

One of the essences of art is the attachment of importance to the authenticity of expression. As such, the question arises as to exactly what level of intimidation and pressure might have been applied to force a dedicated artist such as Taiwanese director-actor Leon Dai (戴立忍) to forgo his beliefs — having participated in and supported various social movements in Taiwan — and issue a 3,000-word statement on Friday last week distancing him from his past actions.

Accused by Chinese netizens of supporting “Taiwanese independence” because of his participation in the Sunflower movement and other social campaigns, Dai, booted from the production of a Chinese film directed by Chinese actress Zhao Wei (赵薇) for his “vague” political positions, was also compelled to stress in the statement that he has “never supported Taiwanese independence” and that he is of the “Zhonghua minzu [Chinese ethnic group, 中华民族] and Yanhuang zisun [descendants of emperors Yan and Huang, 炎黄子孙].”

The Dai incident is certainly not an isolated case, but merely the latest addition to the ever-growing list of Taiwanese artists succumbing to Chinese netizens’ populism.

The use of this sort of populism is becoming a frequent occurrence, in which Taiwanese artists with careers in China instantly become the target of criticism from Chinese netizens, who heckle them to “go back to Taiwan and do not set foot in China again,” or are arbitrarily labeled as supporters of Taiwanese independence if they fail to call China “the interior” (内地) — a loaded term implying that China’s borders encompass Taiwan — or partake in online campaigns echoing Chinese nationalist sentiment.

Granted, this kind of vitriol and cyberbullying from Chinese netizens is nothing new. However, it stands in sharp contrast to the Taiwanese public, which, by comparison, has been very accepting of Chinese actors, neither rejecting them nor demanding that they take a certain political stance. As a matter of fact, Zhao rose to stardom because of her role in a Taiwanese drama.

The difference, which demonstrates the Taiwanese public’s democratic maturity and disposition, further showcases just how irrational and extremely narrow-minded Chinese authorities are as a whole in terms of their definition of so-called “supporters of Taiwanese independence,” as well as their peremptory selves, which do not understand that freedom of artistic expression and creativity should not be censored for political reasons.

Artistic compromise and China

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While this incident has no doubt infuriated many Taiwanese, there is perhaps a silver lining amid the frustration: Rather than brushing off and dismissing the issue, the government, the entertainment industry and the Taiwanese public have been prompted to do some soul-searching about the circumstances that contributed to the predicament the nation's artists face.

There is no denying that China offers a greater earnings potential, as well as a boost in popularity for Taiwanese performers, and stopping such cross-strait cultural exchanges would be impractical and unlikely.

However, while Taiwanese celebrities with careers in China have no control over Chinese netizens, there are measures the Taiwanese government can take.

What are the difficulties Taiwanese production companies face in their home market? What opportunities are lacking for performers in Taiwan? Should the government increase funding for locally produced TV programs and films?

These are questions the government must answer to map out policies which would provide concrete improvements for the nation's entertainment industry, allowing actors to develop their careers more fully without feeling the need to be politically correct in regards to China or being compelled to compromise their beliefs.

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