

May 9, 2023

EXPERTS TAKE

Connecting Taiwan and Finland

An Interview with

PROF. JULIE YU-WEN CHEN

Julie Yu-wen Chen is Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Since 2023, she has been involved in the EU twinning project “The EU in the Volatile Indo-Pacific Region”. Additionally, she is also behind “Spotlight Taiwan Helsinki”, a forum of academic lectures on Taiwan in Finland. In this conversation, ISDP’s intern Reihuan Wu interviewed Professor Chen about her experience of teaching in the Finnish university and the connections between Taiwan and Finland. The interview was conducted on April 6, 2023.

Wu: You have been running Spotlight Taiwan at the University of Helsinki for a few years. Can you tell me about this project?

Chen: At the University of Helsinki, we have received funding for the *Spotlight Taiwan* project for three years. The project is supported by the Ministry of Culture in Taiwan, and it has become popular among many universities over the world.¹ This project gives us a chance to introduce Taiwanese culture to Finland, mostly through academic events. For me, this is a small-scale



project that promotes culture exchange between Taiwan and Finland.

Interestingly, I've noticed that some people compare *Spotlight Taiwan* to China's Confucius Institute, as if they're two competing projects. I think this is a big misunderstanding, as *Spotlight* is totally different from Confucius Institute by nature. Confucius Institute is way larger in scale, and it focuses more on teaching the Chinese language and introducing the Chinese culture through teaching and events. On the other hand, the funding we received from *Spotlight Taiwan* merely allows us to host a couple of individual events about Taiwan each year.

Wu: That's very interesting! What kind of events have you had throughout the years?

Chen: We usually invite scholars from all over the world to talk about their studies on Taiwan and the topics can be very diverse. For example, this year we scheduled three events,² the first one has already taken place in March. The first event was about the comfort women issue, which is not only relevant to Taiwan but also to other East Asian countries. This autumn we will have two other lecturers from the U.S. to give talks on Taiwan's history and politics. One will talk about the history of Mainlanders (waishengren) migration

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history to Taiwan, and the other will be about Taiwan's "sajiao" (performing to be cute) culture.

Wu: Thank you for the introduction of Spotlight Taiwan! Can you tell me about your new project, The EU in the Volatile Indo-Pacific Region?

Chen: "Indo-Pacific Strategy" originated in the United States and was later adopted by other countries such as Japan, Korea, and Australia. This is a new project that has received a three-year funding from the European Union, and we are trying to examine the EU's relations with this region. Granted, unlike the U.S., the EU might not have the largest stake of interest in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, we try to define the EU's role in the region through this project. The project just started this year and will last until 2025.

Wu: Will there be a focus on Taiwan in the project?

Chen: Certainly. The Indo-Pacific region has two major security concerns: Taiwan and the South China Sea. Hence, for us, Taiwan is an important part of this project. We will probably try to give the EU some policy recommendations in dealing with the Taiwan issue.

Wu: Are there Taiwan-related studies in Finland? Or are there any Finnish researchers whose research is related to Taiwan?

Chen: There are some independent courses, although we do not give them on a regular basis, neither are they arranged structurally. I run a course Taiwan's Society and Cultures once in a few years at the university.³ Besides this, Wasiq Silan⁴ is a Taiwanese post-doctoral researcher at another unit inside the University of Helsinki, and she also has some relevant work. Her studies mainly concern the indigenous people of Taiwan.

Besides us, there are other individual researchers whose studies are related to Taiwan. For example, Mikael Mattlin⁵ who is currently at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs and Ari-Joonas Pitkänen⁶ at the University of Turku.

Wu: How was the study of China developed in Finland?

Chen: Like other universities in Northern Europe, earlier Chinese Studies in Finland were more about Sinology and researchers were more interested in China's history and philosophy. Since China's rise as great power, a need to study China's contemporary politics and economy has been recognized. The trend is that universities are shifting from traditional Sinology to focus more on contemporary Chinese society.

Currently, there are three universities with Chinese Studies in Finland. Besides the University of Helsinki where I serve as Professor of Chinese Studies, Chinese Studies can also be found at the University of Turku and the University of Lapland. Other Finnish universities might also have a few researchers who focus on China, but they do not have structural programs on Chinese Studies.

Wu: That is very interesting. Do you think Taiwan Studies should be together or separate from Chinese Studies?

Chen: Personally, I don't think Taiwan Studies as an academic subject should be separated from Chinese Studies. I don't want to politicize the issue, but I believe Taiwan Studies should be discussed altogether with Chinese Studies due to the shared cultural and historical connections. Practically, it is also infeasible to ask students to focus on Taiwan Studies in a small country like Finland. If someone wants to study China, then we should provide various aspects of Chinese cultures in the education. In this respect,

“If someone wants to study China, then we should provide various aspects of Chinese cultures in the education. In this respect, Taiwan comes in as a very crucial part in the study of China.

Taiwan comes in as a very crucial part in the study of China. However, it is unnecessary to establish a degree program to just focus on Taiwan—what can a student do with such a degree?

Wu: This insight is very valuable. By the way, do you usually send students to study in Taiwan?

Chen: We send students to Taiwan every year, even though it was interrupted for a few years during the pandemic. Interestingly, we have seen an increase of students who are interested in going to Taiwan after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

The University of Helsinki has a partnership with National Taiwan University (NTU) and National Tsing Hua University (NTHU), but many students would also go to National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) because its Mandarin Center is well-reputed among Chinese learners.

Before the pandemic, I had a student who went to National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) in Tainan. He had studied Japanese before, and told me that he wanted to pick up Chinese as fast as possible. I originally recommended him to go to NTNU in Taipei, but he insisted on going

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somewhere with few international students. That’s how he ended up spending a year at NCKU, which is in my hometown in southern Taiwan. He picked up Chinese pretty well during his stay in southern Taiwan, and later won the Chinese Bridge in Finland after returning from his studies!

Wu: Like Taiwan, Finland and other Nordic countries are often ranked high as the most liberal democracies in the world. People in Taiwan would also hold a positive view on these countries. Do you think that these countries are also more supportive of Taiwan, perhaps because of the similarity in shared values and political system?

Chen: Many people in Taiwan would believe that Nordic nations are particularly supportive of Taiwan in the international space. But I actually do not agree with this view. The truth is that each Nordic country is incredibly careful in managing their relations with Taiwan under the framework of their One China Policy. This approach applies to almost every country in the European Union. Although some might appreciate Taiwan’s democracy and have favorable views for

Taiwan, following the One China Policy is still the prerequisite for European officials when doing anything on governmental levels.

Wu: Just like most European countries, Finland’s political connection with Taiwan stays at the parliamentary level. After the parliamentary election in early April, it seemed like Finland will get a new government. Do you have any updates on this? How will Finland’s relations in Taiwan be affected?

Chen: Taiwan’s representative to Finland has used the strategy of parliamentary diplomacy to make a breakthrough and build connections with the MPs in Finland. Particularly, there were a couple of individual Finnish MPs from the Centre Party and the Green Party who were key actors in the pro-Taiwan group. However, these two parties happened to suffer a loss in the recent elections. Under such condition, we will expect to see some changes in the dynamics of Taiwan-friendly group of Finnish MPs.

Endnotes

- 1 “Spotlight Taiwan Project,” Ministry of Culture, September 2022, https://www.moc.gov.tw/en/information_211_76950.html.
- 2 “2023 Events,” Spotlight Taiwan Helsinki, University of Helsinki, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/spotlighttaiwan/2023-events/>.
- 3 “Taiwan’s Society and Cultures, Online teaching 5 cr,” Studies Service, University of Helsinki, https://studies.helsinki.fi/courses/cur/hy-opt-cur-2122-80f958b3-57ac-41a4-a03b-f084bb0f1fcd/KUKA-AA213/Taiwan_s_Society_and_Cultures_Online_teaching.
- 4 “Wasiq Silan,” <https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/persons/wasiq-silan>.
- 5 “Mikael Mattlin,” <https://www.fia.fi/sv/person/mikael-mattlin>.
- 6 “Ari-Joonas Pitkänen,” University of Turku, <https://www.utu.fi/en/people/ari-joonas-pitkanen>.