

Word games have real consequences

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The referendum on banning food imports from five prefectures in Japan demonstrated again that oversimplifying terms is an effective tool to sway public opinion or mislead people. The so-called “1992 consensus” has received renewed attention over the past few weeks and the public should be careful not to fall for the same trick.

After the passage last month of a referendum calling for the retention of a ban on some Japanese food imports imposed after the 2011 Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear disaster, some wondered why the public made what they believed was an irrational decision.

Of several factors, one is particularly alarming: the use of an abbreviated term that comes with a negative connotation to refer to food imports. Politicians and media outlets with a political agenda simply referred to imports from the prefectures as heshi (核食, “nuclear food”) in a clear attempt to mislead voters into thinking that they were endorsing a ban on food products contaminated with radioactive materials.

In reality, the measure is a blanket ban that prohibits any targeted product from the areas from entering Taiwan, regardless of whether it is tainted. People were already dealing with an overload of information, so Japanese food became stigmatized as “nuclear food.”

The case of the “1992 consensus” is similar. Although the “consensus” has been thrown around a lot by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), it is seldom explained in detail, making it difficult for the public to understand its real meaning.

The Mainland Affairs Council, the top government body in charge of cross-strait affairs, has published several surveys that illustrate the problem.

About 30 to 50 percent of respondents in one survey mistakenly said they believed that the “1992 consensus” means that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) are two governments belonging to two different countries, the council said.

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The large number of Taiwanese who do not understand the “consensus” correctly could spell trouble for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), because in the eyes of the public it would be unthinkable for the government to reject such a seemingly logical agreement at the expense of cross-strait stability and the economic benefits that come with it.

It is also unclear whether people who say they support the “consensus” understand that they are supporting the idea that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to “one China.”

A lack of understanding of the “1992 consensus” makes the public an easy target for political manipulation: People could easily be tricked into making ill-informed decisions that carry dire political consequences they are not aware of, such as leaving Taiwan economically vulnerable to unification.

A clear example of this is a poll published by the China-leaning Want Want China Times Media Group on the eve of the inauguration on Tuesday of Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) and Taichung Mayor Lu Shiow-yen (盧秀燕) of the KMT — both of whom have publicly endorsed the “1992 consensus” hoping to foster closer cross-strait exchanges.

The poll said that 61.1 percent of respondents supported the development of cross-strait ties on the basis of the “1992 consensus.” It also quoted a hotel association as saying that it welcomed the “1992 consensus” if it could help bring in tourists and money.

The DPP should pay attention to this dangerous tactic employed by CCP sympathizers. It should also do a better job of ensuring that the public understands the actual meaning of controversial political ideas, such as the “1992 consensus” and “both sides of the Strait are one family,” rather than being misled by pro-unification forces.

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