

Beijing's insistence that Taiwan — or the Republic of China (ROC), to use its official title — only participates in international sporting events such as the Olympics or the Summer Universiade using the name “Chinese Taipei” is a masterstroke.

It is also a move that, for Taiwanese, is not only unwelcome, but pernicious.

It is effective for three reasons:

First, it coheres with Beijing's “one China” principle, for to allow the nation to compete at an international competition using the name Taiwan or ROC would be incompatible with that principle.

Second, there is the message it sends to the international community.

However, one could argue that its nonsensical premise elevates it to a position that it can be more easily scrutinized.

Third, and most persuasively, there is what it means to Taiwanese and how they self-identify.

While the notion that the name issue might prompt scrutiny still applies, names do matter. If you take away a nation's name, you rob it of its connection with its past.

On Tuesday it was announced that a group in Japan calling itself the Taiwan 2020 Campaign Council has collected almost 100,000 signatures on a petition calling for Taiwan's national team to take part at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games as “Taiwan.” The group plans to present the petition to the Japanese Diet.

Nation's name historically justified

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The council's effort is supported by pro-localization and "rectification of names" groups in Taiwan.

The rather cumbersome term "rectification of names" is used to speak of ensuring the name of a place or a thing is correct. This is actually a translation — ironically perhaps — of an ancient Chinese concept.

The Analects quotes Confucius (孔子) as saying: "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."

For Confucius, the "superior man" refers to a place or a thing in terms that best reflect their reality.

This is why, for example, the administration of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) preferred school history textbooks to refer to Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) without prefixing his name with honorifics.

In the Taipei Times, Sun is referred to as the ROC's founding father, which is historically correct, for this nation is Taiwan.

The ROC is Taiwan's official title, given to it by the foreign Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) that was exiled here in 1949.

Names are a link to the past. There are parts of northern England, for example, where certain place names remind the local populace even now of their Viking roots from more than 1,000 years ago when the area was under what was called the Danelaw.

This gives locals an idea of the cultural history that formed the environment into which they were born. It does not mean they might claim to be Vikings today.

Like the UK, Taiwanese society is the result of a complex history of immigration and colonialization. That does not mean Taiwanese need to identify themselves as anything other than Taiwanese, despite the overwhelming number who are of Han Chinese descent.

When Japan colonized Taiwan, it embarked upon a process of assimilation of the local populace.

However, many of the place names were simple Japanese transliterations of their Aboriginal titles. Before the Japanese arrived, the area near Kaohsiung was called Takau, meaning "bamboo forest." The Japanese used the Japanese characters for Kaohsiung (高雄), pronounced "Takao." They did not change the name itself.

When the KMT took over, the Chinese pronunciation of those characters was used, giving the main city in that area the name as it is pronounced today.

The link to the past is intact.

It is important for the government to be explicit about the reality to which it subscribes. In other words, to officially refer to the nation as Taiwan and to do so unabashedly, despite the delusional reality espoused or conceded by other states.

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