
Taipei's Fiery New Mayor Knows Whose Culture Is Best

And it's not Taiwan's. In an interview, he discusses the benefits of colonization, his superior understanding of the Chinese Communist Party, and the state of the New York subway.

BY GRACE TSOI

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A former trauma surgeon at one of the most prestigious hospitals in Taiwan, Ko Wen-je made a surprising career shift and **ran** for the Taipei mayoral election last November. A political newbie, Ko bagged more than 850,000 votes and has become the first Taipei mayor in decades — a position considered a stepping-stone to the presidency — who bears no affiliation with any political party. Ko's blunt talking style and a series of rapid moves to **take on** huge Taiwanese corporations such as **multibillionaire** Terry Gou's powerful Hon Hai Group, which makes iPhone parts, have riveted Taiwan. Ko also made international headlines when he accepted a watch as a gift from the visiting British transport minister, a cultural taboo among Chinese speakers. (Ko reportedly later **joked** he could sell the watch for scrap metal.) In a freewheeling Jan. 20 interview with **Foreign Policy** in Taipei City Hall, Ko spoke about the impact of his victory, his views on the Chinese Communist Party, and why a picture of him riding the capital city's subway managed to go viral. The interview, conducted in a combination of Chinese and English, has been condensed for clarity.

On the impact of his victory:

Ko: The country has been shaken up by me. I am just being myself. In our society, no one dares to be themselves. During the campaign, the slogan that made me proudest — “Starting now. I will redefine politics” — has been realized. Politics isn't that difficult: it is about finding your

conscience again. So, just do what is right. Doing the right things is more important than doing things right. There have been a lot of lies and fabrications [in Taiwan's political environment].

On Asian history and colonization:

For the [world's] four Chinese-speaking regions — Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Mainland China — the longer the colonization, the more advanced a place is. It's rather embarrassing. Singapore is better than Hong Kong; Hong Kong is better than Taiwan; Taiwan is better than the mainland. I'm speaking in terms of culture. I've been to Vietnam and mainland China. Even though the Vietnamese are seemingly poor, they always stop in front of red traffic lights and walk in front of green ones. Even though mainland China's GDP is higher than that of Vietnam, if you ask me about culture, the Vietnamese culture is superior.

On Taiwan's current state:

At this moment, Taiwan is like a car with very powerful engines but no steering wheel.

On America and Taiwan:

I lived in the United States for a year and I've been thinking over the past 20 years about why the United States is a good country. Whether you like it or not, [you have to admit] its people are rather free. A cultivated nation is not about having nuclear weapons, spaceships, or high-speed rail. It is about the realization of basic social values and letting citizens live like human beings: democracy, freedom, rule of law, human rights, and care for the underprivileged. They may sound very basic, but these are the fundamental values of a society.

On Taiwanese democracy:

Does Taiwan have democracy? Real democracy means politics belongs to the people. Taiwanese politics belongs to corporations and is controlled by political parties.

On mainland-Taiwan relations:

If you ask me about the one-China policy [which recognizes only one China, while allowing both the mainland and Taiwan to claim they are the “China” recognized] my question is, what is one China? You have to tell me what one China looks like. If a girl is to marry into another family, you have to tell her what that family is like. Cooperation is more important than reunification. If reunification is achieved without cooperation, it will be meaningless. We have to mutually know, understand, respect, each other; then finally we can cooperate with each other. We have to convince Mainland China that a free and democratic Taiwan is more in China’s interest than reunification.

On the photo of Ko taking the Taipei subway that went **viral** in mainland China, in part because of its contrast to the cosseted life of many mainland officials:

I couldn’t have imagined that [the photo would get so much attention], but in fact I don’t care, because I was just being myself. This is called a cultural gap. I once **said** that when more than 99 percent of Chinese people close the doors while doing their business in bathrooms, we can start talking about reunification. This hurt the feelings of many Chinese people, but a cultural gap [between mainland China and Taiwan] does exist. There’s nothing wrong about officials taking the subway. Why is this unusual? So people talked about “one country, two systems,” but maybe we should talk about “two countries, one system” instead. We should try to narrow the gap.

On the Chinese Communist Party:

I have read a lot of books about the party’s history. The party isn’t a rival; it’s a client. China’s a problem that we must face, no matter [whether] you like it or not.

Throughout China’s history, there were very few dynasties when every citizen was fed. It’s unbelievable that the Chinese government can achieve this. It’s something we should respect. However, they have their own difficulties to overcome.

On Taiwan’s influence on the mainland:

I think keeping a democratic, liberal Taiwan benefits Chinese history. When people say the Chinese people do not deserve universal suffrage, there have been five presidential elections in Taiwan already. People say that the Chinese people are not civic-minded; [but] take a look at Taiwan's subway. It's cleaner than the New York subway.

On Taiwan's 2016 presidential election:

I don't know what will happen in the future, but I hope Taipei city will be a "demilitarized zone" between the blue and green parties. [In Taiwan, "blue" refers to the ruling Kuomintang, while "green" means the Democratic Progressive Party, which advocates a tougher stance towards Beijing.] I will try to keep neutral. I will not run for president. That's a clear-cut answer.

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