

# Deep historical links complicate Taiwan's relationship with Myanmar

Monday 22 April 2024, by [NOUBEL Filip](#), [YANG Will](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2024).

## An interview with Taiwan-based journalist Will Yang

Taiwan and Myanmar are linked throughout contemporary history as a result of a substantial Chinese population loyal to the Kuomintang ([KMT](#)) having lived in Myanmar in the 1950s, but also because both countries face China's interference on their border.

At the end of the [Chinese Civil War](#) in 1949, the defeated Kuomintang army fled by boat from mainland China to Taiwan. But some also took a long terrestrial road from southwestern China, where many had gathered, and eventually moved to the safety of Myanmar, where [they stayed for over a decade](#) as some wanted to reclaim China from that base, with initial support from the US. The government of Myanmar does not maintain diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in Taiwan and has the support of Beijing. Yet, it also faces a [growing influence of China](#) on its northern borders amid its civil war.

To unpack a highly complex relationship, Global Voices interviewed Taiwan-based Will Yang (Chinese name: 楊威), a seasoned [Taiwanese journalist](#) who focuses on Myanmar, which he [visits regularly](#), and who also writes extensively about human and migrant rights and international relations from a Taiwanese perspective.

The interview was in Chinese over email after an in-person meeting in Taipei.

**Filip Noubel (FN): You have been going to Myanmar regularly since 2015 as a journalist. How do you see the country changing in the past decade?**

- [Translation](#)
- [Original Quote](#)

**Will Yang (WY):** Since 2015, Myanmar has experienced both democratization and a military coup. So today's generation of young people has experienced the blossoming of democracy and witnessed the infinite possibilities of their country. But now Myanmar is caught in the flames of war. The changes of the past ten years have caused many people in Myanmar to go from being full of hope and expectations to feeling lost and on the verge of despair. The cause of all this is the dictatorship of the military government that continues to abuse the country, and the indifference of neighboring countries as well as of the international community.

It looks like nothing has changed, but in the period of liberal democracy, Western technology and capital entered the country, changing the mindset of the resistance to the military government, and setting it apart from the previous revolutionary generation

of 1988. As young people who participate in the resistance are exposed to different schools of thought, their belief in resistance becomes more conceptual and solid. From outside, I think Myanmar looks like it's going through the same process as it has in the past decades. But people have indeed changed, which is one of the main reasons why the Myanmar military government has not been able to completely eliminate resistance forces so far.

**FN: Taiwan has a rich history with Myanmar. One aspect is the presence of ethnic Chinese linked to the Kuomintang and Taiwan. Can you explain the history of this particular group and where they stand today in both Myanmar and Taiwan?**

- [Translation](#)
- [Original Quote](#)

**WY:** Because the KMT Government fought against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in collaboration with the Allied Forces in northern Myanmar during World War II, many KMT soldiers and their descendants stayed in northern Myanmar at that time. In addition, at the end of the civil war between the KMT and the CCP, an army commonly known as the "[lone army](#)" retreated from [Yunnan](#) province in Southwestern China to the [Golden Triangle](#) area on the border of Thailand and Myanmar, and stationed there for a long time, establishing deep roots in the area. Due to ideological reasons, many descendants of the KMT army chose to settle in Taiwan after leaving northern Myanmar and the Thai-Myanmar border. Therefore, most of the settlements in "[Myanmar Street](#)" in [Zhonghe district](#) in New Taipei City are dominated by [overseas Chinese from Myanmar](#). Only a relatively small number of immigrants who came to Taiwan after the 1988 Myanmar student movement [are Burmese](#). In addition, there are young Burmese ethnic groups (both Chinese and Burmese) who come to Taiwan to study in response to the Tsai administration's [New Southbound Policy](#).

Many people who are related to Myanmar have integrated Taiwanese society: They have become directors, entrepreneurs, writers, and have made achieved success in different fields. Taiwanese businessmen also appreciate Myanmar's potential for development and go to Myanmar to open their business. Besides being linked historically, both sides have a chance to become [more connected economically](#).

**FN: What about the political and economic relations between Taiwan and Myanmar today, given that China is a major actor in Myanmar?**

- [Translation](#)
- [Original Quote](#)

**WY:** Taiwan established its "[Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Myanmar](#)" in Yangon in 2016. After the 2021 coup, the office was not dismantled but continued to operate. Taiwan currently does not have official diplomatic relations with Myanmar, but Taiwanese businessmen do visit the country. However, during the civil war in Myanmar, the military government fully supported Beijing's [one-China policy](#) [that prevents diplomatic recognition of Taiwan]. Myanmar's

National Unity Government ([NUG](#)), which emerged after the 2021 coup in opposition to the military government, maintains friendly relations with the Taiwanese people. Yet it [announced on January 1, 2024](#) that it supports China's policy of not recognizing Taiwan as state in an attempt to win over Beijing's support.

Given China's deep involvement in Southeast Asia's geopolitics, the Taiwanese government's influence in the region is stretched thin. However, there are still many opportunities for exchanges between the two sides in terms of economy, business, culture and education. In the end, the Taiwanese government manages to play its role by supporting the development of civil forces in Myanmar, though it stays outside of politics, thus promoting its influence softly within the Myanmar society.

## **FN: Tell us about your current project of a documentary film.**

- [Translation](#)
- [Original Quote](#)

**WY:** Documentary photographer [Su Wei-ming](#) and I were invited by [Taiwan's Public Television](#) this year to spend two years making a feature documentary about the armed resistance in Myanmar. The content will focus on the mental journey and painful struggles of the Myanmar people in making different choices when facing the oppression of the military dictatorship.

In order to shoot this documentary, we include photographers, artists and reporters who are currently in exile on the Thai-Myanmar border. We already went to the battlefield multiple times to shoot. We want the world to know that Myanmar's resistance to military dictatorship is still going on. Besides, we also want people to see through the power of images the vulnerability and the division of a society struggling to face such oppression. The filming has already started, and the documentary is expected to be broadcast on February 1, 2026, on the date of the fifth anniversary of the Myanmar coup.

---

**Filip Noubel**

**Will Yang**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

---

**P.S.**

Global Voices

<https://globalvoices.org/2024/04/10/deep-historical-links-complicate-taiwans-relationship-with-myanmar/>