

When the leader of a pro-unification political party denounced students protesting a trade pact with Beijing in April last year, saying “you are all [expletive] offspring of Chinese,” he was unambiguously employing race as the primary mode of persuasion.

The angry ululation was unusual in that an appeal to race in Taiwan, unlike, say, the pulpit variety found in the US, typically takes the form of white noise: It contains many frequencies and is only mildly obtrusive and easily ignored — except around election time.

But the outburst revealed an extreme example of a pervasive tendency: At root, race informs all aspects of Taiwanese society, whether ethnicity, culture, business, government or religion.

There are a multitude of examples: It is shown in a multinational corporation declaring itself Chinese because it believes that in the 21st century race will somehow determine consumer choice; it is seen in art exhibitions and documentaries about “Chineseness,” where Han intellectuals glorify Han artists; it is heard in videos by Taiwanese musicians who essentialize the features of African Americans; it courses through a legal system that discriminates against Southeast Asians; it pervades an education system that exoticizes white people and where a teacher calls a student of mixed ancestry a “savage;” it is drilled into the minds of students in such a way that they grow up believing that their heritage can be traced back to a mythical emperor rather than being taught that the human species has a common descent.

Until the preoccupation with race is removed as being a valid public talking point, Taiwanese will always be anchored to a Chinese past that fetishizes the worship of blood, rather than a future that champions values that balance individual liberty with state coercion.

Before I get to the protester’s response, I want to suggest how the fixation with race hides in plain sight. It hides in plain sight because it goes under another, less politically embarrassing, name: ethnicity.

Ethnicity has become the acceptable way to talk about heritage, identity, culture, tradition and language because it has the benefit of avoiding race. And it is true that when people today talk about terms like “Chinese,” they do of course mean ethnicity.

But that is not all they mean and politicians and bureaucrats on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have renewed an effort (largely suspended since the 1940s) over the past decade to conjoin these two terms — Han with Chinese, race with ethnicity — until they become practically interchangeable.

The confusion is particularly apparent in the re-emergence and increased use of *zhonghua minzu* (中華民族) in public discourse. The phrase is protean because it can never be pinned down. But it can be parsed.

*Zhonghua minzu* has always been terminologically chaotic. This newspaper, for example, translates it variously as “people who are ethnic Chinese,” “ethnic Chinese,” “Chinese nation,” “Chinese people,” “Chinese by ethnicity,” “Chinese ethnic group” and, somewhat lazily, “Zhonghua people” and “Zhonghua minzu.” Little context, aside from the article the phrase is found in, is given as to why these translations or Romanizations of the phrase have been used.

Liang Qichao (梁啟超), a Chinese scholar and journalist, coined *zhonghua minzu* in 1902, when Taiwan was ruled by Japan, because he wanted to rally an increasingly fragmented empire around an emerging nation-state ruled by the Han-Chinese majority.

Liang initially used it as a synonym for the Han race (*Hanzu*, 漢族), but then rejected it in favor of a framework that “blends different races” into a unified polity.

Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) picked up on the earlier use of Liang’s neologism, stating after the fall of the Qing Dynasty that “Chinese people are entirely Han people: sharing a common bloodline, language, religion and customs, entirely a single *minzu* [民族, nation, nationality, ethnic group, race],” a concept endorsed by Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and, later, the nationalists in Taiwan.

(Recall, incidentally, that Sun’s portrait hangs in most schools and government buildings in Taiwan and his racial nationalism, in the form of the “Three Principles of the People,” is taught to every student. He continues to be celebrated by many in Taiwan as the “father of the nation.”)

The nationalist's mono-minzu, as Thomas Mullaney writes in his excellent *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, was opposed by the communists, who grounded it in a minzu concept similar to Liang's later formulation, in "notions of plurality and diversity," changing the language of race — discussion of which was abolished in China after 1949 — into that of ethnicity.

Today, these different conceptual notions have merged in that most powerful of symbols: the Yellow Emperor and his zhonghua minzu descendants, a foundation propped up by the assumption that Peking Man evolved separately from the rest of humanity.

So it should come as no surprise that when writing about Taiwan, people call it Chinese — a truism that has led to the academic writing of texts such as Melissa Brown's *Is Taiwan Chinese?* — a question that Hsueh Hua-yuan (許嘉元), Tai Pao-tsun (戴寶村) and Chow Mei-li (周梅利) answered in *Taiwan is not Chinese! A History of Taiwanese Nationalism*.

Take the president as a barometer of its usage. When he holds a commemorative ceremony and talks about the Yellow Emperor as the ancestor of the zhonghua minzu, he is appealing to descent, to race; when he makes paternalistic comments to Aborigines that they need to "adjust their mentality" so that they can become "a human being, a citizen," he recalls the mythological Huaxia's (華夏) project of civilizing the barbarians during the Xia Dynasty. When he talks about a "Chinese nation," what he means is "a Chinese nation ruled by the Han;" when he says "in light of our common Chinese heritage," he means "in light of our common Han heritage."

Other examples are easy to find. When a veteran politician declares his candidacy for president, he stresses ancestry — the zhonghua minzu as descendants of Yan and Huang emperors (軒黃) — as the means by which he will ensure social equality, seemingly unaware that the exclusionary ideals of the former contradict the inclusive principles of the latter. When a former president says that Taiwan fought with the Japanese during World War II, he is vilified as a "traitor to the Han people;" when the mayor of Taipei travels to a forum in Shanghai, he says that the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are "one family."

Notice what is said. Does the mayor mean the family of humankind or the Han family?

For academics, journalists and a host of other public figures and voters, the most salient commonality between China and Taiwan, one that steers public policy, is that they are a family, a zhonghua minzu, a racial category disguised as ethnicity.

When they frame the discussion in this way, should they not be asked why they limit their discussion of Taiwan's future to descent?

Should they not be told that zhonghua minzu narrows the focus in such a way that it hinders Taiwan's ability to address global issues of importance such as climate change, income inequality and resource depletion, because the conversation is framed from a racial perspective rather than as a species-wide problem?

Under this way of thinking, to say that Taiwan's president worships China, as the opposition consistently claims, or links talk of zhonghua minzu with unification, is only partially accurate and confuses the issue.

The president is not primarily concerned with a piece of property across the Taiwan Strait. His primary concern is shoring up the zhonghua minzu, the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.

The phrase and its underlying assumptions have become so entrenched that the mayor does not criticize the "one family" formula as deep-seated racism, but falls back on old, though obviously valid, tropes about China's missiles pointed at Taiwan. Would your brother behave like this? The opposition, in consistently getting it wrong, is, at best, an unwitting accomplice; at worst, sympathetic to the racial undertones.

So what would the students protesting a trade pact with China say about zhonghua minzu?

They would probably say that appealing to this kind of rhetoric does not belong in a conversation about Taiwan's future. They would probably say, as they did to the Han-centric outburst, that "we are not Chinese, we are Taiwanese," clearly downplaying any notion of race

because race is incompatible with democracy, plurality, freedom of speech and other evolving institutions that help to make society more equal.

Nor does the under-40 generation think that race and ethnicity belong in a conversation about Taiwan's past. That is one of the reasons why high-school students protested against revisions to the curriculum that propose the historical period when Taiwan's non-Aboriginal settlers first arrived be changed from the "Age of global competition" to "Han Chinese come to Taiwan and the age of global competition" because it removes race and its associations from the equation.

When the Ministry of Education changes the wording from "Qing Empire" (清朝) to "Qing Courts" (清廷), the students are under no illusion that it is done out of the lingering grudge a certain proportion of Han-Taiwanese have towards the Manchu rulers.

If Taiwanese are to see themselves as a nation, a national discussion has to be made about race and a recognition must be made that much of the current debate about whether or not Taiwan is a part of China or is Chinese is an avoidance of this deeper, lingering issue.

Do Taiwanese place democracy at the pinnacle of their system of values, or do they fetishize a mythical emperor? Do Taiwanese primarily value the rule of law, or an exclusive set of laws for the zhonghua minzu?

You cannot have it both ways. You cannot base your identity on race and then go along thinking that the values of freedom and plurality will flourish within that system.

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