

## Chapter 7

# Reaching Across the Strait: Contact Hypothesis in the Context of Chinese University Students in Taiwan



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**Abstract** Recent changes in the political atmosphere between China and Taiwan have allowed for the recruitment of Chinese university students in Taiwan. Since September 2011, thousands of Chinese degree-seeking students have been admitted to Taiwanese universities. While short-term cross-strait educational exchange programs began in the late 1990s and increased over the years, the enrolment of Chinese degree-seeking students marks a new milestone in the development of cross-strait relations. Despite the political and ideological rivalry between China and Taiwan, studies show that cross-strait educational exchanges have enhanced mutual understanding and changed attitudes of people on both sides. This chapter uses the four conditions of Allport's contact hypothesis – equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support by authorities – as a theoretical lens for understanding the experiences of Chinese university students studying in Taiwan, focusing in particular on how the cultural and educational exchanges affect the individuals involved as well as their societies and cross-strait relations more broadly. It argues that the four conditions have each been met to varying extents and explores the ways in which the exchanges have and have not achieved this. It also finds that the exchanges have been influential for those involved but that they will have to continue for longer before their effects on policies or the political discourse on cross-strait relations will become apparent.

## Introduction

Throughout history, conflict has often been a byproduct of misunderstandings and an inadequate exchange of ideas between societies. In many instances, tensions between societies in conflict have been improved through a better flow of ideas and people. In the case of relations between China and Taiwan, exchanges of any kind have been severely limited since the Chinese Civil War, which resulted in the

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Kuomintang-led government of the Republic of China (ROC) relocating to Taiwan and the establishment of the Communist-led People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China in 1949. The first proposal to lift restrictions was made by Beijing in 1979. Known as the "three links" (三通), it proposed that Taiwan and China open each other's borders to postal services, transportation, and trade, but this was firmly rebuffed by the ROC government under President Chiang Ching-kuo with its "three-noes policy" (三不政策) of "no contact, no compromise, and no negotiation" with the communist government.

Today, political animosity continues to hinder cooperation and exchanges between the two rivals, but considerable progress has been made since educational and other forms of people-to-people exchanges began in the 1990s. This chapter argues that, in the cross-strait context, the four conditions for optimal contact stipulated by Allport (1954) and refined by many scholars since have been met to varying degrees. Although participants in cross-strait cultural and educational exchanges face many challenges and limitations, evidence suggests that Chinese students studying in Taiwanese universities have, on the whole, been satisfied by their exchange experiences. Chinese students in Taiwanese universities have been able to form positive relationships with their Taiwanese peers and professors, and through these experiences, they have gained clearer understandings of Taiwanese values and lifestyles and a deeper appreciation for the political realities that color cross-strait relations. These relationships and experiences lay the basic groundwork for improved relations between the two societies, but it is likely that much more time – perhaps decades – is needed before the impacts of these educational exchanges will become evident at the national policy level or in broader political discourse on cross-strait relations.

## Historical and Theoretical Context

### *Cross–Strait Relations and Early Exchanges*

Cross-strait relations have been highly politicized since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Since then, the competing visions for the future of China and cross-strait relations, as embodied by the governments and people on each side, have been an ongoing obstacle to people-to-people and many other forms of exchanges. However, cultural and educational exchanges have made enormous progress since the 1990s as a result of changes in the cross-strait context and the forces of globalization. In Taiwan, the lifting of the martial law in 1987 served as a milestone in the process of advancing cross-strait relations and paved the way for its aging veterans to be granted permission to visit their hometowns in China. Although political and military rivalry continued, the cross-strait relationship entered an unprecedented era with regard to economic, cultural, and educational exchanges (Chou and Yang 2012).



With respect to cultural and educational exchange programs since November 1987, Taiwan also loosened its policy over Chinese visitors to Taiwan through such policies as the granting of visas to overseas distinguished professionals. As a result, many Chinese professionals in the fields of academia, culture, sports, media, and arts have visited Taiwan in the years since. From 1988 to 2009, more than 235,591 Chinese professionals in the cultural and educational sectors, out of a total of 2,712,572 Chinese visitors in 20 categories, traveled to Taiwan (Kao 2009). Exchange flows have increased not only in numbers but also in significance since Taiwan allowed Chinese graduate students to study in Taiwanese universities.

### *Expansion of Cross–Strait Educational Exchanges*

Taiwan started to take on Chinese students and scholars in the early 1990s along with its policy of granting visas to Chinese tourists, but cultural and educational exchanges remained limited in duration and were highly regulated by the Taiwanese bureaucracy. In the fall of 2010, Taiwan passed a law that enabled its universities to admit students from coastal Chinese high schools and 41 recognized Chinese universities as degree seekers in Taiwan (Chou 2014). According to the Ministry of Education (MOE), only 823 Chinese students studied in short-term programs in Taiwan during the early 2000s, but that number increased to 41,981 full-time students in 2016 (MOE 2017). This is indicative of a momentous shift in both the numbers and type of exchanges taking place between the two societies and suggests that how the frequent contact Chinese students have had with Taiwanese individuals and institutions has affected their perceptions of Taiwan and cross-strait relations deserves investigation.

Recently, relevant academic research has begun to emerge. Lee (2015), for instance, examined whether the political tensions between Taiwan and China have impacted the interpersonal relationships between Chinese and Taiwanese students. It was found that political issues that characterize relations between China and Taiwan, particularly in regard to Taiwan's political status, often created subtle tensions in interactions between Chinese and Taiwanese students, regardless of similarities in their cultural backgrounds. In another study, Shen (2014) examined the impacts of the frequency and duration of exchanges and the linguistic and cultural similarities between Chinese and Taiwanese students. It was found that the similarity in language and culture did not always lead to positive outcomes or eliminate the biases of individuals from the two groups. It also suggested that the relations between the youth of the two societies could be improved through true contact and more positive media coverage in Taiwan about Chinese students. Other studies have examined pull and push factors related to cross-strait educational exchanges and satisfaction among Chinese students in Taiwan between 2011 and 2016 (Chou 2017; Chou and Ching 2015). These studies found that the major reasons that Chinese students chose to study in Taiwan were the opportunities to travel and to experience Taiwanese life.