ROC government relocated to Taipei in 1949, the threat from the Chinese Communists has been in existence all the time. Under this circumstance, the government could not but impose an authoritarian rule to safeguard national security. But leaders of the ruling Kuomintang unfailingly followed Dr. Sun's theory of democratic development without sacrificing too much of the political interests of the people.

Because the Chinese have been under the yoke of absolutist rule for over 2,000 years, and because the majority of them were illiterate and ignorant of democratic norms, Dr. Sun concluded that a democratic society could be attained only in three stages. The final or constitutional stage started in the early 1950s when Taiwan began to have elections for local governmental positions. In July 1987 the late President Chiang Ching-kuo lifted the Emergency Decree that activated martial law and allowed new political parties to be formed. President Lee Teng-hui further expanded the scope of political reform and pushed for the election of the president and the vice president of the country by direct, popular vote. To date, Taiwan can proudly claim it is a genuine democracy. The ideal of "popular sovereignty," with the people enjoying freedom, democracy and equality, has been realized at last. The dream that has been pursued by the Chinese for about one century comes true in 1996.

### **Political Reform on a Step-by-Step Basis**

Now, ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to spend a few minutes briefing you on Taiwan's democratic evolution. Taiwan's political development can be divided into three phases:

a. **Democratic Groundbreaking--1949-1977**

During this period, the security of Taiwan was seriously threatened by the Chinese Communists and Taiwan's economy had yet to be developed. Despite the external threat and internal problems, the ROC government was committed to building a democracy in Taiwan.

As we all know, one of the major characteristics of democracy is free elections. Indeed, free elections serve as not only the basis of political democracy but also the first step toward full-fledged democracy. In 1950, the elections for county/city councilors, county magistrates/city mayors, and town/township/district chiefs were first held in Taiwan in July, August and October, respectively. In April 1957, elections for Taiwan provincial

assemblymen were first held. Since December 1969, supplementary elections for members of the three central parliamentary bodies--the National Assembly, the Legislative Yuan and the Control Yuan--began to be held to fill vacancies left by mainlander representatives who retired or died. Moreover, elections for additional members of the three parliamentary bodies were held since December 1972 in order to select parliamentarians who represent the people of Taiwan rather than just the mainland.

These and other regularly-held elections indicate that, in Taiwan, the training for our people in practicing political democracy started from elections for local public officials and was gradually extended to provincial and national levels. Indeed, decades of democratic education and practice have helped our people gain a better understanding of democracy and acquainted them with the process of elections. On the other hand, through the process and results of each election, governments of different levels would also know what people really need. In this way, regular elections have kept Taiwan's political system stable and laid solid groundwork for Taiwan's democratic achievements in recent years.

b. Democratic Growth--1977-1986

Many political scholars believe that the existence of a meaningful opposition serves as an indicator of a nation's political democracy. And they define a "meaningful" opposition as one: (1) with nationwide organization, (2) that can provide the electorate with a choice other than the ruling party, and (3) which competes with the ruling party on the national level.

By this standard, Taiwan's opposition has during this period gradually become "meaningful." In fact, the competition between the ruling party and the opposition was not only national but also fierce.

Freedom of speech, on the other hand, is also a prerequisite for full democracy. The ROC government during this period began to allow greater freedom of speech and put

up with speeches sharply criticizing the government and the ruling party. Even personal attacks and slanders were tolerated.

To sum up, the expansion of the opposition, the intensified competition among political parties, and the full freedom of speech characterized Taiwan's rapid democratization during this period.

c. Democratic Takeoff--1986-1996

In July 1987, the then President Chiang Ching-kuo lifted the Emergency Decree and legalized the formation of new political parties, ushering in a new era for Taiwan's political democracy. After President Lee Teng-hui succeeded Chiang, who passed away in January 1988, he not only carried on the political reform initiated by Chiang but also went even further to launch a series of constitutional reforms. The reforms made under President Lee centered on the following four aspects:

1. Popular sovereignty

In his Olin lecture made at his alma mater Cornell University last June, President Lee Teng-hui pointed out that "the Confucian belief that only the ruler who provides for the needs of his people is given the mandate to rule is consistent with the modern concept of democracy" and that he believes in "respect for individual free will and popular sovereignty." These surely have been his guiding principles in ruling the nation.

Bearing these in mind, President Lee undertook a series of political and constitutional reforms. In 1991, all seats in the National Assembly were re-elected; in 1992, a new Legislative Yuan elected; and, in 1994, the governor of Taiwan province and the mayors of Taipei and Kaohsiung Municipalities--posts originally appointed by the Premier, were directly elected. Moreover, in March of this year, the president and vice president of my country were elected through direct, popular vote.

To date, all public posts in the ROC--from village chief at the bottom level up to the head of state--are filled through elections. In other words, the shift of power in the

government is now decided by the people. People are now masters of the nation, thus realizing the ideal of "popular sovereignty" pursued by the Chinese people for nearly a century.

2. Human rights

After the lifting of the Emergency Degree in July 1987, civic rights and freedoms protected by the Constitution such as demonstrations, strikes, and formation of civic organizations have been fully guaranteed. President Lee further expanded the scope of freedom of speech by exempting those who simply advocate Taiwan independence (without any actions) from being sentenced on the charge of treason. President Lee himself has shown great tolerance toward sharp criticism coming from not only the opposition but also the ruling party he leads. I can therefore assure you that, regarding human rights, the people in my country enjoy the same protection as do the American people.

3. Return to the Constitution

On April 30, 1991, President Lee announced the termination of the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of Communist Rebellion and the nullification of the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of Communist Rebellion. From then on, the Republic of China has been placed under genuine constitutional rule. Taiwan is now under the rule of law, and the Constitution is the guiding principle for political operations and the ultimate criterion for arbitrating political disputes.

4. Humanitarianism

President Lee often says, "Whatever the people desire is always in my heart." People's demands and opinions have been guiding his administration. A government that respects the free will of individuals is a government of humanitarianism. Such humanitarianism has been shown not only in domestic reforms but also in the development of relations between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.



Indirect trade between Taiwan and the mainland now totals 11.5 billion U.S. dollars a year. It is estimated that Taiwan's investments via Hong Kong in China's southern coastal provinces reach almost 5 billion U.S. dollars. Some sources indicate that overall Taiwan investments on the mainland stand at 17 billion U.S. dollars. In November 1987, the ROC government, on humanitarian grounds, allowed Taiwan residents to visit their relatives on the mainland, and in April 1988, indirect two-way mail through the Red Cross was allowed. By April 1996, over 8.6 million trips have been made between both sides and over 20 million letters and 230 million phone calls were exchanged across the Taiwan Straits. More recently, President Lee announced that Taiwan is willing to assist the mainland in agricultural development. The abovementioned figures and policies represent not only our efforts of promoting cross-Straits relations but also our genuine humanitarian care for the Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits.

### **The Significance of the Taiwan Experience**

Political reform is a never-ending process. When old problems are solved, new ones may arise. Political reformers are always issue-oriented. They have both short-term goals and long-term plans.

After having consolidated democratic development in Taiwan, President Lee's next step is to undertake education, judicial, financial, constitutional and administrative reforms. He has envisaged a very concrete plan for managing Taiwan.

1. President Lee intends to make all the 21 million people in the Taiwan area live happily and harmoniously as a big family and help them cultivate broadmindedness and have a world vision. He hopes the people will make significant contributions to the freedom, prosperity and sustainable development of all of humanity.

2. President Lee intends to make the Republic of China not just a nation with abundant capital and impressive trade volume, but also a modern civilized society with high quality of life, law and order, clean environment, dynamic people, harmonious personal relations,

and elegant culture. It is his hope that Taiwan can win friendship and respect in the international community.

3. President Lee intends to establish Taiwan as a new center of Chinese culture and to enhance understanding and concern between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland through cross-Straits exchanges in a peaceful, mutually beneficial manner. He believes that Taiwan can inject new vitality into the mainland which faces a dilemma in the process of rejuvenating its civilization, thus redefining the Chinese culture in the 21st century.

President Lee's political philosophy brings new momentum to Taiwan's political and cultural reforms and enriches the content of the Taiwan experience. As a result, the Taiwan experience is not just economic but political, and hopefully a cultural dimension will be added eventually.

The enrichment of the Taiwan experience is significant in at least three ways:

1. To the people of Taiwan, the enrichment of the Taiwan experience enables them to enjoy a high degree of freedom, democracy and prosperity that has never existed before in Chinese history. The political system in Taiwan is the first democratic system of the people, by the people, and for the people that has ever been established by the Chinese.
2. To the Chinese mainland, the Taiwan experience will have a "lighthouse effect." It will encourage the Chinese communists to learn from Taiwan. If the Taiwan experience can eventually result in a "peaceful evolution" on the Chinese mainland, leading it toward freedom, democracy and equitable distribution of wealth, this will assuredly contribute to not only China's unification but also world peace.
3. To the developing countries, the Taiwan experience can also be a model of national development. Since the end of World War II, the ROC has been one of just a few countries that have successfully made use of U.S. aid in developing their economy. The ROC is also one of very few countries that can pass peacefully from an authoritarian to a

democratic system. Such a developmental experience is enlightening to countries which are economically backward or yearning for full-fledged democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Republic of China and the United States share not only longtime friendship and cooperative relations but also the same dream. When the Beijing regime conducted military exercises and missile tests near Taiwan earlier this year to threaten the ROC's presidential election, the U.S. government deployed two aircraft carriers--Nimitz and Independence--off Taiwan, sending a warning to the Chinese Communists. The 21 million people in Taiwan will always bear in mind such friendship extended by the government and people of the United States.

It is our firm belief that Taiwan's March 23 election has proved to the world that the democratic system is superior to the authoritarian one and that bullet can never beat ballot. At the same time, however, we can not but ask, "If Taiwan can do this, why can't the Chinese mainland?" If the Chinese mainland can take the first step to pursue democracy, the time for China's unification will not be too far away. A free, democratic and unified China will assuredly make even greater contributions to regional stability and global peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention. In closing, I wish good health and happiness to each of you, and may the friendship between our two countries live long.