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HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE REALIST CORE OF SOFT POWER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAJOR AND SMALL STATES

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is recognised as a vital component of soft power in the era of globalisation, serving as a useful diplomatic tool for many countries, including global giants like the United States (US) and China, as well as small states such as Singapore and Taiwan. Through higher education, countries pursue their specific diplomatic objectives, shaping attractive national images to influence the preferences of people in other countries. This article delves into the role of higher education as a crucial instrument of soft power, offering a case-studies-analysis of different countries. It argues that the essence of soft power still lies in the tangible materials, in which economic power plays a crucial role. Therefore, the soft power of countries that integrate education and diplomacy is still a manifestation of realism, and the soft power of small states cannot normally compete with that of great powers. However, the higher education exchanges between Taiwan and Malaysia are influenced by more than just economic factors. These include Malaysia's own multi-ethnic population structure, the differing political positions within the Chinese community in Malaysia regarding cross-strait relations, Taiwan's advantages in religious freedom and cultural inclusivity, as well as the uncertainty that the worsening US-China rivalry increasingly shapes how other countries assess the risks and benefits of engaging with China.

Keywords: Education diplomacy, higher education, Chinese in Malaysia, soft power, Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

The concept of globalisation is often used to refer to the cross-border circulation of goods; however, the international movement of individuals—such as the transnational mobility of students—is also a vital dimension of globalisation (Rashkova and Van Der 2020). According to statistics from the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2022a), the number of internationally mobile students in higher education worldwide was approximately 2.17 million in 2000. This figure surpassed 3 million by 2007, exceeded 4 million five years later, and by 2016 was approaching the 5 million mark (with the actual number around 4.85 million) (UNESCO 2022b). The latest 2025 UNESCO report shows that the number of people had approached 7 million by 2022. In addition, according to the 2024 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, jointly released by the US) Department of State's Bureau of

Educational and Cultural Affairs (USBOECA) and the Institute of International Education (IIE), the total number of international students in the United States (US) for the 2023–2024 academic year reached 1,126,690 – a 6.6% year-on-year increase and the highest number ever recorded (USBOECA and IIE 2024). Meanwhile, data provided by Ministry of Education (MOE) Taiwan show that the number of international students enrolled in universities and colleges in Taiwan in 2023 reached 116,038, marking the fourth consecutive year of growth and an increase of nearly 10,000 students compared to 2022 (MOE Taiwan 2023).

Against this backdrop, this article aims to explore how states, in an era of globalisation where the cross-border movement of individuals has become increasingly accessible, utilise higher education as a tool to advance their diplomatic influence. More specifically, most states seek to enhance their international visibility and cultivate a positive national image. Furthermore, many authoritarian regimes (or countries with lower levels of democratic development) are becoming increasingly aware that an overreliance on hard power to safeguard national interests or pursue foreign policy goals may provoke backlash from international public opinion. As a result, some authoritarian states have gradually begun to learn how to increase their resilience in today's digitalised environment, employing tactics of information manipulation and dissemination for political propaganda purposes (Roberts and Oosterom 2024). Within this context, the strategic use of education as a manifestation of soft power—one that packages political intentions and objectives—has emerged as an important subject of inquiry in international relations (Lee 2015).

The importance of higher education as a vehicle for international exchange has become increasingly pronounced. It not only connects epistemic communities across countries, but also provides promising young talents with access to greater learning resources and better educational opportunities. As a result, higher education exchange has gradually emerged as a prominent component of contemporary states' foreign affairs.[1] According to The Soft Power 30 report published by the Portland think tank (Macclony 2019), education is now regarded as a core element of a nation's soft power, and the ability to attract international students is considered a key indicator of a country's standing in global higher education. Between 2015 and 2019, the US consistently ranked first in global education-related soft power, whereas China's ranking fluctuated—from 16th place in 2015, dropping to 28th in 2016, then rising to 20th in 2017 and 13th in 2018, before falling again to 17th in 2019. These shifts not only reflect the extent to which education can serve as a barometer of national strength, but also provide a basis for assessing the relative gap between the US and China in terms of soft power. Notably, The Soft Power 30 also points out that even between politically adversarial countries, educational exchange can foster constructive mutual understanding. Therefore, education is not merely a reflection of state's capability—it is, as scholar Joseph Nye Jr. has emphasised, an increasingly important instrument of diplomacy (Nye 2004; 2009).

Existing research on education diplomacy—or academic diplomacy—remains relatively limited but could be broadly categorised into three approaches (Trilokekar 2010; Peterson 2014): (1) treating higher education as a component of public diplomacy; (2) incorporating higher education policies, particularly those related to international student exchange, into a country's foreign policy strategy; and (3) examining how changes in international student mobility impact national interests. Among these perspectives, the view that positions higher education as a form of public diplomacy has become the dominant approach within the field of international relations (Gultekin 2021).[2] It is important to note that these three classifications are not mutually exclusive. However, there remains a notable lack of analysis—especially of a systematic nature—regarding the conditions under which the use of higher education as a diplomatic tool succeeds or fails. This gap makes it difficult to ascertain when and how education diplomacy can effectively serve as a mechanism for exercising soft power (Weissmann 2020; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2023).[3]

While this article does not aim to fill the existing gap in systematic research on education diplomacy, it seeks instead to offer a critical reflection on its underlying nature—specifically, to interrogate the power dynamics embedded within education diplomacy. Through a limited yet meaningful set of comparative case studies, the article highlights the differences in how authoritarian and democratic regimes engage in education diplomacy. It also explores why, despite both being small states, Singapore's higher education policies have been more successful than Taiwan's. Furthermore, the Malaysian case serves as a reminder that intricate domestic political dynamics—such as ethnic Chinese issues and identity politics—as well as structural international factors—such as the quality of US-China relations—can to a certain extent shape the trajectory of higher education diplomacy. The contribution of this article is to propose a realist-informed analytical framework for understanding soft power in the context of education diplomacy, with an emphasis on its material foundations—especially its economic dimensions. Drawing from an ontological position grounded in materialism, this article argues that any form of power capable of producing real-world effects—including what is traditionally understood as soft power—is inseparable from a state's material capabilities (Niiniluoto 2002). Contrary to conventional understandings that characterise soft power as intangible or normatively driven influence, the article finding suggests that soft power should be understood as the materialisation of national power resources within specific policy arenas, such as education. The case studies of China, Singapore, and Taiwan all provide empirical support for this argument. Moreover, particular attention is paid to the role of higher education diplomacy in Taiwan-Malaysia bilateral relations, demonstrating how the effectiveness of education diplomacy primarily depends on economic factors, which serve as the most decisive determinant, while secondary influences include specific historical contexts or shifts in the international political environment.

MATERIALISATION OF SOFT POWER

The Integration of Education and Diplomacy

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye. This concept seeks to challenge, to a significant extent, the realist authority on "power", particularly aiming to diminish the role of military force in US foreign policy. According to Nye, realism overly emphasises hard power (military and economic), but the real dynamics of international relations cannot be solely represented by these two forms of power (Nye 2021). Nye (1990: 31) proposed the concept of "soft power" to describe the ability to attract and persuade others to align with one's goals without coercion or force. For Nye, this type of power is fundamentally different from the use of military and economic force because soft power is a form of "co-optive power" (Nye 1990: 31). In this sense, the concept of soft power is quite similar to the principle in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* that "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting", suggesting that Nye's soft power is not an entirely original idea or novel argument.

Nye (2004: 16) mentions "education" as a crucial component of a nation's soft power, categorising it under the "cultural" sources of soft power. This article argues that such an approach is problematic because "culture" is a broad and ambiguous concept. Binding one concept to culture without precisely defining what *culture* exactly means only complicates understanding further. Moreover, if education is essential for a country to build its soft power, then Nye or scholars belonging to social constructivism need to explain why different countries' higher education policies produce varying impacts or outcomes internationally. For instance, the vast majority of international students graduate from universities or graduate schools in the US or other developed countries in Europe rather than from universities or graduate schools in Africa, South

America, or Southeast Asia. Neither Nye's concept of soft power nor social constructivism can fully and persuasively explain this phenomenon. Moreover, as noted in The Soft Power 30 report (Macclony 2019), both the US and China are major powers, but China's higher education has not achieved the same diplomatic success as that of the US. The superior performance of US higher education compared to China's is not due to the superiority of American culture or values but rather because US higher education benefits from better faculty, facilities, funding, and other material resources.

The reflections on soft power discussed above are corroborated by other scholarly research. According to Philip Altbach and Patti Peterson, higher education represents a form of "power" that not only influences a country's scientific knowledge development but also becomes a force that impacts foreign countries in the era of globalisation (Altbach and Peterson 2008). Any power that can be exhibited or exert influence must be a tangible, substantive force, not merely an abstract concept. Moreover, the transmission of any concept necessarily involves the use of voice, text, or bodily expression, all of which are manifestations of material power (Tan 2021). The study by Anna Wojciuk and her colleagues suggests that utilising education to train the next generation with knowledge can strengthen a country's human resources, thereby, enhancing its soft power (Wojciuk et al. 2015). Furthermore, some literature points out that individuals who have studied abroad almost invariably promote the country where they studied, suggesting that international higher education can serve as a vehicle for public diplomacy (Triana 2015). A classic example is the US Department of State's Fulbright Programme, which aims to foster mutual understanding between foreign peoples and Americans through education. The programme's long-term success is seen by many as a significant demonstration of US soft power (Gallarotti 2022). However, Fulbright scholarships are a form of economic hard power, with recipients studying advanced or novel knowledge at renowned US educational institutions-clearly tangible and substantive.

International higher education is a specialised topic that differs significantly from early childhood education, basic national education, or teacher training. According to the definition provided by the UNESCO, international education is described as "an educational process aimed at promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, and peace among nations" (De Goñi 2024). From this perspective, education indeed serves as a tool (and thus can be used as a diplomatic strategy) through which the international community can more effectively maintain peace.

Looking back at history, the most notable feature of international education is the movement of people. Academic exchanges among citizens of Greece, Athens, and Egypt occurred long before medieval European countries, and scholarly interactions among North American countries only became more frequent after the twentieth century. Gultekin's (2021: 107–108) research highlights that international education began in ancient Greece, with the philosopher Pythagoras considered the first "international scholar" in history. Cross-border educational activities in Europe were very rare before the twelfth century. However, after the establishment of the first university in Italy, other European countries such as England, Spain, and France soon followed, making Europe a major destination for international students (Caddick 2008). Notably, from the mid-eighteenth century, the interconnections between education, diplomacy, and imperialism became more pronounced. Many colonised countries established education systems serving their colonial powers' commercial or political objectives. Examples of this can be found in India in Asia, South Africa in Africa, and Brazil in South America (Carpentier 2019). These examples align with this article's earlier argument that material power supports education. Without the backing of imperial military and commercial power (both forms of hard power), how could colonised

countries in Asia, Africa, and South America have developed political and economic systems closely aligned with Europe, or continue using the colonisers' languages as official languages even after gaining independence?[4]

The strategic incorporation of international education into diplomatic policies began after World War II. Developed countries leveraged their advantages in higher education—closely tied to their economic and technological levels—to intervene in the internal affairs of developing countries. The "diplomatisation of education" gradually became a common international practice, and with the rise of neoliberalism and trade liberalisation in the 1980s, education began to commercialise and even evolve into a transnational service trade (Knight 2002). Since 2000, some Western countries have further "industrialised" international higher education. The number of international students in the US has been increasing annually (excluding the COVID-19 period), with a significant rise in the issuance of student visas and university-related programmes or exchange initiatives (Wang and Liu 2024). This trend has created substantial commercial opportunities for the US and prompted other countries to follow suit. Currently, nearly 80% of the top 100 universities worldwide are located in developed countries in Europe and North America (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2023).

With the "industrialisation" of international higher education, academic research has introduced four theoretical perspectives used to explain higher education in advanced Western countries since the late 1990s: neoliberalism, soft power, global citizenship, and local internationalisation (Altbach and Knight 2007). Neoliberalism emphasises the marketisation of higher education, treating it as a commodity. This approach has led to the development of new fields such as educational marketing, corporate management of educational institutions, and educational accounting, all aimed at increasing revenue in the education sector. Soft power literature highlights higher education as an effective tool for enhancing the host country's reputation. By using education to project influence, a host country can achieve its goals without resorting to coercion. Global citizenship advocates aim to foster a "world society" by encouraging mutual learning and cross-border exchanges among people from different countries (Babones and Aberg 2019: 294). Its goal is to promote the formation of transnational cultural awareness, thereby, encouraging individuals to adopt a more open, flexible, or diverse sense of identity, ultimately reducing the traditional, rigid connection between individuals and their home countries. Local internationalisation proponents seek to use international higher education to broaden the worldview of their own citizens, enabling them to stay informed about global affairs without leaving their country. This perspective has also extended to the field of immigration, where international students are encouraged to remain in the host country after graduation, becoming a significant source of human resources.[5]

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Case Studies from China, Singapore, and Taiwan

In the first decade following the end of the Cold War, the atmosphere of great power rivalry largely receded from the international stage. With the US emerging as the world's sole hyperpower, it actively promoted trade globalisation and the diffusion of democratic values (Mearsheimer 2019). During this period, the liberal international order gradually took shape, characterised primarily

by deepening economic interdependence among states, and an unprecedented scale of cross-border flows of goods, services, and people (Ikenberry 2011; Mearsheimer 2019). At the same time, the rise of the internet ushered international relations into a new era, as the widespread adoption of digital technologies triggered a new wave of globalisation in higher education. To attract more students, many countries began promoting the digital transformation of their higher education systems and universities, offering an increasing range of online courses and degree programmes (Levin 2024: 269–270). Nevertheless, the demand for in-person, classroom-based learning remains robust, and is expected to persist in university campuses worldwide for the foreseeable future.

Since 2000, the total number of universities worldwide has surpassed 20,000. However, only about 500 of these institutions are regarded as elite universities with strong international reputations. Among this elite group, universities ranked within the so-called Top 100 maintain extremely high admission thresholds, making them largely inaccessible to most international students (Terzian 2019). According to the 2025 QS World University Rankings (QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited 2025), the US hosts 25 of the world's top 100 universities (one-quarter), while China (including Hong Kong) has 10 (one-tenth), Japan has 4 (one twenty-fifth), and Taiwan has just 1 (one one-hundredth). This striking disparity in university rankings clearly reflects the substantial differences in higher education-related soft power across countries. Taiwan's relatively weak competitiveness in global higher education inevitably constrains the scope and effectiveness of its education diplomacy efforts. Nevertheless, this does not mean that small states are destined to be disadvantaged in education diplomacy. Singapore provides a compelling counter-example, demonstrating that even small countries can develop world-class universities and enjoy a distinguished reputation in the field of international education diplomacy.

Against this backdrop, this section conducts a case-based analysis of three countries. The case of China helps illustrate how a non-democratic great power leverages education diplomacy to pursue its political objectives and exert international influence, as well as the potential limitations of such diplomatic strategies. The case of Singapore serves as a valuable comparison with Taiwan, as both are small states in East Asia, former members of the so-called Four Asian Tigers, and home to a significant proportion of Chinese-speaking populations—features that make them particularly comparable. Of course, the two countries differ significantly in their historical trajectories, which may partially explain the divergent development of their higher education systems. Taiwan, as the third and most important case in this study, offers insights into how a small state with a unique international status utilises education diplomacy to expand its global presence and foster substantive international engagement. Notably, the intensifying US-China rivalry since 2017, coupled with the tariff war triggered by President Trump in 2025, has unexpectedly created new opportunities or advantages for Taiwan in its education diplomacy with Malaysia.

China

On 1 October 1949, the Government of People's Republic of China was officially established in Beijing, with the number of universities in China at that time totalling 205. By 2022, this number had risen to 3,013 (China University Ranking 2023). The Beijing authorities have worked to enhance China's educational standards through initiatives like the 211 Project and the 985 Project. These policies aim to strengthen the academic research quality of around 100 higher education institutions, making them elite universities capable of attracting students from around the world (Xu 2021).

Over the past two decades, Chinese higher education has experienced significant growth with various forms of official support. The geographic reach of higher education has expanded, and the quality of education has continuously improved, with famous institutions like Peking University and Tsinghua University now achieving world-class status. The MOE of the People's Republic of China, responsible for all education-related matters, views higher education as a crucial driver for national economic growth, scientific progress, and social stability. Universities in China are tasked with cultivating high-level talents and experts for the modernisation of socialism (Mingyuan 2023). Today, China has become one of the mainstream options for international students and is among the most longed-for destinations for students in Asia. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the deterioration of US-China relations, Chinese higher education faces challenges that may affect its ability to continue attracting students from democratic Western countries. Nonetheless, it still holds significant appeal for students from the developing world.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, Beijing has advanced the "World-Class Universities" and "World-Class Disciplines Construction Plan" (referred to as "Double First Class"). Implemented in 2017, the Double First-Class initiative aims to elevate China's top universities and selected disciplines to world-class status by 2050 (Ahlers and Christmann-Budian 2023). In practice, however, the primary focus has been on integrating higher education with the One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBORI) (Peters 2020). Beijing leverages economic activities related to infrastructure development to promote bilateral educational exchanges with partner countries. In other words, education is an integral part of the OBORI, serving not only as a tool for foreign policy but also as a lubricant for economic and trade activities (Li and Xue 2021).

Beijing employs two primary strategies to exert its "education diplomacy" and global influence. First, sending Chinese students abroad. Beijing facilitates the study abroad of Chinese students through various programmes to acquire specific knowledge, skills, or information. According to *China Daily* (Shuo 2019), the number of Chinese students studying abroad reached 662,100 in 2018, an 8.83% increase from the previous year. Of these, approximately 65,800 received state funding. After graduation in 2018, 519,400 students returned to China, marking an 8% increase from the previous year. Since 1978, a total of 5.86 million students have studied abroad, with over 4.32 million completing their studies and 3.65 million returning to China to apply their knowledge. However, the number of Chinese students studying in the US has been declining in recent years. Starting in 2018, the US began restricting student visas for Chinese nationals, particularly for those studying sensitive areas, and placed over ten Chinese universities on a blacklist. Second, attracting foreign students to China. Beijing offers various scholarships to draw international students to Chinese institutions. According to a 2018 article published in the *Journal of Studies in International Education,* the number of international students in China has grown more than tenfold since 1995, from 36,855 to 442,773 (Wen and Hu 2018). However, growth has slowed since 2014 (IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact 2014). Recent Pew Research Center surveys show that 80% of Americans hold a negative view of China, indirectly contributing to scepticism among American and Western students about studying in China (Huang et al. 2024). Previously, American students saw China as a land of opportunity that could enhance their career prospects in Asia, but the intensifying US-China competition has led many young people to view career plans centred around China as foolish.

The number of American students in Chinese universities has drastically decreased from about 15,000 a decade ago to around 800 today (Gu 2024). Despite this decline, numerous scholarship programmes are still available for foreign students, with an estimated 240 scholarships offered to those interested in studying in China. These scholarships are primarily awarded to students

from developing countries, as students from Western countries often face several obstacles, such as having better economic conditions which make it harder for them to obtain scholarships offered by schools. Additionally, due to the tense relations between the US and China, their home countries may directly restrict them from studying in China. Furthermore, the Chinese government may refuse their applications to study due to concerns that Western students could be spies. Issues such as restricted access to information, limitations on discussing political or sensitive social topics, and the impact of China's new anti-espionage law have also played a role of making studying in China less attractive to students from democratic countries. The above situation indicates that soft power is not an abstract concept at all; instead, it is closely influenced by a country's actual material power and the objective challenges it faces in international relations. For example, when the geopolitical competition between the US and China intensifies, China's higher education diplomacy loses its appeal to Western countries.

Singapore

An exceptionally efficient and incorruptible government has long been a source of pride for Singapore. Yet the country's higher education system is equally renowned for its global competitiveness, consistently ranking among the top performers in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Singapore's two most prestigious universities—the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU)—together enrol over 60,000 students, with approximately 33% of them being international students (Alfaro and Ketels 2016). In this regard, Singapore's higher education system undoubtedly exemplifies the country's soft power in attracting talent from around the world.

At the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the NUS, as many as 80% of the students come from overseas—a figure several times higher than that of other universities (LKYSPP 2025). Among Malaysia's current members of parliament, several are alumni of LKYSPP. Having been trained under Singapore's education system, these legislators tend to adopt positions that are more favourable to Singapore in dealing with various domestic or regional issues. In other words, foreign alumni of LKYSPP often serve as an important bridge for promoting the development of bilateral relations between their home countries and Singapore—a role of exquisite instrument for a small state seeking to secure its position amid the complexities of Southeast Asian regional politics (Kang 2014). Moreover, to sustain its national competitiveness, Singapore needs to maximise the projection of its soft power, especially given the inherent limitations of developing hard power. To this end, the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) was established as an educational mechanism offering students from ASEAN member states the opportunity to pursue professional training and degree programmes in Singapore. Successful applicants to the programme receive full scholarships but are expected to contribute to the development of both their home countries and Singapore after graduation.[6] Since its launch in 1998, the SCP has awarded countless scholarships, and the programme has since become a permanent feature of Singapore's annual policy agenda, further consolidating the role of education as a key instrument of the country's foreign policy.

The Singaporean government places great emphasis on education, with its long-term policy goal being to foster a social environment conducive to nurturing not only its own citizens but also foreign nationals and overseas Singaporean communities. To attract talented international students, Singapore has gradually relaxed its immigration policies (Yeoh and Lam 2016). First, it has implemented a talent inflow strategy by offering scholarships to recruit outstanding students from around the world (Gribble and McBurnie 2007). Second, Singapore has adopted a

liberal, market-oriented model of higher education, turning higher education into an expensive and refined commodity through which universities accumulate capital by selling specialised knowledge (Lo 2014). Third, international students studying in Singapore are legally permitted to take up part-time employment, provided that their working hours do not exceed 16 hours per week (Waring 2014). These policies are highly attractive to international students; for Singapore, they not only facilitate the inflow of global talent but also help alleviate domestic labour shortages indirectly.

In addition, Singapore has launched a particularly distinctive initiative—the Global Schoolhouse (GSH) programme—spearheaded by the Economic Development Board (EDB). This initiative represents a major breakthrough and highlights Singapore's transnational higher education policy (Lo 2014). Since its implementation in 2002, the GSH programme has not only accelerated the expansion of transnational higher education but also attracted numerous foreign universities to establish branch campuses in Singapore. The collaborative educational programmes primarily focus on highly specialised fields, particularly applied science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. It is also worth noting that the Singaporean government provides a wide range of financial support for international scholars. For example, it offers rent-free or discounted campus facilities and allows international students to apply for various subsidies during their studies. Existing literature indicates that through academic collaborations with foreign higher education institutions, Singapore's national universities have progressively integrated these institutions into the framework of Singapore-style state capitalism (Sidhu et al. 2014). In other words, by combining a diverse and highly internationalised educational environment, Singapore has advanced the entrepreneurial transformation of its higher education sector—a reform that aligns with its goal of transforming public universities into entrepreneurial entities, thereby, establishing itself as a highly competitive hub for higher education (Sidhu et al. 2014).

Taiwan

In 1994, Taiwan amended its University Act, granting higher education institutions greater academic freedom and policy autonomy—an important step in the country's democratisation process (Peng 2023). In 1995, the government released The Republic of China Education Report: Vision for Education in the 21st Century, explicitly tasking universities with the mission of expanding international academic exchange (Lee 2023). In 1997, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) to promote long-term and stable substantive cooperation between Taiwan and other countries through technological research and development, technology transfer, loans and investments, and diverse skills training—particularly in the absence of formal diplomatic ties. The ICDF's operations span six major areas, one of which is education.[7] In 1998, to further its international education goals, the ICDF launched the International Higher Education Scholarship Programme (IHESP), providing financial support for talented youth from abroad to pursue professional studies in Taiwan. As of 2024, the programme offers a total of twenty-four-degree programmes—three at the doctoral level and twenty-one at the master's level.[8]

Taiwan's active promotion of higher education internationalisation began in 2001. That year, the government issued the White Paper on University Education Policy, which required universities to allocate dedicated budgets for promoting international exchange and cooperation.[9] This policy made the recruitment of international students and the strengthening of academic ties with foreign universities key indicators in evaluating the level of internationalisation within higher education institutions. In response, many universities established international colleges,

gradually transitioned to English-taught curricula, and sought to increase international student enrolment through strategies such as dual-degree programmes with partner institutions abroad. Notably, the growing number of international students in Taiwan has been closely linked to the demographic trend of declining birth rates, which began to emerge around 2010. Faced with pressures from low fertility rates, Taiwan's higher education system encountered enrolment challenges similar to those experienced earlier in Japan. Many universities began to struggle operationally and thus shifted their recruitment focus toward international students. The government supported this approach and viewed it as an opportunity to export Taiwan's education system to other countries. It accordingly set a target to increase the number of international students from 56,135 in 2011 to 150,000 by 2021 (Lin 2020). However, an increase in quantity does not necessarily indicate an improvement in educational quality. In fact, due to Taiwan's relatively low global rankings in higher education, most of the international students it attracts come from developing countries rather than developed ones.[10] A significant number of these developing countries are Taiwan's diplomatic allies in Africa and Latin America, underscoring the fact that from the outset, the internationalisation of higher education has been closely intertwined with Taiwan's foreign policy. This linkage is also one of the reasons why education became a key component of President Tsai Ing-Wen's New Southbound Policy (Cheng 2019; Kabinawa 2021).

Since the launch of the New Southbound Talent Development Programme, Taiwan's strategy has shifted from merely recruiting international students to fostering two-way talent collaboration with countries targeted by the New Southbound Policy (Black 2019). In light of the industrial development needs of these partner countries, Taiwan has offered specialised skills training programmes and related scholarship schemes to attract promising youth from New Southbound Policy countries to pursue undergraduate or graduate studies in Taiwan. At the same time, the Taiwanese government has also encouraged domestic students to participate in academic exchanges or overseas internship programmes. Overall, the New Southbound Policy has marked a significant turning point in the internationalisation of Taiwan's higher education.[11] The proportion of students from New Southbound Policy countries rose from 33% in 2016 to 41% in 2018 (Lin 2020). Based on an analysis of official Taiwanese data, Nguyen and Chang (2019) point out two key observations: (1) Although the New Southbound Talent Development Programme emphasises reciprocal and bidirectional exchange, in practice, the number of students from New Southbound Policy countries coming to Taiwan has steadily increased, while the willingness of Taiwanese students to study in those countries has shown no significant growth; and (2) since 2014, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam have consistently been the top three New Southbound Policy countries sending students to Taiwan. It is worth noting that 2019 represented a turning point in this trend. That year, the rankings of the three leading source countries shifted: before 2018, Malaysia had long held the top position, but starting in 2019, Vietnam surpassed Malaysia, which fell to third place by 2020, while Indonesia rose to second.[10]

Attributing the changes in the number of students from New Southbound policy countries to the impact of COVID-19 is clearly unconvincing, particularly as it fails to explain the increase in Vietnamese student enrolment. In fact, this study finds that the primary reason for the gradual decline in Malaysian student numbers lies elsewhere.[12] Even before the pandemic, China had already begun actively recruiting Malaysian students. Notably, Xiamen University established a branch campus in Kuala Lumpur, and other institutions—especially those specialising in technical and vocational education—also invested heavily in attracting Malaysian Chinese students. These efforts included generous incentives such as tuition waivers and living expense subsidies. Such policies made it difficult for Malaysian students seeking overseas education to resist these opportunities. Thus, an examination of the trends in international student enrolment

in Taiwan over the past decade suggests a reasonable conclusion: while the overall number of students from New Southbound Policy countries has continued to grow steadily, this growth cannot be attributed solely to Taiwan's higher education policies. The case of Malaysia serves as a reminder that Taiwan must develop more competitive advantages to compete with China and maintain its appeal to Malaysian Chinese students.

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

From the higher education practices of the three countries mentioned earlier, it is clear that education is closely tied to political and economic concerns. Therefore, it is common to see foreign policy and higher education policy closely intertwined—a pattern that holds true not only for great powers like the US and China, but also for small states such as Singapore and Taiwan. However, as an undemocratic (or authoritarian) regime, Beijing is subject to two key constraints that limit its ability to attract international students to China: the domestic economic slowdown and the worsening of US-China relations. To elaborate, when China's domestic economy performs poorly, the government's ability to offer financial incentives to international students diminishes. As a result, the effectiveness of higher education as a tool of soft power projection is also weakened; however, as long as Beijing does not pose a threat to US security or interests, US-China cooperation remains possible. That is to say, under such situation, the US is still willing to provide scholarships for American people to pursue studies at higher education institutions in mainland China. Obviously, the latter factor (US-China relations) is more crucial. In other words, if US-China relations become tense, even if the Chinese government offers full scholarships to American students, Washington may not allow its citizens to freely travel to China to attend universities or graduate schools.

Despite both Singapore and Taiwan being democratic polities, they exhibit significant differences in the institutional design and practical implementation of higher education. Singapore's higher education policy exemplifies the characteristics of a typical developmental state—specifically, the government views higher education as one of the key strategies for maintaining national competitiveness. Guided by this core principle, the state's intervention in higher education is clearly evident, most notably through the active involvement or leadership of technocrats. This has enabled a successful integration of state machinery with the capacities of universities. In contrast, Taiwan's higher education policy appears less consistent and more vulnerable to shifts in political power and demographic changes, particularly the declining birth rate. Since 2010, the problem of low fertility has put increasing pressure on many universities in Taiwan. In response, the government has adopted "internationalisation" as a remedial measure to address the enrolment crisis. Furthermore, due to Taiwan's contested sovereignty and the lack of widespread international recognition, its traditional diplomatic space is limited. As a result, Taiwan has developed a Track II diplomacy strategy centred on education as an alternative channel, reflecting a distinctive practice shaped by its diplomatic constraints.

In this context, Malaysia provides a great example of how Taiwan has adjusted its policies due to diplomatic needs, particularly after 1974. This adjustment involved both reducing political ideological considerations and emphasising the abstract identity of being ethnically Chinese. Specifically, in 1974, the Malaysian government decided to grant legal recognition to Beijing and establish formal diplomatic relations, meaning that the Republic of China government in Taiwan was no longer officially recognised by Malaysia. In response, Taiwan could only maintain "unofficial" bilateral exchanges through the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Malaysia. It is worth noting that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, with ethnic Malays constituting

more than 50% of the population, while ethnic Chinese make up about 23%–24%, with the rest made up of other ethnic groups.[12] This demographic structure has led to significant conflicts of interest between Malays and Chinese in areas such as politics, economics, and even education. Notably, Chinese-language education has never been officially recognised by the Malaysian government, which has caused dissatisfaction among many ethnic Chinese citizens, giving rise to what is known as the *huá wéndú lìzhōng xué* (independent Chinese school system).[13] Graduates of these independent schools face difficulties entering universities in Malaysia, so many ethnic Chinese parents, whenever financially possible, send their children to study at universities in Taiwan or China. From this phenomenon, it is clear that the Chinese in Malaysia, both in their political stances and educational choices, cannot avoid being influenced by the political struggles across the Taiwan Strait. For instance, literature points out that after the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan, it actively encouraged overseas Chinese students from Southeast Asia to study in Taiwan with US aid. This policy has fostered a significant number of pro-Taiwan Chinese elites in Malaysia over the years (Esman 1986).

However, early Chinese students who studied in Taiwan and returned to Malaysia faced significant institutional and cultural discrimination in their development process. It was not until 1987, when Malaysia established the Malaysia Friendship and Trade Centre in Taipei to promote trade exchanges, that the situation began to improve (Ku 2000). Why was this the case? On one hand, the tense cross-strait relations during the 1950s and 1960s caused a split in national identity among the Malaysian Chinese students who had studied in Taiwan and China. This division even extended to their families and communities within Malaysia. Some literature points out that in 1950, when the Beijing regime received formal recognition from Britain (Malaysia's former colonial power), pro-Taiwan Chinese in Malaysia faced discrimination from pro-China Chinese.[14] Furthermore, Malaysia at the time held certain prejudices against Taiwan, such as questioning whether Taiwan's higher education system could cultivate internationally competitive talent. This lack of confidence in Taiwan's non-English-dominant higher education system also contributed to Malaysia's scepticism toward Taiwan. However, over time, reality proved otherwise. Since 1987, Malaysian Chinese who had completed higher education in Taiwan began to make notable advances in Malaysia's domestic job market. At the same time, the Malaysian government started to show interest in learning from Taiwan's economic development experience. These changes in objective circumstances made studying in Taiwan an increasingly attractive option. In contrast, China had only just begun its reform and opening-up policies and had not yet established a comprehensive higher education system, nor was it able to offer international students financial incentives.

With the improvement of domestic economic conditions and the increasing political influence on the international stage, China has become more proactive in attracting Malaysian students, which represents an unfavourable change for Taiwan. On one hand, the main attraction of Taiwan's higher education for Malaysian students has always been its advantage of offering courses in Chinese. However, as China also began recruiting Malaysian students, Taiwan lost one of its competitive advantages. On the other hand, China's rise in economic and political power has led to the close and complete integration of its higher education policies with its Belt and Road initiative. The offering of generous, sometimes full scholarships has made it increasingly attractive for more Malaysian Chinese students to choose to study in China for university or graduate programmes. Literature indicates that the number of Malaysian students in Taiwan peaked in 2017, and has since declined yearly, which is related to the large number of scholarships China provides to Malaysian students.[15] It is important for the Taiwanese government to take note of this trend. Although Malaysia remains one of the top three sources

of international students in Taiwan, the number of students in 2024 has dropped below 10,000 (9,686 students), compared to over 10,000 in both 2022 and 2023, signalling a potential concern. Taiwan should not only continue to attract Malaysian Chinese students but also actively seek to attract Malays.[16] Additionally, as a democratic country, Taiwan is more friendly than China when it comes to religious freedom and respect for cultural diversity. Considering the significant proportion of Muslims in Malaysia, Taiwan could enhance its appeal to Malaysian students by offering religious incentives, such as providing halal food and prayer spaces.

CONCLUSION

Few would deny that, in most cases, economically advanced and industrialised countries remain the primary destinations in the global higher education market. For the vast majority of international students, the education and training provided by these countries are seen as guarantees of high-quality and competitive credentials. This long-standing phenomenon aligns with the core argument of this article while simultaneously challenging the notion that education, as a form of soft power, is merely abstract, immaterial, or ideational. In other words, without strong economic resources as support, education—especially higher education—struggles to exert real influence.

China's growing appeal to Malaysian students in recent years is largely attributable to its economic rise: from lagging behind Taiwan in the 1980s to surpassing it after 2000. Furthermore, the Chinese government has actively offered substantial scholarships and financial support to attract international students, significantly increasing the incentives to study in China. This strategy closely resembles dollar diplomacy, albeit repackaged through the lens of education. While such an approach may enhance China's international image, it does not always yield positive outcomes. It is also worth emphasising the critical and often overlooked role governments play in providing quality higher education and facilitating international student mobility. When a country deliberately integrates higher education with diplomacy, higher education becomes a key instrument for deploying and reinforcing soft power. This argument is substantiated by the case study on Singapore presented in this article. Drawing from literature reviews, case analyses and comparisons, and an in-depth exploration of Taiwan-Malaysia relations, this study finds that projecting influence through higher education has become a common diplomatic strategy, regardless of a country's regime type. However, from the perspective of economic scale, Singapore—a small state—has clearly outperformed China in its higher education policies, especially given the strong connection between Singapore's universities and Malaysia's social elite.

In addition, the study reveals that Malaysian students with a Chinese independent school (CIS) background often experience two forms of discrimination: one from the dominant Malay population within Malaysia against the ethnic Chinese community, and the other from internal divisions within the Chinese community itself, particularly between pro-Taiwan and pro-China factions. As a democratic country, Taiwan enjoys a high level of social inclusiveness and public friendliness, and it demonstrates a greater degree of respect for religious freedom and cultural diversity compared to China. While Taiwan may not be able to compete with China in terms of offering large-scale financial aid to attract Malaysian students, it can build on its existing strengths in Chinese-language instruction by expanding bilingual education programmes, ensuring protections for religious freedom, and highlighting its stable cooperative ties with the US. These features can be incorporated into Taiwan's higher education policies to sustain international students' preference for Taiwan.

Looking ahead, Malaysia and Taiwan have the potential to deepen their cooperation in various aspects of higher education. As US-China rivalry intensifies, many young people around the world are growing wary of pursuing studies in China. If Taiwan can seize this rare opportunity, it may be able to further enhance its current educational exchanges with Malaysia. However, Taiwan must adopt a more proactive stance by incorporating its demographic challenges, its competitive edge in the semiconductor industry, and strategies for supporting Taiwanese youth in pursuing careers in Southeast Asia into its educational diplomacy. Only then can Taiwan craft a more comprehensive and effective education diplomacy strategy that fully demonstrates its soft power.

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NOTES

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1 The term higher education in this article refers to cross-border teaching and research exchanges at the university or graduate level between countries, rather than an in-depth discussion of any particular academic discipline or field of study.

2 A similar situation is also observed in Osman Gultekin's research article, where he categorises international education into several types: (1) studying the people, culture, or specific knowledge of other countries; (2) participating in academic exchange activities or obtaining degrees; (3) providing assistance for the educational development of other countries; and (4) promoting professional education through certain programmes of international organisations, thereby, fostering international cooperation. It is important to note that these four types are not necessarily entirely independent and may overlap with each other. For instance, (1) and (2) can occur simultaneously, and (3) and (4) can coexist without conflict. However, from the perspective of a country's projection of soft power or its international influence, the necessity and importance of (2) and (3) are evidently higher than (1) and (4). For more details, please see Gultekin (2021).

3 The success of education diplomacy is contingent upon a range of variables, such as the relative strength of a country's national power and the specific characteristics of the target country toward which the educational initiatives are directed. Given the current lack of comprehensive comparative studies assessing the effectiveness of education diplomacy across different states, it remains difficult to formulate any generalisable or systematic theoretical conclusions. As a result, existing research tends to focus on in-depth analyses of specific national cases rather than producing universally applicable frameworks.

4 Here I recommend one article written by Guzmán-Valenzuela (2023), in which she explores how the history of colonisation has shaped the education system in twenty-first-century Latin American universities, from administrative operations to academic performance. Guzmán-

Valenzuela's article strongly aligns with the perspectives of this article's realist argument, demonstrating the material impact of international higher education on those who receive it.

5 Established in 1992 under the leadership of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the SCP was designed to export Singapore's "development experience" to third countries through a wide range of training programmes. These programmes cover diverse fields such as public administration, law, trade and economy, anti-corruption, cultural heritage preservation, water resource management, and public health governance. To promote and implement these training initiatives more effectively, Singapore has subsequently established training centres in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Please check: https://scp.gov.sg/starthome/who-we-are

6 This perspective also reflects the host countries' expectations for international students, which go beyond academic considerations. In other words, host countries hope that international students will bring global insights with them or, after completing their studies, contribute to the host country's interests. This represents another crucial aspect of higher education, beyond projecting international influence.

7 Please see ICDF at: https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=4470&ctNode=31511&mp=2#aC

8 Please see ICDF at: https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSiteDownloadFile?type=attach&file=f1708657110369.pdf&realname=2024+TaiwanICDF++Scholarship+Application+Guidebook+V.4.pdf

9 Please see MOE at: https://english.moe.gov.tw/public/Attachment/212241653371.pdf

10 The inability to attract students from developed countries is not primarily due to Taiwanese universities generally using Chinese for teaching and doing research, but rather because most Taiwanese universities lack international competitiveness and their curriculum design does not appeal to students from Western countries.

11 Although Taiwan had a Southbound Policy during Lee Teng-Hui's presidency, the focus of that policy was to encourage Taiwanese businesses to diversify their investments away from China, rather than to enhance higher education recruitment or bilateral academic exchanges. Therefore, the New Southbound Policy during Tsai Ing-Wen's administration marks a crucial turning point for the internationalisation of Taiwan's higher education.

12 For complete statistical data, please refer to Overview of International Students in Higher Education Institutions at: https://stats.moe.gov.tw/statedu/chart.aspx?pvalue=36

13 Another contributing factor is the shift in Malaysia's higher education policy. In the past, university admissions in Malaysia were structured to favour ethnic Malays, which made it difficult for ethnic Chinese students to gain entry into local universities. As a result, many opted to pursue higher education abroad, including in Taiwan and countries like Australia. In recent years, however, the Malaysian government has gradually reformed these policies—upgrading certain vocational institutions into four-year universities and opening more enrolment opportunities to ethnic Chinese students. These changes have, in turn, reduced the number of Malaysian students coming to study in Taiwan.

14 Please see US Department of States, Malaysia (08/05) at: https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/malaysia/47502.htm

15 This group of students usually study abroad as the certificates they obtained are not recognised by the Malaysian government with the reasons that CIS is in a different school system run by a set of unique courses design relatively against the national sovereignty in terms of curriculum and education philosophy.

16 The author expresses gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their insights and wishes to clarify that the context of the 1950s saw some countries supporting the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan, while others backed the Communist regime in Beijing. As a result, Chinese individuals living outside of Taiwan or mainland China often face issues of alignment and belonging, and may frequently find themselves in competition or conflict with one another. For a more detailed explanation, please see Wang (1970).

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