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The Great Diversion

September 7, 2008 in [Tales from Taiwan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

Allegations about money-laundering by former President Chen Shui-bian, his relatives, and his acquaintances have been front page news for three weeks, and, on some TV stations, occupy the first 30-40 minutes of the news hour. As might be imagined, this is also a hot topic on the political talk shows, day after day after day. New reports continue to surface about alleged improprieties, ranging from misusing government funds, to opening shady accounts in Swiss banks and tax havens like Liechtenstein and Aruba, to buying mansions and other properties in the U.S. The media hounds are now hot on the chase of Chen's daughter (Chen Hsing-yu 陳幸妤), trying to goad her into outbursts that play well on the evening news and YouTube.

Is the fact that Taiwan's former president is suspected of corruption newsworthy? Obviously. Do these allegations merit a thorough investigation? Definitely. If the evidence warrants it, should indictments be filed? Unquestionably. Is this the most pressing issue facing Taiwan? That's another matter entirely.

To a certain extent, the saturation reporting of the Chen story reminds one of the second of Sunzi 孫子's [Thirty-six Stratagems](#) (三十六計), namely "Besieging Wei to Rescue Zhao" (圍魏救趙), which is based on events during the Warring States Era, when the Qi general Sun Bin 孫臏 (d. 316 BCE; considered a descendent of Sunzi) attacked the Wei capital of Daliang in order to distract Wei troops from the siege of the Zhao capital of Handan (the exhausted Wei army was eventually ambushed and defeated).

Why employ such a strategy?

Perhaps to divert attention away from the fact that the Taiwan stock market has [fallen from 9,295 on May 19 to 6,307 on September 5](#), one of the worst declines percentage-wise worldwide. When asked about losses by investors who had expected the market to soar following President Ma Ying-jeou's inauguration on May 20, Finance Minister Lee Sush-der 李述德 was quoted as saying that [investors should have made wiser choices](#). He has since [apologized](#).

To make matters worse, on Ma recently announced that his ["6-3-3" campaign pledge](#) (annual economic growth rate of 6 percent; annual GDP per capita of US\$30,000; annual unemployment rate of less than 3 percent) [might not be realized until 2016](#). Ma has also [apologized \(three times\)](#), and explained how his goals might be [more reasonably realized](#), but there has been a stream of [plaintive letters to the editor](#) from disappointed citizens, some of whom are also calling their KMT legislators and threatening [not to vote for Ma during the next election](#).

Internationally, [Haiti](#) and [Panama](#) have joined Paraguay as the latest [dominoes to fall](#) in terms of dropping their support for Taiwan's latest proposal to join the UN's auxiliary associations (see previous post).

And then there is the fact that the KMT government is not only hesitating to buy new F-16's (see also previous post), but is now [abandoning the development of some indigenous missile projects](#), to the dismay of both pan-blue and pan-green legislators.

Even Cross-Straits relations, once perceived as the new government's greatest strength, are now a matter of public concern, with Cabinet polls now showing a drop in public confidence from [79.7% in May to a recent low of 49.6%](#). There has also been a decidedly mixed reaction to Ma's announcement that Cross-Straits links involve a ["special non-state relationship"](#) (非國與國特別關係) between two different ["regions"](#) (地區).

Whether the diversionary strategy of devoting extensive coverage to Chen's alleged misdeeds will continue to be effective remains to be seen, especially if Taiwan's economic situation continues to deteriorate. In the short run, it seems reasonable to assume that indictments may well be handed

down to Chen and/or his relatives/friends for at least something like tax evasion. This should have a positive impact on Taiwan's democratic development by clearly demonstrating that nobody is above the law. However, regardless of what the courts decide, the media feeding frenzy will eventually ease, and the logical next step will be to see if this anti-corruption campaign extends to other leading politicians, regardless of their political affiliation. Even more importantly, the end of this great diversion may prompt people to start focusing less on mistakes made by past leaders and more on how the current government plans to work for the good of the Taiwanese people.

Note: The [Chinese media has also used the expression](#) "Besieging Wei to Rescue Zhao" to describe the anti-Ma protest of August 30, implying that this event was designed to deflect attention from Chen's current plight. And, back when it was the ruling party, the DPP proved adept at using identity politics as a diversion from pressing economic issues (see my January 28 and March 2 posts), once again demonstrating that all crows under heaven are black indeed.