

Taiwan must invite the Dalai Lama

Written by Lu I-ming 盧伊明

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During a recent question-and-answer session at the Legislative Yuan, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Tsai Huang-liang (蔡煌琅) asked Premier Mao Chi-kuo (馬英九) whether the government would issue a visa to the Dalai Lama, who said he would be very happy to visit Taiwan when he received a group of Taiwanese religious representatives on March 16 in Dharamsala, India.

Mao tried to avoid Tsai's question, claiming that the government would make a decision acceptable to "both parties."

What kind of answer is that? Does the government need to ask for Beijing's permission?

A visit by the Dalai Lama would be in line with the Republic of China (ROC) Constitution and show respect for Tibet's autonomous spirit. It would also promote Taiwan's international image, especially at a time when the controversy over the Dalai Lama's next reincarnation is in the news.

In an interview with German newspaper Welt am Sonntag in September last year, the Dalai Lama said he would not be reincarnated. He also told international media this month that he would announce the end of his reincarnation cycle on the eve of his 80th birthday in July, making him the last incarnation of the Dalai Lama. Unexpectedly, this infuriated Beijing, which said that he has no right to end the reincarnation cycle, that doing it like this is a double betrayal and demanded that he continue to be reincarnated according to Beijing's conditions.

In response, Reuters quoted Tibetan government-in-exile Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay as saying that "for China to find a successor to the Dalai Lama would be like former Cuban leader Fidel Castro choosing the pope."

Columbia University's first professor of modern Tibetan studies Gray Tuttle said that reincarnation is only meaningful to the Dalai Lama's followers and is none of the Chinese Communist Party's business.

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CNN also reported that for the sake of Tibetan independence and freedom, the Dalai Lama, which means “ocean of wisdom” in the Tibetan language, is now wrestling with the Chinese authorities by terminating the traditional succession system.

Perhaps Mao is unfamiliar with the relationship between the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and the ROC. Article 2 of the government’s regulations on the management of lama temples (喇嘛廟管理條例), which were enacted in 1935 and abolished in 2003, stated that reincarnations are restricted to lamas who have been reincarnated before; lamas who had not been reincarnated before would not be seen as reincarnations without the central government’s approval. The article was suspended in 1973 because it was out of date, and the whole law was abolished in 2003. The ROC has a more enlightened attitude than the People’s Republic of China (PRC), as it respects the uniqueness of Tibetan politics, culture, religion, language and social structure.

In the face of the dispute over the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation, President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration should have displayed some political stature and invited the exiled spiritual leader to visit Taiwan, so that the ROC could compete with the PRC on the world stage and actively demonstrate its determination to implement its understanding of the “one China” policy, which is that “each side has its own interpretation” of the meaning of that policy. However, the Ma administration emasculated itself, and one can only wonder if it is trying to prove that the so-called “1992 consensus” means “one China” without any individual interpretations.

At a time when Beijing and Washington are constantly pressuring Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to accept the “1992 consensus,” it is not appropriate for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to follow suit and insist on a concrete implementation of “one China, with each side having its own interpretation.”

According to a 2013 TVBS poll, 71 percent of the public support Taiwanese independence. Another poll conducted by the University of Hong Kong this year showed that 51 percent of young people in Hong Kong aged between 18 and 29 supported Taiwanese independence. The results show that the Ma administration’s policy of “one China, with each side having its own interpretation” will neither convince young people nor attract any votes. A visit by the Dalai Lama to Taiwan would serve as an opportunity for the ROC to concretely declare its existence, and the nation should seize the chance.

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