



*The Other China
Changes Course*
TAIWAN

Candles and confetti mark a Taiwan TV station's 30 years of success. Lasting autonomy and new prosperity give the whole island reason to celebrate, even in the shadow of mainland China.

By ARTHUR ZICH

Photographs by JODI COBB
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Choking the streets of Kaohsiung at rush hour, motorcycles are a commuter's best friend; islandwide, some ten million—one for every two people—vastly outnumber cars and trucks.

“YOU’RE A GARBAGE HEAP!” cried the legislator. “You’re the fattest cockroach feeding on the garbage!” his political opponent shouted.

It was but one moment in a session of the Li-fa Yuan, the highest lawmaking body of Taiwan, characterized by shouting and bloody brawls that have sent at least three parliamentarians to the hospital.

“Nothing to get excited about,” my friend Sen Hong Yang said later over Chinese tea in a Taipei teahouse. “Just another day at the Li-fa Yuan.”

Only a few years ago such an exchange in the staid halls of the Taiwan congress would have been unthinkable. Now it symbolizes a sea change in the government and politics of Taiwan—the first prosperous, stable democracy in the history of the Chinese people.

This new Taiwan is nothing like the bleak island garrison I knew when I first went there as an interpreter for the United States Air Force in 1958. Then, the Cold War raged, and Taiwan was among the poorest and most precarious outposts in “Free Asia.” The shadow of communist China loomed, just a hundred miles away across the Taiwan Strait. Only U. S. economic and military aid kept that colossal dragon at bay.

By the time I arrived, the U. S. Seventh Fleet commanded the strait, and U. S. B-52s cruised the skies overhead. On Quemoy and Matsu, Taiwan’s islets near the mainland coast, artillery batteries buried deep in concrete bunkers exchanged bombardments with communist gunners in Fujian Province. When I flew into Quemoy back then, the strain was ragged and constant. I have never forgotten the granite-cracking thunder of those shells—or that first realization that out across the water people were actually trying to kill me.

Times change. Today U. S. assistance is long gone, and Taiwan, officially the Republic of China, is one of the largest economic powers in the region.

But Taiwan could hardly have traveled a more tortuous road to reach its success. In 1949 China fell to the communists. The battered army of Nationalist Generalissimo

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“Speak the truth, do the right thing, perform real service,” urges independent candidate Hong Tsung Lin, campaigning—unsuccessfully—in Kaohsiung last year. In that election voters chose the entire parliament from a multi-party slate for the first time, a milestone in the move from authoritarian rule to democracy.

Outside parliament in the capital of Taipei, Po-yu Wu protests for freedom of speech. Her husband, Hua Huang, was in jail for promoting Taiwan’s independence from China—his fourth incarceration for rebellious acts.

Chiang Kai-shek fled to China’s offshore possessions with two million refugees. All that was left of the Nationalists’ dominion was the mountainous, 230-mile-long island of Taiwan; the Pescadores, a cluster of rocky wind-swept islands in the center of the strait; and the garrison islets of Quemoy and Matsu lying in sight of the China coast.

Chiang’s followers maintained that they would once again rule one China under the Nationalist flag. They made Taipei, Taiwan’s largest city, their capital-in-exile until they could regroup and recapture the mainland. Their chances for achieving reunification seemed to wane with each passing year, but their policy toward the communists remained resolutely based on no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise—the “three noes.”

Nationalist legislators, who had been





Strained relations

Populated mostly from China's Fujian Province after 1600, Taiwan gave refuge to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists when Mao Zedong and his troops took over the mainland in 1949.

Nationalist Taiwan (the Republic of China) considers itself the rightful government of all China. Yet each side—the hard-driving capitalists in Taiwan and the hard-line communists in the People's Republic of China—wants reunification only under its own system. Meanwhile, Taiwan has become an economic powerhouse, centered in Taipei (above).



elected on the mainland as representatives of all China in 1947, kept those positions in Taiwan for more than 40 years. In effect the Nationalist Party and the Taiwan government were one and the same, and their legitimacy rested on the principle of one China. On that point they would brook no argument. And so, in practice, they added a fourth “no”: no political dissent by native Taiwanese. Wielding the authority of martial law, the Nationalists restricted free speech, press, and assembly; prohibited opposition parties; and punished dissenters with jail, torture, even death. They sought to cultivate a sense of “Chineseness” and suppress the islanders’ separate identity as Taiwanese, even banning Taiwanese history in the schools and the Taiwanese dialect from public life.

On February 28, 1947—a date Taiwanese bitterly remember as *er-er-pa*, “two-two-eight”—an incident occurred that further explains the resentment native Taiwanese still feel for the mainlanders. On that day Nationalist police beat an old woman selling black-market cigarettes, then fired into the crowd

that formed in protest. All over the island Taiwanese rebelled and rioted. No one will ever know the exact number of Taiwanese killed, but a recent study sanctioned by the government reports that it may have been as many as 28,000.

POLITICS ASIDE, it is almost impossible today to tell the difference between Taiwanese and mainlanders. Among the native Taiwanese, reverence for things Chinese runs deep, and I saw it surface in countless ways in their daily lives. In the pre-dawn stillness of the hills behind Taipei’s stately old Grand Hotel, I joined scores of early risers in *tai-chi chuan*, the ancient Chinese exercise ritual. At the 18th-century Lung Shan Temple, I watched worshipers stream in, each to light a joss stick, say a prayer, and leave a fragrant jade orchid blossom to Kuan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy and the most beloved of China’s deities. One night in Taipei’s “Snake Alley,” with the blaze of neon Chinese characters flashing in the puddles underfoot, I watched hawkers snatch live cobras from their cages, slit them open, and mix the blood with herbs and wine into a Chinese potion believed to restore potency. Wizen old men guzzled it down on the spot.

I found Chineseness in little touches too. One afternoon over a bowl of noodles at a tiny sidewalk shop, I was reading the poet Li Pai, who wrote in the eighth century during China’s Tang dynasty, when a young Taiwanese waitress looked over my shoulder and began reading with me. “Li Pai’s my favorite poet too!” she exclaimed. In Lukang, an old fishing port on the Taiwan Strait, I met Li Sung-lin, an elderly but spry wood-carver. His tiny house was jammed with his carvings of the gods and demons of Taoist myth. He greeted me with a viselike handshake and a welcome in classical Chinese: “Is it not indeed a pleasure when friends visit from afar!” It was the opening of *The Analects of Confucius*.

But Taiwan’s Chineseness is best reflected in a kind of joie de vivre at simply being Chinese among other Chinese, the more the better. I got a taste of this with my friend Sen Hong Yang at the annual Dragon Boat Festival at the lovely country town of Ilan. We were standing on a bridge over the Ilan River watching the long, slender dragon boats racing by below. The cheering crowd around us

was so thick we couldn't move. The din of firecrackers was earsplitting, and we could barely see the water through the smoke.

Suddenly the squeal and clank of Chinese horns and gongs joined the cacophony as a mummers' parade of Taoist deities pranced onto the bridge. Just then the sky opened and it began to pour. Sen Hong and I looked at each other. There was no need for words. Soaked to the skin, water running off our noses in cascades, we simply stood there, arms around each other, laughing. It was *jen-ching-wei*—that intangible joy of being Chinese.

DESPITE their common culture, a great gulf still separates the two Chinas. No formal peace has been declared, and direct travel is still prohibited. But martial law is gone from Taiwan. And now the islanders look toward the mainland less in fear than with an eye toward business investment where labor is cheap, workers are plentiful, and construction costs are low. Indeed many Taiwanese firms have already moved—an underwear factory to coastal Shanghai, a baby-food manufacturer to Beijing, and a tomato-packing plant to the far northwest.

By 1993 Taiwanese investments in mainland China, pouring in mostly through Hong Kong, reached 8.9 billion dollars. Trade

between the two sides was worth more than seven billion dollars. And the two were continuing negotiations to improve relations.

I saw the effects of this thaw everywhere. On Quemoy the military's guard was still up, but the atmosphere resembled a college campus more than an embattled outpost. Not long after my visit the military returned both Quemoy and Matsu to civilian control.

But the biggest change was on Taiwan proper. Close to 300 newspapers, many of them sharply critical of government policies, were thriving.

The native Taiwanese were asserting their identity in ways I had never seen before. Of the nearly 21 million people on Taiwan, 85 percent are descendants of Chinese who emigrated from Fujian Province and elsewhere along the coast between the 1600s and 1949. Like the mainlanders, they speak Mandarin, but they also speak Min-nan hua, the old Fujian dialect that the Nationalists had banned.

"In grade school we were fined a dollar for every Taiwanese word they caught us using," recalls Fan Yun, a 24-year-old Taiwanese graduate student at Taiwan University. "We had to wear a sign around our necks that said, 'I was bad. I spoke Min-nan hua.'"

Three years ago Fan led the island's first major student demonstration—a week-long sit-in of 3,000 students at Taipei's Chiang

Kai-shek Memorial. She does not mince words. "We don't want to live under a mainland regime," Fan said. "The old leaders here were outsiders. To them, Taiwan was a hotel. They reckoned they were going back to the mainland, so they spent huge sums on the armed forces and next to nothing on roads, rails, and harbors. We Taiwanese have never been our own boss. We want independence."

BY THE TIME I LEFT TAIWAN, all but one of the Nationalists' political prisoners, who were jailed for advocating independence from China, had been released. The exception was George Chang, 56, a native Taiwanese and a leader of the independence movement for 30 years.

I visited Chang inside Taipei's Tu Cheng prison. We sat at a simple table in a bare room. Chang's skin was pale, his eyes rimmed with red. He told me he had recently been diagnosed with heart trouble and hypertension.

Chang told me in a soft, quaking voice how the government revoked his passport when he was a student at Rice University in Texas 30 years ago. He and his wife, Tina, became U. S. citizens. But when they returned to Taiwan in 1991, the Nationalists detained them at the airport. "They wanted to deport me," Chang said. "I said, 'Taiwan is my home.'"

They sentenced Chang to five years in jail on charges of conspiracy and sedition, accusing him of "stealing the national territory"—the Nationalist phrase for advocating independence. "How can I steal it?" Chang asked me. "I was born here. It's mine!"

One day I came across Mr. Yin, an old Nationalist soldier whose claim to Taiwan was no less valid than Chang's. Yin had lived in Taiwan for nearly 50 years.

It was a typical Taipei afternoon. The day was overcast, the air muggy and thick with smog. I was strolling a residential section of the city known as Number 7 Park. Old men sitting on low stools kibitzed over a match of *wei-chi*, a popular board game. In the shade of a wine red bougainvillea, an old woman snipped turnip greens. Tawny hens pecked and strutted in the lane.

Mr. Yin, a bald, apple-cheeked man wearing a sleeveless undershirt, denim shorts, and flip-flops, lived at Number 17, Alley 21. He had just passed his 80th birthday, he told me proudly, but still rose before dawn and pedaled his daily paper route to 300 homes. Leaning his bicycle against a whitewashed wall, Yin told me of a life that had come full circle.

In the early days of exile the Nationalist government wanted to make this 25-acre tract into a park. But they were forced by the flood of refugees from the mainland descending on the



Veiled against the sun, women sort electronics trash—much of it originally imported from the United States—at a government-run yard near Kaohsiung. Recovered metals earn big profits on this mineral-poor island, but the expense of controlling pollution during the extraction process has put the industry in jeopardy.

Taiwan's future lies in its own electronics industry, especially now that the manufacture of labor-intensive goods—the foundation of recent wealth—is being driven by high wages to cheaper locations elsewhere in Asia. This microchip factory (right) operates in a high-tech industrial park built by the government in Hsinchu, the island's Silicon Valley.

