

The sacred and profane in Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating
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The Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) commemoration of the July 7, 1937, Marco Polo Bridge Incident once again highlights the party's schizophrenic personality, as well as the doublespeak that such identification constantly creates for party members.

At heart, the KMT remains a party that cannot decide where to find its home and soul. It struggles to balance past and present self-images amid other conflicting perceptions of 21st-century reality. Each different perception has what it considers most sacred in the world. And so to sustain identity, the KMT must resort to its mixed discourse.

There are some basic questions that the KMT must answer:

Where does it really belong in these changing times? Which of the many past, imagined communities that it participated in does it most identify with? What is most sacred in the mind of each of these communities? To attempt a balance, such questions can only be answered with doublespeak.

Consider that in a postmodern world, it is not surprising to see that any imagined community as a nation would have its own sense of the sacred, a term popularized by the religious historian Mircea Eliade in his classic work, *The Sacred and the Profane*. The ironic nature of man allows that while some might deny the religious sense of sacred and profane, the terms can still be co-opted into another realm even if it is secular.

Thus, even if some people deny traditional religious hierophanies, the human mind will seek the sense of a righteous center for its paradigmatic perception of the universe. Just as men acknowledge that there is honor among thieves, so they will always find the distinguishing sense of the sacred even in the secular.

This sense of the sacred is what creates the hierarchy in any developing imagined community. Whether our communities of shared affinity are religious, cultural, national or even athletic, each maintains its own sense of an imagined sacred and profane. Each community determines a place where one can be truly alive and at the center of the world as it was meant to be.

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What then has this to do with China, Taiwan and the KMT? It is in their sense of the sacred that the vast differences in the created imagined communities of these three are found.

This sense of the sacred explains each one's priority of relevance and so underlies the constant created turmoil of identity that the declining KMT finds itself involved.

For example, as regards the question of the spiritual and the secular, the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) uses the imagined community of its ideology to solve this problem by prioritizing its right to control the naming of leadership of all spiritual communities. This is most evident as it seeks to control the leadership of religion by appointing religious leaders whether they are Catholic bishops or successors of the Dalai Lama.

Despite claims to the contrary, identification with Marxist unity and its sacred heritage have disappeared from China. Beijing has shifted to an oligarchy of once hated self-serving capitalists. Now their primary end is to keep leadership positions by family privilege and hierarchy. To keep Tibetans and Mongolians restricted, the prevailing tradition links to a sacred Zhonghua minzu [Chinese ethnic group 中华民族], one that ironically former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) likes to tout.

Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) is revered in China not because he advocated democracy, but because he sought to end the dynastic rule of the Manchus who created that nation's borders and ruled it under their own Manchu concept of unity.

In Taiwan, religion is kept separate from government. This allows differing developments of sacred and fosters a relationship where Taiwanese identity can exist alongside any religion. Taiwan's identity and sense of the sacred is actually found in its identification with democracy and self-determination.

Here Taiwan's historical development comes into play. In Taiwan's anti-colonial imagined community, it has been fortunate. Each generation has exemplified the words of Martinique-born revolutionary Franz Fanon in his work *The Wretched of the Earth*.

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“Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity,” Fanon said.

Taiwan’s fortune is that it has had successive generations that have been able to discover their distinguishing mission and fulfill it. They have answered this call even though the opacity in which they dwelt is more that from the perspective standpoint of the world outside Taiwan than within it.

A quick look at Taiwan’s history reveals how at crucial times from the 228 Incident on successive generations have stood up to their dictatorial persecutors and created their own sense of the sacred. Among these, outstanding events are the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident with its revealing trials, the post-martial law Wild Lily Student Movement and the Sunflower movement.

In each, a different generation has sought its mission and moved the nation farther along the road to democracy.

Democracy has become a sacred aspect of Taiwan’s discourse and part of the KMT’s problem as it seeks a dialogue with Chinese leaders.

The KMT is torn. It cannot forget its belief in the sacredness of the land it was driven from; its heart remains there. Yet, it pledges allegiance to Sun and a conflicting claim to democracy.

More than a century after Sun’s revolution, Hong Kong has exposed Beijing’s unwillingness to deal with democracy despite its promise to honor it in 20 years.

However, KMT leaders have not had the courage to call China out on this.

Instead they seek other means of dialogue by which they can somehow come home and fit

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under a false notion of the sacredness of the Chinese Politburo. The KMT would rather seek a lower place in the sacred ranks of Beijing than live in a free democracy.

This identification problem is found in the KMT's discourse on the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. As a government in exile and one that has been voted out by Taiwanese, the KMT still seeks the sacredness of Zhonghua minzu. In this, it must turn a blind eye to the Chinese Communist Party's separate interpretation of its key role in the Sino-Japanese War, as well as how China's later resumed Civil War ended.

For Taiwanese, the struggle for democracy is its sense of the sacred. For Beijing, democracy only represents the chaos of the profane. This major difference places the KMT at odds with the developing generations of Taiwanese. It cannot decide which sense of the sacred to choose.

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