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EDITORIAL: Rising above the din

In an eloquently written piece published on Sunday, French-Taiwanese education and policy consultant Ninon Godefroy presents an interesting take on the Taiwanese character, as viewed from the eyes of an — at least partial — outsider. She muses that the non-assuming and quiet efficiency of a particularly Taiwanese approach to life and work is behind the global success stories of two very different Taiwanese institutions: Din Tai Fung and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC).

Godefroy said that it is this “humble” approach that endears the nation to visitors, over and above any big ticket attractions that other countries may have to offer, such as an Eiffel Tower or majestic, mysterious pyramids.

Most people hear about Taiwan in relation to China, and the potential of an invasion, she added.

Godefroy has a point about how the geopolitical noise surrounding Taiwan crowds out any other news about the nation and what it can offer. A case in point is a new episode of the weekly investigative report show Enquete Exclusive broadcast on the private national French television channel M6, focusing on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) activity in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The second half of the report turns its attention to how in Taiwan the threat of invasion looms larger than ever, and how the Taiwanese are in a state of permanent alert.

It is difficult to maintain a sense of permanent alert on a personal level when the threat has been part of the fabric of everyday existence for decades.

Wenzao Ursaline University of Languages student Huang Chieh-hsuan (黃婕暉), writing in the article “The Gen Z perspective on China and Taiwan” published in the Taipei Times on May 11 last year, said that she first heard about the possibility of an invasion by China when she was six, but that “after 18 years, the invasion news tastes like a sandwich I eat every morning.”

The Taiwan that Godefroy knows and Huang lives in is largely unknown to people in other countries, because of the noise.

The CCP has been very effective in dominating the discourse on what Taiwan is and how it fits in with the world. This narrative has changed during, and in the aftermath of, the COVID-19 pandemic, when the threat the CCP presents to world peace and prosperity became more apparent with false reporting of the virus and of attempts to control supply chains.

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With this, TSMC became central to the discourse over chip manufacturing and supply chain security. The company remains front and center of the news cycle in Taiwan, with news of its planned US\$100 billion investment in the US. The US Congress, parliamentary groups and think tanks working to support Taiwan and keep non-official channels between governments open and to counter the CCP' s distortions can, to a certain extent, mitigate the CCP' s domination of the discourse.

Another way to circumvent the CCP-induced diplomatic isolation is to find creative alternatives to advocacy and action on the world stage, with UN research fellow Jack Huang (黃一展) writing today on how young Taiwanese, frustrated by lack of action on climate change and blocked from participation in international organizations, are forging new ways to have their voices heard on the international stage.

However, the question remains of how to bring awareness to the world of what Taiwan is, what makes it unique, what there is to celebrate about it.

That is, how does this all fit in with Godefroy' s experience of Taiwan, or the country that Huang Chieh-hsuan calls home? It is not all chips and geopolitical jeopardy, as anyone living in Taiwan knows: There is more depth to Taiwan and its culture. We need to find more effective ways to broadcast this to the world, and rise above the din.