

# Japan-Taiwan Relations From the Perspective of “Folk”

## After the World War II: From the Origin of “Taiwan Independence Movement”

GUO Rui

Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, China

When it comes to the Taiwan question, people tend to focus on American factors. However, if tracing the source, the Japanese factors may be more profound than the American ones. After World War II, a group of intellectuals from Taiwan represented by Thomas W. I. Liao established various “Taiwan independence” organizations in Japan and engaged in “Taiwan independence” activities, which can be regarded as the origin of the post-war “Taiwan independence” movement. Their journey to “Taiwan independence” was also influenced by the political situation at home and abroad at that time, and their experiences also showed that the “Taiwan independence” elements were just victims of international political transactions. The Taiwan question, which continues to this day, has been influenced by the complicated international political situation from the very beginning.

*Keywords:* Taiwan question, international politics, Thomas W. I. Liao, GHQ

### Introduction

In 1947, following the outbreak of the February 28 Incident, the petitions of the Taiwanese people were met with brutal suppression by the Kuomintang (KMT) authorities. Thereafter, figures such as Thomas W. I. Liao (Liao) and others began to engage in “Taiwan independence” activities overseas, seeking to separate Taiwan from KMT control, and were consequently subjected to harsh reprisals by the regime. Even at that early stage, the shadow of American influence could already be discerned in these “Taiwan independence” undertakings.

On February 8, 1950, Liao arrived in Osaka, Japan. On February 28, the organization he led, the “Taiwan Re-liberation League”, convened a memorial meeting for the third anniversary of the February 28 Incident at the Kyoto Press Club, attended by roughly 200 participants. At the gathering, Liao read out a so-called “Bulletin of Free Taiwanese”, publicly advancing the notion of “Taiwan independence” for the first time in Japan. Subsequently, on March 9, he held a press conference in Tokyo, where he briefed journalists on the current state of “Taiwan independence” activities, outlined his future agenda, and announced that a “Congress of Taiwanese Organizations in Japan” would be held on March 18. Yet this planned “Congress of Taiwanese Organizations in Japan” never took place. In response to Liao’s activities, the KMT authorities promptly lodged a protest with the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan, voicing strong dissatisfaction. On March 16, Chu Shih-ming, head of the KMT’s delegation in Japan, met with the Allied Headquarters’ director of diplomatic affairs. Chu argued that

---

**Acknowledgment:** This article was supported by “National Social Science Foundation of China 2020” (Grant No. 20CSS011).  
GUO Rui, Dr., lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, China.

Liao's actions amounted to an attempt to subvert the Government of the Republic of China, demanded that the Allied authorities swiftly suppress his activities, and called for his extradition to Taiwan.

It was under these circumstances that Liao was arrested by the military police of the Allied Headquarters in Japan. At first glance, this arrest appeared to be the direct outcome of KMT intervention. But was that truly the case? Or were there other, less visible factors at play?

In previous studies, the circumstances surrounding Liao's arrest by the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan have either been left vague or received little detailed analysis. What, in fact, were the causes and consequences of his arrest? Why, after serving his sentence, was Liao not extradited to Taiwan as stipulated in the judgment, but instead allowed to remain in Japan and continue his “Taiwan independence” activities? These questions remain shrouded in ambiguity. Accordingly, this article seeks to examine these issues through a careful review of relevant historical sources. By analyzing this episode, it aims to shed light on the connections between Liao's political trajectory and the broader international context of the time.

### **From “Federalism” to “Taiwan Independence”**

In 1945, with the victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan and the restoration of Taiwan, Liao, like many other Taiwanese, was filled with joy. His exhilaration found repeated expression in the essays he published in the journal he edited. For instance, in the inaugural editorial “A Message to My Compatriots in Taiwan”, Liao wrote:

Having returned to the motherland, as citizens of the great China...we are the descendants of the proudest and most resilient Minnan elites among the Han people of the late Ming...We are nationals who have inherited the bloodline of the mainland, and our nation ranks among the world's five great powers. (Thomas, 1945, pp. 2-3)

Such words reveal that, at that time, Liao placed considerable hope in the KMT government's recovery of Taiwan and took pride in his identity as a citizen of China.

Yet, it was not long before the high expectations of the Taiwanese toward the KMT authorities gave way to disappointment—and ultimately to despair. Prior studies on the KMT's postwar takeover of Taiwan have already addressed this question in detail, so a brief summary will suffice here. The main reasons may be outlined as follows: First, rampant corruption among the KMT officials sent to administer Taiwan. Second, the discriminatory treatment of the Taiwanese population by these officials. Third, the economic exploitation and rigid trade controls imposed, which aggravated Taiwan's economic difficulties and deteriorated the living conditions of its people. Together, these practices transformed the Taiwanese people's hopes into disillusionment, not only provoking widespread discontent, but also laying the groundwork for the subsequent February 28 Incident. In response to Taiwan's worsening situation, Liao initially sought to resolve the problems by running for public office.

Beginning in 1946, Liao toured various parts of Taiwan delivering speeches to build momentum for his candidacy. The core of his addresses laid in analyzing the deteriorating situation on the island and in criticizing the governance of the KMT authorities. As a remedy, Liao advanced the idea of “federal autonomy”, namely, “to regard Taiwan as an autonomous territory of China and to implement a high degree of self-government”. This proposal clearly reflected the strong influence of his American educational background and his admiration for the U.S. federal system. Yet, such a notion was intolerable to the KMT regime, which exercised authoritarian rule, and was branded as a dangerous idea.

In August 1946, Liao stood as a candidate in the election for senators of the National Political Council. However, the final outcome was therefore to be decided by drawing lots. The draw left Liao unsuccessful. Archival materials from the KMT authorities indicate that, because Liao's political views clashed with those of the regime, his defeat was engineered deliberately. Later that year, in October, he again ran—this time for a delegate seat in the National Constituent Assembly—but once more failed to secure election. Under KMT rule, Liao actively participated in political elections. Yet his two successive defeats dealt him a heavy blow. At that stage, however, he had not yet advocated “Taiwan independence”. Instead, he argued for “Taiwanese autonomy” within a framework of a “Chinese federation” as a solution to the deteriorating conditions brought about by KMT governance. With the outbreak of the February 28 Incident, however, Liao's thinking gradually shifted, and he began to contemplate the pursuit of “Taiwan independence”.

At the time of the February 28 Incident in 1947, Liao and his elder brother, Liao Wen-kuei, were in Shanghai, where they first learned of the events through newspapers on March 1. On March 4, Liao, together with the Taiwan Association in Shanghai, issued an “Open Letter to Our Compatriots Nationwide on the February 28 Massacre”, in which they sharply denounced the KMT authorities. Although Liao was not physically present in Taiwan during the Incident and ostensibly bore no direct connection to it, the Taiwan Provincial Security Command nonetheless placed him and his brother on a wanted list of 30 individuals, accusing them of “conspiring to rebel”, on April 18 of that same year.

In June 1948, Liao established the “Taiwan Re-liberation League” in Shanghai. The choice of this name reflected their reasoning: Although the KMT authorities had reclaimed Taiwan from Japanese rule, rampant corruption under KMT governance had worsened conditions on the island, making it necessary, in their view, to “re-liberate” Taiwan from KMT control. At that time, because Liao and his associates were wanted by the authorities, the organization found it difficult to operate openly in Shanghai. Nevertheless, Liao Wen-kuei published articles under the name of the Taiwan Re-liberation League in the Shanghai newspaper *China Weekly Review*, sharply condemning the KMT's atrocities in Taiwan. This marked the first public appearance of the organization's name. Meanwhile, as the Chinese Civil War progressed and anti-KMT student movements continued, Shanghai remained politically unstable. Liao was forced to flee to Hong Kong, and his political stance underwent a significant transformation: He shifted from advocating “federal autonomy” before the February 28 Incident to pursuing “Taiwan independence”.

On February 28, 1948, marking the first anniversary of the February 28 Incident, Liao reorganized the “Taiwan Re-liberation League” in Hong Kong, building upon the organization he had originally established in Shanghai. Liao assumed the position of chairman, while Huang Ji-nan served as secretary-general. At the same time, the League issued its program. Liao had abandoned his earlier advocacy for “federal autonomy”, instead seeking to have Taiwan's future determined by its citizens under UN trusteeship. Faced with severe repression from the KMT authorities, the Taiwan Re-liberation League aimed to overthrow KMT rule through external support.

In June 1946, prior to the February 28 Incident, the U.S. Consulate in Taipei was reopened. George H. Kerr, then serving as vice consul, showed considerable interest in the “Taiwan independence movement”. During the period of Japanese rule, Kerr had taught at the Taipei Higher Commercial School, where he came into contact with numerous figures from Taiwanese society, including Liao and Huang Ji-nan. In a meeting with Huang in June 1946, Kerr expressed the view that the political significance of the Taiwanese ancestors' settlement of

Taiwan was analogous to that of the American colonists' independence from British rule in North America. He further noted that, the Taiwanese should have the right to determine the future of their homeland.

In July 1947, Albert C. Wedemeyer visited China as a U.S. special envoy. Through secret channels, Liao met with Wedemeyer to provide a detailed account of the February 28 Incident and to criticize the KMT authorities. At the same time, Liao sought American assistance, submitting a Memorandum on Handling the Taiwan Issue. Subsequently, the memorandum appears to have influenced the U.S. mass media. From October 1947 onward, American news outlets reported on Taiwan's status with reference to Liao's proposals. For example, according to the United Press report on October 14,

Leaders of the Taiwan independence movement demand that Taiwanese representatives attend the peace conference on Japan and determine Taiwan's future through a referendum. One leader stated that Taiwan must first achieve complete separation from China. To save Taiwan, it must be placed under United Nations trusteeship; there is no alternative.

Similarly, a United Press international report on November 2 noted:

A Taiwanese leader stated that they plan to visit Nanjing this week to meet with U.S. Ambassador John Leighton Stuart to request American assistance and secure Taiwan's autonomous rights... They have prepared the relevant documents to appeal to the United Nations.

Simultaneously with coverage in the U.S. media, on October 15, 1947, Robert J. Cotlo, head of the U.S. Information Service (USIS) under the U.S. Consulate in Taipei, met with senators from Taiwan Province and stated:

According to the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, Taiwan was returned to China, but its status remains unresolved until the signing of the peace treaty with Japan. The United States is considering applying the Atlantic Charter to the Taiwan issue, at which point the Taiwanese will be able to determine Taiwan's status according to their own wishes. At present, since Taiwan-related affairs fall under the jurisdiction of General MacArthur, the Taiwanese may submit their claims to him. Should the Taiwanese seek separation from China, the United States could provide assistance. Furthermore, if Taiwan were to accept U.S. trusteeship, it could propose conditions, including the duration of such trusteeship.

These remarks indicate that, prior to the KMT's retreat to Taiwan, the United States has contemplated placing Taiwan under trusteeship.

Cotlo's statements provoked strong dissatisfaction within the KMT government. On March 1, 1948, Sun Ke, premier of the Executive Yuan, held a press conference in Taipei, declaring:

The U.S. has indicated that the originator of these statements (referring to Cotlo's remarks on October 15, 1947) was the head of USIS under the U.S. Consulate in Taipei. This individual does not even understand the local language yet has distorted the facts... We cannot help but ask why, until today, a friendly nation [i.e., the United States] would appoint someone who damages Sino-American relations as a government official?... Therefore, I hope an investigation into the relevant personnel will be conducted.

Shortly after Sun Ke's statement, Cotlo was reassigned, reflecting a shift in U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

Subsequently, Cotlo's successor, Richard P. Connun, indicated that he did not support the previous plan of “trusteeship over Taiwan”, instead advocating: (a) abandoning the idea of trusteeship and calling for “Taiwan independence”; (b) cultivating pro-American forces to control Taiwan's future government; and (c) mobilizing the population under the banner of “Taiwan independence” to launch anti-Chiang movements, while also fostering anti-Soviet, anti-Communist, and pro-American sentiments. These developments indicate that U.S. policy toward Taiwan has begun to shift, preparing to abandon the Chiang Kai-shek government and move from a policy of “trusteeship over Taiwan” toward promoting “Taiwan independence”.

Moreover, as the KMT forces suffered repeated defeats in the Chinese Civil War, the U.S. government's distrust of Chiang Kai-shek's regime grew increasingly pronounced. Consequently, the United States began supporting forces—whether internal or external to the KMT—that had the potential to replace Chiang. On June 23, 1949, George F. Kennan, director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department, submitted a report stating:

General Sun Li-jen should be allowed to enter the new government in Taiwan (referring to the post-recovery Chen Yi administration). If he is willing, we can split the KMT army... As for Chiang Kai-shek, he should be treated as a political refugee.

At the time, Sun Li-jen, who had studied in the United States, served as Deputy Commander of the KMT Army and Commander of Taiwan Defense, wielding significant influence on the island. These developments demonstrate that the U.S. government was planning to abandon Chiang Kai-shek's regime and shift its support to emerging forces in Taiwan. Among these emerging forces were not only internal KMT figures such as Sun Li-jen but also “Taiwan independence” activists like Liao.

On the other hand, the KMT government's flight from the mainland to Taiwan due to its defeat in the Chinese Civil War far exceeded U.S. expectations. With the Communist forces poised to take control of Taiwan, the U.S. government began to show signs of a willingness to abandon the island. On August 5, 1949, the U.S. State Department issued a white paper on Sino-American relations. In this document, the U.S. government sharply criticized Chiang Kai-shek's regime, stating that the KMT's defeat in the civil war was entirely attributable to its own failures. The paper emphasized that the United States had made extensive efforts regarding China's political situation, and that the responsibility for the failure of mediation rested solely with the KMT authorities.

On January 5, 1950, U.S. President Harry S. Truman issued a statement on the Taiwan issue, declaring:

Under the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation, Taiwan has been returned to China from Japan. Over the past four years, the United States and the United Nations have recognized China's sovereignty over Taiwan. ... The United States currently has no intention of obtaining special rights or establishing military bases in Taiwan. The United States also does not intend to use force to intervene in the present situation. The U.S. government will not take actions that could involve it in the Chinese civil war.

The day after Truman's statement, the British government announced its recognition of the People's Republic of China and severed diplomatic relations with the KMT authorities.

### **Thomas W. I. Liao After Relocating to Japan**

It is evident that, against this international backdrop, the series of activities carried out by Liao and the Taiwan Re-liberation League, coupled with the positions expressed by the United States and the United Kingdom, dealt a significant blow to the KMT authorities.

However, as Hong Kong was then a British colony with a unique geopolitical position, where KMT, Communist, and other forces were intricately entangled, the League's activities became difficult to sustain. Moreover, public discourse continued to speculate on whether the Communist forces, having achieved successive victories in the Civil War, would quickly advance to occupy Hong Kong. The Taiwan Re-liberation League considered it too risky to maintain its base there. Consequently, in early 1950, the League relocated its base from Hong Kong to Tokyo. Regarding the rationale for choosing Tokyo as the new base, Jian Wen-jie, then deputy secretary-general of the Taiwan Re-liberation League, explained:

First, there was a view at the time that Tokyo, rather than Hong Kong, had become Asia's center for international political intelligence. Second, due to the historical colonial relationship between Japan and Taiwan, many Taiwanese were residing in Japan. Additionally, the Allied Occupation forces in Japan were perceived as sympathetic toward the Taiwanese, which could not be ignored.

According to records from Sugamo Prison in Tokyo, after being incarcerated, Liao was frequently compelled to perform physical labor. The Allied Occupation Headquarters imposed strict restrictions on Liao after his release, forbidding him from political involvement, requiring his prompt departure from Japan, and mandating frequent reporting of his activities. On the other hand, the original demand from the KMT authorities was for Liao to be extradited back to Taiwan after serving his sentence. However, Liao was not extradited to Taiwan as the KMT had intended. According to the ruling of the Allied Military Tribunal in Japan, the designated destination for Liao after his release was Hong Kong, his place of residence prior to coming to Japan.

This approach is quite intriguing. Although the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan arrested Liao at the request of the KMT authorities, they did not extradite him to Taiwan. In other words, the Occupation Headquarters did not fully comply with the KMT's demands. Why was this the case? It reflected the U.S. attempting to strike a balance between the KMT authorities and Liao, essentially preparing for multiple contingencies. At that time, Taiwan's future fate remained uncertain. Questions circulated widely in public discourse: Would the Communist forces manage to swiftly liberate Hong Kong? Could the KMT army continue resisting the Communists? Was the U.S. fully prepared to abandon Taiwan? Could the United Nations administer Taiwan? Amid such complex uncertainty, the U.S. retained Liao and his “Taiwan independence” faction as a potential lever to influence Taiwan's future. In other words, if the Communists failed to take Taiwan, and the Chiang Kai-shek government could not maintain control, the U.S. might utilize forces like Liao's to manipulate the situation on the island.

On October 12, 1950, Liao was released. He subsequently attempted to apply for a U.S. visa but was unsuccessful. In December of the same year, before the two-month period after his release had expired, Liao applied to extend his stay in Japan and was granted an additional 60 days. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong authorities refused him entry on the grounds that he did not possess a valid passport issued by the People's Republic of China. This refusal reflected the broader international context: On January 6, 1950, the British government became the first Western power to recognize the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China, severing diplomatic relations with the KMT authorities in Taiwan. Given this background, it was understandable that Hong Kong, then a British colony, denied Liao entry.

For these reasons, Liao remained in Japan. In February 1950, after the 60-day extension expired, he applied again to extend his stay in Japan and received approval. Afterward, his whereabouts became unclear. Until the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into effect in April 1952, Liao refrained from any public activities. Following the treaty's enforcement, Japan regained sovereignty from Allied occupation, and the Allied forces withdrew. Liao then applied to the Japanese government for residency on the grounds of political exile and was approved, allowing him to resume public political activities in Japan.

### Conclusion

When Liao began his “Taiwan independence” activities, the KMT forces were suffering successive defeats in the Chinese Civil War. For the KMT authorities, who had been driven out of mainland China, Taiwan represented their last lifeline. If they could not maintain control over Taiwan, the KMT faced inevitable collapse.

It was precisely for this reason that the KMT authorities sought every possible means to suppress Liao’s “Taiwan independence” activities.

Moreover, when Liao initiated his “Taiwan independence” movement, Japan was still under Allied occupation. At that time, Japan had not yet regained sovereignty, and all political, economic, and social activities were subject to the directives of the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan, i.e., the U.S. government. The Cold War had already begun, and the Korean War was on the verge of breaking out. In such a delicate international context, the U.S., acting in its own interest, was bound to support the KMT authorities in their struggle against the Communist forces. Therefore, Liao’s arrest by the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan was understandable. However, because the U.S. did not trust Chiang Kai-shek’s government, which had been consistently defeated in the Civil War, it sought potential alternatives to Chiang both inside and outside the KMT. Among these potential alternatives were “Taiwan independence” forces such as Liao. For this reason, Liao was not extradited to Taiwan after his release, contrary to the wishes of the KMT authorities. At first glance, the Allied Occupation Headquarters’ treatment of Liao may seem contradictory, but in fact, it reflects this complex backdrop. Shortly thereafter, on June 25, 1950, the Korean War broke out. To contain the communist bloc in East Asia, the U.S. Seventh Fleet entered the Taiwan Strait on June 27. Later, after the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army entered Korea on October 19 and engaged the U.N. forces led by the U.S., the American side had to fully support the KMT authorities who had fled to Taiwan.

In summary, Liao’s arrest by the Allied Occupation Headquarters in Japan was not only a result of the KMT’s “anti-Taiwan independence” campaign, but also closely linked to the complex international political situation of the time. The event took place in an environment marked by Japan’s occupation, the onset of the Cold War, the Chinese Civil War, and the Korean War. At first glance, Liao, as a leader of the “Taiwan independence” movement, appeared to have received U.S. support and sympathy. However, once the KMT authorities made their demands, he was arrested. Yet, the fact that he was ultimately not extradited to Taiwan indicates that the KMT’s demands were not fully met. This suggests that Liao was, at best, a pawn in political maneuvering. The Taiwan issue, which continues to this day, has been shaped from the outset by a highly complex international political landscape, particularly influenced by U.S. interests.

## References

- Bai, C. (2000). Public mentality after Taiwan’s retrocession and the February 28 Incident. *Republican Archives*, 16(3), 102-108.
- Chinese Second Historical Archives. (Ed.). (1991). *Historical archives of the February 28 Incident in Taiwan*. Beijing: Archives Press.
- Ito, M. (1999). The political thought of Liao Wenyi. *Bulletin of the College of Liberal Arts of Showa University*, 30, 9-19.
- Mei, Z. (Ed.). (1997). *Selected important documents on U.S.-Taiwan relations (Nov. 1948-Apr. 1996)*. Beijing: Current Affairs Press.
- Thomas W. I. L. (1945). To my Taiwan compatriots. *Qianfeng*, 1(1), 2-3.
- Wang, J. L. (2001). The distortion of Taiwan’s legal status: The evolution of Britain’s related policy and its divergence from the United States (1949-1951). *Modern Chinese History Studies*, 23(1), 1-26.
- Wright, M. C. (1950). Reviewed work: United States relations with China with special reference to the period 1944-1949. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 10(1), 99-104.