

Of all the Cabinet agencies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is perhaps the one most overshadowed by the nation's long-existing national identity struggle of Taiwan versus the Republic of China (ROC), regardless of which party is in power.

It is not difficult to understand why.

The nation's ties with some of its 18 remaining diplomatic allies were formed when the ROC was still ruling China and long before the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) retreated to Taiwan, its "temporary base," in 1949.

Therefore, as much as some Taiwanese hate to admit it, several nations the government calls its formal diplomatic allies — such as Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Vatican — established their relations with the ROC, not Taiwan.

That is why, while some of President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) Cabinet members have managed to tactically avoid references to the ROC in their day-to-day business, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cannot afford the luxury and has to continue using the ROC in its formal engagements.

However, how to address the nation is not the only dilemma the national identity struggle has caused the ministry.

Another major challenge is whether the ministry should put Taiwanese culture or Chinese culture — one of the important legacies of the ROC — at the forefront, a decision that has a more profound impact than some might think.

Within the ministry on Ketagalan Boulevard in Taipei, some meeting rooms and hallways are adorned with Chinese landscape paintings.

Classical Chinese elements are also present in some of the ministry's gifts to foreign dignitaries.

These things might seem trivial, but they could send a dangerous and misleading message to foreign guests that Taiwanese still think they are best represented by Chinese culture, despite the diverse cultures in Taiwan, and that the nation is culturally inseparable from China.

Such perceptions could weaken and undermine the ministry's rejection in the international arena of Beijing's "one China" framework and its claim that Taiwan is part of its territory, adding to the nation's already dire international predicament.

Fortunately, people have started to notice the problem, thanks to a growing realization that for Taiwan to gain full independence from China, it ought to, first and foremost, attach greater importance to local culture, rather than clinging to the illusion instilled in them by the KMT that Taiwanese are the proud inheritors of the legacy of thousands of years of Chinese history.

Minster of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳敦義), who took over the ministry in February, made it a policy goal in his first 100 days in office to introduce new gifts for dignitaries that better epitomize Taiwanese culture.

That the ministry chose to mark the 100th day of Wu's inauguration on Tuesday with the unveiling of seven of the new "Taiwanese" gifts, as well as redecorating the hallway of the main floor where ministry officials receive foreign guests with works by Taiwanese artists, serves as further evidence that such reinvention is to be continued by the ministry.

As Wu's policy adviser, Kate Hung (洪慈慈), told the media at Tuesday's ceremony that the essence of diplomacy is introducing the nation to the world and offering outsiders a better understanding of its culture.

Nearly 70 years have passed since the ROC and the brutal KMT regime were forced on Taiwanese — it is about time to move on from the colonizer's culture and to start telling Taiwan's own stories.

MOFA should speak for Taiwan

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