



TAIWAN

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

GEOGRAPHY

Taiwan is an island on the Pacific Ocean less than 100 miles south-east off the coast of mainland China, south of Japan and north of the Philippines. The nation was known for many years in the West as Formosa, a name derived from sixteenth century Portuguese sailors who called the island “Ilha Formosa,” or “beautiful isle.”

Only one-quarter the size of Wisconsin, Taiwan occupies less than 14,000 square miles, which include several smaller nearby islands. The oblong main island is only 90 miles from east to west at its widest point is 235 miles in length.

In the east, a jagged mountain range stretches the entire length of Taiwan from north to south, featuring

more than 60 peaks above 10,000 feet. Mount Yu Shan, rising 13,110 feet above sea level, is the highest point in Asia. The country’s western coast contains fertile plains and the majority of Taiwan’s people. Taiwan is one of the rainiest regions in the world. It’s subtropical climate features hot, humid summers and chilly, damp winters. Typhoons are not uncommon during the summer, especially in the southern part of the island. The north is subject to monsoon winds. Small earthquakes also occur regularly throughout Taiwan.

PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

More than 22 million people inhabit Taiwan, with the population growing at a rate of .65 percent annually.

Native Taiwanese, who account for 80 percent of the population, migrated from crowded areas of coastal China primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than two percent of aborigines still inhabit the mountainous central and eastern sections of the country. Immigrants from mainland China since World War II make up most of the rest of the population.

People in Taiwan need to know only about 3,000 of the more than 40,000 characters in the Chinese language to function in everyday life.

Mandarin Chinese is the country’s official language. The Majority of people in Taiwan also speak Taiwanese

and English.

Incidentally, the nationality of individuals from Taiwan is Chinese. Taiwanese refers only to the country’s largest ethnic group.

MAJOR CITY CENTERS

The capital city of Taipei in the north, a world-class metropolitan area with a population of over 3.7 million, is one of the nine cities in Taiwan with more than a million people. Kaohsiung, one of the world’s largest seaports on Taiwan’s southwest coast, is home to 1.5 million.

Other major cities include Taichung (1.5 million) in the west-central region. The majority of Taiwan’s people live in congested urban areas, where the cost of living is high.

POLITICAL HISTORY

Chinese may have begun arriving in Taiwan as early as A.D. 500, but large-scale immigration didn't begin until the seventeenth century. About this time, the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish all established settlements on the island. Dutch traders actually gained control of Taiwan in the 1620s, but were expelled by Chinese forces 40 years later, and the island fell back under mainland control.

The island remained a province of China until 1895, when it was ceded to Japan after China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War. At the end of World War II, Taiwan reverted to Chinese government rule.

During the first half of this century, forces in mainland China battled for control of that country. One group was led by Sun Yat-sen, who led a successful revolution against the Ching Dynasty and founded the Republic of China. After he died in 1925, Chiang Kai-shek assumed control of Sun's Kuomintang (KMT) political movement. Shortly after World War II, the Communists, under the guidance of Mao Tse-tung, took control of the

mainland and forced Chiang and his supporters to flee to Taiwan, where they established the Republic of China (ROC) government in 1949.

The ROC then declared itself the legitimate ruling body of all China, a claim it still clings to today. For years, the U.S. and many other nations recognized its claim to legitimacy. At the beginning of 1979, however, the U.S. normalized relations with mainland China and severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, as have most other nations.

The KMT ruled Taiwan as a one-party state under martial law until 1987. After a relatively warm reception from the Taiwanese initially, tensions developed as a result of alleged misrule by ROC authorities and a lack of Taiwanese representation in government.

Once martial law was lifted, other reforms followed, with a multi-party democracy emerging in 1989. That year, native Taiwanese Lee Teng-hui (who studied in the U.S.) was elected president of Taiwan. The Taiwanese majority, however, continues to seek more representation in government.

Taiwan's proximity to mainland China—and the threat of communism

associated with it—has been a constant concern. As a result, the country has built a strong military force, requiring two years of military service from draft-age males.

The republic is based on Dr. Su Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People: by the people, for the people, and of the people.

On January 1, 2000, Taiwan became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), three weeks after China became a member. Ties between the two, in terms of trade, are predicted to improve. Increased military support and political support for Taiwan from the U.S. was an increasing concern for China in 2002. During his visit to Beijing in February of 2002, President Bush reiterated his continued support for Taiwan.

ECONOMY

Spurred by vigorous foreign trade and an industrious populace, Taiwan has experienced steady economic growth for the last four decades. In fact, Taiwan enjoys one of the highest standard of living in Asia. During the last four decades, Taiwan's flourishing economy has gradually moved from an agricultural

base to an industrial one, although the agricultural sector is still productive.

The U.S. is Taiwan's leading trading partner. Major exports include consumer goods such as footwear, furniture, and bicycles, as well as electronic products, machinery, textiles, and plastic rubber products.

With the noteworthy exception of rich offshore fisheries, Taiwan is lacking in most natural resources. As a result, raw materials make up 70 percent of the country's imports, while industrial products account for an even greater percentage of exports.

Virtually all of Taiwan's arable land—one-quarter of the island—is intensively cultivated, with some areas producing two and three crops per year. Only two percent of Taiwan's people are employed in agriculture. Most farmers own their own land as a result of land reforms after World War II.

Major crops include rice, sweet potatoes, peanuts, bananas, pineapple, sugarcane, and tea. The country produces most of its own food, but imports large amounts of feed-grains such as wheat.

Besides agriculture, Taiwan's people are employed in industry (31

percent) and services (67 percent).

EDUCATION

Tremendous emphasis is placed on educational achievement and success in Taiwan, creating substantial pressure on students to excel. Each year, for instance, only one-third of the more than 100,000 (66.6 percent) college applicants in Taiwan are admitted.

Additionally, a student's achievement in a particular subject is often credited to the wisdom of the teacher, a highly respected profession in Taiwan.

Students may prepare for an entire year in advance of the standardized nationwide university entrance exams, given each year in July. Test scores determine not only what college or university the student will attend, but also what he or she will study.

Taiwan has more than 100 colleges, junior colleges, and universities, yet over 28,000 students came from Taiwan to the U.S. in the 2002/2003 academic year. Popular fields of study for these students—the vast majority of whom are pursuing graduate studies—include engineer-

ing, natural sciences, business management, and computer science. Many of Taiwan's students educated here return home to play major roles in shaping the country's economy and government.

Children in Taiwan are required to attend six years of elementary school and three years of junior high. Taiwan boasts a literacy rate of 86 percent.

CULTURE

Because of the country's close association with mainland China, the two cultures share many similarities. Taiwan's people are generally polite, reserved, and friendly.

Friendships in Taiwan tend to have a far greater degree of closeness and permanence than those experienced in the West. Taiwan's people are also group-oriented, preferring activities done together rather than alone.

The idea of "saving face"—both the speaker's and the listener's—governs social interaction in Taiwan. Indirect communication and subtleties are therefore key ingredients in relationships. For example, people in Taiwan often have a hard time saying "no," so as not to offend

the listener. High moral standard, great respect for the elderly, and an emphasis on conformity—all elements of the country's dominant Confucian philosophy—are other characteristic cultural traits.

Taiwan, however, much more so than mainland China, has embraced aspects of Western culture. The Western-style dress commonplace in Taiwan's cities is merely one example.

Listening to music, traveling to parks and tourist spots, and going to movies (both Chinese and foreign) are some of the favorite activities in Taiwan. Many elderly enjoy shadow boxing for exercise. Dancing is a favorite among Taiwan's young people.

Baseball has a large and devoted following on the island. Taiwan's entry into the Little League World Series is a perennial powerhouse, and the country now has its own professional baseball league. Other popular sports include ping pong, soccer, tennis, volleyball, and basketball.

HOLIDAYS

Festivals and celebrations are major social events in Taiwan. In addition to numerous

major holidays, there are hundreds of minor local festivals to honor dozens of local deities.

The country observes most of the major traditional Chinese festivals, including the Chinese New Year, which usually falls in February (according to the Lunar calendar). This three-day celebration—by far the country's most important holiday—draws families together and is punctuated with feasts, games, parties, fireworks, and the honoring of ancestors.

The second most important holiday is Double Ten National Day on October 10. This independence day celebration gets its name from the fact that it falls on the tenth day of the tenth month.

Other holidays include ROC's Founding Day (January 1), Youth Day (March 29), Chiang Kai-shek's death (April 5), Teacher's Day/Birthday of Confucius (September 28), Moon Festival (mid-autumn), Sun Yat-sen's Birthday (November 12), and Constitution Day (December 25).

The Dragon Boat Festival in late May or early June marks the beginning of the summer season and is celebrated with boat races attracting interna-

tional participants. The holiday commemorates the death 2,500 years ago of a poet and statesman who threw himself into a river to protest the misrule of the king. When local villagers heard of the suicide, according to the story, they roamed the water in boats searching for the poet's body.

RELIGION

The majority of Taiwan's people adhere to a blend of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Moral ethics derive primarily from Confucianism, while most worship practices and beliefs come from Taoism and Buddhism. Ancestor veneration and the worship of spirits and nature—hallmarks of Chinese religion through the centuries—are common ingredients in Taiwan's dominant religious practices.

Thousands of gods are worshipped in Taiwan, with each said to meet a certain human need. Many of the gods are personifications of historical Chinese figures who were deified after their deaths.

People in Taiwan often essentially create their own religions, selecting certain beliefs and practices from the various religions that suit their

lifestyles. Agnostics and atheists primarily consist of younger individuals who abandon their traditional family religion. Taiwan guarantees freedom of religion.

CHRISTIANITY

Christians constitute less than 5 percent of Taiwan's population, with Protestants outnumbering Catholics. The church in Taiwan grew dramatically following World War II with the influx of people fleeing communism on the mainland, but growth has stagnated in the last few decades. In fact, in recent years, Taiwan has been the only country with a major Chinese population and a shrinking Christian church.

Explanations for the decline include a high level of backsliding, trends toward both secularism and rebirth of Chinese religions, a lack of discipleship training, and a shortage of pastors. Also, with the relatively few numbers of Christians, believers often marry nonbelievers, and many of those eventually leave the church.

Recent reports from Taiwan indicate, however, that revival is occurring in some areas of the country. Famous Christians from the

Republic of China include Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen, and former president Lee Teng-hui.

Christianity was first introduced to the island in the sixteenth century in the form of Roman Catholicism. Dozens of Dutch missionaries arrived beginning in 1627. When they were driven out in 1662, it essentially marked the end of Christian missionary activity in Taiwan until 1859, when the island's ports were once again opened to foreigners. There are now approximately missionaries in Taiwan.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Taiwan Visitors Association
www.tva.org.tw

SOURCES

Background Notes—Taiwan. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1991.

Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook 2004, Vol. 1, Status of the World's Nations. Gale, Thomas: ISSN 0196-2809.

Culturgram for the '90s—Taiwan. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, David M. Kennedy Center for International Students, 1991.

The Encyclopedia Americana International Edition.

Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, Inc., 1991.

Operation World. Patrick Johnstone. Waynesboro, Ga.: STL Books and WEC International, 1987.

Status of Christianity Country Profile—Taiwan. Lausanne, Switzerland: International Congress on World Evangelization, 1974.

Teams—Taiwan Implementation Manual 1989-1991. Richmond, Va.: Foreign Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1989 (unpublished).

The World Almanac and Book of Facts—1992. New York: Pharos Books, 1991.

The World Factbook, CIA, January 2004:
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/tw.html>.

For more information about International Students, Inc., call 1-800-ISI-TEAM or (719) 576-2700, fax (719) 576-5363, email information@isionline.org, or write: ISI, PO Box C, Colorado Springs, CO 80901. Visit our website at www.isionline.org.

