

Democracy is Taiwan's salvation

Written by Jerome Keating
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The threats to the stability of Taiwan and its democracy are many. Everyone knows the obvious threat of the 1,600-plus missiles aimed at it by China, its hegemonic neighbor on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

A second and less obvious danger comes from the bumbling incompetence of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who seems bent on making Taiwan's economy totally dependent on China.

However, a third and subtler threat surfaced recently in the re-emergence of a discourse that tries to link certain individuals' desire to see the union of Taiwan and China with cyclic inevitability.

This discourse is a threat, but it can also be a benefit. By understanding it and the cyclic thinking behind it, the major differences that exist between Taiwanese and Chinese history and identity quickly become clear.

Former premier Hau Pei-tsun (郝柏村) resurrected this discourse when he voiced the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) stock, but defunct, dream that Taiwan and China would not only inevitably be united, but that they would be united under the Republic of China (ROC) government. Like a staunch ex-Confederate in the US, saying: "The South will rise again," Hau brought back Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) lost dream.

Making his remark more ironic was that Hau was speaking at a forum "to witness" Taiwan's democracy funded by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. This did not stop him from saying that to use the name "Taiwan" in place of the ROC was "self-deprecating."

Chou Chieh-min (周齊敏), also a former military man, insulted the people of Hualien and Taiwan as a whole with similar sentiments and discourse. However, it was by referencing the classic opening lines to Luo Guanzhong's (羅貫中) Romance of the Three Kingdoms: "The empire long divided must unite; long united must divide, Thus it has ever been," that Chou expanded the thought.

Chou was attempting to link the ROC dream of unification with the perpetuation of the mythical Middle Kingdom.

For Chou, his individual identity, as well as Chinese (not Taiwanese) identity depends on this sense of cyclic history, with its return to a past "golden age." It is no surprise that the Romance was written 1,000 years or more after the period it describes. In effect, Chou's discourse was a revisiting of the "myth of the eternal return," a term coined by Romanian historian Mircea Eliade.

Eliade spoke of this myth in a religious framework, one that separates religious and secular, sacred and profane actions. However, in a post-modern age, where people create their own meaning, philosophical and personal myths quickly and easily overlap and replace religious myths.

Within the paradigmatic view of the universe that any individual holds, the paradigm of necessity creates its own sense of sacred and profane. Sacred time and space, and the subsequent divisions and insights that they express, then follow.

James Joyce exemplified this transference by adapting the religious concept of epiphany from his Catholic background to illustrate the new insights into reality that his characters in Dubliners developed.

Thus for China, where Confucianism is not a religion, it functions as one in the Chinese myth. In it, sacred time and space are found. So when China, the mythical "Middle Kingdom," is reunited, then "Confucian harmony" will supposedly reign. Profane time and space subsequently come into existence when China is divided.

This is what Hau and Chou are saying: The idea and belief that Taiwan does not have a "sacred" identity and history without being linked to China. It is the same argument and denigration vis-a-vis Taiwan that was expressed a century earlier by former vice president Lien Chan's (連戰) grandfather, Lien Heng (連橫), in The General History of Taiwan when he stated that: "Taiwan's sorrow is that it has no history."

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Put another way, Taiwan's history is only "real" if it is tied to the Middle Kingdom. The elder Lien knew nothing and probably cared nothing of Taiwan's early history as it did not fit the paradigm through which he viewed the world.

He would not know how most recent research illustrates that Austronesian language and culture spread outward from Taiwan to Madagascar in the west, Easter Island in the east and as far south as New Zealand. This all happened long before the Yellow Emperor began the China myth.

This discourse of inevitability is antithetical to Taiwan. Taiwan's history and identity rely more on linear thinking. Taiwan has no aspirations to be part of a mythic Middle Kingdom and Taiwanese do not need size to identify with or have a sense of glory.

They can find the concept of homeland or motherland within the confines of their small island. This is something that even Chinese dissidents who strive for a Taiwan-style democracy in China have difficulty grasping. If there was any nostalgic thinking of a glorious past in Taiwan, it certainly would not rest with the KMT, the nation's last colonial ruler. Instead, for the older generation at least, it would more ironically be their time spent as part of the Japanese Empire, which is spoken of as "harsh, but fair."

Taiwan's democracy is linear, not cyclical. It reflects a linear emergence of the nation overcoming a variety of colonial governments until democracy was finally won. Taiwan's glory is in this hard-won democracy and its future. The harmony the nation seeks is not a harmony by suppression, as found in China today. Taiwanese harmony must be achieved with the checks and balances of a democratic system where diverse elements must work together and where leadership must constantly rely on serving the electorate and not holding a hierarchical position to retain power.

Contrary to the discourse of inevitability espoused by Hau, Chou and others, Taiwan can move forward, developing its democracy, maintaining its independence and strengthening its identity. That is a discourse and vision worth promoting.

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