

Ma growing nation into a ‘cabbage republic’

Written by James Wang 王健

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The “Treasured Masterpieces from the National Palace Museum, Taipei” exhibition in Japan became the subject of heated controversy after the word “national” was omitted from the National Palace Museum’s name on promotional posters — an incident that serves to highlight the strange attitudes espoused by President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration.

If the Jadeite Cabbage with Insects (翠玉白菜) is so valuable that people are just dying to see it, then the Ma administration should raise the stakes and require that any institution or organization that wants to borrow it must first recognize Taiwan as a sovereign, independent nation, instead of merely squabbling over the use — or lack thereof — of the word “national.”

The most baffling behavior exhibited during the controversy has come from the government and the Japanese media, rather than from the Tokyo National Museum, the exhibition’s main organizer.

As agreed, the Tokyo museum used its Taipei peer’s full name, but posters printed by Japanese media outlets omitted the word “national” because Beijing authorizes whether those outlets can set up permanent offices in China.

Like the Ma administration, the Japanese media fold immediately in the face of opposition from China. They might use freedom of the press as an excuse to reject suggestions made by the Tokyo National Museum, but they are too afraid to use the same reason to reject Chinese requests that they put pressure on Taiwan.

The Ma administration’s mistake was not that it insisted that the event’s main organizer use the wording agreed to in the contract, but that it demanded that Japan’s media follow suit.

Issuing a command to the media there to do as they are told is an expression of Ma’s antidemocratic leanings. In another example of this, the president also demands that media outlets report visits by foreign dignitaries to the nation as “visits to China” and say that they have “arrived in China,” prohibiting them from saying that officials are “visiting Taiwan” or “arriving in Taiwan.”

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While the Central News Agency — the nation’s “official” media outlet — does as it is told in Chinese print, it cannot avoid writing “arriving in Taiwan” in its English-language reports. Furthermore, in its articles on the ongoing visit by China’s Taiwan Affairs Office Minister Zhang Zhijun (張志軍), the agency must of course say “visiting Taiwan,” even in Chinese, because it would not dare write that a Chinese official is “visiting China.”

In the exhibition debacle, the government at the last minute took a tough stance, saying it would cancel the exhibition unless the Japanese media acquiesced to its demands.

The Jadeite Cabbage was crafted during the Qing Dynasty and inherited by the Republic of China. When Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) ran off to Taiwan in 1949, he brought with him a lot of antiquities and set up the National Palace Museum. The institute’s name and the ancient treasures in its collection are foreign and so the pieces cannot be freely exhibited for fear that China will get its hands on them.

If the Ma administration’s tough stance was consistently taken, the Jadeite Cabbage could be used to bring about international recognition of Taiwan’s national status and dignity, and that would be praiseworthy.

However, exaggerating one’s power and creating a “one country, two museums” situation, while deteriorating toward a “cabbage republic” that finds solace in the use of the word “national” only turns the nation into a laughing stock.

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Translated by Perry Svensson

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