

# Involving Taiwan in the Dialogue with European Civil Society and Its Public Sphere: Information, Communication, Interpretation, and Interaction

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The aim of this talk is to advance some ideas regarding future cooperation between Europe and Taiwan. The existing channels, such as the regular diplomacy and political lobbying, for some considered as hard diplomacy, as well as academic exchange opportunities have been described by respectively career diplomat participants as well as Taiwan Studies academics during the previous sessions of this forum. To extend the discussion on how to cultivate further Europe-Taiwan dialogue and interaction, the following contribution can be considered as a “soft diplomacy,” a parallel dimension to the above-mentioned “hard diplomacy.”

In order to facilitate such soft diplomacy we believe a neutral, non-politicized, access-friendly exchange and dialogue platform should be created, parallel to the two existing contact channels of political lobbying and

academic exchange. There is an undeniable importance to enhance the mutual understanding and reciprocal interest for ordinary citizens of Taiwan and Europe to discover common grounds for further cooperation. To this purpose we suggest observing the public sphere and civil society of each region and then identifying common issues for potential cooperation as a natural way to involve Taiwanese and European citizens in meeting, understanding, and collaborating with each other. First we shall present some suggestions for future cooperation within the realm of the public space, followed by a closer look at potential avenues for enhanced contacts between the members of civil society.

### Dr. Lutgard Lams:

My part of the joint presentation concentrates on the public sphere. The four items embedded in the subtitle are meant to clarify our contribution to this forum. Each item represents a linear and diachronic process to develop further dialogue between Taiwan and Europe. The first item “Info” can be seen as part of the political lobbying as well as academic research on specific areas. The efforts made to involve European officials and MEPs in appreciating the success of Taiwan’s democratization process and its progress on human rights are most commendable and have been rather successful. A few years ago, several national and international research networks of European scholars on Taiwan Studies were established, which, we are proud to say, have resulted in providing Taiwan a better profile in European academic circles. Now we would like to explore the second item, “communication and interpretation,” as well as the third one, “Interaction,” to fit this session’s objective: “future cooperation Taiwan-Europe.” We will primarily focus on how cooperation can help Europeans better understand Taiwan. Obviously, the same exercise is to be

carried out in the reverse sense and initiatives within Taiwanese associations are already being worked out to promote a better understanding in Taiwan of European commonalities and differences.

Within the first dimension, 'communication and interpretation in the public sphere,' my main concern is facilitating a better understanding of a diversity of sources and voices in and about Taiwan. This interpretive activity is currently lacking in diversity, at least in Belgium. To have an idea about the situation in other European countries, a larger forum encompassing a wider scope of European researchers in this field could be enlightening. The following observations, stemming from my research background in the discipline of discourse analysis rest on a social-constructivist perspective, which holds that various views of the social world are built up through knowledge produced by discourse. Discourses can become efficient mechanisms of domination, but also resistance. Individuals can indeed resist imposed versions of social reality and participate in modelling subjectivity and constituting knowledge about aspects of the self and defining identities. The concepts of subjectivity and truth, as discussed in Foucault's seminal work *Dits et écrits* (94), make up the core pillars to examine European ways of communication and interpretation of Taiwanese issues.

The main question here revolves around how information about Taiwan is digested and interpreted by ordinary Belgian citizens. Close observation can furnish empirical results, which in turn are instrumental in identifying suggestions for action. I believe the answer to the question is rather simple. On average, the ordinary Belgian citizen appears to know very little about Taiwan, except for some vague notions regarding Chang Kai-shek, the cross-Strait issue or perhaps even some ideas about the 'independence minded' Taiwanese president, collected through the input of media narratives. The bulk of the

communication about Taiwan originates from mediated stories with the dominant perspectives as disseminated by China. If, by chance, one comes across people who seem to be more informed about Taiwan, most likely the latter have only been communicated one ideological perspective on issues of political and social identity in Taiwan, either the 'blue' or the 'green' story, with the balance tilting toward the 'blue' version. What is lacking is an overall view of the various voices in Taiwan and the multiple stories that can be told about different aspects of Taiwanese society.

In Belgium, media narratives on Taiwan are often reduced to a political space with one meaning. The various perspectives on issues of identity and nationalism are rarely disclosed. Pluralism of voices is often missing. The reasons can be multiple: time and space constraints in the journalistic text writing process, commercial strategic guidelines following the imperatives of the market and advertising, thus reducing what journalists themselves may deem newsworthy, and lack of resources to position permanent correspondents in Taipei. A major factor is the unbalanced reliance on news agencies, dominated by some international press groups and, when it comes to news on Taiwan/China, by local agencies such as Central News Agency (Taiwan), but predominantly Xinhua (China). The latter dominates the Chinese national media scene, which leads to a situation whereby "the communication chases the information," indicating an active communicative strategy while simultaneously delimiting information. In addition, we note the competition from the economic magnet of China, which steers most of our media professionals' interest in China's direction. Yet, a fundamental reason for the absence of well-balanced communication on Taiwan is a basic lack of genuine interest in Taiwan, stemming from lack of or partial knowledge and information.

Indeed the polarized positions in Taiwan don't facilitate a fully-informed

understanding of Taiwan.

Even in academic circles, it is not always easy to find our way to the various ideological lines present in Taiwanese society. I recently came across an academic dissertation from a student of Political Science on the topic of the cross-strait issue. Although the bibliography looked extensive, only one voice, viz. the blue orientation, permeated the entire thesis. The opposite scenario is conceivable as well. This is due to a one-sided reliance on source material. Regrettably, people who case or are only aware of partial information will still picture themselves as 'future' experts on the Taiwan case. This exposure to partial information risks weakening the objectivity of their scientific efforts. Moreover their works or analyses risk providing an incomplete image of Taiwan to European students, media workers as well as ordinary citizens who may consult them for their expertise on this issue. Such a process proves Foucault's notion of how discourses can play a significant role to produce knowledge. As soon as discourses have become legitimated, they can be transformed into an efficient tool of domination.

To improve/complete the European partial understanding of Taiwan, we should therefore have some kind of network/mechanism that can help analyze how European media narratives and official EU discourse perceive Taiwanese socio-economic, political and cultural spheres as well as its role in the international community. This analysis should shed a light on how this particular discourse is instrumental in consolidating Europeans' views of Taiwan. In my previous academic research I have carried out similar projects to map the various Taiwanese perspectives on certain social and political structures and processes. Continuing these analytical efforts by collaborating with Taiwanese colleagues could be most beneficial for a better understanding in Taiwan about European perspectives on the issue by analysing the latter's

discourse on Taiwan. To be concrete, the geographic and strategic advantage of Brussels as the EU capital provides a great opportunity for establishing an observation antenna in Brussels, affiliated with relevant Taiwanese institutes or organisations. This antenna could conduct projects on monitoring and analyzing EU and Benelux institutional discourse and media narratives. Results of the interpretive analysis of the information gathered could then serve to adapt type and manner of communicating with European institutes and its citizens in view of an improved mutual understanding.

### Xavier Liao:

The dimension of soft diplomacy, as we define it, rests on two pillars. The first one is the public sphere where different agents/players (e.g. lobbyists, think tanks, academics, mass media) engage in exchanging and interpreting information on public affairs. Civil society is the second one. Dr. Lams just suggested her concrete proposal for an interpretive activity to improve mutual understanding between Taiwan and Europe within the public sphere. I follow the line on our continuum from information over communication and interpretation to *interaction within civil society*. It is the latter theme I would like to further elaborate.

The main idea is to involve players from Taiwan and European civil society into a permanent dialogue. Starting from the idea of a self-organizing civil society as a counterbalance to state power and drawing on the spirit of de Tocqueville, who deems a healthy civil society an indispensable condition for modern democracy, it can be argued that civil society in Europe as well as in Taiwan has come to constitute the space where different social groups and communities engage in dialogue to reach a consensus on societal cohabitation

(NGOs for humanitarian aid and NPOs for cultural, educational and social purposes, also including such players as enterprises, trade unions, associations, think tanks and other local collectivities).

In terms of social interaction, over the last two decades we have observed a boom of associations in Taiwan sparked by public or private initiatives set up since the lifting of martial law, which enabled the Taiwanese citizenry to finally enjoy their fundamental right to freedom of association. These associations play a significant role in communities with pluralist political, social, economic and cultural agendas. They create a bottom-up civil society, which differs from the traditional top-down, 'hegemonic' governmental ruling system where citizens are mobilized for a collective consensus. More and more Taiwanese associations devote their efforts to reach associative objectives like democracy, human rights, social solidarity, ethnical identity, cultural citizen rights, language rights, which are all themes that are simultaneously being developed in Europe.

In the field of cultural interaction, mobility among Asian and European individual artists as well as exchange activities for cultural institutions of both areas can be enhanced through initiatives such as the following. The non-profit association, IMEA- InterMedia Europe Asia-, which I established in 2002 in Belgium, carries a mission to promote artist exchange programs, creativity workshops, thematic debates on cultural issues. Individual filmmakers, artists, audio-visual production companies, TV channels, galleries, museums, artistic education institutes are our major collaborators and partners. Joint exhibitions have been organized together with Taiwanese, Belgian, Armenian, South African and Russian artists, filmmakers, and musicians. On the institutional level, we've engaged partners like film festivals, museums, municipal cultural centers, TV channels and cultural foundations to initiate or participate in

exchange activities.

Through our observation of ever changing social phenomena and first-hand experience of cross-border exchange events, we realize that the vivacity of civil society has brought a new dynamic to Taiwanese society itself and certainly has the potential to create a fresh and energetic dimension for more cooperation between Europe and Taiwan in the future. The advantage to involve Taiwanese civil society players into a permanent dialogue is to open up another channel for European-Taiwan cooperation within a neutral, non-politicized, easily accessible and especially sustainable sphere where Taiwanese and European ordinary citizens can meet and touch each other's hearts based on their common interests.

The task and the concrete issue is how to identify the members of these civil societies and to reach out to them. The following thoughts are meant to help improve understanding and open up leads for realistic cooperation, extending beyond traditional institutional circles.

- *Organizing thematic forums in all EU member states.* The forum is a sounding board for ideas and proposals to help the two areas to enter into dialogue and to identify common ground (e.g. social issues, such as environment, ageing population, minorities, social justice, immigration; cultural issues: art(ist)s without borders, artists' social status, etc.).

- *Building a permanent platform or center* where players from both areas can get together and talk about their own experiences. This has the added value of creating a 'mirror' effect. By looking at and talking about oneself, one gets a better understanding of the self. This exchange provides the opportunity to benchmark each other, to give away traditional mindsets, and enter into each



other's perspective, resulting in (partial) elimination of ethnocentric closure. Particular mindsets in dichotomous terms of "you" versus "us" have to be changed into a mindset of an inclusive "we." A suggestion for this permanent platform is setting up a Formosa/Taiwan Institute/Center in Europe as the operational mechanism to improve communication between the peoples of both areas. Following the realistic idea, as suggested by dr. Lams, Brussels can be considered as the strategic point to launch this pilot station. This could be conceived of as an institute along the lines of Goethe Institut (Germany), Alliance Française (France), American Center (USA), Hungarian Institute (Hungary), Het Huis van het Nederlands (Flanders and the Netherlands), Instituto Italiano Di Cultura (Italy), Instituto Cervantes (Spain), Japanese Center (Japan), and the Confucian Institute (PR China) in Brussels, where we, supported by public or private means, could host artists' exhibitions, audio-visual work screenings, workshops, seminars, debates, roundtables, and forums for members of the academic as well as non-academic world.

To conclude, we can summarize the main points: one of the effective tools to enhance mutual understanding can be provided by a good grasp of how both areas are perceived and then framed in their respective discourses. In the first part of the presentation, dr. Lams has suggested setting up an antenna in Brussels for monitoring and analyzing Taiwan news in EU institutional and media narratives. This monitoring has two functions: 1) to identify what Europeans see and do not see about Taiwan; 2) to prepare Taiwanese to provide complementary information to bring back to Europe.

In this respect, the 'Formosa/Taiwan Center/Institute' can be combined with the above-mentioned antenna to serve as the public space for the players to enter into dialogue, as suggested in the second part of the presentation. To ensure mutual understanding, we believe an interdisciplinary and intercultural

approach is worth considering as a method to initiate such a communication platform offering a neutral, non-politicized and easily accessible sphere where we can develop a sense of common ground, shared by players of both areas, in the academic as well as non-academic field.