

Ma Ying-jeou's accidental legacy

Written by Bret Hinsch
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As President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) eight years in office draw to a close, the time has come to reflect on the legacy that he leaves behind. Yet strangely, Ma has declared Republic of China (ROC) citizens unqualified to judge his performance.

Faced with a long series of polls showing dissatisfaction with his policies, he always brushed aside his lack of popular support as mere miscommunication. If only he could explain things properly, surely everyone would understand that he has done a superb job.

Ma's peculiar understanding of his role explains why he refuses to hold himself accountable to voters. Even though Taiwanese elected him, he never considered representing Taiwanese to be his primary duty. Instead he used the power of the presidency to pursue a far grander mission — the unification of Taiwan and China.

If the electorate lacks the authority to judge his performance, then who can? Ma has declared that only "history" can properly assess his legacy.

So how do historians plan to go about determining Ma's legacy? The most obvious approach is to look back at what he wanted to achieve, and then determine whether he succeeded.

When Ma ran for president, above all, he emphasized that he would stimulate the economy. His so-called "6-3-3" agenda made three major promises to Taiwanese: 6 percent annual economic growth; per capita GDP of US\$30,000; and an unemployment rate of less than 3 percent. In retrospect, these wild promises seem laughably unrealistic.

Since Ma's election, Taiwan's economic performance has fallen behind the other Asian Tigers. In the past decade, Seoul has become an Asian Manhattan, while Taipei remains stuck somewhere between Tokyo and Bangkok.

As for his other main campaign promise, Ma declared that he would resolve cross-strait tensions. However, his true ambitions far exceeded what he dared divulge to voters. In fact, Ma

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daydreamed that he would win the Nobel Peace Prize by uniting Taiwan with China.

Since his election, he has made no secret about this plan. Ma wants unification, he wants it soon and he has used every opportunity to further this goal.

As Ma lacks an instinctive empathy for democracy, he never bothered to build a popular consensus for his pro-unification policies. Ma came of age under a Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) dictatorship and the fundamental spirit of democracy has always eluded him. He might observe constitutional formalities, yet his psychology seems much closer to an emperor than a president.

When it became clear that Taiwanese were drifting away from China, Ma panicked and arranged a last-minute meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平). Ma and Xi cooperated to try to tilt the “status quo” toward inexorable unification before the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed power.

In the end, reality has turned out far different than Ma's daydreams. Not only is he unlikely to win a Nobel prize, but his hardline tactics backfired. Instead of forcing unification, he ignited panic. People began to fear that Taiwan would soon end up like Hong Kong, ruled by puppets of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

So if a historian judges Ma's legacy based on whether or not he carried out his campaign promises, the verdict is clearly negative. His extravagant promises about rapid economic growth came to nothing, while support for unification plummeted during his tenure in office.

Fewer Taiwanese now consider themselves Chinese. Twice in Ma's second term, young people took to the streets in protest. Ma's pro-unification agenda has been a fiasco.

Nevertheless, even though Ma failed to achieve his key objectives, he has still earned an important place in the history books. Unexpectedly, Ma leaves behind a legacy so consequential that future academics are likely to judge his term in office a major turning point in Taiwanese history. Although he failed to accomplish his intended goals, he nevertheless

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transformed Taiwan's politics and society.

Ma's accidental legacy consists of three parts.

First, he made the mistake of pressing for rapid integration with China without first building a public consensus. When Ma repeatedly carried out secret negotiations with the CCP, the public responded with alarm. Ironically, because he pushed hard for a quick merger with China, inciting such a forceful backlash, he is likely to go down in history as the president who killed peaceful unification.

Second, Ma helped destroy the KMT. When he took the helm of his party, the KMT was riding high. However, by promoting unification without public support and conducting relations with China inside a black box without any oversight, he alienated the electorate.

Eight years ago, voters turned to Ma expecting moderate and prudent government. They were shocked to discover that they had elected a radical. Although the voters took out their anger on the KMT's hapless presidential candidate and party chairman, Eric Chu (吳敦義), the real object of their wrath was Ma. His ideological extremism has sent the KMT into a death spiral, which is likely to end in the party's destruction.

Third, Ma has fundamentally altered the way Taiwanese understand themselves. He pushed so hard for unification that he forced people to ponder their national identity.

In response, Taiwanese have rejected Chinese nationalism as espoused by the KMT, and antiquated village life advocated by the DPP under former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁).

Instead, led by the nation's younger generation, they have opted for a third path.

The new "Taiwaneseness" is deliberately cosmopolitan, tolerant, inclusive, modern and progressive. Young people feel uncomfortable when their elders distinguish between speakers

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of Hoklo — (commonly known as Taiwanese) — and Mainlanders, Hakkas and Aborigines. Instead they see all ROC citizens as equal Taiwanese.

In large part, this new sense of identity emerged in reaction to Ma's persistent advocacy of Chinese nationalism. So, ironically, Ma deserves credit as the unintentional fountainhead of a new Taiwanese national identity.

Historians are likely to consider Ma's term an important turning point, not for what he tried to accomplish, but for the unintended legacy that emerged from his failures.

Ultimately, Ma is likely to be remembered as a tragic figure. He began his term in office with the enthusiastic support of an electorate won over by his good looks and educational credentials.

The story that followed could have been written by Sophocles. Like the protagonist of a Greek tragedy, Ma began to consider himself almost godlike and disregarded the citizens who had supported him. By pushing aside democratic norms to pursue his own agenda, he wrecked unification, the KMT and the remnants of Taiwan's Chinese identity.

In the end, Ma's hubris not only led to his own failure, but caused him to obliterate everything that he values.

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