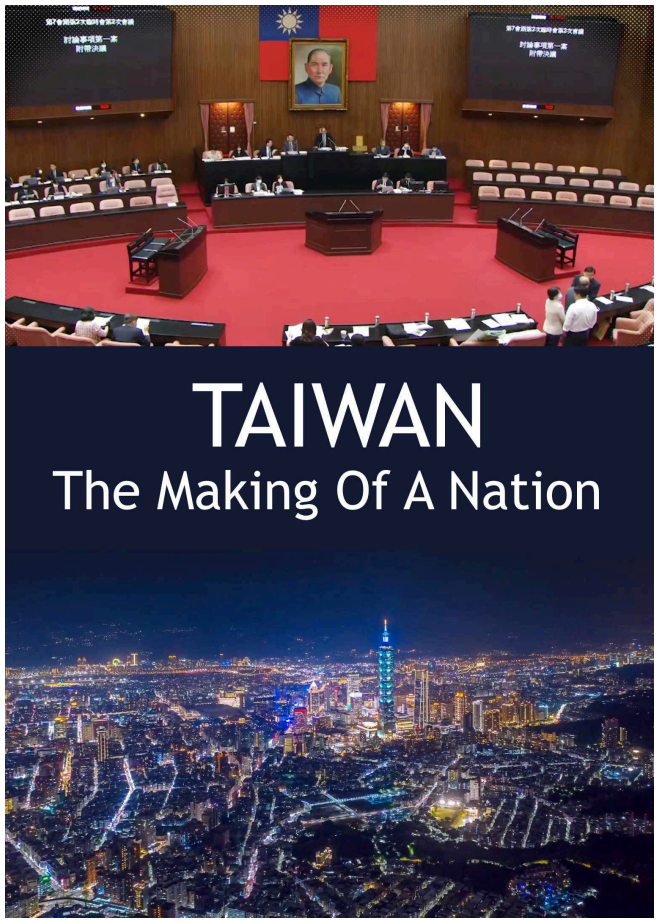
TAIWAN: THE MAKING OF A NATION



STUDY GUIDE

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Taiwan: The Making of a Nation

Taiwan: The Making of a Nation provides a nuanced exploration of the historical factors that have contributed to societal divisions, examining the forces shaping Taiwanese society, including the tension between economic interests and environmental concerns, indigenous rights and political clashes related to China.

About Taiwan

Taiwan is in the western Pacific Ocean, about 100 miles off the coast of southeast China. The main island is about 245 miles long and at the widest point it is about 90 miles wide.[1] There are also numerous smaller islands. Japan and South Korea are northeast of Taiwan, and the Philippines to the south. Taiwan's official name is the Republic of China (ROC), and its capital is Taipei City, located in the north of the island. Taiwan is a multi-party democracy, and its current president is Lai Ching-te, who was elected in 2024. Most of the country has a subtropical climate, and about two-thirds is mountainous. About 80 percent of the population lives in urban areas.

Population

The population of Taiwan is approximately 23 million. According to the Taiwan government website, 95 percent of the people who live there are Han people. Han Chinese is the dominant ethnic group in China. However, the website explains that describing the Taiwanese as Han is too simplistic because there are many different subgroups of Han. It says, "While Taiwan may be described as a predominantly Han Chinese society, with more than 95 percent of the population claiming Han ancestry, its heritage is much more complex. The successive waves of Chinese immigrants that began arriving in the 17th century belonged to a variety of subgroups with mutually unintelligible languages and different customs. Today in Taiwan, however, distinctions between them have become blurred as a result of extensive intermarriage and the universal use of Mandarin." [2]

In addition, according to the government site, 2.5 percent of Taiwan's population is Indigenous Malayo-Polynesian Peoples. There are 16 officially recognized Indigenous subgroups in Taiwan: Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Hla'alua, Kanakaravu, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Thao, Truku, Tsou, and Yami. The Amis are the largest Indigenous group.

Finally, 2.5 percent of the Taiwanese people are new immigrants. As explained on the website, most come from nearby. It says, "Recent years . . . seen an influx of new arrivals from China and Southeast Asia, mostly through marriage. Currently, the number of new immigrants is over 590,000."[3]

[1] https://www.britannica.com/place/Taiwan
[2] https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_2.php
[3] https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_2.php

The official language of Taiwan is Mandarin, however, many Indigenous dialects are also spoken there. The primary religions are Buddhist and Taoist.[4]

Early History of Taiwan

While the majority of the population is now Han Chinese, Taiwan was originally inhabited by a variety of Indigenous groups who lived there for thousands of years before the presence of colonial powers. These people are also referred to as Austronesian, a group of people that live in numerous other places in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Madagascar. In fact, some historians believe that the Austronesian people of Taiwan were the ancestors of all other Austronesian peoples.

In 1624, the Dutch founded a colony in southwestern Taiwan. They encouraged many Han Chinese to migrate there to work on sugar and rice plantations. In 1683, they Dutch were pushed out of Taiwan by the Chinese Qing dynasty, which ruled Taiwan from 1683 to 1895. At that time, more Chinese settlers migrated to Taiwan from the mainland. After the Qing empire was defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan became a Japanese colony in 1895. Under Japanese rule, there was significant industrialization and modernization, and healthcare, education, and Taiwan's infrastructure were improved. However, there was also pressure on the Taiwanese to assimilate, and dissent against Japan was suppressed. Taiwan remained a colony of Japan until 1945, when Japan lost World War II. At that time, China, under Chiang Kai-shek, took control of Taiwan.

Taiwan After World War II

While living standards had improved for most people under Japanese rule, after China took control, many people became unhappy with the new policies and corruption of the Chinese government. In 1947, there were widespread protests throughout Taiwan, set off by the police beating of a woman selling contraband cigarettes. The government responded harshly by sending in troops who rounded up and killed thousands of Taiwanese people, including many intellectuals. This is often referred to as the "228 Incident."

In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek was defeated by the Communist Party, which took control of China, establishing the People's Republic of China. Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan and set up a government there called the Republic of China (ROC). He placed Taiwan under martial law, which lasted until 1987. This period of time is also known as the "White Terror." It is one of the longest periods of martial law in history and the population of Taiwan was subject to censorship, political repression, and the oppression of protesters.

[4] https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/taiwan/#people-and-society

Democracy

Martial law was lifted in 1987, and Taiwan slowly transitioned to democracy. Another political party--the Democratic Progressive Party--was founded in 1986. In 1991, the temporary provisions that had allowed the government to suppress dissent were abolished. In 1996, Taiwan had its first direct presidential election. In 2000, the Democratic Progressive Party defeated the Kuomintang (KMT), the party that had controlled Taiwan for more than fifty years.

Today, Taiwan is a multi-party democracy and is seen by many people as a model of democracy. It has also taken actions to improve the treatment of its Indigenous people. For example, the Basic Law for Indigenous Peoples was enacted in 2005 and improved Indigenous rights. Under the 2017 Indigenous Language Development Act, children learn the Amis Indigenous language in school.

Disagreement Over the Status of Taiwan

While Taiwan has its own government, and has essentially been independent for years, the People's Republic of China has long stated that Taiwan is part of China and it has made it clear that it seeks unification. Taiwan is both economically and strategically important. Its strategic importance is related to its location. Economically, it dominates the manufacture of computer chips and semiconductors, which are essential to many different electronics products.

China has pressured most countries into avoiding official diplomatic relations with Taiwan and only twelve countries officially recognize Taiwan as a country: Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Holy See, Marshall Islands, Palau, Paraguay, St Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Eswatini, and Tuvalu.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the open trials that took place after the 1979 protest influence the people of Taiwan?
2. Why is the content of school texts so important to society, as explained in the film?
3. Why do you think it is important for the people of Taiwan to understand their history?
4. As shown in the film, why is the question of identity a complex issue for many of the people who live in Taiwan?
5. As explained in the film, over time many people in Taiwan have gone from seeing themselves as Chinese to seeing themselves as Taiwanese. Why do you think this is the case?
6. Why has Taiwan been so successful economically according to the film?
7. How did that success damage the environment?
8. Why have some people in Taiwan chosen to relocate from the city to the country, as explained in the film?

9. Why do you think the filmmaker says that help for the Indigenous has been "too little and too late"?

Additional Resources

- BBC, "China and Taiwan: A Really Simple Guide," January 7, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59900139
- Emily Feng, "Taiwan Marks the 76th Anniversary of the Start of the 228 Massacre," NPR, February 28, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/02/28/1160009123/taiwan-marks-the-76th-anniversary-of-the-start-of-the-228-massacre
- Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan). https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/
- Heritage Foundation, "Economic Freedom Country Profile: Taiwan," updated February 2025. https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/taiwan
- International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, "Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan." https://iwgia.org/en/taiwan.html
- Lindsay Maizland and Clara Fong, "Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense," Council on Foreign Relations, March 19, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-trump
- Minority Rights Group, "Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan." https://minorityrights.org/communities/indigenous-peoples-6/

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