

A Brief History of Taiwan

Capital: Taipei

Population: 23,113,901 (July 2012)

Languages: Mandarin Chinese (official), Taiwanese, Hakkanese

Religions/Beliefs: Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity

Located in the waters off China's southeastern coast, Taiwan or the Republic of China is home to 23 million people ranging from members of the earliest aboriginal tribes to the most recent immigrants. With its dynamic history and culture, present-day Taiwan, one of the "Economic Tigers" of East Asia, boasts a flourishing export industry and recognizes three main spoken languages: Mandarin Chinese (official), Taiwanese, and Hakkanese, with over 10 aboriginal dialects still in existence. While perhaps best known in the United States for its complicated political relationship with China, Taiwan, whether viewed as a province or as a nation in its own right, represents a fascinating union of diverse cultural influences and histories.

Early History

At the time the Portuguese explored what they named *Ilha Formosa* ("Beautiful Isle") in the sixteenth century, Taiwan was inhabited by groups of aboriginal people¹. Today, remnants of the eleven major aboriginal groups still remain, forming approximately 2 percent of Taiwan's overall population. Although the Portuguese decided not to colonize Taiwan, other European powers settled on the island including the Spanish, who established themselves in Keelung. In 1624 the Dutch also gained a foothold in Taiwan when they established the fort of Zeelandia (present-day Tainan) along the coast. By 1640, the Dutch had gained control of Taiwan by ousting the Spanish, and a prosperous trade emerged between Taiwan, the Dutch East Indies, and mainland China. Dutch colonizers generally viewed the Taiwanese indigenous population as "savage" and paid them little attention.

¹ Taiwan's aboriginal people are linguistically descended from people who inhabited the islands of the central and south Pacific

Meanwhile, the Manchus on the mainland were busy solidifying their control over China as the new Qing dynasty. Pockets of resistance from Chinese loyal to the former Ming dynasty (1368–1644) remained, especially in southern China. Residents from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, many of them Hakkanese, were drawn to Taiwan, seeking fortune and/or to escape the economic and political turmoil. The incoming Chinese drove the aboriginal population into the mountainous region in the eastern part of Taiwan. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese became the majority.

Koxinga

Also known as Zheng Chenggong, Koxinga² (1624–1662) was a legend of the seas born of a Japanese mother and a Chinese father. Considered by the Chinese and Japanese to be a Ming loyalist and by the Dutch to be a pirate of the Taiwan Straits, Koxinga provided naval support and troops to the collapsing Ming dynasty in their battle against the Manchus from 1646 to 1660.

Koxinga financed his military expeditions through his lucrative international trade, and he posed a threat to the fledgling Qing dynasty. He failed to take the capital of Nanjing, in 1661, but with his fleet of 900 ships, he launched an attack on the Dutch fortress of Zeelandia. The following year he successfully drove the Dutch out of Taiwan, thus establishing Chinese control of the island for the first time in 1662. Koxinga died later that same year.

Koxinga's descendants tried to maintain control of Taiwan, developing the island's agriculture and trade industry. But the Qing dynasty would not tolerate any potential threat to their supremacy, and in 1683, the Zheng family surrendered in the face of a well-planned imperial onslaught (see Chapter 3).

² While his given name is Zheng Chenggong, “Koxinga” is the westernized pronunciation of the Ming imperial surname bestowed upon him for his loyalty.

Taiwan Under the Qing (1683–1895)

After their success in Taiwan and the removal of Koxinga's troops and family from the island, the Qing decided to make Taiwan a military buffer zone between China and the Dutch.³ Taiwan was declared part of the territory of Fujian Province with Tainan as its capital city. The Qing put several measures in place to ensure control over the new territory. For example, they discouraged emigration to Taiwan and permitted only limited contact across the Taiwan Strait. They stationed permanent troops on the island and insisted that aboriginal territories be respected. With these measures in place, Taiwan would remain a prefecture of Fujian for approximately 200 years until in 1887 with its population exceeding 2.5 million, it gained provincial status.

Taiwan Under Japanese Rule (1895–1945)

Taiwan remained a part of China until Japanese forces crushed Qing troops in the 1894 Sino-Japanese War (see Chapter 7). Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki signed the following year, the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan “in perpetuity.”

The Taiwanese initially objected to life under Japanese rule, and a group of the Taiwanese ruling class founded the Formosan Republic on May 25, 1895 with the financial and military support of Qing officials. Despite Qing support, the Japanese efficiently suppressed the independence movement by seizing Tainan in October of the same year and ending the rebellion. The seizure of the new republic's capital effectively ended the rebellion, once more establishing Japanese rule over the island.

The Japanese were to rule Taiwan for the next fifty years despite a number of small uprisings. Unlike their brutal occupation of mainland China from 1936 to 1945 (see Chapter 11), the Japanese controlled Taiwan as a colony that they wished to develop. They strengthened the island's infrastructure, building schools, roads, a transportation system and hospitals, and improved the economy by introducing new agricultural techniques and some industry.

³ Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*, 57

The 1940s

During World War II, Taiwan remained under Japanese control. The Allies met at several conferences during the course of the war. In 1943, at the Cairo Conference, the Allies signed an agreement whereby Taiwan and Manchukuo (Manchuria) would be returned to China upon Japan's defeat. Thus, when the war ended in 1945, Chiang Kai-shek (head of China's Guomintang or Nationalist government) appointed Chen Yi to act as chief administrator over Taiwan. However, the Taiwanese, acclimated to prospering under Japanese rule, protested against Chen's corrupt and inept rule and in February 1947 staged a rebellion that culminated in bloodshed, with Guomintang forces firing on demonstrators. Following the "2-28 Incident," Chen then ordered the detainment and execution of thousands of Taiwanese intellectuals and leaders. With Taiwanese morale shattered, Chiang Kai-shek focused on plans for readying Taiwan as a possible future base to which the Guomintang could retreat, fortifying the island with troops and military equipment (see Chapter 12).

The Republic of China

When the Communists established the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan and established the Republic of China (ROC). Thus began the dispute over which was the rightful government of "China." Was it Chiang Kai-shek's Guomintang government in exile in Taiwan or Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party on the mainland?

The San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 signed between the United States and Japan following World War II only served to complicate matters. According to the terms of the treaty, Japan would retract all claims to Taiwan, whose status would later be decided by the United Nations charter. However, the United Nations pointed to the futility of supporting Chiang Kai-shek's forces in Taiwan, as they viewed the Guomintang retreat as an admission of weakness. Thus, the United Nations continued to ignore the delicate question of the island's status and Chiang Kai-shek continued to govern Taiwan.

Ruling under martial law, Chiang Kai-shek outlawed criticism of his government and denied citizens freedom of the press. Despite his reign of “white terror,”⁴ Chiang Kai-shek proved to be a more effective ruler than Chen Yi, introducing land-reform programs in an effort to boost Taiwan’s economy.

Factories grew to provide inexpensive goods for both domestic and export purposes, and trade zones and tax incentives were established to attract foreign investment. Receiving \$1.5 billion in foreign aid from the United States during this time, Taiwan quickly became one of Asia’s wealthiest economies. Many countries including the United States viewed the Guomindang government in Taiwan at this time to be the legitimate government for both mainland China and Taiwan.

Foreign Relations

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States also provided significant military aid to Taiwan, establishing the Military Assistance and Advisory Group on the island. For example, after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, President Harry Truman provided a naval fleet to patrol the Taiwan Straits to discourage a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Four years later, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan, guaranteeing U.S. protection.

However, in the 1960s, the United States and mainland China began to explore a normalization of their relationship, and the United States ceased to provide Taiwan with foreign aid for development in 1964 (see Chapter 15). With the onset of “Ping-Pong diplomacy” in 1971 and President Nixon’s visit to mainland China the following year, the United States moved even closer to establishing ties with the Communist government of mainland China. Following suit, in 1971, the United Nations General Assembly voted Taiwan out of its UN seat, giving that seat to the People’s Republic of China instead. In yet another massive blow to Taiwan’s claims of sovereignty, China and the United States jointly issued the Shanghai Communiqué on February 28, 1972:

⁴ In *Elegy of Sweet Potatoes: Stories of Taiwan’s White Terror* author Tsai Teh-pen refers to the ruthless martial law enforced by Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan during this time.

The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan.⁵

In succeeding years, one by one, many nations withdrew formal recognition of Taiwan, the Republic of China. The United States ended diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979, but in April of that year passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which emphasized continuing U.S. commitment to Taiwan. According to the act, “the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means,” and the United States promised to “resist any resort to force or other economic forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people in Taiwan.” The Taiwan Relations Act did not affect other nations’ views towards Taiwan, and today, only twenty-five nations (mostly in Latin America) still recognize the ROC as the legitimate government of all of China. Despite the lack of formal recognition, Taiwan continues to preserve economic ties with numerous capitalist nations and in 2001 was officially named a member of the World Trade Organization.

Moving Towards Democracy

Chiang Kai-shek’s death in 1975 spelled the beginning of the end of the “white terror” that Taiwan had experienced. Though Chiang Ching-kuo, his son, assumed the presidency with no formal dissent, unlike his father, Chiang Ching-kuo allowed opposition to his rule and did not quell the 1986 formation of the Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan’s first genuine opposition party. The year before his death in 1988, Chiang Ching-kuo declared the end of martial law in Taiwan.

1988 hailed the first legitimate two-party election in Taiwan, and Lee Tenghui became the first Taiwanese-born president. Also known as “Mr. Democracy,” Lee introduced free

⁵ <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/communique01.htm>

elections to the National Assembly in 1991 and lifted media restrictions, paving the road for the democratic Taiwan the world knows today.

Taiwan Today

A multi-party democracy, Taiwan's modern-day government is composed of five branches: executive, legislative, control, judicial, and examination. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches serve much of the same functions as their counterparts in the United States. The control branch's main function includes managing public services, investigating charges of corruption within the government, and measuring efficiency. For example, the control branch can investigate corruption charges and impeach those found guilty. Acting in the capacity of a human resources department, the examination branch manages the government's personnel system, conducting professional, technical, and civil service examinations. The president possesses executive power over all five of the branches while continuing to manage the tricky political situation between China and Taiwan.

While the "one China" question remains unsolved, Taiwan and China conduct an expanding and lucrative import and export business across the Taiwan Strait. In 2001, China became Taiwan's largest export market and by 2007 fielded over 80 percent of Taiwan's foreign investment. 2005 saw the opening of direct flights between Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou on the mainland and Taipei and Gaohsiung in Taiwan. The direct flights marked a new opening of cross-strait relations, allowing not only businessmen but also relatives and tourists to travel conveniently between mainland China and Taiwan. In 2010, China and Taiwan signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, a landmark free trade agreement that cut tariffs on many goods and services and reduced commercial barriers. The bilateral deal represents the most significant step to date in normalizing cross-strait relations, and is meant to serve as a stepping stone for Taiwan—long hampered by diplomatic isolation—to negotiate trade pacts with other countries in the region.

As China and Taiwan's economies become increasingly interdependent, both governments appear to be committed to maintaining the status quo, leaving the "one China" question unresolved. "Not independent but not reunified," China and Taiwan enjoy peaceful cross-straits relations and both continue to grow economically.

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