

The 'preemptive cringe' and its role in UK-Taiwan trade and politics 1950-80

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The paper illustrates the historical predicament of the London Foreign Office in responding to increasing demands for trade overtures to the Republic of China while proverbially 'looking over its shoulder' for fear of upsetting Beijing. Compounding this problem was the need, after recognition the PRC in 1951, to act as though the ROC Government 'did not exist', with its representatives *persona non grata* in the UK. This did not prevent a tacit agreement to allow the 'Free China Centre' to remain open in London as *quid pro quo* for the highly unusual step of keeping the Tamsui Consulate even after the 1951 de-recognition. A device the FO concocted was that the Consulate might only negotiate with ROC 'Provincial government bodies'. This proved a hostage to fortune as, for example, when ROC navy began attacking British ships in the Taiwan Straits in the 1950s one FO officer commented wryly: 'Will somebody explain how we complain to the 'Provincial navy' about this?'

This situation would continue to lead to ludicrous episodes in both Taipei and London. As the Foreign Office fell over backwards to avoid dealing with the diplomatically 'non-existent' ROC Government, ROC agents in London continually grandstanded, pretending to be legitimate diplomats, much to the dismay of Whitehall, which energetically sought to prevent MPs, and especially Ministers, socializing with the Free Chinese Centre agents. Among the semantic contortions involved, it was taboo to speak of trade 'Delegations' or 'missions' in either direction, while on occasion sports teams were not allowed to 'represent' their country, but had to compete as 'individuals'. This did not prevent ROC trade 'ministers' appearing in London arriving from time to time as 'tourists', while British MPs under pressure from industrial constituents also developed a sudden interest in 'touring' the island — sometimes to be manipulated into 'issuing' fake press-releases praising the ROC Government and military. Meanwhile, at an almost metaphysical level, the Foreign Office agonized over whether it might be wrong to refuse a visa to a Taiwan Minister because the grounds for this would admit the existence of the government he served, which of course 'did not exist'. Such nonsense inevitably led to lively questions in Parliament.

In the event, as pressure for more trade grew, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in league with Banking interests and Conservative back-benchers outwitted the Foreign Office by setting up a 'secret' agent in Taipei, on the CBI payroll, posing as an employee of Jardine-Mathesons. As a result of this and the foundation of the Anglo-Taiwan Trade Committee in 1976, trade began to flourish. This even involved eventually doomed efforts to set up a nuclear fuel-processing agreement, the FO insisting that the UK would keep the extracted plutonium for its own bomb-stockpile.

Meanwhile, by the late 1960s, the beleaguered British Consuls at Tamsui knew that both the Hong Kong Authorities and the UK Embassy in Beijing, as well as elements in the FO, were conspiring to

have the Consulate closed. This they finally achieved in 1972, after which UK-ROC relations entered an even more precarious stage before eventually reaching the present pragmatic and tolerant state. Nevertheless the aptly-named 'preemptive cringe' towards Beijing continues to affect UK-Taiwan trade and politics to this day.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Michael Hoare's main Taiwan Studies have been centred on the relationship between the United Kingdom and Taiwan in the Twentieth Century and earlier. He has given numerous seminars around this question at SOAS, London, the Academia Sinica, and EATS meetings internationally. A point of departure was a Chinese paper given at the 50th Anniversary '228' memorial Conference in 1997 at the invitation of Lin Tsung-Yi, who became a close friend and influence. Following an earlier Science Research career in London University, he undertook Chinese language studies both in London and at the Shi-Da in Taipei in 1984, and has visited Taipei annually since then. His 'Intimate Chinese, From Grammar to Fluency' was recently published in Taipei. In parallel to Chinese studies he has published on Lexicography and History of Geodesy and is now primarily involved in finishing a long-standing study in the Cultural History of Science: 'Weighing Fire: European Lives in Literature and Science'. He is a well-known visitor to the Academia Sinica Taiwan History Department, where Huang Fu-san has been a constant influence and encouragement.