

In an article titled First Year of the China Factor published on Christmas day in a Chinese-language publication, Academia Sinica research fellow Wu Jieh-min (吳建民) said that China has been using a “cross-strait political-commercial alliance” comprised of financial groups and pro-China organizations to interfere in Taiwan’s elections, and in doing so, influencing policymaking, public discourse and political order. The article garnered quite a bit of attention, but there was also quite a lot of confusion in the subsequent debate, which descended into so much noise with the sheer plethora of different opinions being voiced. Unfortunately, this was a lost opportunity to reflect on this idea of the “China factor” and its repercussions.

The ensuing debate not only had various different foci, it also approached the question from many different perspectives. Some took a moralistic approach, categorizing the issue as concerning the machinations of a malevolent power, while others looked at China’s influence on Taiwan over the course of the last century.

There was also some slightly more in-depth analysis, considering both the positive and negative aspects of the China factor, with some distinguishing between the “China factor” (中國因素) and the “Beijing factor” (北京因素). There were also those who took a comparative approach by looking at the experience of Hong Kong society over the past decade or so.

In fact, if one proceeds from a preliminary lexical analysis for “China factor” in the news archives over the past 10 years, one discovers that the term has, indeed, become increasingly common since 2000, but that its actual meaning has changed. Some people think that the term has only really become quantitatively significant recently, as a result of last year’s presidential election, and that the present preoccupation with the idea is misplaced.

However, this is not the case. The China factor has been consistently present in public discourse in Taiwan for the past 12 years, and it has gradually been assuming a more important place within that discourse, although it is true that it was discussed more in the run-up to, and immediate aftermath of, presidential elections.

As we have said, the actual nature of the debate has morphed in that time, too. Earlier on, the focus had been on the “external” influence of China, concentrating on Beijing’s application of pressure on Taiwan internationally, and Taiwan’s opportunities and pitfalls as a result of

China’s economic progress. More recently, the debate on the China factor has turned to the “internal” aspects, to how it is directly influencing Taiwan’s broadcast media, human rights and consolidation of democracy.

We can say, then, that the influence of the China factor on Taiwan during the past decade or so has been a process — at least in terms of public debate — of moving from external to internal influence, and from less to more.

If we agree to use Wu’s definition of the China factor, and take it as Beijing’s ability to encroach upon Taiwan’s democracy, then, according to the trends mentioned above, there are justifiable concerns that China is trying to make Taiwan another Hong Kong. It is true that, since the 1980s, the progress of democratization in Hong Kong has sustained some serious body blows from Beijing’s interference and obstructive behavior. Economically speaking, the former British territory has also had concerns over whether it will lose some of its strong position, and come to be seen as a secondary Chinese city. The people of Hong Kong have seen fit to take to the streets to safeguard their core values of freedom and the rule of law.

The influence of the China factor is keenly felt in all aspects of life in Hong Kong, and increasingly so. People who work in the media are almost universally subject to pressure to self-censor, not to mention the blatant and undisguised interference in Hong Kong’s politics and elections by the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Beijing has absolutely no intention to countenance the development or strengthening of a civil society in Hong Kong, and for this reason, it is keeping the pressure up on institutions that promote communication — such as the broadcast media or TV — to the extent that government officials in Beijing can apply pressure, either explicitly or implicitly, on their counterparts in Hong Kong with a single telephone call, influencing policymaking there.

So how should Taiwan deal with the China factor? I believe that it should do so on the following three levels.

First, it should consolidate the current civil society and encourage people to participate in the political decisionmaking process. In the US, the US-China Policy Foundation was set up in

Democracy and ‘the China factor’

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Friday, 18 January 2013 08:29

1995 and has become an important soundboard for the US government in the formation of its China policy. Taiwan needs sustained debate, incorporating public opinion on the impact of the China factor on the country.

Second, Taiwan needs to pay more attention to how Hong Kong is developing under the “one country, two systems” model. The next five years are going to be decisive for Hong Kong, and are going to be crucial for whether it is going to be able to safeguard the Basic Law and judicial independence, hold “genuine” double general elections and continue to protect freedom of expression.

All of these are of interest to Taiwan, for no other reason than that Hong Kong is the best example, the precursor, of what Taiwan can expect under the influence of the China factor.

Finally, Taiwan needs to revisit the concept of the cross-strait common area, promote mutual understanding between China and Taiwan, and support the civil rights of the freedoms of assembly and expression, so that it can mitigate the systematic exclusion of public opinion from the policymaking process, and to make the necessary preparations for the inevitable future political talks.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/01/18](#)