

## Taiwan must build cultural literacy

Written by Manoj Kumar Panigrahi  
Sunday, 31 January 2021 07:04

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Since the introduction of the New Southbound Policy during President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) first term in 2016, there has been building momentum toward increasing people-to-people exchanges between Taiwan and the policy's 18 partner countries. While the government's attempt to improve relations with these countries is admirable, there is a significant gap in Taiwan's cultural knowledge of them. To narrow the cultural literacy gap, Taiwan needs to start cultural education as early as kindergarten.

New residents and migrant workers from these target countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia are particularly vulnerable in Taiwan.

Despite having more than 1 million foreigners from Southeast Asia in Taiwan, there remains a dearth of understanding of these countries' cultures and traditions, which has led to multiple misunderstandings. Examples include strong opposition to the introduction of Southeast Asian languages in the school curriculum by some parents and bullying of children of migrant heritage for their accents and appearance.

To reduce misunderstandings and raise awareness, the government has conducted multiple cultural activities, such as observing Southeast Asian countries' national days, but such efforts fall short due to a lack of coordination between government agencies.

As every county or city has its own policies, there are no proper guidelines on approaching cultural literacy. To decrease such gaps, individuals and groups have been trying to increase cultural awareness among Taiwanese about foreign cultures, especially those from the policy countries.

However, there is still room for improvement. One key aspect to look at is schools. Teaching students about cultures at a young age has considerable benefits. In the short term, it creates a better study environment for students of migrant backgrounds, and in the long term, it helps people to embrace the idea of a heterogeneous Taiwanese society.

According to Ministry of Education data, in 2018, there were more than 1.78 million students in elementary and junior-high schools — out of which 166,801 had an immigrant background,

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accounting for 9.36 percent of the total number of students. Even though these students make up a considerable part of the education system, there has been a low level of soft skill cultivation in kindergarten to 12th-grade education, including cross-cultural literacy.

Making students interact with people from different cultural backgrounds at a young age would allow them to see the world from a different perspective. Reading about any country besides their own opens up a world of mystery for a student. It would be a thrilling experience for them to interact with individuals from different countries and learn about their cultures in class.

Given a large community of migrants from Southeast Asia, the government should not miss the opportunity to harness their talents. Letting them come to the schools as part of a unique curriculum for Southeast Asian cultures, which goes beyond language learning, would lead to Taiwanese accepting their classmates from mixed or other cultures.

In my own experience sharing Indian culture in schools and universities and interacting with thousands of students across Taiwan, I have seen an abundance of knowledge about Western countries, in contrast to Southeast Asian or South Asian cultures, which are geographically closer to Taiwan.

The New Southbound Policy should make a two-way exchange of culture and education possible. There has been a push for talks at universities and within policymaking circles in the past. Yet, the failure to cultivate cross-cultural skills at the primary and secondary school level is a failure to effectively capitalize on the potential of early age cultural socialization. Thus, the government should encourage partnerships with schools from New Southbound Policy countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made travel difficult, forcing many schools worldwide to operate remotely. Digital platforms are used to learn and interact with students and teachers across Taiwan and New Southbound Policy countries. Such digitization of meetings would also save time and resources spent traveling.

Additionally, learning about the diverse cultures of these countries would definitely be a boon to the Taiwanese business community because of their increased investments there. It would help them properly manage the local workforce and create a friendly work environment.

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Such knowledge of primary cultural traditions would also help reduce workplace violence, and would also facilitate further investments and mutual benefits to both sides.

With an increase in globalization, cultures have also seen changes. The way to look forward to a mutual understanding is to understand the culture. By doing so, we also increase respect for each other and social opportunities for everyone.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/01/31](#)