

NTHU shows enemy inside the gate

Written by The Liberty Times Editorial
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On Monday last week the Chinese-language Liberty Times (the Taipei Times' sister newspaper) reported that a Chinese-funded research institute, the Cross-Strait Tsinghua Research Institute, had established an office at Taiwan's National Tsing Hua University's (NTHU) main campus without securing approval from the government.

The institute was founded by the NTHU Alumni Association in cooperation with China's Xiamen City Government and Tsinghua University in Beijing. The revelations sparked fears that China might have infiltrated one of the nation's top academic institutions.

The timeline of events shows that in 2013, former NTHU president Chen Lih-juann (陳立俊) led a delegation of departmental directors from NTHU to Xiamen for preparatory talks. This led to the amalgamation of Tsinghua University and NTHU's respective alumni associations.

In 2016, an office of the Cross-Strait Tsinghua Research Institute opened at NTHU's Hsinchu campus. Then-NTHU vice president Wu Cheng-wen (吳正文) attended the opening event, indicating that top officials at NTHU were significantly involved in establishing the office.

Since Hsinchu is a major national technology hub and NTHU is a key incubator of Taiwanese high-tech talent, it seems more than just a coincidence that Beijing chose to establish an office there. The motivation is so obvious it hardly bears stating: to poach Taiwanese talent and conduct research and development for China's semiconductor industry.

After the existence of the office was revealed, igniting a political storm, officials at NTHU initially feigned innocence, claiming that the institute was a promotional agency "established by a group of alumni" and stated that "the organization is not part of NTHU." That the university's administrative body could be utterly ignorant of a Chinese spy cell within its midst stretches the bounds of credulity.

In fact, Chen has stated that the institute's purpose is to accelerate the establishment of Beijing's Western Taiwan Straits Economic Zone and Belt and Road Initiative, as well as to support the rapid development of the Chinese coastal city of Xiamen and Fujian Province. In Chen's words, the institute serves to "advance cross-strait integration and propel the

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development of the Fujian Free-Trade Zone.”

This clearly shows that the institute exists to facilitate China’s “united front” efforts in Taiwan. With the assistance of Taiwanese collaborators, the institute established an office at NTHU, which enabled Beijing to reach into the heart of the university by hiding in plain sight.

Those Taiwanese academics and officials involved in the affair might claim that the institute and the office at NTHU were a product of a different era when relations between Taipei and Beijing were less fraught, and that it was purely a vehicle for cross-strait academic exchanges.

However, if this were the case, why was it necessary to go to the trouble of channeling the institute through the NTHU Alumni Association and leasing its office on campus through the Tze-Chiang Foundation of Science and Technology?

This demonstrates that those involved were fully aware that the office would require a permit from the government, according to the provisions of the Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area (兩岸人民關係條例). From the start, a circuitous route was devised to evade the law, demonstrating that the purpose of the office was anything but innocent.

The alumni association and the foundation were intermediary organizations — proxies designed to obscure the true nature of the office; a trick frequently employed by Beijing’s United Front Work Department.

Beijing made full use of the golden opportunity afforded by the “wide-open door” policies of the administration of former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) to establish footholds inside a large number of Taiwanese colleges and universities. The problem is certainly not limited to NTHU.

The damage that this has caused, in the space of just a few years, is incalculable, and President Tsai Ing-wen’s (蔡英文) administration is now tasked with cleaning the mess. The government must now conduct inspections of all of Taiwan’s higher-education institutions.

However, as the law currently stands, the maximum fine that the government can issue an offending academic institution is a paltry NT\$500,000 (US\$17,989). It remains to be seen whether the government can ferret out all of the Chinese espionage cells.

Beijing uses alumni associations as front organizations to increase the efficacy of its “united front” operations. The most concrete example of this is the Alumni Association of the Huangpu Military Academy, established during the 1980s and specifically tasked with targeting retired high-ranking Taiwanese military officers. More recently, this has spawned the Zhongshan Huangpu Cross-Strait Affection Forum, which has become a platform for retired high-ranking pro-China military officers to ingratiate themselves with their masters in Beijing.

Retired air force general Hsia Ying-chou (何英周) reportedly met with high-ranking Chinese military officers at the forum in Beijing. During the meeting, Hsia was quoted as saying: “Let us talk no more of the Republic of China armed forces and the People’s Liberation Army: They are both China’s army.”

This was in addition to other equivocal statements that sought to blur the lines between friend and foe.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Wu Sz-huai (吳斯懷), a lieutenant general, and a number of other retired Taiwanese military officers have previously traveled to China to attend “united front” activities under the guise of attending the forum. In 2016, Wu was among a group of retired generals who went to Beijing to attend an event commemorating Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙), hosted by Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平).

The situation has reached stratospheric levels of absurdity: While serving members of the military work round the clock to defend the nation, a clique of retired generals openly drink and make merry with the enemy, raising their glasses to the unification of Taiwan.

Last week Hsia stirred up more controversy after an interview he gave to hawkish Chinese state-run newspaper Global Times.

Hsia, who served as president of National Defense University and president of the ROC Air Force Academy, said in the interview: “Beijing has every right to send warplanes to patrol Taiwan’s southwestern air defense identification zone [ADIZ], as it is part of Chinese territory.”

A former air force pilot, Hsia is helping the enemy to whitewash its incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ. As Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) put it, Hsia is a “total disgrace.” Su also said that no country would allow high-ranking military officers, whether serving or retired, to jeopardize national security, adding that Hsia should be sanctioned according to the law.

While Su is right to criticize Hsia’s language, there is no consensus within Taiwanese legal circles as to whether Hsia has broken the law.

Since entering office in 2016, the Tsai administration has beefed up Taiwan’s national security laws, yet this has failed to dry up the near-endless stream of voices calling for appeasement and assisting Beijing in its “united front” skullduggery. It is a serious problem, yet the legal system seems incapable of putting a stop to it.

Last year the Anti-infiltration Act (反渗透法) came into effect. While it provides a mechanism for the levying of stringent penalties, the way in which the act was drafted makes the issuance of heavy fines only applicable in cases of Chinese espionage. Beijing is therefore able to continue to manipulate Taiwan’s liberal democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of association in a “gray zone” campaign of incremental infiltration.

Taiwan often responds passively to this form of interference, although this is by far the most frequently employed subversive technique in Beijing’s political warfare armory.

The infiltration of NTHU provides a good example of this phenomenon. After the university came under suspicion, the government initiated inspections of colleges and universities across the nation to ferret out any undetected spy cells. By contrast, Hsia’s disgraceful language and behavior, which repeatedly plumbs new depths, has met nothing more than a verbal dressing down from the government. Officials such as Su can only watch impotently, as Hsia continues

to disseminate enemy propaganda to his heart's content.

The crux of the problem is that it is extremely difficult for the government to stay one step ahead of fifth columnists such as Hsia, who might pop up anywhere, anytime, without warning. This is the dilemma that the government faces.

There are several examples of other democratic nations countering the threat of Chinese espionage and subversion through legal means. In 2018, Australia enacted the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act. It stipulates that any organization or individual in Australia that acts as a representative for, or engages in activities on behalf of, a foreign government without having first declared their position to the authorities shall be deemed to have conducted a criminal offense.

The law forces individuals and organizations collaborating with a foreign power to declare their interest, and provides a degree of transparency, while delineating what type of behavior is legal or not.

By contrast, Taiwan often only investigates after the event has occurred, closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. This approach is inherently inefficient and causes authorities a great deal of unnecessary work.

The European Parliament is consulting with Australia on how to implement similar measures to combat Chinese political interference. Taiwanese lawmakers have previously discussed emulating the Australian approach. However, the implementation of similar laws was eventually abandoned.

With Beijing closing in on Taiwan, high-level officials within Taiwanese security and intelligence circles have warned that external and internal security matters are grave, with the enemy having penetrated Taiwanese society. While the Tsai administration is attempting to deal with the situation, the legal tools at its disposal are insufficient. Taiwan's national security apparatus also has shortcomings.

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The long and the short of the matter is that Taiwan's security situation is grim and the enemy is inside the gates. The government must attack the problem with a greater sense of urgency.

Translated by Edward Jones

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