

Flag furor shows China's true colors

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 08 November 2013 08:24

When singer Deserts Chang (蔡幸娟) held up a Republic of China (ROC) flag given to her by a Taiwanese student at a concert in Manchester, England, and told the audience that it was the flag of her country, Chinese students in the audience were upset. The incident set off a battle between Internet users on each side of the Taiwan Strait and raised the question that if Chinese citizens become irate at the sight of a Taiwanese flag at a concert, how the two sides will ever be able to discuss peace with dignity and equality.

Holding up the national flag after being handed one by a compatriot at an overseas event was a natural reaction, nothing more, nothing less.

As Chang said: "It is just a flag. Flags, pineapple cakes, Taiwanese rice, Gaoshan tea and traditional characters all mean the same thing to me — They represent the place I come from, and wherever I see them I always feel gratitude and identification."

While Chang's reaction — and her comments in the aftermath — have been tolerant and composed, she has faced an outpouring of vitriol from China. She has been scolded for promoting Taiwanese independence, been called a "slut" and accused of going to China just to "steal our money." The attacks have been rude, personal and politically biased.

How ironic is it that the target of so much bile is the daughter of former Straits Exchange Foundation secretary-general and vice chairman Chiao Jen-ho (趙建福), a man who had dedicated himself to breaking the ice between Taiwan and China.

Given the delicateness of the cross-strait situation, top leaders on both sides have stressed peaceful exchanges, but apart from superficial slogans, Beijing has never made any concession when it comes to allowing Taiwan international space. It reserves extra approbation to the use of the ROC name and flag in international settings and often embarrasses Taiwan, for example by insisting that it be listed as a "province of China" on maps and by international agencies and organizations.

Despite years of such repression, China's tactics have been less than effective when it comes to influencing the average Taiwanese. Instead it has created widespread resentment, as

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evidenced by the results of a recent TVBS opinion poll that found that if respondents had to choose between unification and independence, a record 70 percent would choose independence.

Suspensions and distrust of China's motives have also created strong public opposition to the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) and the recent service trade agreement, even though Beijing — and President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) — feel that it has gone a long way toward pleasing Taiwan by making concessions in these agreements.

Chang's actions have won widespread support in Taiwan, including from lawmakers from across party lines, and public support for unification is likely to decline a bit further as a result of the furor. She said she has spent many years thinking about her national identity, but that she did not want to evade either the opportunity for exchange or the current dispute over interpretation, saying: "This is the only way that we will get an opportunity to both shape and witness what they will become."

Flexibility must be the fundamental principle of cross-strait exchanges. If China continues to maintain its high-handed and autocratic attitude to Taiwan, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait will only continue to drift further apart.

The government made much of Taiwan Affairs Office Director Zhang Zhijun (張志軍) addressing Mainland Affairs Council Minister Wang Yu-chi (王郁琦) as "Minister Wang" when they met at the APEC summit in Indonesia last month, citing it as an example of China's goodwill and flexibility. However, Deserts Chang's simple act of holding her national flag aloft has revealed China's true colors.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/11/08](#)