

The struggle over 'Taiwaneseness'

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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It is almost a historical irony that former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and former vice president Lien Chan (連戰) have both sparked debate with their — arguably mutually exclusive — attitudes toward the nation's history with China and Japan from 70 years ago.

While what underlies both historical narratives — underlining Taiwan's particular connections with the two nations — is an argument belonging to a past era, there are significant differences between their views on the present and future.

Lee and Lien have both brought up "Taiwan" as a community — an article in a Japanese magazine in Lee's case and Lien's speech during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) yesterday.

Lee separated Taiwan's political existence from that of China, adding that the Republic of China (ROC) Constitution contradicts existing circumstances.

He said he has confidence that younger Taiwanese can "break away from the old and revolutionize politics."

Lien, on the other hand, upheld a "Taiwanese consciousness" during his meeting in China, portraying it as the spirit of endurance and solidarity Taiwanese have cultivated through 100 years of foreign rule and hardships. However, Taiwanese consciousness "should not be equated to or used for secessionist [calls for] independence," he said.

Certainly, no argument other than common ancestry is needed for unificationists' assertion of Chineseness; the war against Japan was an effort by "all Chinese children," including Taiwanese, Lien said, in an apparent retort to Lee's comments.

Lien ties not only Taiwan's past but also its future to China, repeating the hackneyed rhetoric of cross-strait cooperation on trade and market development based on common Chineseness and the so-called "1992 consensus."

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Lee, unlike Lien, does not expect cooperation per se — even if it is with Japan — to boost the economy.

He said the point is innovation and new thinking — citing the example of the Internet of Things — and that it is the younger generation who hold the key.

Taiwan and Japan, Lee said, “have deep bonds,” but probably to his Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) detractors’ disappointment, Lee never said that Taiwanese “are” — note the tense — Japanese.

He said he and his brother fought as Japanese for their then-motherland 70 years ago; he did not say that “all Taiwanese” regard Japan as their motherland.

What Lee said was that there was no “war of resistance against Japan” in colonial Taiwan in the sense that there was a country-to-country war taking place in China from 1937 to 1945, not that there was absolutely no “anti-Japanese-rule activities” in Taiwan.

The real problem the KMT has with Lee and his claims does not lie in the historical fact that Taiwan was once part of the Japanese empire. The problem the party has is with disconnecting Taiwan from the ROC, or China’s “war of resistance” rhetoric, and thereby the epic story of a glorious fight against foreign nations as a whole in the name of the Chinese nation that has made the KMT and its ilk hysterical.

Naming Japan as people’s zuguo, (祖國, or motherland), even adding “70 years ago,” is not acceptable, for, as KMT Legislator Lin Yu-fang (林錫山) said zuguo indicates “where your ancestors lived and Lee’s ancestors came from China’s Fujian Province.”

Lien’s implied point is: “Insofar as Lee’s ancestors came from Fujian, China, his zuguo should be China, which should also be the case with other Taiwanese.”

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While nonagenarian Lee, nostalgia over Japanese rule notwithstanding, has no doubt about Taiwanese identity borne from the land and its history, and shared by young people, the KMT, represented by Lien or not, is trapped in a limbo formed by its anachronistic and inconsistent beliefs in an ROC without Taiwan's locally grown perspectives.

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