Isolation, Identity and Taiwanese Stamps as Vehicles for Regime Legitimation

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Postage stamps issued by the government of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan provide a useful tool for considering changing elite aspirations and political objectives. Stamps issued on Taiwan while under authoritarian rule frequently sought to demonstrate or bolster the legitimacy of the ruling KMT, typically through demonstrating the ROC's status in international society or through portraying the economic and developmental success of the KMT regime. The on-going democratic transition on Taiwan has seen a move away from stamps as mechanisms for domestic regime legitimation. Since the election of President Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party in 2000 stamps have increasingly become a medium for promoting the idea of a ‘Taiwanese’ identity distinct from that of ‘China’.

KEYWORDS: Taiwan; postage stamps; legitimacy; identity

Society and politics on Taiwan have undergone remarkable changes since Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) established itself on the island in 1945. Four decades of authoritarian rule gradually gave way to an increasingly democratic and plural system against a background of collapsing support from and status in international society. Along with democratisation the politics of identity and of Taiwanese nationalism asserted themselves in an increasingly polarised society. In this context postage stamps can be read as officially sanctioned texts that reflect the ruling elite’s self-image, self-understanding and aspirations and desired outcomes at a particular point in history. The approach to understanding postage stamps adopted here is taken from Jacques E. C. Hymans work on currency iconography and collective identity. Hymans presents an alternative view to the mainstream 'state as pedagogue' perspective (associated with Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm) where the state elites consciously attempt to create particular identities among their populations. Taking my lead from Hymans, the paper argues that postage stamp design in Taiwan, rather than solely or even primarily attempting to 'indoctrinate the public with a set of specifically national values', has in fact

been much more concerned with attempts by the state elite to enhance their public legitimacy. A shift away from using postage stamps as a mechanisms to generate and bolster legitimacy toward a more explicit attempt at identity formation begins in the 1990s with the emergence of an increasingly democratic electoral system on Taiwan, but a change to stamps as vehicles for identity formation becomes increasingly prominent after the election of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000.

**Methodology: A Brief Note**

Between 1949 and 2004 the ROC post office has issued 20 sets of unique ‘Definitive’ stamps (changyong youpiao), 269 sets of ‘Commemorative’ stamps (jinian youpiao), 464 sets of ‘Special’ stamps (tezhong youpiao) with a total of over 3,000 individual stamps. The paper provides a quantitative survey and qualitative analysis of the topics and subjects that have appeared on Taiwanese stamps between October 1949 and December 2004. The paper argues that the data indicates that images taken from Taiwan are not new and date back to the 1950s and that the increase in the absolute number of Taiwanese images relative to broader ‘Chinese’ images is not statistically significant until 2000 and the election of President Chen Shui-bian of the DPP. Not only do the number of images of Taiwan increase significantly after 2000, but so do the type of images. Before the late 1990s images of Taiwan typically carried symbols of ‘natural’ phenomena—scenery, flora, fauna etc.—whereas more recent stamps issues have increasingly carried symbolic images of social and cultural phenomena, such as folk art, ‘local’ architecture, and ‘traditional Taiwanese’ art. The paper examines the changing images presented on definitive stamps and then considers particular types of commemorative and special issues, namely the commemoration of key national anniversaries, the appearance of maps on stamps and the appearance of flags. The paper then considers how state elites have attempts to secure legitimacy through using stamps by promoting personality cults, nationalist and martial images, the idea of the ROC on Taiwan as a democracy, images of national construction and national achievements and finally attempts to secure legitimacy through representing international friendships and support.

A particular problem with regard to stamps is the on-going debate over ‘What is Taiwan?’ in terms of state sovereignty, and ‘What is Taiwanese?’ in the context of cultural icons and symbols. It is symptomatic of Taiwan’s difference that there is no simple vocabulary to describe the island—every possible usage is contested: country, state, island, province, political entity, and a range of other terms have been used, each term with its supporters and detractors. For the student of international politics, this causes particular problems—simply to name the object of your study (the Republic of China, the ROCT, Taiwan, Taiwan Province, the Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu) is to commit oneself to a—perhaps unwanted or unwitting—position in a deeply politicised debate. Therefore any consideration of ‘national’ imagery must consider which ‘nation’ is being presented. Allen Chun has argued,