

※Special Essays※

**Tibet and Taiwan:
Past History and Future Prospects**

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Introduction

This paper is an account of the relationship between Tibet and Taiwan, more correctly the relationship between the Tibetan government and people in exile, and that of the government and people of Taiwan. While I have attempted to address the issue in its entirety, it is based primarily on my limited involvement, supplemented by access to information I had during my years of service in various capacities in the Tibetan government in exile (1967-1995), including five years as a member of the Kashag, the cabinet of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

More recently, this account has been enhanced by the opportunity to visit Taipei as a research fellow at the Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, during December 2005, when I was able to meet with many key officials, past and present, and private citizens, including Tibetans, who have a stake in this relationship. Finally, however, it still remains a personal interpretation with an obvious Tibetan bias which I have tried best to minimize.

My first inklings of Taiwan began in my early years in India; scanty bits of information and heated discussions about our difficult relations with the island nation. All of which became more real when I started working in Dharmasala in the late 1960s and especially during my tenure at the Office of Tibet in New York (mid 1970s to the late 1980s) when I first met with representatives of Mongolian-Tibetan Affairs Commission (MTAC) of the

government of the Republic of China (ROC), who would drop by to visit us occasionally. It appeared then that one of the main tasks of the MTAC in the 1970s was simply to invite Tibetans, and if possible Mongolians, to visit Taiwan for the National Day celebrations. Occasionally, even the Chairman of the MTAC would come visiting. Of course I would report all of this to Dharmasala and in turn would be asked to convey our concerns about their activities among Tibetan exiles.

In the early 1980s I had the occasion to visit Taiwan with another senior Tibetan official to call on the then Prime Minister, to brief him about the Fact Finding Delegations to Tibet from exile sent by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and to take the opportunity once more to express our views about the MTAC and the need for ROC to change its policies. My last official meetings with ROC officials were during my tenure in the Cabinet of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1990 -1995.

In all these years of my interactions with officials of the ROC, including the MTAC, each one was personally very gracious and always expressed their sincerest friendship and concern for the Tibetan people. But frustratingly, for the longest time, they did not seem to listen specifically to what we had to say, especially about obstacles that stood in the way of better relations and our desire to move the relationship forward.

Early Contacts

The people of Tibet and the people of Taiwan are two peoples who do not share a common ancient history, but who have since the mid 1950s begun to have ties that now span a wide spectrum of cultural and political interests and activities. This relationship has been complex and difficult but it has reached a considerable level of interaction and depth.

The first contacts between these two peoples began soon after the establishment of the Republic of China's control over Taiwan at the

conclusion of World War II. By 1949, although no longer on the mainland, the ROC government declared itself the legitimate government of China representing of all of its people, including, to the surprise of the Tibetans, the Tibetan people. This idea that the Tibetans are part of the Chinese peoples has been around since the founding of the Chinese republic at the turn of the last century, and it was actively pursued by the new Republican government, but it was never accepted by the Tibetan government, and in fact Tibet refused to join the new republic when invited on several occasions.

Before the ROC government left China it had limited interactions with Tibet, confined mainly to parts of eastern Tibet then under the Chinese provinces of Szechuan, Qinghai, and Yunan. These areas were ruled by Tibetan chieftains but were often under local Chinese Warlords and strong men in the area. It was also in the last years of ROC rule in China that they were able to send an official representative to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on the occasion of the young 14th Dalai Lama's formal installation. However, this mission was eventually expelled by the Tibetan government on the eve of the KMT's defeat by the Communists in China,

Nevertheless, when the ROC reestablished itself on Taiwan it continued its old policies regarding the Tibet, and made its Mongolian & Tibetan Affairs Commission the primary agency responsible for pursuing such policies, even though by 1950 the People's Liberation Army had already invaded Tibet and set in the motion the incorporation of all Tibetan areas into the People's Republic of China, and there was no way for the ROC to have any contact with any Tibetan anywhere.

For a while in the 1950s the ROC was able to have limited contact with Tibetans in Kalimpong, India, bordering Sikkim and Bhutan, where a sizeable community of prominent Tibetans, including businessmen, government officials, and resistance leaders were based. But the Tibetans were not enthusiastic for the ROC which professed common alliance against the

Chinese Communist Party but did not recognize Tibet's separate and independent status. It is from these times that the Tibetan public began to have an uneasiness about Taiwan, equating the ROC and the KMT, and their policies, as representative of the people and the government of Taiwan.

All of this would have remained somewhat insignificant, politically and historically, were it not for the events of 1959; the Tibetan national uprising against the Chinese Communist occupation and the resulting exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India soon followed by many thousands of Tibetan refugees. President Chiang Kai-shek issued a message of support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans but no real assistance of any kind was offered.

Chiang's Tibetan Friends

One of the very first Tibetans in Taiwan seems to have been the Changkya Hutokthu, a lama from the Amdo area, and a small circle of his aides. He is said to have had close relations with Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT government, and served as the head of all the Buddhist organizations in Taiwan until he passed away in 1957. He is acknowledged for bringing an important Buddhist relic to Taiwan, and his former residence has become the home of the newly established Mongolian & Tibetan Cultural Center in Taipei where one of the floors is dedicated to a small exhibition about his life.

President Chiang's other ties to Tibet was with one of the older brothers of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Gyalo Thondup, who as a teenager was a student in Nanjing in the mid 1940s. It is said that Chang and his family took personal care of the young man, and, although they kept in touch after the events of 1959 and Thondup visited Taiwan several times, their ties did not result in any closer understanding between the two governments. In fact, Gyalo Thondup remained one of the main critics of ROC policies regarding Tibet.

Prominent Tibetans in Taiwan

Although many thousands of Tibetans poured into India, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, exceeding 85,000 in the first few years of exile, none were able to come to Taiwan by virtue of its geography and because Taiwan did not have any official ties with India making contact with the new refugees a sensitive issue, and because no offer of asylum was made in the first instance. Among the few that made it to Taiwan in the early 1960s was a former leader among the Tibetan resistance, Chamatsang of Lithang, who was welcomed as a “general” and a symbol of Tibetan resistance against the Chinese Communist. He and his family formed part of the small Tibetan community in Taiwan which barely grew until the late 1990s.

While Chamatsang’s move to Taiwan did not raise any serious alarm within the exile community, it was soon followed by the two prominent Tibetan figures, Yuthok and Surkhang, former Kalons, ministers of the Dalai Lama’s cabinet, which caused considerable public debate. Both were important public figures, Surkhang, the senior minister of the cabinet in Lhasa who was at the forefront of resisting the Chinese occupation polices, and Yuthok, by 1959 already a former Kalon but widely respected in public and in government.

Kasur Yuthok arrived in Taiwan indirectly by way of the United Kingdom where he had difficulties with immigration and found Taiwan the only alternative to returning to India, and because the ROC government was welcoming. And Surkhang arrived in 1972 as a visiting scholar at Chen-Chi University after his stint at the Department of Far Eastern Studies, University of Washington. They had left India because they no longer felt that they had a role in the exile polity owing to internal disagreements. Their arrival in Taiwan stirred strong reactions within the Tibetan community and many saw their actions as compromising with parties worse than the Chinese Communist. However, during their stay in Taiwan, both Yuthok and Surkhang tried to convey to Chang Kai-shek and the ROC government the need for a change in their policies regarding Tibet; to no longer look at Tibet as part of

China, and to support the cause of Tibet on its own merits. Yuthok and his family left Taiwan in the early 1970s and moved Canada, and Surkhang passed away in Taiwan in 1977, and his family too moved to the United States soon after.

The Koumintang's Tibet Policy

From the early stages of this relationship between Tibet (in exile) and Taiwan, the interests of the ROC or of the KMT were not served by its own institutions and policies. From the Tibetan point of view it was flawed basically by the very idea that Tibet was somewhat “rightfully” considered part of China, and worsened by the fact that a “constitutional” government body was charged to make such policy work. These policies never had any real chance of success because the vast majority of the Tibetan people, including key leaders in government and politics, would not accept a diluted Tibetan identity as part of a larger Chinese identity and state, especially after what had happened in 1959.

The issue always, among the Tibetans, was that since Taiwan did not support Tibetan independence we had no business having any ties with them, and cooperation by any Tibetan with Taiwan was seen as a sign of great disloyalty to the cause of Tibet, and it was not kindly looked upon.

The KMT's position, based on Chiang Kai-shek's statement issued after the Tibetan uprising of 1959, was that the right of the Tibetans to decide their future would be respected once the mainland was reclaimed. Despite Tibetan beliefs that the policy needed reconsideration in view of events in Tibet and of the KMT's own limited rule in Taiwan, it was never reconsidered or changed leaving little prospect for any real accommodation between the two “exile” governments.

Since the doors in Dharmasala were not open to the KMT, it seems that efforts were carried out elsewhere in Nepal and India to reach out to the Tibetan

people; through a Tibetan language publication in Calcutta, and in clandestine ways. Individual contacts became possible because some of these Tibetans in exile had in fact had relations with the KMT prior to the 1950s in parts of Eastern Tibet; those who had visited China, and some who had even worked with the KMT government as early as the 1930s and 1940.

Tibetan Efforts and Failures

However, these “unofficial” contacts were not welcomed, and the TGIE sent several emissaries in the 1960’s and 1970’s to Taiwan to find ways to improve the relationship; prominent figures such as P.T. Takla, brother in law of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and W.G. Kundeling, Kalon (Minister) for Religious and Cultural Affairs, but who were unable to convince the ROC to reconsider their policies.

Only in the late 1970s the first signs of change seemed possible when a Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama was able to bypass the MTAC and meet with the then Prime Minister and officials of the National Security Council on several occasions. It ushered in a new era of relations with the ROC welcomed by the TGIE. According to the understanding then, the MTAC was no longer going to remain the government arm that dealt with Tibetan affairs. However, since the MTAC was a “constitutional” body it could not be conveniently removed nor its functions immediately curtailed. Hence the new arrangement remained unpublicized and some of the joint activities secret.

However, this secret arrangement was soon to turn into a very messy affair when it became public knowledge as a result of a “leak” about it somewhere in Europe. The “secret” nature of the relationship and some of its cooperative projects came under the scrutiny of the Tibetan parliament in exile and became a matter of great contention and finger-pointing within the exile polity. Many suspected that this was all the doings of the MTAC while others saw it as deliberate internal Tibetan political machinations. Whatever the causes of

the outing, it brought the new relationship to an effective halt, and an end to the cooperative projects, including the rather sensitive subject of gathering of information from inside Tibet. Most of the Tibetan officials who were part of this had to disassociate completely from it, and a key figure terminated his service owing to the political fall out.

While this episode was a watershed event, concluding in 1990, it unfortunately did not change the situation. The MTAC seems to be back, ever more active, recruiting more Tibetans to work for them, and pursuing major projects within India. One such assistance program, worked out with the then leadership of the Chushi Gangdruk, the former Tibetan resistance organization, was presented directly to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

However, in light of the recent National Security issue and repeated TGIE objections to MTAC's unofficial and, at times, suspected "secret" ties with Tibetans, the proposal was immediately rejected. The TGIE found it unacceptable that a Tibetan organization would strike such a "deal" with MTAC when so many issues about our relationship were unresolved, and immediately demanded that it dropped and publicly recanted. The Chushi Gandruk did not immediately accept the TGIE's disapproval, insisting that they were simply trying to find humanitarian assistance for fellow Tibetans and that since the TGIE was no longer pursuing a policy of independence for Tibet, saw no harm in any cooperation with the MTAC.

Once more these developments resulted in a major flare-up within the exile community. With the Chushi Gandruk insisting that they had intended no wrong, and at the same time claiming to speak for a sizeable segment of the Tibetan people, the TGIE's position as representing all Tibetans in exile was put to question. It became so serious that that the Speaker of the Parliament and the Chair of the Cabinet had to ask all Tibetans from Kham to state whether they supported the position taken by the Chushi Gandruk or by the TGIE. In the end, the vast majority of Khampas supported the government's

position, but it was a crude and desperate loyalty-test that had to be carried out contributing little to the unity among the Tibetans, and gave cause for another larger group of Chushi Gangdruk members to claim to be the true Chushi Gangdruk, loyal to Tibet and the Tibetan government in exile, reigniting yet another row.

It seems that repercussions were equally strong in Taiwan leading to many serious discussions and change in the MTAC as well.

Finally a New Chapter

So it seemed that this unfortunate dance of the MTAC and the TGIE would go on forever, to the detriment of all. Fortunately, forces much larger were already at play in Taiwan. With the end of martial law in 1987 and the election of Lee Teng-hui as President in 1996, Taiwan was swiftly moving to becoming a successful democracy and the KMT's policies and hold over the government slowly loosening. And by 2000 that hold, specifically their hold over the executive functions, would sever when Chen Shui-bian, as candidate of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party, was elected President of Taiwan.

The MTAC still exists today under the Chen administration despite the considerable debate in recent years about its mandate and its very future existence. And while the constitutional character of the MTAC and other constitutional matters have yet to be tackled in Taiwan, the fundamental policy regarding Tibet has changed; the government of Taiwan and the MTAC is on record that they acknowledge the Tibetan people's right to decide their own future in accordance with international principles of human rights and democracy. However, the TGIE still does not feel comfortable in having direct interactions with the MTAC although they interact with other officials and departments of the government. As such, the MTAC presently does not seem to have an active political agenda but is focused more on cultural, humanitarian, and educational programs, working with other governmental

and non-governmental entities on projects and programs with Tibetans in exile and in Tibet.

Apart from the democratic and political changes that have contributed to this new Tibet-friendly climate in Taiwan, the steady growth of public interest in Tibetan Buddhism seems to have been an important factor in improving Tibetan Taiwanese relations. Even during the period when official relations between the TGIE and ROC were not going well, the Taiwanese public was already interacting with Tibetans in various ways, especially with Tibetan lamas and scholars; befriending and studying with them in far away places such as Nepal, India, and U.S., and even in Taiwan itself.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's first visit to Taiwan in 1997 and his second in 2001 have been important milestones in the history of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan and of Tibetan Taiwanese ties. The first visit was made possible by a tremendous amount of work by both Tibetan and Taiwanese officials and private citizens, and they are many who are happy to have contributed to its success. In the aftermath of the first visit a "religious" foundation was established, headed by a Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which is the official TGIE representative office in Taiwan. This official presence is complimented by over 200 different Tibetan Buddhist centers throughout Taiwan, and Tibetan scholars, lamas and books seem commonplace in Taiwan today.

Conclusions

It is clear from this brief history of Tibetan-Taiwanese relations that the policies of the Koumintang regarding the future of the Tibetan people were unacceptable and unworkable for the Tibetans. Such policies should have no place in the future as far as the people of Tibet and Taiwan are concerned. Irrespective of whether the Tibetan people become completely independent of China or not, or if any creative "integration" becomes possible with or within a larger community, it cannot succeed unless a people's distinct identity and

their basic rights as a people are fully acknowledged, respected and manifest.

The lesson for us (the Tibetans and the Taiwanese) is that as numerically smaller peoples, close to larger societies, our identities and our very survival will always be challenged. But if we can remain true to our ideals and the best of our cultural traditions, our worth and meaning as communities are never diminished. Far from it, we can always find ways to renew ourselves and find new relevance in an ever changing world.

The Tibetan and Taiwanese people should look at our new emerging relationship as one of great potential and challenge. Our interactions of Buddhist learning and experiences are at its nascent stages, and promises to be rich and fruitful, spiritually and culturally. As for our concerns about China, the very best will be required of our creativity and hard work to find the right answers. Even the Tibetan experience of exile might play a valuable role in helping us to enhance our efforts to reach out to the world community; to create greater awareness and sustained support for the work of peace, freedom and democracy for Tibet and Taiwan.

What we attempt and accomplish together will add yet more layers to Taiwan's emerging new identity, and will compliment the new social and political consciousness of a successful and abundant Taiwanese society that can stand firmly on its own with a level of sanity and purpose that can be a model for all.

On a practical level, the relationship between Tibet (in exile) and Taiwan now needs to advance to its next level. If there is a need for further clarity in the "official" positions of the TGIE and Taiwan, or if a reconfirmation of our basic purposes are required, the efforts need to come from both parties. A relationship of such potential should not remain as one of temporary convenience or of unfulfilled promises.

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