

Back to Transnational Knowledge Production about China

Taiwan

Abstract

Taiwan has its unique path for becoming a site for China watching. But with the rise of the so-called Taiwan studies in academia, scholars have different views on whether Taiwan studies should stand alone as a new discipline or be part of China studies. To complicate the matter, the interlocking of Taiwan studies and China studies in Taiwan with the newly minted knowledge realm of the Indo-Pacific in the contemporary era will pose new challenges for Taiwan because Taiwan's international relations and knowledge production are unable to move toward genuine decolonization. A transnational approach is advocated to reduce the problem.

Keywords: Taiwan, Taiwan studies, Indo-Pacific, China watching, decolonization

It is nearly a cliché to talk about Taiwan as the other China. In Chapter five, when we mentioned the setting up of the prominent East Asian Institute (EAI) in Singapore, the early leaders of the EAI had carefully examined the development of Taiwan because Taiwan was believed to have good facilities for China watching during the Cold War. Taiwan's studies of 'bandits,' referring to the Chinese communists, have even earned the field a special name, *feiying*, or bandit studies. But after investigating the capabilities of the United States (US) and Taiwan, the EAI's early leaders reached the conclusion that even these two supposed strongholds for monitoring China could not see into what was going on in *Zhongnaihái* (中南海), the headquarters of the Chinese communists. There are many things that can be said about Taiwan. In this chapter, I confine myself to three aims. The first is to present the views of those who have worked in, visited, or studied in Taiwan to evaluate the status of Taiwan as a place for China watching. The second is to assess the rise of the so-called Taiwan studies in academia. Clearly, this new field's emergence has much to do with the increasing numbers of Taiwanese intellectuals and Taiwan sympathizers with aspirations to support a distinct Taiwanese identity, even in the domain of academic disciplines. But how should we regard Taiwan studies? Is it part of the China studies, Chinese studies, sinology, or China watching that we have discussed at length so far? This is what I intend to debate here. The third goal of this chapter is to link this discussion to the contemporary framing of Indo-Pacific politics with regard to Taiwan. In Chapter eight, I noted the uneasiness of the Chinese government, commentators, and scholars with the Indo-Pacific framing. What

about Taiwan? My discussion will reveal that despite the overall open academic environment for the studies of Taiwan and China to prosper on the island, Taiwan has a serious problem of not being able to escape from a colonial or neo-colonial mindset to freely produce decolonized knowledge. The knowledge realm of the Indo-Pacific will unfortunately entrench Taiwan further within this problem.

9.1 Chinese studies in Taiwan

Taiwan does not just cultivate its own researchers for the purpose of watching China. Since the Cold War era to the present, there have also been various scholarship and study programs to attract foreigners to undergo their Chinese-language training and advanced education in Taiwan. We have met Russian sinologist, Alexander Pisarev, in previous chapters. As his research was on peasantry and the Kuomintang, Taiwan is naturally part of his research interests. In 1996, he originally went to Taiwan at the invitation of colleagues and did not have the intention to stay there long. At the time, he also had other options like visiting Italy as a scholar. But eventually, he stayed longer in Taiwan than originally expected, working in the Russian Studies section of Tamkang University in Taipei. Working for Russian studies might appear irrelevant to his training as a sinologist. But as he was asked to conduct research and teach about Soviet–Chinese relations and Russian–Chinese relations, which are borderline themes covering two countries, he could still use his training as a sinologist in his work (Pisarev 2012). This is again an example of the interlocking of knowledge realms between Chinese studies and Russian studies.

As Chih-yu Shih (2014) has observed, Pisarev represents some Russian and Polish sinologists who arrived in Taiwan quite early and managed to establish a new career there.

With democratization taking place in Eastern Europe and Mongolia, not unlike in Taiwan, Taiwan exerts a special attraction on sinologists from the former regions. Moreover, Taiwanese academics adopt an American epistemology in China studies. Combined with Taiwanese academics' deep understanding, as well as daily practice, of Chinese culture, this makes Taiwan a practical node strongly connected to both the United States and China. Taiwan's vast and rich academic resources similarly comfort those senior sinologists from Eastern Europe and Mongolia who experience nostalgia for Chinese classic humanities. (Shih 2014: 83)

In Pisarev's (2012) view, Taiwan has preserved more Chinese traditions than the People's Republic of China (PRC) has. Pisarev (2012) contends that Russian scientists should study Taiwan because it is culturally much more traditional than the PRC.

Additionally, because Taiwan has been able to modernize in a 'humane form' (compared with what happened on the Chinese mainland), the society and authorities in Taiwan can work together to recognize their collective political responsibility to overcome mistakes in the past and find ways to move society forward (Pisarev 2012). "I don't mean to say that there are no Taiwan problems. There are quite a few problems in this society. However, what I observe gives me optimism and a desire to continue studying Taiwan," Pisarev (2012) clarifies.

Pisarev also notes that politicalization in Taiwan differs from politicalization in the Soviet system or in the PRC.

Because the society itself participates very energetically in all political discussions, in a positive sense, politicization can be different. If politicalisation just expands one ideology, then this is bad. If this involves of citizens in political debates and processes, that is good. I see it here in Taiwan. (Pisarev 2012)

As Taiwan is formally still the Republic of China (ROC), Pisarev notes that Taiwanese sinologists devote relatively more time and energy to the study of the history of the ROC, Sun Yet-Sen, and events in the ROC in the 1920s and 1940s. One might also recall that in the early days of the Kuomintang regime on the island of Taiwan, there was very limited space for scholars to study alternative topics and offer alternative views. From 1945 to the late 1980s, the ideology of the Kuomintang did not mean that Taiwan should become part of the PRC but rather that the vast PRC would become part of the ROC. Having focuses other than the ROC would be labeled as opposition to the government and thus be suppressed. So, the early generations of Taiwanese sinologists focused significantly on studying the ROC (Pisarev 2012). If there was effort put into studying the Chinese mainland, the motive was to observe the 'enemy,' as noted in previous discussions of the bandit studies in Taiwan. The famous Institute of International Studies (IIR), for example, used to be a think tank of the Kuomintang but was later integrated into National Chengchi University. The IIR was an important research agency devoted to studying Chinese communist problems and international politics. It also had the mandate of communicating with foreign agencies, making it a vital research institution that performed scholarly diplomacy for the Taiwan government at the time (Liu 2013; Gordon 1968).

There were scholars who thought differently from Pisarev, though. For instance, Swedish sinologist, Torbjörn Lodén (2016), expressed that his leftist inclination had attracted him to Mainland China. Lodén (2016) recalls:

Rather typically of students of my generation, I thought Taiwan was too conservative. In fact, I knew very little about what it was really like in Taiwan. I wanted to study in Mainland China, which I knew was not democratic but still thought was dynamic and

developing in the right direction. But going to Mainland China was not possible at this time, in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, so I went to Hong Kong instead. (Lodén 2016)

I have previously mentioned South Korean students who went to China to study since China opened up from 1979. Some Korean students have opted to study in Taiwan instead. Prof. Moon Chung-Koo of Konkuk University in South Korea, for instance, received a tuition waiver to conduct his postgraduate studies at National Taiwan University, after completing his undergraduate studies in economics in Korea. National Taiwan University is the leading university in Taiwan. He liked the strict and solid training there but passing all the requirements was difficult. It took him four years to complete his master's studies in agricultural economics and then eight years of doctoral study in theoretical economics at National Taiwan University.

Foreign scholars whose work concerned the Republican period would usually have connections with Taiwan too, even though they would not necessarily have studied in Taiwan as students. Andreas Steen (2022), a Professor of China Studies at Aarhus University in Denmark, has focused on the Republican period for his entire career, especially Shanghai's history and culture. He has been to Taiwan a few times to conduct research on the history and memory of music. In more recent years, he began a project, 'Sounds of War: The Memory of World War II in Taiwan, East Germany, and Denmark, 1945-2015' in collaboration with his colleague, Wulf Kansteiner, sponsored by the Velux Foundations in Denmark. In their project, they analyzed how communities in Taiwan, East Germany, and Denmark have been using sound as interpretations of World War II—music, language, tones, or even noise—to build a collective memory and identity during and after the Cold War (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Another example would be Mette Halskov Hansen and Koen Wellens, two sinologists at the University of Oslo, Norway. They have a project called 'Transcendence and Sustainability: Asian Visions with Global Promise' that explores how religion contributes to combating or can potentially be a factor in combating climate change and loss of biodiversity in several Asian countries. They look especially at Asian religions, so they have sub-projects going on in India, Vietnam, the PRC, and Taiwan. In Taiwan specifically, they study religious or spiritually inspired organizations such as the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation and others that are focusing on environmental issues (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing geopolitical tension between China and the West, the numbers of students and researchers going to China have decreased, although the situation has improved slightly during the post-pandemic era. Taiwan has absorbed some of these foreign students and researchers. But Koen Wellens argues that Taiwan should be studied because it is Taiwan, not because

one cannot go to China. He shared his experience of first going to Taiwan to study the Chinese language in 1983. Since 2008, he has had problems obtaining a visa to China. The last time he was in China was in 2012. So, he thought that since he had already been studying issues regarding ethnic minorities in China, why could he not study ethnic minorities in Taiwan? Thus, he visited Taiwan several times to find topics to work on (Chen and Lodén 2023). In addition to the aforementioned collaborative project, Wellens (2022) has his own project that investigates how the indigenous Tsou community in Alishan relates their traditions, such as hunting, to the environment, and how these have come into conflict with the Taiwanese authorities (Chen and Lodén 2023).

Last but not least, as noted in Chapter eight, Taiwan has become an important site for socially engaged scholars, such as those working on human rights, to meet and collaborate because the opportunities for similar activities are few and far between on the Chinese mainland. The data and reports gathered by Taiwanese participants in these meetings in Taiwan, as noted in Chapter eight, were unfortunately used by the Chinese court to arrest PRC activists who had joined these meetings in Taiwan, becoming the infamous July 9, 2015 crackdowns. The Chinese government's continuous global crackdown and transnational repression of these activists has been called the 709 crackdown 2.0, putting relevant future events into hibernation.

The next section will investigate the emergence of the so-called Taiwan studies within and outside Taiwan. Does Taiwan studies belong to Chinese studies, or can it stand alone as an academic discipline? Halvor Eifring, a sinologist at the University of Oslo since 1995, does not see his Taiwan-related research as separate from Chinese studies. Eifring has long been working on a study of the psychological structures of the great mid-18th-century Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He is currently in charge of an international cross-disciplinary project on 'mind wandering' in various traditions of meditation, contemplation, and self-cultivation. In the Chinese context, the project is about Confucianism and Daoism in the classical era, along with the Buddhism of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Furthermore, his project includes Indian yoga philosophy, the Christian Desert Fathers, and modern neuroscience and philosophy of the mind. Eifring believes that his research is not directly concerned with Taiwan. "I'm studying the early stages of Chinese history and Chinese culture, and Taiwan is a good place to do that. But it's not about Taiwan; it's about Chinese culture," he clarifies (2022). It might be easier to understand that Chinese studies or China studies could include Taiwan studies. But there have been debates among Taiwan-minded scholars in Taiwan and abroad who hold different views about whether Taiwan studies is part of Chinese studies or not. This is what we will explore next.

9.2 Taiwan studies

In a 2022 debate in *Taiwan Insights*, an online magazine of the Taiwan Research Hub at the University of Nottingham, T.Y. Wang and Christopher H. Achen (2022), two US-based scholars, argued that Taiwan studies should stand alone without being part of Chinese studies. Their argument is that as Taiwanese people have increasingly embraced a distinct identity separate from China, the academic field dedicated to Taiwan studies should be the same. They raised the example that many university centers for the study of Taiwan, particularly those in the USA and to some degree in the United Kingdom (UK), are located within the broader East Asian or Asian studies, in parallel with studies of China, Japan, Korea, and other nations. The Centre of Taiwan Studies at the University of London is part of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). It was founded in 1999 and has been the only institution in the world that offers a master's degree on Taiwan studies outside of Taiwan for decades as of early 2025. The University of Nottingham has the Asia Research Institute that houses the Taiwan Studies program. Taiwan studies programs in the US, such as those at the University of Texas, University of South Carolina, and University of Washington, have similar arrangements. In 2025, the University of Washington in the US would be the first in North America to offer a new East Asia studies program, a master's degree that includes a Taiwan Studies track (Website of the University of Washington 2025). The University of California, San Diego has a Centre for Taiwan studies funded with generous donations from alumni. These institutions are not blended into any China studies, Chinese studies, or sinology programs. Instead, they have the same standing as study programs for Japan, Korea, China, and other nations.

In September 2024, there was an international conference at National Cheng-Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan, that invited scholars dedicated to Taiwan studies from home and abroad to share their experiences. The theme of the conference was 'Becoming Taiwanese-Narratives on the Island and Overseas' (成為臺灣人—島嶼與海外敘事). The preface of the conference indicated that with the increasing 'de-sinicization' (去中國化) of Taiwan's society, the organizers hoped that Taiwan studies would gradually become different from sinology (期待「臺灣研究」逐漸可以別於「漢學」) (Website of Conference on Becoming Taiwanese-Narratives on the Island and Overseas 2024).

Beyond universities, there are also professional associations that are solely for Taiwan studies. In the academic field of Political Science, for example, a group called the Conference Group on Taiwan Study was created as a related group of the American Political Science Association in 1990. On either side of the Atlantic, there are the North American Taiwan Studies Association (NATSA), created in 1994, and the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), founded in 2004.

In terms of academic publications, there is the English-language *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* (IJTS) published by De Gruyter Brill (formerly Brill), a European publisher. The IJTS is the first internationally collaborative, multidisciplinary, and peer-reviewed academic research journal in English dedicated to all aspects of Taiwan studies, including social sciences, arts and humanities, and topics that are interdisciplinary in nature (Website of the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* 2025). Currently, the journal is co-sponsored by Academia Sinica in Taiwan and the EATS. Its editorial office is supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is hosted by the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS. The same publisher for the IJTS, De Gruyter Brill, also recently published an *Encyclopedia of Taiwan Studies Online* (2024), edited by several known scholars and led by Michael Hsin-Huang Hsiao. The Taiwan-based Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly and the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation have sponsored this publication.

Although the US has relatively more independent institutions for Taiwan studies, one must recognize that many are either exclusively or heavily sponsored by government agencies, mostly under the Taiwan-identity-minded Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) government or received grants from foundations based in Taiwan. On the one hand, one could argue that it would be hard for a nascent field to take off without these sponsorships. On the other hand, one can clearly see the correlation between the politics of funding and the development of the Taiwan studies field. This development in the US also corresponds to the real political situation, where there are generally more Taiwan sympathizers in society, in the political arena, and in the academia than in other countries, allowing the birth of these various Taiwan-focused independent units in American universities.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, there are still quite a lot of study programs that institutionally include the studies of Taiwan as part of their China studies, Chinese studies, or sinology programs (Perkuhn and Chien 2022; Chien 2022). The Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS, University of London, is a rare exception, but one has to bear in mind that its operations are heavily sponsored by the Taiwanese government (Fell and Lim 2021). On continental Europe, Germany has more Taiwan-related programs than other European countries. For instance, at the University of Tübingen in Germany, Prof. Gunter Schubert, who is Professor of Greater China Studies, directs the European Research Centre of Contemporary Taiwan. At another German university, the Ruhr-University Bochum, two sinology professors, Christine Moll-Murata and Christian Schwermann, head the Research Unit for Taiwanese Culture and Literature with funding from the German and Taiwan governments (Website of the Taiwan Research Unit 2024). As of 2025, in Vienna, Helsinki, Oslo, and Olomouc, we see examples of different arrangements for the studies of Taiwan under units that focus on Chinese studies. These arrangements might reflect the lack of sufficient resources to set up Taiwan studies units

as standalone units. People working on Chinese studies thus spare some of their resources, time, and efforts to foster Taiwan studies within Chinese studies. As students learning about Taiwan also should ideally know Chinese culture, history, and language, this kind of resource sharing is logical for most universities.

Some Taiwan-related courses are organized with an unsteady stream of resources and are offered sporadically. At the University of Oslo in Norway, for instance, there is a course called Taiwan Studies supported by Taiwan's Ministry of Education. The course is part of the Chinese studies curriculum but students from other master's programs can take the course too (Chen and Lodén, 2023). Halvor Eifring (2022) points out that it is not easy to secure funding for a Taiwan course from the Norwegian Research Council, so they look for funding from the Taiwan side, where there are funding initiatives from various ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Interestingly, not only non-Taiwanese institutions are confronted with the challenges of resources; institutions in Taiwan face hurdles too. Study programs solely dedicated to Taiwan studies are experiencing declining numbers of applications, and their graduates are concerned about not being able to find employment after graduation (Chien 2022).

As a tactic, some scholars in Taiwan literature have considered the Sinophone theory as a way to link Taiwan studies to the Sinic world and thus internationalize Taiwan studies with the aim of attracting new students. Elsewhere in the world, Sinophone studies as a rising sub-field has gained much recognition in the US, more so than in Europe. There is much potential for the Sinophone field to develop because its framework is highly transnational and trans-regional in nature. According to this line of thinking, sinology as a field and Sinophone studies as a sub-field is a medium in which Taiwan studies can grow. Sinitic knowledge becomes the common ground for these knowledge realms to interlock (Chien 2022).

In sum, both arrangements, Taiwan studies as part of Chinese studies versus Taiwan studies as an independent field, are in existence in Taiwan and in various parts of the world. But even independent institutions such as SOAS have benefited from integrating their Taiwan courses with other area studies and interdisciplinary programs to attract larger pools of students (Fell and Lim 2021).

If interlocking any sort of Chinese studies with Taiwan studies is stirring debates among the scholarly community, interlocking with the Indo-Pacific is the new uncharted frontier, with the potential to become the next point of contention. In Chapter eight, I mentioned the problem of the interlocking Indo-Pacific knowledge realm for the Chinese government and Chinese experts. This is not easy for Taiwan either, although from geopolitical perspectives, some may argue that Taiwan should be part of it and should play a more active role in situating itself within the Indo-Pacific framework.

9.3 Interlocking with the Indo-Pacific

As Shih (2022) rightly points out, decolonization requires a discourse that neither reproduces colonial relations nor commits binary thinking (Shih 2022:82). Taiwan historically missed the opportunity to decolonize when the Kuomintang relocated to the island of Taiwan in the late 1940s. Back then, the residents of Taiwan had just gained independence from Japanese rule. That would have been a golden opportunity for the locals to celebrate and learn to decolonize Taiwan properly. However, the incoming Kuomintang regime only had in mind the urgency of gaining hold of power in Taiwan and expected the local Taiwanese to promptly switch their loyalty and demonstrate their Chineseness to the new regime, leaving them no chance to articulate postcolonial sentiments (Chou 2024:163; Shih 2022:76). As the regime was not sympathetic to the local elites' emotions and desires, these elites turned to the former colonial power, Japan, for reconnection. Hence, a nostalgia emerged for the colonial modernity that Japan had instituted (Shih 2022:78). As long as the Kuomintang could not really regain the Chinese mainland as it claimed to wish to, it could only ever institute a pseudo-Chinese regime on the island of Taiwan (Shih 2022). As a result, the intensification of relations between local elites and Japan turned into a magnified desire for a separate statehood from China that the Kuomintang held on to. Those elites became both anti-Kuomintang and anti-Beijing, depending exclusively on Japan, the old colonizer, and the US, a metaphorical neo-colonizer, for their Taiwanese identity.

As the Indo-Pacific concept is highly advocated by Japan and the US for geopolitical motives, Taiwan has been drawn further into it (Yang 2018; Scott 2019, 2022; Yang and Hashmi 2022). It inevitably deepens Taiwan's connection with Japan and the US, and whatever does not belong to the US–Japan alliance, such as the PRC, becomes the ultimate out-group. The contradiction between the decolonial spirit and the Indo-Pacific concept is solid and transparent.

What happens at these geopolitical levels affects the direction of research and educational institutions as these institutions have strategically picked up the new term of Indo-Pacific for their work, aiming to demonstrate the relevance of their research to timely topics and in the hope of securing budgets for their operation (Chao 2025; Chen 2025). Taiwan's Ministry of Education has been the primary driver in educational reforms and the allocation of resources to Southeast Asia-related fields in the context of the so-called New Southbound policy, which is related to the wider Indo-Pacific framework.¹ At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

¹ Taiwan's Ministry of Education website (2021 and 2024) contains more information about how it links education policy to NSP. For instance, it created the New Southbound Talent Development Programme targeting Southeast Asian and South Asia countries to expand Taiwan's higher education market overseas and promote interflows of talented people between Taiwan and NSP countries.

think tanks and some research institutes have led the general development of the Indo-Pacific knowledge realm.

In terms of educational institutions, in response to the old Southbound policy, in 1996, Tamkang University in northern Taiwan set up a Graduate Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the first of its kind in Taiwan. In 1997, the National Chi-Nan University in Nantou in Central Taiwan also established a Graduate School of Southeast Asian Studies and a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (Chen 2025). Later, in southern Taiwan, the National Sun Yat-Sen University in Kaohsiung and the National Cheng Kung University in Tainan also founded a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the turn of the 21st century (Ku 2006). Today, with the arrival of the newly minted Indo-Pacific concept, each of these Southeast Asia-focused institutions has demonstrated various degrees of interlocking with it in their events and publications. Be that as it may, at the time of the writing of this book, they appear to continue focusing primarily on their conventional area studies. Publications related to Indo-Pacific topics are still predominantly published by think tanks that work on foreign policies and international relations.

As a result of these transformations, Taiwan's capacity to understand and study Southeast Asia has increased compared with decades ago. The attempt to attract Southeast Asian talents is also yielding results. More and more students from Southeast Asian nations—including Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia—are studying in Taiwan, displacing Chinese students from the Chinese Mainland, Macao, and Hong Kong as a major source of international students. Diversification away from the Chinese market is visible in the recruitment of international students (Website of the Ministry of Education of Taiwan 2024; Huang 2025).

To sum up, the above development arises out of the context of some Taiwanese elites' aspiration for further de-sinicization and yearning to be more active in the US–Japan-led Indo-Pacific politics at the international level. The de-sinicization aspect refers to the fact that many of Taiwan's current policies are driven by motives of creating and enshrining its own distinct identity apart from China. The process started with Taiwanization or indigenization already during the KMT's time and evolved further to become de-sinicization during various DPP administrations (Chang 2004; Lams and Liao 2011; Leibold and Chen 2025). A discourse of Taiwan subjectivity has been developed, and we can see that a Taiwan-centric worldview or cultural and educational policies prioritizing a Taiwan-centric view have become common. While the process does help decolonize Taiwan from the Chinese sphere of knowledge production, at the same time, the measures taken to achieve de-sinicization have pushed Taiwan closer to a metaphorical colonial dependence on the US and Japan, hindering Taiwan's genuine decolonization from its geopolitical past, present, and future.

What could potentially be more concerning is that for such new development to succeed, Taiwan must envision a fresh perspective on its relationships with nations

in Southeast Asia or the Pacific islands (Effendi 2025; Marinaccio 202). Although there are no real colonial relations between Taiwan and these countries, scholars (e.g., Marinaccio 2021) have argued that there is neo-colonial imagination because of Taiwan's one way of conceiving its relations with Southeast Asia or the Pacific islands, without the acknowledgement and acceptance from the locals in these countries. As delving into this would deviate from the kernel of this book, I have opted not to elaborate further on the problem here. In a nutshell, such politically motivated selections of relations are understandable from geopolitical perspectives. Nevertheless, they leave many questions about how Taiwan itself and all the people living there can genuinely decolonize its foreign relations and how it can uphold the principle of decolonization in its various policy domains.

I have not talked much about my views in this book. My view is that de-sinicization is the wrong way forward for Taiwan. In fact, Taiwan's strength is its different form of Chineseness. Some scholars noted above believe that Taiwan, rather than the PRC, has the most traditional Chinese culture. Taiwan's Chinese culture does not impede its growing distinct Taiwanese identity. It is an asset of the Taiwanese identity. Its richness lies not just in its Chinese roots but also in its rich tapestry of Japanese, European, American, and Southeast Asian cultures interacting in Taiwanese society.

Taiwan's identity struggle reminds me of Korean and Japanese scholars' struggle concerning China in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Both Korea and Japan had been influenced by Chinese civilization for centuries. Before the Japanese colonization of Korea, Korean intellectuals did not even clearly think that Chinese culture and history were 'the other' (Shim 2023). However, with the desire to reposition themselves as modern sovereign states distinct from China, Japanese scholars such as Shiratori Kurakichi (白鳥庫吉, 1865–1942), created the new academic discipline of *Tōyōshi* (東洋史), which literally means 'Asian history' to "provincialize their neighbours, especially China, as their Orient" (Shim 2023:296). The term *Chūgoku*, which is equivalent to *Zhongguo* (literally 'China') in Chinese, means that China is the center of the world. The Japanese replaced that term with *Shina* (支那) to tone down the meaning that China is the center of the world (Shim 2023). Japan liberated itself from the Chinese world order using this way and made itself become the center of *Tōyō* (東洋, Asia). While placing Japan as the center did not wholly lead to positive historical outcomes, the Koreans adopted the Japanese approach to build up modern Korean studies on Chinese history (Shim 2023). With this, Korea and Japan managed to generate new identities for their countries distinct from China while at the same time successfully internalizing the essence of Chinese civilization as one vital foundation of their respective civilizations (Shim 2023).

If Taiwanese policymakers, political elites, and intellectuals wish to interlock Taiwan closer with Southeast Asia, South Asia, or the Indo-Pacific, the desire for such a global linkage and framework should be built upon the premise that they

understand Taiwan's rich Chinese-plus many cultures. It is similar to the Korean and Japanese cases where the essence of Chinese civilization is internalized. Nonetheless, the two nation-states do manage to carve out distinctly new identities away from China. Within this context, one can then ask how to encourage a transnational and global framework in understanding and studying Taiwan's past, present, and future.

Ping-Hui Liao (2018), an internationally recognized authority on Taiwan studies active in both the Taiwanese and American academia, has been advocating for a transregional framework to understand Taiwan. His view is that Taiwan was globalized very early through encounters with European explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries. Liao (2018) mentions the work of an American scholar of Chinese history, Tonio Andrade (2008), who examined how the Dutch, Spanish, and Chinese colonial empires encountered one another and competed in the Far East. Andrade's (2008) book *How Taiwan became Chinese* explains how the Dutch facilitated the first and most profound sinification in Taiwan. At the end of what Andrade (2008) called the Sino-Dutch colonization, Taiwan became a welcoming place for more Chinese immigrants. Andrade's (2008) analytical framework breaks the boundaries between conventionally defined political or cultural entities, revealing the connections between several societies and cultures back in the early modern period (1500–1800). This is an example of a transnational approach to the study of Taiwan that does not exclude China proper in any way but places Taiwan within a much broader regional or global framework for analysis.

Some might cynically argue that transnationalizing Taiwan studies is also a path towards de-sinicization. Notwithstanding, I would maintain that transnational encounters between cultures and entities beyond nation-states have been a more prevalent state of affairs than the bounded nation-state framework can capture. Transnationalizing Taiwan studies in no way de-sinicizes Taiwan; instead, it complicates Taiwan's relations with China and other forces at play. It is also in line with the decolonial spirit in that it does not just put Taiwan in a binary framework. A similar debate is in the change of Taiwan's history textbooks, where Chinese history is no longer taught in detail, unlike decades ago. Rather, the emphasis is on Taiwan's interactions with regional players, shifting towards more of a study of the history of East Asia. Chuang (2020) reports that some critics believe this too is a kind of de-sinicization, while Taiwan's Minister of Education Pan Wen-chung explained that this has nothing to do with de-sinicization but rather prepares students to become global citizens by having a more comprehensive understanding of the world which they inhabit. In the next and final chapter of this book, I will propose that a similar approach, embracing the globalness of China, can be implemented within Chinese studies.

Knowledge Production about Global China

Abstract

Knowledge production about China has historically been global, more than we think. Even the West is in China's own knowledge production about China. An increasing number of ethnically Chinese scholars working outside of China have successfully contributed to the English-dominated international knowledge production about China. Moreover, as China has become influential in many aspects of people's lives around the world, it has become part of 'us.' Studying China does not just involve doing fieldwork in China. We should widen the geographical locations of China watchers whom we may interact with to understand China. Cross-fertilization of China studies with more disciplines might promise new intellectual potential, although it cannot replace China studies ultimately.

Keywords: Knowledge production, China, global China, cross-fertilization

10.1 Reclaiming knowledge production about global China

Due to heightened political tensions, China watchers in the West can no longer access the People's Republic of China (PRC) easily (see Chapter seven), although not all scholars have the same experience and perceptions of the problem. Sometimes, PRC-based Chinese scholars are also excluded from knowledge production about China, as exemplified by the example of Indo-Pacific knowledge production, where China appears to be at the core of Indo-Pacific politics. Still, the PRC government and Chinese scholars find themselves missing or excluded (see Chapter eight). This leads us to the conclusion of this book, where I ask how knowledge production about China can continue.

Historically, political turmoil in China has never completely prevented foreigners from entering and studying it. As securitization in the West and China veers into seemingly dangerous territory, China watchers will tread with caution in continuing their work. Some China watchers have looked further into the possibilities of using online methodology to collect data for China research. In contrast, others have looked to Taiwan as an alternative studied subject or an alternative base to watch China (see Chapter nine). Some scholars believe that fieldwork in China is still possible but requires more effort in building up individual relationships and using that kind of social capital to open up opportunities for support in fieldwork and

even find collaborators on the ground to help keep collecting data (Tan et al. 2023). In addition, inviting individual partners to meet outside of the PRC to continue the discussion of collaboration is essential. However, one must still factor in how to protect Chinese collaborators no matter where they are located. These coping strategies, to be honest, were used in the old days when accessing the PRC was hard. They are still valid in the contemporary context (Heimer and Thøgersen 2005). It might be more costly, and funding agencies should include these concerns in their calculations to support knowledge production about China. China is already part of ‘us,’ and we need to step up, not decrease, such endeavors. In conjunction with this, we also need to reassess and reaffirm the global, transnational, transregional, and transcultural nature of the concept of China. Thinking creatively about our fields may also help us broaden the scope beyond the PRC territory to continue our research on China. Here are several reasons that support the effectiveness of a global approach.

First of all, knowledge production about China has historically been global, more so than we may think. The contentious and malleable concept of China naturally makes knowledge production about China a much more global realm than its mere geographic confinement to the current PRC. I agree with Caroline Sy Hau (2016), a Chinese-Filipino author and scholar at Kyoto University, Japan, that signifiers such as ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ cannot be taken for granted as simply something coming from China. In fact, many scholars have argued about the actual meaning of China. This is not just a political issue of what Chinese territorial sovereignty encompasses. There is no consensus on what China really is. As Hau (2016) comments,

Is it the current government? Is it the nation-state? Is it the civilizational process? Is it cultural China? [...] Is it the Kuomintang-led government that used to call itself the Republic of China? [...] The biggest challenge is to overcome, and think through, or break through, the barrier of thinking about the signifier called China, because we cannot take it for granted. (Hau 2016)

Back in the 1950s to 1970s, for example, “Taiwan was America’s and Europe’s substitute for China. It was where we went to learn Chinese. Hong Kong was where we went to watch China,” as Gregory Lee (2023), a Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of St. Andrews, rightly recalls.

Second, global knowledge production about China is produced both within and outside the PRC. Even ‘the West’ appears in the PRC’s knowledge production about China. Historically, there has always been a Western presence in China. Even in Chinese academia, Western knowledge, practices, and cultures have affected the contours of the development of some Chinese academic disciplines (Zhang 2026),

such as economics. Indeed, Chinese scholars do localize Western knowledge, but this does not deny the influence of Western knowledge in the PRC. Eduard Daniel Oviedo (2022) of Argentina expressed in an oral history interview that China has studied American scholar, Joseph Nye's literature on soft power and eventually used it in its foreign policy implementation. Non-Chinese language academic works are still translated into Chinese and introduced to Chinese academics, although sometimes certain contents are censored and thus do not present the original content in its full form.

All of these prove that a clear East–West divide in epistemology is unthinkable (Lee 2023; Zhang 2023). Knowledge production about China is accordingly global, beyond a rigid East–West divide (Franceschini and Loubere 2022). Caroline Sy Hau (2016) rightly points out that modern China exhibits a significant degree of hybridization, influenced by its interactions with Japan, Southeast Asia—particularly the Chinese communities in that region—and the Anglo-Pacific world. To grasp the complexities of China, it is essential to adopt a perspective that extends beyond a solely China-centric view. An effective study of China must consider its position within a broader regional and global context. This interconnectedness has played a prominent role in shaping both the Chinese nation and its civilization in contemporary times.

Finally, as China has become influential in many aspects of people's lives around the world, it has become part of 'us' (Klotzbücher 2023). "Studying China does not involve just doing fieldwork in China. We can study China in many countries around the world" (Hau 2016). China's increasing relevance for many of us in the world implies that the 'epistemological China' that is being produced is becoming ever more global. It is more global than centuries ago. A China-centered way of learning about China, as conventional sinologists used to implement, is still a vital way of learning about China, but it is no longer the only way. Other parts of the world also contribute to knowledge production about China (Klotzbücher 2023; Hau 2016). It is in this vein that we can see more exchanges between knowledge production realms. Previously, we mentioned Thai senior China expert, Khien Theeravit's comment that "Chinese studies in Thailand is virtually inseparable from Asian studies and Thai studies. Context-wise, they are all intertwined" (Tantraporn, Manomaivibool, and Wright 2021). Hong Liu (2001), a scholar based in Singapore, further speaks of "Sino-Southeast Asian studies" as an alternative paradigm to conventional studies of China. Caroline Sy Hau believes that given Southeast Asia's closeness and entanglement with China, "Sino-Southeast Asian studies" is "a fruitful area of research" where she can make her contribution from a Filipino perspective (Hau 2016).

This book concludes with an affirmation of a paradigmatic shift that has fertile ground to develop if we re-examine and re-embrace the idea that knowledge

production about China is global in nature due to its interlocking and interactions with other knowledge production realms (Dessein 2024). Southeast Asia is a high contact zone with China. The intersectionality of knowledge production about China and Southeast Asia is high. This leads to solid ground for an alternative paradigm, such as the Sino-Southeast Asian studies that Hong Liu proposes. Compared with Southeast Asia, Central Asia’s intersectionality with knowledge production about China is lower. Still, several local Central Asian China watchers have been the bridge between Russian, Chinese, and Central Asian knowledge production about China.

Likewise, Maria Montt Strabucchi (2025), a Chilean historian and expert in Latin American studies, notes that most Latin American nations lack dedicated programs in Asian studies or area studies, unlike other regions. Instead, the examination of Asia primarily occurs within the frameworks of social sciences or humanities. This results in the study of Asia and more specifically, China, often serving as an intersection of various academic disciplines. The integration of these knowledge domains is a natural occurrence in the Latin American context. Table 10.1 lists examples of the interlocking of knowledge realms that have been mentioned in this book and may serve as inspiration for future cross-fertilization.

Table 10.1 Strong Examples of Interlocking of Knowledge Realms between Chinese Studies and Other Disciplines

Interlocking of disciplines	Examples of countries or regions where this development occurs
Sino-Southeast Asian studies	Southeast Asia
Chinese studies/China studies, Asian studies, and Thai studies	Thailand
China–African studies	Africa, Europe, North America, China
China–Latin American studies	Latin America

Source: Organized by the author.

Contemporary geopolitical tensions and international politics might have expedited the need to reaffirm the global nature of knowledge production about China, as China watchers seek to find new routes and fields beyond the territory of the PRC to continue watching the country. There is a functional necessity for the global China paradigm. But to be fair, with or without such external pushes, China watching should have been reassessed, reclaiming its original global, transregional, transnational, and transcultural status.

In Chapter nine, I already touched upon a similar attempt to place Taiwan and Taiwan studies in a much more transnational framework. We can and should also place China and China studies in a much more transnational framework. A parallel



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Figure 10.1. Poster for the Master's Program Sinophone Societies and Cultures at the University of Vienna, Austria. Source and copyright of the poster: University of Vienna. Copyright of the image inside the poster: Liza Wing Man Kam.

example here could be Chien-Wen Kung's 2022 book *Diasporic Cold Warriors*, which explores how the Kuomintang sowed the seeds of anti-communism among the Philippine Chinese with the active participation of the Philippine state from the 1930s to the 1970s. Kung's book treats "Sinicization and de-Sinicization in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, and in relation to Manchus, Uyghurs, the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, Tsinoys, Hong Kongers, and ethnic Chinese Singaporeans" (Kung 2022:223) as "comparable processes that span geographies and are enmeshed in distinct historical contexts and political processes" (Kung 2022:223). Kung's work speaks a lot to global Chinese history and Sinophone studies. Chinese language literacy is still necessary for this type of research.

The newly established master's program, 'Sinophone Societies and Cultures,' at the University of Vienna in Austria, is designed with a similar rationale to prepare students for research in the Sinophone realm (Website of the University of Vienna 2025). This program encompasses Sinophone societies and cultures located in Chinese-speaking areas and communities across East Asia, which include Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, North America, Europe, and various other regions globally (Figure 10.1). This serves as an excellent example of an educational initiative that has employed the global China perspective to disseminate information about China.

Furthermore, in order to contribute to the overall decolonization of knowledge production about China, which used to be dominated by the Global North and by English- or Chinese-language writings, globalizing China studies could give China watchers opportunities to interact with other related disciplines which might have been ignored before (e.g., Latin American studies, Central Asian studies) and China watchers from more regions of the world. This way, China experts can meet counterparts, generating multi-sited data and perspectives to enrich our continuous efforts in regard to watching China.

Networking certainly is the medium, but it does not stop at social interactions between China watchers. Indeed, the point here is to push different epistemological traditions to meet and interlock to the extent that they can harness nuanced, fresh, and consolidated understandings of China. The resistance against any easy binary thinking concerning 'China versus us' is in line with decolonial spirit. Rodolfo Maggio (2023a, 2023b), an anthropologist working on the Pacific Islands, for instance, has used a decolonial methodology, aided by ethnographic work, to delve into China in the Pacific Islands, demonstrating a new intellectual potential. During his 2024 fieldwork in the Solomon Islands, Maggio found a carver who presented a piece of artwork, a '*nguzunguzu*-dragon hybrid.' The dragon and the *nguzunguzu* serve as emblems of Chinese and Solomon Islands identity, respectively. Traditionally, *nguzunguzu* are used to embellish canoes and can embody either aggression or peace, influenced by the dynamics between the paddlers of

the canoes and those who see the canoes coming. In a similar vein, dragons in Chinese mythology can symbolize either fortune or calamity, contingent upon their interactions with humans. Therefore, both *nguzunguzu* and dragons represent supernatural entities whose influence can manifest as either beneficial or harmful, shaped by their relationships with people. As articulated by the carver, the hybrid artwork reflects his endeavor to contextualize China within a local framework. This concept drives Maggio's (2024a, 2024b) research, prompting him to utilize this hybrid figure as a foundation for exploring the grassroots connections between Solomon Islanders and the Chinese (Chen 2024).

A globalized China studies with decolonial spirits allows for a renewed significance of China studies within policymaking environments. The field of China watching, along with the wider discipline of Asian studies, has often engaged in excessive self-criticism, frequently characterizing itself as a byproduct of Western imperialism. This perception has contributed to a diminished credibility in the context of international relations. However, by integrating local perspectives and decolonial viewpoints, revised and globalized China studies can effectively educate and equip international relations analysts, fostering the advancement of these academic fields and *realpolitik*. In the context of the development on the Pacific Islands, as Maggio's (2024a, 2024b) work has demonstrated, this will allow policy analysts to move beyond the colonial conception that the region is either an American lake or Chinese Pacific, to rather an interstitial space where local players and agency can localize outside forces (Maggio 2024a, 2024b).

To this end, in the next concluding section, I will talk about pushing the boundaries of China studies to meet Global South studies and cross-fertilize, but with a realistic understanding of the limits of such an endeavor.¹

10.2 Cross-fertilization of China studies and Global South studies and limits

The previous section has provided ample reasons why China studies and Global South studies cross-fertilization should be bolstered even if not on the scale that Sino-Southeast Asian studies have reached. Research or educational institutions in other regions of the world, such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, would need funding instruments to support mobility, research, and education schemes that can help cross-fertilize their area studies with China studies. I am not

¹ I use the term 'Global South' as a shorthand to expediate the discussion. As indicated at the outset of this book, I am aware of the problem of the North-South construct, and I do not want to repeat the mistake here. Global South here would then include areas such as Central Asia as well (see Chapter one).

blind to the fact that such funding may end up coming from the Global North, hence perpetuating the hierarchy of resources and knowledge production in the world.

The objective of mobility, research, and educational funding for the Global South must be to at least facilitate the meeting of different epistemological traditions. This could enable leveraging of the varying levels of development within Global South studies, covering regions of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East (or West Asia), Central Asia, and even Oceania. Of these Global South regions, China–Africa studies has become a distinct field or subfield with scholars supported by funds from China, America, and Europe (Mohan and Lampert 2013; Alden and Large 2018; Pepa 2020; Bolin, Carayannis, Niewenhuis, and Vlavonou 2022; Chiyemura, Gambino, and Zajontz 2023). While there are scholars working on China–Latin America studies, China–Middle East studies, and China–Central Asian studies, they are hamstrung by a lack of sustainable institutional backing (Longobardi 2022). Nonetheless, the deficiency in long-term institutional backing has not prevented individual researchers from reaching out and doing quality work on their own; it just makes it more difficult. For example, in the oral history interviews that we have reviewed throughout this book, many Global South researchers eventually obtained scholarships or funding from either China or Global North countries to help them continue their work. The downside is that these individuals tend mostly to work in silos. They do not have the means to cultivate disciples who will follow their path and thus form a critical mass to sustain whatever they have achieved (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Longobardi 2022).

Throughout this book, I have noted several times that Chinese funding is not always seen by the West as positive. However, China is actively contributing budgets to support knowledge production about China in the Global South. Through international agreements, the Chinese government and its various agencies have sponsored and facilitated expert exchanges between China and regions in the Global South (Bamba 2022; Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). For instance, China’s partnership with the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (see Chapter six), a regional international governmental academic organization headquartered in Costa Rica, has facilitated educational and cultural cooperation with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Jauregui, Gutierrez, Armijo, and Zheng 2022; Ibarra 2024). In addition, the Chinese government and universities have contributed to the development of a new generation of researchers from Latin America by providing a diverse range of scholarships (Strabucchi 2025). Thematically, while most research projects focus on topics on China’s relations with the regions pertaining to the field of international relations, there are limited numbers of Global South scholars focusing on literature, history, and languages. In Central Asia, along with Chinese scholarships, China has collaborated with a number of Central Asian think tanks to facilitate the coordination

of research agendas and the advancement of pro-China viewpoints in the policy sphere (Jardine and Lemon 2025).

Importantly, it should be noted that these schemes and exchanges have yet to be translated into deep and enduring dialogues between scholars from China and these regions. However, China is doing more in producing knowledge about China in these regions than the rest of the world. As a result of China's efforts in facilitating collaboration, Chinese-language publications involving Chinese and Global South researchers are now common (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022). To expand on this, if the West tends to look at Chinese funding in a negative light, one could argue that Western or Global North funding schemes should prioritize further cross-fertilization of China studies and Global South studies.

At the time that this book was written, however, the Global North, which has mostly been the source of funding, is having budget cuts in many domains due to the political and economic turmoil that many of them are facing now. The current defunding of universities and interference by the federal government in American universities is a quintessential example of the result of political and economic turmoil. In Europe, the war in Ukraine and economic slowdown have affected many countries' research and development budgets. This would affect the traditional receivers of funding in the Global South because there is less funding for them compared with before (Käppeli, Gavas, and Granito 2025). An alternative view is that if the Global North can no longer provide funds to the Global South, it might lead to positive change. Without the ability to give money, the Global North may lose its traditional donor's power over the Global South. The traditional donor's power is much more transactional in nature, dominated by the donor's agenda and interests, where grants will be given in exchange for certain actions. When the Global North can no longer give much, this situation could mean that the Global North and Global South start to share the struggles of financial constraints and find other ways to work together. While it is true that diminished funding from the Global North will most likely decrease offline mobility and exchanges with the Global South, nowadays experts can move meetings and exchanges online. The COVID-19 pandemic somehow facilitated the widespread usage of online meetings. Even if online and offline meetings would never 'feel' the same, at least online ones can still induce exchanges at a low cost.

Also, when there is less money to give for the Global South countries, it becomes easier to look for more balanced partnerships that focus on mutual support rather than dependency. Partnership between Global North and Global South communities cannot be built simply on a transactional basis anymore. It might take some time for both sides to adjust to a new mentality that partnership for cross-fertilization is beneficial for the development of a sound understanding of global China. It is a common good that deserves efforts in partnership regardless of the lack of funding.

Online meetings, as said, can be some kind of imperfect solution. This idea suggests a profound change in how people in the Global North cooperate with the Global South to study China.

Clearly, not all Global South countries can offer grants. But there are some Global South countries that are developing nations that can offer grants for scholarly activities. Some of these grants must be applied for with the support of local Global South partners. The process is transformative in the sense that China watchers in the Global North might realize that they have to learn to understand and follow the rules of certain Global South grant-giving institutions. The traditional power relations may change in line with the decolonial spirit while we are cross-fertilizing China studies with Global South studies.

In the long run, to redress the power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South and support local sustainability, local institutions in the Global South must learn to prioritize local resources rather than pursue external funding anyway. For example, in Chile, the National Agency for Research and Development has funded the 'Millennium Nucleus Impacts of China in Latin America' (*Impactos de China en Latinoamérica y el Caribe*, ICLAC) initiative, which allows universities to offer free online courses in Spanish designed to improve the comprehension of China (Website of the Millennium Nucleus Impacts of China in Latin America 2025). Maria Montt Strabucchi (2025), a participant in ICLAC, noted that Spanish-speaking nations in Europe, North America, and Latin America often maintain distinct channels for disseminating information and knowledge regarding China. These complimentary online courses in Spanish, as a kind of common good, contribute to enhancing awareness and understanding of China for both Spanish speakers in Europe, North America, and Latin America, cross-fertilizing China studies with Global South studies. It also makes it more even in the traditional power relations between the Global South and the Global North academic communities.

This book concludes with advocacy for revised and globalized China studies that expand the geographic range of people with whom we may communicate, particularly with the Global South communities. Although it cannot eventually replace conventional China studies, cross-fertilization of China studies with Global South studies may offer new intellectual possibilities.