Whose hero?


In Beijing, he's the man who recaptured Taiwan. In Taipei, he's the Father of Taiwan. He may have died 340 years ago, but the influence of Zheng Chenggong has never been more alive

ON THE COAST of Xiamen, looking longingly across the Taiwan Strait, stands a 16-metre statue of 17th-century warrior Zheng Chenggong. In the hills of Taipei, watching over the city below, an image of Zheng also sits, like some larger-than-life concrete god of the island. This year, Beijing will celebrate Zheng Chenggong as a national hero who took back Taiwan. This year, Taipei will invoke his name as the founder of Taiwan. This year is the 378th anniversary of Zheng's birth. No, it's not a lucky number, nor is the similarly uninspiring 340th anniversary of his greatest historical achievement. So what's all the fuss about?

Zheng Chenggong, or Koxinga as the West knows him, sailed across the Taiwan Strait in 1661 to either occupy the island for China or set up a new colony for the Taiwanese, depending on your point of view. The actual history makes him the son of a Chinese pirate who was the last military strongman of the crumbling Ming dynasty. When the Qing dynasty swept out of the north, Zheng fled to Taiwan. There, out of harm's way, he fought a nine-month war against the Dutch colonizers, eventually driving them from the island.

The facts would appear clear enough, but history is more often riddled with interpretation than truth, especially when caught Lip in such a highly politicized environment as the Taiwan Strait. In mainland China's texts, Zheng Chenggong appears as the loyalist "fighting to retake Taiwan from the foreign colonizers." The Taiwanese, however, increasingly view Zheng as the Father of Taiwan, who opened the land and made it safe for them to settle.

For the Taiwan of today, which is leaning more and more towards independence, such a figure has never been more important. As John Chang, political scientist and research fellow at the Taiwan Research Institute, puts it, Taiwan "is still in the stage of building and needs historical heroes; people need something tangible to define their state by." The island's political leaders hope Zheng Chenggong can fulfill that role: Vice-President Annette Lu likened him recently to Moses, who "led his people to the land of milk and honey."

Alarmed, Beijing has taken up the fight for the hearts and minds of Taiwanese, reminding them of what it says are deep historical and cultural links that span the strait. Zheng's memory is an important part of this: "China is stepping up research and propaganda to counter Taiwan's," comments Deng Kongzhao, a research associate at the Xiamen University, and author of Zheng Chenggong and Taiwan History. "It acts as a balance to the rhetoric on Zheng Chenggong coming out of Taiwan."
In recent years, the mainland has celebrated Zheng with no less than two television miniseries, one feature-length movie, a competition for playwrights, four souvenir phone-cards, three first-class postage stamps and numerous conferences. Tour groups are encouraged to visit his home town of Anping as well as his grave site and the Zheng Chenggong Memorial Museum, where they can learn all about "the great nationalist who recovered Taiwan from the Dutch imperialists, restoring it to its proper place in Chinese territorial domain."

The activities have been no less intense in Taiwan: Textbooks are being rewritten, documentaries made and museum exhibitions designed to focus on Koxinga's arrival on the island in 1661. In the southern Taiwanese city of Tainan, tour guides lead visitors through the Zheng Chenggong memorial hall, offering comforting tales: "Before Zheng Chenggong there were no Chinese on Taiwan. He brought all the people over and made this a safe place for them."

"We are using a Taiwan flavour to tell the history of the Taiwanese," comments author Chin Jyou, whose novel The Father of Taiwan: Zheng Chenggong sold out within a month of its release in July. "We are an important place in the world but have always had our history obscured by China."

Unfortunately, China is not the only object that is obscuring Taiwan's history. Quite simply, historical research shows that the real Zheng Chenggong does not quite live up to the man that either China or Taiwan would hope him to be (see box on page 56).

Many historians say that he was less an imperial warrior and more a self-serving imperious warlord. His fight against the Dutch looks less noble in the light of the suffering he inflicted on the island's aboriginal population and immigrant-Chinese population. And then there's the question of where he even came from: Zheng was born in Japan: his mother was the daughter of a lower-class Japanese samurai.

True, history's heroes are rarely clean and clear-cut: Think of Thomas Jefferson's illegitimate son by a black slave. But what does it say when two rivals are so insistent on investing so much in such a historically questionable figure? And can Taiwan really build a solid identity on a man whose shape is constantly changing?

BUT THEN, history has never been a simple matter in Taiwan. As Chen Kuo-tung, a historian at Taiwan's leading academic institute, the Academia Sinica, puts it, "the history of Taiwan is one of colonization, and in the process Taiwan's history has also been colonized."

The example of Zheng Chenggong best illustrates the point. He was a rebel against the Qing dynasty; the Chinese imperial rulers did not glorify him, and tore down his temples. The Japanese, who colonized the island from 1895-1945, emphasized Zheng's Japanese mother, making him a conqueror for the Japanese. Members of the nationalist Kuomintang (KNIT), who fled mainland China after being defeated by Mao Zedong's communists, likened themselves to Zheng as the Chinese liberators of Taiwan. The KMT also liked to play up the idea that Zheng was staging a plan to re-conquer the mainland, much as they themselves hoped to do.

Now, with the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in power, Koxinga is being busily remade as a Taiwanese hero. As President Chen Shui-bian said recently,
"Remember the great work of Zheng Chenggong, the king who opened up Taiwan. He is Taiwan's great historical figure."

Taiwan today is using the image of Koxinga in a much deeper way than in the past, and in an even more pronounced way than China: It is trying to build an identity with him. "They want to reevaluate history to move away from a China consciousness and towards a Taiwanese consciousness. They want to get away from China and offer new explanations for Taiwan independence," says Deng Kongzhao of Xiamen University.

Zheng is convenient because he's the first larger-than-life character in Taiwan's written history, which only really begins in the 17th century. Also, he established the first Chinese political and social institutions on the island, setting precedents for the next 400 years. Such conditions nicely fulfill the qualifications for the Father of Taiwan. "Without him there would be no Taiwan today," says Wang Chih-hong, editor of the popular but serious magazine Rhythms Monthly, which recently ran a Zheng Chenggong commemorative issue.

This is all part of a larger trend in Taiwan, as the island attempts to write its own history from its own perspective. "The writing of Taiwan's history is important to Taiwan's future development to prove that we are a diverse culture, not a single Chinese culture, but one separate from China," says Chen Yu-hsiu, who chairs the cabinet-level Council of Cultural Affairs.

Before, the island's history textbooks focused entirely on the 5,000 years of Chinese civilization. Today, they make more mention of Taiwan history and a bit less of the mainland's. Even Taiwan history as a subject in the island's universities is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was only in 1984 that a Taiwanese university awarded its first doctorate in the subject. Today, still only 30%-40% of the island's history graduate students work in Taiwan history, though that figure is growing rapidly. For DPP Legislator Hsiao Bi-khim, this transformation is part of an effort to give people "the freedom to find their own identity."

The irony is that the historical Zheng is not a figure many Taiwanese would necessarily want to identify with. Research suggests he terrorized the Taiwanese and the aborigines more than he liberated them. "We resisted Zheng Chenggong when he came: we fought against him tooth and nail and he created a bloodbath," says Ang Kaim, research associate at the Academia Sinica's Institute of Taiwan History. Nor is Zheng a particularly good servant of mainland China's ends: Historians now believe that rather than recovering Taiwan for the mainland, Zheng had plans to conquer the Philippines and set up his own kingdom.

To some in Taiwan, all this makes Zheng an unsuitable candidate for Father or the Nation. "Zheng Chenggong cannot represent the Taiwanese people," says Lai Fui-shun, professor of history at Chinese Cultural University in Taipei. "He killed them and he killed the aborigines." His views are echoed by Ang Kaim: "It is a pity for me that the DPP government does not seriously confront this critical problem. It is crisis for our forthcoming identity."

Such a crisis could create a point when the island's myths get overtaken by historical facts and its heroes become true Taiwanese, not outside colonizers. For historian and independence advocate Su Beng, author of the definitive The 400-Year History of the Taiwanese People, that's a day to look forward to: "The whole history of the Taiwanese people has been rebellion against foreign colonizers," he says. "We must continue to rebel until we stand on our own two feet."
The other scenario is that instead of allowing people to stand on their feet such a crisis could result in a serious backlash against the independence movement. "To build a nation on myths and falsities just provides ammunition to the enemy warns political analyst Philip Chan. "China can jump all over it, completely invalidating claims of an independent country."

Perhaps. Yet fact and fiction have always become intertwined as people attempt to define a national consciousness. Zheng Chenggong may be just another example. "We have seen the same thing throughout history," says John Chang of the Taiwan Research Institute. "The U.S. has its myths and heroes that have been poked full of holes, but there they still stand."