

Let Taiwan finally just be Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating
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What does “desinicization” mean and what would it take to desinicize Taiwan? If Taiwan were desinicized, what would be left? Would that allow Taiwan to finally be Taiwan?

These and many other questions flood the mind after American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Chairman James Moriarty opened an old can of worms with comments made during his visit to Taiwan.

Moriarty, who was quoted by an unknown legislator as being worried about desinicization problems in Taiwan’s transitional justice, soon found himself backtracking and having to qualify what he had said.

With those words, he resurrected the many nomenclature and identity issues that the US created with its on-again, off-again “strategic ambiguity” practice regarding Taiwan.

Let us start with the nomenclature problems. Many call the democratic nation Taiwan, but in its Constitution, it is officially the Republic of China (ROC). The ROC, of course, lost its place in the UN when the followers of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣經國) left in 1971 before they were voted out.

The AIT was formed in 1979, when the US moved its embassy from Taipei to Beijing. It is purposely called the American Institute in Taiwan, not in the ROC. How does this relate to the desinicization of which Moriarty spoke?

Consider the original inhabitants of Taiwan, of whom 16 tribes are recognized. Some of these Aborigines are credited with developing and spreading the linguistic and DNA-related Austronesian “empire” that extends from Madagascar to Easter Island and from Taiwan down to New Zealand. This influence certainly could be called the Taiwanization of the Pacific.

On the other hand, the earliest colonial powers that ruled Taiwan were the Dutch and Spanish in the early 17th century. The Dutch in 1643 drove out the Spanish, but in 1662, they were replaced by Cheng Cheng-kung (鄭經), also known as Koxinga, and his Ming loyalists who were

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fleeing the conquering Manchu in China. Should Koxinga then be credited with de-europeanizing Taiwan and beginning its sinification?

Koxinga died the same year that he defeated the Dutch and, much to the chagrin of his followers, they were pursued by the Manchus and Shi Lang (施琅), who captured Penghu and brought them back to the continent in 1683.

Since Koxinga's followers were replaced by the Manchu and the Han Green Standard Army defectors who joined their ranks, would this be considered a desinicization of Taiwan and the beginning of its manchurianization? One could hardly consider Manchu banner rule an extension of sinicization.

The Manchu Qing controlled the western half of the island originally with the purpose of keeping any Chinese loyalists from returning. Much later they gave the area to Japan "in perpetuity" with the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki. Thus, Taiwan became Japan's model colony and Japan became the first nation to control the whole island.

The Japanese naturally set about nipponizing the island.

However, in 1945, Japan lost World War II and had to give up Taiwan by signing the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which came into effect in 1952. However, this treaty never said to whom the island should be given, leaving the door open for it to be given to the Taiwanese in the spirit of self-rule fostered by the UN.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) began coming to Taiwan in 1945 as an occupying power on behalf of the US. After they lost the Chinese Civil War to the communists in 1949, they came in force since they had nowhere else to go.

The KMT immediately set about denipponizing Taiwan and forcing the people to learn Mandarin in place not only of Japanese, but also of Hoklo and Hakka.

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Is this the sinicization of Taiwan that Moriarty is worried about losing? If so, does this mean that he supported the White Terror and the one-party state martial law that the KMT imposed for 38 years?

Or is this a clue that the legislator who reported the alleged statements that Moriarty backtracked on was perhaps a KMT legislator, desperate to preserve some influence of his party after they were heavily defeated in Taiwan's past two elections?

These are unanswered questions.

Regardless, all this opens an additional can of worms regarding the US' involvement with Taiwan. The US did support the KMT and its ROC until 1979, when it moved its embassy from Taipei to Beijing. That was the year the AIT was formed.

The Shanghai Communiqué from 1972 and subsequent communiqués of 1979 and 1982 created the conflicting distinction between the People Republic of China's "one China" principle and the US' "one China" policy, in which it recognizes — but does not accept — China's claim to Taiwan. These also spawned the Taiwan (not ROC) Relations Act in 1979 and the Six Assurances of 1982.

It would be good for all to acknowledge that the one clear point in all this verbiage is that the official US position, and presumably therefore Moriarty's and the AIT's, is that the US is undecided on Taiwan.

Strange as that might seem, 70 years after the end of World War II and all that has passed with the US' on-again, off-again support of the ROC/Taiwan, the US, for strategic ambiguity purposes, remains undecided.

Forget that the ROC, also known as Taiwan, is now a fully fledged democracy, something that the US normally promotes. Forget that Taiwan is a mid-sized nation that is larger in population than 70 percent of the nations in the UN and economically more viable than 80 to 90 percent of those nations, and forget that the San Francisco Peace Treaty never stated to whom Japan

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should give Taiwan, but only that it would surrender it. The US' position remains undecided.

Does this mean that the door is open for Taiwanese to finally be Taiwanese? Or is Moriarty expressing different concerns with his desinicization comments?

Taiwanese should be reminded of the words of the 19th-century US essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who pursued an ideal of real US thought in his 1837 American Scholar address. When Emerson gave the address it was more than 50 years after the nation's Revolutionary War, which was won in 1783.

With the opening lines "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands draws to a close" and with closing lines like "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," Emerson was saying that Americans needed to develop their own identity and take control of their destiny.

"We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds," he said.

Was Moriarty advocating for or against such ideas for Taiwan? Is the US finally recognizing that in addition to there being Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, there are also Taiwanese on the Taiwan side?

Perhaps it is time to officially desinicize Taiwan and let Taiwan be Taiwan.

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