

Taiwanese must show self-respect

Written by Jerome Keating

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As a mid-sized nation, Taiwan has its normal share of issues, challenges and troubles. However, recent affairs have once again demonstrated that is not all; Taiwan has the additional challenge of gaining and maintaining status among other nations; and herein lies the rub for its citizens.

China, of course, continually tries to block Taiwan from direct interaction with other nations. And albeit primarily for economic gain, those nations play along with China's efforts. As a result, they find themselves forced to jump through a different set of hoops in order to include Taiwan in their trade and travel. It is a strange game and one that has gone on for decades.

However, change appears to be in the winds, as evidenced by the following: First, the weeks-long brouhaha over the congratulatory telephone call made by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to US president-elect Donald Trump. Then the even more surprising follow-up of Trump saying that he might reconsider the US' "one China" policy, nebulous as it is. With such suggestive vagaries, the question of "what next?" becomes evident.

Trump, for sure, is unpredictable; nonetheless, what the telephone call did in fact do was give the people of Taiwan some respect, as it again brought attention to Taiwan's problem. It also forced all other nations to ask the basic question: "Why should we put up with such idiocy, especially when China's economic leverage is starting to wane."

That question is an issue that those nations must face up to. However, Taiwan faces different questions. What degree of self-respect do Taiwanese have and what should they require from the world? And finally, how does their sense of national identity tie in with this respect?

In a half-joking way, Taiwanese might sometimes relate to the catchphrase of comedian Rodney Dangerfield: "I just don't get no respect." In this, there is a certain truth, as Taiwan must often enter international organizations through the back door.

However, from a different and more internal perspective, it is time for Taiwanese to be proactive in standing up for themselves. They need to take to heart the statement made by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his novel *Humiliated and Insulted*: "If you want to be respected by

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others, the great thing is to respect yourself. Only by that, only by self-respect will you compel others to respect you." That is what Taiwanese must understand.

Taiwanese might not control what others think about them, but they can control what they think about themselves. For this reason, the question that all Taiwanese must ask is: "Do we respect ourselves as a nation, even if we are miscast as an orphan child who must sometimes use the back entrance in international affairs?"

In answering this question, Taiwanese clearly need to distinguish how they feel about themselves from what others feel about them, especially when other nations are coerced by gambits of trade to pretend to ignore Taiwan. Thus, Taiwanese must first develop and promote a clearer, personal understanding of their history. They must see how they rose through numerous past colonial situations to achieve Taiwan's present-day democracy and economic power. This sense of history and identity of theirs presents an awesome awareness that Taiwanese must personally take charge of. No other nation will do that for them.

Taiwanese must also take charge of how to evaluate their status in relation to the status of other nations. They must not forget that they are a mid-sized nation with a population larger than 75 percent of the nations in the UN and a GDP in the top 15 percent of nations in the world. This personal perspective is one that Taiwanese can continue to take charge of and recognize.

To point out how Taiwanese can take charge of this perspective, a few sample comparisons are in order. Start with two well-known nations, one European and one in the Pacific. Both of these are much smaller in population than Taiwan, but each is well known, and each is an island nation. These two have a distinct sense of national pride, despite their small populations; they are Ireland and New Zealand.

Population-wise, Taiwan is three to four times larger than either. Economically, Ireland was a Celtic tiger; Taiwan was an Asian tiger. In trade, Taiwan and New Zealand have a robust relationship. However, in market value, Taiwan is larger than either, both in GDP and purchasing power parity (PPP), but that does not keep either of the two from having a distinct sense of personal respect. One does not have to ask an Irishman or a New Zealander if they are proud of their country. It is inbred. Taiwanese must promote and project the same to the world.

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A different perspective can be gained from tourism. Taiwan recently received its 10 millionth tourist for this year. Ten million is a surprising amount for a nation that in the eyes of many is kept in the shadows by China. It is equivalent to nearly half the population of mid-sized Taiwan and a number that will still increase before the end of the year. Yes, Taiwan is probably more popular than many here might realize, and this despite China's efforts to "punish" Taiwan by restricting its citizens from coming here.

Contrast that popularity with other popular tourist destinations, such as the Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. They are all well known as tourist destinations and countries with a unique personal sense of pride and identity.

Again, mid-sized Taiwan's population is larger than the combined total of any three of these, or even four if Iceland is included. And again, using figures from the IMF World Economic Outlook October 2016, Taiwan's GDP and PPP are larger than the GDP of any of the Scandinavian countries.

"If you want to be respected by others, the great thing is to respect yourself." As a mid-sized nation, Taiwan must recognize its worth and contributions to the world. It has a popularity, hidden beauty and worth that it often does not realize.

If "smaller" countries such as those mentioned have their inbred self-respect, Taiwan should have it as well, but it must come from within. Taiwan has come a long way and has a lot going for it; it is time for all to acknowledge this.

Taiwanese are great travelers, and so as they travel and enjoy other lands, they should also let others know that for them, there is still no place like home. Their sense of national pride can be as great as that of any Irishman, New Zealander or Scandinavian.

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