Chapter 3

The Media and National Identity under Democratization

Being a colonial regime from China, the authoritarian KMT government pushed a Chinese identity for Taiwan while repressing the Taiwan identity of the Taiwanese people until democratization in the early 1990s. After the first native Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui, came to power, Lee's democratization policy gave the Taiwanese people the right to advocate Taiwan identity openly. Identity politics in Taiwan became a very important issue alongside the development of democratization. Consequently, surveys indicated a significant change in national identity with a growth of Taiwan identity and a drop in China identity from the early 1990s.

During the martial law period, most media were part of the state apparatus to propagandize China identity. However, democratization brought freedom of the press leading to changes in the portrayal of national identity in Taiwan's media. After the early 1990s, some media continued their message of China identity from the martial law period. By contrast, the rise of some Taiwan identity or alternative/neutral media challenged the predominance of China identity media in the media market. Thereafter, there was intense competition in the media between those pushing a Taiwan identity and those pushing a China identity from the early 1990s with both having a considerable following.

This chapter first discusses Lee Teng-hui's democratization and Taiwanization policies as well as the growth of Taiwanese identity among Taiwanese people. Second, this chapter further explores the changes in the overall map of the news media market, including print and electronic, in relation to national identity under democratization. Finally, this chapter also analyses the intentions of both the pro-Taiwan Chen Shui-bian government and the pro-China Ma Ying-jeou government to influence national identity in such government media as Radio Taiwan International and the Central News Agency.

Democratization and the Rise of Taiwan Identity

On January 13, 1988, Vice-President Lee Teng-hui, a native Taiwanese, succeeded to the presidency after Chiang Ching-kuo's death. As a native Taiwanese, Lee was subject to repeated attacks by Mainlander conservatives within
the KMT during the early years of his presidency. In February and March 1990, the conservative, Non-Mainstream Faction (feizhuliupai 非主流派), composed mainly of Mainlanders, challenged Lee Teng-hui’s Mainstream Faction (zhuliupai 主流派) for the nomination as the KMT’s presidential candidate. However Lee Teng-hui was the victor in this political struggle. On May 11, just a few days before Lee Teng-hui’s presidential inauguration, some KMT conservatives, most of whom were of Mainland descent, established a formal organization, the New Nationalist Party Alliance (Xin Guomindang lianxian 新國民黨連線) (Jacobs 2012:76), to oppose Lee Teng-hui. In August 1993, the New Nationalist Party Alliance became the Chinese New Party.

Lee’s handling of political events further strengthened his position. In March 1990, tens of thousands of Taiwanese students launched a movement to request political reform, including the retirement of the “old thieves” (laozei 老賊) in the National Assembly, Legislative Yuan and the Control Yuan. Lee Teng-hui responded to the petition of students and launched a “National Affairs Conference” in June 1990. After 1990, Lee Teng-hui instituted a series of political reforms which led Taiwan to democratization. In May 1991, Lee Teng-hui announced the abolition of the “Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion” (Dongyuan kanluan shiqi linshi tiaokuan 動員戡亂時期臨時條款), established in 1948. He then carried out constitutional reform. In 1994, the Taiwan government had direct elections for the Taipei City mayor, the Kaohsiung City mayor and the governor of Taiwan Province, all of which had previously been appointed. In the same year, the National Assembly enacted a law for direct presidential elections. The first direct election of the president, held under the threat of Chinese missiles in March 1996, was a great achievement of democratization under Lee Teng-hui. Lee’s efforts received significant international recognition. For example, on May 20, 1996, Newsweek (Asian edition) praised Lee Teng-hui as “Mr Democracy.”

Bruce Jacobs (2012:6) argues that Taiwan’s democratization and Taiwanization have been two very closely linked processes, whereby Taiwanization emphasizes identification with Taiwan, consciousness of Taiwan and even a Taiwanese nationalism. Bruce Jacobs (Jacobs 2012:6) further argues, “The KMT created a ‘colonial’ society in which the Chinese Mainlanders, who account for

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1 The Mainstream Faction tended to be supported by native Taiwanese, but some Mainlanders also supported it, such as James Soong.
2 The “old thieves” meant the life-term members of the National Assembly, the Legislative Yuan and the Control Yuan who had been elected in the late 1940s in China and were then given permanent positions when the Mainland fell to the Communists and the KMT could no longer conduct elections there.