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# China and the IUB(MB)\*

## Invited Essay

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This is an account of science politics that centred on the International Congress of Biochemistry in Toronto in July 1979 that has previously been told only in part. I shall use the opportunity afforded by the invitation to write something about that Congress to put this in the public domain.

It concerns the successful negotiations to readmit a representative body of biochemists from the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an Adhering Body of the International Union of Biochemistry (IUB, now IUBMB). Adhering Bodies are most commonly the National Academies or Biochemical Societies of a particular region, which constitute the General Assembly, the governing body of the Union. In 2002, there are approaching 70 representations, although a number of them are Associate Adhering Bodies, smaller communities that do not pay an annual fee or exercise a vote.

An account of these negotiations has already been published by the author and E.C. (Bill) Slater (Slater, E.C., and Whelan, W.J. III-V. (1980) China to rejoin the IUB. (TIBS, 5, 1). This explained how the problem began and how it was solved, but lacked the details of what were sometimes hectic negotiations. The initial events paralleled a decision in the United Nations, where the PRC (mainland China) was successful in bringing about the expulsion of the Republic of China (Taiwan), and its replacement by the PRC, which has always claimed that its authority extends over Taiwan.

Similarly in the scientific community, where governance is exercised by Unions such as the IUB, collected together in the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), the PRC demanded the expulsion of Taiwan where Taiwan was in separate membership. The IUB admitted Taiwan as a separate member in 1963, resulting in

the withdrawal of the Academia Sinica, representing the PRC, in 1965.

In 1967 the IUB moved to try to make it possible for Taiwan and the PRC both to be represented, by redefining its Adhering Bodies, which were now not to be countries, but scientific communities of a country or a defined geographical area that has an independent budget for scientific purposes.

No more was heard on the question for about 10 years. Mainland China was undergoing the Cultural Revolution which greatly restricted the contacts of mainland Chinese scientists with their colleagues abroad. Towards the end of



the 1970's, representations from the PRC began again and in two ICSU Unions Taiwan was replaced by the PRC. ICSU proposed a formula for representation of scientific communities similar to what had been done in the IUB and recommended that members be listed under a name that will avoid any "misunderstanding about the territory represented". In the spring of 1979 I, as the General Secretary of the IUB, received a request from the PRC for re-admission to the IUB in the guise of a new body, the Chinese Biochemical Society, that was about to be formed. The proposal was coupled with the condition that separate membership from Taiwan should cease.

While welcoming the approach, the IUB Executive Committee took the line that the Statutes, as modified in 1967, did not justify this latter request. It was at this point that the detailed negotiations began. We needed to act rapidly, if possible, because it was in Toronto, in July, that the General Assembly would meet, and the situation could be discussed. The Assembly ordinarily

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meets only each three years, during the Congress.

Slater and I accepted an invitation to Taiwan and travelled to Taipei in June 1979 to discuss the matter with representatives of their Academia Sinica. After several days of discussion it became clear that no-one in Taiwan saw any prospect of reaching an accommodation. I recall a feeling of despair while sitting in the Grand Hotel, Taipei, waiting for our hosts to take me to the airport for the journey home. But, as I waited, two thoughts came to mind, One was having seen the letterhead being used by one of the Taiwanese biochemists in which his address was given as Taipei, China, not the almost universal Taiwan, Republic of China. It occurred to me that "China" could be used as a description without any political connotation.

I took out a yellow pad, which I still have, on which I wrote:

"For the time being there will be two Adhering Bodies from China".

If all parties could agree to this, then the Society being formed on the mainland could be admitted to the IUB while, following the suggestion made by ICSU, a body representing biochemistry in Taiwan could be formed and have a non-political name.

The IUB Executive Committee agreed to this proposal, though I recall that in the days immediately before the Toronto Congress I was still missing the vote of the President of the IUB, Alexander Bayev. Coming from Moscow, would he go along with a proposal which involved our disagreeing with mainland China about the expulsion of Taiwan? He did.

The next step was to learn the opinions of the representatives of mainland China and Taiwan. To our delight, mainland China dropped its insistence that Taiwan be expelled. It was now all up to the Taiwanese.

Negotiations began in earnest once we had all assembled in Toronto for the Congress and continued through the early hours of the day when the General Assembly was to be held in the afternoon. I woke up my wife at 4:30 a.m. to tell her that we had reached agreement, only to learn after little sleep that the Academia Sinica in Taipei did not agree with what we had negotiated with its delegates.

It became clear that everything hinged on the name to be given to the Body ( a Society, replacing their Academia Sinica) that would in future represent Taiwan. Slater and I got in touch by phone with the Foreign Secretary of the Academia Sinica, Taipei and after about an hour of sometimes heated discussion, with the General Assembly about to begin, finally agreed on a form of wording that could be put to the delegates to the Assembly. They agreed with the proposal and immediately after the Assembly ended they remained, so that Wang Yin-lai, one of the two delegates from the PRC, could address the Assembly at that historic moment. The final resolution did not, however, end there on 11 July. The precise name of the Body from Taipei was still a sticking point. About seven weeks later, in August, after a visit by me to Beijing and two visits to Taipei, I was joined by Slater in Taipei and a nomenclature was finally agreed. Then the Society from the PRC was admitted to membership of the IUB, following a mail ballot of the Adhering Bodies on the final terms of the agreement.

As a footnote, during these travels, that took me around the world twice in 3 weeks, I picked up an amoeba, which laid me low for the whole of September.

The 1979 IUB agreement was immediately adopted by two other ICSU Unions, while ICSU itself adopted a similar formula in 1982. In 2002 mainland China and Taiwan are separately represented in ICSU and in all but one of the 26 ICSU Unions.

"For the time being" has now lasted for 23 years.

*\*This article has been solicited by the Editors. Dr. Whelan has had a distinguished career as a researcher, Editor In Chief of a number of Scientific Journals (TIBS, 1975-78, BioEssays, 1983-88, FASEB J. 1986-), IUBMB Life, 2000 -) and Member of the IUBMB Executive: Secretary General, 1973-83, President, 1997-2000).*