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Big China, Little China

Reunification can happen, once both sides acknowledge their shared past

NOW THAT HE HAS WON THE ELECTION, TAIWAN'S NEW President Chen Shui-bian should accept the challenge laid down last week by Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji. In dramatic remarks aimed at spooking Taiwanese from voting for Chen, Zhu said that Beijing is willing to discuss with Taipei "anything within the framework of one China." The two sides should use this opportunity to think hard about what concept of "China" they claim allegiance to.

Cross-Strait dialogue has made no progress toward reunification because Taiwan and the mainland are talking past each other. Terms like "de facto independence" and "one country, two systems" assume that the nation state as defined by a physical border and international law is the only possible starting point for any negotiation. But reunification has never been—nor should it be—a question exclusively of legalities.

The word "China" with a capital "C" must stand first and foremost for the 5,000-year-old civilization of which Taiwan has always been a part. By contrast, communist China—China with a small "c"—has a history of just 50 years. China's small "c" culture, adopted from European intellectual tradition, has little to do with the capital "C." In fact, the Communist Party has tried its best to eradicate "C" throughout most of its rule.

Civilizations existed long before there were nation states; as Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington notes, the forces of civilization are generally far more powerful in shaping history than are nation states. This viewpoint helps clarify the cross-Strait conflict, which is unlikely to be resolved until the alien "c" civilization is purged from the body politic of China.

Taiwan is understandably not willing to become part of a communist civilization. But in recent years some DPP leaders, psychologically marred by harsh KMT persecution in the past, have been pushing a "Taiwan identity" that they claim is unique and separate from Chinese civilization. Instead, Taiwan should stress that it is part of the unbroken legacy of ancient Chinese civilization, while the Communist Party, though victorious in last century's civil war, is not.

China's communist leaders often claim that their mandate to rule is based in part on having overcome the memory of the country's past humiliations. But it was not communism that righted the wrongs of Western and Japanese imperialism. When World War II ended, China under the Kuomintang was one of the five victorious world powers, an equal among equals and a founding member of the United Nations Security Council. The Communist Party inherited what the KMT government had gained, not one square centimeter of territory more. Exiled in Taiwan, the defeated

KMT has learned its lessons. The ruling party has helped build a prosperous, educated, democratic society at which Chinese on the mainland can only marvel.

Taiwan did not have to forsake China's 5,000-year legacy to get there. The past has provided it with ample sources of inspiration to enrich its present. The basic institutions of modernity—democracy, a market economy based on private ownership, respect for individual rights—have proven to be both universal and Chinese. If such values did not appeal to basic Chinese instincts, modernity would not have taken root so quickly and smoothly in Taiwan.

By contrast, Beijing clings to a one-party dictatorship based on an ideology that is not Chinese in origin. It is

not conducive to bringing out what is best in Chinese civilization. In his remarks last week, Premier Zhu said foreign commentators exaggerate the level of corruption in China. But he missed the point. It is not just about money but

about the basic values of a society. Nearly everyone in China realizes that communism is at a dead end, but they must pretend it is alive and well. As a result, lying in China has become an accepted survival skill. Transferring public money into private accounts is but a relatively minor manifestation of widespread moral decay. It is impossible to eradicate

corruption, moral or monetary, because few are untouched by it. The constitution itself is hypocritical, for the rights of citizens it promises are routinely trampled upon.

China's leaders surely know that many Chinese inside and outside the country are alienated from the party because it fails to represent the larger Chinese civilization, which has a tradition of inclusion and tolerance. For more than half of the past 1,000 years, China has been ruled by non-Han minority cultures with varying traditions. But communist ideology perpetuates exclusion and intolerance. The party's narrow mindset impoverishes the country. Is it any wonder that few significant literary, artistic or scientific achievements have emerged from a communist dictatorship?

China's future depends on how its leaders resolve the incompatibility between the 5,000-year-old civilization and the 50-year-old communist culture. The end result is not in doubt, but it's unclear if the transition will be smooth or chaotic. What's needed is a courageous, visionary generation of leaders in Beijing unencumbered by the ghosts of the past 50 years who can take the country back to the mainstream of Chinese civilization. Chen Shui-bian should focus Beijing's attention on China's true roots and avoid the dead-end policy of promoting a separate cultural identity for Taiwan or hinting at potential independence. Reunification will happen a lot faster than many people expect, if and when the Communist Party is willing to place China's interests above its own selfish concerns. A very big if. ■

