

China targeting young Taiwanese

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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“Natural independence” is a term often used to describe young Taiwanese, particularly those born after the lifting of martial law in 1987, who harbor a strong Taiwanese national identity.

The term was coined by former Democratic Progressive Party legislator Lin Cho-shui (林錫山), who, in a series of articles published in 2014 titled “The Natural Independence of the Younger Generation,” said that unlike elderly Taiwanese who formed their ideas of independence after an intellectual struggle against the Chinese Nationalist Party’s (KMT) China-centric brainwashing, young people are growing up in a democracy and have naturally come to identify themselves with Taiwan.

China’s Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson Ma Xiaoguang (馬曉光) on April 25 said that there is no such thing as “natural independence” in Taiwan, only “artificial independence,” as he reiterated his office’s stance that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait “belong to the same Chinese ethnic group.”

While China might in public refuse to acknowledge the existence of Taiwan’s naturally independent generation, it must surely have taken notice of the trend, particularly in the wake of the 2014 Sunflower movement, during which young people swarmed the streets in a show of resistance against China-leaning and surreptitious policymaking.

Beijing has since recalibrated its “united front” tactics to emphasize engagement with what it calls the “three middles and the youth” — residents of central and southern Taiwan, middle and low-income families, small and medium-sized enterprises, and young people — and the “one generation and one stratum” — the younger generation and ordinary Taiwanese.

However, it appears that Beijing has decided to nip the problem in the bud by attempting to stop Taiwan’s youngest generations from also becoming naturally independent, and therefore developing into a mainstream force.

How does Beijing spread its “one ethnic group” concept and pro-unification stance to Taiwanese children? Simple: by engaging teachers at elementary and junior-high schools.

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Taiwanese teachers and students have made a number of high-profile visits to China, including a delegation led by then-Secondary and Elementary-School Principals Association of the Republic of China director-general Weng Ching-tsai (翁正德) to Beijing late last year, shortly after the Chinese Communist Party concluded its 19th National Congress, as well as various summer youth camps.

Meanwhile, schools in China also send delegations to Taiwan for reciprocal visits, which they use as a pretense to send Chinese officials to Taiwanese elementary-school campuses.

According to media reports, some of the papers written by students after their visits to China included praise for Chinese culture and admiration of China's economy.

No one is against healthy cross-strait exchanges that help promote mutual understanding and improve Taiwan's international competitiveness. However, when one party harbors ill political intentions, it is a different story.

Via these frequent engagements with Taiwanese teachers, it is obvious that Beijing wishes to instill "China's greatness" in Taiwanese children in a bid to further its unification goal.

An element of Beijing's "united front" tactics involves assimilating Taiwanese teenagers and children into "the Chinese dream" and preventing them from fostering sentiments in favor of Taiwanese independence.

This begs the questions: What are the government's countermeasures to guard Taiwan's educational institutions? When will this be declared a national security issue?

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