

## Ambiguity burdens Tibetan students

Written by Dolma Tsering

Sunday, 27 September 2020 05:08

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Taiwan and Tibet enjoy a unique and amicable relationship. With the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan and Taiwan embracing democratic values, both sides have successfully strengthened a relationship that was once at the point of brinkmanship due to the establishment of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission based on China's nationalist frontier policy of five races.

Since the late 1990s, Taiwan and Tibet have put relations on a new path, as shown by the establishment of the Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Human Rights Network for Tibet and Taiwan, the Taiwan Tibetan Welfare Association, Students for a Free Tibet's Taiwan chapter, Taiwan Friends of Tibet and, most recently, the Taiwan Parliamentary Group for Tibet.

Taiwan also has hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist centers and hundreds of thousands of Tibetan Buddhism followers.

When he was freelancing in Taipei in 2003, Indian Legislator Tsering Namgyal said that the city must have had 100 Tibetan Buddhist centers, while the rest of Taiwan must have had more than 200 centers. Every year sees an increase in the number of Tibetan Buddhism followers. There are about 250,000 and their number continues to grow.

The growing interaction between the two communities and governments has brought an increasing number of Tibetans to Taiwan. The shift in the demographic of Tibetans visiting Taiwan also indicates a change in their perspectives on each other.

Today, Tibetan visitors to Taiwan include monks, students, businesspeople, members of parliament and members of non-governmental organizations.

On Tibetan National Uprising Day, Tibetans in Taiwan are joined by Taiwanese friends in organizing rallies, like other Tibetans do around the world.

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The Human Rights Network for Tibet and Taiwan, one of the biggest Tibet advocacy groups, continuously organizes activities regarding human rights violations in Tibet and about Tibetans' political struggle.

Since the first breakthrough in relations between Taiwan and the Tibetan government in exile, the two sides have enjoyed a harmonious relationship, but challenges still arise from ambiguity in Taiwan's Tibet policy and questions about Taiwan's position on the Tibet issue.

Among a host of issues, the Taiwanese government's ambiguity on the treatment of Tibetan refugees is one that has become more evident and relevant in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

On the one hand, the government has passed several initiatives to assist Tibetan refugees, including issuing permanent residency to Tibetans in 2009, but on the other, it continues to strictly regulate Tibetan refugees seeking to come to Taiwan to study, or for other purposes.

Except for Tibetan monks, it is mostly Tibetan students living in India who aspire to visit Taiwan. They are required to apply for a visa through an Indian legislator, which is unusual. Tibetan students are not eligible to directly apply for a visa through the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in India (TECC).

The legislator issues a letter of guarantee on behalf of the Tibetan refugee student. As most of them are not familiar with politics in Taiwan, they would lose their way in the visa application process if it were not for the Human Rights Network for Tibet and Taiwan.

Also, refugee students must come to Taiwan on a visitor visa that is only valid for six months. When it expires, they must return to India and apply for a new one. Even those pursuing doctorates are not eligible for a student visa, like other international students.

The regulations are burdensome for Tibetan students, with the cost of airfare, the process of acquiring a new visa at the TECC, and the hassle of obtaining the exit and return visas from the Indian government.

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The burden becomes even greater for those pursuing language studies in Taiwan. They only have a one-week break between semesters, so they must acquire the new visa within this week or miss some days of classes, which from a student's perspective is a huge gap in their education.

Even worse, the visitor visa granted to Tibetan students cannot be exchanged for another type of visa. These Tibetan students are not eligible for an Alien Resident Certificate (ARC), which would give them a one-year residency.

Not granting Tibetan students an ARC prohibits them from taking advantage of work opportunities and denies them access to the National Health Insurance system, something that has made them particularly vulnerable since the outbreak of COVID-19.

If it was not for the government's people-centered approach of extending visas every month, Tibetan students would need to pay about NT\$120,000 on airfare to return to India and likely lose a year of their academic career.

The ambiguity on Tibetan refugees is attributed to Taiwan's lack of regulations regarding refugees, but it nevertheless continues to pose serious challenges for Tibetan students.

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