

# Cross-strait Exchanges: A Plus or A Minus?

| *Jen-to Yao and Tuo-tzu Lee*

Yesterday I chatted with the manager of an arts gallery. She told me that nowadays the works of young Taiwanese artists deserve to be collected. "China exerts an overwhelming influence on us. Ten years ago we wouldn't see any aspects of Beijing in our everyday lives, but now such sights are gradually penetrating our lives. Therefore, in the future, images that reflect our unaffected native culture are bound to make people nostalgically reminisce about the past. And these works will also bring back fond memories," she said.

In recent years collectible lucky dolls representing deities from Taiwanese folk religion or raucous street performances by temple troupes known as "Jumping Princes" have proven hugely popular. From the perspective of cultural products such phenomena are actually a way of keeping the memory of folk culture alive. Folk culture is forced to be commercialized and committed to memory, because of the commercial logic of capitalism and more importantly, because of the "market" that it created. This market is the deliberate recalling of a "native" Taiwanese culture that has slipped into oblivion amid rapid economic growth and social changes. Yet undoubtedly any re-imagined culture is unable to return to its original plainness.

The social impact from cross-strait opening does definitely not only manifest itself in the economic sphere, where we face a number of measures affecting us all such as the recognition of Chinese academic degrees, the opening of Taiwan to Chinese workers, and the liberalization of the service industry, all within the coming decade. We should pay greater attention to how the cultural clashes and cultural assimilation behind these "opening" measures will affect the trends of Taiwanese society in the coming decades. If the native culture that we recall in the future does not longer look like today's, how else could it look? Do our country and society already clearly understand these implications deep inside and are they well prepared?

The answer is very obviously No. Since the Chinese National Party (KMT) returned to power, it has viewed the past eight years of Democratic Progressive Party rule as a closed-door policy era. Therefore it has been calling for opening and the easing of all restrictions and regulations toward China. The KMT has been storming down this road, so that the speed of cross-strait exchanges by far exceeds the scope of

normalization. The government decided to allow Chinese students to study in Taiwan, then to recognize Chinese degrees, but it failed to consider whether adjustments are necessary to address the tricky details that might crop up in the wake of this opening and whether the students should be given the right to work in Taiwan upon graduation. Could teacher evaluation become a blind spot of academic freedom once Chinese students have entered our universities? And what kind of students will be attracted to study in Taiwan under the current three restrictions and six noes policy? What kind of contacts and clashes will these students have with Taiwanese society ten years down the road? And then again, where do the "three restrictions and six noes policy?" clash with the opening of the service industry under the planned Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China?

The opening of Taiwan to Chinese tourists has been a disaster right from the beginning. The government opted for opening only for the sake of a short-lived stimulation of the tourism industry, but it failed to assess the experiences of neighboring Hong Kong. Without a clear distinction among the target groups, the Chinese tourists will crowd out tourists from other countries and also prevent the quality of travel in Taiwan from improving, or even turn back the clock to the 1970s when Taiwan tried to lure the Japanese with shopping tours.

The entire tourism industry is now in a fix because it needs to progress with the times, yet service quality is stepping backward. Don't mention the bizarre Rebiya incident, when China threatened to curb the number of tourists to pressure Kaohsiung tour operators into protesting against the screening of the "controversial film" of Uigur independence activist Rebiya Kadeer by the Kaohsiung city government.

Yet the central government openly sits back and does nothing or even adds insult to injury, because of the confrontation between the green and blue political camps or probably really due to its ideological stance.

All these examples illustrate that the government clearly failed to properly assess and prepare its policy. It only wants opening after opening for ideological reasons, yet has virtually not considered what kind of counter measures need to be taken in the wake of opening up. Similar problems have cropped up in the industrial sector. The government has proposed compiling a special budget to help industries that are affected by the planned Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China to transform and upgrade. Yet it has not considered how corresponding policies for the cultural and creative industries and tax policy should be adjusted after all. Only if we make such adjustments will the industries be able to earnestly tackle transformation in a meaningful way, instead of turning farm workers into engineers as the indifferent full

employment model would have it. Only then can we avoid that taxpayers' hard earned money lines the pockets of vote captains, who solicit votes for the ruling party.

If the government pursues opening without doing anything, the ultimate outcome will be that the more contacts we have, the more bilateral relations will step backward. Societies have per se measures for self protection. If the government does not use policy to channel and address these protective measures, they will manifest themselves in strange aspects. In recent years a typical example for self protection measures has been the issue of "black heart" products as people call contaminated food from China. Since the government was unable to safeguard food safety, the people's self protection mechanism kicked in, translating into a total boycott of Chinese foodstuffs. This outcome suggests that the more social exchanges we have across the Taiwan Straits, the more likely we are to walk down a road to ruin. For bilateral ties this will only have a negative effect.

How will people reflect on this "ten-year rush" ten years from now? How will the Taiwanese face the fact that they can't turn back the clock on these ten years, when they realize that China's shadow that claims Taiwan as "inner territory" has already penetrated every corner of Taiwan's society? What if they realize that due to the activation of "social self-protection measures" exchanges have not led to any positive results? The cross-strait relations that the people want are "normalized cross-strait relations." The public hopes that the government prepares well for all kinds of opening measures instead of desperately trying just anything. All along Ma has not been able to understand why his approval ratings keep declining, although he has done so much for cross-strait relations. It's because he didn't give the Taiwanese people a normalization-oriented cross-strait exchange policy, but a rushed cross-strait opening that was poorly prepared. When our society's self protection mechanisms kick in, opening will often lead to worse cross-strait relations, not better ones as Ma's wishful thinking would have it. **B**

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