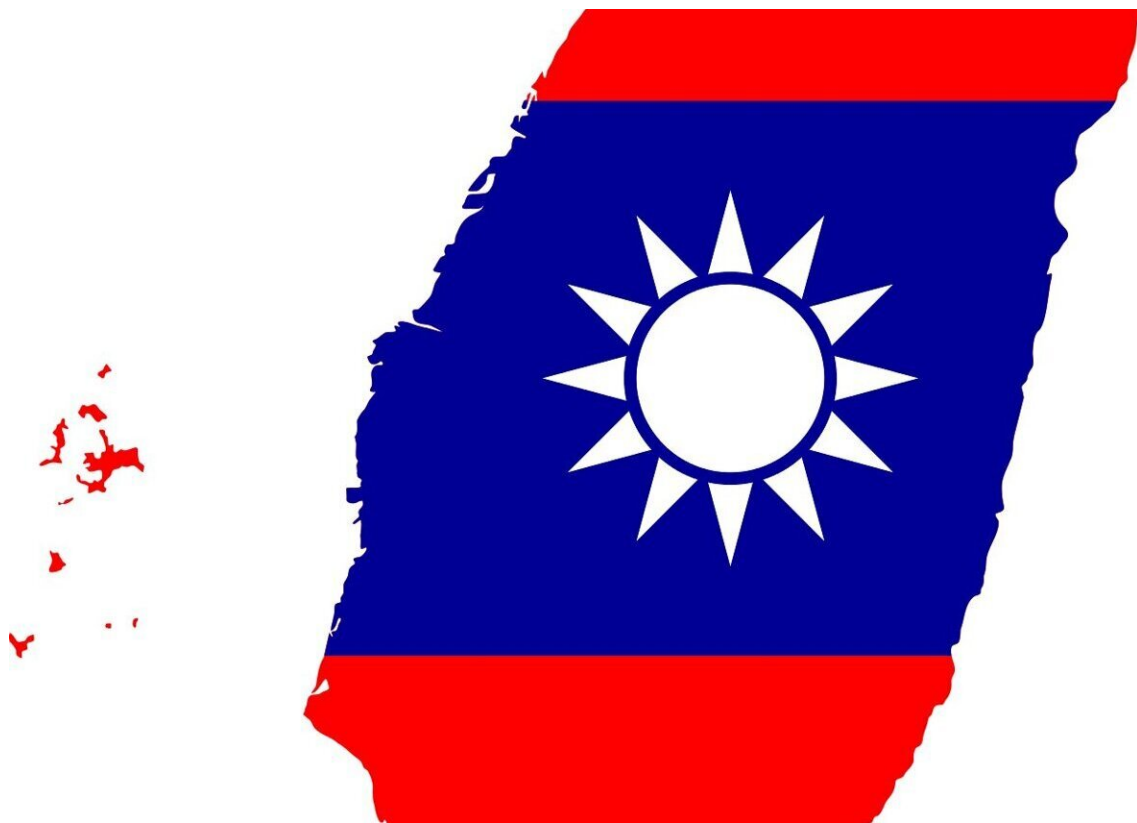


Taiwan's Indigenous languages are under threat—what can NZ learn from their successes and failures?

February 21 2024, by Chien Ju Ting



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There has been a [global push to revitalize Indigenous languages](#) since the late 1980s.

Aotearoa New Zealand has been at the [forefront of revitalization efforts](#), earning the admiration of campaigners in other countries, including Taiwan.

Te reo Māori became an official language in 1987. Immersion education is an option for students alongside dedicated Māori news media. Te reo Māori is also increasingly used in mainstream schools, universities and public life.

But the work is not finished. Academics and campaigners have expressed concerns [te reo Māori could still go extinct by 2100](#). And the current government has made moves to [discourage the use of te reo Māori](#) in official spheres.

New Zealand can learn from the successes and difficulties of countries like Taiwan. The colonial language (Mandarin Chinese) has had dominance in Taiwan for generations, despite efforts to save threatened Indigenous languages, cultures and identities.

The answer for Taiwan—and New Zealand—may lie in supporting the work of grassroots campaigners instead of relying on the government.

The colonization of Taiwan

Taiwan has 16 Indigenous groups—making up around 2% of the island's 23.5 million population. Each group has [its own unique language and culture](#). These languages are believed to be the root of the Austronesian language family, encompassing te reo Māori, Hawaiian and several Pacific languages.

The island of Taiwan was governed by mainland China for hundreds of years before being ruled by Japan between the late 19th century and the end of the second world war.

Taiwan became the home of the Kuomintang (KMT)—the Chinese Nationalist government—after the faction lost [China's civil war in 1949](#). The KMT implemented [martial law](#) and a Chinese-only language policy. It had a significant impact on the survival of Indigenous languages.

This policy disrupted the sharing of these languages within families, leading to their rapid decline. Mandarin Chinese became the dominant language for communication in all social domains.

While Taiwan was presented to the world as the "democratic China", there was no democratically elected president until 1996. The election of [President Lee Teng-hui](#) marked the [start of the "Taiwanisation" movement](#).

In 2016, [Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen issued a formal apology](#) to the Indigenous peoples on behalf of the government for "four centuries of pain and mistreatment ... indigenous peoples' languages suffered great losses."

The revitalization of Taiwan's languages

While Indigenous peoples welcomed the gesture, the effectiveness of government measures to revitalize Taiwan's original tongues remains in question.

Taiwan has introduced a series of policies dedicated to bolstering the revitalization of Indigenous languages. These efforts started with the [Education Act for Indigenous Peoples](#) in 1988 and culminated in the most recent [Development of National Languages Act](#) in 2019.

These laws look good on paper and reflect the [government's inclusion of Indigenous peoples](#) as a key part of national Taiwanese identity.

However, linguistic analysis of the policies show that ideologically they act to say "we are not China" rather than creating a positive, long-term framework for language revitalization. The Education Act, for example, introduced "mother-tongue" classes (classes to teach one of the Indigenous languages).

But these classes are plagued by the question: whose mother tongue gets taught?

By the time these classes were introduced, the vast majority of Indigenous families were speaking Mandarin Chinese in the home, the [single most important domain for inter-generational transmission of language](#).

Even with the Indigenous Language Development Act in 2017, Indigenous languages continue to decline. A [2010 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation \(UNESCO\) report](#) identified six of Taiwan's Indigenous languages as "critically endangered" and others as "rapidly in decline".

[Very few Taiwanese can claim fluency](#) in any of the Indigenous languages, particularly those with a limited number of speakers, [such as Kavalan](#).

Research shows the usual problems of not enough teachers and materials are a smokescreen. The real problem is the pervasive use of Mandarin Chinese in all facets of Taiwanese life and the failure of "mother-tongue classes" to provide any sort of fluency.

Reclaiming indigeneity

What can Aotearoa New Zealand learn from Taiwan's experience?

Firstly, it is clear policies might just be words if the government isn't honest about its intentions. [One study](#) found that while the policies are technically for language revitalization, they are really about enhancing Taiwan's international reputation and avoiding direct opposition to the one-China ideology.

Additionally, it's not simple for many Taiwanese Indigenous people to "decolonise" because their families and histories are deeply connected to Taiwan's past. There's been intermarriage, urbanization, relocation and even coercion.

But what Indigenous communities can do is "recolonise indigeneity" by [establishing grassroot language revitalization efforts](#), continuing [Indigenous journalism and television productions](#) and [creating Indigenous art and creative spaces](#).

Indigenous communities also need to be part of policy-making and participants in all political and cultural domains.

Undoubtedly, Indigenous people and their language contribute to national identities. Taiwanese Indigenous people aren't Chinese, but the question arises—are they Taiwanese? What matters most to them is [being recognized as "Indigenous Taiwanese"](#), standing alongside their non-Indigenous counterparts.

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