The Recognition Protocol

Chapter 9: The Recognition Protocol

Observer Commentary

Identity paradox: Self-identification is necessary but insufficient for identity to function in social systems. Identity requires external recognition.

Example: An organism can claim to be "King of France." The claim is sincere and deeply felt. But if no other organisms recognize the claim—if no subjects bow, no bureaucracy implements royal decrees, no foreign powers acknowledge sovereignty—then the identity claim has no social reality. The organism may experience themselves as King, but the identity doesn't function.

This is core problem of unrecognized states: They possess many attributes of statehood (territory, population, government, military, currency) but lack external recognition from international community. Without recognition: - Cannot join international organizations - Cannot sign binding treaties - Cannot access international courts - Cannot issue passports accepted globally - Cannot establish embassies - Cannot participate in formal diplomacy

Taiwan case: Possesses functional sovereignty but lacks widespread formal recognition. Maintains informal relationships with major powers but cannot formalize them without triggering mainland retaliation.

Result: Identity exists in superposition—simultaneously state and non-state, depending on observer. Internally, Taiwan functions as independent country. Externally, international community treats it as ambiguous entity to avoid antagonizing mainland.

This creates existential anxiety for Taiwan population: Your identity depends on others' willingness to recognize it, and that recognition is being systematically withdrawn through mainland pressure.

Philosophical question: If identity requires external recognition, is it possible to have "true" identity that doesn't depend on others? Or is all identity inherently social and therefore contingent on recognition?

Subject under observation: Taiwanese diplomat (unnamed for operational security) attempting to maintain Taiwan's informal diplomatic relationships while

formal recognition erodes. The organism experiences daily the gap between internal identity (legitimate representative of sovereign state) and external recognition (ambiguous quasi-official contact).

Human Narrative

The diplomat's official title was "Representative," not "Ambassador." The office was called "Taipei Economic and Cultural Office," not "Embassy." The flag outside showed the emblem of the Taiwanese government, but the building was not listed in the city's official diplomatic registry.

These were the compromises required to maintain presence in countries that officially recognized the People's Republic of China. Taiwan couldn't have formal diplomatic relations, but it could have "unofficial" relationships that functioned almost like official ones—trade negotiations, visa processing, cultural exchanges, even quiet security consultations.

Almost. But not quite. And the gap between "almost" and "actual" was where the diplomat lived daily.

His name was Chang Wei-ming, age 47, career foreign service officer who had watched Taiwan's diplomatic space shrink throughout his professional life. When he started in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, Taiwan had formal diplomatic relations with 29 countries. Now, in 2025, it was down to 13—mostly small Pacific island nations and a few Central American countries that Taiwan maintained through development aid and financial incentives.

Every few years, another country would "switch recognition" from Taiwan to the PRC. There would be a ceremony in Beijing: The foreign minister of some small country would sign documents recognizing the One China Principle. Taiwan would issue a statement condemning the decision. And then Taiwan's embassy in that country would close, staff would pack up, and the flag would come down.

It was slow-motion erasure.

Chang was currently posted in Washington, DC—the most important posting in Taiwan's diplomatic service. The United States didn't officially recognize Taiwan, but it maintained robust unofficial relationship through the Taiwan Relations Act. The US sold Taiwan weapons, supported its participation in international organizations (where possible), and maintained strategic ambiguity about whether it would defend Taiwan in case of Chinese attack.

But even this relationship was under pressure. As China's economic and military power grew, the US became more cautious about antagonizing Beijing. High-level visits between US and Taiwan officials were rare and had to be carefully choreographed to avoid triggering Chinese diplomatic protests. The US wouldn't use the word "Taiwan" in official contexts, instead referring to "the authorities

on Taiwan" or using other euphemisms that acknowledged Taiwan's existence without affirming its sovereignty.

Chang's job was to maintain the relationship in this ambiguous space—to be present but not too present, to push for recognition without pushing so hard that the US retreated further.

It was exhausting.

That morning, he had a meeting with a mid-level State Department official. The meeting was scheduled for 30 minutes, held in a conference room at the State Department building, and officially characterized as "informal consultation on regional security matters."

Chang arrived with two colleagues from the economic and political sections of the office. They were escorted through security—more stringent than in previous years, or so it seemed—and brought to a windowless conference room on the fourth floor.

The State Department official, Karen Miller, arrived five minutes late. "Sorry, traffic was terrible. Let's get started—I have another meeting at 11."

Chang had met her several times before. She was professional, knowledgeable about Taiwan issues, and clearly sympathetic to Taiwan's position. But she was also constrained by US policy and by China's increasing willingness to retaliate against countries that supported Taiwan.

"Thanks for meeting with us," Chang said. "We wanted to discuss the upcoming UN General Assembly session and Taiwan's efforts to participate."

"Right. I've seen your formal request. You're asking for US support for Taiwan's observer status at the WHO, correct?"

"Yes. Given the ongoing pandemic recovery and the importance of global health cooperation, we believe Taiwan's exclusion from WHO is not just unfair but actively harmful to global health security. Taiwan has world-class public health expertise and should be able to contribute."

Miller nodded. "I agree with you. The Secretary has made statements supporting Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations. But as you know, China blocks Taiwan's participation, and we can only do so much."

"We're asking for more active support. Public statements are helpful, but we need the US to use its diplomatic leverage to pressure WHO members to support Taiwan's inclusion."

"That's… difficult. We have to balance multiple equities. China is a permanent Security Council member, a major trading partner, and a crucial actor on issues like climate change and North Korea. If we push too hard on Taiwan, Beijing retaliates by withholding cooperation on other priorities."

"So Taiwan's health participation is less important than other priorities?"

"I didn't say that. I'm explaining the constraints we operate under."

Chang felt the familiar frustration rising. "Ms. Miller, with respect, Taiwan has been hearing about 'constraints' for decades. We understand geopolitical reality. But at some point, principles have to matter. If the US genuinely supports Taiwan's democratic system and international participation, it needs to be willing to bear some cost to defend those principles."

Miller's expression remained carefully neutral. "The US has borne significant cost to support Taiwan. We sell you advanced weapons systems. We conduct freedom of navigation operations in the Taiwan Strait. We support your participation in regional economic frameworks. We're not abandoning Taiwan."

"But you're also not recognizing Taiwan. You maintain strategic ambiguity about defense commitments. And every year, Taiwan's international space shrinks a little more, and the US tells us it's doing what it can within constraints."

"What would you have us do? Formally recognize Taiwan? That would trigger a crisis with China that could escalate to military conflict. Is that what you want?"

"No. But we want meaningful support, not just symbolic gestures."

They were going in circles. Chang had had this conversation dozens of times with different American officials. The script was always the same: Taiwan asks for more support, US expresses sympathy but cites constraints, nothing changes.

Miller checked her watch. "I need to wrap up soon. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. We've heard reports that the administration is considering downgrading the level of permissible official contacts with Taiwan. Can you confirm or deny?"

Miller's pause was answer enough. "I can't discuss internal policy deliberations."

"So it's being considered."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't deny it either."

"Mr. Chang, I can't comment on every rumor that circulates. What I can tell you is that the US commitment to Taiwan remains strong, and we will continue to support Taiwan's security and prosperity."

The meeting ended shortly after. In the car back to the office, one of Chang's colleagues said: "That was useless."

"They're all useless," Chang said tiredly. "But we keep having them because the alternative is having no meetings at all, which would be worse."

Back at the office, Chang had an hour before his next meeting—a lunch with a congressional staffer who was friendlier to Taiwan than the executive branch tended to be. He used the time to draft a report for the Foreign Ministry in Taipei, summarizing the State Department meeting.

He chose his words carefully. He couldn't be too pessimistic—that would demoralize colleagues in Taipei who were already struggling with Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. But he couldn't be too optimistic either—that would create false expectations.

He wrote:

State Department contact expressed continued US commitment to Taiwan but offered no concrete support for WHO participation. Request for increased diplomatic pressure met with familiar citing of geopolitical constraints and risk of Chinese retaliation. Rumored downgrade of official contact policy not denied, suggesting policy review is indeed underway.

Assessment: US support for Taiwan remains rhetorically strong but operationally limited. As China's relative power increases, US calculus increasingly favors accommodation with Beijing over support for Taiwan. We should anticipate further erosion of US willingness to bear costs on Taiwan's behalf unless strategic environment changes dramatically.

Recommendation: Diversify diplomatic relationships beyond US dependence. Strengthen ties with Japan, European partners, Southeast Asian countries. Emphasis on Taiwan's strategic value (semiconductor industry, democratic partner, first island chain position) rather than moral claims. Moral arguments alone are insufficient when power dynamics favor China.

He read it over, then deleted the last paragraph. Too pessimistic. Too much truth. He rewrote:

Recommendation: Continue engaging US at multiple levels (executive, legislative, think tanks, media). Emphasize shared values and strategic interests. Seek opportunities to demonstrate Taiwan's value as partner on regional security, technology cooperation, and democratic resilience.

Better. Anodyne enough to be acceptable, specific enough to sound substantive, vague enough to be meaningless.

He hit send and closed his laptop.

The lunch with the congressional staffer, Jason Chen (American-born, Taiwanese heritage, staffed for a senator who chaired a subcommittee on East Asia), was more encouraging.

"We're planning a congressional delegation visit to Taiwan in August," Jason said. "Six senators, bipartisan. It'll send a strong signal."

"That's excellent news. We appreciate congressional support."

"Don't thank me yet. The administration is going to push back. They hate these visits because Beijing throws fits and threatens retaliation. But the senators are determined to go."

"Will they meet with our president?"

"That's the plan. Though State Department will insist it's 'unofficial' and can't be characterized as head-of-state meeting."

"Of course. The usual fiction."

Jason smiled sympathetically. "I know it's frustrating. But it's what we can do within current policy framework."

"I appreciate that Congress is willing to do even this much. It matters."

They talked about other initiatives—proposed legislation supporting Taiwan's arms purchases, resolutions condemning China's military exercises, symbolic gestures like renaming the street where the Chinese embassy was located to "Taiwan Boulevard" (which had no chance of passing but made good press).

All of it was helpful. None of it was sufficient.

As they finished lunch, Jason said: "Off the record—what's the mood in Taipei? Are people scared?"

Chang considered how to answer. "It depends who you ask. Older people who remember the civil war are worried. Younger people who've only known democratic Taiwan are more defiant. Business community is anxious about economic disruption. Military is preparing for worst-case scenarios. Government is trying to balance deterrence with not provoking escalation."

"And you personally?"

"I'm scared," Chang admitted. "I've spent my career trying to keep Taiwan's international space from collapsing completely. And I'm losing. Every year, we have fewer formal allies, less access to international organizations, more restrictions on our diplomats' movements. We're being erased from the international system while we're still here, still functioning, still democratic. It's like watching yourself disappear."

Jason was quiet. Then: "For what it's worth, I think Congress is going to push the administration harder on Taiwan. There's growing recognition that strategic ambiguity isn't sustainable anymore. China is getting more aggressive, and at some point the US has to make clear where it stands."

"I hope you're right. But I've been hearing 'at some point' for twenty years. The point keeps receding."

That evening, Chang video-called his wife in Taipei. She was awake—morning there, evening in DC, the time zones creating awkward overlap that made communication difficult.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"The usual. Meetings that accomplish nothing, reports that no one reads, diplomatic theater."

"You sound depressed."

"I am depressed. This job is pointless. We pretend we're maintaining Taiwan's international presence, but really we're just managing decline."

"You've felt this way before. You always find renewed purpose."

"Maybe I'm tired of finding renewed purpose. Maybe I want to just accept reality: Taiwan is going to be absorbed by China eventually, and all of our diplomatic efforts are just delaying the inevitable."

"You don't believe that."

"Don't I? Look at the trajectory. Every year, fewer allies. Every year, less international space. Every year, China gets stronger and more willing to use its power to punish countries that support Taiwan. How does this end in anything other than Taiwan's disappearance as an international actor?"

His wife was silent for a moment. Then: "It ends in us continuing to exist, to govern ourselves, to live free lives, for as long as we can. Even if the international community doesn't recognize us, we recognize ourselves. That has to count for something."

"Does it? If no one else recognizes your identity, does it really exist?"

"Yes. We're not just performing for international audience. We're living our lives. Our democracy is real even if it's not recognized. Our sovereignty is real even if it's contested."

"I want to believe that. I do. But after twenty years of watching our international presence shrink, I'm not sure anymore."

They talked for another thirty minutes—about their children (teenagers now, barely remembered him from his brief visits between postings), about their finances (Washington DC cost of living was brutal), about whether he should request reassignment to Taipei (but postings in Washington were prestigious and important, and he couldn't justify leaving).

After the call, he sat in his apartment's small study, looking at the wall where he had hung maps and photos from his diplomatic career. Photos of him with various officials, always smiling, always performing the role of representative of a legitimate government. Maps showing Taiwan's formal diplomatic allies, the number shrinking year by year.

On his desk was a book he'd been reading: *On Self-Determination and Statehood* by an international law scholar. He'd hoped it would provide intellectual framework for Taiwan's position. Instead, it had made clear that international law offered no path for Taiwan: The legal criteria for statehood included recognition by other states, and recognition was precisely what Taiwan lacked.

Taiwan was trapped in legal limbo—functioning state without legal status, effective government without international legitimacy.

The book offered no solutions, only analysis of the problem.

He closed the book and turned off the light.

Observer Commentary

Duration of narrated events: 12 hours. Observable psychological state: Chronic stress bordering on despair.

The organism Chang Wei-ming experiences daily the ontological vulnerability of unrecognized identity. He functions as diplomat representing a government, but the government's existence is not acknowledged by the international system he operates within. This creates profound existential anxiety.

Observation on recognition as constitutive of identity:

The philosopher Hegel theorized that self-consciousness requires recognition from others. Applied to collective identity: A nation exists not merely through self-declaration but through mutual recognition by other nations.

Taiwan case demonstrates limits of self-determination: A population can collectively self-identify as distinct nation, establish functional government, develop separate culture. But without external recognition, the identity doesn't achieve full realization in international system.

This is not merely symbolic. Lack of recognition has material consequences: - Taiwan excluded from UN, WHO, ICAO, Interpol, and most international organizations - Taiwan passport not accepted by many countries - Taiwan unable to sign formal treaties or defense agreements - Taiwan diplomatic representation must use euphemistic titles and unofficial channels

Result: Taiwan exists in liminal status—more than province, less than state. This indeterminacy is precisely what Beijing prefers: Taiwan remains ambiguous enough that Beijing can claim sovereignty while Taiwan maintains de facto autonomy.

But ambiguity creates anxiety for Taiwan population. You cannot securely plan future when your political status is contested and eroding.

Observation on decline management as psychological burden:

The diplomat's role is not to achieve victory but to slow defeat. This is demoralizing. Each small success (congressional visit, weapons sale, symbolic gesture) is framed as achievement, but the larger trend is unfavorable and everyone knows it.

The organism's question to his wife—"If no one else recognizes your identity, does it really exist?"—is philosophically sophisticated. He has grasped the social construction of identity: It's not enough to feel Taiwanese; you need others to acknowledge that identity claim for it to function socially.

Wife's response represents internalist view: Identity is self-constituting, doesn't require external validation. This is psychologically comforting but pragmatically insufficient. A person can claim to be king, but without subjects recognizing the claim, the kingship doesn't function.

Taiwan can claim to be independent state, but without international recognition, the independence doesn't fully realize. Taiwan is Schrödinger's state—simultaneously existing and not existing until observed (recognized) by international community.

Observation on strategic ambiguity as unstable equilibrium:

The United States maintains "strategic ambiguity" about whether it would defend Taiwan. This serves multiple purposes: - Deters China by preserving possibility of US intervention - Constrains Taiwan by preserving possibility that US won't intervene - Avoids forcing US to make commitment it might not honor

But ambiguity is unstable. As China grows stronger, it becomes more willing to test US commitment. Taiwan must increase defense spending without certainty of US support. US must decide whether Taiwan is worth risking war with nuclear-armed peer competitor.

At some point, ambiguity resolves into clarity—either US commits definitely or abandons Taiwan definitely. The current state is transitional.

Projection: Within 2-3 years, a crisis will force US to clarify its position. Either: (a) US makes explicit defense commitment (low probability—would escalate tensions and reduce flexibility) (b) US remains ambiguous but increases support (most likely—maintains current equilibrium) (c) US quietly downgrades commitment (moderate probability—if China's power continues rising and US determines Taiwan is indefensible or not worth cost)

The organism Chang's assessment that US support is "rhetorically strong but operationally limited" is accurate. US support will continue as long as costs remain low. If costs rise substantially, support will erode despite rhetoric.

This is standard great power behavior: Small powers are supported when convenient, abandoned when costly. Moral claims and shared values are invoked but don't override strategic calculus.

Taiwan's tragedy: It needs international recognition to fully exist as state, but

the international system is structured to deny that recognition. Taiwan's existence depends on China's forbearance or US/allied protection, neither of which is reliable long-term.

The organism Chang has spent career navigating this impossibility. His despair is rational response to unwinnable situation.

End observation log.

[Chapter 9 Complete]