

♁ Lien Chan

Lián Zhàn 連戰

b. 1936—Taiwanese politician, former premier and vice president of Taiwan, and KMT chairman

Alternate name: simpl. 连战



Summary

Born into a rich Taiwanese family, Lien became the premier of Taiwan in 1993. He went on to be elected as Taiwan's vice president on Lee Teng-hui's ticket, but by the end of the 1990s, his relations with Lee had soured. After his defeat in the 2000 presidential elections, Lien took over the Nationalist Party and unsuccessfully ran again for Taiwan presidency in 2004. He then decided to focus on Taiwan's reconciliation with mainland China, actively contributing to President Ma Ying-jeou's rapprochement policy.

As with many successful politicians with long careers, Lien Chan has adopted contradictory positions and made conflicting alliances. He succeeded as a politician because he was perceived both by the Nationalists Party (Kuomintang 國民黨, KMT) and the Taiwan public as a clever person and an able administrator. His patrician background,

however, has kept him removed from society. Considered by many as aloof and cold, he lacks charisma and as a result failed on two occasions to be elected president of the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan). After an election defeat in 2000, he moved so close to China in his ideology that he has alienated many Taiwanese and become even more isolated.

Lien Chan's Unusual Background

Lien Chan is different from other Taiwanese politicians in several respects. Firstly, he was born into a wealthy and well-known Tainan merchant family, originally from Longji, in southern Fujian. His paternal grandfather Lien Heng 連橫 (or Lien Ya-tang 連雅堂; 1878–1936), a historian, wrote the *General History of Taiwan* (*Táiwān tōngshǐ* 臺灣通史, 1921), a famous book that promoted the idea of a unified and strong Taiwanese identity. Secondly, Lien Chan

was not born in Taiwan but on the mainland, in Xi'an, on 27 August 1936. The reason for this was that, after the 1931 Sino-Japanese Mukden incident, in which Japanese troops seized the city of Mukden (now Shenyang, Liaoning Province) as a prelude to invading the rest of Manchuria, and because of the growing tension between both countries, his grandfather, living on the mainland, asked his only son, Lien Chen-tung 連震東 (Lien Chan's father), to leave Japan where he was studying and come back to China. There he did some intelligence work for the KMT and met his future wife, Chao Lan-kun 趙蘭坤, a Yenching University student who came from a well-known Shenyang family. It is said that Lien Heng, just before his death, gave his grandchild the name "Chan" (zhàn 戰), meaning "war". Lien Chan is thus what is called in Taiwan a "half-mountain" person (*bànshānrén* 半山人), or a half-mainlander. After attending primary school in Xi'an, he moved with his family to Taiwan in 1945, when the island was handed over to ROC. His father accepted a position in the ROC provincial government and was later elected to various local public offices. He was the only Taiwanese on the powerful Central Reform Commission (1950–1952) and served as ROC minister of interior from 1960 to 1966. In the early 1960s, with the help of his wife, who managed the family's fortune, he became the seventh wealthiest man on the island, partly by speculating on land purchases and

also benefitting from his connection to the KMT.

Thirdly, there are controversies about Lien Chan's grandfather's political inclinations: while most historians agree that Lien Heng was anti-Japanese and anti-Manchu, he is presented as a Taiwanese nationalist by some and a Chinese patriot by others, including Lien Chan himself. This ambiguity has served Lien Chan's political career, helping to reach out to larger segments of the local Taiwanese electorate. Fourthly, and contrary to most KMT officials, Lien Chan married a "beauty queen," former "Miss Republic of China" Fāng Yǔ 方瑀, who was born into a mainland family in Chongqing in 1943. They had two sons and two daughters, including Sean Lien (or Lien Sheng-wen 連勝文), a KMT politician and an unsuccessful candidate to Taipei mayorship in November 2014. This marriage boosted Lien Chan's profile, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it became less of an asset as Taiwan fully democratized.

Recognized by the KMT

As a good student who was interested in politics and diplomacy, Lien Chan was quickly identified by the KMT as a potential leader. In 1957, he graduated with a degree in political science from National Taiwan University (NTU) and went on to do his military service at the Political War College. He most likely

joined the KMT at that time. In 1959, he went overseas to the University of Chicago in the United States, where in 1961 he obtained a master's degree in international law and diplomacy. In 1965, he earned a PhD in political science, with a thesis on the liberal Chinese thinker Hú Shì 胡适 (1891–1962), whose work was partly banned in Taiwan. After his marriage, Lien taught and did research for a while at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Connecticut. In 1968, he moved back to Taiwan and took up a visiting professorship in political science at NTU, later becoming chairman of the department and of the Graduate Institute of Political Science. Giving advice to and cultivating relations in the government, he became more active in the KMT and, in 1975, was appointed ambassador to the Republic of El Salvador. This was a stepping-stone in Lien's political career: in 1976, he was recalled and appointed as the director of the KMT Committee of Youth Affairs. Two years later, he became deputy secretary-general of the KMT Central Committee, and the commissioner of the National Youth Commission of the Executive Yuan, a ministerial post in charge of recruiting well-trained scholars and convincing those established abroad to come back to Taiwan.

Career in the Government

In 1981, Lien Chan was promoted to the post of minister of transportation and

communications. Six years later and a few months before the January 1988 death of ROC President Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國, Chan rose to the position of vice premier (or number-two position) of the Executive Yuan in the Yu Kuo-hwa 俞國華 cabinet. But shortly after *Lee Teng-hui 李登輝, a local Taiwanese, succeeded Chiang as head of state and KMT chairman, he asked Lien Chan, whom he had befriended in the late 1960s, to become the minister of foreign affairs and to help him develop a more pragmatic diplomacy as Taipei's allies began to normalize ties with Beijing. Lien seems to have been only mildly successful as this post, since less than two years later he was replaced by Frederick Chien 錢復.

Lien's political career was hardly on the wane, however, especially since he decided to side with Lee Teng-hui in his battle against the conservatives in the KMT. As governor of Taiwan Province from 1990 to 1993, Lien was chosen by Lee, over Lin Yang-kang 林洋港, to become the premier of the first Executive Yuan confirmed by a fully democratically elected parliament, or Legislative Yuan. In this position he replaced General Hau Pei-tsun 郝柏村, a mainlander with whom Lee had a difficult relationship and whom could not have been reappointed by the new Legislative Yuan. Then emphasizing his Taiwanese

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.

identity, Lien was also clearly supportive of Lee's rapid democratization strategy.

During the rest of the 1990s, Lien worked closely with Lee Teng-hui, introducing additional constitutional reforms such as the direct election of the president of the ROC in 1994, and in developing a channel of communication with China while also intensifying Taiwan's pragmatic diplomacy. In 1996, he successfully ran as vice president on the same ticket as Lee and kept both his positions (premier and vice president), before being replaced in 1997 as premier by Vincent Siew (Hsiao Wan-chang 蕭萬長) after the Council of Grand Justices ruled that retaining these dual roles was "constitutional but inappropriate."

Lien then publicly backed Lee's mainland policy, in his willingness both to negotiate technical agreements with Beijing and, especially after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (during which China tested missiles in waters close to the island), to slow down factory transfers to and investment in the mainland. In 1999, he also approved Lee's qualification of the relations across the Strait as "quasi-state to state relations." Lien finally took an active role in Lee's attempt to enhance Taiwan's international status and return to the United Nations. For example, in 1995, Lien met with Václav Havel in Prague, underscoring on this occasion the similarities between Taiwan's democratization and Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution.

Lien Turns Conservative

Also assuming the post of vice chairman of the KMT (1993–2000), Lien quite logically became the KMT candidate in the 2000 presidential election. It has been argued that he was chosen by Lee in order to destroy the KMT. It has also been said that Lee publicized his "two state theory" to boost Lien's chances to win. In any event, Lee clearly initially supported Lien's campaign. Lee, however, was aware of Lien's deteriorating image after his disastrous management of the 21 September 1999 earthquake rescue operations, and eventually decided to secure independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate *Chen Shui-bian's 陳水扁 (b. 1950) victory against James Soong Chu-yu 宋楚瑜, an ambitious KMT leader and mainlander who had run as an Independent against Lien Chan (and Chen) after falling out with Lee.

The year 2000 constituted a turning point in Lien Chan's career. After his defeat, he took the reins of a weakened KMT, where he started to develop a more conservative mainlander, or Chinese nationalist, orientation. For instance, he entertained the idea of setting up a confederation with the PRC, and opening party-to-party talks with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Later, in 2003, he was instrumental in forcing the Chen administration to open direct charter flights across the Taiwan Strait. He officially reconciled with James Soong

and, to increase his chances of winning, put him on his ticket as a vice president candidate in the 2004 presidential election. After Chen Shui-bian managed to get reelected with a hair-thin majority, Lien and Soong decided to legally question the results, to no avail.

Lien's Rapprochement with China

Unable to accept his defeat, Lien Chan suddenly turned his attention to cross-strait relations. Criticizing more and more forcefully Chen's mainland China policy, which he considered too confrontational, and supported by larger segments of the business community, he tried to regain some influence in restoring official relations between the KMT and the Chinese CCP. In April 2005, one month after Beijing enacted a new "anti-secession law," Lien travelled to the PRC and met *Hú Jǐntāo 胡錦濤 (b. 1942).

This "journey of peace," his timidity in promoting Taiwan's democracy on the mainland, and his silence on the "anti-secession law" precipitated his retirement from the KMT chairmanship, which was taken over in July 2005 by *Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 (b. 1950). Since then and particularly since Ma's election as ROC president in 2008, Lien, who has kept the title of KMT honorary chairman, has travelled multiple times to China, giving the impression to many Taiwanese that he was drifting closer to Beijing than

Taipei. It is true that a kind of division of labor has taken shape between the Ma administration and Lien Chan, the latter (and other KMT patriarchs) being used to negotiating with the CCP authorities. Ma also used Lien's prestige on the mainland to appoint him Taiwan's (or "Chinese Taipei") representative at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings between 2008 and 2012. Lien, however, has also tried to push Ma's rapprochement policy with China further than the majority of the KMT and Taiwanese society would have wished. For example, in February 2013 he took the occasion of his meeting with the CCP's new general secretary, *Xí Jìnpíng 習近平 (b. 1953), to pronounce a "16 character principle" for cross-strait relations, which endorsed not only Beijing's "one China" and integration policies but also Xi's idea of "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The following year, he led eighty Taiwanese business leaders and civil group representatives to the mainland and publicly supported the PRC concept of a "one China framework" (*yīzhōng kuàngjià* 一中框架).

Today, Lien Chan seems a politician of the past. He accompanied Taiwan's democratization but did not make any major personal contribution to it. He only managed to get elected to a public office when running with Lee Teng-hui in 1996. And at the end of his career, he consoled himself by embarking into a rapprochement with the PRC that has been perceived by most Taiwanese, including

many KMT voters, as exaggerated and putting him in a relationship with the CCP leaders that was too cozy for the representative of a democracy. In accord with the old Chinese proverb “old men go back to their roots” (*lǎorén guīgēn* 老人歸根), Lien, coming from a Taiwanese patrician family closely linked to the mainland and attached to its Fujian origins, is promoting in his old age a reunification of the Chinese nation and a dream that trumps political and ideological differences. As such, he represents a section of the Taiwanese political spectrum that is doomed to get smaller and smaller.

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Further Reading

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