

Taiwanese need strong statements

Written by Jerome Keating
Thursday, 01 April 2021 04:35

Leaders and citizens use slogans and phrases to capture the inspirational ideas and spirit that they feel their causes need during challenging and difficult times.

Texas settlers used the battle cry “Remember the Alamo” to inspire them as they fought to establish their republic.

Former British prime minister Winston Churchill addressed the needed heroic work of the Royal Air Force in a speech, saying: “Never have so many owed so much to so few.”

Former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) focused on the importance of economic results over narrow ideology, saying: “It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.”

In the handling of COVID-19, Taiwan has done extremely well, so well that it could also come up with its own inspirational statement to make itself more known to the world.

Despite its “political isolation,” Taiwan not only fought off the virus, but also led the way in manufacturing the masks that help prevent the virus’ spread.

By August last year, it had provided more than 51 million masks to nations around the world. It could highlight the achievement and indirectly chide those nations over the ramifications of Taiwan’s “undeserved” isolation.

It used this simple phrase: “Taiwan can help.”

Taiwan accomplished this because it was already well-prepared and had learned how to handle COVID-19 due to its experience with SARS, a virus that came from China.

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However, Taiwan faces a bigger problem, one that will not easily go away: the ever-present “China problem.”

The hegemony of China is not Taiwan’s problem alone; other nations are finally recognizing it as well.

When the US discussed security in the Indo-Pacific region with Japan, India and Australia in a meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the issue of Taiwan and its democracy were a front-burner topic.

Similarly, that same issue was also on the table when officials of the administration of US President Joe Biden squared off in a contentious first meeting with their Chinese counterparts in Anchorage, Alaska.

Meanwhile, Chinese aircraft continue to push more deeply into Taiwan’s airspace and, if that is not enough, US Navy Admiral John Aquilino has said that China might be preparing for an all-out attack in less than six years that could involve more than Taiwan.

In short, this bigger problem of China’s hegemony remains.

What should be done? Obviously awareness and military preparations are in order, but what about the spoken side — the inspirational phrases and sayings that fit this problem, the ones that Taiwanese can rally round?

In reviewing its history, it does not seem likely that Taiwan’s answer will come from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT).

The KMT has produced its share of phrases and slogans, but most have missed the mark and

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failed because they remained focused on China.

For example, after retreating to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) still spoke of retaking China, saying: “The first year preparation, the second year invasion and the third year victory.”

That did not turn out as planned.

Again, at a later moment of crisis, when the US moved its embassy from Taipei to Beijing, then-president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) came up with his “three noes”: “No contact, no negotiation, no compromise.”

His words met the needs of the time, although the KMT later gave them up.

Former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) continued this thought and stirred the pot even more when he stated that Taiwan and China should deal with each other on a “state-to-state” basis.

His successor, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), the first Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) president, won his first election with only 39 percent of the vote as the KMT split over two candidates.

With his party also in a minority in the Legislative Yuan, Chen could only issue his compromising “four noes”: “not to declare independence, not to change the name of Taiwan’s government, not to add the state-to-state theory to the Constitution, and not to promote a referendum that would change the status quo on independence or unification.”

It was at that time that former Mainland Affairs Council director Su Chi (蘇起) of the KMT made up his fake “1992 consensus,” an invitation to “let us pretend.” The KMT realized that with democracy, its dream of returning to China was slipping away, and it wanted to keep its hand in the game. The fake “consensus” did that.

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Chen's successor, Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of the KMT, simplified it all with his "three noes": "No independence, no unification, and no use of force."

His last "no" seemed to be added just to reach three, because who would have believed that Taiwan would initiate force on China at that time?

All these phrases came from leaders, but recently, Broadcasting Corp of China chairman Jaw Shaw-kong (賈曉剛), a cofounder of the New Party, seemed to understand that slogans can come from the people as well.

On returning to the KMT, he said that the party's Central Standing Committee should listen more to the people and get in line with public opinion.

His comments were on the mark, but, as he had been outside the KMT fold, and clung to the dwindling and bereft New Party for nearly 30 years, it begged the question: If he was in tune with the public voice, why did it take him so long to return and why go back to the KMT?

Finally, former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) of the DPP has offered not so much inspirational quotes, but something more akin to academic wordplay.

She suggested changing China's "one China" principle to a "one Chinese" principle and to speak of "integration" of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait instead of "unification."

Taiwanese need more than this. They should look to statements that came directly from the people. What were some?

One strong expression was the response to the then-KMT one-party state under martial law following the Japanese colonial era. That statement, later acknowledged by Lee, was "pigs replaced dogs."

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It captured how the KMT was much worse than the Japanese.

Another on-the-mark statement points to Taiwan's continued lack of achieving transitional justice from the KMT's White Terror period: "So many crimes, so few criminals."

This phrase cries out from all the families that suffered and points to how the injustices remain.

Taiwanese can see that the US was complicit by closing one eye to these crimes. For the longest time, the US supported the "pigs" and only became more active when the KMT committed assassinations on its own soil as with the murder of writer Henry Liu (劉以鬯) in California.

All this is what Taiwanese need to be conscious of as China tries to control the discourse and keep Taiwan from openly speaking of its de facto independence.

Chinese leaders do not want to hear the word "independence" from Taiwan and have drawn a red line with the threat of war over that dreaded "I-word."

However, the people need not be silent. As the saying goes, "there can be more than one way to skin the Chinese cat."

China cannot forbid all discourse.

Taiwanese should look for words to rally behind, words that speak to their soul. As one who carries a Republic of China passport and can vote in elections, I want to offer some suggestions to get the people's creative juices flowing.

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The people can still glory in statements like: “To be Taiwanese is to be democratic and free.”

Or: “We know our history, Taiwan is Taiwan and China is China. Live with it.”

If China threatens war and imposing its one-party state, other responses can be: “After pigs replaced dogs, do you think we would be happy with jackals?”

Or: “Been there, suffered that. No thanks.”

Or even: “Can you spell Pyrrhic victory?”

These are only suggestions. I am confident that Taiwanese will find the words to guide the “Taiwan spring” needed in these troubled times.

Jerome Keating is a writer based in Taipei.

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