

## **Youth Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Happiness: A Comparative Study of Chinese Undergraduates from Taiwan and Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Youth need to develop skills and character to enable them to cope with challenges. However, there is limited research on youth's perspectives of meaningful activities and happiness among youth in the Asia Pacific region. Firstly, this study identifies the types of activities that are deemed meaningful to youth. Secondly, it examines if there is any significant relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and happiness and thirdly, it compares youth's engagement in meaningful activities and their happiness level in two institutions in Taiwan and Malaysia. A total of 338 undergraduate students responded to a packet of survey, including self-report of engagement in meaningful activity survey and the Authentic Happiness Inventory. Results show that there is a significant relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and happiness at  $p < .01$ . Among the activities cited, voluntary work and organised community activities appear to be the factors that constitute youth engagement in meaningful activities and happiness. Tzu Chi Medical students yielded the highest mean scores in Happiness as compared to the students from other departments at  $p < .01$ . Insight into how engagement in meaningful activities has been found to positively influence youth happiness has significance for educational organizations in programme development, staff training, and evaluation.

*Keywords:* Youth, engagement, meaningful activities, happiness, community activities

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### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 14 March 2016

Accepted: 11 October 2016

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### **BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM**

Can extracurricular activities in institutes of higher education support positive youth development and happiness? According to Larson (2000), the increasing risk such as

suicide, violence, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse among youth might be the absence of engagement in positive life trajectory. The World Health Organization (2012) reported that nearly 1,000,000 lives are lost yearly due to suicide, which means 3000 suicide deaths occur every day. In particular, suicide among youth has increased to such an alarming rate that those between 15 and 19 year presently are at the highest risk of suicide in up to a third of countries (Cohen, 2014). Both Taiwan and Malaysia are confronted with high suicide rates among youth.

According to Kok and Goh (2011), an estimated total of 425 suicide cases reported between January and August in 2010, were mostly from the youth group. In Taiwan, the relevant stakeholders are concerned because suicide has become the second-biggest cause of mortality last year of youth aged between 15 and 24 (Chiu, Lin & Pan, 2014). In short, a series of suicide cases among youth reported in Taiwan and Malaysia in recent years is reason for concern.

Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soule, Womer and Lu (2004) found that extracurricular school programmes that provide youth with skill-building activities and happiness may help in reducing at-risk behaviors especially suicidal thoughts. Harun and Salamudin (2010) too posited that personality development can be cultivated through outdoor education programmes. Therefore, good character building among youth is vital to ensure a healthy community. As a core element of

positive development, youth must acquire the ability to demonstrate initiative. Larson (2000) and Lee, Kwong, Cheung, Ungar and Cheung (2010) support the argument that initiative is important for agency and independent actions by young adults.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

There is a substantial amount of evidence that extracurricular activities such as community-based projects, volunteerism and sports may lead to youth meaningful engagement and happiness. How do these meaningful activities produce positive outcomes? Do meaningful activities such as community-based projects, volunteerism and sports lead to youth happiness? To date, very limited studies have explored the relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and happiness from the positive psychology perspective. This study firstly identifies the types of activities that are deemed meaningful to youth. Secondly, it examines if there is any significant relationship between engagement in meaningful activities and happiness. Thirdly, it compares youth's engagement in meaningful activities and their happiness level from two private institutions in Taiwan and Malaysia respectively.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HAPPINESS**

One of the recent dimensional perspectives on happiness tends to focus more on how we use our attention and level of involvement

in activities. Compton and Hoffman posited that engagement theory views happiness as a function of how absorbed we are in the activities of life. From this vantage point, a sense of happiness comes from being involved in what we are doing meaningfully. Cantor and Sanderson (1999) argued that happiness is found through participation in activities that are intrinsically motivating. They contended that it is not necessary *which* activities people choose. What is important is the *process* of being fully involved in an active life that really matters.

Seligman (2002, 2011) advocates that meaningful life involves going beyond individual concerns to take on a wider perspective on life, that is, in the service of something more significant than one's self. According to Schmidt (2014), this endeavour may take many paths such as religious practices, humanitarian causes, or career paths that involve helping others or improving policies. This practice creates meaning that improves happiness. We need to be engaged in our daily activities using our own signature strengths and connect with something bigger than ourselves, such as our community (Compton & Hoffman, 2013). The statement has clearly shown that meaningful engagement in life establishes longer lasting happiness. Numerous studies (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and King, 2009; Yeager and Bundick, 2009; Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013) explored the meaning of happiness and ways to improve a person's happiness level. Yet, little effort was found to have studied the relationship between

youth engagement in meaningful activities and happiness from a positive psychology perspective in the Asia-Pacific region.

### **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES AND HAPPINESS**

Engagement in meaningful activities is one of the highlighted factors that can contribute to happiness. Research also claimed that happier people are both more willing to help others and have more positive outlook in life (Konow & Earley, 2008; Wang & Graddy, 2008; Froh, Kashdan, Yurkewics, Fan, Allen & Glowacki, 2010). Rich (2003) also reviewed that the development of initiative and engagement often emerge from daily activities, especially the ones that the youth are excited about, be totally involved or absorbed in. Bundick (2011) believes that extracurricular activities such as community service and volunteer work stimulate "greater life satisfaction and overall positive development." The above studies clearly show that meaningful engagement in life establishes long lasting happiness. Thus, this study hopes to highlight the importance of what constitutes engagement in meaningful activities and happiness especially through extracurricular activities.

The aim of positive youth development practice is to help the young people acquire an array of competencies and to connect to one self, others, and the community at large (Larson, 2000; Lee, 2007; Compton & Hoffman, 2013). LeBlanc,

Talbot and Craig (2005) and Lerner and colleagues (2005) discuss positive youth development in the context of the six Cs of developmental outcomes, that is, Competence, Confidence, Character, social Connection, and Caring or compassion, and Contribution to community. Their evaluations emphasize the importance of skill development and interpersonal relationships which in turn contribute to youth happiness. In a nutshell, being engaged in meaningful activities may help youth cultivate their purpose and achieve positive experiences related to happiness.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilized survey as a scientific tool to collect data from the samples. Quantitative method was employed in this study to reveal the relationship between the variables.

## Participants

Purposive sampling was used as only specific samples with certain characteristics relevant to the study are selected as participants (Palys, 2008; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2009). A total of 338 Chinese undergraduates from two private universities, Tzu Chi University (TCU), Taiwan ( $n=143$ ) and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia ( $n=195$ ) were recruited in this study. The author drew samples from specific faculties (psychology and counselling, social work and medicine who were usually involved in community-based projects/ services and volunteerism) in an effort to examine youth happiness when they were involved in meaningful activities. Table 1 shows the distribution of the demographic variables of the Chinese undergraduates in this study.

Table 1  
*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
UTAR respondents	195	57.7
TCU respondents	143	42.3
Gender		
Male	101	29.9
Female	237	70.1
Age		
17-19	156	46.1
20-22	170	50.3
23 & above	12	3.6
Religion		
Buddhist	205	60.7
Christian	42	12.4
Others	91	26.9
Area of Living		
Rural	78	23.1
Urban	252	74.6
Not Stated	8	2.4

Notes.  $N=338$ . UTAR – Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia; TCU – Tzu Chi University, Taiwan

Of the 195 respondents from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia, 130 students (38.5%) were from the Department of Psychology and Counselling and 65 students (19.2%) from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science. Of the 143 respondents from Tzu Chi University (TCU), Taiwan, 59 (17.5%) students were from the Department of Psychology, 37 (10.9%) from the Department of Social Works and 47 (13.9%) from the College of Medicine. The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 28 which is representative of the youth in this study. Half of the population belonged to the 20-22 age group. In terms of gender, 70.1% of the respondents were female ( $n = 237$ ) which is the norm of the university in Malaysia and Taiwan where there are more female than male undergraduates. The majority of the Chinese students indicated that they were Buddhists (60.7%) and lived in the urban areas (74.6%).

### Procedure

Before embarking on data collection, permission from both the higher institutions was first obtained. Students were recruited and surveyed either online or on paper in the classrooms conducted by the researcher herself. Packets containing participant information letter, informed consent, and the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents. The questionnaire distributed in Malaysia was in English as the students could understand and answer the questionnaire fairly well since the medium of instruction in UTAR is in

English. For TCU, the questionnaires in both English and Mandarin versions were administered. The Mandarin version was translated by an expert Chinese language lecturer in Malaysia and further checked by another expert professor in TCU in Taiwan before the questionnaire was distributed. Altogether 338 students responded to the survey.

### Measures

The *Engagement in Meaningful Activity Survey (EMAS)* developed by Golberg, Brintnell, and Goldberg (2002) is a 12-item self-report unidimensional scale designed to measure the activities deemed meaningful to the respondents. The measure uses a Likert-type scale (1=rarely; 2=sometimes; 3=usually; 4=always) with items such as “The activities I do help me express my personal value” and “The activities I do give me a sense of satisfaction” with higher mean scores indicating higher level of perceiving the meaningfulness of their activities. In general, the scale reflects individuals’ beliefs that their daily activities are similar to their values and needs; provide proof of mastery and competency; and are valued in one’s socio-cultural group (Eakman, 2011; Eakman, Carlson, & Clark, 2011).

Goldberg, Brintnell and Goldberg evaluated the psychometric properties of the EMAS which evidenced moderate test-retest reliability ( $r = .56$ ) and good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .89$ ). The principal components in the exploratory factor analysis showed a two-component structure

within the EMAS, which is, Personal-Competence and Social-Experiential meaning. It was found that the EMAS demonstrated theoretically predicted zero-order correlations with measures of meaning and purpose in life, depressive symptomology, and life satisfaction. The internal consistency of the survey was  $\alpha=.88$  (Eakman, Carlson, & Clark) and the reliability of the present study was found to be  $\alpha=.87$ .

The *Authentic Happiness Inventory* developed by Peterson (2005) to measure general happiness which includes feelings about oneself, general life satisfaction, enjoyment of day-to-day experience, and optimism for the future (Peterson, Park, Steen & Seligman, 2005). The measure consists of 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, e.g. "Most of the time I felt bored" to 5, e.g., "Most of the time I felt fascinated by what I was doing" with higher mean score indicating higher level of happiness. The developers reported high internal reliability for the Authentic Happiness Inventory which was alpha of .95 (Peterson, et al., 2005).

Zabihi, Ketabi, Tavakoli, and Ghadiri (2014) validated the Persian version of AHI

through the Exploratory Factor Analysis and the results show high internal consistency (alpha of .93). The results obtained from the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and the Scree test indicated a four-factor solution as "Meaningful and Purposeful Life", "Pleasure and Positive Emotions", and "Interpersonal Connectedness" which are similar to Seligman's conceptualization of authentic happiness. In the current study, the internal reliability for the Authentic Happiness Inventory was found to be alpha of .93, similar to Zabidi et al.'s study.

A series of descriptive statistics, namely frequency and percentage, and statistical analyses, including Pearson correlations, and *t*-tests were used to analyse the quantitative data. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS).

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 2 displays the ranking of the types of activities (in frequency and percentage) which were deemed meaningful to the students based on ten listed items in the survey.

Table 2  
*Types of Meaningful Activities as Perceived by the Respondents*

No.	Variable	<i>n</i>	%
1	Volunteer Activities	70	20.7
1	Community Organizational activities	70	20.7
3	Physical Exercise	41	12.1
4	Socializing	39	11.5
5	Reading	29	8.6
6	Musical Activities	23	6.8
7	Travelling	18	5.3
8	Others	14	4.1
9	Home making/home maintenance	10	3.0
10	Religious activities	8	2.4

*Note.* Altogether 16 respondents (4.7%) did not attempt to answer this section.

Students cited both volunteer and community organizational activities ( $n=70$  or 20.7%) as the most meaningful. It is also worth-noting that the respondents cited physical exercises ( $n=41$  or 12.1%) as meaningful. Socializing ( $n=39$  or 11.5%) was ranked fourth on the list as meaningful.

Pearson correlation analysis shows that the mean scores of Engagement in Meaningful Activities Scale was positively and significantly correlated with the mean scores of Happiness Scale where  $r(338) = .50$  at  $p < .01$  as in Table 3.

Table 3  
Correlation between Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Happiness

Measure	1	2
1. Engagement in Meaningful Activities	-	.50**
2. Happiness	.50**	-
Mean	2.95	2.88
SD	.50	.54

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2 tailed)

An independent-samples  $t$ -test was run to compare the means for the measures of engagement in meaningful activities and happiness between respondents by different institution/country as in Table

4. There were no outliers in the data; the variable scores were normally distributed; and the homogeneity of variance was not violated.

Table 4  
Comparison of Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Happiness by Institution/Country

Measures	Institution				$t$ -value	$df$	$p$ -value
	TCU (Taiwan) ( $n = 143$ )		UTAR (M'sia) ( $n = 195$ )				
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey	3.03	.49	2.89	.50	-2.65	336	.01*
Happiness	2.84	.54	2.91	.55	-1.12	336	.26

Notes. TCU- Tzu Chi University, Taiwan; UTAR – Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia, \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$



The result shows significant differences in the mean scores for Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey at the .05 level. TCU students scored significantly higher ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) than UTAR students ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) in the mean scores for Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey where  $t(336) = -2.65$  at  $p < .01$ . However, the result shows no significant differences in the mean scores of Authentic Happiness Inventory Scale between TCU and UTAR at the .05 level. In

other words, the respondents from the two countries do not differ significantly in terms of happiness in relation to engagement in meaningful activities.

In order to look at variation across course types, the analysis of variance (*ANOVA*) was used to compare the mean scores of the engagement in meaningful activities and happiness among the respondents of different departments/colleges for both TCU and UTAR undergraduates as in Table 5.

Table 5  
*ANOVA Results for Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Happiness by Course Types*

Variables	Course Types	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>
Engagement in Meaningful Activities	UTAR_PY	130	2.91	.50	4	.62	2.52*
	TC_PY	59	2.95	.55	4		
	TC_SS	37	3.09	.43	4		
	TC_Medic	47	3.09	.46	4		
	UTAR_Medic	65	2.86	.50	4		
Happiness	UTAR_PY	130	2.97	.58	4	1.35	4.76**
	TC_PY	59	2.69	.55	4		
	TC_SS	37	2.82	.53	4		
	TC_Medic	47	3.05	.45	4		
	UTAR_Medic	65	2.78	.45	4		

Notes. UTAR – Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, TC - Tzu Chi University, PY - Psychology, SS - Social Science, Medic – Medicine, \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

The results revealed significant differences in the mean scores by course types in Engagement in Meaningful Activities and Happiness Measures. TCU students from the Department of Social Science and Medicine scored the highest in the mean scores ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=.43$  and  $.46$  respectively) of Engagement in

Meaningful Activities as compared to the students from other departments where  $F(4,333) = 2.52$  at  $p < .05$ . However, post-hoc analysis using the Tukey HSD test revealed no statistically significant mean differences in the mean scores of Engagement in Meaningful Activities by course types as in Table 6.



Table 6  
*The Tukey-HSD Post Hoc Test Results for Engagement in Meaningful Activities Measure of Respondents by Course Types*

Measure	Course Types	Course Types	Mean Difference (I-J)	p
Engagement in Meaningful Activities	TC_PY	UTAR_PY	.05	.97
		TC_SS	-.14	.68
		TC_Medic	-.13	.64
		UTAR_Medic	-.10	.80
	TC_SS	UTAR_PY	-.19	.26
		TC_PY	.14	.68
		TC_Medic	.00	1.00
		UTAR_Medic	.23	.14
	TC_Medic	UTAR_PY	.18	.20
		TC_PY	.13	.64
		TC_SS	-.00	1.00
		UTAR_Medic	.23	.10
	UTAR_PY	TC_PY	-.05	.97
		TC_SS	-.19	.26
		TC_Medic	-.18	.20
		UTAR_Medic	.05	.96
	UTAR_Medic	UTAR_PY	-.05	.96
		TC_PY	-.10	.80
		TC_SS	-.24	.14
		TC_Medic	-.23	.10

Notes. UTAR - Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, TC - Tzu Chi University, PY- Psychology, SS - Social Science, Medic – Medicine, \*\* $p < .01$

For Happiness Measure, TCU Medical students yielded the highest mean scores in Happiness ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=.45$ ) as compared to the students from other departments where  $F(4,333) = 4.76$  at  $p < .01$ . Post-hoc analysis using the Tukey HSD test as in Table 7 revealed statistically significant mean differences in the mean scores of

Happiness for TCU Medical students against Tzu Chi Psychology students at  $p < .01$ . On the other hand, the mean scores of Happiness for UTAR Psychology students ( $M=2.97$ ,  $SD=.58$ ) were significantly higher than the mean scores of TC Psychology students ( $M=2.69$ ,  $SD=.55$ ) at  $p < .01$ .

Table 7  
*The Tukey-HSD Post Hoc Test Results for Happiness Measure of Respondents by Course Types*

Measure	Course Types	Course Types	Mean Difference (I-J)	p
Happiness	TC_PY	UTAR_PY	-.28	.01**
		TC_SS	-.14	.74
		TC_Medic	-.36	.01**
		UTAR_Medic	-.10	.85
	TC_SS	UTAR_PY	-.15	.57
		TC_PY	.14	.74
		TC_Medic	-.23	.30
		UTAR_Medic	.04	.99
	TC_Medic	UTAR_PY	.08	.91
		TC_PY	.36*	.01**
		TC_SS	.23	.30
		UTAR_Medic	.27	.07
	UTAR_PY	TC_PY	.28	.01**
		TC_SS	.14	.57
		TC_Medic	-.08	.91
		UTAR_Medic	.19	.14
	UTAR_Medic	UTAR_PY	-.19	.14
		TC_PY	-.10	.85
		TC_SS	-.04	.99
		TC_Medic	-.27	.07

Notes. UTAR - Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, TC - Tzu Chi University, PY - Psychology, SS - Social Science, Medic – Medicine, \*\* $p < .01$

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

With respect to the first research question, that is, to identify the types of activities that were deemed meaningful to youth, the findings indicated that volunteer work and community organizational activities ( $n=70$  or 20.7%) as the most meaningful. The finding is in line with Froh et al. (2010) and Lee (2007) who posited that helping youth become more concerned about helping others and engagement in meaningful activities might be one way to enhance their positive emotions

and personal growth. The finding is also congruent with Farahmandpour (2011) who suggested that a meaningful act of service can be transformative for the students as it gives the young people the opportunity to develop their capacities as they serve the communities. Students consider their activities to be meaningful through this process of action and gained understanding on what it means to build a better world for the community.

Students also cited participation in physical activities ( $n=41$  or 12.1%) and

socializing with others ( $n=39$  or 11.5%) as meaningful. The finding is similar to Huang and Humphreys (2010) who found that youth who are involved in sports tend to be healthier, more sociable and develop communicative skills which eventually lead to a happier life. The findings show that both voluntary work and community organizational activities are deemed most meaningful to the respondents. This is in line with Schmidt (2014) who indicated that meaning comes from seeking commitment to serving a cause greater than ourselves especially activities that involved helping and improving the happiness of others.

From the second research question, results from the findings suggest that there was a significant relationship between students' engagement in meaningful activities and happiness at  $p<.01$ . The finding is consistent with Larson (2000) and Rich (2003) who reported that students who are engaged in meaningful activities, such as games, hobbies, and arts, experience high levels of intrinsic motivation amounting to happiness. The result confirms the finding of Scales, Blyth, Berkas and Kielsmeier (2000) in that volunteer work and community organizational activities have positive effects on youth's concerns for the welfare of others. The finding is also in line with Wang and Graddy (2008) who suggest that happy people are both more capable in rendering help to others and sustaining positive outlook in life.

In comparing the perspectives between youth in Taiwan and Malaysia for the third research question, TCU Medical students

seemed to gain more in term of happiness as compared to the other students in relation to engagement in meaningful activities at  $p<.01$ . The findings are consistent with Bundick (2011) who indicated that people who are always engaged in activities which they find personally meaningful are more likely to have their meaning systems reinforced and thus experience greater happiness. Seemingly, the training offered at the Buddhist Tzu Chi University may have played a role in providing holistic care teaching models to the medical students such as compassion.

According to Seppala (2013), compassion may boost our well-being in helping to broaden our perspective beyond ourselves. Seppala posits that depression is linked to a state of self-focus, a preoccupation with "me, myself, and I." Thus, when youth, especially the at-risk youth, shift their focus from self to others, youth may feel energized to help and before they know it, they may even have gained some perspectives on their own situations as well. In a nutshell, youth who are involved in meaningful activities such as helping others, may enhance their positive emotions and lay the foundation for personal growth and experiences.

Most importantly, this research may offer some empirical insights into the relationship between youth engagement in meaningful activities and happiness. The findings show that the structured out-of-school engagements and other meaningful extracurricular activities involvement may provide opportunities for positive youth

development (Bundick, 2011; Larson, 2000). Researchers and practitioners generally agree that thriving youth who have a sense of meaning and purpose live to their true potentials and are reasonably happy with their lives (Bundick, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF STUDY**

At the outset, several limitations need to be highlighted. Firstly, all measures were self-report and based from only two institutions only, namely, Tzu Chi University and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized.

Additional objective assessments and observer reports (e.g. lecturer and peer ratings) might help reduce the potential source of bias of this study. Future research might test a meditational model of engagement in meaningful activities which leads to the identification of meaning and purpose in life, which in turn promotes happiness and positive development among youth. Future research may also carry out pre- and post-testing to measure personal development and happiness, before and after engaging in meaningful activities. Longitudinal designs with at least follow-ups and in-depth interview sessions will enable a better understanding of the processes that lead to more positive outcomes in youth.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research supports the importance of engagement in meaningful activities and its relationship to happiness in youth. The results suggest that students derive a sense of happiness from being involved in activities that are intrinsically motivating and meaningful to them. This study breaks new ground by discovering the importance of instilling humanity such as compassion as part of positive youth development. Tzu Chi University emphasizes the importance of humanistic values which can be recommended to higher institutions, not only in Malaysia but also to other parts of the world. Indeed, among the structured out-of-school engagements, extracurricular involvement may provide opportunities for positive youth development. Engaging in meaningful activities such as community service and instilling the passion to help others can promote happiness in youth, in the present and future. It is hoped that this study may inspire institutions, organizations, or health practitioners to develop innovative programs in order to change the mindset and build the competencies in youth.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to thank Tzu Chi University for hosting my four-month sabbatical leave in Taiwan and granting the permission to collect data at the university in Hualien. This research was sponsored by the Taiwan Fellowship Program, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan.

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