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# FOOTNOTES

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## What Every American Needs to Know about Taiwan

by Shelley Rigger

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About a month and a half ago, a college student in Taiwan ran away from home because, as he told a reporter later, "There's only negative news on TV, and I do not believe Taiwan is such a bad place." He'd been watching television throughout his adolescence and all he ever saw on TV were footage of conflict and political upheaval. He was constantly told that Taiwan is a polarized society fighting for survival between the advocates of unification with China, which the opponents believed would be the end of Taiwan society as a self-contained, self-governing place with cultural, societal, and political integrity, and on the other hand the independence camp, which wants to tear Taiwan away from mainland China even at the risk of sparking a catastrophic war that would destroy both sides. This is the way his society was presented to him in the mass media.

In the last year or so, the big emphasis in the Taiwan media has been on suicides and murder-suicides that have been caused by economic misery. Of course, the economic misery is hypothesized as a consequence of this political polarization. So this kid said, this is not the country I think I live in. But I need to test this proposition, to test my knowledge. So he ran away from home, took only a small backpack, no money, and said "I want to circle the island relying totally on the kindness of strangers." Nine days later he arrived back home having been transported, fed, housed, all the way around Taiwan from top to bottom, down one side and up the other. He concluded, "The most rewarding part of my trip was breaking down stereotypes and experiencing my nation's pure and passionate heart." I felt very akin to him, because I too have experienced Taiwan's pure and passionate heart many times and find it in

confusing juxtaposition to the *superficial* tension and polarization that I experience when I look directly at Taiwan politics. So I thought the experience of this young man was a good one for illustrating how even for Taiwanese, the way Taiwan looks on CNN and Taiwanese TV is really confusing and upsetting.

Another side of Taiwan is exemplified by Taipei 101, which is 101 stories tall. People argue about Taipei 101, as they always do about skyscrapers, is it a good idea, is it necessary, is it beautiful, does it look like a bunch of Chinese take-out containers? I personally think it's a beautiful building. But what is really striking is its isolation. It's twice as tall and then some as the next highest building in the city, which is a couple miles away. It towers over everything around it. Some of these buildings used to seem tall, like the WTC and the Fareast Plaza Hotel. Now they're tiny compared to Taipei 101, which symbolizes a couple of things about Taiwan to me.

First, it symbolizes the incredible ambition of the Taiwanese economy and society. The fact that it could be built in Taiwan shows you that it's not just ambition, that Taiwan really is capable of incredible feats of technological and economic performance. This is an expensive building to build, it's an expensive building to lease out with tenants, it is a technological marvel because Taiwan is on the rim of fire, it's in an earthquake zone. There are regular earthquakes in Taipei, you probably remember the one 11/21/99. This building has a huge sphere suspended at the top that is able to move to compensate for motion in an earthquake or high wind. So it's a technological marvel, an economic amazement. But it's also completely alone in the same way that Taiwan is isolated, not economically, but politically and increasingly in other ways from the things around it, from the nations and places that surround it. So this building too towers above, represents something wonderful but is ultimately disconnected from the city around it.

Taiwan was first mapped for Europeans by Portuguese explorers, who called it the *Ila Formosa*, the beautiful island. It is a beautiful island, with high mountains throughout the center, but it also has a broad coastal plane and fine beaches in some places. It's 244 miles from north to south, 94 miles at the widest east-west point. It's slightly smaller than the states of Delaware and Maryland put together, but has a population of 23 million. It is a very crowded place, especially because the whole central mountain chain is

largely uninhabitable. The highest mountain, Jade mountain, is over 13,000 feet. There are a lot of mountains that approach that altitude. So it is not a very hospitable place over most of its land area. So those 23 million people are basically concentrated on this western coastal plain between the city of Kaohsiung in the south and the city of Taipei in the north. So it is an extremely densely populated country. And at the closest point, it's 95 miles from the PRC.

From the end of the 1500s until 1895, Chinese who needed to get out of Fujian Province, the neighboring province, drifted to Taiwan. Some came to fish its waters and sailed back and forth, some came to farm the coastal plain, some to hide their pirate ships from the Chinese authorities. It was an outpost. And while it was in theory recognized off-and-on as part of the Chinese empire, it was very loosely incorporated into the Chinese empire until the 1800s, when it became a province of China for about 10 years. So the settlers of Taiwan are nearly all Chinese in origin. Nearly everyone who lives in Taiwan, 97-98 percent, are descendants of these Chinese who drifted over at various times for various reasons. There's a small population of aboriginal people whose ancestors drifted to Taiwan from South Pacific islands, but they are a very small percentage.

So until 1895 Taiwan was a marginal part of the Chinese world. Then China experienced an important change beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through 1911. This period of turmoil, the revolutionary period, included the fall of the Qing dynasty and in 1912 the founding of the ROC under the spiritual guidance of Dr. Sun Yat-sen. So in mainland China, from 1912 to 1945, you had this effort to build a republic, a state with at least the aspiration of becoming democratic in the Chinese mainland. And this is a crucial period for the development of Chinese nationalism; the idea of China as a modern nation really flowered in mainland China during these decades.

But for Taiwan during those same decades, actually beginning in 1895 and continuing to 1945, but including the whole Republican period, Taiwan was pulled away from the Chinese world and grafted onto a different empire, the empire of Japan. In 1895 the Japanese and Chinese armies fought a war that started in Korea and at ended to everyone's amazement – in a Japanese victory. One of the spoils they demanded for their victory was Taiwan. The Qing dynasty relinquished Taiwan to the empire of Japan. From 1895, as long as Japan was able to concentrate on its imperial holdings before it began to concentrate on homeland defense in the 1940s, Taiwan was the pearl of the Japanese empire. The idea of Taiwan was that it would be the place where the Japanese empire would demonstrate to the Western world that Japan was as good as anybody at colonizing and developing these so-called virgin territories of the world, these “backward” places that Europeans were colonizing. Thus, two of the major public buildings in Taiwan are the Taipei Guest House and the Presidential Office, both examples of Japanese colonial architecture. The guest house was the Japanese governor's residence and the presidential office, which is used today, was the Japanese colonial governor general's office building.

For fifty years, then, Taiwan, which had been peripheral to the Chinese empire but connected to China, was

disconnected and cut away from that root, part of a very different political and cultural tradition.

In 1945 the situation changed again, because Japan was defeated in World War II and Taiwan was returned to China. In 1945 the government of China was the ROC, the government set up under the ideas of Sun Yat-sen and at that time governed by the Nationalist or KMT party under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. The Nationalist ROC inherited Taiwan from the empire of Japan. Initially, the transfer of power looked like it was going to go well, because many Taiwanese still thought of themselves as ethnically Chinese. They were enthusiastic at the thought of being returned to the nation and culture that they thought of as their motherland. But there were many tensions between the Chinese who moved in from the mainland to administer Taiwan and the people who had been living there, many of whose families had lived there for centuries.

These tensions built up until in February 1947 there was an uprising by local Taiwanese, who wanted not so much to expel the ROC as to impress upon the ROC government that Taiwanese wanted and deserved better treatment than they were getting. This rebellion was crushed with great violence by the ROC, which set in motion an undercurrent of tension and resentment between the people we call the native Taiwanese, or just Taiwanese, those whose families came before the Japanese imperial period, and the newcomer mainlanders, who came between 1945 and the next big event, 1949. In 1949, as you know, the armies of the Communist Party defeated the Nationalist army and expelled the ROC from mainland China. Rather than surrendering and disappearing from the face of the earth, the ROC moved its capital of government to Taiwan, where they found refuge and began planning how they would return to mainland China and recover it someday. They wanted to reestablish ROC democratic rule under the constitution built on the principles of Sun Yat-sen, in mainland China.

Meanwhile, the communists were still waiting to finish the job of exterminating the ROC. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Taiwan was an odd mixture of an uneasy political situation under the leadership of Chiang Kaishek. On the one hand, there was a considerable amount of political repression and dissatisfaction through the 1950s-70s. But at the same time there was an amazing economic miracle in Taiwan. In the 18th through the beginning of the 20th century, Taiwan's GDP per capita was not only below Japan's and Western Europe's, but actually below the world average. There's a major spike during the Japanese colonial period, but a really astonishing spike after 1950, when the economic development policies of the ROC government in Taiwan began to have amazingly fruitful results for Taiwan's economy. So by the late 1980s Taiwan had surpassed the world, China, and was converging with Japan and Western Europe.

The 1980s-90s were a period of rapid political change in Taiwan. There are many reasons for this. One was the international derecognition of the ROC that accelerated in the early 1970s. After President Nixon visited China, in very short order many countries began to establish relations with the PRC and break relations with the ROC on Taiwan. Taiwan left the UN in 1972, so it became very isolated

internationally. It lost its status as “the good China” and became the China that we can no longer recognize because the PRC is big, it’s important, it’s real, it’s not going anywhere. Taiwan had to figure out what to do with itself when it could no longer command the role of free China in a world where “free China” would always be preferred above “Red China.” One of the responses to that tension was democratization. Both President Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kaishek’s son, who succeeded him, and his successor, President Lee Teng-hui, recognized that democratization was one of the ways to build legitimacy for Taiwan inside Taiwan and internationally. So they undertook this period of democratization. The proliferation of elections has been both the major propeller and the major symptom of Taiwan’s democratic transition.

There were elections before 1983, but only in 1983 did these begin to be really competitive, with multiple parties or quasi-parties competing for real power in meaningful political offices. There are a lot of these elections, and in a very short span of time Taiwan’s government has been completely reconstituted on the basis of fully elected representatives of the Taiwanese people.

But along with the rise of democracy in Taiwan has come an increasing sense of Taiwan as its own place. Along with democratization came the increasing feeling among Taiwanese people that Taiwan should be Taiwan: “We don’t really need China. We’re not going to reestablish the ROC in China, the PRC is here to stay, and that’s fine. We value what we have here, we don’t need to be part of the big China in order to realize our destiny as a society.” Through the 1980s and 90s in particular, although this started even earlier, there was a great deal of enthusiasm for Taiwanese culture, for doing things that emphasized the uniqueness and individual nature of Taiwan society. This is seen in the attention given to the goddess Mazu, the patron goddess of Taiwan (who is widely worshipped in southern/southeastern mainland China as well). The most popular folk cult in Taiwan is the Mazu cult. Also, in 2005 it was decided that 2006 would be the year of the puppet theater in Taiwan, the puppet theater being the prototypical Taiwanese art form.

Becoming Taiwanese, beginning to have this feeling that we are Taiwanese, not Chinese, or that we are Taiwanese and Chinese but we don’t need to be part of the Chinese nation-state in order to feel sufficient and complete, is driven by a number of factors. First, beginning in the mid-1990s, China began to press more strongly the idea that Taiwan would have to return to the motherland. Until 1979 forcible liberation of Taiwan was the goal. After 1979, China’s policy goal changed to peaceful unification, but the idea has always been that Taiwan would go in under the PRC as some kind of special region like Hong Kong but as a part of the PRC state.

In 1995, after President Lee visited Cornell University, where he had received his Ph.D., China ratcheted up the hostility of its rhetoric substantially and in fact moved from hostile rhetoric to military action aimed at intimidating Taiwan. One of the consequences of that has been to create a backlash in Taiwan, where more and more Taiwanese say “Why should we think about becoming part of China if they think of us as a military target?” This backlash has

diminished the support and enthusiasm within Taiwan for bringing these two places together. A lot of Taiwanese have taken the attitude that if this is how they feel about us, let’s just forget it.

Most Taiwanese believe that only people in Taiwan should be given the privilege of determining the fate of Taiwan and its people. So they don’t necessarily have hostility toward the PRC, they just think “we are a political community of our own and so we should make our decisions.” However, there is very little enthusiasm in Taiwan for independence, for just making all of this explicit and saying “From now on we will have nothing to do with China. We’re going to take the China out of our name.” The official name of Taiwan is still the ROC, and the year in Taiwan is still calculated as the year of the republic. They call themselves Taiwan and ROC interchangeably, and many Taiwanese still say ROC as a reflex.

The idea of taking China out of the name and becoming the ROT, which I advise against for other reasons, is not popular in Taiwan. Despite the fact there’s not a lot of enthusiasm for unification, there’s also not a lot of enthusiasm for independence. Looking at polls taken from the 1960s through mid-2003, one sees that the percentage of Taiwanese who say “I am Taiwanese only” never reaches 50 percent. So about 5 percent would say “I am Chinese only,” the rest, approximately an equal proportion but slightly higher in most surveys, would say “I am both Chinese and Taiwanese.” From late 1996 until around the time the current president, Chen Shui-bian, was elected in 2000, there was a very steep increase in the percentage calling themselves Taiwanese. It has leveled off since then, but it’s leveled off at a high number. Support for independence has not increased significantly—it was 15 percent in 1996, compared to about 18-19 percent in 2003. So people can change their identity, but not their attitude toward independence and unification. Thus the idea that for people to think of themselves as Taiwanese means that they must demand an independent Taiwanese state that cuts itself off from China is not consistent with the actual public opinion in Taiwan. Most people just want to keep things the way they are, to go on being the ROC on Taiwan, not have unification, at least not until China changes a lot, but not to have independence either. They’re fairly content with the status quo. This creates numerous contradictions.

One of these is Taiwan’s international political isolation. In one mid-1990s cartoon, while Taiwan was trying to get into APEC, South Korea says “Check with Beijing to see if there’s a spare seat.” Anything Taiwan wants to do in the international community has to be approved by China. Increasingly over the past ten years, China has not allowed Taiwan to do anything in the international community: participate in the WHO, certainly not the UN. The last thing Taiwan got into, possibly the last it ever will, was the WTO. That was negotiated so that both Taiwan and the PRC could enter together.

Perhaps one reason Taiwan was admitted to the WTO, although not to WHO or cultural/political organizations, is that despite its political isolation internationally, which is completely orchestrated by the PRC, Taiwan has an important global economic presence in many industries,

particularly in high-tech. Much of the manufacturing or assembly process of high-tech products is carried out by Taiwanese-invested companies in mainland China. But the really good stuff, the R&D, the design, and in many cases the core high-tech components and manufactured in Taiwan, exported to the PRC, where they are assembled into a notebook computer, and then reexported. So they say “Made in China” on them but they could not be made in China without Taiwanese know-how, technology, and capital.

The contradictions for Taiwan, then, include international political isolation vs. a strong global economic presence, also the appearance of political conflict and polarization, which may be masking what the student discussed above discovered, that there is a huge silent majority in Taiwan that is not interested in conflict with anybody, not with China and not with other Taiwanese. But because the political elite continues to have this visceral conflict within itself, most Taiwanese are increasingly withdrawing from political engagement and just trying to focus on things like career and family.

The last contradiction is the rising sense of Taiwanese identity discussed earlier, which seems to be in sharp contradiction to the fact that Taiwan’s economy is increasingly tied to and intertwined with the mainland economy. Taiwan is probably the largest single source of FDI in mainland China. Forty percent of Taiwan’s exports go to mainland China, and they are nearly all either components or equipment for manufacturing. The Taiwanese have

probably \$150 billion invested in the PRC. So it’s a very deep and extensive relationship. UBC Coffee, for example, was once the hip chain in Taiwan, then it went downhill and was overtaken by chains like Starbucks. So UBC moved to the mainland, where it is considered very classy. There are now three special schools for the children of Taiwanese businesspeople working in China.

Is Taiwan headed for disaster, given all these trends and contradictions? Ted Galen Carpenter’s *America’s Coming War with China: A Collision Course over Taiwan* (Palgrave, 2006) begins, middles, and ends with the idea that Taiwan is going to declare independence and that the U.S. is going to be drawn into a war with China, because that’s what Taiwan is going to do. I would say that this is a completely wrong interpretation of the realities of Taiwan society and public opinion. In fact, the only reason we might encounter a crisis in the Taiwan strait would be if Beijing decided that it could no longer wait for the trend of economic integration and the softening of hostilities built up as a result of civil war and decades of conflict to work their magic. If Beijing decides that it can’t wait for those things and tries to compel Taiwan to accept unification before Taiwan is ready, then we could have problems. But the PRC isn’t likely to do that because of the costs to it of doing so and because the trend to seek formal independence and change the name of ROC has already peaked. The PRC can increasingly see that on the other side of that hill, the prospects for some kind of accommodation between these two sides are actually looking better.

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