

# The Olympic Torch Relay as a Venue of Political Struggles-The Case of Taiwan and China

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## Abstract

This project focuses on the controversies of the Olympic Torch Relay of the 2008 Beijing Olympics between Taiwan and China. After numerous rounds of negotiations, Taiwan rejected being a stop of the torch relay and became the first IOC member to do so. Since the (re)introduction of the torch relay in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, it has become an invented tradition par excellence and carried many different political implications. China and Taiwan have complicated relationship since the Civil War of 1949 which expelled Republic of China out of the mainland. Taiwan's involvement in the IOC activities also mirrors the harsh political reality for the administration. On the other hand, 2008 Beijing Olympics is regarded as the crown jewel of the recent China Fever and an official testament of the surge of China. This thesis argues that, under this complex circumstance, the Olympic Torch Relay was a venue for political struggles. The then-ruling DPP administration appropriated it as its claim of Taiwanese sovereignty and beckoned the support from the pro-independence extremists.

Key words: Olympic Torch Relay, Taiwan-China Relationship, Beijing Olympics



## Introduction

At the 112nd International Olympics Committee Session in Moscow on July 13, 2001, Beijing, China was elected to host the XXIX Olympiad in 2008 after two rounds of voting. People all over China were in a collective ecstasy and redemption. An ecstasy was because they believe that the Olympiad could be the crown-jewel of the rejuvenated “Middle Kingdom”. It was also the sweet redemption after the crushing defeat in Monte Carlo, Monaco in 1993, in which Beijing was narrowly defeated by Sydney after four rounds of dramatic voting.

China is widely regarded as the next superpower-to-come. Beijing Olympics is the single most significant and anticipated mega-event in the 21<sup>st</sup> century China thus far. The gathering of the worldwide elite athletes and prominent delegates in Beijing also reflected China’s glory days as the “Middle Kingdom”. Under the omnipresent optimism, the nationalistic “All for the Olympics” is the motto pursued by 1.3 billion Chinese. Beijing indeed presented arguably the most spectacular mega-event in the Olympics history.

If the opening ceremony is the theme for the Beijing Olympics symphony, the Torch Relay must be the splendid overture for it. The Relay lasted over 130 days and covered over 137,000 kilometers. It traveled through 20 cities across 5 continents. There were 21,780 torch bearers along the way. The Relay also unprecedentedly included an ascent with the torch to the top of Mount Everest on the border of Nepal and Tibet. It was the longest route and the most participated torch relay but also the most controversial one since the Relay was reinvented in the Berlin Olympics in 1936.

Due to China’s military intervention in Tibet, Falun Gong persecution, its role in the War in Darfur and previous questionable human rights record, numerous protests took places since the very beginning of the Relay. During the torch lighting ceremony in Olympia, Greece, three members of Reporters Without Borders breached security and attempted to disrupt a speech by Liu Qi (劉淇) the head of Beijing's Olympic Organizing Committee. There were major disruptions during the relay in London, Paris, San Francisco, Nagano, Seoul and even in China’s own Special Administrative Region Hong Kong. However, the biggest controversy came right across the Taiwan Strait even before the Torch Relay started.

When the route first announced on April 26, 2007, Taipei was a stop between Ho Chi Minh City and Hong Kong. However, due to the disagreement between Beijing and Taipei on the language used in describing whether the Taipei leg was a domestic or an international one and further disputes on the flag, emblem and anthem, the Taipei leg was eliminated from the route by both sides of the Taiwan Strait eventually.

It would be extremely naïve to regard the Olympics as a “pure” sporting event. However, during the negotiation of Taiwan and China on the Torch Relay issue, it was political maneuver par excellence. China and Taiwan are in a very complex relation. They are, on the one hand, linguistically, racially and culturally proximate, economically interdependent, yet politically opposite and militarily hostile on the other. This essay aims to demonstrate the process and ramifications of this political struggle between the two complex rivals on two sides of the Taiwan Strait through the Olympic Torch.

## National Identity of Taiwan: A Complex Issue

Taiwan is only 180-kilometer away from the Chinese mainland. The geographical proximity to China made it historically influenced or governed by the Chinese empires. Its resourceful tropical crops, especially sugar canes, and geographical proximity to China, Southeast Asia and Japan made it an ideal spot for the expanding Europe empires since the discovery by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who gave the name Formosa (beautiful island) to this island. The island had been occupied by Spain and the Dutch before it was reclaimed by Qing China in 1683.

After 200 years of governance, Taiwan was ceded to Japan in 1895 under The Treaty of Shimonoseki

after Qing China lost in the First Sino-Japanese War. The two-sides of the Taiwan Strait have a tangled history since. Even though Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China after the Second World War, Japanese heritage was highly appreciated among Taiwanese of that generation. Even though China reclaimed the sovereignty over Taiwan, the regime itself was overwhelmed engaging with Mao and the Communists in the Mainland. Also, after fifty years of separation, Taiwan and China were two different worlds. The appointed Governor Chen Yi ( 陳儀 ) and his staff were arrogant and disrespectful to the people of the former Japanese colony. The uprising finally erupted on February 28, 1947 (The 228 Incident) and left a deep scar in Taiwanese society ever since. The hidden grudges or even explicit conflicts between islanders and mainlanders were omnipresent. The terms of “islanders” and “mainlanders” used in this essay need to be clarified before heading to further discussion.

In Taiwan, 1949 marks a simple dichotomous point of ethical affiliation. For those who immigrated before 1949 and their offspring are called “ben-shen-jen ( 本省人 )” or native inhabitant. Most of this group are economic immigrants. For those who immigrated in 1949 along with the retreat of the *Kuomingtung* (KMT—The Nationalist Party) and their offspring are called “wai-shen jen ( 外省人 )” or people from outside the province. This group can be categorized as political immigrants who were mostly military or government employees. To make the distinction easier, I will adopt “islander” and “mainlander”, which reflects the denotations of the terms in Chinese fairly well, to the respective groups in this essay.

Although they were the losing side of the Civil War, the KMT and Taiwan were able to hold on to the name Republic of China and claimed the sole representative of China in the international society. Most notably was the seat in the United Nations and the possession of the veto power of the UN Security Council. With the growing presence of the People’s Republic of China in the international stage since the 1960’s, Taiwan or the Republic of China was getting marginalized. Since the late 1960s, the Republic of China’s seat in the United Nations was tentative. U.S. aid came to an end in 1965. John F. Kennedy suggested the “One China, One Taiwan” policy beginning in 1961 and Lyndon B. Johnson followed his predecessor’s will. Although the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, and aggravating relations between the People’s Republic of China and the U.S.S.R shifted U.S. focus away from Taiwan (particularly during the Nixon administration), it was obvious that KMT’s legitimacy to represent China was in jeopardy.

The PRC eventually superseded the ROC and inherited its permanent veto power in the United Nations in 1971. The termination of official diplomatic relations with the United States in 1979 marked yet another major setback for this isolated regime. The exclusion of the ROC in the international sports organizations immediately reflected the political world. Taiwan was absent from the international competitions until 1981 when a new agreement was signed in Lausanne, Switzerland. Under the new agreement with the IOC, Taiwan was able to return to the Olympics and other international sporting events under the name “Chinese Taipei”.

Putting together pieces of the history of Taiwan from a national identity perspective is a daunting mission. Scholars from various fields including history, political science, cultural studies, sociology, etc. also try to dissect this issue from various angles. Nationalism, liberalism and postcolonialism/poststructuralism are three major perspectives usually adopted in previous discourses (Jiang, 1998). From the perspective of nationalism, “blood” is the most “natural” and basic trait. From this perspective, Tang-shan ( 唐山 , or Southeast China ) has become the common root and origin of blood for the islanders. Ancestors from Southeast China crossed the “black ditch” and settled on Formosa become the collective imagination of the islanders of Taiwan.

The second main discourse on the identity of Taiwan is the liberalist perspective. It does not focus on the blood-related identity. Instead, it is the constitutional democracy that defines state/nation. It argues that a nation does not require its members to have the common origin and blood or even the feelings of affiliation. Ethical affiliation is just like gender or class which should not become the required criterion but only a characteristic of a member of a nation.

For post-colonialist/post-structuralist, the identity is an empty subject. The meanings of empty entity here are twofold. First, the discussion of subject is based on freedom. However, the real freedom cannot contain any substantial content. Second, emptiness is not annihilation. The empty subject constructs itself by digesting objects to adjust its interior and exterior relations. In other words, the emptiness is not a vacuum but a receiving and meaning-creating space. (Liao, 1995)

To sum up, the nationalistic discourses focus on roots and liberalistic focus more on route of the identity. As for the post-isms, identity is an open canvas waiting to be painted.

These three discourses all have its share of supporters. However, it is the nationalists that dominate the discussion of the identity of Taiwan, whether it is for grass-root independent movement or pro-reunification camp. For the pro-reunification camp, Taiwan is not only the representative of Republic of China but also share the five-thousand-year-old Chinese blood, language and culture.

In the pro-independence nationalist discourse, mainlanders are usually associated with pro-reunification and viewing China as the orthodoxy and the ultimate Motherland. While it is reasonable and rightfully so for the first generation political immigrants, the beckon second or third generation of the mainlanders, some of them may not have even stepped into China's soil especially during the Martial Law era, feel is from the imaginary Motherland- a sort of nostalgia without memory par excellence.

For the pro-independence camp, Taiwan is an "emerging nation". It has to put the KMT-driven, China-based ideology into oblivion. For this camp, Taiwan has been a nation for over four hundred years when the ancestors emigrating from Southeast China. Since 1949, Taiwan was "occupied" by the displaced regime of the KMT, which is a symbol of residual Chinese political control. The full name of the KMT in Chinese is 中國國民黨 (Chung-kuo-kuo-min-tang, or "Chinese" Nationalist Party), which further fortifies its association as an alien political power from China.

As Cohen (1985) argues, the most striking feature of the symbolic construction of the identity is its oppositional character. Identity is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion. We have to notice that these boundaries are relational rather than absolute. People mark the boundary of the identity in relation to others. It has been suggested that all social identities, collective and individual, are constituted in this way - in a "vis-à-vis" manner. Collective images of a *we* and an *us* cannot be completed without the designation of a *they* and a *them*. Hence, collective identity rests upon exclusion to some degree (Keller, 2003). For most of the Taiwanese, this *they* is China.

"China" in recent Taiwan's nationalist discourse does not necessarily limits only to Communist China, but the lineage of Middle Kingdom as a whole. This is evident as the pro-independence President Chen Shui-bian trying hard to de-Sinofy, from switching the name of China to Taiwan of various state-run enterprises to teaching Hokkien, or *Bân-lâm-gú*, in elementary school. However, this school does not justify why the identity of Taiwan has to be built upon excluding solely Chineseness, but not Japaneseness, Portugeseness or Americaness. Regardless of its shaky argument, this discourse is nevertheless the most influential one in the construction of the identity of Taiwan in the last twenty years, after the lift of the Martial Law, which was enforced by Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo from 1949 to 1987.

It is important to mention that in the nationalist discourse, especially from the radical pro-independence supporters, humiliation and sadness have become the main rallying point to construct the identity of Taiwan. The 228 Incident is the most obvious example. It is remembered as simple as the mainlanders slaughtered the islanders. Humiliation and sadness overwhelmingly outweighs the glory and joy in the pro-independence discourses. Just as Earnest Renan argues (1990[1882]: 19), "humiliation unifies more than joy does. When national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort."

Although the controversy of the Olympic Torch Relay *per se* does not appear to be a humiliation, it was redirected to be looked at from that way by the Chen Shui-bian administration. The whole process was a humiliation for Taiwan being a state. From this angle, it definitely triggered the emotion of anti-China

complex among Taiwanese. Thus, this essay examines how a ceremonial and symbolic event was appropriated by a beleaguered administration to secure its nationalist discourse of the identity of Taiwan vis-à-vis China. The duties raised from the Olympic Torch triggered a series of political stunt including a mockery - “UN for Taiwan” Torch Relay started on October of 2007 in response to the rejection of the Olympic Torch. Ironically and strangely enough, this relay was mainly organized and funded by the Sports Affair Council.

## The Olympic Torch and Relay

The Olympic Torch was (re)introduced in the Game since the 1928 Summer Olympics at Amsterdam for its reminiscence of ancient Greek mythology in Prometheus. Eight years later, Nazi Germany modified the event with transporting the flame from Greece and relaying around specific cities. The General Secretary of the Olympics Organizing Committee, Carl Diem, had the idea of relaying the torch as a propaganda stunt to raise the international attention days before the Games and connection to ancient Greek tradition. It was especially prominent since Adolf Hitler was convinced that the Arians were the heirs of the ancient Greeks polis. By connecting the Berlin Olympics to Greek tradition, it would justify the claim of Arian supremacy. Furthermore, the ceremony was captured in Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary *Olympia* in order to promote Hitler and Nazi’s mystique. Torch Relay has since become an “invented tradition” par excellence, in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s sense (1992), in each Olympics (Kruger, 2004).

The torch relay of the 2008 Beijing Olympics lasted 130 days, traveled 137,000 kilometers including five major continents and took 21,780 bearers. It is the biggest torch relay in many senses and probably will be the biggest ever since the torch relays of both Vancouver and London Games will be downsized and will only relay domestically after ignited in Greece.

The term Olympic Torch is translated slightly different from English. It is called “*shen-huo* 聖火, or holy torch/ fire” of the Olympics in Chinese. The word *shen* amplifies the torch even more mystique and aura.



Just as previous discussions on the Olympics Torch Relay show, as “sublime” as the “holy torch” widely perceived, it is inevitably a political invention. When it was inaugurated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the torch relay was closely tied with modern Nazi Germany. It demonstrated its surging power and resonated the Olympic Motto: Swifter, Higher, Stronger. These values of modernity justified Nazi’s claim of racial supreme. With the mythical connection to ancient Greek, modern Olympic Torch embodied the coherence of the “imagined community” (in Anderson’s sense (1991)) and fortified Nazi and Hitler’s legitimacy in the midst of the international stage. This invented tradition has thus become a symbol of the recognition of a political entity, even before the United Nations’ recognition as a “nation”.<sup>1</sup> The organizing committee of the Olympics becomes the surrogate of the host nation to deploy its power over the fellow members of the Olympic family, even though it involves the thorny issues including territory, government and sovereignty. The route of the torch relay is supposed to be merely an “announcement” and should never been challenged and questioned. It is supposed to be an honor to welcome the Olympic Torch. Rejection of the Torch was unheard of and unthinkable until the controversy between China and Taiwan in 2007. The so-called pure Olympic Spirit is just a fantasy. What reveals in the controversy is that the Olympic Torch relay is yet another venue of international political struggles.

The controversy of the Taiwanese identity, as Yeh (2005: 250) argues, is a struggle of the essence of social identities and a fight for the right of interpretation of Taiwanese history. The Olympic Torch Relay saga was a symbol of this struggle. The ghost of “Motherland” has been haunting Taiwan for over five decades. The Democratic Progressive Party ( DPP ) and Chen Shui-bian’s main object was to exorcise the

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Puerto Rico, Cook Islands, Taiwan.

ghost from Taiwanese civil society. The integrity of the Olympic Torch was at stake for the pro-independence administration.

## The DPP Strategy

In 2006, Taiwan was in one of the worst domestic political turmoil in decades. President Chen Shui-bian of the DPP, his family and family-in-law were involved in a series of corruption scandals. In that fall, hundreds of thousands of citizens protested on the streets around the island and demanded Chen's resignation. Just like former Argentine military President Leopoldo Galtieri's stunt of invading Falkland Islands in hope of igniting national grudge against the United Kingdom to divert the attention away from economic crisis and civil unrest in 1982, Chen attempted to repeat the trick and the Olympic Torch was one of the most prolific instruments available for him.

The negotiation between the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) and the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee (CTOC) on the route of the Olympic Torch Relay started in February of 2006. The inclusion of Taiwan appeared to a consensus in the very beginning. The Chief Secretary of the CPOC Chen Shi-quay (陳士魁) said that the bottom line of the CTOC was "third country in or out" (Huang, 2006b). For example, it was even acceptable to put Taiwan between Ho Chi Minh City and Shanghai. The mood had been optimistic for Taiwan to land the Olympic Torch for the first time since the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

On February 12, 2007, CTOC and BOCOG reached four points of consensus recorded in memorandum:

- 1) Two sides promise to follow all resolutions made by the IOC and preserve the purity and holiness of the Olympic Torch and the Relay.
- 2) The Beijing Olympic Torch Relay is an integral part of the Olympiad. It must follow the Olympic Charter.
- 3) The Torch Relay takes place in Taiwan, which is an Olympic activity in the Chinese Taipei territory. Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee has to assure the smooth-running of the Torch Relay.
- 4) When the Torch Relay is taking place in the Chinese Taipei territory, the usage of the flags, emblem and anthems must follow the IOC rules. Meanwhile, the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee is responsible for the coordination to prevent from others using the contraband flags, emblem and anthems.

The whole process looked very promising especially after the signing of the memorandum. However, the Chairman of the CTOC Thomas W. Tsai(蔡辰威)unusually expressed his concern during an interview with the United Daily reporter Huang (2006a) as early as July 2006, "Can Taiwan people accept that if we can't raise our national flags then?" Because according to IOC bylaws, none of the flags, anthems and emblem other than those recognized by the IOC could appear on the official Olympic activities. It was an odd "warning" considering the omnipresent optimism. From the hindsight, however, it was a perfect self-fulfill prophecy.

Graph 1 Route of the Beijing Olympics Torch Relay



Taiwan was a stop between Ho Chi Minh City and Hong Kong the Special Administrative Region of China when the route of the Torch Relay was announced on April 26, 2007 (see Graph 1. For the Flash version, see <http://zhuanti.sports.cn/huoju/1.html>). This exactly matched the “third country in or out” policy. Then why did Taiwan reject the entry of the Torch?

According to the response by then-Director of the Sports Affairs Council Yang Jong-her ( 楊忠和 ), Hong Kong is a part of Chinese territory. It is confusing to place Taiwan right before Hong Kong. Taiwan would be easily mistaken as a domestic leg in China (Ma & Lan, 2007). Moreover, in a flash map widely adopted by the Chinese media, the characters “China” was superimposed on Taiwan. This absolutely breached the already-thin trust between Taiwan and China.

However, Chairman Tsai believed that the planned route was an equal NOC-to-NOC case. He expressed his powerlessness by saying “CTOC is just a civil organization. We can only obey the government’s decision” (ibid).

After the initial rejection of the Olympic Torch, the cross-strait negotiation re-opened under the request from the IOC on July 18. The negotiations seemed to be optimistic in the beginning yet again. However, the then-Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council Chen Ming-tung ( 陳明通 ) announced on September 21 that due to “unexpected complex” caused by China, the agreement would not be signed by the CTOC. What this “unexpected complex” was, Chen never revealed. However, according Chairman Tsai, it is believed that the requirement of the flags, emblem and anthems was the final roadblock that deprived the Torch Relay in Taipei (Wang, 2007).

During the whole negotiation process, the DPP and Chen Shui-bian administration showed different positions in various stages. In the early stage, which is from February of 2006 to February 2007, friendly position was taken by Taiwan negotiation representatives. This was the extension of Chen’s soften position toward China since 2006. In 2006, the negotiation on cross-strait charter flight and tourism has started. However, when the series of scandals erupted, Chen’s approval rate plummeted. His leadership was serious challenged. Since February 2007, a political hawk cabinet was appointed to some key positions managing Taiwan-China relation. First, Chen Tang-shan ( 陳唐山 ) was named the Secretary of the National Security Council. Then Chen Ming-tung was named the Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council. Even the Director of the Sports Affairs Council was replaced by Yang Jong-her. All these moves were made to redirect the nation’s attention away from Chen shui-bian’s scandals. The inconsistency on the attitude toward the Torch Relay was the inevitable consequence. When asked about the inconsistency, Chen Ming-tung simple replied, “I was not the Minister then,” or “I cannot be responsible for the former Minister” (Lee, 2007).

It was obvious that the agreement on four points of memorandum were reached in the very beginning.

However, in the press release or the press conference, both the Mainland Affairs Council and the Sports Affairs Council took strong position condemning “China” for restricting Taiwanese using own national flag, emblem or anthem on the home soil. As expected, in most news stories, the Taiwanese government blamed China for its relentless bashing Taiwan’s international space. The fact that the so-called “unexpected complex” is far from “unexpected” but has been in the memorandum in the very beginning was mostly ignored. Chen Shui-bian’s administration overturned the very own agreement they signed and successfully redirected the sporting event to a nationalist issue.

From Chen Shui-bian and the DPP’s perspective, rejecting the Olympic Torch was a win-win situation. On the one hand, it secured Chen’s shaky administration for that moment. As the then Minister of the Sports Affairs Council Yang Jong-her claimed, “if the Olympic Torch did come, it could have been more terrible than 1000 missiles.”<sup>2</sup> He believed that Taiwan’s absence would be the best-case-scenario. “The relay would have had caused turmoil and conflicts around the island”, said Yang, “because every city would fight for the Torch.” On the one hand, it ignited Taiwanese’s grudge against China. It also helped the independence of Taiwan for the long run, considering how pro-independence nationalists regard China as the vicious *they* in their discourse.

Taiwan was eventually absent from being a leg of the Olympic Torch Relay. However, that did not stop China incorporating Taiwan as a part of its reunification propaganda during the relay. Lin Chin-fa (林清發), the Commissioner of the Association of Taiwanese Corporations in Beijing and former cycling coach for the Taiwanese Olympic Team, was invited to be the sixth torch bearer in the Beijing leg. He received the torch from Han Mei-ling (韓美林), the designer the official mascots of the Beijing Olympics *Fuwa* and delivered to the famed go player Chan Hao (常昊). Even though Taiwan was officially out of the Torch Relay, it was somehow eventually incorporated into the capital of China and its propaganda.

## One Year After – as a Conclusion

The controversy of the Olympic Torch Relay was apparently a political maneuver between two political rivalries across the Taiwan Strait. While China wanted to appropriate the chance to hint Taiwan’s affiliation equal to Hong Kong and Macau as “special administration region”, Taiwan countered with its own maneuver and interpretation. China’s attempt to include Taiwan in the association of the special administration region through the Torch Relay failed. Even though the Torch never landed on Taiwan, Beijing still managed to find a way to include a Taiwanese in the Torch Relay in Beijing to accomplish its political propaganda.

One year after the Beijing Olympics, the controversy of the Torch Relay seems like a distant memory. Newly-elected KMT President Ma Ying-jeou speeds up pace of the cross-strait talk and interchange. Direct flights and cargo shipping have become routines within months since his inauguration. Had the Torch Relay taken place under a different regime, it could have gone a totally opposite direction. By reviewing the birth of the Torch Relay in Nazi Germany, it is not surprising to see it come a full circle back to its political and propaganda intention after six decades. The Torch of Beijing Olympics for the DPP was a symbol of China. When the cross-strait relation was ameliorating in 2006, the Torch was a friendly gesture and could ease the tension between Taiwan and China. When thing went wrong for Chen Shui-bian and the DPP, the Olympic Torch was rejected as a scapegoat for China and, to some degree, Chen Shui-bian’s scandals. If the discourse of the identity of Taiwan cannot go beyond nationalism, sports will always be appropriated for its purpose,

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<sup>2</sup> A very brief telephone conversation conducted on June 19, 2008. Yang was reluctant to accept any formal interview but expressed his “concern” on the Torch Relay in the conversation. Other key figures including Chen ming-tung, Thomas Tsai refused any forms of interview regarding this “sensitive” issue even after repeated requests.

especially *vis-à-vis* China.

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