

Difficulties in hosting International Scientific Meetings in Taiwan

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To do international science in a politically difficult state like Taiwan is very difficult if not impossible. By the efforts of people in Taiwan, the scientific community on the island has been able to grow in size and quality in the past one half of a century in spite of damages inflicted by the last world war and the social instability caused by the transition of powers that ensued both in Taiwan and the mainland China. Since the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan in 1949, the life of people in Taiwan has been totally segregated from that in the mainland China. The scientific activities on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have had independent pathways of development. Even the Chinese language and characters that are used in all walks of life and recording of Chinese civilization now have two pathways of evolution. Biologically speaking, segregation is the beginning of speciation. Since the cession of Taiwan by the late Ching Dynasty to Japan in 1895 to today, Taiwan has had the experience of been ruled by a mainland government for only less than five years. To my view, being segregated for almost one century is a time long enough to develop substantially different cultures. For instance, to organize an academic society in Taiwan has to follow rules and regulations that are substantially different from those in the mainland China. As to the open door attitude of the society to the outside world, I believe Taiwan has a wider margin than the mainland.

As much as the two societies are different, however, the political doctrines of the two governments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait claim the existence of only one China. To us biochemists in Taiwan, we think our community is independent of the other. Then, how can we do international science in this kind of contradictory situation? In organizing this IUBMB sponsored Symposium on Protein Structure and Function, the naivety of scientists had been greatly challenged by the cruelty of political reality, and the good will of making services to the world biochemistry community had

been met with an unexpected response. You can see from the contents of this volume that there is not a single contribution from the mainland Chinese biochemists. To our invitation, initially we received enthusiastic responses from individual mainland biochemists. I do not like to go into details of how the situations had changed so drastically, but I think I owe the readers an explanation about what are the basic difficulties existing between the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese biochemical communities by reflecting on some past histories.

In 1964, at the invitation of the US National Academy of Sciences, Academia Sinica, Taipei organized the National Committee for Biochemistry and filed an application to join the International Union of Biochemistry as a member. The Union took a mail ballot on the application but the outcome was not unanimous. The mainland biochemistry community was already admitted to the Union as a member in 1961, so the outcome was not unexpected. Whether to approve the application from Academia Sinica, Taipei had to be decided by a general ballot at the General Assembly held concurrently with the Biochemistry Congress, New York, in 1964. I was designated by the Academy as the delegate to sit in the Assembly if the outcome of voting was favorable, and was admitted to the Assembly as a new member.

Unfortunately, admitting Academia Sinica, Taipei as a new member caused the loss of an old member to the Union. Sometime in 1965, I received a letter from President Ochoa of the Union informing that the admission of Taiwan to the Union met with strong objection from the mainland Chinese biochemistry community. The Union tried to keep the two biochemistry communities across the Taiwan Strait in the Union based on the principle of universality of science, but the mainland community left the Union.

Through 1960's, the biochemistry community in Taiwan had grown to a state that the need of a Biochemical Society had been strongly recognized. So the Chinese Biochemical Society was formally instituted in Taipei in 1970, but representation at the Union was still through Academia Sinica mainly for financial reasons.

In 1979, we had information through several sources simultaneously that a Chinese Biochemical Society was formed in Hang-Zhou, China, and it expressed an intention of joining the Biochemistry Union under the

condition that the membership of Academia Sinica, Taipei be removed. Of course to keep the mainland outside of the Union was unrealistic but to remove the membership of Academia Sinica, Taipei as a consequence was an injustice. Through enormous efforts of Union officers, most notably the untiring shuttle diplomacy of Secretary General Prof. W. J. Whelan and Treasurer Prof. E. C. Slater, a scheme to accommodate the two communities as two independent members in the Union had been formulated in the fall, 1979. According to this scheme, the two Chinese Biochemical Societies would be members, but since they have an exactly identical nomenclature, one should assume an alias in the listing as a member to avoid confusion. This is why the Chinese Biochemical Society, Taipei has been listed in the Union Bylaw 1 as the Biochemical Society located in Taipei.

This scheme has been adopted in later formulations of accommodating scientific communities from both sides of the Taiwan Strait in ICSU unions. But in all cases, it has been understood that the aliases are used in listing the Taiwanese adhering bodies in the union bylaws and in doing union businesses only, and does not preclude them from the right of using formal names in conducting their own businesses.

Now let me return to the point about the difficulty that the organizer of the Symposium had faced so as to warn future organizers of such activities.

The most unfortunate thing about organizing an international meeting by an academic society is that the society has to raise funds to support the operations of the meeting, and in Taiwan the funds usually come from governmental funding agencies. In securing funds, applications must be filed by using the governmental registered name of the society. All supporting documents for the proof of meeting organization should also be issued under the same official name. Now you have the dilemma: if this meeting is organized under the auspices of an ICSU union, you need to use alias so as to comply with your listing in the union statutes, but alias is not recognized by the funding agencies to which you apply for funding. Of course, if the society is rich enough or funds are available from private organizations, we can obviate all these difficulties by just adhering to alias. But this situation is far from practical in Taiwan.

But for the above mentioned difficulties, should we go back to the old days of not contributing to the world scientific communities by avoiding

organizing international scientific meetings? After fourteen long years of first using alias to solve the difficult political situation, the relationship between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has changed a lot. We tend to think a mutual understanding between the two has developed, and agenda for scientific collaboration is becoming a reality. After all, the use of alias was not for scientific but political reasons. If the political relations have softened, shall we still stick to alias that causes difficulty for us? If the mainland Chinese biochemists recognize that the biochemistry community in Taiwan has its independent character, we hope they could also understand that collaboration rather than opposition is mutually benefiting, and the problem of nomenclature should not be a serious issue of controversy as long as ambiguities are avoided. As the chief organizer of the Symposium, I sincerely hope that the lesson learned from this Symposium is not only of pure scientific nature but also of spiritual aspects of comradeship in science.

Finally, I should thank some old and new officers of IUBMB for their guidance in solving difficulties we have faced. Without such guidance, the first IUBMB sponsored scientific meeting in Taiwan could not have materialized. I should of course thank my colleagues in supporting me through all the difficult times in organizing and executing the programs.

POSTSCRIPT:

To me, the same situation is still prevailing. Several years after publication of this article, a fellow from China Association of Science and Technology wrote me a letter proposing that a channel of science and technology collaboration be set up under the umbrella of ICSU. I gave him a reply with a copy of this article. No answer has been received. (Jong-Ching Su, November 2008)