Local Elites and Intra-party Dynamics: the KMT-bentupai

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Introduction: Taiwanization of the KMT and the bentupai

In 1988, when Li Denghui first became president of the R.O.C and chairman of its ruling party, the KMT, he was the first native Taiwanese to ever hold the top political position in Taiwan’s history. While during his incumbency Taiwan went far along the road of liberalization and democratization, there also took place a process of noticeable liberalization within the KMT, which also meant - what Li as party leader himself stood for - the continuation and acceleration of Taiwanization, that is, the promotion of more and more native Taiwanese party members into higher intra-party bodies and positions. Li Denghui actively pushed for Taiwanization of the KMT and of the state as well (Clark 2003).

Along with the processes of liberalization and Taiwanization, factions again arose on the central level of the KMT, a phenomenon that had been symptomatic of the party’s history on the mainland, but that had been successfully eliminated by the leadership since retrocession and the following efforts at party reorganization in the early 1950s. Now, at the turn of the 1980s to the 90s, there emerged the so-called mainstream faction that was made up mostly of native Taiwanese, who by then also were the majority of the KMT as a whole, and who supported Li Denghui and his program of political reforms. They were opposed by the non-mainstream faction that largely united the party’s mainlander elites. They were opposed to Li’s reforms as well as to the gradual detachment from mainland China by official policy. Both groups stretched across the various levels of the party hierarchy, and were loose networks or currents rather than tight organizations. Factions of various lifespan also emerged within the KMT’s caucus in the Legislative Yuan. They adopted particular names and organized more formally, as for example, the “Wisdom Club” (知識會), which was close to Li Denghui, or the “New Kuomindang Alliance” (新國民黨聯線), who identified with the interests of the mainlanders on Taiwan (Hood 1996).
Around the turn of the century, the Taiwanese media coined the term KMT-
bentupai (本土派), or pro-localization faction of the KMT. The term bentupai, in
the case of the KMT, seems to denote a current within the party that, unlike the
KMT of the former days but similar to Li Denghui’s mainstream faction, somehow
has a strong political orientation towards Taiwan (bentu 本土, the homeland).

Tentative definition of the concept
However, it has so far remained unclear what the bentupai really is, and it is not
easily defined, because there are several dimensions which the term seems to
connote. One possible would run along the sub-ethnic dimension. Accordingly, one
would class those party members with the bentupai, who are of native Taiwanese
origin. And secondly, because the mainlanders since 1949 settled mostly in and
around Taibei in northern Taiwan, the bentupai thereby obtains a geographical
dimension, according to which it is localized mainly in central and southern Taiwan,
apart from its representatives in the Legislative Yuan. Thirdly, concerning the
dimension of political stances, one might, hypothetically at least, assume that the
political goals of the members of the bentupai are characterized by a relatively
strong sense of Taiwan’s special identity, even national identity, and thus strongly
prioritize the political, economic, and social well-being and integrity of Taiwan and
its inhabitants above the ideal of a united Chinese nation. This is often subsumed
under the expression “Taiwan first” (Taiwan youxian 臺灣優先). A fourth
dimension to be distinguished might be the hierarchical, which places the main
forces of the bentupai on the local rather than on the central levels of the party.

What has to be stressed in addition to the hypothetical character of these lines of
definition, is that they are not to be understood as very strict or exclusive. Of course
not all native Taiwanese KMT members can be counted among the bentupai, nor
can all KMT members of central and southern Taiwan, because in these regions
there are some mainland party members as well.

At least as a starting point, the KMT-bentupai may be defined as a loosely
connected group of KMT politicians and cadres on the local level in central and
southern Taiwan who are benshengren and thus share similar social and political imprints and values, and who therefore will pursue common – but not necessarily coordinated - strategies towards the party center.

Research questions
Given such a current within Taiwan’s biggest political party, it is striking that this has not been researched, neither in Taiwan itself nor in the West, as the phenomenon of the bentupai is connected to several of Taiwan’s most important political and sociocultural problems. Taiwan’s political identity, in the eyes of local political elites, for instance, is an important factor in the process of political transformation, but so far it has not been researched enough. It is thus related to the old line of conflict between mainlanders, today in the second and third generation, and native Taiwanese, over influence on the political development of Taiwan, even if nowadays that conflict is not as fierce as it used to be. It might be more adequately conceived of as a conflict between an overall Chinese and a particularly Taiwanese consciousness. Furthermore, the politico-geographical contrast between the north, which has been better developed for decades, and the less developed south, which came to be a stronghold of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is also related to the emergence of that intra-party current.

The interesting research topic that the KMT-bentupai thus constitutes may be approached by way of several guiding questions (and hypotheses):

1. What understanding of the concepts of bentupai and KMT-bentupai do people in Taiwan and especially politicians of both political camps have? Is there acceptance of, and identification with, the concept of bentupai among those KMT politicians who might be expected to belong to it?

2. What are the characteristics in terms of personnel? Who are the bentupai and what is their strength within the party? What does their relationship with the Taiwan’s local factions (difang paixi 地方派系) look like? And of what nature is the relationship between local bentupai members and bentupai legislators?
3. What particular political orientations with regard to national identity, China policy, and party politics has their socialization in the “political ecology” of central/southern Taiwan produced, and how do they compare with the party charter and the values and goals of more conservative (mainlander) party members’?

4. What are the common interests and how successful is the bentupai in pursuing them?

5. Which strategies do the members of the bentupai pursue towards the party center and towards the other political parties? And how successful are they?

6. Ultimately, an interest in researching the KMT-bentupai also consists in gauging the influence that this faction might exert on the party as a whole in terms of political positioning with regard to the important issue of Taiwan’s political status. Related to this, of course, is the question of the development of Taiwan’s entire party system.

The preliminary answers to these questions, which follow, draw on the results of fieldwork conducted over a period of altogether four month last year. Two places, Taizhong City and County and Tainan City and County, were chosen as representative of central and the southern Taiwan, respectively. The research method employed consisted of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with local politicians and sometimes cadres of the KMT as well as the DPP. The purpose of the interviews conducted with DPP politicians was to provide the possibility of drawing comparisons between statements made by the local elites of the two parties about political and ideological orientation. Additional interviews were conducted with several legislators of both parties, one KMT central party cadre, and three journalists. Apart from the interviews, campaign literature was also collected, where available.
Some preliminary results

What were the findings? As for the concept of bentupai in general, to some people it primarily refers to that current in the KMT which is under consideration here, though a more general understanding of the term is common when not specified by party designation. The word bentupai in political Taiwan accordingly refers to any public figure or grouping who stand with their actions or demeanour for Taiwan-centered, pro-localization positions. This, of course, includes first and foremost, the DPP and the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU).

Meaning of “KMT-bentupai”

Concerning the KMT-bentupai in particular, the existence of such a phenomenon was often acknowledged or even emphasized by interviewees from the green camp. However, when politicians of the green camp talk about the KMT-bentupai, their statements are not always merely descriptive but sometimes tend to be a discursive instrument against the KMT’s image of a united political force. The logic of such statements implies that if there is a bentupai within the KMT, then there are factions that are mutually antagonistic, and possibly that certain parts of it stand politically closer to the green camp than to their own party leadership. One instance of such a statement was when Hsieh Chang-ting, the DPP’s candidate for this year’s presidential election, appealed in public last year to Wang Jingping (王金平) and the bentupai forces related to him, to come over and join the green camp if their voice and views continued to be ignored within the KMT. Wang Jinping is the speaker of the Legislative Yuan and identified in public discourse as the head of the KMT-bentupai.

With that same logic, quite a few of the KMT members with whom I spoke tended to repudiate the existence of a bentupai within the KMT saying, for example, “There are only members of the KMT, and there is no bentupai nor factions within the KMT.” They would rather discount the concept as a ploy by their political adversary, the DPP, or an invention by the media.
But then many other KMT members among the interviewees did acknowledge the concept and thereby - to varying degrees - even the existence of a bentupai. One KMT city councillor from Taizhong would only concede that, according to general usage of the term, just about anybody of native Taiwanese origin and (usually) speaking the Taiwanese dialect could be included under the term bentupai, but he did not see any political relevance connected with it. A cadre in the upper ranks of the party center, himself a native Taiwanese, thought that the question of the existence of the KMT-bentupai was interesting but difficult (with which I agree) and that he couldn’t make a judgement about it.

Interestingly, some KMT members who attested to the existence of the bentupai in the sense of an intra-party group or current, were themselves closer to the more conservative, China-related parts of the party, whether they were of mainland origin or had their support base in the Huangfuxing party chapter, which unites party members with an army background.

Two others tended to see the bentupai as being simply any party members who identify with Taiwan and care for the well-being of its inhabitants. By that definition even mainlanders could be included in the bentupai, though these two respondents themselves were (sub-)ethnic Taiwanese. Clearly, their definition charges the concept with positive values: identification with Taiwan and care for the well-being of the Taiwanese ahead of concerns for the Chinese nation on the part of politicians have become important and valuable political currency in Taiwan in recent years. So it is not surprising that the two KMT members mentioned both stated their identification with the bentupai. They possibly represent a trend among central and southern KMT politicians to use bentupai as a label that is appealing to voters.

Some other respondents who confirmed the existence of the bentupai said that it was made up of only certain members of the KMT legislative caucus. One person among those who argued this way, a Tainan county councillor of the KMT, gave as a reason, that only legislators would deal with those political questions of national importance, where pro- or non-pro-localization of the party and its policies are touched upon, questions like Taiwan’s national identity and China-policy. But most
interestingly, this man belonged to a group of several local KMT politicians from the south who described their own political position as “deep blue” (shenlan 深蓝). When enquiring, however, about what they meant by calling themselves “deep blue”, it became clear that they weren’t referring to some set of conservative, China-centered, old-style ideological KMT values. What they meant by being shenlan is simply standing loyally on the side of their party and attacking the DPP assiduously in day to day political quarrels. On the contrary, the political values and identity that those local KMT politicians showed, corresponded much to what one would expect from pro-localization-minded southerners. They explicitly denied any identification with mainland China and professed their wish for Taiwan to be and to ultimately remain independent under any official name. And sometimes they attested to being influenced in this way by the special political ecology of southern Taiwan. Finally, one local KMT politician, a Tainan city councillor, revealed these same political orientations and confessed identification with the bentupai. And what is more, she mentioned, in conjunction with her intra-party position, that she, as a typical southerner, had supported Wang Jinping both generally and during his election to the position of party chairman in 2005.

Summarizing these findings, it should just be noted, that in Taiwan the term bentupai, in connection with the KMT, far from being a clear-cut analytical concept, is subject to very different understandings and uses. Most strikingly, even those politicians who might be expected to be part of the phenomenon, seem to have very different estimations about the strategic value of confirming the concept at all.

Characteristics in terms of personnel
The mention of support for Wang Jingping (王金平) is reminiscent of the personal element of networking and intra-party factionalism that may or may not be characteristic of the KMT-bentupai. As mentioned before, Wang Jinping, speaker of the Legislative Yuan since 1999, is widely seen as the head of the KMT-bentupai. He shares many of the attributes that mark the preliminary understanding of the concept as outlined above; for example, he is a local Taiwanese from the south, from Kaohsiung County, and he has a reputation for being conciliatory towards the DPP, for which reason he also enjoys their respect. Furthermore, he has a
background with the local factions in Kaohsiung County and has a reputation for being particularly well connected with many politicians in and from the south of Taiwan. Prior to the nomination of the mainlander Ma Yingjiu as KMT presidential candidate in the spring of 2007, Wang Jinping showed some ambitions to get nominated himself, and, as a token of Taiwaneseness, “played the ethnic card” against Ma by calling into question the appropriateness of a member of the (sub-) ethnic minority governing the majority of Taiwanese.

As Wang is the most well known and highest ranking representative of the KMT’s pro-localization faction, it would have been evidence of the faction character of the bentupai if all or most of the KMT-respondents who were termed bentupai by other Taiwanese people or even designated themselves as such, had supported Wang against Ma. However, this was not the case: most of them rather professed loyalty to, or greater sympathy for, Ma Yingjiu as the best leadership figure for the KMT.

But then again, the intra-party network of (mainly central and southern) local politicians in support of Wang Jinping does exist. This was shown in the summer of 2007 when a group of southern county and city council speakers and vice-speakers petitioned the party center to fire two top party officials, based on rumours that those two had tried to tarnish Wang’s reputation and sought to prevent him from getting nominated as a candidate for the next election of the Legislative Yuan speaker.

If one adds to this the fact that some informants outside the party conceived of the bentupai as the aggregate of the local factions, which many of the petitioners in support of Wang surely also belong to, there seems to emerge a picture of two different kinds of bentupai-politicians within the KMT. One kind may be described as the typical local KMT politicians who are well connected to each other, and are members of local factions or at least entertain connections with them. They pursue largely material political interests on the basis of just these connections and their strong social rootedness in their localities, and they support Wang Jinping as the most prominent member of their network. Bentupai in this sense can be termed a party faction, a faction from interest (Hume 1742/1987), albeit without much organization or formalization.
The other kind of bentupai-politician is embodied by those who claim as an aspiration the development of Taiwan and the well-being of people in Taiwan in general and in rural Taiwan in particular. They demand a further adjustment of the KMT to Taiwan, ongoing intra-party democratization and modernization, and even the curtailing of the mainlanders’ old bastions of power inside the party, and yet they support Ma Yingjiu. For those reasons they are labeled as bentupai by outsiders, such as the media and hence, by average citizens. They themselves, as we have seen, may or may not subscribe to that label. In contrast to the traditional-style local bentupai politicians, they may tentatively be termed “idealists”.

Clearly, these two types of bentupai are described here only as ideal types. The particular traits of each are by no means mutually incompatible. On the contrary, many of the people in question may show attributes of both tendencies in various ratios, and certainly all of them keep their material political interests in mind. Yet, what might justify the hypothetical distinction between these two kinds of KMT-pro-localization faction is the fact that in addition to their different political emphasis, several of those termed “idealists” have a personal and/or social background that is markedly different from that of the traditional style bentupai. For example, many of them have studied abroad, or even worked in the academic field - experiences that may well have worked to distance them from the local factions.

It was stated above that one trait of the (tentative) definition of the bentupai was that it consisted of local politicians rather than of people at the center of the party or the political system. This assumption was inspired by the location of the political center in Taibei, which is sometimes called “Taipei Guo” – “the Taipei empire” - to indicate the great socio-geographic difference between this mainlander-dominated urban area and the central and southern bentu localities, and therefore it is not easily associated with the notion of bentupai. But thereby arises the question of the relation of those KMT legislators, who are often called bentupai-legislators by the media, to the bentupai in general. However, as the speaker of the Legislative Yuan appears to be the head of a bentupai network, and as they get elected in the central and southern localities, and campaign there on the basis of their local social ties, there seems to be no a priori reason to conceptually separate them from the broader
The same goes for the “idealists” among *bentupai* legislators, whose political identity and values, and reported strategies showed no significant difference from those of their local counterparts. Nor can the *bentupai* simply be pitted against the party center, as for example in the Central Standing Committee where there are now six *bentupai* members - who are mostly also legislators - out of a total of 32 members.

KMT Central Standing Committee: ethnic/sub-ethnic composition & strength of *bentupai*

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* counted as such by informant from the media

**Political positioning of *bentupai* members**

With regard to the range of ideology and policy preferences of the pro-localization faction, it had been hypothesized that its exponents would show positions that deviate from those of the official party line and the party leadership. However, apart from a stronger identification with Taiwan as the homeland than the mainlanders’ and a preference for the perpetuation of at least a *de facto* independence on the part of some local politicians, most respondents that were considered to be KMT-*bentupai* showed no significant differences from the party line on China policy, economic policies towards China, and cultural policy. Rather, it could be observed that the larger national questions of Taiwan were of no direct relevance to the personal political work and campaigning of local politicians. The issues they address in local politics are the material things that matter directly to their constituencies, like the local economy and infrastructure in the broadest sense. For the same reason, individual service to people in the sense of help with practical matters, and the reputation for being good at that, is what they see as important in their work. Even some of the *bentupai* legislators said that in election campaigns they would emphasize such issues of local concern over the larger national questions.
Political and strategic Interests

These findings point to the question of the interests that are common to the bentupai politicians in the KMT. One informant from the media, who formerly published bentupai-related articles, opined that the most basic interest, at least of the legislators, consists of getting election nominations. He saw this as a disciplining effect on the bentupai, i.e., the reason why they didn’t dare deviate from or oppose policy of the party center. But, of course, after being nominated as candidates for central or local level elections, their aim is to get elected. And although it may have changed a little in the last two decades, in the special “political ecology” in (central and) southern Taiwan, where a majority of the electorate came to favour the DPP with its message of localization, getting elected has often not been an easy task for KMT candidates. So one would expect that they should have an interest in changing the party with which they are affiliated in the direction of localization.

Strategies

As the interviews revealed, it is this specific interest of bentupai members that their intra-party strategies are designed to achieve. Especially those termed here as “idealists” reported that, over the last three years or so, they have tried to communicate to Ma Yingjiu the special features of the social and economic situation and cultural peculiarities of the people of central and southern Taiwan and also the tricky situation into which those aspects put KMT members. For example, the Taizhong County vice-commissioner related that during Ma Yingjiu’s visits there he often advised him on where to stay and what to visit in order to get acquainted with “real life” outside of Taipei, the aim being to influence Mr. Ma to become more localized himself. The need for that, or possibly the need of a corresponding image, seemed to occur to the party center and Ma himself in the summer of last year, when he went with much publicity for a “long stay” to the central and southern regions.

Another, more drastic strategy at swaving the party centre towards localization was displayed by the vice-speaker of Tainan County council in August/September of last year. Via the media, this man appealed to the the “camp” of Ma Yingjiu, i.e., the party centre, to talk to Wang Jinping and his people in order to settle the conflict that had reportedly erupted between Ma Yingjiu’s supporters in the top party ranks
and Wang. But in the same breath the councillor from Tainan County threatened to leave the Ma-Hsiao campaign team and join the DPP campaign team of Hsieh Chang-ting (Lianhe Bao, 2007/08/29). The result was that a few weeks later Ma Yingjiu went out of his way to visit the vice-speaker in his home town to listen to his political views and demands. Apart from what he already had demanded, he wanted Ma Yingjiu to remedy the social and economic imbalance between the Taipei region and the south so that the people in the rural areas of the south “not feel exploited again.” (Lianhe Bao, 2007/09/23) Whether or not Ma took his words to heart and will actively work to fulfill these demands as president, remains to be seen. But it was interesting to note that the strategic threat by a KMT exponent of localization policies of jumping to the DPP worked effectively to a certain degree, though up to now it has been the only instance of such a strategy to be found.

Conclusion
So far, the findings of this research don’t allow the drawing of a complete and coherent picture of the phenomenon of the KMT-bentupai. On the contrary, they probably raise more difficult questions than they can convincingly answer. For example, are the attempts to appear localized and localizing that Ma Yingjiu and the party in general made during the latest election campaigns (including Ma Yingjiu’s “long stay”) a result of the influence of the bentupai? Or are they a strategic adaption that party leaders would have made anyway to Taiwan’s political climate, as it has been shaped by the DPP in recent years, even without being influenced by an intra-party faction? Much points to the latter alternative. And what is the relation between prudent image-building and true localization stances on the part of KMT politicians who are deemed bentupai?

It has, at least, become evident that the bentupai is more than just an invention of their political adversary, as some KMT members would like to have us believe. As for the question of whether the pro-localization faction is changing the KMT in such a way as to become a merely Taiwan-centred party without much ideological difference from the DPP remains to be seen – especially now that a KMT candidate has been elected president, and who, just a few days after the elections, mournfully honored Jiang Kai-shek at his gravesite.
References


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