

In Irvine, Taiwanese Miffed Over Sister City Deal

About 200 protest at City Hall over agreements with China that smother the city's relations with Taiwan.

By Jean O. Pasco, Times Staff Writer
June 28, 2006

About 200 people waved U.S. flags outside Irvine City Hall on Tuesday, demanding that the City Council unwind its sister city agreements with China, which the protesters said snubbed their homeland, Taiwan.

In those agreements, Mayor Beth Krom pledged that the city would recognize the claim of the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of the island.

A separate memo signed by Valerie Larenne, a city staffer who coordinates the sister city program, went even further, promising that Irvine would no longer send official delegations to the island, nor play the Taiwanese national anthem or display its flag.

"We want people from Taiwan or China to come to Irvine to live in peace and harmony," said Ching Fen Tsai, one of the organizers of the protest, which featured a fabric banner saying, "No to China Manipulation" and speeches in English, Mandarin and Taiwanese. "These differences can be ironed out."

Like many Southern California municipalities, Irvine has developed sister city relations around the world, first with Tsukuba, Japan, in 1989, and Hermosillo, Mexico, in 1990.

In 2000, the city adopted Taoyuan, Taiwan, as its third sister city. Then in May, Irvine officials traveled to China to sign a five-year sister-city deal with the Xuhui district of Shanghai.

On Tuesday, the council was considering dueling resolutions trying to unwind the controversy. One was written by Councilman Suhkee Kang, an ally of Krom and Councilman Larry Agran, with whom he and Irvine resident Henry King had traveled to China in March 2005 before proposing the sister city agreement. They made another trip with a larger delegation in November, and the council approved the relationship in April.

Kang's resolution asks the council to void the memo signed by Larenne and to send a letter of explanation to Xuhui Mayor Sun Chao. It also asks Krom and city staff to "make necessary modifications" to the sister city documents — without spelling out what they would be.

Another resolution, by Councilwoman Christina Shea, calls for both agreements to be voided and for the city to start from scratch with Xuhui, minus political pronouncements. It also reaffirms Irvine's relationships with both the Taiwanese and Chinese cities.

Krom has dismissed the flap as a misunderstanding and said Larenne lacked the authority to obligate Irvine to additional conditions. She sent a letter last week to the Chinese mayor reiterating the city's support for the "One China" policy, signed by President Carter in 1979, but also emphasizing the importance of Irvine's relationship with the Taiwanese city.

Her letter, however, did little to quell growing anger within the Taiwanese community in Irvine, where about 3,000 people of Chinese descent live, according to the 2000 census.

The community considers the city's One China pledge "unnecessary political trouble" that "seriously jeopardizes Irvine's relationship with Taoyuan, Taiwan," Wu-Lien Wei, director general of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles, wrote in a letter sent

Monday to Krom.

Others jumped into the fray, accusing the Communist Chinese government of using Irvine to subvert the Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979, which stated the U.S. policy of maintaining strong economic, cultural and social relations with the people of Taiwan and defending the island in the event of attack.

"Taiwan is a self-governing, free market democracy — a U.S. ally — and should be openly recognized as such," said George Wu, on the board of directors of the Formosa Foundation.

Stan Yang, president of the Formosan Assn. for Public Affairs, said the agreements, drafted by Xuhui officials, were "part of China's deceptive scheme to undermine a free and democratic Taiwan."

A spokeswoman with Sister Cities International in Washington said 28 U.S. cities and counties had sister-city relationships in both China and Taiwan, including San Diego, Albuquerque, Phoenix and Little Rock, Ark.

None reported being required to sever sister-city relations with a Taiwanese counterpart as part of the deal, though Irvine city staff said two of the cities — San Francisco and Orlando, Fla. — had signed documents affirming the "One China" policy.

Taiwan, once under direct Chinese rule but now a self-governed island and U.S. ally, has struggled for years against China's reunification policies. China says Taiwan is a renegade province to be recovered by force if necessary.