

Don't believe China's convenient historical tales. Taiwan belongs to the Taiwanese

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There is much talk from Beijing about how the island has been part of China since time immemorial. The reality is more complicated

The American sinologist Lucian Pye [famously said](#) that China is a “civilisation pretending to be a nation-state”. But it is precisely the opposite: China is a modern nation-state that pretends to be an ancient civilisation - when it suits its expansionist ambitions.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the way it talks about Taiwan, which it claims has been part of China since time immemorial. The government recently published a [white paper](#) - released in the context of unprecedented live-fire drills aimed at intimidating Taiwan after Nancy Pelosi's visit - which begins by referencing the dispatching of troops to Taiwan by the Sui Dynasty (581-618). Chinese territorial claims over Taiwan often cite the history of the Ming dynasty warlord Koxinga, who made Taiwan his base of operations during his short-lived Kingdom of Tungning (1661-1683), or Taiwan's formal incorporation into the Qing dynasty as a province in 1887.

Yet references to dynastic Chinese history to justify contemporary territorial claims are spurious. After all, the Chinese Communist party, which rules over the People's Republic, is precisely one of the historical forces that *overthrew* imperial China. And the CCP has never controlled [Taiwan](#) in its 75-year history. It is not as though a pre-modern polity simply sending troops to Taiwan means that an entirely different polity, 1,500 years later, has the right to control it.

Where Koxinga is concerned, while Chinese nationalists revere him as a historical figure seen as subjugating Taiwan for China, he was also half-Japanese. As a result, during Taiwan's 50-year period under Japanese colonial rule, from 1895 to 1945 - another event that splits Taiwan's history from that of the Chinese mainland - Koxinga was used to [emphasise Japanese claims over Taiwan](#). Lastly, Koxinga is remembered as [a genocidal Columbus-esque figure](#) by Taiwan's indigenous people, who had settled the land and were its original inhabitants long before Han settlers arrived.

Even during its incorporation under the Qing, China did not control all of the island of Taiwan, and it seemed uninterested in it as a territory. Hence it was ceded to the Japanese in 1895 after the Sino-Japanese war, [only a short eight years after its incorporation](#).

One has to wonder why ancient, pre-modern history seems to trump the contemporary will of the Taiwanese people for self-determination, which is to say, the pragmatic position of maintaining Taiwan's status quo of de facto independence. Polls released by [National Chengchi University's Election Study Center last month](#) found that more than 80% of the population prefer maintaining the democratic status quo in some form, while only 1.3% wanted immediate unification with China.

While Beijing threatens force against the Taiwanese if they pursue independence - as seen in the China ambassador to the UK's recent declaration that [“‘Taiwan independence’ means war”](#) - it also militarily threatens Taiwan for simply seeking to maintain the democratic freedoms that it already

has.

China otherwise touts three communiqués between the US and China on Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s, or the 1992 consensus between the CCP and Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT), as more historically recent rationales for its claims over Taiwan. Yet the US and China did not come to any agreement on Taiwan in the three communiqués. [And China frequently conflates](#) the US One China Policy, which *acknowledges* (but does not *recognise*) the PRC position that Taiwan is part of China, with its own One China Principle, which asserts that there is only one state that is China, which is the PRC, and that Taiwan is part of China.

The 1992 consensus was the result of a meeting between the KMT and the Communist party on the mainland. Both parties agreed that there was "One China", but the meaning of this term was interpreted differently. Moreover, non-KMT political parties [have long questioned whether](#) any agreement was actually made or was a post-facto fabrication - ultimately, this was not a decision negotiated by a democratically elected Taiwanese government. Rather it was negotiated solely by the KMT, which ruled over Taiwan for decades as a one-party dictatorship, before the first direct presidential elections in 1996.

Nationalist renderings of history are always suspect - and the official Chinese line on Taiwan is no different. The Taiwanese have long sought pragmatic ways to maintain their democratic freedoms, without becoming entangled in a bloody war with [China](#) that would cost both Taiwanese and Chinese lives. So what is the way forward? Perhaps it begins with listening to Taiwanese voices about how they view their own history and the paths that they see to preserve political freedoms and avoid conflict - rather than heeding to views imposed from without on the basis of dubious history.

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P.S.

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