

To address surging public doubts, Foreign Policy magazine has released the recordings of its interview with Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲). As it turns out, Ko's actual words were "the longer the colonization, the more advanced a place is. It's rather embarrassing."

Before the clarifications were made, however, China's mouthpiece the Global Times had already rushed headlong into an attack on Ko, saying that colonial progressivism is a way to praise the colonized. Comments made by Taiwan's pan-blue camp and pro-unification media are basically in tune with this point of view. A Chinese netizen commented, "Only by continuing to increase our national strength can we impose restraints on this whore who thinks foreign powers are superior."

Perhaps this is what the Chinese really think. People like this completely brush off the tragic fact that Taiwan cannot determine its own future. They criticize Japan for having colonized Taiwan and call Taiwanese imperial citizens of the Japanese Empire, but never bother to reflect on how cruel they are when they claim that Taiwan is a part of China and that the Taiwanese are also Chinese.

The history of Taiwan is for the most part a history of colonization. During the Age of Discovery, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain took turns ruling parts of Taiwan. Cheng Cheng-kung (鄭成功), known in the West as Koxinga, forged a Han Chinese regime in Taiwan during his attempt to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and restore the Ming Dynasty, but in the end, the Qing defeated him and took over Taiwan.

After the First Sino-Japanese War ended in 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. In 1945, World War II ended and Japan surrendered to the Allies, and in 1952, the Treaty of San Francisco, officially signed by Japan and the Allied Powers, took effect and Japan relinquished its dominion over Taiwan.

Before Japan gave up its rule, however, Chiang Kai-Shek (蔣介石) and his regime fled to Taiwan, and the democratic world accepted the Republic of China's occupation of Taiwan in order to block the expansion of the Communists. Not until 1996, with the first free and direct presidential election, did the 23 million people living in Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu decide who they themselves wanted for a leader.

Identity is key to nation's future

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China, on the other hand, was invaded by imperialists in modern times, and Chinese leaders nowadays continue to take considerable advantage of nationalism as a way to continue their hold on power. All they need to do is come up with some anti-Japanese, anti-American or anti-British rhetoric to stir up the entire nation's memories of past humiliations, diverting the whole nation's attention away from interior problems.

The irony is that most Chinese leaders are paying lip service to the opposition to foreign countries, but their actions usually speak louder than words: They send their children to these imperialist nations, and this is also where they hide any illegally appropriated fortunes they have gotten their hands on. It is easy to see that they are using anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as tools to monopolize their hold on power in China.

The reason that they put salt on old wounds by attacking imperialism and colonialism in such a conspicuous way is nothing but a trick to disguise the fact that they themselves are colonizing China. Today the "New China" is just as autocratic, authoritarian and feudal as the old China that was invaded and colonized, and it is governed to the same extent by arbitrariness and the lack of rule of law. The real liberation of China is yet to come.

Taiwan is already on its democratic road of no return. However, although Taiwanese people have the right to vote, they are not completely masters of their nation yet, because their rights to write their own constitution, hold referenda and recall elected officials are still restricted. Popular sovereignty has not yet been fully realized in Taiwan.

Fortunately, more and more Taiwanese realize that Taiwan's future must be built on a Taiwanese identity. The past experience of colonization, pain and glory lies in the past. The healthiest attitude to adopt is to neither bear a grudge nor wax nostalgic, to be strictly critical of both the negative and positive experiences of the colonial era, and to keep the positives. This latest brawl is an attempt of both the pro-unification and the pro-independence camps to shield their weaknesses, but instead it only serves to expose these weaknesses, because both sides are being held captive by the past, and they cannot be freed unless they are able to gain an insight into Taiwan's history.

What we can and should do is light a path that leads toward an autonomous future and form a Taiwanese national identity. Countries that were colonized in the past should sympathize with

each other and help each other on the basis that they are sovereign countries.

In retrospect, ambitions for dominance and quests for national interests were present in both imperialism and colonialism. They were not acts of philanthropy. If there really is such a thing as colonial progressivism, it is not a matter of the subjective benevolence on the colonizers' part, but rather it is a product of objectivity and perhaps even an accident.

Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore may be fortunate examples, but there are many more unfortunate examples in which resources of those colonized areas have been completely plundered, and traditional values, power structures and culture have been destroyed. Those countries became Third World countries that still today are unable to recover from their past wounds. This is something that Ko should realize instead of continuing to live in his romantic fantasy world.

As for Hong Kong, which has been called the "Pearl of the East" thanks to the prosperity brought about by British colonization, its situation has continued to worsen since its return to China in 1997. In light of this fact, perhaps those who echo the Chinese view that "colonial progressivism is a way to praise the colonized" should perhaps take a good look in the mirror.

The important thing in Ko's comments on colonialism is not what he got wrong. The recording has been released and there are no major errors. The problem with what he said is that he did not convey his thoughts in full, which should be that the fortunate countries that have become more advanced following colonization should make good use of the advantages that were gained through the sacrifices of their forebears. Striving to pursue an independent future is the only way to redeem history.

Many of those who criticized Ko did so because they hate colonialists in general — Japan in particular — and therefore cannot tolerate any praise for them. However, those people are quite busy paving the way for China to annex Taiwan, even though that means Taiwan once again will be colonized.

The flaws of traditional Chinese thinking require corrections by the younger generation and by new citizens. Judging by the Sunflower movement, perhaps the younger generation, who neither hate nor are nostalgic over what was gained and lost during colonialism, will be more

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confident in their national identity as Taiwanese, and thus be able to lead Taiwan beyond its historical burdens.

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