

Tea controversy hits boiling point

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The “one country, two systems” framework is an emotive subject. There is no question of it being implemented in Taiwan, as the nation, unlike Hong Kong, is not a part of China. Hong Kongers — as they must abide by the framework — would prefer it if Beijing kept the “two systems” part intact.

A message posted on WeChat and Sina Weibo by the Hong Kong agent of Yifang Taiwan Fruit Tea on Monday set the Internet alight, with users from Taiwan and Hong Kong mocking and condemning the Taiwanese company. The reaction was in some ways more informative and consequential than the facts.

The contentious parts of the message were the opening sentence, which said: “We are resolved to maintaining ‘one country, two systems,’ and are opposed to the violent strike,” and a sentence from the middle, which said: “Yifang strongly disapproves of any action intended to break up the country.”

Following calls for Yifang to distance itself from its agent, its parent company issued a three-point statement, which was mostly a sanitized, corporate-speak platitude about the firm’s commitment to making the best tea possible, obeying the law of the land and staying away from politics.

The company was perhaps blind to the controversy, but admittedly it was caught between a rock and a hard place.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) briefly stepped into the fray, saying that tea and politics were best kept separate; former New Taipei City mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫) said on Facebook that people should “drink tea as you did before and continue to oppose [Hong Kong’s proposed] extradition law”; while Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) asked what the controversy had to do with Taiwan.

Politicians did the right thing by avoiding demonizing the company or criticizing the agent’s message, and Ko’s appeal to the illogical basis of the controversy is correct, although it misses the point.

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First, the agent expressed support for “one country, two systems.” This is essentially what the protests and strikes are about: A clear distinction between the two systems used to govern China and Hong Kong.

Second, the agent said it was opposed to violent strikes. Nothing contentious there.

Third, the agent talked about “one country, two systems” in Hong Kong, where it exists, and did not mention its implementation in Taiwan.

Finally, although the reference to any action that contributes to breaking up China could be interpreted as including Taiwanese independence — in terms of Beijing’s false claim that Taiwan belongs to China — it is reasonable to see this firmly within the context of China and Hong Kong.

The point is not the logical basis of the statement, but what it symbolizes.

Taiwan stands in solidarity with Hong Kong in its predicament. Lawyer Lu Chiu-yuan (盧耀元) published an article urging Yifang founder Ko Tzu-kai (高志凱) to remember his roots and reminding him that his fortune was built upon the very people protesting and striking in Hong Kong.

Online commentators mocked the agent’s message with phrases such as “one fruit, two juices” (*yi guo liang zhi*, 一國兩汁) — which is a homophone of the Chinese words for “one country, two systems” (一國兩制) — and YouTuber Chillseph posted a tutorial using the “reddest of red tea” (black tea is called “red tea” in Chinese), blending made-up tea varieties sounding like the Chinese words for “heavy-handed cops” and “corrupt police.” In the end, he tips the blend down the toilet.

If Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) is alarmed by how his changes are being rejected by Hong Kongers, he should rethink touting a similar model as some kind of inducement for Taiwanese to accept his plans for unification.

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