

# Unpacking Asian Identity in Taiwan: An Empirical Study of Taiwanese University Students' Perceptions of Asia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article explores the evolving perceptions of Asian identity among Taiwanese university students, focusing on the impact of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP). The study uses data from the Asian Student Survey (ASS) to analyze how these students perceive neighboring Asian countries, particularly those targeted by the NSP. The findings reveal that Taiwanese students view Asia as a dynamic and diverse region but tend to prefer Western countries or developed Asian nations like Japan for education and career opportunities. The research also shows that while the NSP has enhanced Taiwan's image in some Southeast Asian countries, it has had a limited impact on altering Taiwanese students' perceptions of these nations. The study highlights the strategic significance of the NSP in fostering regional integration and mutual understanding, emphasizing the importance of people-centered exchanges in shaping regional identities. Despite the policy's achievements, the article suggests that further efforts are needed

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to connect Taiwanese society more deeply with the broader Asian region to fully realize the potential of regional cooperation and identity formation.

**Keywords:** *Taiwanese university students, Asian identity, New Southbound Policy, Regional integration.*

## 1. Introduction

The study of identity holds considerable significance, serving as a crucial indicator of how individuals understand their social and international contexts (Abdelal et al, 2006), as well as a vital tool for self-examination. The formation and articulation of identity break down the routines of daily life into dimensions of cultural significance and affinity. Identities tied to specific geographical contexts, in particular, encompass a complex interplay of political, social, and cultural elements (Paasi, 2003). These elements are deeply interdependent, each influencing and shaping the others, ultimately coalescing into a unique and multifaceted identity.

The survey project on university students in Asian countries represents a pioneering transnational academic collaboration that promotes self-reflection and mutual understanding among young cohorts across different nations. This research initiative, led by Professor Sonoda Shigeto of the University of Tokyo, Japan, aims to explore intra-regional perceptions within Asia—or more succinctly, how Asia perceives itself. As members of this international research team, we are pleased that Taiwan is actively contributing to this significant analytical endeavor. The survey and research on the identities of university students are particularly insightful, as these students are not only the intellectual and social elite in many Asian societies but also the future leaders of their respective countries. By examining the identities of Asian, particularly Taiwanese, university students, we gain deeper insights into how the next generation of Asian citizens perceives the region as a community, neighboring countries as partners, and themselves as essential participants in the collective effort to build and sustain this regional community alongside other emerging talents. This understanding is critical for anticipating the future trajectory of Asian regional cooperation and identity formation.

The identity of university students in Taiwan is shaped by both external factors and government policies. Externally, the ongoing cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China exert considerable influence. Beijing's

political pressure to limit Taiwan's international space has cultivated a unique perspective among the Taiwanese population, particularly within the university student demographic. This pressure has led to a heightened sense of distinctiveness and awareness among students regarding their national identity and international standing (Chen, 2012). Internally, the formation of student identity has been influenced by a series of government policies developed since the 1990s, particularly through successive waves of the Southbound Policies. The most notable of these is the New Southbound Policy (NSP), implemented in 2016. The NSP, with its distinctive people-centered rationale, has played a crucial role in fostering interpersonal exchanges between Taiwan and other countries in the region (Yang, 2018; 2022; 2023). This policy has not only strengthened Taiwan's regional ties but has also contributed to the formation of regional communities, encouraging a more interconnected and cooperative regional identity among Taiwanese university students. Through these external and internal influences, the identity of Taiwanese university students has evolved to reflect both the pressures and opportunities presented by their unique geopolitical context. This dual influence underscores the complexity of identity formation in Taiwan, highlighting the interplay between political forces and policy initiatives in shaping how students perceive themselves and their place in the broader regional and global community.

In light of our research findings based on the survey data, we have identified three key insights. First, the way Taiwanese university students perceive Asia reflects both Taiwanese society's affinity with and unfamiliarity with the region, as well as the deep-seated concerns arising from the pressures of international power dynamics. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of Taiwan's position within Asia, where a sense of belonging is tempered by the challenges posed by external geopolitical forces.

Second, given that Taiwan's civil society is vibrant, diverse, open, and highly internationalized, it is reasonable to expect that Taiwanese university students' perceptions of Asia align closely with those of their counterparts in neighboring Asian countries. Asia, as a whole, is seen as a developing, dynamic, and highly heterogeneous region. For Taiwan, Asia represents a positive and energetic image. While the movement of people and labor mobility are often key drivers in fostering a sense of Asian identity, it is noteworthy that Taiwanese students tend to prefer staying in Taiwan for their

future careers. This contrasts with trends in other countries where mobility is more common. For instance, young students from Southeast Asia often seek opportunities for further study or work abroad, driven by the closer ties facilitated by ASEAN-led regionalism. Similarly, young professionals in Japan and South Korea frequently pursue careers with international companies, often opting for positions in overseas branches or factories.

The third research finding is that the promotion of the NSP has generally led to an improved understanding of neighboring Asian countries among Taiwanese university students. These students increasingly recognize the profound impact that Southeast Asian nations can have on Taiwan's future. The strategic goals of the NSP are not only enlightening but also of significant importance. Beyond diversifying Taiwan's economic and trade dependencies away from China, the NSP's focus on people-centered development agendas aims to strengthen Taiwan's presence and connectivity within Asia. Enhanced cultivation of relationships and social networking are critical. We argue that only by fostering mutual understanding and exchanges among people can we promote a genuine sense of Asian identity, ultimately facilitating Taiwan's integration into the broader regional community. This approach underscores the importance of interpersonal connections as the foundation for a shared regional identity and Taiwan's active participation in the evolving Asian landscape.

## **2. Outlining Taiwan's Unique Focus with NSP features**

Taiwan initiated the promotion and implementation of its NSP following President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in 2016. The NSP marks a significant departure from previous southbound policy initiatives, such as the "Go South" policy of the 1990s, which primarily aimed at balancing westward investment. Unlike its predecessors, the NSP is not merely a risk diversification strategy; rather, it represents a comprehensive effort to enhance Taiwan's connectivity and partnerships with neighboring Asian countries (Yang, 2018). The policy's scope extends to ASEAN member states, South Asian countries, New Zealand, and Australia, thereby fostering deeper regional integration.

Through the NSP, Taiwan has implemented five flagship programs designed to establish and strengthen constructive partnerships with these neighboring countries and societies. The first focus is on boosting economic, trade, and industrial links, aiming to enhance economic cooperation and

create mutually beneficial industrial partnerships. Secondly, the NSP emphasizes the cultivation of industrial talents and educational cooperation, promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills through educational collaboration and talent development. Additionally, the policy supports collaboration on public health and medical care, strengthening joint efforts in public health initiatives and medical services. Furthermore, regional agricultural cooperation is advanced through the NSP, aiding in the support of sustainable development within the region. Lastly, the NSP enhances social connectivity and fosters dialogue through initiatives like the Yushan Forum, building stronger social ties and encouraging regional discourse (Yang, 2018; 2022). Overall, the NSP is fundamentally about empowering Taiwan to form constructive and sustainable partnerships with neighboring Asian countries. It also facilitates collective efforts to advance a people-centered development agenda, underscoring the importance of cooperation in achieving shared regional goals. Through these initiatives, Taiwan aims not only to diversify its economic relationships but also to position itself as a key player in the evolving landscape of Asian regionalism.

It is worth noting that surveys on regional identity are relatively uncommon in Taiwan, as are surveys focusing on Taiwan's image and identity in Southeast Asian countries. However, as Taiwan continues to implement the NSP, efforts to explore these areas have gradually increased. Notably, the long-term Taiwan Social Change Survey series, organized and conducted by Academia Sinica, has included specific content since 2018 that addresses the perception of Southeast Asian countries, understanding of cultural characteristics, and attitudes towards migrant workers and new immigrants in Taiwan. These additions reflect a growing interest in gauging Taiwanese people's attitudes towards their neighboring countries in Asia and the immigrant populations from Southeast Asia. In parallel, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) has embarked on the first-ever large-scale project to survey the image of Taiwan and perceptions of Taiwanese businesses in various Southeast Asian countries. Since 2018, TAEF has completed three surveys in Vietnam (2019), Indonesia (2020), Thailand (2021), Singapore (2022), Malaysia (2023) and the Philippines (2024). These surveys have employed both telephone interviews and in-depth focus group discussions to capture the perspectives of local populations and business elites regarding Taiwan.

The objectives of this survey project differ from those of previous initiatives. While Academia Sinica's surveys focus on the general public's views and TAEF's surveys target business elites, the international team led by Professor Sonoda Shigeto has chosen to survey university students. This approach aims to capture how Taiwanese university students view neighboring Asian countries, including their general perceptions of Asia, favorability towards other nations, familiarity with them, and the likelihood of considering Asia as a future work destination. By analyzing these findings, our research seeks to offer a different perspective from the surveys conducted by Academia Sinica and TAEF. We hope that this detailed analysis will not only enhance our understanding of Taiwanese university students' views but also provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the NSP, enabling us to further evaluate its performance and impact on Taiwan's regional engagement.

### **3. Analytical Approaches**

To analyze the perceptions of Asia among Taiwanese elite university students, this paper utilizes data from the second and third waves of the "Asian Student Survey" (ASS) dataset, developed by Dr. Shigeto Sonoda from the University of Tokyo. This comprehensive dataset includes university students from 11 countries, with a sample size of approximately 200 students per university.

The data analyzed in this paper specifically focuses on the Taiwanese student sample. The second wave of the survey was conducted at National Taiwan University (NTU) and National Sun Yat-sen University during September and October of 2013, while the third wave was conducted at NTU and National Chengchi University between September and December of 2018. The sample sizes for the second and third waves were 400 and 413, respectively. All three universities are widely recognized as Taiwan's most selective and prestigious institutions, with entrance examination percentile ranks for most programs exceeding 90%, and some programs at NTU requiring scores in the 99th percentile. Given the composition of the samples, it is important to note that the Taiwanese students discussed in this paper refer specifically to those attending elite universities, rather than being representative of the broader population of Taiwanese university students. This distinction is crucial, as the perspectives and experiences of elite university students may differ from those of students at other institutions.

This paper aims to explore the potential effects of the Taiwanese government's grand strategy, the "New Southbound Policy" (NSP), on Taiwanese students' perceptions of the region. The NSP, proposed by President Tsai Ing-wen in 2015 and implemented after she assumed office in 2016, is designed not only to enhance Taiwan's diplomatic and economic standing in the region but also to reshape Taiwanese people's perceptions of the NSP-targeted countries. A key objective of the NSP is to foster positive people-to-people exchanges by encouraging a more favorable and nuanced understanding of these countries among Taiwanese citizens.

To assess whether the NSP has achieved its intended policy outcomes, this paper compares data from the second wave (2013) and third wave (2018) of the ASS. If the NSP has been effective, its impact should be observable in the differences between these two datasets, particularly in how Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP countries have evolved over time. Therefore, the following analysis will focus primarily on a comparative examination of the survey data available from both waves. In instances where data from the second wave is not available or applicable, the analysis will center on the third wave dataset, with a comparative analysis across the countries included in this wave. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the NSP's influence on the perceptions of Taiwanese elite university students toward the region.

Based on the available data, the following analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on Taiwanese students' perceptions of Asia as a whole. This section examines their general views on Asia, with particular attention to the influence of the NSP. Since the NSP has gained prominence as a key strategic initiative in Taiwan, it has redirected significant attention and resources toward the NSP-targeted countries. This shift is likely to be noticed by university students, who are increasingly exposed to more student exchange programs with NSP countries and a growing presence of foreign students from these countries in Taiwanese universities.

As a result, it is theoretically expected that Taiwanese students' general perception of Asia should now incorporate a stronger emphasis on NSP countries. Furthermore, the perception of non-NSP countries may have shifted as well, potentially showing a decline in attention or resources allocated, or at the very least, remaining unchanged in comparison to previous years. This part of the analysis aims to explore these dynamics, offering insights into how the NSP may have reshaped students' broader understanding of the Asian region.

Furthermore, this paper examines Taiwanese students' perceptions of the NSP partner countries. In theory, these perceptions should have become more positive due to the Taiwanese government's increased allocation of resources toward NSP partner countries. The government has invested heavily in promoting people-centered exchanges and fostering positive images of cooperation with NSP countries. Consequently, we would expect the NSP-related indicators in the third wave of the survey to reflect more positive sentiments compared to those in the second wave. Additionally, this paper investigates students' perceptions of China. Interestingly, although the official discourse surrounding the NSP does not explicitly identify it as a response to the perceived threat from China, it is clear that the policy aims to reduce Taiwan's dependence on China by strengthening ties with NSP partner countries. By avoiding conflictual cross-strait rhetoric, the NSP is designed to be more acceptable and appealing to its target countries, minimizing potential objections from China. However, it is important to recognize that the NSP exists within the broader context of Sino-U.S. rivalry and cross-strait tensions. It would be misleading to view the NSP and Taiwanese perceptions of China as entirely separate phenomena. Therefore, it is theoretically plausible that students' perceptions of China in the third wave may have become more negative compared to the second wave.

The second part of this analysis focuses on the perception of Taiwan from the perspective of those living in NSP countries. Given the NSP's emphasis on people-centered exchanges, we would expect that individuals in NSP partner countries, particularly university students, would have developed a more favorable image of Taiwan. This is likely due to the significant investments made by Taiwan's Ministry of Education in cross-national student exchange programs and the generous scholarships provided to students from NSP partner countries to study in Taiwan. As a result, we would anticipate an increase in positive perceptions of Taiwan in the third wave of the survey compared to the second wave.

#### **4. Perception of Asia in Taiwan**

##### **4.1 General Perception of Asia**

Taiwanese students' perception of Asia appears to be strongly influenced by geographical proximity. According to the survey question, "Which countries are included in your image of Asia?", there is a high level of consensus that



Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, which are geographically closest to Taiwan, are considered part of Asia. Conversely, fewer students regard South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern countries, such as Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Iran, as part of Asia. This suggests that the farther these countries are from Taiwan, the less likely Taiwanese students are to perceive them as part of Asia.

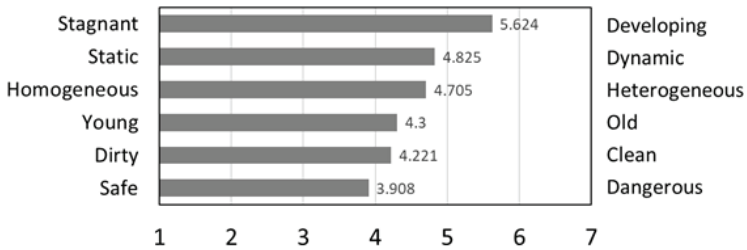
Interestingly, while 93.1% of students consider Indonesia to be an Asian country, only 74.5% view East Timor as part of Asia, despite the fact that East Timor's capital, Dili, is geographically closer to Taipei than Jakarta. This discrepancy indicates that students' perceptions of Asia are not solely determined by physical distance but are also influenced by their level of familiarity and knowledge of specific countries and regions. The Maldives provides another example of this phenomenon; few Taiwanese students can accurately identify its geographic location, reflecting a broader trend where countries that are less familiar or less prominent in public discourse are less likely to be included in students' mental maps of Asia. This suggests that geographical knowledge and exposure to certain regions play significant roles in shaping how Taiwanese students conceptualize the boundaries of Asia.

Another important issue to consider is how Taiwanese students perceive the concept of the "Indo-Pacific community." Although the Trump administration did not formally advocate the Indo-Pacific strategy until 2017 (Ford, 2020), the Obama administration had already introduced its "pivot to Asia" policy in the early 2010s (Clinton, 2011), attempting to position the United States as an integral part of Asia. Similar efforts to align with Asia were evident even earlier from the governments of Australia and New Zealand. However, these efforts appear to have had little impact on Taiwanese students' perceptions. Few students recognized the United States, Australia, or New Zealand as constituent members of Asia. This suggests that geographical distance plays a dominant role in shaping students' perceptions of regional belonging, with "Western" countries receiving less than 10% recognition as part of Asia. This finding underscores the strong influence of proximity on how Taiwanese students conceptualize the boundaries of Asia, despite political and strategic efforts by these nations to integrate more closely with the region.

In terms of the image of Asia depicted in Figure 1, the most prominent perception among Taiwanese students is that Asia is a "developing" region,

characterized by progress and growth rather than stagnation. Additionally, Asia is perceived as “dynamic” and “heterogeneous,” highlighting the region’s diversity and rapid changes. While there is a slightly stronger impression of Asia being “old”, “clean” and “safe” students’ perceptions of these attributes are more neutral compared to their views on development and dynamism. Overall, Taiwanese students view Asia as a dynamic and developing region with a diverse character. This perception likely reflects a broader recognition of the significant economic growth occurring in many developing Asian countries, which often surpasses that of the developed world. This understanding positions Asia as a region of both opportunity and transformation in the minds of these students.

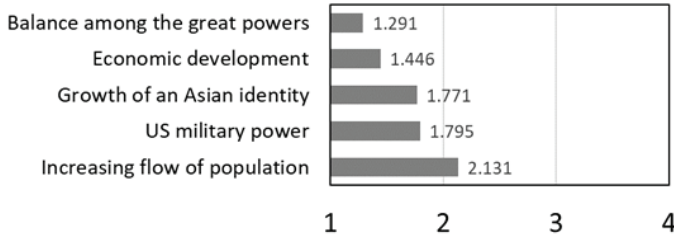
**Figure 1. Taiwanese Students’ Image of Asia**



In assessing the strategic perception of Asia, students were asked to evaluate the importance of various factors in maintaining stability in the region, using a scale from “1” (very important) to “4” (not at all important). As depicted in Figure 2, Taiwanese students consider maintaining a balance among the great powers to be the most crucial factor for regional stability. Other significant factors include sustaining economic development, shaping a cohesive Asian identity, and the presence of U.S. military power. In contrast, the cross-national movement of people is regarded as the least important factor among the options provided. These results suggest that Taiwanese students tend to adopt a realist perspective when considering regional affairs. Given the significant military threat posed by China across the Taiwan Strait (Zuo, 2019), it is understandable that Taiwanese students prioritize the involvement of other great powers in regional matters as a necessary counterbalance to China’s expanding influence (Beckley, 2017). Without such checks, there is a concern that China’s unchecked power could lead to

increased conflict and instability in Asia. This strategic outlook reflects the broader geopolitical anxieties present in Taiwan regarding regional security and the balance of power.

**Figure 2. Factors Considered Important for Maintaining Stability in Asia**



The survey results also reveal a sense of commercial liberalism and constructivism among Taiwanese students, who see economic prosperity and collective identity as key factors for stability in Asia. The belief is that as Asia becomes more economically developed, the likelihood of conflict diminishes, as initiating conflict would become increasingly unpopular and costly for most countries (Levy, 2009). Additionally, a stronger collective Asian identity is perceived as a stabilizing force, fostering greater mutual trust and understanding. This, in turn, could lead to countries in Asia treating each other as more trustworthy partners in cooperation (Acharya, 2005). However, despite the acknowledged importance of collective identity, it remains uncertain how far a heterogeneous Asia can go in developing such a unified identity, given its vast cultural and political diversity.

In terms of economic integration in Asia, Table 1 provides a comparison of survey data from the second and third waves. Students were asked to indicate their agreement with several statements regarding economic integration in Asia, using a scale where “1” represents “strongly agree” and “4” represents “strongly disagree.” This comparison reveals significant shifts in student perceptions between 2013 and 2018. The data indicates that the strongest agreement among students is with the statement that economic integration will ‘make environmental issues more serious,’ a concern that has shown a statistically significant increase by 2018. This suggests a growing awareness and apprehension about the environmental impact of regional economic integration. Additionally, students express concern about the potential for economic integration to exacerbate income inequality between

countries, reflecting an awareness of the uneven benefits such integration might bring.

Another noteworthy shift in perception is the declining agreement with the statement that economic integration benefits only foreign multinationals. By 2018, students are increasingly disagreeing with this notion, a change that is statistically significant. This shift could be attributed to the fact that ordinary Taiwanese citizens have begun to experience more tangible benefits from regional integration, leading to a more favorable view of its broader impacts. These findings reflect evolving attitudes among Taiwanese students towards the complex dynamics of economic integration in Asia, balancing concerns about environmental and social impacts with a growing recognition of its potential benefits.

**Table 1. Do You Agree with “Economic Integration Will ...”**

	2013	2018	Diff.
Make environmental issues more serious	1.992	1.829	-0.163*
Create greater income inequality between countries	1.995	1.921	-0.074
Create mutual trust among Asians	2.319	2.255	-0.064
Weaken state power	2.279	2.278	-0.000
Enrich our life	2.466	2.384	-0.082
Destroy domestic economies	2.429	2.443	0.014
Be beneficial only for foreign multinationals	2.538	2.823	0.285*

*Note: Using t-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .*

When it comes to personal connections with the Asian region, Taiwanese students exhibit relatively less interest in studying at Asian universities or working for Asian companies compared to their interest in more developed countries. Table 2 provides a comparison of students’ levels of interest in studying in various countries, based on data from the second and third waves of the survey. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest on a scale ranging from “1” for “very interested” to “4” for “not at all interested.” The data reveals that the most popular study destinations are Western developed countries and certain developed countries in Asia, such as Japan and Singapore. In contrast, there is noticeably less interest among students in pursuing education in developing Asian countries. Interestingly, the overall level of interest in studying abroad has decreased since 2013. The

only exception to this trend is South Korea, where the level of interest has significantly increased.

This decline in interest might be attributed to a variety of factors, including a general decrease in enthusiasm for studying abroad or pursuing advanced degrees among Taiwanese students. Additionally, the growing quality and appeal of educational opportunities within Taiwan or in nearby regions could be influencing students' decisions to stay closer to home rather than seeking education in less familiar or developing parts of Asia. The growing interest in South Korea may reflect its rising status as an educational destination, likely driven by its expanding soft power, including increasing cultural influence and the high regard for its universities. (Nye & Kim, 2019).

**Table 2. Level of Interest in Studying in the Following Countries**

Country	2013	2018	Diff.
USA	1.622	1.611	-0.011
UK	1.766	1.849	0.083
Canada	1.963	2.003	0.040
Japan	1.931	2.101	0.170*
Germany	2.064	2.156	0.092
Australia	1.989	2.221	0.232*
France	2.297	2.445	0.149*
Singapore	2.361	2.46	0.099
New Zealand	2.382	2.54	0.158*
South Korea	2.87	2.721	-0.148*
China	2.694	2.836	0.143*
Malaysia	3.032	3.23	0.198*
Thailand	3.24	3.292	0.052
India	3.175	3.331	0.155*
Philippines	3.345	3.395	0.050
Vietnam	3.343	3.413	0.069
Indonesia	3.342	3.427	0.085

*Note: Using t-test, \*p < 0.05.*

Table 3 summarizes the preferred companies or organizations where Taiwanese students aspire to work. In Taiwan, employment with foreign companies is generally associated with higher salaries and greater prestige,

a perception that is likely even more pronounced among elite university students. However, the results in Table 3 reveal that the majority of students prefer to work for Taiwanese companies. This preference may be attributed to Taiwan's status as a global leader in the semiconductor industry and as a critical supplier of high-tech components (Ibitz, 2020).

Given that approximately half of the respondents are studying in science-related fields, such as natural sciences, engineering, medicine, or related disciplines, this preference aligns with the opportunities available in Taiwan's robust technology sector. Students also express interest in working for American, European, and Japanese companies, which are perceived to offer competitive salaries and career opportunities. However, there is almost no interest in working for companies from other Asian countries, particularly those in developing regions. This preference is rational, as companies from less developed Asian countries are generally expected to offer lower salaries and fewer career advancement opportunities compared to those in developed nations.

Despite Taiwanese students' recognition of Asia as a fast-developing and dynamic region, there is an ironic disconnect when it comes to their personal career aspirations. While they acknowledge the economic vitality of Asia, they still prefer to align their professional futures with developed countries, overlooking the potential opportunities within the broader Asian region. This trend suggests that while Asia's growth is recognized on a macro level, the specific career opportunities in less developed parts of Asia remain undervalued or overlooked by Taiwanese students.

**Table 3. Which Company Would You Like to Work for Most**

	2013	2018
Taiwan's company	48%	56%
American company	22%	26%
European company	16%	11%
Japanese company	9%	5%
Korean company	0%	2%
Another Asian country's company	4%	1%

*Note: Using t-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .*

#### 4.2 Perceptions of NSP Countries

The Asian Student Survey (ASS) asked respondents to evaluate the influence of 13 countries on Taiwan using a scale ranging from “1” (good influence) to “5” (bad influence). The results, summarized in Table 4, reveal striking trends, particularly concerning Japan. Among the countries surveyed, Japan consistently stands out as the nation perceived to have the most positive influence among Taiwanese students. From 2013 to 2018, Japan’s perception not only remained highly favorable but also improved significantly. In both the 2013 and 2018 surveys, Japan was rated as the country with the most positive influence, reflecting the deep-rooted and growing sentiment of “Taiwan-Japan friendship” that has been widely observed over the past decade (Dreyer, 2021). This strong positive perception of Japan aligns with broader cultural and historical ties between Taiwan and Japan, as well as Japan’s prominent role in regional economic and political affairs. The increasing favorability suggests that Taiwanese students view Japan not just as an influential neighbor but as a key partner with whom Taiwan shares strong bonds of friendship and mutual respect.

**Table 4. Do You Think the Following Countries Have a Good/Bad Influence on Taiwan?**

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Singapore	2.355	2.343	0.012
Malaysia	2.536	2.522	0.014
Thailand	2.625	2.582	0.043
Indonesia	2.683	2.664	0.019
Myanmar	2.813	2.807	0.006
Philippines	3.254	2.930	0.324*
Vietnam	3.484	3.225	0.259
Japan	2.076	1.793	0.283*
China	3.268	3.814	-0.546*

*Note: Using t-test, \* p < 0.05.*

Regarding NSP countries, particularly those in Southeast Asia, the ASS survey includes Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam for students to assess. The results from the 2013 survey indicate that Taiwanese students believe Singapore is the most likely

to have a positive influence on Taiwan. This favorable perception aligns with Singapore's reputation as an economically prosperous and politically stable state. In contrast, Taiwanese students' perceptions of Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia are largely neutral, reflecting a more ambivalent view of these countries' influence on Taiwan. However, attitudes toward Vietnam (3.484) and the Philippines (3.254) are generally negative, suggesting that Taiwanese students perceive these countries as having less favorable impacts on Taiwan.

The ranking of scores among Southeast Asian countries appears to correlate with the level of economic development as perceived by the students. Countries that are more economically prosperous, such as Singapore, tend to be viewed more positively by Taiwanese students, while less economically developed countries, like Vietnam and the Philippines, receive more negative evaluations. This trend suggests that Taiwanese students' perceptions of Southeast Asian countries are influenced not only by cultural and historical factors but also by their economic standing and development within the region.

It's important to consider that subjective survey scores may be influenced by specific news events or broader geopolitical contexts. For example, the *Guang Da Xing* No. 28 shooting incident in May 2013, which led to heightened tensions between Taiwan and the Philippines, significantly affected public sentiment. The widespread anger in Taiwan at the time even led to instances of bullying and shaming of Filipino migrant workers. Given this context, it is not surprising that the survey conducted in September and October of 2013 reflected a negative perception of the Philippines, with many respondents viewing the country as a source of bad influence. Similarly, the survey results for Vietnam were even more negative than those for the Philippines. This could be attributed to differences in political regimes. Vietnam, governed by the Vietnamese Communist Party, operates under a socialist system that is unfamiliar to many young people in Taiwan. These students might draw comparisons with China, another socialist regime, which could further contribute to Vietnam's lower score in the survey.

However, it is expected that the continuous implementation of the NSP will foster a deeper understanding and increase social exchanges between Taiwan and Vietnam. As Taiwanese people, especially the youth, gain more insight into Vietnam's economy, society, and culture, the perception of Vietnam is likely to evolve. Over time, this growing familiarity should lead to a more nuanced and fair evaluation of Vietnam, independent of



the negative connotations associated with China. The NSP aims to build stronger, people-centered connections, which could eventually help reshape the perceptions of Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations among the Taiwanese public.

Among the 18 partner countries of the NSP, the Taiwanese government initially prioritized the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand during the early stages of policy implementation (Yang, 2017). It would be reasonable to expect that Taiwanese university students' perceptions of these key countries would improve following the launch of the NSP. However, the results of the 2018 survey do not provide strong evidence to support this expectation. While the good/bad influence scores for these countries do show changes in the anticipated direction, the variations are neither statistically significant nor substantively meaningful in most cases. The only notable exception is the Philippines, where the score improved from 3.254 in 2013 to 2.930 in 2018, indicating a shift in Taiwanese students' perceptions from negative to a more neutral stance.

Similarly, a perceptual change regarding Vietnam is observed, with the score decreasing from 3.484 in 2013 to 3.225 in 2018. Although this suggests a slight improvement in the perception of Vietnam, the difference is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that, despite the government's efforts under the NSP, the shifts in Taiwanese students' perceptions of these priority countries have been modest and, in some cases, insufficient to demonstrate meaningful or significant change.

The limited, if any, change in Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP target states can be explained by several factors. One plausible reason is that the good/bad influence scores reflect a more holistic evaluation of a target state, encompassing a broad range of factors beyond the scope of immediate policy initiatives. The NSP, with its focus on collaboration at the societal level, may not have been sufficient to raise the awareness necessary for Taiwanese students to significantly adjust their existing perceptions in a short period.

Additionally, the NSP's efforts, such as fostering educational exchanges, cultural interactions, and economic partnerships, while important, may not immediately influence deep-seated perceptions that are shaped by long-standing historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. These ingrained perceptions are often slow to change and require sustained efforts over time, particularly when they involve altering complex views about entire nations or regions.

Moreover, the influence of broader media narratives and limited direct exposure to these countries could mean that Taiwanese students' perceptions are slow to evolve, even in the face of policy-driven initiatives like the NSP. The results suggest that while the NSP may be laying important groundwork for future shifts in perception, significant and measurable changes in how Taiwanese students view their Southeast Asian neighbors may require more time and a broader range of experiences and interactions to take root.

A similar pattern emerges when examining the results for preferred destinations for advanced study. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest in studying in various countries, using a scale ranging from "1" (very interested), "2" (somewhat interested), "3" (not really interested), to "4" (not at all interested). Thus, a lower score indicates a higher level of interest among Taiwanese students in studying in the target country. Table 5 presents the results for six NSP partner countries.

**Table 5. Level of Interest in Studying in NSP countries**

Country	2013	2018	Diff.
Indonesia	3.342	3.427	0.085
Malaysia	3.032	3.230	0.198*
Philippines	3.345	3.395	0.050
Singapore	2.361	2.460	0.099
Thailand	3.240	3.292	0.052
Vietnam	3.343	3.413	0.069

*Note: Using t-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .*

Overall, NSP partner countries are not the top choices for Taiwanese students seeking to study abroad. Singapore consistently received the highest score in both the 2013 and 2018 surveys, despite not being a focus country under the DPP administration. Singapore's appeal largely stems from its status as an international hub with a well-developed higher education market (Sanders, 2020). However, beyond Singapore, the scores for other NSP countries suggest a lukewarm attitude among Taiwanese students. Moreover, a comparison of the 2013 and 2018 results reveals a clear trend of declining interest among Taiwanese students.

The fact that the differences between the two surveys for most countries (except Malaysia) are statistically insignificant suggests that the NSP has

had little impact, despite substantial investment in scholarship programs for Taiwanese students. It is also worth noting that the trend of declining interest is not exclusive to NSP partner countries. Compared with the 2013 survey, Taiwanese students in 2018 clearly showed a diminished enthusiasm for studying abroad in any target country except South Korea. This phenomenon may reflect growing anxiety among Taiwanese students; as post-college careers become increasingly uncertain, studying abroad no longer guarantees future success. Consequently, the last few years have witnessed a significant decline in interest in studying abroad.

The limited progress in Taiwanese students' understanding of NSP countries is also evident when examining the dimension of personal connections. Respondents of the ASS were asked about their acquaintances or friends from Asian countries, with responses ranging from "1" (Yes/close) to "3" (No). Survey data are available for both 2013 and 2018. As shown in Table 6, the majority of Taiwanese students do not have friends or acquaintances from NSP countries, although they report stronger personal connections with individuals from Northeast Asian countries and China. Among the NSP countries, Malaysia stands out with the most promising result (2.383), likely due to Taiwan's longstanding policy of overseas Chinese education. Ethnic Chinese students from Malaysia have been the most significant contributors to the foreign student population in Taiwan, making it reasonable that Taiwanese students are more likely to interact with Malaysian classmates in school.

**Table 6. Personal Acquaintance with Asian People**

Country	2013	2018	Difference
China	2.149	1.913	-0.236*
Indonesia	2.765	2.608	-0.157*
Singapore	2.685	2.740	0.055
Malaysia	2.383	2.177	-0.206*
Philippines	2.820	2.792	-0.021
Vietnam	2.853	2.797	-0.056
Thailand	2.793	2.855	0.062
Myanmar	2.908	2.940	0.062

*Note: Using t-test, \* p < 0.05.*

Interestingly, some progress has been observed since the initiation of the NSP. Significant results in Malaysia and Indonesia may indicate that an increasing number of students from these countries have come to Taiwan for advanced study in recent years. However, for other NSP countries, the 2018 results do not indicate meaningful changes in Taiwanese students' personal connections. When combined with the results of other survey questions, it is plausible to conclude that Taiwanese students' perceptions of NSP countries show limited signs of positive change. The policy mandate of the NSP to strengthen bilateral ties has not yet achieved satisfactory outcomes from Taiwan's perspective. Taiwanese students have not yet developed a mindset that views NSP neighbors as mutually beneficial partners.

### *4.3 Perceptions of China*

For most Asians, whether viewed positively or negatively, the rise of China has been the most significant development of the last decade. Within the ASS, respondents were asked to assess the causes and effects of China's rise. According to Sonoda (2021), four frameworks are used to understand this phenomenon: political instability, increasing opportunities, global threat, and peaceful rise. The first two frameworks focus on domestic dynamics within China, while the latter two consider the broader external implications of China's ascent on the global stage. These frameworks were presented as statements for respondents to evaluate, with a 4-point scale ranging from "1" (strongly agree) to "4" (strongly disagree). This scale allows respondents to express varying levels of agreement or disagreement with the statements, thereby providing insight into how different aspects of China's rise are perceived across the region.

Sonoda (2018) suggests that the frameworks of "increasing opportunity" and "peaceful rise" are generally better predictors of how people view China's rise. However, the results for Taiwanese students present a somewhat different picture. In the 2013 survey, most Taiwanese students accepted the arguments centered around political instability and global threat, while they largely disagreed with the narratives of economic opportunities and a peaceful rise. Furthermore, Taiwanese students held a pessimistic view that a rising China would eventually surpass the United States to become the regional hegemon, leading to significant changes in Beijing's relations with Taiwan. Notably, even in the early 2010s, Taiwanese students were cautious about the argument of economic opportunities

presented by China. This counterintuitive stance may be partially explained by growing concerns over the PRC's economic encroachment.

The Sunflower Student Movement, which took place just a few months after the 2013 survey, vividly illustrated this perception shift (Chen, 2024). The movement, which halted the legislative process for the cross-strait service trade pact, reflected deep-seated worries among Taiwanese youth about China's growing influence. Given Taiwan's geographical proximity to China and the ongoing military threat, it is understandable that Taiwanese students are less inclined to view China merely as a land of opportunity, and instead, approach its rise with caution and skepticism.

As previously discussed, it is problematic to overlook the connection between the NSP and Taiwanese perceptions of China. While not inherently conflictual, the NSP could potentially encourage Taiwanese students to distance themselves from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) sphere of influence. The results of the 2018 survey largely align with this expectation. At a global level, Taiwanese students agree that China's rise poses a threat to global order, and they clearly reject Beijing's narrative of a peaceful rise. These attitudes mirror the findings from the 2013 survey but have intensified in the 2018 results, showing statistically significant changes. Regarding economic opportunities, the survey reveals a slightly more positive view, indicating that more Taiwanese students believe China could offer opportunities for future development. This shift may be linked to the aggressive expansion of Chinese capital since 2013. However, the difference between the two surveys in this regard is not statistically significant. Lastly, despite China's economic prosperity, most Taiwanese students continue to view China as politically vulnerable.

In addition to the four aspects mentioned above, Table 7 provides further insights that clarify Taiwanese students' perceptions. Regarding the causes of China's economic miracle, Taiwanese students have become increasingly skeptical of the argument that China's achievements are solely due to the efforts of its people. This shift suggests an underlying rejection of the PRC's legitimacy. Moreover, while Taiwanese students largely agree that China will eventually replace the United States as the hegemon in Asia, the 2018 survey reveals a significant shift in a more negative direction. This indicates a move away from a previously more pro-Beijing stance in their subjective perceptions.

**Table 7. Evaluation of China's Rise**

	2013	2018	Difference
The rise of China has been threatening the global order	2.137	2.021	-0.116*
China will maintain her peaceful relations with Asian countries in spite of her rise	2.739	3.019	0.281*
The rise of China offers us a lot of opportunities	2.268	2.184	-0.078
In spite of rapid economic growth, China is politically unstable	1.845	1.851	0.006
China will supersede US in terms of her influence in Asia	1.883	2.010	0.127*
The rise of China is the result of Chinese people's efforts	2.409	2.561	0.152*
Chinese-speaking people will increase due to the rise of China	1.754	1.630	-0.115*
The rise of China will change relations with our country	1.696	1.682	-0.014

Note: Using *t*-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Given the context of Sino-US rivalry and cross-strait tensions, the causal link between the NSP and a worsening perception of China cannot be confirmed without conducting a multivariate analysis. However, the survey data analyzed above provides no evidence to contradict the statement that the NSP has made Taiwanese people more cautious about China's influence. It is worth noting that Beijing has made considerable efforts in recent years to engage Taiwanese youth, particularly through exchanges in higher education, which have been strongly promoted by Chinese authorities. As indicated in Table 6, most Taiwanese students have personal connections with people from China, and this trend has improved between 2013 and 2018, with statistically significant changes. Nevertheless, Taiwanese students' interest in studying in China has significantly declined during the same period. Taken together, these findings suggest that Taiwanese students have developed a more strategically pragmatic perspective on China compared to their counterparts in other Asian countries.

## 5. Perception of Taiwan in NSP Countries

After examining Taiwanese perceptions of Asia and the impact of the NSP, the following section investigates the policy's effects within the NSP countries themselves. To evaluate potential policy outcomes, surveys conducted in several NSP countries have been selected, focusing specifically on students' perceptions of Taiwan. The central hypothesis is that if the NSP

has indeed had a positive impact, perceptions of Taiwan in 2018 should be more favorable than those in 2013. The countries with available data include Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Initial effects can be observed through the analysis of three selected survey questions, which are discussed below.

**Table 10. Taiwan’s Influence to Your Countries**

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Philippines	2.507	2.194	-0.313*
Thailand	2.518	2.268	-0.250*
Vietnam	2.567	2.347	-0.220*
Singapore	2.211	2.105	-0.106*
Indonesia	2.456	2.352	-0.104
Malaysia	2.358	2.347	-0.011
Average	2.436	2.269	-0.167

*Note: Using t-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .*

The first question addresses how students in NSP countries perceive Taiwan’s influence on their own countries. Students were asked to rate Taiwan’s influence on a scale from “1” (good influence) to “5” (bad influence). According to Table 10, the average responses from six NSP countries in 2013 were generally neutral regarding Taiwan’s influence, with Singaporean students holding the most positive views. However, following the implementation of the NSP in 2016, a statistically significant shift in perception occurred by 2018. The overall perception moved from neutral to a more favorable view of Taiwan’s influence. Notably, significant improvements were observed in the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, where students’ perceptions shifted towards viewing Taiwan’s influence more positively. This change suggests that the NSP has had a tangible impact in enhancing Taiwan’s image in these countries, indicating a successful outreach in fostering better relations and perceptions among students in the region.

The second question examines the personal connections students in NSP countries have with Taiwanese people. Students were asked whether they have Taiwanese friends or acquaintances, with responses ranging from “1” (yes, at least one is close to me), “2” (yes, but not close to me), to “3”

(no acquaintance). While the majority of students in NSP countries reported not having any friends or acquaintances from Taiwan, there has been a significant improvement in these personal ties since the implementation of the NSP. According to Table 11, the most notable improvements in personal connections have been observed in Vietnam and Thailand. These results indicate that the NSP has successfully contributed to fostering closer people-to-people ties between Taiwan and NSP countries, strengthening the social and cultural connections that are essential for deeper bilateral relationships.

**Table 11. Personal Acquaintance with Taiwanese People**

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Vietnam	2.847	2.545	-0.302*
Thailand	2.826	2.702	-0.124*
Singapore	2.394	2.283	-0.111
Malaysia	2.88	2.796	-0.084*
Philippines	2.666	2.61	-0.056
Indonesia	2.867	2.856	-0.011
Average	2.747	2.632	-0.115

*Note: Using t-test, \*  $p < 0.05$ .*

The final question may be the most relevant to university students, as it directly addresses their interest in studying in Taiwan. Students were asked to indicate their level of interest on a scale from “1” (very interested) to “4” (not at all interested). Since the implementation of the NSP, the number of foreign students from NSP countries studying in Taiwan has increased significantly. Taiwanese universities have invested considerable effort in attracting students from these countries through increased publicity, marketing, and scholarships. It was anticipated that these efforts would positively influence students’ decisions to consider Taiwan as a desirable educational destination. The results shown in Table 12 align precisely with these expectations. Although, on average, university students in NSP countries still tend to prefer studying in other countries such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.S., their level of interest in Taiwan has significantly increased. This improvement is observable across almost all the countries listed in Table 12, with particularly notable increases in Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore.



The educational dimension of the NSP appears to have produced some of the most tangible and observable effects among the policy’s initiatives. Over the five years following the NSP’s implementation, there has been a marked rise in the number of students from NSP partner countries choosing to study in Taiwan (Tsay, 2015). For example, during the 2019 academic year, there were 128,157 overseas students studying in Taiwan, with 57,143 of them coming from NSP partner countries, accounting for 56% of the total number of overseas students. These students represent significant potential for future diplomatic and economic bridges, serving as cultural ambassadors and “student diplomats” who will contribute to forging stronger partnerships between Taiwan and their home countries.

**Table 12. Level of Interest in Studying in Taiwan**

Country	2013	2018	Difference
Thailand	3.446	2.702	-0.744*
Vietnam	3.164	2.545	-0.619*
Singapore	2.773	2.293	-0.480*
Philippines	2.852	2.61	-0.242*
Indonesia	2.963	2.856	-0.107*
Malaysia	2.663	2.796	0.133
Average	2.977	2.634	-0.343

*Note: Using t-test, \* p < 0.05.*

Based on the above analysis, it appears that the policy effects of the NSP have been more significant in shaping NSP students’ perceptions of Taiwan than in altering Taiwan’s perception of NSP countries. Evidence suggests that views of Taiwan in some NSP countries have shifted positively, with students expressing a growing interest in studying in Taiwan. While there is still room for further improvement, the trend toward more favorable attitudes indicates that the people-centered approach of the NSP has achieved notable success in these areas. Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen has emphasized the importance of strengthening “values-based diplomacy” with “like-minded” international partners as a strategy to secure Taiwan’s niche in the global community. The NSP, as her flagship foreign policy initiative, plays a crucial role in promoting these values-based diplomatic efforts in Asia and with other aligned partners. The progress observed in student perceptions is a

testament to the effectiveness of this approach, underscoring the potential for further strengthening ties through continued engagement and collaboration.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented in this study, several key policy implications can be drawn regarding the impact of the NSP on both Taiwanese students and students from NSP countries. First, Taiwanese students' perceptions of Asia seem to be influenced by a combination of physical proximity, familiarity, and strategic concerns shaped by the region's geopolitical dynamics. The findings suggest that more resources, both public and private, should be directed towards enhancing Taiwanese society's understanding of NSP countries. Familiarity breeds connection, and it is only through increased knowledge and engagement that stronger ties can be fostered between Taiwan and the broader Asian region.

Second, despite Taiwan's vibrant, diverse, and international character, Taiwanese students still tend to view Asia as a dynamic yet heterogeneous region. Although Asia is perceived positively, there is a notable inward-looking tendency among Taiwanese students, with many showing a stronger preference for studying or living in Western developed countries or in Asian nations like Japan, rather than in neighboring NSP countries. While there has been a modest increase in interest in these countries since the implementation of the NSP, the change is not significant. This suggests a need for further efforts to connect Taiwanese people with those in the NSP region, thereby enhancing their interest and understanding of these neighboring countries.

Third, the NSP appears to have had a more pronounced impact on students from NSP countries than on Taiwanese students. Evidence suggests that students from some NSP countries have developed a more positive view of Taiwan following the NSP's implementation, particularly in the realm of education. This success reflects the effectiveness of the NSP's people-centered approach abroad and highlights the importance of continuing such efforts.

Fourth, while not fully captured by the survey data, the NSP holds strategic importance beyond its immediate people-centered goals. The policy plays a critical role in helping Taiwan and other countries diversify their economic dependencies away from China. Additionally, Taiwan can contribute to strengthening the role of NSP countries in the global

manufacturing network, particularly as China becomes a less favorable location for investment.

In conclusion, the NSP's focus on promoting regional identity and shared human values is crucial for Taiwan's integration into the broader regional community. Rather than merely exporting a "Taiwan model," the NSP should continue to emphasize values-based diplomacy with like-minded international partners. This approach aligns with President Tsai Ing-wen's vision of securing Taiwan's niche in the global community through strengthened relationships based on shared values. The case of Taiwan underscores the diversity of Asian identities and the significance of contextual factors, such as the NSP, in shaping identity formation and regional collaboration. Through ongoing efforts under the NSP, Taiwan can continue to build stronger, more meaningful connections with its neighbors in Asia, fostering a sense of shared identity and mutual prosperity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "This paper utilizes data from the second and third waves of the "Asian Student Survey (ASS)" dataset, collected by Prof. Shigeto Sonoda at the University of Tokyo, Japan. This comprehensive dataset includes university students from 11 countries, with a sample size of approximately 200 students per university. As to the concrete procedure of the research, sample size in each country as well as funding agencies for the research, see Sonoda (2021: 268-269)."

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