

Making Taiwan Studies Sustainable: Reflections Five Years after the Golden Age of Taiwan Studies Debate

Written by Dafydd Fell.

Back in September 2017, representatives from some of the leading Taiwan Studies programmes in the world met for a Conference on the Global Development of Taiwan Studies at SOAS University of London. In the aftermath of the event, I wrote [a piece in the Taiwan Sentinel asking whether we were now enjoying “A Golden Age of Taiwan Studies.”](#) The piece then sparked a lively debate with numerous follow-up articles in Taiwan Sentinel and forums in the International Journal of Taiwan Studies.

The Fourth World Congress of Taiwan Studies, held at the University of Washington, Seattle in June 2022, saw a return to many discussion points from 2017-18. Therefore, almost five years after the 2017 conference, it seems a good time to take stock of the state of the field and how to make it more sustainable.

In many respects, the state of international Taiwan Studies appears even more promising than five years earlier. The programmes that joined the 2017 conference all remain active; in most cases, they have significantly expanded the scope of their activities. Additionally, new Taiwan Studies programmes have emerged, and other dormant programmes have re-emerged. Back in 2017, when Niki Alsford from the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) joined the SOAS conference, it was in the capacity of leading a programme still at the planning stage. Since then, UCLAN has rapidly emerged into one of the most active Taiwan Programmes in Europe, establishing the [Northern Institute of Taiwan Studies](#) and the [Centre of Austronesian Studies](#). The [Research Unit for Taiwanese Culture and Literature](#) at Bochum University was one of the most active in Europe in the early 2000s, hosting the European Association of Taiwan Studies conference in 2005. After about a decade of being dormant, it has been encouraging to see the programme once again becoming active in recent years.

In the realm of publications, the pace of expansion has been even more rapid since 2017. The most obvious breakthrough was the establishment of the [International Journal of Taiwan Studies](#) in 2018. The journal has quickly become an important platform for publishing important Taiwan-focused research, but additionally, it provides important resources for Taiwan Studies teaching courses. The picture also looks rosy in the field of Taiwan Studies book publications. For instance, 2021 was the best-ever year for the [Routledge Research on Taiwan](#) book series, with six books published that year. So, while there was just a single Taiwan Studies book series in 2017, there are now six more Taiwan-focused book series operating! Additionally, important Taiwan Studies blogs and podcasts have also emerged, such as the popular Taiwan Insight at the Taiwan Studies Programme at the University of Nottingham.

Despite these positive signs concerning an expansion in international Taiwan Studies, it does strike me that many of the challenges we discussed in 2017-18 have not been resolved. Many Taiwan Studies programmes remain very vulnerable and far from being institutionalised. For instance, many programmes remain over-reliant on short-term funding and one or two enthusiastic individuals. Under such circumstances, programmes could easily collapse with the ending of short-term project funding or the departure of the core programme figure. Even at one of the relatively institutionalised programmes, my own university SOAS, we often struggle each year over whether we can run a sufficient number of Taiwan courses.

Back in 2018, an important proposal that was raised at the Third World Congress of Taiwan Studies was described in these terms, [“The manifesto aims to end decades of short-term, fragmented and ineffective funding for the field by creating a new body, the Taiwan Foundation, to offer financial](#)

[support to international universities willing to promote the academic study of Taiwan.](#)” Nevertheless, in the subsequent few years, no progress has been made towards creating a Taiwanese version of the Korea Foundation.

Considering the numerous challenges facing international Taiwan Studies today, not least the one on funding, I wanted to reflect on a few other practices that have been critical for my own programme at SOAS to survive and thrive over the last two decades. A critical challenge for all Taiwan Studies programmes has been financial sustainability. So far, European universities have not successfully acquired the kind of private endowments seen in a number of North American Taiwan Studies projects. At my university, we have gradually expanded the scope of the programme because we have received unbroken external funding since 1999 and have steadily diversified the sources of such funding over time. I am sometimes asked whether changes in Taiwan’s ruling parties could affect Taiwan Studies funding, especially as the Kuomintang (KMT) is often seen as less enthusiastic about the study of Taiwan. But it is noteworthy that our programme at SOAS was established under a KMT presidency, and our first major programme expansion occurred after the KMT returned to power in 2008.

For many UK universities, tuition fees are the main funding source; therefore, Taiwan Studies teaching courses need to recruit enough students, or they will be closed down. Many UK universities have introduced Taiwan-focused courses over the last two decades, but most have been short-lived. Even at SOAS, we have seen courses on Taiwan legal topics, Taiwan’s economic development and Hokkien withdrawn. Nevertheless, we have maintained and expanded our Taiwan modules because they have recruited well. This is often quite challenging as many competing options exist for students. For example, why should a student decide to take a class on Taiwan’s politics rather than one on China’s international relations?

We have tried to adopt a range of strategies to make the Taiwan teaching courses as attractive as we can so as to maintain healthy student numbers.

One such method has been to ensure that Taiwan courses are well integrated into various disciplinary and area studies degree programmes. While it is important to make courses available on many degrees as open options, the most reliable way to bring students into our classes has been where courses are listed as compulsory or core courses on degree programmes. Where our Taiwan courses have been withdrawn, these have tended to occur where the relevant departments have been less supportive and not integrated them into their degree programmes as core courses.

Even in my university, there is often little connection between academic events programmes and teaching courses. In contrast, we try to make the SOAS Taiwan Studies events tightly integrated with the teaching programme. We run about 60-70 Taiwan events annually; a large proportion of these are designed to complement the courses. Thus, students will meet many key figures on their reading list over the year. Still, we also try to make sure they can meet practitioners related to their programme of study, such as Taiwanese politicians or filmmakers. A further element of the events is to encourage students to present their own research on Taiwan on platforms such as the European Association of Taiwan Studies conference or our Summer School. This way, we can provide students with a study environment that can make Taiwan-focused courses competitive with those focused on larger countries or regions.

A key starting point for successful Taiwan Studies programmes is developing an enthusiastic team rather than being too reliant on a single individual. For instance, at SOAS, a key turning point was the addition of a Ministry of Education-sponsored Taiwan teaching post in 2009. This allowed not only an expansion of Taiwan teaching courses but also made possible a more expansive events programme.

In addition, many universities have other scholars and doctoral students that have a Taiwan research interest. Therefore, a further challenge for programme leaders is encouraging and persuading such scholars to contribute to the programme.

Further, we have tried to expand the Taiwan Studies team at SOAS to create a group of Research Associates affiliated with the Centre of Taiwan Studies. These can include recent PhD graduates and more established scholars not necessarily from London. One of the best examples of one of our Research Associates is Ming-yeh Rawnsley. She has been promoting international Taiwan Studies first through leading the European Association of Taiwan Studies and, more recently, as the International Journal of Taiwan Studies editor. However, she also contributes to the SOAS Taiwan Programme by presenting her research at our seminars and giving research advice to our students. A final element of team building is getting students involved in the centre's activities. For instance, our student volunteers have often been critical to our ability to run extensive Taiwan Studies events such as our Summer Schools or the 2015 hosting of the World Congress of Taiwan Studies.

Looking ahead, the field will need to continue seeking strategies to cope with a challenging environment facing many of the still vulnerable international Taiwan Studies programmes. While introducing a Taiwan Foundation would provide an important boost to the field, at least in the short to medium term, other more small-scale approaches will be required to enhance sustainability. Greater cooperation rather than competition between existing Taiwan Studies programmes would be a practical strategy. For instance, at a recent roundtable at SOAS on making Taiwan Studies sustainable, the US-based scholar Chen Yi-ling called for the creation of Taiwan Studies clusters, in which groups of Taiwan projects within a geographical region worked together and pooled their resources.

Dafydd J. Fell is the Reader in Comparative Politics with particular reference to Taiwan at the Department of Political and International Studies of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He is also the Director of the SOAS Centre of Taiwan Studies. His book Taiwan's Green Parties: Alternative Politics in Taiwan was published in March 2021.