

No such thing as ‘Chinese people’

Written by Lee Hsiao-feng 李曉峰

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If democratic Taiwan and authoritarian China were united, Taiwan's democracy would disappear, which would make it more difficult for authoritarian China to become a democratic nation. In other words, the meeting between President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) hurt Taiwan and was of no benefit to China.

While Beijing often shoves the “one China” slogan down Taiwan's throat, Xi did not bring it up during the meeting. Instead, he stressed that the two sides both “belong to the same people.” Ma, on the other hand, eagerly brought up the “one China” framework to help his counterpart apply it to Taiwan.

Xi kept talking about the cross-strait family relationship and “one people,” but the fact is that there are more than 60 different ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China, so how can adding Taiwan to the mix result in one people? What kind of arithmetic is that?

Of course their — the same applies to the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) — talk about belonging to “the same people” means belonging to the Zhonghua minzu (Chinese ethnic group, 中華民族). However, this is a political term — an imaginary construct — and not a scientific term based on empirical knowledge.

In ethnography, ethnology and other ethnic studies, there is no such thing as a “Chinese people.” This term, which does not stand up to academic scrutiny, was constructed at about the time of the founding of the Republic of China. About 100 years later, it seems to have become the magic formula that the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party are using to bring about a united China, as it is being used to suppress all ethnic groups and areas that want political independence and autonomy: Anyone who wants independence is accused of destroying the “Chinese people.”

In what way is this different from the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that Imperial Japan wanted all Asian countries to accept during World War II lest they be attacked for destroying the peace?

In order to identify with this empty phrase, Taiwan would have to sacrifice its status as an

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independent, autonomous democracy. That would really be the most idiotic decision imaginable.

If China wants to use the concept "Chinese people" to unify all ethnic groups in China, that is its own problem. Taiwan has no obligation to join them in constructing this political fairy tale.

At the meeting with Xi, Ma said that Taipei and Beijing should work together to rejuvenate China. Taiwan should indeed build friendly relations with China, ideally by exchanging ambassadors, but Taiwan is under no obligation to "rejuvenate China." It is like the US and the UK: while the two countries work closely together in the international community, the US would never get the preposterous idea of saying that the two are working together to rejuvenate Great Britain.

Ma brought up the so-called "1992 consensus" in the meeting because he wanted to ingratiate himself with Xi and stress the so-called "one China" principle. At home, Ma's "1992 consensus" means "one China, different interpretations," but when he met with the mighty Xi, the "different interpretations" part somehow disappeared, swallowed down by Ma. He might be a puppet president, but does he have to be a coward, too?

Ma seems to have forgotten what he said during the 1992 talks in Hong Kong when he was still vice chairman of the Mainland Affairs Commission: "The Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits knows very well that the two sides have nothing in common when it comes to the interpretation of 'one China.'"

At the time, he also criticized China for being "lacking in sincerity" and submitting Taiwan to political blackmail with its insistence on "one China." Today, he is helping the enemy with its political blackmail.

The key reason why Taiwan cannot be annexed by China is the difference between democracy and autocracy. It has nothing to do with bloodline or ancestry. What Ma and Xi should have talked about is democracy, not ethnicity. Making belonging to a particular ethnic group the only concern will only bring an end to Taiwan's democracy and destroy all hope for the democratization of China.

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