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The former president of the island nation, who advocates independence from China, has been a polarizing figure among Asian Americans.

By David Pierson, Times Staff Writer

Lee Teng-hui, the controversial former president of Taiwan, arrived in Los Angeles for a weekend of speeches and meetings that is attracting legions of his loyalists from across California as well as protesters who say his anti-Beijing pronouncements are only fueling the flames of discord between Taiwan and China.

Lee is one of Taiwan's most strident voices in the movement to declare the island nation's formal independence from China, an action that some fear could spark a war between the two nations. He has emerged as a polarizing figure in Asian American communities, with supporters calling him a brave advocate of democracy and critics dismissing him as a demagogue whose rhetoric could wreak havoc.

But Lee's mission has become more difficult in recent years as China's economy has boomed and more Chinese Americans become interested in doing business there. China's ascendance has in some ways marginalized Taiwan on the world political stage, though Lee remains a thorn in Beijing's side.

"China would like nothing better than to see him boxed up and stored away in a warehouse where he's not allowed to speak publicly again," said T.J. Pempel, director of the Institute of East Asian Studies at UC Berkeley.

China tried to block Lee's visit and to prevent the National Press Club from hosting him in Washington, D.C. But Lee met with several congressmen and senators, though the White House has described Lee's two-week tour as unofficial.

In Washington, Lee was met by protesters who support unification of the two nations. Another group based in L.A.'s Chinatown has organized 100 demonstrators to gather in Pasadena today, where Lee will deliver a speech to about 2,000 supporters, many of whom traveled from Northern California and nearby states.

In a speech Friday at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in downtown Los Angeles, Lee, 84, said the international community should not be seduced by China's soaring economy and should push for freedoms that would result in two independent, democratic governments in China and Taiwan.

China views Taiwan as a renegade territory that broke off after the communists took power in 1949. The then-ruling Nationalist Party fled for Taiwan, where it established what it called the rightful Chinese government. The Nationalists ruled for decades with an iron fist before Lee came to power in 1988 — the first native of the island to become president — and introduced democracy during his 12 years in office.

In Taiwan, some people support unification, others support independence, but many would just like to keep the status quo. China raised the stakes this year by passing laws that gave the government a legal framework to attack Taiwan militarily if it declared permanent independence.

"Lee is very important to us," said Chin-Ho Liao, commissioner of overseas affairs in Taiwan. "He is our spiritual leader."

Taiwan is not recognized by the United Nations or the World Health Organization. The country has

resorted to covert official recognition from some of the more obscure nations across the globe.

Lee was introduced Friday by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach), a staunch supporter who said Lee was his "personal hero."

"I suggest in Taipei we should have a statue of President Lee instead of Chiang Kai-shek," the congressman said, referring to the late Chinese Nationalist leader. Other guests included local politicians, officials from USC and Pepperdine, and the consul generals of Belize and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Lee called on the United States and other nations to press for reforms in China and for Taiwan's independence.

"The strategy for freedom in 21st century Asia is for free democracies to cooperate fully, join together to resist China's strategy of division, and bring the light of freedom to the darkest corners of Asia," Lee said.

Paul Li, director of the China Unity Assn. in Chinatown, said he rented a bus for 100 protesters to confront Lee and his supporters in Pasadena. Li said Lee's message had little potency because so many in Southern California are prospering by doing business with China. (China is Southern California's No. 1 trade partner, with \$85.6 billion in two-way trade last year. Taiwan was the fourth-biggest, with \$14.8 billion.)

"He is not president anymore," Li said. "He suggests Taiwan should be independent. We feel that he will destroy or damage the relationship with Taiwan and China. We don't want him to say something bad that will ruin the relationship."

K.C. Chen, president of the Formosan Assn. for Public Affairs, said he wasn't worried about the protests.

"We don't mind the protesters. The more the better because we want Taiwan's voice heard by the mainstream."