

All Taiwanese are Lee Ming-che

Written by Chen Fang-ming 陳芳明

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If the family of Taiwanese human rights advocate Lee Ming-che (李明哲) had not started looking for him after he went missing in China, the Chinese government would not have said anything about his detention.

It was not until one week after his disappearance that China's Taiwan Affairs Office confirmed that Lee had been detained for engaging in "activities endangering national security."

It has been reported that Lee was a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) employee until he left the party in 2008. He is now a member of a non-governmental organization (NGO) and worked as an instructor at Wenshan Community College in Taipei's Wenshan District (文山區) until his arrest.

There are several signs to suggest that Lee might have been arrested so that Beijing could trade hostages with Taipei, which arrested a Chinese man on suspicion of espionage last month. If this assumption is correct, Lee might have been arrested as a symbol of Taiwan's democracy movement.

Anyone who has participated in the democracy movement is an adversary to Beijing: Democracy advocates believe in the rule of law and in human rights, whereas Beijing is only concerned with maintaining political stability.

Taiwan has seen three transitions of power between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the DPP since democratization and the ideas of democracy and human rights have become deeply ingrained in Taiwanese minds. Anything Lee says or does is simply a reflection of the spirit of Taiwanese society.

However, under Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平), Chinese authorities have been determined to crack down on democracy, human rights and any other values considered universal in the rest of the world.

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How the situation will evolve remains unclear, but one thing is certain: Anything Lee might have said in China that led to his arrest was simply a reflection of Taiwan's democratic values. Beijing detained Lee without informing anyone, because it fears that if NGOs are free to act in China, that would encourage hope for more autonomy in Chinese civic society.

Chinese authorities appear to consider NGOs a bigger threat than any other official organization. It has been four weeks since Lee lost contact with his family, yet even the Straits Exchange Foundation cannot offer any help.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not allow the existence of a “civic society” in China. From writers' associations to environmental organizations, each civic group is monitored and controlled by the government. Saying that there are exchanges between civic society on either side of the Taiwan Strait is a lie. Beijing has always been very cautious toward “civic society” and Lee's arrest has only confirmed the CCP's intolerance of civic society activities.

Lee, a member of Taiwanese civic society and of an NGO, stands a greater chance of influencing the Chinese public than the Taiwanese government does. All Taiwanese who are familiar with the nation's democratic values can identify with Lee. Lee is every Taiwanese. Every Taiwanese might one day be detained by Beijing.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office announced in February that it is considering treating Taiwanese in the same way as it treats Chinese as a way to attract Taiwanese to move to China.

The main reason nothing came of this proposal is that many Taiwanese find the prospect of “being treated as a Chinese citizen” horrifying, because it means being deprived of human rights in a nation where there is little regard for the law, fairness or justice.

The Chinese authorities think that treating Taiwanese like their own citizens means guaranteeing employment and offering other benefits that would make living in China more convenient.

Treating people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait as Chinese is of course what the CCP's

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“one China” principle is all about. However, what has happened to Lee is a good example of what it really means to be treated like a Chinese citizen.

Lee’s treatment in China is the treatment that all Taiwanese will receive in China. Anyone who believes in democracy, the rule of law and human rights could suddenly disappear in China.

Lee Ming-che is a human rights advocate who paid close attention to public affairs and human rights in China, his wife, Lee Ching-yu (李慶餘), said in a statement.

Most Taiwanese are just like Lee. After the 2011 protests against Kuokuang Petrochemical Technology Co’s plan to build a naphtha cracker complex, the 2013 demonstration demanding that the government investigate the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘), the 2014 Sunflower movement and the anti-nuclear movement, there is hardly a Taiwanese today who does not have some basic understanding of human rights.

The Lee incident underlines the fact that China is still a very unfriendly nation and his detention shows that China could arrest any Taiwanese who believes in democracy. Taiwanese cannot back down on their principles of democracy and human rights.

Any such compromise would only lend justification to Beijing’s decision to arrest Lee.

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Translated by Tu Yu-an

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