

Identity trend cannot be fought

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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A poll published on Tuesday by the US-based Pew Research Center found that two-thirds of the nation's citizens identify as "Taiwanese," rather than as "Chinese." The findings reflect similar polls over the past several years and demonstrate a growing trend.

A professor cited in an article about the poll said that Taiwan's democracy and China's diplomatic pressuring of Taiwan resulted in the growth of a Taiwanese national consciousness. This may be partly true, but the issue is not that simple.

When the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) accepted Japan's surrender in Taiwan in 1945, there were many who welcomed a Chinese government, seeing it as an emergence from the grip of a colonial Japanese regime. However, only two years into KMT rule the 228 Incident took place, martial law was imposed and dreams of a Chinese democracy quickly died. It is hard to say how many people in those first two post-war decades were truly supporters of the KMT and who adhered to a Chinese national consciousness, but by the 1970s the *dangwai* (黨外, "outside the party") movement took shape, and more Taiwanese began thinking about democracy and self-governance. Yet the KMT had control over information. It cracked down on *dan gwai*

publications and arrested dissidents. Wherever it could — the media, school curricula, cultural activities, the arts — the KMT emphasized a Chinese identity and the idea of a shared struggle to fight against communism and "retake the mainland."

By the 1990s, Taiwanese slowly became more used to the idea that they were free to choose their own government and define their own identity. While support for the Democratic Progressive Party grew rapidly, many people continued to support the KMT and considered themselves "Chinese." Identity and culture are often thought of as closely linked, and many of those KMT supporters came from households and school systems where they were taught to think of themselves as Chinese. Some of them might have recognized opportunity in China's economic growth, while others might have felt hopelessness at Taiwan's exclusion from international organizations. They might have thought that the nation's exclusion could be remedied through closer ties with China, which the KMT promised.

However, it has become apparent that Taiwan's democratic and liberal values are incompatible with those of China. While Taiwan since the 1990s has allowed political dissent and protest, marriage equality, press freedom, and free speech, among other freedoms, China has not. While China's "one country, two systems" formula was intended to allow Hong Kong to keep

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such freedoms, events over the past few years have shown China's unwillingness to honor the terms of this formula, meaning it would not honor a similar agreement in Taiwan. Taiwanese do not want to lose their hard-fought freedoms, which "peaceful unification" with China would most assuredly mean.

The KMT has found itself in a difficult position, promising its supporters a place in a nostalgic, idealized China that does not exist. Arguably, for many KMT supporters, abandoning their rigid adherence to an imagined Chinese consciousness is unimaginable. Doing so would be to suddenly lose their identity.

Successive generations of Taiwanese will grow increasingly distanced from China, as they will be less exposed to curricula, media, peers and a government that refer to them as "Chinese." Beijing should note this trend, rather than wasting its time and resources on futile "united front" efforts. The KMT, too, if it hopes to survive, should realize that its die-hard support base is aging, and that most young Taiwanese have no interest in machinations regarding an idealized, "unified" China.

For them, Taiwan is all they have ever known, and Taiwan — not China — affords them the freedom to be themselves.

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