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# Taiwanese Public Opinion on Inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan: Political or Religious Motives?

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## **Abstract**

The Dalai Lama's absence from Taiwan since 2009, attributed to mounting pressure from China, has not deterred the persistent calls from the Taiwanese populace for his visit. However, the extent to which this desire represents a mainstream or minority viewpoint remains unclear. This raises questions about the motivations behind the Taiwanese people's appeals for the Dalai Lama to visit the country. Is this driven by religious sentiments, or is it politically motivated? To explore these questions, the authors propose a hypothesis that suggests a dual motivation for pro-green individuals advocating the Dalai Lama's visit—namely, a blend of religious and political inclinations, encompassing pro-Taiwan independence sentiments and opposition to the Chinese Communist Party. On the other hand, for pro-blue supporters favouring the Dalai Lama's invitation, the primary motivation appears to lean more towards religious considerations. This paper draws its insights from a comprehensive survey project, the Sinophone Borderlands Survey, conducted in Taiwan during May and June 2022.

## **Keywords**

Dalai Lama; Taiwan; cross-Strait relations; religious motivation; political motivation

## **Introduction: Why the Dalai Lama Visiting Taiwan Matters**

The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (born in 1935), the highest spiritual leader and former head of state of Tibet, has visited Taiwan three times. In 1997, 2001, and 2009, each visit unfolded as a significant public spectacle. Beyond addressing Buddhist congregations, the Dalai Lama delivered talks on secular ethics and orchestrated an interfaith forum accessible to the broader public. These events drew tens of thousands of attendees, with many more tuning in via live broadcasts. During his first two visits, in 1997 and 2001, the Dalai Lama held meetings with the Taiwanese presidents of the time—Lee Teng-hui of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang/KMT) and Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) respectively. These encounters served to fortify ties between Taiwan and the Tibetan government-in-exile. Consequently, the impact of his visits reverberated not only within the Buddhist community but also left an indelible mark on cross-Strait relations, and China has issued repeated warnings against extending invitations to him in Taiwan (Zablocki, 2009).

While Tibet today is officially part of the People's Republic of China (PRC), its historical leader and many of his followers fled in 1959 and sought refuge in neighbouring India. In India, the Tibetan exile community, which today numbers around 100,000 people, attempted to perpetuate the original governance structure, with the Dalai Lama as both the head of state and the government. Evolving over time, the government-in-exile, officially known as the Central Tibetan Administration, underwent modernisation, and in 2011 the Dalai Lama relinquished secular power and resigned from the leadership of the government-in-exile, retaining only his role as the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader. Subsequently, Lobsang Sangay became the head of the government after democratic elections in which exiled Tibetans voted in 2012, and in 2021 he was succeeded by Penpa Tsering (Bělka, 2023). Despite these internal changes, the Chinese government steadfastly labels the Dalai Lama as a separatist and reacts with anger when other countries invite him to visit.

Since 2009, Taiwan has hosted the 'Blessing Concert for His Holiness Dalai Lama' every 6th of July, celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday in the form of a longevity prayer ceremony. This annual event draws nearly 4,000 participants, bringing together a community of Buddhists eager to celebrate and seek blessings. During the ceremony, the Dalai Lama imparts teachings via live video broadcasts, creating an interactive session where he engages with participants by responding to their questions.

The fervent desire for the Dalai Lama's presence in Taiwan is evident in the consistent invitations extended by various Buddhist groups. The Dalai Lama, in turn, has expressed his eagerness to revisit Taiwan. A notable example occurred in 2015 when the Taiwan International Tibetan Dharma Association, representing 53 groups encompassing Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, actively sought the Dalai Lama's visit. This association, established in 2011 with the goal of harmonising resources to promote Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan, formed a delegation to Dharamsala to personally invite the Dalai Lama. Simultaneously, they sent a letter to then-President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT), outlining the Dalai Lama's willingness and readiness to visit Taiwan. The Association called on the government to meet the expectations of Buddhists and allow the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan (*Taiwan People News*, 2015). Despite

these efforts, the KMT government, influenced by China, did not permit the Dalai Lama to celebrate his 80th birthday in Taiwan.

Despite these challenges, the Blessing Concert and longevity ceremony continues to be held every year. Furthermore, the organisers continue to extend invitations to Taiwanese senior officials, including DPP Vice President Chen Chien-Jen in 2019 and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) Deputy Mayor of Taipei Huang Shan-Shan in 2022. However, amid escalating tensions between Taiwan and China, orchestrating a visit by the Dalai Lama to Taiwan has grown markedly more challenging. The Dalai Lama himself acknowledged the 'delicate' nature of relations between Taiwan and mainland China in 2021, expressing a preference to remain in India (Sharp, 2021).

The invitation conundrum surrounding the Dalai Lama's potential visit to Taiwan seems to persist, transcending religious considerations to morph into a poignant political issue tied to cross-Strait relations. Underpinning this complex dynamic is an implicit opposition to the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨, *Zhongguo gongchandang*). This sentiment was evident after 10 March 2019, the 16th anniversary of the Tibetan Uprising Day, when various Taiwanese NGOs jointly initiated a petition titled 'Invite His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Taiwan'. The petition declared that 'Taiwan will stand with those persecuted by China', framing the issue as a broader stance against the oppressive CCP regime and showcasing Taiwan's commitment to defending human rights and freedom on the global stage (Hu, 2019).

In 2016, more than 40 legislators organised the 'Taiwan Parliament Group for Tibet'. The composition of this group included pro-green parties such as the DPP, the New Power Party (NPP, 時代力量, *shidai liliang*), the Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSP, 台灣基進, *taiwan jijin*), and individual legislators without party affiliations. The group openly called on the Taiwan government to support human rights and demanded public support for Uighurs, Tibetans, and Hong Kongers—groups oppressed by China. It has repeatedly expressed that 'the Dalai Lama should be welcome to visit at any time' (Chang, 2022).

It is evident that there are two groups of people within Taiwanese society that consistently advocate for welcoming the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan—one driven by religious considerations and the other more by political inclinations. While their voices resonate through various news media channels, this article aims to discern the broader sentiment among the Taiwanese populace and identify additional groups beyond Buddhists and pro-green legislators that might endorse a visit by the Dalai Lama. Furthermore, the investigation seeks to unravel the motivations behind such endorsements, probing whether they are rooted in religious convictions, political ideologies, or a nuanced combination of both.

The research draws upon data from the Sinophone Borderlands Indo-Pacific Survey, a component of the broader Sinophone Borderlands project, a series of representative public opinion surveys that ran from 2020 to 2022 and investigated global attitudes towards China

and other related issues. These surveys were administered online, and we acknowledge that there may be potential variations between online and offline data collection methodologies (Heerwegh & Loosveldt, 2008).

The Taiwanese sample, comprising over 1,300 respondents, is nationally representative across age, gender, and region (see sec. 2 for a breakdown). Responses were collected in Chinese between May and June 2022 from participants registered in national online panels by Cint, a global leader in digital insights and research technology and one of the project partners. Participants responded to approximately 60 questions, although only a subset of the data related to the goals of the current paper is reported here. Specifically, the authors of this article looked at questions related to perceptions of Tibetans and the Dalai Lama<sup>1</sup> and the willingness of individuals to invite the latter to Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> The acquired data underwent disaggregation based on political leanings and religious affiliations or practices. Key demographic variables, including age, gender, and education, were also systematically recorded. Analysis was conducted using JASP software.

Taking people's perceptions into consideration is important because they often have real-world implications. This holds particular significance in Taiwan, where public opinion, especially on sensitive topics involving Taiwan's relationship with China (and discussing the Dalai Lama visiting Taiwan inevitably touches on cross-Strait relations), profoundly influences political decision-making. The subsequent sections of this article delineate the Dalai Lama's interaction with Taiwan (sec. 1), followed by an in-depth analysis of the selected 2022 Sinophone Borderlands Survey data, examining Taiwanese opinions regarding the Dalai Lama and the prospect of his visit (sec. 2). The conclusion synthesises the findings, highlighting a prevailing inclination among the Taiwanese population to welcome the Dalai Lama, underscored by the noteworthy observation that religious beliefs can transcend diverse political perspectives.

## **1. The Dalai Lama's Visits to Taiwan**

As we have mentioned, the Dalai Lama has visited Taiwan three times in total: in 1997, 2001, and 2009. In March 1997, he landed in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, by invitation from the Chinese Buddhism Association (Associated Press, 1997). During this visit, he made public appearances in Kaohsiung and Taoyuan (Chen & Wang, 1997). Although the aim of the visit was stated as religious in nature, according to the Dalai Lama himself it was also to 'promote a better understanding between the Tibetan people and the Chinese, wherever they live' (Dalai Lama, 1997). On the last of his six-day visit, he met with Lee Teng-hui, then the recently inaugurated first directly elected president of Taiwan. In a public display of unity, the pair appeared before cameras hand in hand. The content of the exchange was non-political, although the Dalai Lama did congratulate Lee on his historic victory the year before becoming China's first

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1 'How positive or negative do you feel about the following people on the scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents cold, negative feelings, 50 represents neutral, and 100 represents warm, positive feelings?' Unless stated otherwise, all translations from non-English sources, whether scholarly and journalistic publications or survey materials, are the authors' own.

2 'Should the Dalai Lama be invited to Taiwan?'

democratically elected president in 5,000 years (Chen & Wang, 1997). This camaraderie endured beyond Lee Teng-hui's passing in 2020, as evidenced by a condolence letter and a recorded message from the Dalai Lama at Lee's funeral, where he commended Lee's role in Taiwan's democratisation and referred to him as a personal friend (Dalai Lama, 2020). While initially, there were plans for the Dalai Lama to address the Legislative Yuan, this proposal was ultimately abandoned, possibly to avoid provoking Beijing. The *People's Daily*, a Chinese newspaper, alleged that the Dalai Lama also met with several other high-ranking officials during his visit (Tibet Online, 2016).

In March 2001, the Dalai Lama embarked on his second and lengthiest visit to Taiwan, spanning ten days. The invitation originated from Taiwanese Buddhist groups, leading to the hosting of at least three sermons and blessing sessions. In addition to meeting President Chen Shui-bian and Vice President Annette Lu, the Dalai Lama also met with DPP Chairman Hsieh Chang-ting and the chairmen of the two major opposition parties, Lien Chan of the KMT and James Soong of the People First Party (PFP, 親民黨, *qinmin dang*). He also met Taiwan's renowned religious leader, the Venerable Cheng Yen (Yang, 2001), as well as Catholic bishop Paul Shan Kuo-hsi (AP Archive, 2001). Other political figures included Prime Minister Chang Chun-hsiung (Government Information Office, 2001), Tainan County Mayor Chen Tan-sun (a pro-Taiwan independence advocate) (BBC, 2001), and Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou (Gu, 2009). He also met Lee Teng-hui for the second time.

In the aftermath of the devastating flooding caused by Typhoon Morakot on 8 August 2009, Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu, along with leaders from the seven southern counties and cities governed by the DPP, collectively penned an invitation letter to the Dalai Lama. The purpose was to seek his presence in Taiwan for prayers and solace, aiming to offer comfort to the people affected by the natural disaster. Responding to this joint call, the Dalai Lama embarked on his third visit to Taiwan, spanning from 30 August to 4 September. Notably, a year prior to this visit, President Ma Ying-jeou had declined to permit the Dalai Lama's visit, citing that it was 'not the right time' (Radio Free Asia, 2008). Throughout this visit, several religious congregations took place, but an initially planned international press conference and public speech in Taoyuan was cancelled. One speech in Kaohsiung was relocated to a smaller venue, accommodating 700 attendees instead of the originally planned 15,000 (Qiu et al., 2009). High-ranking KMT politicians avoided meeting the Dalai Lama, while members of the DPP, such as Tsai Ing-wen and Chen Chu, did otherwise and engaged with him (Voice of America [Chinese], 2009). As in 2001, the Dalai Lama again met with Paul Shan Kuo-hsi.

During his visit, hundreds of members of the Unionist Party (統促黨, *tong cu dang*) protested outside the Dalai Lama's hotel (Chinese TV System, 2009), to which he responded with a hint of irony:

They really know what practising democracy is and they used their freedom of speech, so I am very happy when I come across people who are protesting. I would like to say to them that you really enjoy the freedom of speech and if you have the chance, I hope

you will go to mainland China and let him [White Wolf, the founder of the party] enjoy it as well.

(Dalai Lama, 2009)

A decade later, in May 2019, Taiwan hosted a landmark event—the first-ever Religious Freedom Forum. This forum brought together government officials, religious leaders, and representatives from civil society in Asia and the United States. A collaborative effort between the Taiwanese and US governments, its primary objective was to shed light on religious persecution around the world and formulate a practical action plan to safeguard religious freedom (Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, 2019). In anticipation of this event, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, in conjunction with three NGOs from the United States and Taiwan, sought to extend invitations to both the Dalai Lama and Rebiya Kadeer, the leader of the World Uyghur Congress. However, the Taiwanese government, under President Tsai Ing-wen's leadership, declined this proposal, wary of provoking China (Xia, 2019). Consequently, while the Church and NGOs extended an invitation to the Dalai Lama, he officially cited health reasons and refrained from applying for an entry visa. This strategic move allowed him to circumvent the potential controversy of a visa denial, which would likely have sparked public outrage. Despite these diplomatic challenges, the invitation itself conveyed a meaningful message—highlighting that the desire to welcome the Dalai Lama to Taiwan is not confined to Buddhist circles but extends to non-Buddhist groups as well.

Returning to 2009, during the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan on 30 August, several organisations conducted opinion surveys, as outlined in the appendix at the end of this article. Three days before his arrival, *Apple Daily* reported on 28 August the results of an internet-based poll undertaken the previous day with a sample size of 738 individuals. The survey posed a specific question: 'Do you agree with the DPP's statement that inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan is for the purpose of giving a blessing to Typhoon victims?' Typically, responses to such questions are framed as 'agree' or 'disagree'. However, *Apple Daily* made it more specific:

- Agree, the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan will soothe the hearts of the victims.
- Disagree, it is obviously a political manipulation, the DPP should not hide its motivation.

The poll results indicated that 59.89 percent agreed, 26.02 percent disagreed, and 14.09 percent had no opinion (Mainland Affairs Council, 2009). The intricacy of the question's wording reveals the nuanced political undertones associated with the Dalai Lama's visit, even when ostensibly centred around religious or humanitarian intentions.

Other surveys had similar findings. The TVBS Polling Centre ran a survey on 31 August 2009 with a sample size of 939 individuals and asked a similar question as the *Apple Daily*: 'Some people say that the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan is a political operation, while others say it is simply a religious blessing for the victims. Which statement do you agree with more?' The findings revealed that 30 percent perceived the visit as politically motivated, 52 percent viewed it as religious in nature, and 17 percent refrained from commenting. Additionally, the poll

gauged opinions on whether the Dalai Lama's visit would escalate cross-Strait tensions, with 39 percent agreeing, 46 percent dissenting, and 15 percent withholding comment (Mainland Affairs Council, 2009).

A survey conducted by the TSP between 31 August and 1 September 2009, with a sample size of 957 individuals, asked whether people believed the purpose of the Dalai Lama's visit was humanitarian and religious rather than a political operation. The outcomes reflected a predominant belief, with 61.65 percent responding affirmatively, 27.17 percent expressing scepticism, and 11.8 percent opting not to respond. The same poll delved into the controversy surrounding the visit, mainly connected to China, and found that 55.8 percent agreed it caused controversy, 19.96 percent disagreed, and 24.24 percent had no opinion. Furthermore, when queried about China's blockade of the Dalai Lama, 12.23 percent deemed it just, 56.53 percent disagreed, and 31.24 percent remained undecided (Mainland Affairs Council, 2009).

Finally, the polling centre of the DPP, then in opposition, conducted a survey from 31 August to 1 September 2009, with a sample size of 709 individuals. When asked if they believed the purpose of the Dalai Lama's visit was religious, not political, 67.2 percent of respondents agreed, 23.4 percent did not, and 9.4 percent abstained from providing an answer. With China threatening to diminish cross-Strait exchanges over the Dalai Lama's visit, the DPP poll queried whether China's behaviour was deemed appropriate. The responses indicated that only 8.8 percent found it appropriate, a resounding 79.6 percent disagreed, and 11.6 percent offered no opinion. Moreover, 52 percent of respondents disagreed that the Dalai Lama's visit would damage cross-Strait relations, 39.9 percent agreed, and 8.1 percent withheld an opinion. Finally, a substantial 75.4 percent of surveyed Taiwanese citizens expressed agreement with the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan, while only 18.1 percent dissented and 6.5 percent gave no opinion (Mainland Affairs Council, 2009).

Examining the questions posed in the four polls (*Apple Daily*, TVBS, TSP, DDP) conducted around the time of the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan in 2009 reveals a central concern: whether or not the DPP's invitation was driven by purely religious or political motives (see the appendix for the specific wording of the survey questions). The term 'political operation' carried dual connotations during this period. First, it was perceived as a means for the then opposition party (DPP) to challenge the ruling party (KMT). This was evident in the context of President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) initially rejecting the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan in 2008, only to acquiesce to it in 2009. Second, it served as a demonstration that Taiwan was unyielding in the face of China's suppression, asserting its commitment to defending human rights and freedom. Across the four polls, the majority of Taiwanese respondents agreed on the religious intent behind the Dalai Lama's visit. However, approximately 23 to 30 percent of respondents disagreed, believing that the motivation was political. Concerning China's involvement, the prevailing sentiment among the majority of respondents was disagreement with practices such as blocking the Dalai Lama from visiting Taiwan.

## **2. Taiwanese People's Motivations for Wanting the Dalai Lama to Come to Taiwan**

In 2000 Chen Shui-bian assumed the presidency, marking the first instance in half a century that an opposition party wrested power from the KMT in Taiwan. The DPP championed the idea that Taiwan possesses a distinct identity surpassing the overarching nationalism of Greater China, and as such, it recognised the Tibetan government-in-exile and actively forged substantive ties. In March 2001 the Dalai Lama was invited to return to Taiwan, four years after his previous visit. Two years later, in 2003, the Taiwan-Tibet Exchange Foundation (TTEF) was established, serving as a semi-official conduit for bilateral exchanges and extending humanitarian support in the realms of medical and agricultural aid to Tibetan settlements in India. The DPP government under Chen continued to cultivate relations with the Tibetan government-in-exile through the TTEF (Pan, 2023) and extended multiple invitations to the Dalai Lama to return to Taiwan, underscoring its commitment to fostering cultural and diplomatic ties between Taiwan and Tibet.

However, representatives of the Dalai Lama and China's United Front Work Department began contact and dialogue in September 2002, and the two sides continued to hold talks thereafter, with a total of eight meetings by November 2008 (Namloyak, 2021: 328–329). The CCP used these talks to exert pressure on the Tibetan government-in-exile and prevent the Dalai Lama from continuing to visit Taiwan, effectively preventing the development of further relations between the DPP government and the Tibetan government-in-exile. As the result, the Dalai Lama originally planned to visit Taiwan once every two years but cancelled this visit to Taiwan after 2003 (Chen, 2006: 32–33). Throughout President Chen's tenure (2000–2008), the invitations persisted, but the Dalai Lama only visited once (in 2001). After the eighth China–Tibet talks in 2008, during an interview with *Yazhou Zhoukan* (Asia Weekly), the Dalai Lama publicly acknowledged the fundamental differences between the Tibetan government-in-exile and the CCP, saying with regret that he had no hope of using the talks to achieve substantive results in resolving the Tibet issue. Furthermore, he conveyed admiration for the 'Three People's Principles' implemented in Taiwan, deeming them intriguing and potentially serving as a model for future Tibetan democracy (Ji, 2008). In other words, the Dalai Lama no longer had any expectations for Sino-Tibetan talks and has expressed his willingness to have further exchanges with Taiwan in the future.

The political landscape in Taiwan underwent a significant shift in the 2008 presidential election, resulting in the election of Ma Ying-jeou, a pro-China candidate from the KMT. In an effort to foster amicable relations with China, President Ma disbanded the TTEF and rejected the Dalai Lama's expressed desire to visit Taiwan. As previously mentioned, the Dalai Lama's visit in 2009 transpired due to the humanitarian imperative prompted by the devastation caused by Typhoon Morakot. It was the party in opposition at the time, the DPP, that extended the invitation, emphasising humanitarian considerations as the driving force behind the Dalai Lama's third visit to Taiwan. Although the results of the 2016 presidential election saw another rotation of political parties, with Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP assuming the presidency, the ruling party's stance on inviting the Dalai Lama has leaned towards reluctance in the six years since. This trend is often attributed to the heightened assertiveness of China's military threats, as outlined in recent analyses (Pan, 2023).

Since 2000 two major political camps have taken shape: the pro-blue camp, spearheaded by the KMT, and the pro-green camp, led by the DPP. The primary divergence between these political factions lies in their stance on Taiwan's political status. In simple terms, the KMT leans towards fostering close relations with China, with historical aspirations of unification, while the DPP champions and advocates for Taiwanese autonomy. As the years have elapsed since the Dalai Lama's last visit to Taiwan in 2009, the island has witnessed significant political party rotation, as has been outlined in this article. Beyond the support from Buddhists and pro-green legislators, who else in Taiwan is now inclined to extend a welcoming invitation to the Dalai Lama? Furthermore, what motivations, be they religious or political, underpin this desire among Taiwanese people to embrace the Dalai Lama's presence?

Building upon the insights gleaned from the 2009 polls, as elucidated in the preceding section, and considering the contemporary political landscape, we formulated a hypothesis when designing the Sinophone Borderlands Survey in 2022. We posited that pro-green supporters inclined to invite the Dalai Lama do so primarily for political reasons, while pro-blue supporters who express a willingness to extend an invitation do so primarily from religious motives. The survey subsequently substantiated the validity of this hypothesis.

The survey encompassed a nationally representative sample comprising 1,351 respondents, ensuring a balanced distribution across age, gender, and region demographics. The gender distribution was fairly even, with 48 percent females and 52 percent males. Ethnically, respondents included 70 percent Taiwanese Minnan, 16 percent Taiwanese Hakka, 8 percent Mainlanders, 2 percent Aboriginal individuals, along with small percentages representing recent Mainland immigrants and foreign immigrants. Language usage within the sample was diverse, with 56 percent primarily speaking Mandarin Chinese at home, 37 percent opting for Taiwanese, and 5 percent choosing Hakka (with overlap among these languages). It is noteworthy that the sample skewed towards a lower representation of older individuals (attributed to challenges in surveying this demographic online) and was more reflective of residents from larger cities with higher educational backgrounds.

In the survey we asked: 'If there were parliamentary elections this weekend, which party would you vote for?' The data revealed that, based on our findings, a majority of individuals in Taiwan would cast their votes for the DPP (24%), followed by the KMT (18%), with smaller parties trailing. Notably, 21 percent of respondents remained undecided, while 18 percent expressed an intention not to vote (see also Table 4, where respondents' voting intentions are measured against willingness to invite the Dalai Lama). However, when participants were asked, 'What is your political leaning?', basically compelled to choose between green and blue (on a 7-point scale from deep green to deep blue), the results shifted. The pro-blue camp garnered a higher percentage at 38 percent, surpassing the pro-green camp, which secured 32 percent. Intriguingly, a substantial 30 percent remained in the middle ground, demonstrating a nuanced and diverse spectrum of political inclinations (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Respondents' political leanings

Political leaning (1 = deep green to 7 = deep blue)	Percentage of sample
1	6%
2	6%
3	20%
4	30%
5	26%
6	7%
7	5%

*(a) General Sentiments Towards Tibetans and the Dalai Lama*

Our study gauged attitudes towards Tibetans and various other groups using a “thermometer question” (Table 2). Respondents were asked to position their feelings on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 indicated cold, negative sentiments, while 100 represented warm, positive feelings. Respondents' sentiments towards Tibetans were relatively warm, with a mean score of 59. Notably, among the ethnic, religious, and national groups covered in the survey, Taiwanese respondents expressed the warmest feelings towards the Japanese (71), Europeans (66), and US-Americans (64), surpassing their sentiments towards Tibetans. Intriguingly, sentiments towards the PRC-Chinese (47) were rated least warm, occupying the lower end of the spectrum.

TABLE 2 Sentiments towards different groups

Groups	Mean (0 = negative to 100 = positive)
Muslims	51
Immigrants	60
Africans	55
Americans (from the US)	64
Chinese (from the PRC)	47
Rohingya	54
Uyghur	58
Europeans	66
Japanese	71
Indians	52
Tibetans	59

The first question directly relating to the Dalai Lama measured general sentiments towards him and employed the same thermometer-style question and scale. The outcome mirrored the sentiments expressed towards Tibetans in general, with Taiwanese respondents feeling relatively warm towards the Dalai Lama, reflected by an identical mean value of 59.

When tested against other variables, the survey revealed that older individuals tended to harbour warmer feelings towards the Dalai Lama, potentially stemming from their exposure to his previous visits to Taiwan, perhaps fostering a personal affinity. Gender differences surfaced, indicating that, on average, men expressed warmer sentiments towards the Dalai Lama than women. Additionally, individuals with higher levels of education exhibited greater warmth in their feelings towards the Dalai Lama. An intriguing trend emerged in relation to religious affiliations, where heightened religiosity, regardless of the specific faith (Buddhism, Taoism, or Catholicism, the three predominant religions in Taiwan), correlated with a more favourable view of the Dalai Lama, with Buddhists (unsurprisingly) responding most favourably of all. Finally, the survey identified no discernible correlation between geographic location within Taiwan and individual identification or sentiment towards the Dalai Lama.

We explored correlations between the willingness to welcome the Dalai Lama and the hypothetical acceptance of refugees in Taiwan. Notably, Taiwan lacks an official refugee law, and the acknowledgement of refugees on its territory is a highly speculative notion. Nevertheless, our findings unveiled a compelling pattern: the greater an individual's readiness to embrace refugees—whether from China, Hong Kong, war-torn regions, or Tibet—the more inclined they were to welcome the Dalai Lama. Strikingly, the most robust correlation emerged in relation to refugees from Tibet. This intriguing correlation implies that Taiwanese individuals not only recognise the challenges faced by Tibetans but also welcome the Dalai Lama because of broader humanitarian reasons.

#### *(b) General Attitudes Towards Welcoming the Dalai Lama's Visit*

The second question directly relating to the Dalai Lama was whether he should be invited to Taiwan. Respondents answered on a 7-point scale, with responses grouped into three categories in Figure 1: yes, no, and neutral (the midpoint in the scale). A notable 58 percent of respondents expressed a positive inclination towards extending such an invitation. This prevailing sentiment among the Taiwanese populace regarding the welcome extended to the Dalai Lama aligns closely with attitudes observed in surveys conducted in 2009, coinciding with the Dalai Lama's last visit to Taiwan, as detailed in the preceding section.

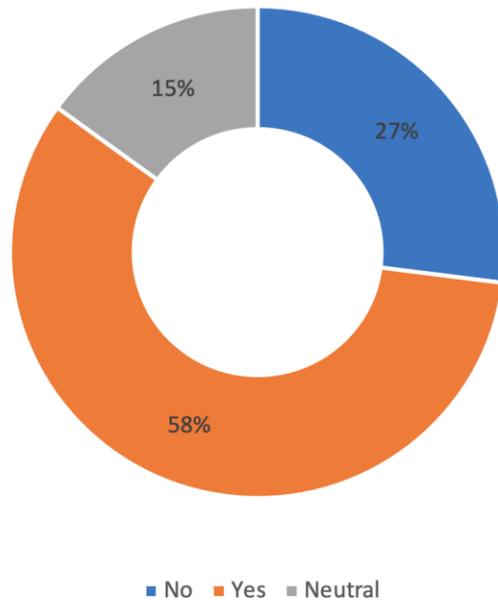


FIGURE 1 Should the Dalai Lama be invited to Taiwan?

We further analysed the results of the invitation question against various variables and found that older individuals tended to be more supportive of inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan. Additionally, gender dynamics surfaced once again, with men displaying a greater inclination to extend an invitation compared to women. Religious affiliation continued to play a noteworthy role, with individuals identifying as Buddhist, Taoist, or Catholic expressing a heightened willingness to invite the Dalai Lama. Among these groups, Buddhists again exhibited the most favourable response. Unsurprisingly, individuals with warmer feelings towards Tibetans were more likely to favour inviting the Dalai Lama. This trend extended to attitudes towards the Rohingya, a displaced group from Myanmar now residing in refugee camps in Bangladesh, with favourable sentiments towards the Rohingya correlating with a greater inclination to invite the Dalai Lama. Examining attitudes through the lens of cross-Strait relations, a noteworthy inverse relationship emerged. Individuals with more positive perceptions of China and those willing to align Taiwan's foreign policy with China were less inclined to support inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan.

We also investigated Taiwanese people's stance on the spectrum of Taiwan's independence versus unification with China. Our findings revealed a positive correlation: the stronger the endorsement of independence, the more inclined individuals were to support inviting the Dalai Lama. This connection underscores the influential role of the 'China factor' in shaping attitudes towards the Dalai Lama's potential visit. Moreover, when examining individuals' identity, as categorised in the survey (options included Taiwanese Minnan, Taiwanese Hakka, Mainlander, Aboriginal, recent Mainland immigrant, recent foreign immigrant, and other), a nuanced pattern emerged. Specifically, Taiwanese Minnan were more willing to invite the Dalai Lama, whereas Mainlanders had a comparatively lower inclination towards extending such an invitation. Notably, akin to the initial Dalai Lama question, no correlations were observed with regional factors or educational backgrounds.

*(c) Attitudes Towards Inviting the Dalai Lama by Politics, Religion, and Education*

Examining the political leanings of participants, we find that the more aligned a respondent is with the pro-green camp (recall Table 1), the greater their willingness to extend an invitation to the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan (Table 3). In contrast, those without strong political leanings, falling outside the realms of both the pro-green and pro-blue camps, exhibited the least inclination to extend such an invitation (4 on the political leaning scale in Table 3).

TABLE 3      Should the Dalai Lama be invited to Taiwan? (By political leaning)

Political leaning (1 = deep green to 7 = deep blue)	Mean (1 = deep green to 7 = deep blue)
1	5.2
2	5.1
3	4.6
4	4.3
5	4.4
6	4.7
7	4.8

Zooming in on respondents' voting intentions, outlined earlier in the article, provided intriguing insights into their disposition towards inviting the Dalai Lama. Among the supporters of the two predominant parties in Taiwan, those aligning with the DPP exhibited a greater inclination to support the invitation compared to their counterparts supporting the KMT (Table 4). However, voters supporting the TSP, a staunchly pro-Taiwan-independence party, were even more inclined to invite the Dalai Lama than DPP voters. In contrast, KMT voters registered the lowest score, a trend consistent with that party's political stance.

TABLE 4      Should the Dalai Lama be invited to Taiwan? (By voting intentions)

Voting intentions	Oppose or support inviting the Dalai lama (1 = strongly oppose to 7 = strongly support)
TSP	5.9
DPP	5.1

NPP	4.7
TPP	4.6
Other political party	4.4
KMT	4.3
I don't know	4.3
I wouldn't vote	4.1

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We also analysed correlations between political leaning and education/religion and found that for pro-blue respondents, there is a positive correlation between wanting to invite the Dalai Lama and holding a religious belief (in the case of all three listed religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Catholicism) but no correlation with education levels. For pro-green respondents, a positive correlation was evident between the desire to invite the Dalai Lama and political motivation, whereas such a correlation was notably absent among their pro-blue counterparts. This appears to align with the initial hypothesis, affirming that pro-blue individuals harbour religious motivations for inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan, while pro-green individuals are primarily motivated in this preference by political considerations.

## Conclusion

Since the Dalai Lama's first visit to Taiwan in 1997, Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan has grown significantly. The total number of Tibetan Buddhist centres increased from 82 in 1996 to 473 in 2018, while the community of Tibetan Buddhist adherents soared to approximately half a million (Own, 2018). A notable manifestation of this growth is the increasing participation of Taiwanese Tibetan Buddhist devotees in Dharamsala, culminating in an annual organisational pilgrimage that has been facilitated by the Taiwan International Tibetan Dharma Association since its founding in 2011. Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the annual turnout ranged from 1,000 to 1,500 followers (Dalai Lama, 2020), dwindling to around 600 post-pandemic (*Yam News*, 2022). From this perspective, the Dalai Lama's visits to Taiwan have profoundly fulfilled their objective of disseminating Tibetan Buddhism, rendering his potential return to Taiwan of paramount religious significance.

Yet, within the Taiwanese context, the prospect of inviting the Dalai Lama for another visit invariably intertwines with the intricate web of cross-Strait relations. China, staunchly opposing such visits, consistently endeavours to thwart the Dalai Lama's presence in Taiwan. What could be a profound religious event often gets entangled in the complexities of political discourse, deviating from substantive discussions due to opposing political stances and party conflicts. Despite the persistent invitations from Taiwanese Buddhists, the nuanced perspectives of the Taiwanese populace on this matter have seldom been elucidated. A major contribution of this research lies in presenting comprehensive data on the public opinion of the Taiwanese people regarding the invitation of the Dalai Lama.

Among all the variables we tested, religious belief emerges as a common factor capable of transcending diverse political affiliations. Not confined solely to Buddhism, this inclusive support extends to adherents of Taoism and Catholicism, illustrating a broader societal consensus in favour of a potential Dalai Lama visit. Even within the pro-blue camp, often associated with amicable sentiments towards China, the allure of the Dalai Lama's visit persists, underpinned by religious motivations. For the pro-green supporters, religious considerations are also a factor, but they are further reinforced by their political stance, such as Taiwanese autonomy, human rights, refugee protection, global justice, and so on. This outcome underscores the remarkable ability of Taiwanese society to forge consensus on substantial issues, surmounting political divides and preconceived biases.

Although the Dalai Lama has been unable to come to Taiwan in recent years, a majority of the populace has steadfastly maintained support for a prospective visit since 2009. This underscores the notable fact that there is no substantial correlation between the use of political measures to impede the Dalai Lama's visit and his enduring popularity in Taiwan. Nevertheless, the ongoing thwarting of his visits remains a source of disappointment for his followers and serves as a poignant manifestation of Taiwan's ongoing challenges in achieving comprehensive religious freedom.

The backdrop of cross-Strait relations, marred by conflict since 1949, has further intensified in recent years, particularly under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping. The heightened military threat to Taiwan has become increasingly pronounced, a concerning trend that gained momentum with Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. This visit, perceived by the CCP as a breach of the 'one China' principle, resulted in CCP's forceful reaction, involving substantial military exercises in the sea and airspace surrounding Taiwan as a retaliatory measure against perceived harm to China's interests.

From the perspective of the Chinese government, the Dalai Lama is not a 'simple monk' but a political exile who has long engaged in 'anti-China separatist activities' and attempted to split Tibet from China (Embassy News, 2023). When any country in the world invites the Dalai Lama to visit, it will be met with staunch opposition from China, which has been known to impose punitive measures on countries receiving the spiritual leader (Ramachandran, 2023). Despite China's threats, many countries have nevertheless chosen to extend invitations to the Dalai Lama.

China consistently views the Dalai Lama's visits to Taiwan as a perceived conspiracy involving collaboration between Taiwan's push for independence and Tibetan independence (Chen, 2006). Given these geopolitical complexities, it is now evident that decisions regarding inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan necessitate careful consideration of political implications. However, a notable discrepancy emerges between the perspectives of the Taiwanese people and the Chinese government on this matter. Our survey underscores that religious considerations hold significant sway in public opinion and cannot be disregarded. This research emphasises the

crucial interplay between political factors and public sentiment, urging Taiwanese government decision-makers to navigate this delicate balance while upholding religious freedom.

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### Appendix: Taiwanese Public Views on the Dalai Lama's Visit to Taiwan (2009)

Polling agency, survey dates, sample size	Survey question and response	Result	
<i>Apple Daily</i> , 27 August 2009 (reported 28 August 2009), sample of 738	Do you agree with the DPP's statement that inviting the Dalai Lama to Taiwan is for the purpose of giving a blessing to Typhoon victims?	Agree, the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan will soothe the hearts of the victims.	59.89%
		Disagree, it is obviously a political manipulation, the DPP should not hide its motivation.	26.02%
		No opinion / I don't know.	14.09%
TVBS Polling Centre, 31 August 2009, sample of 939 (aged over 20)	Do you know that Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama arrived in Taiwan last night?	Yes.	93%
		No.	7%
	Do you think the timing of the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan is appropriate?	Appropriate.	38%
		Not appropriate.	34%
		No opinion.	27%
	Do you think the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan will escalate tensions in cross-Strait relations?	Yes.	39%
		No.	46%
		No opinion.	15%
	Some people say that the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan is a political operation, while others say it is simply a religious blessing for the victims. Which statement do you agree with more?	Political operation.	30%
		Religious blessing.	52%
No opinion.		17%	
Taiwan Statebuilding Party, 31 August to 1		Believe.	61.65%
		Don't believe.	27.17%

September 2009, sample of 957 (aged over 20)	Do you believe that the Dalai Lama's trip is based on humanitarian concerns and religious blessings, and not political intentions?	No opinion.	11.18%
	Officials from the presidential office said, 'President Ma will not meet with the Dalai Lama.' In your opinion, should President Ma meet the Dalai Lama?	Should.	40.44%
		Should not.	28.94%
		No opinion.	30.62%
	Do you think the biggest reason for the controversy caused by the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan is China's interference?	Agree.	55.8%
		Disagree.	19.96%
		No opinion.	24.24%
	If President Ma Ying-jeou or his wife could attend the Dalai Lama's dharma teaching, do you think it would help improve public criticism of the Ma government's negative response to the disaster?	It will improve.	27.06%
		It will not improve.	50.68%
		No opinion.	22.26%
	China's blockade policy against the Dalai Lama, do you think it is just?	Yes.	12.23%
		No.	56.53%
No opinion.		31.24%	
Polling centre of the Democratic Progressive Party, 31 August to 1 September 2009, sample of 709 (aged over 20)	Some people say, 'The Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan is a religious trip to pray for blessings and comfort the victims, not a political activity.' Do you agree with this statement?	Agree.	67.2%
		Disagree.	23.4%
		No opinion.	9.4%
	Some people say, 'The green camp invited the Dalai Lama to Taiwan for political purposes and deliberately created problems for Ma Ying-jeou.' Do you agree with this statement?	Agree.	37.0%
Disagree.		50.7%	

		No opinion / no answer.	12.3%
During the Dalai Lama's trip to Taiwan, he was protested by some groups. Do you think the protest is appropriate?		Appropriate.	13.2%
		Not appropriate.	77.7%
		No opinion / no answer.	9.1%
Do you think President Ma Ying-jeou should meet with the Dalai Lama?		Should	48.6%
		Should not	36.3%
		No opinion / no answer.	15.1%
Do you believe that the Dalai Lama's cancellation of the scheduled domestic and foreign press conferences and speech in Taoyuan was the result of China's pressure on the Taiwan government?		Believe	51.1%
		Don't believe.	36.8%
		No opinion / no answer.	12.1%
Regarding China's threat that the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan will reduce cross-Strait exchanges, do you think China's behaviour is appropriate?		Appropriate.	8.8%
		Not appropriate.	79.6%
		No opinion / no answer.	11.6%
Some people say, 'The Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan will have a negative impact on cross-Strait relations.' Do you agree with this statement?		Agree.	39.9%
		Disagree.	52.0%
		No opinion / no answer.	8.1%
Overall, do you agree that the Dalai Lama is coming to Taiwan to pray for the victims?		Agree.	75.4%
		Disagree.	18.1%
		No opinion / no answer.	6.5%

Source: Mainland Affairs Council (2009).

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