



China Perspectives

2009/4 | 2009

Religious Reconfigurations in the People's Republic of China

Su Chi, Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China: A Tail Wagging Two Dogs

London and New York, Routledge, 2009, xix, 342 pp.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4959>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4959

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2009

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, « Su Chi, Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China: A Tail Wagging Two Dogs », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2009/4 | 2009, Online since 13 January 2010, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4959> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.4959>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

Su Chi, Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China: A Tail Wagging Two Dogs

London and New York, Routledge, 2009, xix, 342 pp.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan

- 1 Who hasn't heard of Taiwan's Su Chi? Su has long been a noted figure in the island's politics, and became the Secretary General of the National Security Council of Taiwan, or better the Republic of China (ROC), since President Ma Ying-jeou took office in May 2008, the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate having comfortably won the election two months earlier with 58 percent of the votes. Conceived on the mainland but born in Taiwan in 1949, Su comes from one of many military families of the KMT who owed their lives to their reinstatement, initially deemed provisional, on a land marked more by 50 years of Japanese occupation and modernisation than by the seven years of "War of Resistance Against Japan."
- 2 A member of the "baby boomer" generation that benefited from the first fruits of Taiwan's economic take-off in the 1960s, Su studied in the United States before teaching at the Chengchi and Tamkang universities on the island. He joined the KMT and entered the government in 1993, at first as deputy secretary-general in Lee Teng-hui's presidential office and then as chairman of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), the ministry-level body in charge of dealings with Beijing. After Chen Shui-bian's election as president in 2000, Su won fame for coming up with the "1992 consensus" concept (*jiu'er gongshi*) as a compromise proposal purportedly hammered out by representatives of Beijing and Taiwan to explain the "One-China" formula. Su hoped the concept would help the new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government resume semi-official talks with the mainland that had been initiated in 1992.
- 3 As a legislator between 2005 and 2008, he was one of presidential candidate Ma's confidants, accompanying him as diplomatic advisor on foreign trips, notably to Washington in 2006. He played a key role in the election campaign and, unsurprisingly, joined Ma's administration. He has remained at the helm of the Security Council

despite opposition calls for his exit following the typhoon Morakot devastation in August 2009 (he was blamed for Taipei's initial reluctance to request international aid). As a leading player in rapprochement attempts between the two Chinas, Su deserves to be read and understood.

- 4 I know Su Chi personally, as do many Taiwan-watchers, and enjoy cordial relations with him. At first I was reluctant to discuss his book. But its hybrid nature as the work of an academic specialising in cross-strait relations and a political document by a top KMT leader persuaded me to overcome my hesitation. The reader is hereby alerted to the risk of subjectivity that might weigh on this review.
- 5 The book is an updated translation of the 2003 Chinese version entitled *Weixian Bianyuan: Cong liangguo lun dao yibian yiguo* (*Brinkmanship: From two-states theory to one-country-on-each-side*) and covers the years 2004-2007, especially the year of Chen Shui-bian's controversial election, 2004.
- 6 To be frank, its main interest lies in how Su, a member of the KMT and of the Lee Teng-hui administration, "revisits" the 1990s. His analysis of the years of "conciliation" (1991-1994) is detailed and complete, covering secret talks that preceded the public ones, and in general is quite accurate (Ch. 1). He explains how the "92 consensus" idea occurred to him. Recalling the vagueness of the verbal compromise worked out in November 1992 by the negotiators from Taipei and Beijing, he says the two sides had not then openly rejected the formula dubbed by the Taiwanese media "One-China, different interpretations" (*yi ge zhongguo, gezi biaoshu*), the ROC's National Unification Council (NUC) maintaining in August 1992 that "One China = ROC." Thus there was no question whatsoever of recognising the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was in fact the KMT's classic interpretation, and the party renewed it in 2000 by adopting Su's "consensus," with Beijing quickly following suit, as is well known.
- 7 More surprisingly, he seeks to show (Ch. 2) to what extent Lee's trip to the United States and to Cornell University in June 1995 was the initial source of all future problems and not only the 1995-1996 missile crisis. But his real *bête noire* is the "two-state theory" Lee put forward in July 1999 (Ch. 3). Su, then heading the MAC but informed of this initiative at the last minute, had the task of explaining *urbi et orbi* that Lee's "two-state theory" did not in the final analysis contradict the "One-China" principle: an impossible task, no doubt, and one that led him to the verge of resignation. Curiously, however, he tries to explain – none too convincingly – why he remained in the government (pp. 64 ff.). As actor and then detractor in Lee's team, Su offers a highly useful account and sometimes gripping description of the internal forces (Lee's advisors such as Tsai Ying-wen, the KMT, and the DPP) and external ones (the Chinese and US governments) at work. It is the best passage in the book.
- 8 The Chen Shui-bian years receive a more banal treatment, with the critical and overly concerned attitude of an opposition politician constantly tempted to be more trenchant against internal rivals than against the external power threatening his country's very existence. Washington's restraining role (Ch. 8) is finely analysed, too finely perhaps, given, for example, the excessive importance attached to the link between senior State Department official Donald Keyser and a Taiwanese spy (p. 260), and risks losing sight of the "big picture." Chen never had the legislative majority needed to change the Constitution and legalise the ROC's real and not notional frontiers. And though he froze the NUC's functioning, Chen had only narrow elbow room, crowded by a China growing

more powerful with each passing day and a Bush administration sticking to the US's traditional "One-China" policy.

- 9 The account of 2004 is perhaps the most one-sided, focused on the Sino-American irritation over Chen's referendum move and on the KMT's inability to accept his controversial victory over the ill-conceived and unconvincing Lien Chan - James Soong Chu-yu coalition. This duo had lost the momentum some people credited them with even before the failed assassination attempt on Chen and his running mate Annette Lu Hsiu-lien.
- 10 Lien's China visit and the restoration of ties between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are briefly, almost summarily, dealt with in the book, whereas these party-to-party relations hold a highly important place in the Taipei-Beijing détente.
- 11 By now it should be clear that this book gives a glimpse of the understanding and state of mind, not only of one of the pillars of President Ma's team, but also of a good part of the "pan-Blue camp" (the KMT and its allies). It should also be clear that Su the politician has prevailed over the academic, the former overlooking realities the latter would definitely have noted, and also thereby – more seriously – risking the possibility of weakening the credibility of Taipei's current strategy with regard to Beijing.
- 12 The first glaring reality is that the "Green camp" (the DPP and its allies), representing nearly half of Taiwanese people, wants nothing to do with the "1992 consensus." Chen may well have invoked the "1992 spirit" many a time, but that was not enough for the Chinese side to engage in talks with him. Nowhere does Su acknowledge that neither the NUC set up in 1991 nor the unification guidelines it adopted had any democratic legitimacy. In fact, the NUC was formed by a president who had not then been democratically elected, and his decisions could in no way reflect any kind of national consensus. Moreover, only one (former) DPP member (Kang Ning-hsiang) has ever served on it. The NUC's "One-China" definition adopted by Su is in legal conformity with the old ROC constitution (enacted on the mainland in 1947). However, Taiwan's democratisation has imposed a new definition, a *political* one: the territories Taipei currently controls. It was this reality that Lee in 1999 and then Chen in 2002 sought to impress upon Beijing, Washington, and the world at large. In other words, the "One-China" definition the KMT is clinging to now is outdated and illegitimate in the eyes of many Taiwanese people. Moreover, it prevents the ROC from extricating itself from a non-state limbo. In fact, the predominant majority of countries recognise only one China, namely the PRC, with Taiwan as merely a part of it.
- 13 Su also glosses over Lee's 1993 bid for Taiwan's reintegration in the United Nations. Noted in passing (p. 81), this albeit near-impossible enterprise nevertheless contributed to consolidating the consensus in Taiwan on its future, which is now being undermined thanks to the KMT's peculiar infatuation with its old brother enemy. Lee had understood that détente and "normalisation" with China would only be valid if the process did not hinder the growth in international stature of the ROC/Taiwan. But Su, probably more than Ma or other KMT leaders, holds that the priority must clearly be the building of a close relationship with the mainland, eschewing at all cost anything that might annoy Beijing. But is it in the US interest to see Taiwan lowering its guard?
- 14 The third omission concerns Taiwanese identity and consciousness. Numerous books have shown that the democratisation process, especially the election of the president by direct universal suffrage since 1996, consolidated Taiwanese national political

identity. While admitting the rise in Taiwanese identity to the detriment of the Chinese one, Su tends too often to cry “electoral manipulation” (p. 49) whenever a politician plays the identity card. He thereby belittles the island’s past and the collective memory of 85 percent of the Taiwanese -- not a word, for example, on the massacre of 28 February 1947, or on the work of memory and reconciliation by the Lee-led KMT. In other words, Su adopts a viewpoint bound to be deemed “unificationist” by a great number of his compatriots, who would be tempted to add that this is “not surprising, given his mainland background”...

- 15 Finally, regarding the “92 consensus,” what Su does not deal with is its ambiguous and limited nature. Ambiguous because every time the Chinese leaders became discontented with the Taiwanese, they denounce the “One-China, different interpretations” formula and seek to impose on everyone, including the Taipei authorities, PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. Limited because Beijing endorsed this vague definition, or rather absence thereof, only in order to engage in talks *on functional issues* with Taipei. This compromise sidelines questions linked to sovereignty, and therefore cannot resolve them. Now, how can the PRC and the ROC engage in *political* talks, let alone negotiate a peace treaty, without dealing with and trying to overcome, one way or another, this basic divergence, and without accepting that two Chinese states coexist?
- 16 Su has every right to favour reunification once China becomes a democracy, and that is probably the only real solution in the long term. But while awaiting this brilliant but distant and hypothetical future, Su and other “Blue Camp” leaders ought to pay greater attention to Taiwan’s reality and try to reduce the risk of deepening the island’s social divisions rather than heightening them by restoring the KMT’s old ideology. Above all, they ought to devote greater energy towards strengthening their government’s hand in the difficult negotiations underway since 2008 with Beijing, and not to weaken it by signalling a viewpoint that is too one-sided and conciliatory to the PRC.
- 17 As can be seen, I have been frank with Su Chi, hoping this would be of use to Taiwan and, perhaps more importantly, to be persuasive on the value of reading this book.
- 18 Translated by N. Jayaram