

## Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary of the European Association of Taiwan Studies

*Written by Dafydd Fell.*

It was a special moment to open the 2023 European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS) Conference back at SOAS twenty years after we started planning the first conference. The venue for the opening in June 2023 was even the same as the first 2004 conference in the SOAS University of London's Khalili Lecture Theatre. It was also wonderful to see many people at this year's conference who had also been involved in the early history of the association. Reflecting back over the last twenty years, it is remarkable how European Taiwan Studies has developed, and EATS has played a critical role in this Taiwan Studies miracle.

In preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of EATS, I decided to take a look at its origins. Although I had been one of the founders of EATS and was the Secretary-General for its first decade, I did not know the full story of how the project first got started. I was a PhD student at SOAS between 1999 and 2003 and only became aware of the European Taiwan project on starting to work as a SOAS Taiwan Studies postdoctoral fellow in September 2003. At my first meeting on starting the new job, my line manager, Professor Robert Ash, explained that one of my main tasks was to bring this delayed research project to fruition.

The SOAS Taiwan programme's first-ever annual report dated May 1999 stated that one of its four core goals was to 'To establish a European network of individuals and institutions with an interest in Taiwan.' The first step in March 2000 was to issue a questionnaire to more than one hundred institutions and/or individuals in Continental European countries, requesting basic information from those with an active interest in Taiwan Studies. This aimed to establish a database of Europe-based scholars with a Taiwan research focus, which the report argued would lay the foundation for future collaborative research.

The first funding proposal for the European Network of Taiwan Studies (ENTS) was then submitted by Robert Ash to the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation in the autumn of 2000. In June 2001, Professor Chu Yun-han (President of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation) informed SOAS that the application had been successful. SOAS was awarded a grant of US\$47,475 for three years (starting in July 2001) to facilitate the creation of the ENTS. Since then, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and Professor Chu have been ardent supporters of the European Taiwan Studies project, and so it was with great sadness that we heard of Professor Chu's passing earlier this year.

It was stated in the SOAS programme's 2001 annual report that ENTS sought to achieve the following goals:

- to foster a community of interest among specialists on contemporary Taiwan working in European universities and research institutions.
- Within this community, to disseminate and share information on current research and other issues relating to Taiwan.
- to consider ways in which individual and collaborative research on Taiwan within Europe can be further enhanced.
- to promote links between European specialists on contemporary Taiwan and their counterparts in Asia, North America, and Australasia to facilitate communication among and between them.

The proposal aimed to achieve these objectives in two ways. First, it proposed to create a database and website for ENTS members 'to provide a means of disseminating news of lectures and seminars,

workshops and conferences, research in progress, and other activities of European specialists on contemporary Taiwan.' Secondly, it was proposed that from the 2001-2002 academic year, an annual two-day ENTS Workshop would be held for members. For the first workshop, it suggested reviewing major domestic economic, social, and political developments in Taiwan during the previous year, as well as issues affecting its international relations in the same period. Moreover, it was made clear that the ENTS would be interdisciplinary and incorporate the humanities.

Initially, the Secretariat of the ENTS was based at SOAS, with Robert Ash and Phil Deans directing the project. However, they reached out in the project's first formal year to broaden involvement beyond SOAS, and the 2002 annual report explained that Ann Heylen in Belgium, Andreas Fulda in Germany, Stéphane Corcuff in France, and Tom Hart in Scandinavia (Sweden) had agreed to act as ENTS liaison officers.

In both the SOAS 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 annual reports, it is clear that the project had not progressed as quickly as had been hoped at its commencement in the summer of 2001. The objectives of holding the initial workshop in the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 academic years were not achieved. The model used in the first few SOAS Taiwan conferences and workshops had been run based on invitation-only events, which had prioritised access for established academics. Likely, this model would also have been used for the initial ENTS workshops. The stalling of the ENTS project created the possibility of a different approach.

When I was tasked with setting up the first ENTS workshop, I had a quite different vision to the earlier, more elitist SOAS Taiwan conference model. I had started attending the North American Association of Taiwan Studies (NATSA) conferences in the late 1990s and continued joining these events throughout my PhD years. Some other European PhD students also joined these NATSA conferences simultaneously, and a common topic of conversation was that we needed something similar in Europe.

In the autumn of 2003, with my colleagues Chang Bi-yu and Robert Ash, we began preparing for the first conference. I will always be grateful that Robert Ash gave young and upcoming scholars like myself and Chang Bi-yu the freedom to redesign this project. The first symbolic change was to adopt the name European Association of Taiwan Studies. A more important model we borrowed from NATSA was an open Call for Papers. Potential participants were invited to submit abstracts, which a committee would then review. This meant the conference was more inclusive and offered space for doctoral students and people not part of existing academic networks. The initial call for papers was highly successful, and the news of the call was very widely distributed across Europe. Out of over seventy abstracts, we settled on thirty-five paper presenters, making this the largest Taiwan Studies conference held on the continent up to that point. Another inclusive feature borrowed from NATSA was that it was an open public event, so audience members just needed to register and did not need an academic affiliation. Looking back at the audience list from the first conference in 2004, it is encouraging to see there were MA and PhD students who later became leading figures in the field and contributed significantly to international Taiwan Studies.

The first conference also provided the chance to discuss with other European colleagues about how to run the association in the future. It was encouraging that by the end of the first conference, we already had proposals for the next three year's conference hosts, which would be Bochum (Germany 2005), Paris (France 2006) and Stockholm (Sweden 2007). Additionally, we had a group of young scholars who were committed to working together to develop the EATS project from a range of European institutions. A number of those participants would go on to be actively involved in the organisation of EATS and EATS conferences over the next two decades, such as Ann Heylen, Jens Damm, Stéphane Corcuff, Gunter Schubert, and Henning Klöter.

Although the early EATS organisation borrowed some elements from the NATSA model, there were also some differences. To a certain extent, the early NATSA conferences were run by Taiwanese PhD students based in the United States, and they also made up the majority of conference participants. In contrast, the EATS board members were initially mainly junior scholars who had recently completed their PhDs. Also, though PhD students often make up a third to a half of EATS conference paper givers, there has been a higher proportion of speakers already in tenured positions. The nationalities of speakers have also tended to be much more diverse at EATS, as the association has been remarkably successful at raising its profile all over Europe. **Another difference was that for its first seven years, EATS was based at a university (SOAS) and its finances were managed by the SOAS Research Office.** This helped give the association a degree of stability until it could move to a more institutionalised model of becoming a registered association under German Law.

In its early years, the main task of EATS was quite straightforward: that of smoothly running a major international Taiwan conference in a different European country each year. The fact that the EATS conference has now been in twelve European countries is an achievement in itself. However, EATS was ambitious to expand its goals from very early on. For instance, a journal special edition and an edited volume were published using revised versions of papers first presented at the first two conferences. In both cases, these were co-edited by core members of the initial EATS boards.

Over the last two decades, EATS has continued to grow in the scale of its conferences and the range of Taiwan Studies projects it promotes. It promotes Taiwan Studies publications through its book displays, EATS newsletter and support of the International Journal of Taiwan Studies and the influential blog Taiwan Insight. Countless journal articles and book chapters were presented at the EATS conferences before being submitted for peer review and publication. Its MA panel is also valuable for European Taiwan Studies teaching programmes, as postgraduate and even undergraduate students can gain diverse feedback on their Taiwan dissertation projects.

Looking back, I am proud to have been heavily involved in starting and running EATS for its first decade. Since then, I have tried to support EATS as much as possible, and I admire what has been achieved during the organisation's second decade. **In short, EATS is a key player in making European Taiwan Studies as vibrant as it is today.**

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