

Taiwan Studies: An experience from India

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On 24 August 2015, late evening, I was about to board my flight to Taipei as an exchange student for my Master's degree programme. Earlier that day, I was asked by my classmates, "are you going to Thailand? Or is it Taliban? You want to join the Taliban?". Patiently, I had to explain to them, much to their disappointment, saying I was going to Taiwan. Post that, I provided them with a brief introduction to Taiwan, and I was told, "You will face a lot of trouble there". My immediate response was, I will take things as they come. Since then, I finished my exchange period, returned to Taiwan in 2016 fall as a Doctoral candidate and student, and graduated and received the coveted Doctorate in 2021.

The 'trouble' which I was warned that I was going to face came in many forms to me, language, culture, food differences etc. Navigating through them pushed me deeper into Taiwanese society, history, culture, and politics. The groundwork of going around Taiwan's every corner, sharing and interacting with 1000s of students and teachers helped me to understand more about Taiwan and their opinion on issues such as the

school education system, rural-urban divide, role of temples in the community, and low birth rate, etc. Beginning my teaching responsibilities in the 2021 fall in India, I started to teach courses on Cross-Strait relations and East Asian politics.

Even though I had a solid determination to develop Taiwan studies in India as a stand-alone field of study, I knew not where to begin. Given Taiwan's geographical location and size in East Asia, "Taiwan Studies" has constantly been overshadowed by the already often researched fields of China, Japan, and Korean studies. It would not be fair to blame the Indian academic community or public for being mainly in the dark about "Taiwan Studies". It is undoubtedly unheard of.

My first step was to reach out to Dr Dafydd Fell, Director of the SOAS Taiwan Studies Programme. He was happy to guide me by sharing his co-authored published articles, which took me through the experiences of several Taiwan Studies programmes across Europe and North America. The article rightly mentioned the need for more students to take the Taiwan studies programmes. However, it also noted that the challenges that the Taiwan Study programmes had been shut down due to a lack of funding, and some are under the larger umbrella of East Asian studies and programmes.

Along with Dr Dafydd Fell's shared articles, the discussion has been brought up again in Taiwan Insight by Dr Josie-Marie Perkuhn and Dr Hung-yi Chien on introducing Taiwan studies with Sinology and beyond. Both scholars used the term "Sinitic" rather than "Chinese" to emphasise the cultural aspects of shared heritage between Taiwan and China. Such usage of the word "Sinitic" nullifies the political debate when one talks about Taiwan and China.

However, a contradictory view was found in the article by Prof. T.Y. Wang and Prof. Christopher H. Achen, who stated that Taiwan studies has grown to their own maturity and it can stand now on its own two feet. While I agree with Prof. Wang's and Prof. Achen's argument in the context of Europe and North America, the same does not apply to the case of Taiwan studies in South Asia.

Although democratic, India and Taiwan are politically apart due to the complex "One-China" policy. The study of Taiwan is minimal but not negligible in India. One of the critical parameters where Taiwan has been known in India is in the education sector. Taiwan has become increasingly a top destination for further studies due to the rise in scholarship numbers, thanks to the New Southbound Policy (NSP) initiated by Taiwan in 2016.

As per the data collected from the Ministry of Education (MOE), Taiwan saw a significant rise in Indian students. It is depicted in the table below. The data is available until 2020.

| Year | Number of Indian Students | Year on Change (%) |
|------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 2016 | 1293 | |
| 2017 | 2072 | 60.2 |
| 2018 | 2628 | 26.8 |
| 2019 | 2783 | 5.9 |
| 2020 | 2239 | -19.5 |

There is a big dip in the number of students in 2020, and it should continue to be seen in 2021 and 2022, too, due to strict border control rules adopted by Taiwan because of Covid.

The other way students in India came to know about Taiwan is through its Taiwan Education Centre (TECs), which began in 2011 at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. TECs again got support from Taiwan's MOE. TEC's aim to promote the Mandarin language and the culture of Taiwan is mostly set up in higher education institutions. As of the writing of this article, there are 24 TECs in India. Data from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre, New Delhi, reveals that since 2011, 11,857 Indian students have had basic Mandarin teaching lessons and a brief idea about Taiwan's geography and culture.

Moreover, being in a class where one gets to know more than the language through several cultural activities has led some students to go to Taiwan for travel, semester exchange, or further studies. Another academic initiative bringing Taiwan closer to Indian scholars is Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fellowship (MOFA Fellowship). Since its inception in 2010, 33 Indian scholars, till 2022, have received MOFA Fellowship.

There are multiple reasons why Taiwan Studies has not taken off yet in India. First is the lack of understanding; what is Taiwan? Like my friends' lack of awareness which I mentioned in the earlier part of this article, most people in India are unaware of Taiwan. The closest reference that the public understands Taiwan is when the brands HTC, Asus, and Acer are mentioned. Another recent reason people began to take cognisance of Taiwan is when an Indian politician put ROC's flag in front of the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi in 2020 to wish Taiwan a happy Double Ten Day!

Second, students and scholars who are or want to focus on Taiwan do not see many employment opportunities which need expertise in Taiwan, thereby reducing enrolment in Taiwan studies.

The third is the issue of China Studies shadowing Taiwan Studies. China has become a more prominent geographical neighbour and a significant trading partner. The unresolved issues between India and China have led many scholars to focus primarily on the latter than on Taiwan. On the other hand, numerous scholars in the past have been invited to visit China or went there on their own for several conferences and language learning. And some of them have also found meaningful employment opportunities in

India and abroad, including in China. This is where the debates of this series of articles focused on whether Taiwan studies should be seen as an independent study or mixed with Sinology or other East Asian studies.

At the Jindal School of International Affairs, there is no separate “Taiwan Studies”. The courses regarding Taiwan are being taught as electives. I got eleven students in my first two semesters of experience teaching courses on Cross-Strait relations between Taiwan and China. In the course about Taiwan History and Culture, nine students were enrolled. This shows that the Taiwan Study is still at a nascent stage in India. As the class were offered as electives, and the students were a mix of undergraduate and master levels, they had a brief idea of what is Taiwan and the Cross-Strait tensions. Delving deeper into the course, which touched upon several variables regarding cross-strait such as the role of foreign brides, the business community, youth etc., was new to them. As an instructor, I have tried to let students publish their research work on online platforms that focus on international relations in place of their class reports. Such incentives pushed a higher turnaround of digital articles about Taiwan in India, ultimately reaching out to a larger group of people who can read about Taiwan. Four online articles were published by the students, which boosted the student’s confidence and pushed newer interests among the other students who were not part of the class.

The government and academicians must work upon a little academic knowledge of Taiwan in India. To begin with, Taiwan Studies can make space for itself within existing programmes or research centres in Northeast Asia or East Asia. Once it gains a stronghold, it can take off as a separate entity. I am optimistic about collaborating with other Taiwan Studies programmes worldwide to enhance India’s new front of research. The primary and most important goal now thus is to initiate and cultivate interest in Taiwan in India. Whether the interest in Taiwan is coming independently or clubbing it with other studies should not matter at the current stage. The debate of whether it shall be clubbed with “China studies” or be called “Sinitic” study can be taken up later.

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