

Post-Taiwan Fellowship 2020 Working Report

**Taiwan's Soft Power in Malaysia:  
The Role of State and Non-State  
Actors**

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Research Model	1
3. Objectives of Study	3
4. Research Methodology and Sources	3
5. Working Research Findings	5
6. Tentative Conclusion	10
7. Expert Recommendations	11
8. Future Research and Publications	13
9. References	15



## 1. Introduction

As scholar Lu Yeh-Chung coined it, the Taiwanese understanding of the term “soft power” has been multi-faceted. With policy formulation in mind, most of the scholars in Taiwan with the most representative of all, Lin Bi-jaw, preferred to adopt Joseph Nye’s revised definition of soft power: the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferential outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Under such definition, Nye recognized the three co-optive means which are the intervening variables in turning soft power resources into preferred outcomes. Such theoretical framework has become the foundation of Taiwan’s soft power studies among the academics in recent years.

At the same time, state leaders such as former Taiwanese vice-president, Annette Lu (under Chen Shui-bian administration), had taken the course further and emphasised human rights, democracy, peace and love as Taiwan’s soft power in the early years of 21st century.<sup>2</sup> As for the previous Ma Ying-jeou administration, the Taiwan hand, Gary Rawnsley, posited that traditional Chinese culture has instead become the main constituent among other resources, for soft power promotion.<sup>3</sup> In the current Tsai Ing-wen administration, however, soft power is reframed into the overarching key link (among the four links) within its New Southbound Policy (NSP), that was geared towards preserving good relations with ASEAN and South Asian countries, New Zealand as well as Australia. More than just cultural resources now, the present Tsai administration is deploying all resources for the country’s soft power diffusion, ranging from medical care, education to technology and agriculture for the promotion of multilateral and bilateral cooperation with the NSP nations.<sup>4</sup>

Within the host countries such as Malaysia, however, Taiwan’s soft power diffusion is localized through specific programs and projects implemented by its state and non-state actors on the ground. Focusing on the case of Malaysia, this research is carried out to understand the roles of state and non-state actors in diffusing Taiwan’s soft power in the Southeast Asian country.

## 2. Research Model

### (I) Operational Definition of Taiwan’s Soft Power

This research is based on Nye’s general definition of soft power. Whilst Nye has explained well on how power works, he, however, established a soft power operational structure based on the targeted audience (political elites, public, etc.), instead of the general state. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Yeh-Chung Lu, “Fad or Fact? Soft Power in the Case of Taiwan” (paper presented at the 2007 AACSB Annual Conference, Richmond, Virginia, October 5-7, 2007) p. 3; and Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), pp. 20-1.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Lu, “A New Horizon for Taiwan: Soft Power in the Era of Globalization, Remarks Delivered to the Sixth Taiwan Roundtable,” November 19, 2001, <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=16964&rmid=2355> (accessed June 3, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Gary D. Rawnsley, “Taiwan’s Soft Power and Public Diplomacy,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2014): 170.

<sup>4</sup> “The Guidelines for “New Southbound Policy,”” *Taipei Cultural and Economic Office (TECO) in Brunei Darussalam*, August 23, 2016, [https://www.roc-taiwan.org/bn\\_en/post/644.html](https://www.roc-taiwan.org/bn_en/post/644.html) (accessed June 20, 2019).

his soft power conceptual structure is highly complicated and specified to the point that it is derived from the US experience.<sup>5</sup> This is very much different in the case of Taiwan.

With relatively limited resources and the lack of formal relations with Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, it is impractical to conduct Taiwan's soft power research based on Nye's soft power operational structure that focused on specific audiences. Instead, Nye's general conceptual framework of power definition can be an excellent reference for this research in which the targeted audience will be the Malaysian public at large. As mentioned in the last section, any power, including soft power, can be taken as capabilities/resources in which through conversion strategy, they will produce the preferred outcomes to the targeted audience.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly relevant for Taiwan's soft power in which the actors are the parties involving in such conversion strategy. This is the operational definition that this research will rely on in terms of analyzing Taiwan's soft power.

## **(II) Research Gaps and Questions**

Within the research framework as stated in the last sub-section of Research Model, there are two main groups of researchers working on Taiwan's soft power as a whole. For the first, scholars like Shane Lee and Rawnsley have focused heavily on Taiwan's soft power capabilities/resources with the former looking at these elements in the context of Taiwan's defense against China while the latter saw public diplomacy as the soft power tool to dispense them.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Lu and Wang have concentrated their studies on the outcomes of Taiwan's soft power within the American and European settings.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that between these two extremes, there is a gap on Taiwan's soft power research that delves into the functional relationship between these two ends. This research, therefore, seeks to fill the gap by examining the bridging roles of state and non-state actors from both ends. Focusing on the context of Malaysia as a host country, this research seeks to tackle three research questions designated to answer the nature of bridging roles of these actors:

1. What are perceptions of Taiwan's state and non-state actors on the nation's varying soft power capabilities/resources?
2. How do they act upon soft power capabilities/resources to achieve desired outcomes as expected by these state and non-state actors?

As shown on next page, the research model of this study is summarized in Figure 1 below.

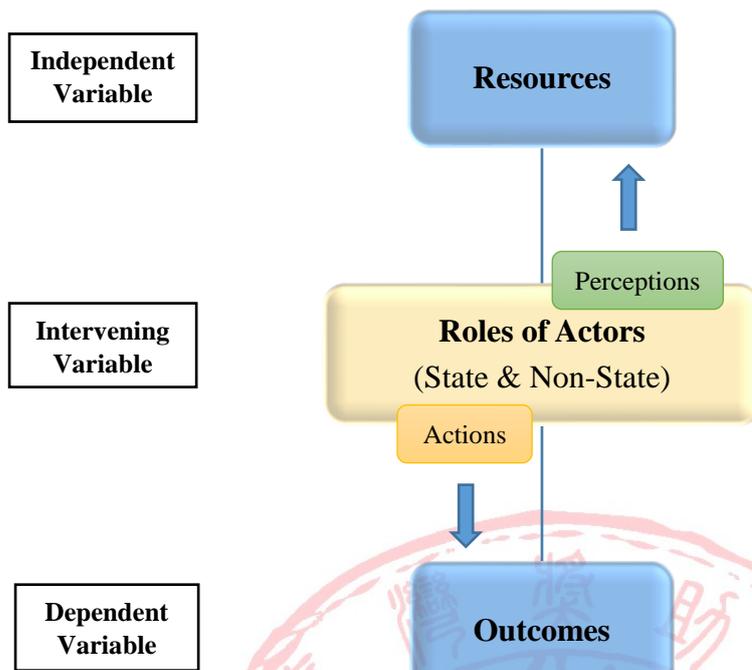
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<sup>5</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Shane Lee, "A New Interpretation of "Soft Power" for Taiwan," *Taiwan International Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (2005): 15-20; and Rawnsley, pp. 168-70.

<sup>8</sup> Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (2008): 444-45; and Lu Y.C., "Fad or Fact? Soft Power in the Case of Taiwan," pp. 19-23.



**Figure 1: Research Model of Taiwan's Soft Power Diffusion in Malaysia**

### 3. Objectives of Study

This research is set with the following objectives as below:

- I) To examine the overall roles of Taiwan's state and non-state actors in soft power diffusion within Malaysia;
- II) To ascertain the limitations of Taiwanese soft power in Malaysia; and
- III) To propose recommendations to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (MOFA Taiwan) in order to tackle these limitations.

### 4. Research Methodology and Sources

In general, this study is conducted based on qualitative research methods. In order to measure the relationship among the three variables — soft power capabilities/resources, actions of state and non-state actors and outcomes of these actions — the order of such relationship is determined prior to data collection process. As far as independent variable is concerned, four broad categories of soft power resources, namely, contemporary culture, foreign policy, high technology and humanitarian assistance, are identified for their relationships to the intervening variable.

This boils down to the intervening variable of this research. As the intermediary variable between both independent and dependent variables, it consists of the roles of state and non-state actors play in the diffusion of Taiwan's soft power in the host country. By that, it includes

on one hand, these Taiwanese soft power actors' perceptions of what are the soft power capabilities/resources in Malaysia, and on the other, their actions that led to the outcomes of Taiwan's soft power diffusion in the Southeast Asian country. As the core part of this research, this carefully constructed intervening variable will demonstrate the two constituents (perceptions and actions) that made up the roles of Taiwanese soft power actors in Malaysia at large.

For the outcomes, they are understood as the "end products" produced through the actions deemed by the Taiwanese soft power actors. In general, the outcomes are comprised of the host country's acceptance of collective agenda, material acquisition or receipt and import of intangible and tangible products for local consumption. Specifically, these included Malaysia's adoption of Taiwanese cultural lifestyle (including food and beverage consumption, reading and recreational activities), preference for/purchase of the nation's technology, humanitarian aid acceptance as well as tangible increase in the number of Malaysian tourists, students and visiting fellows in Taiwan.

### **(I) Data Collection**

As this proposed research is a greater extension to the existing study on Taiwan's soft power in Malaysia which I conducted in 2020, the same data collection and analysis methods will be employed again for this purpose. As data in Taiwan are readily accessible in open data platform and are revealed for public scrutiny, these advantages have helped me to collect them handily as it had been the case in 2020. In all, three techniques of data collection will be employed, namely, documentation, archival research and semi-structured interviews.

Through access to databases in Taiwan's National Central Library (NCL) and other sources, newspaper articles and government's think tank reports that are related to Taiwan's soft power (and actors) are documented for further analysis. At the same time, the primary sources such as the official documents (including policy discussions) of Taiwan's foreign ministry and other government agencies relating to Taiwan's soft power, are gathered and compiled through archival research in public archives. Finally, the conduct of semi-structured interviews will allow me to convey fewer but important questions to the Taiwanese soft power actors: policy-makers, businessmen, NGO leaders, academics and so on. Concurrently, such interview approach will also facilitate open-ended discussions with these elite interviewees and thus, gained valuable information from them.

### **(II) Data Analysis**

In terms of analysis, the content analysis method will be applied to all documents collected, be it from documentation, archival research and semi-structured interview techniques. As stated by Holsti, content analysis is the inference-making technique that systematically and objectively recognizes special characteristics of messages.<sup>9</sup> Through strict selection of various data, such method will achieve the twin goals of reliability and validity of the empirical findings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ole R. Holsti, "Content Analysis," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, eds. E. Lindzey and E. Aaronson (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1968), p. 608, quoted in Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Jahoda C. Selltitz, M. M. Deutsch and S. W. Cook, *Research Methods in Social Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1967), quoted in Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), p. 241.

For this research, the content analysis method will allow me to decode the latent and manifest meanings of the data regarding the perceptions of Taiwan's state and non-state actors towards Malaysia as a soft power recipient. In addition, such method will help me to identify and interpret the involvements and considerations by different soft power actors, culminating into tangible actions on the ground.

As for the period of study, this research will cover the last ten years (2010 - 2020) of developments. With this periodization, I will be able to gather large volume of data with different variations. This will help me to trace the trends and variations of Taiwan's soft power diffusion in Malaysia from the then Ma Ying-jeou administration to the current Tsai Ing-wen administration.

## 5. Working Research Findings

This section showcases the research findings 3 months after the completion of Taiwan Fellowship 2020. In all, there are four categories of soft power resources, namely, contemporary culture, foreign policy, high technology, and humanitarian assistance, which provide answers to the research questions. They are the perceptions, actions and outcomes of Taiwanese state and non-state actors involving in each category of soft power resources in the host country of Malaysia.

### D) Contemporary Culture

This soft power of resource in Malaysia can be divided into food and beverage (F&B), pop and reading culture. For food and beverage, Din Tai Fung and bubble tea operators (Xin Fu Tang, The Alley, Gong Cha and so forth) and Eslite, remained to be the non-state actors that diffuse Taiwan's soft power in the Southeast Asian country. As these are business players, they perceived their products and experiences as profitable goods that could be sold to Malaysia.

As revealed by the then Chatime's franchisee, Bryan Loo, the lack of a tea market in Malaysia back in 2012 and before, has led to this Malaysian businessman bringing the Taiwanese bubble tea brand to Malaysia more than a decade ago.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the former franchisee of Din Tai Fung, Lim Meng Lu, also detailed the lack of Taiwanese style of restaurant (offering highest quality of food, services-oriented and comfortable dining experiences in clean environment) as the opportunity to bring such brand to Malaysia.<sup>12</sup> Last but not least, Eslite has indicated its current expansion interest to Malaysia, the first in Southeast Asia, is due to Kuala Lumpur's potential in UN's World Book Capital City as well as its high population of Chinese Malaysians — the two factors that can fuel its business growth in the long-run.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wei-shen Wong, "Bubble Tea Craze Leads to A Flurry of Stores Opening in Klang Valley," *The Star*, March 19, 2012, [https://www.thestar.com.my/news/community/2012/03/19/bubble-tea-craze-leads-to-a-flurry-of-stores-opening-in-klang-valley\\_1/](https://www.thestar.com.my/news/community/2012/03/19/bubble-tea-craze-leads-to-a-flurry-of-stores-opening-in-klang-valley_1/) (accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Meng Lu Lim, interviewed by host, *Breakfast Grill – Xiao Long Bao, The Pull Factor*, BFM 89.9, October 8, 2010, <https://www.bfm.my/podcast/morning-run/the-breakfast-grille/breakfast-grille-081010-lim-meng-lu> (accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Crystal Hsu, "Eslite to Open Kuala Lumpur Store in 2022," *Taipei Times*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/biz/archives/2020/11/18/2003747090> (accessed March 13, 2021).

Given the potential of Malaysian market to these Taiwanese products and experiences, these non-state actors seek to expand into the Southeast Asian nation through two different cooperation efforts with local partners. The first is establishing franchise business model for Malaysian franchisees but without compromising the reputation of the Taiwanese franchisors and F&B products' quality. Precisely due to such indirect marketing concept for business expansion, both Ding Tai Fung and bubble tea operators have seen their business outlets expanded throughout Malaysia — with Ding Tai Fung having 12 branches (4 non-pork) in Malaysia as in March 2021 and bubble tea shops mushrooming in the country with at least 9 brands from Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the bubble tea consumption has become a new culture among young Malaysians that spanned into dine-in leisurely activities during weekends and post sharing in the social media platforms.<sup>15</sup>

The other form of cooperation is for the Taiwanese brand to expand independently but with close partnership with the Malaysian counterpart. This is exemplified by Eslite in which its Malaysian strategic cooperation partner, YTL, rented its luxury shopping mall, The Starhill, to the Taiwanese bookstore chain to become its flagship branch in Kuala Lumpur. As disclosed by Eslite group chairperson, Mercy Wu, the flagship store will not only feature a rich selection of Chinese, English and Malay language books, but also performing arts, design, music, themed restaurants and coffeeshops as well as cutting-edge cultural and creative brands as well.<sup>16</sup> Once Eslite is opened in 2022, it is expected that the entire Taiwanese reading culture as showcased its Taipei branches, stands to be replicated to its Malaysian flagship branch for local consumption.

## II) Foreign Policy

The other category of Taiwanese soft power diffusion in Malaysia is Taipei's foreign policy itself. Altogether, there are two constituents of Taiwan's foreign policy in which its soft power diffusion is evident in the case of Malaysia: foreign tourism as well as foreign higher education and research strategies. As far as foreign tourism strategy is concerned, the state actor involved in localizing Taiwan's Muslim tourism campaign, is none other than Taiwan Tourism Bureau (TTB) in Malaysia.<sup>17</sup>

Generally speaking, Taiwan's Muslim tourism strategy in Malaysia has its origin in the TTB's overall Muslim tourism strategy back in 2008 when it invited international Islamic tourism experts to visit the country. In the successive years, the Bureau started to circulate booklet for Muslim travelers since 2010 and began working with local tourism groups in Taiwan, to coach businesses as part of its new efforts to improve the country's environment for this particular group of travelers.<sup>18</sup> As of today, subsidies have been provided by TTB to develop new itineraries and halal catering, train Southeast Asian

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<sup>14</sup> Jolin Lee, "The Ultimate Guide to Bubble Teas in KL," *Lifestyle Asia*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.lifestyleasia.com/kl/food-drink/drinks/the-ultimate-guide-to-bubble-teas-in-kl/> (accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Li Mei Foong, "Boom or Bust?: Malaysia's Bubble Tea Scene Approaches Saturation Point," *Channel News Asia*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/boom-or-bust-malaysia-bubble-tea-saturation-11711138> (accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> "Taiwan's Eslite Spectrum to Debut at The Starhill in 2022," *The Star*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/money/2020/11/17/taiwans-eslite-spectrum-to-debut-at-the-starhill-in-2022/1923533> (accessed March 13, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> There is a plan for me to interview Taiwan Tourism Bureau's official in Kuala Lumpur in the coming months.

<sup>18</sup> "Tapping the Muslim Tourism Market," *Taipei Times*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2020/01/23/2003729715> (accessed March 15, 2021).

language tour guides as well as encourage restaurants and hotels to take up halal certifications to cater the needs of Muslim tourists.<sup>19</sup>

In Malaysia, TTB's local office is responsible for the localization of Taiwan's Muslim tourism in the Southeast Asian nation. Given the Bureau's official view of tapping the 20-million Muslim market in both Malaysia and Brunei, TTB Malaysia started its own "Salam Taiwan" campaign in 2018 that aimed to attract more Malay Malaysians to visit the country.<sup>20</sup> The campaign included engaging Malay actress, Mira Filzah, to be the travel ambassador and had promotional video featuring the instagrammer (with 3-million fans) as well as other Malay fashion and internet celebrities, for Taiwan's tourism. As stated by the Bureau, such video will then be aired on internet, movie theatres, TV stations and outdoor electronic boards for both Malaysian and Bruneian viewers.<sup>21</sup> So far, Taiwan's soft power diffusion in Malaysia through its localized Muslim tourism strategy had produced promising outcome as showed by the increase of Malaysian tourists from 526,129 persons in 2018 to 537,692 persons in 2019. Such increase, is no doubt, is still a notable development considering that there was a drop for the figure from 2017 to 2018.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike its Muslim tourism strategy, there is no specific strategy from Taipei that catered solely for Malaysian students and scholars in the area of higher education and research. Rather, the strategy is understood in the establishment of Taiwan Fellowships and Scholarships (TAFS) — a batch of scholarship and fellowship programs that is offered by different state actors such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica, International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) and Center for Chinese Studies (CCS).<sup>23</sup> As an extension of Taiwanese government in Malaysia, the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Kuala Lumpur, adopted the TAFS' view of utilizing the 3 categories of awards, namely, Fellowships for research, Huayu (Mandarin) Enrichment Scholarships, and Scholarships for Degree, to promote relevant research, educational links and enduring friendships between Taiwan and the global community.<sup>24</sup>

In the context of Malaysia, TECO in Malaysia is working hand-in-hand with these central government agencies (state actors) in Taiwan, to promote these scholarship and fellowship programs to wider Malaysian public, soliciting local applications for them or even recommending suitable applicants from the country for further considerations in Taipei. As for the outcome of Taiwan soft power diffusion from foreign higher education and research strategies, I am in the midst of collecting the exact data (or figures) on the number of Malaysian students and scholars who accepted the 8 scholarships and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Tourism Bureau Invites Malaysian Celebrity Mira Filzah to Star in Video Promoting Taiwan Tourism," *Taiwan News*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3477681> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Taiwan Tourism Bureau, "Changes in the Number of Visitor Arrivals from Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mainland China and Hong Kong from 2011~2020," *Tourism Statistics Database of the Taiwan Tourism Bureau*, <https://stat.taiwan.net.tw/> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that the role of non-state actor, Federation of Alumni Associations of Taiwan Universities, Malaysia (FAATUM), is not covered in my research in Taiwan. This part will be delved on in the second part of my research in Malaysia later.

<sup>24</sup> "About TAFS," *Taiwan Fellowships and Scholarships (TAFS) Portal*, <http://tafs.mofa.gov.tw/Contents.aspx?loc=en> (accessed March 15, 2021). The 8 scholarship and fellowship programs are MOE Huayu Enrichment Scholarship, MOFA Taiwan Scholarship, MOE Taiwan Scholarship, Academia Sinica Taiwan International Graduate Program, International Higher Education Scholarship Programs of Taiwan ICDF, MOFA Taiwan Fellowship, MOE Short Term Research Award and Research Grant for Foreign Scholars in Chinese Studies.

fellowships from 2010 to 2020.<sup>25</sup> It is expected from these data, I will be able to observe any upward trend and with that, conclude the outcome of Taiwan soft power diffusion from thereon.

### III) High Technology

In Malaysia, there are two types of high technology that are relevant to Taiwanese soft power diffusion: agricultural and medical technologies. In terms of agricultural technology, both state and non-state actors — Council of Agriculture (COA) and Ji Sheng (JS) Agrotech — are involved in such soft power diffusion. From the data provided by an interviewee from COA, both the government agency and JS Agrotech viewed the country's cutting-edge machineries, facilities and equipment as well as seeds and seedlings, as agricultural technological resources which can be tapped by the Malaysian counterparts through the JS Agri-Park in Machap, the state of Johor.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the potential of Taiwanese agricultural technological goods, both COA and JS Agrotech have successfully organized the Taiwan Agricultural Machinery and Materials Expo in Johor state in 2019.<sup>27</sup> With JS Agrotech providing the location for the Expo, it was disclosed to me that the company invited COA and relevant Taiwanese businesses to the Expo in 2019. For the COA's participation, they included sending three of its experts to deliver lectures on Taiwan's latest agricultural technologies for the Malaysian participants.<sup>28</sup> For the Taiwanese companies at large, they are limited to selling as machineries, facilities and equipment as well as seeds and seedlings; and from the disclosure from COA's official, only 2 out of 40 companies are considering to invest in Malaysia. Most of them, as alluded to me, preferred Indonesia as their investment destinations.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the outcome of Taiwanese soft power diffusion for the sub-category of agricultural technology is limited to exporting machineries, facilities and equipment as well as seeds and seedlings to the Malaysian counterparts who in turn, need these to develop their own agricultural businesses.

For medical technology, there are two fronts for Taiwan's soft power diffusion in Malaysia. First is the Taiwanese government's 1 Country 1 Center (1C1C) project in which Malaysia is one of the 6 partner countries including India. As the cooperation partner for Malaysia, Taiwan's Chang Gung Memorial Hospital (non-state actor) is tasked to achieve the aim set within Medical and Public Health Cooperation and Development of Industrial Chains flagship project of the New Southbound Policy: capacity-building and cooperation in advanced ICT and medical management technology as well as development and

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<sup>25</sup> It is made known by MOFA Taiwan official that these data are not available publicly and thus, I will request TECO in Malaysia and/or other central government agencies for help to obtain them. Also, it is notified to me that a lot of Malaysian students and fellows are applying for MOFA-funded TAFS thus far. More information are available: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Taiwan official, interview by author, Taipei, November 11, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> 農委會 (Council of Agriculture), 第一屆馬來西亞台灣農業機械暨資材發售會: 工作細部情況, 2019年11月.

<sup>27</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such expo was not held in 2020. It is made known to the author there is a plan to hold another Expo in 2021.

<sup>28</sup> "Taiwanese Agricultural Machinery, Materials, and Equipment Sent to Malaysia to Create Local Services Model, Marking a Breakthrough in Taiwan-Malaysia Agricultural Cooperation," *Council of Agriculture (COA) News*, December 18, 2019, [https://eng.coa.gov.tw/theme\\_data.php?theme=eng\\_news&id=597](https://eng.coa.gov.tw/theme_data.php?theme=eng_news&id=597) (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Council of Agriculture (COA) official, interview by author, Hsinchu, October 27, 2020.

connectivity of healthcare industries for partner countries (in this case, Malaysia).<sup>30</sup> So far, organizing seminars, medical trainings and visits to Chang Gung Memorial Hospital remained to be the main efforts undertaken by the hospital in its limited cooperation with the Malaysian counterparts (hospitals).<sup>31</sup> As such, the anticipated outcome of diffusing Taiwan's soft power through medical technology is largely unrealized as medical technological cooperation is at its infancy.

By comparison, Taiwan's Southern Taiwan Science Park (STSP), a state actor, has made greater strides in Malaysia. Recognizing the fact that many Malaysian dentists studied in Taiwan before taking up their practices back at home, STSP utilizes such long-standing and unique connection to market the Taiwanese medical technologies to Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> By establishing its Medical Device Promotion and Operation Center in Kuala Lumpur, STSP is leveraging this first ever medical device center in Southeast Asia for the Taiwanese vendors to sell their products to the Malaysian customers.<sup>33</sup> As highlighted by a STSP official interviewed by me, the medical device center has concluded deals worth of US\$ 210,042 since its opening in November 2019. With more deals are also expected in the coming months,<sup>34</sup> Taiwan's soft power diffusion through medical technology is achieved via the medical device center.

#### IV) Humanitarian Assistance

In Malaysia, humanitarian assistance should be understood as an independent soft power resource instead of being part of Taiwan's foreign policy. This stemmed from the fact that the Malaysian chapters of Taiwanese Buddhist foundations such as Tzu-Chi and Fo Guang Shan, are responsive to every disaster that occurred in Malaysia's soil. For all of the humanitarian assistance, they worked independently without any influence from the Taiwanese government agencies and pursued their work according to their perceived humanistic view.

Among the two Taiwanese Buddhist foundations, Tzu-Chi Malaysia is the most active in which its humanitarian assistance to Malaysia has been remarkably extensive for an organization that was set up as small liaison offices 29 years ago. As stated in Tzu-Chi's mission work in Malaysia, the Malaysian chapter is dedicated to the cause of betterment of humanity in the spirit of Great Love (*da ai*) and aimed to undertake Master Cheng Yen's global missions in the Southeast Asian nation.<sup>35</sup> Armed with such humanistic view, Tzu-Chi Foundation Malaysia has undertaken five different missions in the country: charity, medicine, education, humanistic culture and environmental protection.<sup>36</sup>

Among them, charity mission is the most apparent in which Tzu-Chi swiftly responded by offering various humanitarian assistance to an array of disasters for the past

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<sup>30</sup> Health and Welfare NSP Project Office, "Medical and Health New Southbound Policy," *Taiwan Medical and Healthcare Regional Partnership Portal*, July 26, 2019, <https://nsp.mohw.org.tw/cp-1069-5042-4f222-2.html> (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> 衛生福利部委託中華經濟研究院衛福新南向專案辦公室執行辦理, "馬來西亞," *醫衛新南向產業e鏈接*, <https://nsp.mohw.org.tw/lp-2302-1.html> (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Southern Taiwan Science Park (STSP) official, email interview by author, September 18, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "Introduction," *Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation Malaysia Portal*, <https://tzuchi.my/en/about-us/tzuchi-global/our-missions> (accessed March 15, 2021); and "Our Work," *Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation Malaysia Portal*, <https://tzuchi.my/en/about-us/tzuchi-malaysia/our-work> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

10 years or so. These included providing immediate psychological support to the families of the victims on board MH370 flight (2014), distributing food and water to the flood victims in the east coastal states of Malaysia (2014), donating essential goods to those financially affected families in Sabah not long after imposition of Malaysia's MCO 1.0 (2020) and contributing millions of donation as well as more than 1,000 beds to all hospitals in Sabah following the spike of COVID-19 cases last October (2020).<sup>37</sup> In a show of recognition from the Malaysian side, Master Cheng Yen received the 2015 Better Malaysia Foundation Personality Award on behalf of Tzu-Chi's humanitarian assistance in the country for the past 10 years.<sup>38</sup>

The other is Fo Guang Shan which owned the Dong Zen Temple in Jenjarom, state of Selangor. Similar to Tzu-Chi, Fo Guang Shan's mission work in Malaysia is comprised of three areas, namely, culture and art, education and charity. Unlike Tzu-Chi, however, culture and art as well as education are the main mission areas of Fo Guang Shan's development in Malaysia. That said, it still engaged in charity mission as part of Fo Guang Shan's Buddhist outlook of overcoming human sickness and sufferings through the practice of Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> The great example is evident in Fo Guang Shan's collaboration with other Buddhist associations in Malaysia to organize the Future and Hope Charity Concert for the East Coast flood victims. As the host and main organizer for the charity concert, Fo Guang Shan donated the money from the event to re-build 30 units of houses in Kuala Krai for the flood victims, fully equipped with water and electricity for each unit of house.<sup>40</sup> As for outcome of Taiwanese soft power diffusion through humanitarian assistance, it is relatively palpable for Tzu-Chi Malaysia in light of its recognition from the Malaysian counterpart back in 2015. Such recognition, however is difficult to determine for Fo Guang Shan as charity works made up a small portion of its three missions in Malaysia.

## 6. Tentative Conclusion

This research findings show that when comes to concluding Taiwan's soft power in Malaysia, the situation is somewhat mixed on the ground. From the available data collected thus far, Taiwanese soft power diffusion is evident in three categories of resources as in culture, foreign policy and humanitarian assistance — in which state and non-state actors perceived and acted to produce tangible and intangible outcomes for such power diffusion. The same, however, would not be said for the other category of soft power resources, high technology. Despite high technology being an attractive soft power resource for Taiwan, the involving non-state actors are less enthusiastic than the state counterparts. These are the private companies which are

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<sup>37</sup> The Editor, "#MH370\* MAS Ropes in Mercy Malaysia, Tzu Chi as Caregivers," *The Edge Markets*, March 12, 2014, <https://maa.theedgemarkets.com/article/mh370-mas-ropes-mercy-malaysia-tzu-chi-caregivers> (accessed March 15, 2021); "Great Love via Cash-for-Work," *The World of Tzu Chi*, February 2015, pp. 9-11, <http://publication.jingsi.my/tcworld/eng/tcworld60/files/assets/downloads/publication.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2021); and "Taiwanese Tzu Chi Donated Millions and Thousands of Beds for Sabah Hospitals," *The Sun Daily*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/taiwanese-tzu-chi-donated-millions-and-thousands-of-beds-for-sabah-hospitals-FH4797502> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> "Taiwan Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation Malaysia Recipient of 2015 Better Malaysia Foundation Personality Award," *The Sun Daily*, March 29, 2015, <https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/1368682-BSARCH302364> <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/taiwanese-tzu-chi-donated-millions-and-thousands-of-beds-for-sabah-hospitals-FH4797502> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> "慈善事業," 馬來西亞佛光山網站, <https://fgsmy.org/cn/弘法事業/慈善事業/> (accessed March 15, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> "Future and Hope-Charity Music Concert," *The Buddha's Light International Association Portal*, January 29, 2015, <https://myblia.wordpress.com/category/disaster-relief/> (accessed March 15, 2021).

profit-oriented and perceive soft power diffusion in terms of selling their technologies to the Malaysian counterparts.

As revealed in research findings, such finding is the most important feedback that I gained from a senior official in the Council of Agriculture (COA). By extension, this is an indication that there is still long way to go for Taiwan to utilize its agricultural technology for soft power diffusion. As for medical technology, the outcome is relatively positive, especially in the case of Medical Device Promotion and Operation Center in Kuala Lumpur. That said, it should be recognized that the space remains big for Taiwan to utilize more of its soft power resources for diffusion of soft power in Malaysia. This will be the way forward for Taiwan's soft power in Malaysia.

## 7. Expert Recommendations

Throughout the research, there are also observations which warranted recommendations to the Taiwanese government for further consideration in its diplomatic engagement with ASEAN countries. Not limited to this research, there are three recommendations that spanned into public diplomacy and cooperation in new areas for the Taiwanese government:

- I) **Arrangement of special meetings with Taiwan Fellows coming from ASEAN countries by MOFA Taiwan.** From my Fellowship tenure in Taiwan, I gathered feedbacks from other Southeast Asian Fellows and found that most of them felt there were little engagements from MOFA Taiwan with them. While I managed to interview main officers from the Southeast Asian Affairs Section due to invaluable help from TECO in Malaysia, other Fellows in Taiwan might not have the same experience as me.

For short-term, I recommend MOFA Taiwan (especially the Southeast Asian Affairs Section) to arrange special meetings with Taiwan Fellows coming from ASEAN countries in different periods of time (for example, 4 months once) every year, so as to engage them closely while in the country. Such engagement will not only help MOFA Taiwan to understand the political, economic and social situations in each of ASEAN country (via future presentation or informal exchanges), but also to establish close ties with every Southeast Asian scholar for future collaboration with the Taiwanese government. More importantly, such importance attached to each of them will serve to instill positive impression of Taiwan among them, with the potential that they will introduce more talented Southeast Asian scholars to come to the country as Fellows or establish some sort of ties, with the Taiwanese counterparts (soft power outcome in the resource category of foreign policy).

- II) **Push for active and tangible engagements for Taiwanese sub-national governments (SNGs) with Malaysian counterparts.** During my research, I had the opportunity to explore the sub-national level of cooperation between Taiwan and Malaysia. To my surprise, I found that sub-national cooperation between the two sides is not as active and tangible as had been reported by both sides. While I had yet to approach Kaohsiung city government on its cooperation with any level of governments in Malaysia,<sup>41</sup> I was able to gain feedbacks from Taipei city government on its cooperation with the Selangor state

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<sup>41</sup> It is not reported in the media if former Kaohsiung mayor, Han Kuo-yu's visit to Malaysia resulted in any cooperation with the state governments in the Southeast Asian nation.

government. In what was extensively reported to be active and tangible cooperation in the areas of urban transportation, entrepreneurship and smart cities by both sides,<sup>42</sup> I was surprised to be told that Taipei-Selangor cooperation has not progressed far ever since Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed in March 2017.

From the feedback, it was revealed that the U-bike model (relevant regulations and practices) which Selangor state government wanted to learn from Taipei, did not manage to take off in the Malaysian state. Furthermore, the official from Taipei Computer Association (TCA), the party involved in the cooperation on behalf of Taipei city government, also disclosed that Selangor's prioritization of e-commerce development did not elicit Taipei's interest to pursue high-end cooperation in the areas of smart cities and business start-ups.<sup>43</sup> The differing priorities between both sides, therefore, explained that despite Selangor Information Technology and Digital Economy Corporation (SIDECE) sending delegation to Taipei annually, the outcome of cooperation remained obscure thus far.

By all means, the case of study of Taipei-Selangor cooperation should serve as a lesson for Taiwan to conduct any engagement with Malaysia's state or city governments in the future. Instead of letting SNGs cooperating based on their respective interests, the Taiwanese government should monitor such development and encourage its other cities to enter into a win-win cooperation that produces tangible outcomes to both sides. The most important principle for cooperation is the harmonization of priorities between both SNGs as opposed to agreeing to general interests as seen in the case of Taipei and Selangor. As highlighted by my commentary in *Taiwan Insight*, the other best candidate for ICT-related cooperation area will be Penang, which has joined WeGo, a South Korean-led organisation set up for the global promotion of smart and sustainable cities.<sup>44</sup> A similar exploration of cooperation between a Taiwanese industrial/creative city (Hsinchu or New Taipei) and Penang which will give it a strategic opening for further smart cities cooperation ventures with other WeGo network members in Southeast Asia: Thua Thien Hue, Cauayan, Batam, Riau, and Baguio.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of heritage, Malaysian states can also become the gateway for developing Taiwan's cultural cooperation with other ASEAN countries. In my discussion with the Executive Director of Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF), Dr. Alan Yang Hao, a network of heritage cities is well on the table for further exploration of sub-national cooperation.<sup>46</sup> For instance, a cultural bubble can be formed by bringing together Tainan, Melaka and Ambon into a network of heritage cities — on the basis that these cities share not only the ancient indigenous heritage but also, those from Portuguese and Dutch as well.

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<sup>42</sup> Taipei City Government, "Taipei, Selangor Ink MOUs to Strengthen Cooperation," *Taipei City News*, March 27, 2017, [https://english.gov.taipei/News\\_Content.aspx?n=A11F01CFC9F58C83&sms=DFFA119D1FD5602C&s=482C1528F204E97B](https://english.gov.taipei/News_Content.aspx?n=A11F01CFC9F58C83&sms=DFFA119D1FD5602C&s=482C1528F204E97B) (accessed March 20, 2021); and Xavier Kong, "MOU Signings "Another Milestone" in Selangor-Taipei Relations, Says MB," *SIDECE News*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.sidec.com.my/mou-signings-another-milestone-in-selangor-taipei-relations-says-mb/> (accessed March 20, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Taiwan Computer Association (TCA) official, telephone interview by author, Taipei, November 24, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Chee Leong Lee, "Prospect of Malaysia as the Gateway for Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) Push," *Taiwan Insight*, July 23, 2020, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2020/07/23/prospect-of-malaysia-as-the-gateway-for-taiwans-new-southbound-policy-nsp-push/> (accessed March 20, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> "Local Governments," *WeGO Portal*, <http://we-gov.org/local-governments/?ckattempt=1> (accessed March 20, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Hao Yang, interview by author, Taipei, July 7, 2020.

As a first step, the Tainan municipal government can start exploring a plan with the Melaka state government in Malaysia, and later, enlist the latter's support to promote this network to the Maluku provincial government in Indonesia.<sup>47</sup> In all, these are the suggestions for the Taiwanese SNGs to explore with their Southeast Asian counterparts in the medium-term.

**III) Formulation of policy and target for Taiwanese young scholars specializing in Southeast Asian studies.** Being hosted by the premier institution on Southeast Asian studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), had led me to see the advancement of Southeast Asian studies in Taiwan. Nevertheless, I believe there is a huge room for improvement in nurturing Southeast Asian experts among the young generation of Taiwanese. This will be pivotal if Taiwan is to position itself as a 'Southeast Asian country' in the long-term — a point that is highlighted by Transportation Minister, Lin Chia-lung in last November 2020.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, having a pool of Taiwanese experts on Southeast Asia, will also decrease its dependence on Southeast Asian experts residing in the country, as high job mobility (with higher perks or salary packages) has made it difficult to retain most of them in the long-term.

As such, I propose for the Taiwanese government to have a tangible policy and target to train a pool of young locals to become Southeast Asian experts in the next 10 years. Instead of leaving such expertise training entirely to the Taiwanese academic community, Ministry of Education Taiwan can become the facilitator by providing consistent funds for those universities to attract Southeast Asian experts for language training and teaching discipline-based courses to the young Taiwanese in the early stage. As for the targets, Taipei can start aiming for 20 to 30 young Taiwanese scholars to be trained for specific country experts in Southeast Asia, language specialists, Pacific connections' analysts, multi-disciplinary academics as well as regional observers on ASEAN as an international organization. While this will be instrumental at the initial stage of training, it is expected that this first batch of young Taiwanese who take up Southeast Asian studies with niche knowledge and language abilities of the dynamic region, will eventually take over the mantle and train the next batch of Southeast Asian experts in the country. This will ensure Taiwan will have a pool of Southeast Asian experts in the long-term.

## **8. Future Research and Publications**

In complementing the results from this qualitative research in Taiwan, I am planning to continue its research on Taiwanese soft power in the eyes of Malaysians. For this, I seek to employ quantitative methods of data collection and analysis to comprehend the types of perception and level of positive/negative opinions of Taiwan among the Malaysian populace (that is, from the recipient's perspective). For this, a survey will be carried out in the near future in which the feedbacks from the Malaysian students, business actors, scholars, non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders and political elites, are gathered for regression analysis. It is I's hope that this part of research will complete the process of generating a set of indicators and results, making it the first comprehensive study on Taiwan's soft power in Malaysia.

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<sup>47</sup> Lee, "Prospect of Malaysia as the Gateway for Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) Push."

<sup>48</sup> Cheng-hsiang Fan and Joseph Yeh, "ASEAN Parliamentary Friendship Group Formed," *Focus Taiwan*, November 3, 2020, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202011030014> (accessed March 20, 2021).

At the end of this research, I hope to publish two works from the data obtained in Taiwan and Malaysia. The first publication will be the book that I am planning to co-author with another South Korean expert for international publication in May 2022. This will be on comparison between Taiwanese and South Korean soft power in Malaysia in which both authors are to contribute half of the book each — featuring the background of the two nations’ soft power in Malaysia, the latest situations and limitations of such soft power. The second publication will be a full book on Taiwanese soft power in Malaysia that is solely co-authored by me. Expanding from the half of the book published earlier with the other author, I will tackle the latest situation of Taiwanese soft power in detail, featuring one chapter for each soft power resource and its diffusion of power’s outcome in the host country of Malaysia. This full book is expected to be published by April 2023 and I am planning to apply to various research grants such as Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (CCKF), for field trips and other research-related needs for this project.



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