

“When I hear the word ‘culture,’ that’s when I reach for my revolver.” So goes the mistranslated and often misattributed line from German playwright Hanna Johst’s *Schlageter*.

Although Hermann Goering might not have said it, it does fit his character or that of any dedicated, hardline pragmatist wary of being manipulated by “fancy words.”

In parody, therefore, Taiwanese might consider their own adapted version. It could be something like: “When I hear the words ‘*Zhonghua minzu* (中華民族, Chinese nation),’ that’s when I reach for my revolver.”

If there has ever been in recent times a more manipulative phrase bandied about by those in power or those wanting power, that phrase is “*Zhonghua minzu*.”

The phrase is used in present-day China to justify the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) one-party state rule over Han Chinese, Tibetans, Mongols, Uighurs, Manchus and many others. However, its roots date back to the Manchus and the Qing Dynasty.

In 1644, once the Manchus were allowed in through the Shanhai Pass to help quell Li Zicheng’s (李自成) rebellion against the Ming Dynasty, they did not stop there. Flush with victory and ambition, they went on to conquer not only China, but also Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia.

That was a massive conquest for such a relatively small state and it created a new challenge, namely, how to rule this vast and diverse population, and forge it into a multicultural empire.

Three early Manchu rulers — Kangxi (康熙), Yongzheng (雍正) and Qianlong (乾隆) — were quite skilled not only in warfare, but in organization: from organizing troops under different banners to knowing how to convince others to join their side and rule. So, while they did not use the phrase *Zhonghua minzu*, they did find a way to bring the five major cultural groups under one nation and one emperor.

During that period, many in the Han majority still cried: “Overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming,” but their goal was directed simply at restoring Han rule in Ming Dynasty’s territory.

Where did Taiwan fit into this?

Emma Jinhua Teng (滕慧娟), in *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography*, traces the changing attitudes on how Taiwan went from being an undesirable “mud ball” outside the pale to eventually becoming a province in 1887, eight years before Taiwan was surrendered to Japan in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.

Yet even then, Taiwan’s Aborigines were seen as a separate category to the five “culture blocks” that the Qing were unifying. It was only as the island took on value that the Qing decided to conquer the eastern half, a feat that it never accomplished.

In uniting the “five culture blocks,” the Manchu thinking was pragmatic. When you are a minority ruling a vast majority, you need a unifying way to justify your rule. Still, every male had to wear the Manchu queue.

However, the use of *Zhonghua minzu* came into being with Qing scholar-journalist Liang Qichao (梁啟超) in 1902, when there was talk of reform and revolution in China. He needed something to unify all, once the Manchu rulers were gone.

At this time, Taiwan was part of the Japanese empire and not considered a part of *Zhonghua minzu*.

As to China, even Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙) originally thought of just restoring the Han rule with Ming boundaries in the vein of “overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.”

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However, pragmatism again came into play when it was realized that the Manchu borders far exceeded those of the Ming. So, the minorities and their borders were included and *Zhonghua minzu* took hold.

With the downfall of the Qing in 1911, the term *Zhonghua minzu* gained in popularity and its manipulation began to spread.

Mongolia and Tibet wished to break free. However, then-Chinese president Yuan Shikai (袁世凱), who fancied himself as a new emperor, invoked *Zhonghua minzu* to keep Mongolia in the fold.

Time moved on and Taiwan was still not part of the Zhong-hua minzu scene. In 1935, Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) sent Chen Yi (陳儀) over to watch the 40th anniversary of Japan's rule on Taiwan. There was no cry for "return Taiwan" or to make it part of *Zhonghua minzu*.

Similarly, Mao Zedong (毛澤東), in talking to Edward Snow in the 1930s, advocated that Taiwan become independent of Japan. He supported a Taiwanese revolt, which would basically create an independent Taiwan.

After World War II, things took a different turn; Chiang pillaged Taiwan's resources and would eventually use it as an escape base after he lost the Chinese Civil War.

However, Mongolia lucked out; the Soviet Union wished to have a nice buffer state between it and its Chinese comrades, and so it supported a referendum, which the Mongols won. Mongolia was no longer part of *Zhonghua minzu*.

There were still Mongols inside China in what is now called Inner Mongolia, but because they needed Soviet support, Mao and the CCP let Mongolia slip away.

Taiwan's problems began in this period. When the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lost the

Chinese Civil War, Chiang and the KMT fled to and occupied Taiwan with their one-party state. They still claimed they were the rightful rulers of all of China since their 1947 Republic of China (ROC) Constitution saw Taiwan and even Mongolia as spoils of war and part of the ROC.

The 1952 Treaty of San Francisco denied this; Japan did give up Taiwan, but did not specify a recipient. It was not part of either the ROC's or the People's Republic of China's (PRC) concept of *Zhonghua minzu*. The treaty did not recognize Taiwan as part of *Zhonghua minzu*.

In 1987, martial law was lifted in Taiwan and it became a democracy. It threw off the one-party state and talk of Taiwan's *de facto* independence became realistic and more vocal.

On the other hand, the term *Zhonghua minzu* became a byword for those wanting to claim and subordinate Taiwan's democracy.

The term again gained prominence with the bogus "1992 consensus" created in 2000 by then-Mainland Affairs Council chairman Su Chi (蘇起).

There was no consensus. On the ROC side there was "one China, with different interpretations" whereas on the PRC side, there was "one China, and time is running out for you to accept our interpretation."

For the KMT, the term *Zhonghua minzu* took on special meaning. It signified that it did not really lose the civil war, and that it and the CCP were all fighting for the same thing. It became willing to trade Taiwan's democracy for its version of *Zhonghua minzu*, where allegedly all are friends and can make money together.

Thus when the phrase is uttered, for Taiwanese, it means you will lose your democracy. The CCP want your land and your location. It can all be claimed in the spirit of *Zhonghua minzu*. In effect, it means that Taiwan's democracy must be sacrificed for the "unity" of China.

Taiwan — not Zhonghua — minzu

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This is the background and reason why Taiwanese can say: “Whenever I hear that manipulative phrase, *Zhonghua minzu*, I reach for my revolver.”

On the other hand, Taiwanese could consider a new phrase, “Taiwan *minzu*.” This phrase allows them to encompass the many distinct groups that already make up their democratic nation.

These groups include the Aborigines, the Hakka, the two groups of Hokkien, the KMT and all others who are willing to support the democratic nation that Taiwan now is.

This is more in keeping with Taiwan’s imagined community and the reality that exists on Taiwan.

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