EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF TAIWAN STUDIES CONFERENCE

Taiwan’s break with Japan:
1972 Revisited

Joji Kijima
(112027@soas.ac.uk)
18 April 2004

1. Introduction

30 years after the severance of diplomatic relations between the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan and Japan, two ‘previously unknown facts’ were revealed in the re-union of political actors from both governments (Ishii 2003a: 27; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a, 2003b). To put them in the chronological order, the first of such facts is that Chiang Kai-shek had belatedly acquiesced in the dual representation of ‘China’ in the United Nations (UN) in 1971. The second fact is that Tokyo never once alluded to the ‘severing of relations’ (danko) with Taipei in 1972. These ground-breaking findings surely offer us a clearer view of the path that led to the present state of relations between Taipei and Tokyo (Ibid). However, they also raise another set of questions for further study—which in turn ‘could contribute to the setting of a course for Japan-Taiwan relations in the years ahead’ (Ishii 2003a: 27).

In light of these new findings, this study addresses the following three questions: 1) What made it impossible for Taipei to consent to Washington’s dual representation formula more clearly and swiftly at the UN in 1971?; 2) Would it have been possible for Nationalist China to avoid severing relations with Japan in 1972 if Taipei had managed to remain in the UN in 1971?; and 3) How was Tokyo’s (in)action of making no mention of ‘severing relations’ made possible in 1972? In addressing these questions, this study highlights two discourses—the discourse of ‘one China’ and that of Japan’s ‘debt of gratitude’ (ongi) to Chiang Kai-shek’s ‘returning virtue for malice’ (yide baoyuan) postwar Japan policy. This
study in effect shows that Japan’s ‘recognition’ was not sufficient for maintaining diplomatic relations between Taipei and Tokyo in 1972. After all, it takes two to tango.

2. The China seat in the UN 1971: the mirage of ‘two Chinas’

From 1945 until 1971, Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist regime on Taiwan occupied the so-called ‘China seat’ as an original member and one of the five permanent members of the Security Council in the United Nations. More specifically, between 1951 and 1960, Nationalist China represented ‘China’ under the auspices of the United States which managed to rally a majority of member states in support of a ‘moratorium’ against Communist China’s admission to the UN. However by 1961, as a result of decolonization and the admission of numerous Third World states to the General Assembly, Washington had realized that the ‘moratorium’ procedure could no longer be sustained. Thus, in 1961, the United States proposed that the Chinese representation issue be considered an ‘important question’ which required a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly for any resolution on seating to pass. For the following decade, until 1971, this US-backed ‘important question’ resolution kept Taipei in and Beijing out of the United Nations. Nevertheless, by 1971, Washington had greatly lost its grip on the UN as the number of General Assembly membership had increased to 131 from 99 members in 1960 and 60 states in 1951 respectively. In fact, the rival Albanian resolution, which was designed to expel Taipei and admit Beijing, had gained momentum and received over half of the vote (51 to 49 with 25 abstentions) in the General Assembly in 1970 for the first time. Moreover, by the summer 1971, US President Richard M. Nixon’s abrupt announcement of his forthcoming visit to Beijing had ‘shocked’ the members of the free world. It was at this critical juncture that Washington ambiguously proposed the aforementioned dual representation resolution and the ‘reverse important question’ resolution at the United Nations.
Question 1: what made it impossible for Taipei to accept Washington’s dual representation formula more clearly and swiftly at the United Nations in 1971? Taipei’s reaction to the American proposals—especially the dual representation formula—was very slow. Fang Chin-yen, ‘a former diplomat who was long responsible for ROC’s activities within the UN in connection with the issue of Chinese representation’, describes Taipei’s reaction as the following (Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a: 64, 2003b: 30):

‘The biggest question about the US “dual representation” proposal, under which the PRC would get China’s seat on the Security Council but Taiwan would remain as a member of the UN, was how Chiang Kai-shek would take it. When this proposal was set forth, he became visibly upset. Over the course of my long career as a diplomat, I had come to know Chiang Kai-shek as an extremely realistic person. But he was also very formal (in other words, he was anxious to save his face) and slow to deal with matters.’

Furthermore, Fang suggests that such inflexibility can be attributed to the authoritarian nature of Chiang’s decision-making as he laments the lack of alternative proposals at the time (Ibid.):

‘…we didn’t have an alternative proposal. This was due to a political structure….in Taiwan….the Foreign Ministry wasn’t able to put forward an alternative proposal concerning China’s UN representation.’

More significantly, Fang further states how Chiang’s slow and ambivalent reaction under the authoritarian political structure consequently caused confusion in the chain of command, thereby distracting the following abandonment of ‘one China’ from adequately reaching diplomatic posts in time (Ibid.):

‘At the time, we sent out two directives to our overseas diplomatic posts. First we sent one saying that we would aim to “shoot down” the Albanian draft, just as in previous years. Then, after the United States came out with its dual-representation proposal, we hurriedly sent out a second directive saying that the ROC itself opposed this proposal but that our friends were free to decide on their own positions. But in the meantime our diplomatic posts around the world had already gone ahead with operations in line with the first directive. This confusion contributed to the passage of the Albanian resolution.’
It is based on the second directive that recent works have concluded Chiang Kai-shek had abandoned his one-China policy by tacitly accepting the idea of dual representation in 1971 (Ibid.; Ishii 2003a: 27). Therefore, in addition to the ambivalent nature of Chiang’s abandonment of ‘one China’ under the authoritarian political structure at the time, it was the timing with which Chiang switched to ‘two Chinas’ that cost Taipei its membership on the Security Council as well as its General Assembly seat.

However, such belatedness and ambivalence cannot be fully understood in terms of the authoritarian style of decision-making and the standard operational procedure as suggested by the recent studies. Here, it is also worthwhile to briefly examine Chiang’s belated acquiescence of ‘two Chinas’ through the lenses of political discourse and legitimacy. By doing so, one can further argue that Chiang Kai-shek’s own discourse of ‘one China’ made it extremely difficult even for himself to consent to Washington’s dual representation formula clearly and swiftly. From this perspective, it is understandable that Chiang Kai-shek was not in a hurry to deconstruct his own discourse of ‘one China’ and de-legitimize himself as the leader of China voluntarily. For instance, even Japanese Prime Minister Sato Eisaku (1997: 388, 410), a very close ally of Taipei’s, could only get Chiang’s vague message— that he might acquiesce in another ‘two Chinas’ formula in which Taipei was to remain on the Security Council. On another occasion, with a Japanese dietman whom Secretary General Hori Shigeru dispatched, Chiang persistently refused to reveal how he would cope with the dual representation resolution (Jiji Tsushinssha Seijibu 1972: 90). Accordingly, in terms of political discourse and legitimacy, Chiang was only able to abandon ‘one China’ tacitly and belatedly. Certainly, it was unfortunate given the probability that Chiang’s clear and timely adoption of the ‘two Chinas’ formula would have encouraged Washington to sponsor the ‘dual representation’ resolution only and prevented Beijing—which would have rejected such a formula since it was dictated by its own version of ‘one China’ (Kissinger 1979: 773)—from entering the UN.
Question 2: would it have been possible for Nationalist China to avoid severing relations with Tokyo in 1972 if Taipei had managed to remain in the UN in 1971? Japan agreed to co-sponsor the two US-drafted resolutions of the ‘China question’ at the UN in the fall of 1971. Tokyo’s co-sponsorship was a discursive effect of Chiang Kai-shek’s ‘returning virtue for malice’ postwar Japan policy. In fact, as the Japanese cabinet and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were divided over Washington’s request for Tokyo’s co-sponsorship, Prime Minister Sato Eisaku had to solely assumed political responsibility for supporting the ‘reverse important question’ (which required a two-thirds majority to expel Taipei from the UN) as well as the dual representation resolution (which was designed to secure Taipei’s seat in the General Assembly while allowing Beijing to replace Taipei as a permanent member of the Security Council). Although the dual representation formula was never put to the vote as Taipei walked out of the UN after the defeat of the ‘reverse important question’, it was the sense of ‘indebtedness’ to Chiang’s ‘magnanimous’ postwar Japan policy that enabled Sato to legitimate his decision to vote for the resolution.

According to Takeshita Noboru (1991: 65), the then Cabinet Secretary, Prime Minister Sato commented on the Chinese representation issue in the following fashion (author’s translation):

‘At the end of the war, the Soviet Union detained 600,000 Japanese soldiers. But Chiang Kai-shek made the announcement of “returning virtue for malice” (uramini mukuiruni tokuwo motte suru) and repatriated all the Japanese troops. In addition, while the Soviet Union advocated for the divisive occupation of Japan, Nationalist China along with the United States and Great Britain opposed that idea. We must not forget this debt of gratitude to Chiang Kai-shek for preventing us from becoming a divided nation like Germany and Korea. In the next General Assembly meeting of the United Nations, the “reverse important question resolution” will probably be defeated, and Nationalist China could well be expelled from the UN as a result. But I will continue to abide by international faith as long as I’m in power. The next prime minister could proceed with his China policy based on what the UN will decide.’

Ironically, while Tokyo was able to repay its ‘debt of gratitude’ to Chiang’s ‘returning virtue for malice’ postwar Japan policy, this repayment nonetheless turned out to be more than the Sato Cabinet could politically afford. As a matter of fact, the internal legitimacy of the Sato Cabinet was decisively undermined by the defeat of the ‘reverse important
question resolution’ at the UN in the fall of 1971 (Lee 1976: 104; Ogata 1988: 42-3; Hosoya 1993: 157). Consequently, as Sato suggested, the domestic environment of Japan’s China policy necessitated the next generation of Japanese leaders to embark on the normalization of relations with Beijing—which now represented ‘China’ in the UN. Here, it is important to note that Tokyo’s recognition of Beijing would necessarily lead to Taipei’s de-recognition of Tokyo as long as Taipei insisted on its version of ‘one China’ policy just as Beijing.

However, it was not Tokyo’s intention to sever relations with Taipei at the time as former Ambassador to Beijing Nakae Yosuke recalls (Koeda 2000: 230; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a: 61-2, 2003b: 28-9). Thus, just as Nakae further suggests (Ibid.: 31), if Taipei had ‘the idea of stressing Taiwan’ and managed to remain in the UN in 1971, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei would not have been so keen on normalizing relations with Beijing in 1972. Given that the discourse coalition of Japan’s ‘debt of gratitude’ to Chiang Kai-shek was formidable within the ruling party (Baba 1998: 114; Gotoda 1998: 299-300), it would have been much more difficult for Tokyo to buy Beijing’s discourse of ‘one China’ and switch recognition. In fact, the new Prime Minister was timid about visiting Beijing so soon after forming his cabinet (Takeiri 2003: 199). In short, if Chiang Kai-shek had managed to keep the China seat by abandoning his ‘one China’ discourse more clearly and timely in 1971, it would have been much easier for Taipei to avoid severing relations with Tokyo.

3. Taiwan’s break with Japan 1972: ‘returning virtue for malice’ v. ‘one China’

On 28 February 1972, the ‘San Francisco system’—which had kept Communist China isolated and contained for two decades—came to an ‘end’ as the ‘Shanghai communiqué was issued by President Richard M. Nixon of the United States and Premier Zhou Enlai of the Peoples’s Republic of China (Iriye 1992: 355-6). It was ‘a complete shift away from the self imposed policy of mutual exclusion that the two governments had pursued since the Korean War’ (Ibid: 356). At the same time, this shift in Washington Cold War strategy known as ‘détente’ significantly reversed NSC 13/2 of October 1948, which George F.
Kennan had definitively set in motion for the United States the fight against Moscow from its Japanese bastion since the ‘loss’ of China had become imminent (Kennan 1967: 368-96; Hosoya 1993: 114; Drifte 1983: 50-6; Buckley 1992: 30-1; Tanaka 1997: 34-8; Sakamoto 2000: 4-7). Consequently, in contrast to the early Cold War period, the significance of Japan as the linchpin of US hegemony in East Asia greatly diminished as Washington played the ‘China card’ in order to end the Vietnam War in an honorable fashion (Iriye 1992: 351; Ross 1995: 40; Burr 1999:30). More critically, the ‘end’ of the ‘San Francisco system’ also brought an ‘end’ to the Chiang regime’s ‘dependence on external legitimacy’ (Wakabayashi 2002: 90-1), thereby forcing it to internalize its legitimacy through ‘Taiwanization’ (Ibid. 1992: 182, 274-6; Rigger 1999: 111, 179). In any case, insomuch as Nixon’s visit to China was ‘shocking’ to Japanese and Nationalist Chinese elites who had collaborated with Washington to constitute its hegemony in East Asia, the ‘end’ of the ‘San Francisco system’ manifested the lack of consent which had sustained the system for two decades. Such absence of consent in turn led to Taipei’s break with Tokyo.

**Question 3: how was Tokyo’s (in)action of making no mention of ‘severing relations’ made possible in 1972?** In spite of Nixon’s visit to mainland China, the discourse of ‘returning virtue for malice’ continued to oblige the Japanese to repay ‘a debt of gratitude’ to the Chiang regime on Taiwan. In other words, insomuch as the discourse had made Tokyo’s diplomatic recognition of Taipei possible for two decades, it continued to make Japan’s de-recognition of the Chiang regime impossible over the course of ‘normalization’ of relations between Tokyo and Beijing in 1972. For example on 19 September 1972, ten days before the ‘normalization’ of relations with Beijing, Special Envoy Shiina Etsusaburo visited Taipei and explained to Premier Chiang Ching-kuo that Japan’s negotiations with Beijing would be conducted in such a way that it could maintain ‘hitherto existing relations’ (jurai no kankei) with Taipei ‘including diplomatic relations’ (Sato et. al. 1992: 299; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a: 66-7, 2003b: 31-2). Shiina, a major proponent of Japan’s ‘debt of gratitude’ to Chiang Kai-shek (Ibid: 137-40,144), also carried a letter from Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei, which made absolutely no mention of ‘severing relations’ (danko) because it had been completely deleted at the final stage of drafting (Ogura 2003: 231-2). Even after the ‘normalization’ of relations with Beijing, the Japanese government merely announced

The recent ground-breaking study shows that this ‘unexpected aspect of the break’ can be attributed to the following two reasons (Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a: 68, 2003b: 32). First, Tokyo wanted the break to be initiated by Taipei. It has been argued that ‘(c)ircumstances on Japan’s side kept it from abrogating the 1952 Treaty of Peace between the Republic of China and Japan’ (Ibid). In other words, for the purpose of the advantageously, ‘normalizing’ relations with Beijing, Tokyo tactically maintained that the Treaty of Peace with Taipei had already ended the state of war and settled the issue of reparations between Japan and ‘China’ in 1952 (Ibid.). According to this logic, Tokyo could not de-recognise Taipei for it strove to achieve ‘normalization’ with Beijing while it concurrently maintained the validity of peace with Taipei (Ibid.), thereby attempting to preclude the issue of reparations which Tokyo claimed Chiang Kai-shek had already foregone 20 years earlier (Zhu 2003: 413-6). Second, it has been suggested that Tokyo restrained from abrogating the Treaty of Peace with Taipei because it feared that Taipei might declare a return to the state of war and retaliate against Japan (Takahashi and Wakayama 2003a: 69, 2003b: 33). As a matter of fact, according to the recent publication of the minutes of the peace negotiations between Prime Minister Tanaka and Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing, Japan expressed its concern and Tokyo’s fear was taken into consideration for the expression ‘abnormal state of affairs’—rather than the ‘state of war’—between Japan and ‘China’ (Ishii et. al. 2003: 72). However, it can be argued that these are but discursive effects of ‘returning virtue for malice’ as it played an indispensable role for the settlement of war reparations as well as the conclusion of the Treaty of Peace between the Republic of China and Japan in 1952.

Therefore, one can argue that the discourse of ‘returning virtue for malice also contributed to making no mention of ‘severing relations’ in 1972. In fact, the 19 September 1972 meeting between Premier Chiang Ching-kuo—Chiang Kai-shek’s son who had politically begun to take over from his ailing father—and Special Envoy Shiina Etsusaburo was conducted in the discourse of Chiang Kai-shek’s ‘returning virtue for malice’ postwar Japan policy. According to Nakae Yosuke’s notes—the only one set of minutes in the Japanese language, which has recently been made public (Ishii et. al. 2003b: 133-
43)—Chiang Ching-kuo and Shiina discussed the immanent diplomatic crisis between Taipei and Tokyo just six days before the Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to Beijing as the following (Ishii et. al. 2003b: 138-9, author’s translation):

‘..the relationship between China and Japan is special. President Chiang Kai-shek is very interested in issues related to Japan. He has been so interested in Sino-Japanese relations that he has once drawn attention to the question of whether Japan should see China as a friend or an enemy. It was before the Japanese militarists instigated your nation to go to war against China. He supported the Japanese imperial institution and opposed the divisive occupation of Japan by four Allied powers. Subsequently, he approved the signing of the “Peace Treaty” between the Republic of China and Japan”. These facts are unfailing results of the historical vision with which he approached issues related to Japan. The underlying assumption of his vision is that we cannot mutually secure prosperity in Japan and peace in Asia as a whole unless the Japanese government takes pro-“Republic of China” and anti-“communist” positions. Recently, Chiang Kai-shek has re-emphasized that the issues related to Japan must be viewed not only from Japan but also from Asia as a whole.’

In reply, Special Envoy Shiina stated the following without making any mention of ‘severing relations’ (Ibid.; Takahashi and Wakayama 2003b: 32):

‘I have listened keenly to what you have said about overcoming various difficulties. I feel even more strongly that we are at a critical juncture. Looking at all the situations in Asia and around the world, I believe it will be difficult to eliminate every contradiction in connection with the Japan-ROC issue, but we will exert our utmost efforts to avoid missteps’

Interestingly, as much as the discourse of ‘returning virtue for malice’ constrained Tokyo from alluding to the ‘severing of relations’, one can further argue that the discourse also functioned to leave the possibility of ‘two Chinas’/‘one China, one Taiwan’ open for Taipei. Just as Shiina emphasized that Tokyo intended to maintain ‘hitherto existing relations’ with Taipei in the same meeting as mentioned earlier, it can be argued that there was ‘another lost opportunity’ for Taipei to rescue its diplomatic relations with Tokyo. More specifically, if Chiang Ching-kuo had identified with Taiwan in 1972 as he later did in the 1980s, it would have been much more difficult for Tokyo to normalize relations with Beijing—given that Communist China abided by its ‘one China’ discourse whereas Taipei
continued to receive Tokyo’s repayment of ‘a debt of gratitude’ for Chiang Kai-shek’s ‘returning virtue for malice’ postwar Japan policy.

4. Conclusion

In summary, drawing on new findings in the Japanese language, this study on diplomatic severance between Taipei and Tokyo attempted to address three how-(im)possible questions. By doing so, it highlighted the discourses of ‘one China’ and ‘returning virtue for malice’ which Nationalist China on Taiwan mobilized vis-à-vis Japan. First, this study attributed Chiang Kai-shek’s belated acquiescence in the dual representation of China at the UN to the discursive effect of ‘one China’. Second, this research attempted to show that it would have been possible for Taipei to avoid severing relations with Tokyo in 1972 if the Republic of China on Taiwan had managed to remain in the UN in 1971 by abandoning its ‘one China’ discourse more clearly and timely. Third, the author argued that Tokyo’s (in)action of making no mention of ‘severing relations’ was a discursive effect of ‘returning virtue for malice’ and that there was ‘another lost opportunity’ for Nationalist China to save its diplomatic relations with Japan if Chiang Ching-kuo had identified with Taiwan in 1972. One of the lessons that can be drawn for the future of Taiwan-Japan relations is that unilateral recognition is not sufficient for bilateral diplomatic relations—more simply, it takes two to tango.
References


Takahashi, Masaharu and Wakayama Juichiro (2003a) ‘“Nitchu” ka “Nittai” kade yureta Nippon gaiko’ (Japan’s foreign policy between ‘Japan-China’ and ‘Japan-Taiwan’).
Chuo Koron April: 60-75.

----(2003b) ‘The untold story of Japan’s break with Taiwan’, Japan Echo June: 28-34.


Wakabayashi, Masahiro (1992) Taiwan: Bunretsu kokka to minshuka (Taiwan: the Democratization of a divided nation), Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai.
