

Facts about Taiwan



HISTORY

The Aborigines

Little is known of Taiwan's earliest history, but with the results of radiocarbon dating of primitive utensils it has been estimated that people have inhabited Taiwan for at least 10,000 years. The first inhabitants of the island were not Chinese, even though Taiwan has always been on the periphery of the Chinese Empire. Although Chinese history dates back more than 3000 years, there was no significant Chinese migration to Taiwan until the 15th century. Taiwan's earliest inhabitants - simply known as 'aborigines' - appear to have migrated from the Pacific islands, as their features closely resemble those of the people of the nearby Philippines.

When the Chinese arrived in Taiwan, there were two distinct groups of aborigines. One lived on the rich plains of central and south-western Taiwan and the other lived in the mountains.

Arrival of the Chinese

From the Sui dynasty (589-618) until the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Chinese name for Taiwan was Hsiao Liuchiu, even though Taiwan was not as yet claimed by China. From the 15th century on Chinese people from Fujian province migrated to Taiwan in ever increasing numbers. Fujian is just across the straits from Taiwan, and the Fujian dialect is almost identical to modern day Taiwanese. As their numbers grew, the Fujianese occupied the land most suitable for agriculture (Taiwan's west coastal plain), driving the aborigines towards the mountains and the rocky east coast. The Fujianese have always been the keenest of Chinese travellers, and today they can be found all over South-East Asia.

Along with the Fujianese came a small but steady stream of ethnic Chinese known as the Hakka. Coming from Henan province in northern China, the Hakka first moved to

Guangdon and Fujian provinces in the south to escape severe persecution in their homelands. The name Hakkameans 'guests' and, as guests in search of a home, they gradually trickled into Taiwan. Today, the Hakka are a minority in Taiwan - only their nearly forgotten dialect distinguishes them from the Taiwanese majority.

European Imperialism

In 1517 the first Europeans - Portuguese sailors - landed on Taiwan's shores and were so impressed by the beautiful scenery that they named it Ilha Formosa, which

means 'Beautiful Island' . The name Formosa is still used, though nowadays the island is better known by its Chinese name, Taiwan, which means 'Terraced Bay'.

Following the tradition of imperialism that was popular at the time, the Dutch invaded Taiwan in 1624. The Dutch established the first capital on Taiwan, at what is now the city of Tainan in the south-western part of the island. Two years later the Spanish grabbed control of north Taiwan, but they were expelled by the Dutch in 1641.

Taiwan had no real army to resist the Dutch occupation, but events on the Chinese mainland soon changed all that. Blood was flowing in China as the up-and-coming Qing (Manchu) dynasty armies set about destroying the Ming dynasty supporters. Cheng Chengkung, also known as Koxinga, was one Ming supporter who fled to Taiwan. He left in 1661 with 35,000 troops in 400 war junks and successfully expelled the Dutch from their stronghold in Tainan.

The Manchu Period

Koxinga's forces had hoped to launch an invasion to recapture the mainland from the Manchus, but instead the Manchu armies captured Taiwan in 1682. For the next 200 years there was substantial migration from Fujian province across the Taiwan Straits. These immigrants brought their culture and language with them, and these still dominate Taiwan today. Taiwan remained a county of Fujian province from 1684 until 1887 when, with a population of more than 2.5 million, it became a province of China.

Japanese Imperialism

In 1894 a dispute over Korea led to the Sino-Japanese War. Taiwan, being somewhat remote, managed to avoid most of the dislocations of the battle on the mainland. But when China was defeated in 1895, Taiwan became one of the spoils of war and was ceded to Japan. Although the Japanese brought law and order, they also brought harsh rule. Many of Taiwan's residents objected and rebelled against this rule, proclaiming Taiwan an independent republic later that year. The Formosan Republic, the first republic in Asia, was short-lived as the Japanese quickly and brutally crushed it. For the next 50 years Taiwan remained part of Japan. The Japanese influence was extensive and even today many of the older people speak Japanese.

Although the Japanese ruled with an iron fist, they were also efficient and contributed substantially to Taiwan's economic and educational development. During Japan's rule Taiwan became more developed than mainland China. The Japanese built roads, railroads, schools and hospitals, and improved agricultural techniques. However, WWII created a great demand for men and raw materials to feed Japan's war machine. The Japanese drafted tens of thousands of Taiwanese into the Japanese army, many of whom were killed or wounded. The western Allies also bombed Japanese military installations in Taiwan, though the island was lucky enough to escape the carpet bombing that Japan endured. By the time the war ended, Taiwan's economy, along with those of mainland China and Japan, was in ruins.

The Republic of China

Birth of the Republic Events in mainland China were destined to impact on Taiwan's future. China's last dynasty - the Qing dynasty - collapsed in 1911 following a

Dr Sun Yatsen, founding Father of the Republic of China (ROC)

nationwide rebellion led by Dr Sun Yatsen, who became the first president of the Republic of China (ROC). Sun Yatsen did not lust for power, but instead stepped down in favour of Yuan Shikai. Unfortunately, Yuan Shikai did not share Sun Yatsen's vision of a democratic China and he attempted to promote himself as a new emperor. He was unsuccessful and died of cancer in 1916.

A period of civil war ensued while various rival warlords and factions struggled for power. Unity was eventually restored when the Kuomintang (the KMT, or Nationalist Party) forcibly took power. The Nationalist army was led by Chiang Kaishek, who preferred the title 'Generalissimo'. However, the KMT soon found itself beleaguered by Japan's growing militancy and the Communist rebellion, and in 1931, Japanese forces occupied Manchuria. In 1937, they invaded the Chinese heartland.

Under the Yalta Agreement, China regained sovereignty over Taiwan after Japan's defeat in WWII. At first the Taiwanese were happy Chiang Kaishek, leader of the KMT, led the move to Taiwan from China.

to be rid of the Japanese military and welcomed the KMT, but their joy soon faded when Chiang Kaishek sent the corrupt and incompetent General Chen Yi to be Taiwan's governor. Chen Yi's misrule came to a head on 28 February 1947, when anti-KMT riots broke out and were brutally repressed - somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 civilians were killed. The incident, now known as '2-28' (for the date when it occurred), remained a forbidden topic of discussion in Taiwan until the lifting of martial law in 1987.

The 'Two Chinas' In 1949, the Communists wrested control of the Chinese mainland from the KMT and established the rival People's Republic of China (PRC). The KMT, now firmly under the control of Chiang Kaishek, fled to Taiwan, taking with them their flag and ROC constitution. Thus began the still unsettled saga of 'two Chinas', - the ROC and the PRC.

About 1.5 million Chinese, including 600,000 soldiers, moved to Taiwan after the

Communists captured the mainland. As a result, the island's population grew from around six million in 1946 to 7.5 million in 1950. In 1950, disgraced former governor Chen Yi was executed on Chiang's orders.



As they fled, KMT troops were able to hold onto three small islands just off the Chinese mainland - Kinmen (Quemoy), Matsu and Wuchiu - which still remain under the control of Taiwan. An invasion of Taiwan was fully expected, but the Communist army became bogged down in the Korean War. The USA (fearing Communist world domination) sent its 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Straits to thwart any invasion plans the Communists may have had.

The KMT maintained from the beginning that their stay in Taiwan was temporary - that they would retake mainland China from the Communists 'very soon', and that, in the meantime, no political opposition could be permitted. Such policies did not necessarily endear the KMT to the native Taiwanese. Nevertheless, the KMT proved itself capable of repairing Taiwan's war-torn economy. An excellent land-reform program was introduced in the 1950s which resulted in a far more equitable income distribution than is found in most Asian countries. Rapid industrialisation in the 1960s made Taiwan one of the wealthiest economies in Asia.

In October 1971, the ROC lost the China United Nations seat. A further blow came in January 1979, when the USA withdrew recognition of the ROC in favour of the PRC regime on the mainland. Most countries have now withdrawn diplomatic recognition of the ROC. In spite of this, most of the capitalist world maintains very strong unofficial economic ties with Taiwan.

Chiang Kaishek died from a heart attack in 1975, at the age of 87. His son, Chiang Chingkuo, became president of the ROC in 1978 after an uncontested election. He was re-elected in 1984 and served a second term till his death in January 1988.

From the 1980s to the present day, mainland China has kept relentless pressure on other countries not to sell military hardware to Taiwan. This has caused some serious rows, most often with the USA. China says arms sales to Taiwan are 'interference in the internal affairs of China'. China has also tried to get other countries to break economic links with Taiwan, but few have done so. Taiwan has consistently denounced these policies, which are referred to as 'Chinese-Communist united-front tactics'.

Political Reform In 1986, a political upheaval occurred with the formation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), despite a government ban on new political parties. After much debate, the KMT - under the specific orders of President Chiang Chingkuo - decided not to interfere with the DPP. A large number of DPP candidates were elected in 1986 and were permitted to take their seats in the legislature, thus creating Taiwan's first true opposition party.

In 1987, 38 years of martial law ended. It was one of the last acts of Chiang Chingkuo before his death. He was succeeded by Lee Tenghui, the first Taiwanese-born person to hold the post of president.

President Lee's first important act was to solve the problem of the 'ageing deputies' KMT legislators who were elected in the mainland before the Communist takeover. Unable to stand for re-election, they were frozen in office for over 40 years, absurdly claiming to represent their constituents in the mainland. In December 1991, those still living (there were more than 460) were finally forced to retire, and the first free election to the National Assembly was held. This made Lee very

popular and earned him the unofficial title of 'Mr Democracy'.

With the ageing deputies gone, reforms quickly followed. Almost all restrictions on the press were lifted. Raucous parliamentary debates and free elections soon allowed the Taiwanese to claim that their society was one of the most liberal in Asia.

With free debate now permitted, the Taiwanese leadership soon accepted reality and gave up its position that Taiwan would 'retake the mainland'. However, China has not given up its position that it will 'retake

Taiwan'. The leaders of the PRC have stated unequivocally that there is only 'one China', and that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will invade Taiwan if the island ever makes a formal declaration of independence.

With this in mind, the Taiwanese have been careful to continue referring to their country as the ROC. Officially, the Taiwanese agree that there is only one China, which is currently divided between the PRC and ROC, but 'someday' the Chinese nation will be reunited. Unofficially, many young Taiwanese people favour establishing a fully independent Republic of Taiwan, but so far the majority has been willing to live with the status quo.

Unfortunately, the status quo may not be good enough. While officially claiming to be part of China, the Taiwanese upped the ante in 1994 by lobbying the United Nations to grant a seat to the ROC. As far as China was concerned, this was tantamount to a declaration of independence. Lee Tenghui angered China further by making a high profile visit to the USA in late 1995 as a precursor to his re-election campaign. China went ballistic literally - and conducted a series of missile tests in the hope of intimidating Taiwanese voters to vote for 'pro-China' candidates in the December 1995 parliamentary elections. A second round of war games, conducted during the March 1996 presidential elections, were held to scare off voters from supporting President Lee Tenghui. Chinese missiles plunged into the sea just 25km off the coast of Taiwan.

China's 'missile diplomacy' pretty much achieved the opposite of what the Chinese leadership intended. The USA parked two aircraft carriers just off the coast to thwart any actual invasion plans. Independence sentiment in Taiwan greatly increased as a direct result of China's threats and 'war games'. Voters rallied to President Lee and returned him to power with 54% of the vote in a four way race. The DPP candidate, Peng Mingmin, ran on an unabashed independence platform and came in second with 21% of the vote. The most pro-China candidate, Lin Yanggang, received 15%. The remaining 10% went to pro-Buddhist Chen Li-an.

Recent Developments President Lee's glory did not last long. One of his first official acts following re-election was to fire Ma Yingjeou, the popular Justice Minister who had received widespread praise for his crack down on corruption. Lee's greatest political problem, however proved to be something totally unexpected - crime. In 1996, a high profile crackdown on underworld godfathers won some kudos, but the political benefits were soon dissipated when many of the gangsters were quickly released from prison for 'medical reasons'.

The first big shockwave came in November 1996, when Liu Pang-you (magistrate of Taoyuan County) was killed along with seven others in a gangland execution in the garage of Liu's mansion. That December, the nation was further horrified by the savage rape and murder of 47-year-old Peng Wanru, a well-known women's rights activist and member of the DPP. In 1997, the brutal kidnapping and murder of Pai Hsiaoyen daughter of famed Taiwanese TV star Pai Pingping - brought up to 70,000 demonstrators onto the streets of Taipei to protest the breakdown in law and order. China's takeover of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997 sent more jitters through Taiwan. The second half of the year was gloomy with the growing Asian currency crisis. Taiwan's currency value dropped by about 15%, but overall Taiwan came out of the crisis in better shape than almost every other country in the region. The other major event of 1997 was a six day visit to Taiwan by the Dalai Lama. China sternly objected to the visit and demanded it be stopped, but the Taiwanese authorities issued the visa despite Beijing's protests (see the Asian Flu boxed text in the Facts for the Visitor chapter).

China began 1998 by extending an olive branch to Taipei, offering to resume talks which had been suspended (by China) during the 1995 missile crisis. Part of the motive behind the new peace offer might have been that China was facing a severe banking crisis

of its own, and could ill-afford any further confrontations that would have scared off Taiwanese investors.

GEOGRAPHY

Shaped roughly like a leaf, the island of Taiwan is only 160km across the Taiwan Straits from mainland China.

The maximum length of the island is 395km, and the maximum width is 144km. Taiwan's total land area of 32,260 sq km is surrounded by a 1448km coastline. Though the island is small, its mountains are extremely high, reaching 3952m at Yushan (Jade Mountain), which is higher than Mt Fuji in Japan. Indeed, apart from the Himalayan region, Yushan is the highest peak in North-East Asia.

The mountains rise straight out of the sea on Taiwan's east coast, while the west side of the island is a flat and fertile plain, much more hospitable to human habitation. Over 90% of Taiwan's population resides there. However, the mountainous eastern side of the island is far more scenic.

In addition to the island of Taiwan itself, there are a number of smaller offshore islands which have become popular with tourists. These include Orchid Island, Green Island, the Penghu Islands (which numbers 64, including islets), Hsiao Liuchiu, Kinmen, and Matsu (18 including islets).

Taiwan, like mainland China, lays claim to 53 rocks, shoals and reefs above Brunei in the South China Sea, known as the Spratly Islands. The Spratlys are also claimed by Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei. The claims wouldn't be taken too seriously except that there is *possibly* oil under these islands, which has led to heavy fortification of the area. Taiwan maintains a military base on the largest islet in the Spratly group to enforce its claim.

On the northern front, Taiwan has had a long running dispute with Japan and mainland China over the Tiaoyutai Islands (Japan calls them the Senkaku Islands) which lie to the north-east of Taiwan. The islands were indeed part of China once, but were annexed by Japan in 1895 (the year Taiwan was also annexed). When the Japanese were forced out of Taiwan at the end of WWII, they held onto the Tiaoyutai chain and the Americans acquiesced.

Taipei, at the very northern end of Taiwan, is the largest city and the seat of the national government. Other large cities include Kaohsiung, Taichung and Tainan - all on the west side of the island.

GEOLOGY

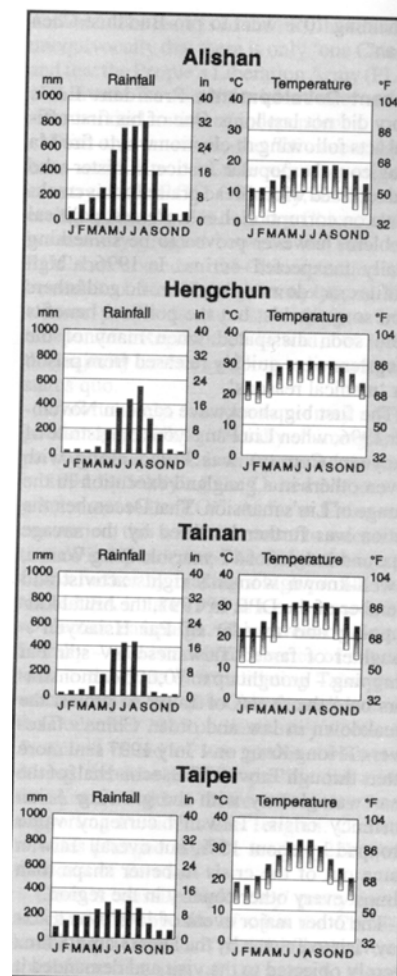
Taiwan is on the western edge of the Pacific 'rim of Eire', where the Philippine tectonic plate collides with the Eurasian landmass. Where two plates collide like this, you expect to find steep mountains, earthquakes and sometimes volcanoes. This is indeed the case in Taiwan - steep limestone mountains rise dramatically out of the sea on the east (Pacific) coast. The mountains were mostly created by fault action, though a few have volcanic origins. All of Taiwan's volcanoes are now extinct, though numerous hot springs remain as a reminder of the recent geological turbulence. Orchid Island and Green Island off the east coast are totally volcanic in origin.

A major fault line runs down the east coast, the source of frequent tremors which reverberate throughout the island. Noticeable minor earthquakes occur several times a year, but there have been no devastating geological disasters in Taiwan's recent history. In 1995, an earthquake demolished a school in Taitung County, but fortunately this occurred at night when no students were inside. However, the potential for a deadly earthquake remains a threat, especially on the east coast.

CLIMATE

Taiwan is a subtropical island with two rather than four - seasons. For such a small place, the climate varies considerably. There are basically three climatic regions: the north and east coastal region, the south-west coastal region, and the mountains.

In the north and east coastal region, which includes Taipei, there isn't really a dry season. Winter is cool, occasionally chilly, and is characterised by heavy cloud cover and frequent drizzle. Statistically, more rain falls during summer but, ironically, the skies tend to be sunny most of the time. Summer rain comes in short, torrential thunder showers mostly during the afternoon. Summers are sticky and very hot.



The south-west has two distinct seasons. Summer is hot and humid, with frequent afternoon thunder showers. Winter is very dry and sunny, with pleasantly cool days. The mountains get the most rain of all, especially during summer. The summer rain tends to fall in short-lived thunder showers, starting about 2 pm and often ending by 4 pm. Places at higher altitudes often experience an afternoon fog. During winter the weather tends to be drier on the west side of the mountains than on the east side. Temperatures can get very low above 2000m, and winter snow is common above 3000m. A striking feature of Taiwan's winter is the monsoon wind (*bdnliu*) from Central Asia, which can send the temperature plummeting 10°C or more in just a few hours. You might be comfortably wearing a T-shirt and shorts in the morning, but by noon you'll have to put on long trousers and a coat. At such times it can snow in the mountains.

The Penghu Islands in the Taiwan Straits are lashed with severe winds during winter. Kinmen and Matsu are surprisingly cold in winter, thanks to their proximity to the icy mainland.

Spring is Warm and mild but there is frequent rain throughout the country. This is known as the 'plum rain' and can continue through to August.

Summer is typhoon season. The brief autumn (October and November) is the most delightful time to visit the whole region, including mainland China, though typhoons are possible in October. Autumn temperatures are ideal, and this is the driest time of year, especially in the south-west.

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Painful as it is to admit, Taiwan is infamous for its poor record on environmental protection. The industrial revolution, rapid population growth, rubbish dumping, dense motor vehicle traffic and unplanned urban development have all had a major impact.

The good news is that there is growing awareness of the issue and environmental protesters have grown ever more shrill in their demands to clean things up. The dirtiest

industries have been forced to shut down operations, though most have simply moved across the Taiwan Straits to mainland China where protesters don't dare raise their voices. Taiwan's rather lame Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is making slow progress in cracking down on polluting industries and vehicles. Some efforts at recycling have begun. Taiwan may someday get its act together on protecting the environment, but that day is probably still several years away.

Flora

Thanks to its subtropical climate, Taiwan is covered with some very lush vegetation, at least in those parts of the island which have managed to escape urban development. The mountain areas and the east coast are especially rewarding for nature enthusiasts. However, many native species have been pushed aside by exotic imports. Approximately 55% of Taiwan is forested or cultivated woodland. The high mountain forests are predominantly cypress, though juniper, fir, pine, spruce,

bamboo, azalea and many hardwoods are common. Camphor trees, which at one time provided the base material for Taiwan's thriving camphor industry, have all but disappeared. In the past, camphor was Taiwan's leading export; unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

On the web...

You will learn much more by surfing on these sites...

www.taichi-belgium.com For a taichi view on what's possible to do and to see in Taiwan.

www.lonelyplanet.com This is Lonely Planet's award-winning site, containing destination updates, recent travellers' letters and a useful traveller's bulletin board.

www.tbroc.gov.tw The ROC Tourism Bureau's Web site in English is worth a peek.

www.sinica.edu.tw/tit/index.html The site for *Travel in Taiwan* magazine has all sorts of useful information for tourists.

www.icrt.com.tw This English-language site maintained by International Community Radio Taipei (ICRT) is the place to catch up on activities, concerts and other happenings in Taiwan.

www.webcom.com/bamboo/chinese The venerable Carlos McEvelly has one of the best Chinese linguistic sites around.

www.zhongwen.com Rick Harbaugh has put together a superb online etymological dictionary of the Chinese language on this site.

www.community.com.tw If you're thinking of taking up residence in Taiwan check out this Community Services Centre site.

www.hotel.cybertaiwan.com This site has information on Taiwan's hotels.



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