Ethnic Identity in the Politics of the Unreal

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> At the turn of the twenty-first century, Taiwan is a global hotspot. The events and rhetoric surrounding Taiwan's second presidential election in March 2000 raised fears that tensions in the region might result in actual warfare among nuclear powers. Why is Taiwan—with a stable, democratic government and a strong economy—considered a threat to world peace? […] Ultimately, the problem is one of identity—Han ethnic identity, Chinese national identity, and the relationship of both of these identities to the new Taiwanese identity forged in the 1990s (Brown 2004: 1).

The opening lines from the above recent book aptly epitomise the popular sentiments underlying the salience of national identity in contemporary Chinese-speaking societies and the apparent relevance of ethnicity in identity politics. On the surface of things, at least, the magnitude of political rhetoric at the global level on the one hand clearly accents the crucial relevance of ethnicity, while debates over the nature of ethnicity tend on the other hand to exacerbate ongoing political conflicts. Driving this relationship is an underlying assumption that both are necessarily intertwined. I argue, however, that appearances are often deceiving.

Ethnicity is the exemplary stuff of anthropology. Even without cultures, nation-states, identities, and similar phenomena, anthropologists have developed their own calculus of intra- and inter-ethnic relationships based on tangible criteria of real peoples practicing materially distinctive beliefs and lifestyles. Thus, we have learned to characterise ethnic relations in old Taiwan as the concrete interaction of discrete communities of Hakka vs. Hokkien, Zhangzhou vs. Quanzhou, Han vs. aboriginal plains or mountain peoples, and Chinese vs. colonial Dutch, Spanish or Japanese, which in postwar and contemporary periods might be transformed by the addition of Mainlander vs. Taiwanese and now the advent of 'transnational' labour and other beasts. In sum, there has been a long history of looking at ethnic relations-as-ethnic relations, if this is what characterises an earlier phase of anthropological research. This is nothing new.

Among anthropologists, there is enough debate regarding the nature and importance of ethnicity. Some anthropologists claim only to study culture and not ethnicity, others seem to recognise only the substantive nature of ethnic traits and customs, to the exclusion of culture in the abstract, while still others use ethnicity and culture interchangeably as though they are part of the same system as a whole. These largely invoke questions of definition, which in a Taiwan context has

made for keen word games. The autonomous nature of ethnicity was then problematised by a realisation that ethnic boundaries were constantly made, remade, if not invented, even as the conditions of such construction continued to be topics of fierce debate. In this regard, the advent of the nation-state and the emergence of national identity constitute important factors, but I argue that the dynamics of ethnicity in the context of Taiwan's nation-statism has been more thoroughly misunderstood than understood by scholars.[1] If anything, the Republic of China in Taiwan is the typical incarnation of a mono-cultural nationalism, yet Taiwan's experiences have clearly run counter to the norm, especially in ethnic terms. In most other places, such as the former USSR and Yugoslavia, as if to vindicate The End of History, crumbling socialist regimes have given way everywhere to the real face of ethnonationalism. In places such as South Africa, after blacks were given the vote, they voted quite naturally for majority rule. Only in Taiwan, where everyone knows that native Taiwanese constitute three-quarters of the population, did people (in its first free elections) knowingly vote for a KMT regime by a three-to-one margin that was dominated by alien Mainlanders. Any impartial analyst would have concluded that ethnicity *per se* accounted for little. By most standards, Taiwan should have become independent long ago; so what is the problem here? In actuality, ethnic realities have never been an object of doubt. They have always on the other hand been clouded by political discourses disguised as cultural realities. Yet scholars in and of Taiwan consistently refuse to confront the fictive nature of these discourses for what they are, opting instead to show how facts are perverted by politics.[2] A politics of ethnicity couched in such terms not only misses the point completely; it is also driven by an impoverished, if not vulgar, definition of politics.

Ethnicity is an arbitrary definition of culture. Anthropologists in particular seem to take for granted that culture *ipso facto* has to do with ethnic culture. Philosophers and literary critics do not necessarily think that culture is ethnically marked, and in most contexts I think they are right. On the other hand, I criticise Taiwanese sociological colleagues, who lean to the other extreme and seem to think that *benshengren* and *waishengren* constitute real ethnic groups (*zuqun*), whose relational dynamics can be statistically quantified to a tee. Contrary to what most people tend to think, *benshengren* and *waishengren* are inaccurately rendered as Taiwanese and Mainlanders. They basically just mean insiders and outsiders, from a Taiwan perspective, or us vs. them outsiders. They are Orientalist categories of the most vulgar kind, no different from what Chinese call 'you' Westerners. We know enough not to attach any meaning to 'Western' culture; but *waishengren* or Mainlander culture is equally meaningless, so how social scientific are any ethnic studies in Taiwan based on such *zuqun*? This is unreal. Moreover, if it is acceptable to read alien provincials (from the mainland) and (Taiwan) native provincials, which is what *benshengren* and *waishengren* refer to literally, as 'ethnic' groups, whose differences are largely experienced as a function of cultural mindsets and lifestyles, in addition to language and place of origin, then this would be like saying that Californians and New Yorkers constitute different ethnic groups

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[1] See in particular Chun (2000).

[2] It is possible to view identity politics as the product of 'rational' institutional development. See, for example, Chu and Lin (2001).

too, for which there is an abundant literature (mostly in the popular media) about inherently incompatible values and behaviours. The abuse of ethnicity as a sociological category, at least in Taiwan academia, has been compounded by statistical analyses and opinion surveys that routinely categorise data and assess social trends according to whether one is Taiwanese or Mainlander, even second and third generation ones. It is sometimes difficult to determine if the hardened existence of such groups (and perceptions) is the result of concrete (as though real) experiences or excessive reification by sociologists.

In an early essay, I characterised the KMT's policy of cultural nationalism as a politics of the unreal (Chun 1994). Not only was it predicated on the fictive nature of 'The Republic of China', or what political sociologist Philip Abrams would have called a collective misrepresentation; it placed a premium on a myth of historical-cum-cultural destiny. This cultural myth is different from the assumption of ethnic reality that seems to drive this cross-straits war of words and the ruminations of tea leaf readers who seem to revel in telling us what is really real. I am not convinced that ethnic realities are inherently relevant to anything,[3] in spite of the tremendous stock that people seem to have placed in the diverse transformations from monoculturalism to multiculturalism, Sinicisation to Taiwanisation, or cultural unification to ethnic independence. If this is the realm of the real, then I second the Baudrillard-inspired manifesto: 'welcome to the desert of the real'.[4] This famous line from in the movie *The Matrix* highlighted the ability of the state to impose an omnipresent sense of virtual reality, no different from the way ethnic and national identities represent political discourses or social constructions of the self.

The recent discovery of multiethnic hybridity or multiple identities in contemporary Taiwan, as though rooted now in the colonial and traditional, not to mention postmodern and transnational eras, is not in itself a revolutionary theoretical breakthrough. All societies, from time immemorial, have been multiethnic, only to be subject later to temporary erasure by the standard modern nation-state. The celebration of democracy in Taiwan has also been viewed as consonant with the increasing trend toward indigenisation, leading not only to heightened Taiwanese consciousness of various kinds, but also those of Hakka, aboriginal first peoples, and all other local voices.[5] The blooming of Taiwanese identity out of the dregs of the KMT's mono-cultural nationalist hegemony combined with the advent of oppositional, cosmopolitan, multivalent, and emancipatory cultural trends of all sorts in turn point to the same unilineal evolution from nation-state mono-culture to true cultural indigenisation. Yet few people seem to remember that the actual precursor to the current wave of cultural indigenisation was not the DPP's full-scale embrace of it as post-colonial emancipatory ideology but rather the first phase of the KMT's attempt to institute a policy of ethnic indigenisation, an initiative that eventually engendered the rise of

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[3] For an account of the transformation of cultural Sinicisation to Taiwanisation in the popular and official media, see Chang (2004).

[4] The phrase 'desert of the real' was originally coined by Jean Baudrillard in 1981 (see Baudrillard 1994: 1). The line from the film *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Wachowski and Wachowski), 'Welcome to the desert of the real', has since been invoked often in other contexts by Slavoj Žižek.

[5] See, for example, Hsieh (2005) and Wang (2005).

Lee Teng-hui and the Taiwanese faction of the KMT. I call this 'The Chiang Ching-kuo Effect'. Chiang's broad-based attempt to indigenise or localise the ROC state apparatus to the territorial confines of Taiwan in the aftermath of its expulsion from the United Nations was the point of departure too for his attempt to defuse longstanding conflict between Mainlanders and Taiwanese. His famous declaration that he was Taiwanese (despite his thick Zhejiang accent and obvious mainland origins) had important ramifications for the meaning of ethnic indigenisation and the process of Taiwanisation in particular. Or to paraphrase America's favourite *connoisseur* of Chinese taste, 'if Chiang can do it, you can do it too!' In many ways, this is a powerful testament to the subjective positionality of identity. If, as in Chiang's case, ethnic origins account for little, then it is just another way of arguing that alien Mainlanders can choose to be Taiwanese as well. It is, as Ernest Renan aptly phrased it, a matter of 'the will'. This is not exactly the kind of indigenous consciousness promoted by DPP-inspired Taiwanese cultural nationalists, but it is definitely a discourse of indigenisation. It is also difficult to dismiss the effects of this kind of indigenising mentality, especially on descendants of Mainlanders raised in Taiwan, not to mention its overt disavowal of diasporic sentiments among a declining population of diehard Mainlanders. The most recent resurgence of independence-minded Taiwanese indigenous consciousness was not an extension of The Chiang Ching-kuo Effect. It was a phenomenon that surfaced only in the run-up to the third presidential elections and began to be put into practice only during Chen Shui-bian's second term. Moreover, as I understand it, it had nothing to do with ethnicity *per se*; it was an election strategy, pure and simple, to galvanise more support from grassroots factions that had been marginalised by Chen's pragmatic or progressive faction within the DPP, not unlike George W. Bush's fervent appeal to his neo-conservative constituents in recent US elections.

In short, indigenisation has been a growing and universally accepted trend in Taiwan for the last two decades; it is just that the KMT version of it has been different from the DPP one. Neither of them divide along ethnic lines, as both parties have for at least the last decade been dominated by Taiwanese factions. In my opinion, these radically different approaches to indigenisation can perhaps better explain why people favour reunification, independence or some kind of hybrid perspective, but these political sentiments, strictly speaking, need not be prompted by perceptions of ethnic or cultural affiliation, despite what anthropologists tend to think. They can be and are often driven by political considerations, pure and simple.

The differences between these two approaches to indigenisation aside, however, few people have pointed to the close similarities that the DPP's grassroots approach to Taiwanese consciousness and national identity shares with the KMT's own cultural nationalist identity mindset, not so much in terms of content but rather in terms of form and function. It is as though a Chinese *shawen zhuyi* has been replaced only by a Taiwanese one, but it is an ethnic chauvinism in any case, defined in principle by the dictatorship of a shared language, customs, and values mostly to the exclusion of outsiders. As long as ethnic consciousness and political mindsets continue to be defined by such a standard conceptual framework, it will be difficult to transcend its inherent dualistic tendencies. Ethnicity, culture, and identity can, of course, transcend the rigid

stereotypes of meaning and function that currently inform them, but they are also dependent on the evolution of nation-state institutions. In many regards, the DPP has extended the KMT's cultural nationalist mindset and policies to new heights, evidenced partly by the first revision of the Immigration and Nationality Act in seventy years, with its intention of slowly phasing out dual nationality, bringing in new containment policies regarding foreign labour, and more 'liberal' policy toward permanent residence, which now enables non-ethnic Chinese to live long-term in Taiwan but only as a permanent invisible caste, like Japan's Koreans. In an era of transnationalist hybridity, this multicultural *façade* is in fact a reactionary fallback to the nineteenth century (or fascism). Taiwan's multiculturalism (*duoyuan wenhua zhuyi*) applies only to *benshengren*, i.e. Hakkas and aborigines.[6] People seem to have *only* recently discovered the advent of foreign labour, e.g. Filipino maids and Thai construction workers, despite their long presence. Even at Academia Sinica, when colleagues talk about the massive influx of foreign researchers (mostly South Asian and East European post-docs), they are not referring to their ethnic Chinese research fellows (a quarter of whom probably have U.S. green cards or passports).

   In an early essay on Chineseness, I argued (Chun 1996a) that ethnicity-as-an-arbitrary-definition of culture must be distinguished, in analytical terms, from ethnicity-as-appropriated-by-identity. That both issues have been confused and conflated in the scholarly literature constitutes the source of our ongoing misunderstanding of Taiwan's situation and its underlying geopolitics. Although most people refer to ethnic or cultural identity as a synonym compound, identity is basically different from the other two. Ethnic customs and cultural systems can exist without social communities and the moral attachments that bind them to the latter. Because identity is literally subjective or position-based by definition, I find it impossible to determine on the basis of ethnicity or culture alone what identity is or without asking: who is speaking here? Shared ethnicity or culture means nothing as far as identity is concerned. I know many cases where one Mainlander Taiwanese sibling identifies as Mainlander and another as Taiwanese. Westerners increasingly appear on Taiwan TV to claim that they wish to be Taiwanese too. So who are we to presume that Taiwanese or anyone else as a whole should identify ipso facto in any necessary way, not to mention plains aborigines and Tujia? Most importantly, identity is not determined by ethnicity or culture, strictly speaking; it is determined by context. I can identify alternatively as Cantonese, Taiwanese, Chinese or Asian, depending on whether the context of speech deals with life routine, profession, intellectual inclination, or politics, and in no case is ethnic reality a relevant concern. The list of contexts is not exhaustive. Moreover, feminists, Marxists and humanists teach us that it is possible to identify as male or female, in combination with our ethnic or class backgrounds, or just as a generic human being. So how do we actually know that ethnicity is necessarily relevant to anything, offhand or in general? The inherent subject-positioning of identity means that it should be to some extent a function of politics, hence changing too, but what is politics? One must transcend events and actions.

   I would argue that geopolitics at a fundamentally deep level creates abstract social and political spaces in which identity 'functions'. I first spelled this out in an

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[6] For the argument in full, see Chun (2002).

essay on discourses of identity, but it suffices to say here that most observers of Taiwan seem to be content with a notion of politics that can be gleaned in large part from the mass media, polemical discourse, opinion surveys, party politics, and official policies (Chun 1996b). Discursive transformations at the level of political events and social action are rooted in contests of power ultimately at a global level even as they articulate cultural processes that have meaning or value primarily in local terms.

Ethnicity is more often than not divorced from reality; any identity so constructed is really the product of complex political processes. The composition of Chinese living in Hong Kong and Taiwan after 1949 is roughly the same, with 25 per cent made up of people coming from mainland China after World War II and the establishment of the PRC, yet ethnicity is hardly seen as a relevant factor in Hong Kong. Hong Kong identity was always shaped by different forces. Despite its status as a British colony since 1841, which defined official state practice, most people lived in a world that was essentially an extension of China. Before 1949, borders with China were open, and prior to 1970 there was no sense of a distinct Hong Kong identity. People called themselves Chinese, and 'our nation' usually referred to China. Hong Kong was a battleground split by allegiances to either the PRC or ROC (not Britain) that peaked in the late 1960s. The transformation of Hong Kong into a free market port brought about explicit Westernisation, the evolution of a market society and the de-politicisation of public culture, which spawned, among other things, the emergence of a mass-mediated Hong Kong cultural identity. In this kind of public sphere, the ethnic dualism that epitomised Taiwan was clearly absent. If anything, it created a generation of people whose lifestyle was perceived as largely alienated from developments on both sides of the national divide and where an identity gap widened between Hong Kongers (regardless of ethnic origin) speaking Cantonese and rooted in 'a borrowed place and a borrowed time' on the one hand, and an older diasporic generation yearning to return to the motherland on the other, not to mention a growing number of people who identified with Britain. The Sino-British Declaration of 1984 to repatriate Hong Kong to China brought about a revival of Chinese cultural consciousness (as though in search of lost roots), but identity processes in Hong Kong ran counter to the trend of cultural indigenisation forming in Taiwan. If anything, ethnic identity in both places evolved in opposite directions.

In the realm of politics, politicians seem to have infected the general public, including gullible intellectuals, into believing that Taiwanese cultural consciousness can be mobilised at the service of increasing sentiments in support of political independence.[7] Within the United Nations, why not try the North-South Korea model, one might argue, or East Timor and the principle of self-determination? This is wishful thinking, and it does not hurt to try, but Tibet is incontestably non-Han and religiously autonomous too. Yet how far has it got with such efforts? One also tends to forget that the current 'perception' of incommensurable claims to cultural nationalism has been exacerbated in large part by the rise of nationalist sentiment that formed over the last decade in the PRC after the collapse of Marxist socialism and was fueled by China's advent into

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[7] In reading elections literally, many political commentators do the same. See, for example, Corcuff (2004).

a new global capitalist order. There were at least two occasions in history when Taiwan's call for independence would have been received more positively by the PRC regime; one in 1949, after its defeat on the mainland and retreat to Taiwan, and the other, after its expulsion from the United Nations. Even during the height of the Cold War, the inability of the PRC to conquer Taiwan militarily, not to mention the tiny island of Quemoy, just off the coast of Fujian, would have made Taiwan independence more feasible than reunification, from the perspective of most Mainlanders. Yet, in all these cases, the staunch determination by the KMT to recapture the mainland, reinforce the legitimacy of traditional China and keep alive all hopes of reunification, as exemplified by the slogan 'Don't forget the state of Ju', carved onto a mountain in Quemoy, kept the state of war alive, and it is this staunch legacy, from which later parties in Taiwan have implicitly retreated, that is being revived by the PRC government now, supported increasingly by popular nationalism in various domains of life. Is it any accident that the KMT, especially the staunch anti-Communist Old Guard yearning for eventual reunification, is the faction most eagerly courted by the PRC in reconciliation talks?

Why can't people think outside the box? I have argued elsewhere that Taiwan might have a better chance of achieving independence by avoiding ethnicity-sovereignty altogether. Why not try promoting itself as the first postmodern nation, a term which one of my super-realist sociological colleagues called an oxymoron? Scholars have made so much about neo-Confucianism and other grand narratives as the secret of success by East Asian tigers that it has overlooked one undeniable fact. Much of Taiwan's economic success took place after it was expelled by the U.N. and became a pariah state. That is to say, it has actually done better as a non-nation, so why does it need independence at all? As for being postmodern, wasn't its success attributable to its forward-looking economic policy in an evolving global economy? The U.N. is better off adopting postmodernism as a criterion of nationhood in the twenty-first century.

During the second presidential election, Chen Shui-bian gave a lecture at LSE, which was packed on both extremes with raucous PRC and Taiwanese students. Although ninety per cent of the questions had to do with sovereignty/independence issues, little if anything in his talk dealt with them, the topic being Taiwan's future role in the global economy. Finally, Chen calmly stated, 'in actuality, all three political parties agree on one point, i.e. that Taiwan has been *de facto* independent since 1949.' What is amazing in this regard is not the literal content of this statement, which most people should know by reading any modern history textbook, but the question of why it took fifty years to say this or why it was taboo (on both sides of the straits) to acknowledge this fact. Is this not a collective misrepresentation on a massive scale as well?

If normal politics is unreal, how unreal can it get? During the first PRC missile crisis, while trying to explain the incomprehensible calm that enveloped most of Taiwan in the face of PRC sabre-waving and the Western media's depiction of an Iraqi-Kuwaiti-like crisis in the making, I argued on *H-ASIA*'s listserv (mostly to the horror of PRC colleagues) that China would not invade (Chun 1996c). This would be like cutting off one's arm, just because it began to shake uncontrollably. Yet in the midst of all this commotion about reunification and independence, few if any of us bothered to ask what kind of 'unification' were people really talking about? I think it is safe to say that, for many Chinese (on both sides), 500 years is not a

long time to wait for reunification. Every student of Chinese history knows the story about the fall of the Qing dynasty, after which someone discovered a dusty placard in the imperial rubble, proclaiming 'restore the Ming', as if to suggest that it was worth waiting 368 years for this. In this postmodern, transnational, and cosmopolitan era, the very thought of it is inexplicably unreal. What are people fighting and dying for, in actuality, if not an anachronistic fiction?

If anything, politics should be forward-looking, not backward-leaning. It should be an ongoing negotiation of life in the present, with a vision of the future. To the contrary, recent trends in cultural discourse and social policy continue to reinforce ethnic fictions as the basis of political reality, institutionally investing them with even greater force and routinising given mindsets with even greater legitimacy. Thus, Chineseness in its various incarnations is now giving way to indigenous multiculturalism and celebrations of Taiwanese and Hakka cultural consciousness. At Academia Sinica and other universities, the vestiges of what initially began as institutes for the Study of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles have mutated into institutes for the Study of National Development or were dismantled entirely. In its place, institutes for the Study of Taiwanese Culture and History have appeared everywhere, in addition to faculties of Hakka Studies, each with its own liberal arts and social science departments, without doubt as intellectual monuments to the political correctness of our times. When Ernest Gellner (1964: 169) argued that (emphasis added) 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist', he underscored the seminal role of culture in the emergence of nations, all else being equal, but I doubt if he intended to argue the primacy of mind over matter, against all political obstacles to the contrary. History has shown instead that things can always change. The history of the nation-state is recent and will continue to mutate. The history of ethnic identities that have emerged as a result will change correspondingly as well. The failure of Taiwanese independence is not one of failing to recognise its ethnic reality but one of failing to seize political reality when they had such opportunities, in 1949 and 1970.

Meanwhile, on top of political fictions, one continues to get ideological and economic fictions that spiral into each other to increasingly convoluted heights. We already know very well so-called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' that apparently epitomises the current trend. Consistent with this trend is the perception that cross-straits economic integration will in the long run become the basis on which political reunification becomes inevitable, if not increasingly desirable in practice. It is as though the informal reality will eventually give way to the official one, if not make political reunification a desirable and rational option. This is a convenient fiction that has gradually replaced the last policy of wishful thinking, namely that of 'one country, two systems'. These may have been conceived as regimes for recognising in the short term the apparent differences that set Hong Kong and Taiwan apart, while calming psychological anxieties about the future, but they are in the long term rhetorical strategies that still have firmly in mind the ultimate objective of reunification. As rhetorical strategies, they can always change with evolving situations. After all, does it matter what capitalism in China is actually called? Just as the negotiations leading up to the Sino-British Declaration of 1984 have already shown, the PRC is unlikely to change its mind about the eventual fate of Hong Kong, even after another fifty years of capitalist

lifestyle. Politically, it is already linked to the larger policy-making processes that drive the nation as a whole. Economically, Hong Kong's autonomy may not mean much, especially if it is eclipsed by the rise of Shanghai as the new focus of the global economy in China. Legally, after the meaningless guarantee of capitalist autonomy ends in fifty years, if it is desirable to integrate Hong Kong into the rest of China, at least from the perspective of Beijing, there will be little that Britain, UN or the international community can do to counteract any changes toward reunification, whatever that means then.

The situation of Taiwan is of course different, but the logic of economic integration in the political long term still has the same wishful thinking. If transnational capitalism toward the end of the twentieth century demonstrates that the omnipotence of the market can turn national economies into anachronistic mercantilisms that render political control equally unnecessary, then there would be much reason to believe that economic integration will facilitate political ones as well.[8] At present, the reality seems to be quite the contrary. Despite the rise of Third World economies in these emerging global markets, the increasing penetration of the global capitalist economy has still come largely at the expense of the have-nots, with increasing gaps in wealth in the larger order of nations. Nonetheless, like the possible eclipse of Hong Kong by an emerging Shanghai, the rise of the Chinese economy as a whole *vis-à-vis* Taiwan might have dire consequences for the existing political balance of power in cross-straits relations. What this might mean at that time for ethnic identity, however, is anyone's guess.

In the meantime, one is left mostly with the myopia of local party politics. In fact, the most serious dilemma in the history of party politics in postwar Taiwan is that there has never really been any alternative to the 'follow the leader' principle. During most of its martial law era, the KMT rarely publicly tolerated dissent from the official line. The very thought of Taiwanese independence, realistic and more probable then than today, would have more likely landed one a trip to the firing squad than a medal for bravery. It is an understatement to say that such ideologies were suppressed with the full force of the law, as it had at the same time managed to make such opposition parties illegal for most of that history. Hu Hou-hsien's film *City of Sadness* (1989), released after martial law, was acclaimed as being politically courageous for daring to deal openly with events of the 28 February massacre, which became the founding myth of Taiwanese self-determination and several years later replaced Retrocession Day as a public holiday, even though no one dared to mention 2-28 by name anywhere in the film. Few if any new trends in policy have come from the bottom; unreal politics is also unimaginative.

For most of Lee Teng-hui's tenure as up-and-coming bureaucrat and president, he had faithfully toed the party line, while repeatedly reminding people that KMT rule in Taiwan had been nothing less than positive, for which they should be very thankful for.[9] While this does not detract from his eventual achievements of publicly rectifying the past history of Taiwanese repression and his efforts to

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[8] Cabestan (2005) has argued that nationalist rhetoric will in the long run have counterproductive effects on economic relations.

[9] For a different rationalistic, institutionalist view of Taiwan's cultural policy and politics, see Wang (2004).

initiate state-to-state relations with the PRC, if they reflected his underlying principles all along, he never really showed his true colours until very late, which in turn resulted in his expulsion from the KMT, when his positions fell out of favour with those who later gained power. Moreover, it is not surprising that his perspectives in general tend to be closer to the independence-minded DPP. His establishment of the TSU Party is similarly the personification of Lee's positions, without which it is difficult to say what the Party really stands for ideologically. The establishment of the PFP Party by failed Presidential candidate James Soong shows that losers who can go no further up the party totem pole typically spin off to start up their own political party as the last resort for realising their personal ambitions.

As long as following the leader remains in institutional fashion, bold innovative ideas, even when they happen to reflect reality more accurately, will never find the light of day in political Taiwan. Like the LDP in Japan, nothing short of a disastrous election loss will force people to do things differently, which usually starts with thinking differently. Political parties in Taiwan have been too concerned with winning the next election to even attempt to forge a broad ideological vision of the polity and the future. It has always been easier to operate with given mindsets and negotiate in familiar strategic terrains. Rhetorical visions and discourses of culture or ethnicity are promoted less to make sense than to make people toe the line so as to conform to desired expectations. This in turn has reproduced a myopic field, where the more things change, the more they stay the same. In actuality, the politics of other countries are not dissimilar. How difficult is it for many Western liberal democracies to transcend the false duality of labour and conservative party politics? To the country's credit, Taiwan probably enjoys the distinction of being the only country in the world where party ideology is divided along reunification and independence rather than any discernible political ethos about the nature of society. This is a country where debates about how to gain admission into the UN will garner more headline news attention than 'trivial' matters of everyday life, like the economy, urban policy, corruption, environmental safety, etc., and where the urgency to create faculties of Taiwanese studies and Hakka studies in every university supercedes the necessity of first teaching any kind of general academic discipline devoted to ethnic or cultural studies. That politics is unreal is one thing; the extent to which it inundates the unreal world is surreal.

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