

Chinese and Taiwanese Scholarships for Pacific Island Countries

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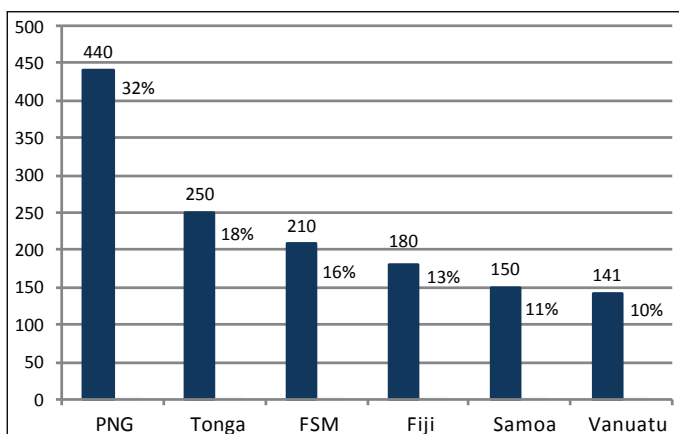
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Diplomatic competition between the People's Republic of China (hereafter 'China') and the Republic of China (hereafter 'Taiwan') has revived since 2016. The Pacific is a main battlefield as six of Taiwan's 17 diplomatic allies are from the region. Because providing scholarships to Pacific island countries (PICs) is a significant part of public diplomacy for China and Taiwan, this paper compares scholarship schemes of the two sides.

China's scholarship schemes

China provides three types of scholarships for Pacific students. The first and primary type is bilateral scholarships for China's eight partner countries in the region: Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu. China allocates about 20–30 scholarships annually for each country. As Figure 1 illustrates, by 2018, a total of 1,371 students from China's Pacific allies were awarded scholarships. The number of Pacific students studying in China has grown in the past decade. For example, five ni-Vanuatu students were awarded scholarships in 2009 but the number increased to 23 in 2018. Few students from Cook Islands and Niue have applied for Chinese scholarships as New Zealand and Australia are more common choices.

Figure 1: Number and percentage of PIC recipients of Chinese scholarships



Source: Compiled by first author.

The second type of scholarship is the China–PIF Scholarship scheme that commenced in 2008. Before 2017, 10 scholarships were offered annually through the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to students from all 14 Pacific states; after 2017, this number increased to 20. However, as Pacific students tend to apply for the bilateral scholarship scheme, this second type of scholarship does not actually attract 20 applicants. Also, a large proportion of awardees for the China–PIF Scholarship are from Pacific states recognising Taiwan. In 2018, 13 Pacific students were awarded China–PIF scholarships with five from Kiribati and three from Solomon Islands. Chinese companies operating in Pacific countries provide the third type of scholarship. For example, [Huawei](#) and [China Harbour Engineering Company](#) offer a limited number of scholarships for Pacific students to pursue tertiary education in information communication technology and civil engineering.

Scholarship awardees study in China under four program types: bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees and visiting scholars (junior or senior level). For students enrolled in Mandarin-taught courses, additional Mandarin study is offered in the first one to two years of programs. Bachelor's degree courses are taught in Chinese while students/scholars in the other three programs can enroll in either Mandarin- or English- taught courses. Scholarship awardees can apply to study in a range of disciplines at 289 Chinese universities. Scholarships cover tuition fees, dormitory fees and a monthly stipend. The better living conditions for scholarship students (e.g., well-furnished double rooms costing seven times the price of domestic-student dormitory rooms) and their stipend have made them easy targets of resentment for Chinese classmates, most of whom self-fund their studies and share dormitory rooms with five to seven classmates.

Taiwan's scholarship schemes

Like China, Taiwan's main scholarships are bilateral and offered to its six Pacific allies: Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, as well as 'friendly' countries

(typically Fiji and PNG). Currently, two Taiwanese institutions offer bilateral scholarships: the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MOFA\)](#) and the [International Cooperation and Development Fund \(TaiwanICDF\)](#). In practice, these scholarships are both controlled by MOFA. Compared to the awards China offers its allies, scholarships from Taiwan to Pacific partners are more limited. In 2018, for example, 66 students from Taiwan's Pacific allies were awarded MOFA scholarships, which was about half the number funded under China's bilateral scholarships (approximately 130). However, when considering the smaller combined population of Taiwan's Pacific allies, Taiwan's scholarships are more generous in terms of per capita awards (1 for every 12,318 allied citizens) than those for China (1 for every 68,586 allied citizens). Taiwan also funds the Taiwan/ROC-PIF Scholarship Scheme for students from all 14 Pacific countries. Yet, between 2001 and 2016, only 78 students had completed studies under this scholarship.

The funding and application structures for MOFA and TaiwanICDF scholarships are different, and choosing between the two is a major consideration for Pacific students. The MOFA Scholarship scheme was established in 2003 to promote people-to-people exchange with Taiwan's allies. Scholarships are awarded based on quotas that increase with the inauguration of new presidents or for other strategic reasons. For example, at the end of president Ma Ying-jeou's second term in 2015/16, five Nauruan students were awarded MOFA scholarships; under current President Tsai Ing-wen, this quota has increased to nine.

Regarding structure and program choice, MOFA Scholarship recipients study one year of Mandarin and then attend bachelor's, master's or doctoral programs. Although students can apply for Mandarin- or English-taught degrees, most choose English-language programs. During their Mandarin study, students receive a stipend every month, while during degree programs, the stipend is a lump sum. MOFA arranges and pays for roundtrip economy-class airfare for students, but all other expenses are paid by students from their stipends.

The TaiwanICDF Scholarship was established in 1998 to enhance development in partner countries. It includes 31 programs at 19 universities in Taiwan, the majority of which are master's degrees. Unlike MOFA Scholarship students, TaiwanICDF students do not study Mandarin before they start degree programs but instead take Mandarin as part of their courses. Sometimes this causes difficulties when students communicate with Taiwanese citizens who do not speak English. Additionally, unlike the MOFA Scholarship, the TaiwanICDF pays for student tuition, housing, book fees, medical insurance and roundtrip economy-class airfare. TaiwanICDF students also receive a monthly stipend. This mitigates some of the financial

difficulties in the MOFA Scholarship scheme where students pay all expenses using stipends.

Notably, the TaiwanICDF Scholarship is considered more difficult to obtain than the MOFA Scholarship. For example, in 2018, MOFA scholarships were awarded to seven Tuvaluan students while only three received TaiwanICDF scholarships. Additionally, because the TaiwanICDF Scholarship is not awarded according to consistent quotas like the MOFA Scholarship, allies have sometimes not received this scholarship, which may negatively influence Taiwan's soft power.

Impact

Currently, many Chinese and Taiwanese scholarship alumni are working in Pacific governments with some occupying high-level positions. For example, PNG Minister for Transport Westly Nukundi completed a Chinese government scholarship while Tuvalu's Deputy Representative to the UN Fakasoa Tealei received his bachelor's degree under a Taiwan scholarship. This may solidify support for China or Taiwan in partner countries.

Feedback from Pacific awardees on the Chinese scholarship program is mixed. A 2017 [survey](#) of 46 Pacific students indicated that over 74 per cent were positive about their educational experiences in China, but students also suggested that bachelor's degrees should include more English courses and that China should increase stipends. Dr Rebecca Bogiri argues that studying in China helps Pacific recipients 'move from a "laid back" and "relaxed" attitude common to the Pacific region to a pro-active, respectful, efficient and hardworking person'; however, sometimes, Chinese degrees are not taken seriously when students return home to search for jobs. Although equivalent survey data for Taiwan are not available, according to the second author's semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 Pacific students in 2017/18, students praise Taiwan as safe, convenient and advanced, and recommend Taiwan scholarships to others. Like complaints about the Chinese scholarship program, however, students also recommend that stipends be increased.

Because diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan is intensifying, the number of scholarships both sides provide to Pacific states is likely to increase in the future.

Notes on authors

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Endnote

1. Presentation at the University of South Pacific, Port Vila, 8/2/2019.

