BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 13,892
Area (sq. km.): 35,980

Taiwan is a partially tropical island about the size of Belgium or the U.S. state of Maryland. It is located about 100 miles (160 kilometers) east of mainland China. The government of Taiwan also controls the Penghu Islands (off Taiwan's west coast) and islands near China's coast (Chinmen, Matsu, and Wuchiu). A north-south mountain range forms the backbone of the island. The highest peak is Yushan, with an elevation of 13,110 feet (3,996 meters). To the west of the central mountain range is a fertile plain, which contains the majority of the population and most of the agricultural activity.

Taiwan's north has warm, humid summers and cold, rainy winters; some snow falls at higher elevations. Southern Taiwan is warmer, and rain falls mostly in the summer. Typhoons are possible from June to October. Average summer highs range from 89 to 100°F (32–38°C); average winter lows are between 54 and 64°F (12–18°C). The island is subject to numerous small earthquakes every year and larger quakes on a less frequent basis.

History

Origins and Immigration

Taiwan has been inhabited for thousands of years, and Taiwan's indigenous peoples successfully maintained their autonomy until well into the 17th century. Regular contact between mainland China and Taiwan began as early as the T'ang Dynasty (AD 618–907). In 1624, the Dutch established a presence on the island. In 1683, the Manchus of mainland China conquered it and made it a province of China, which resulted in a significant increase of immigration from mainland China.

Revolution and Civil War

The island was ceded to Japan following the Sino-Japanese War (1895) and remained under Japanese control until 1945. During that period, forces on mainland China battled for control of China's government. A successful revolution inspired by Sun Yat-sen founded the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912, but the new government was overshadowed by the activities of contending warlords. Sun's Nationalist, or Kuomingtang (KMT), political movement was led by General Chiang Kai-shek after Sun died (1925). Chiang battled the Communist forces of Mao Zedong, but they both fought against the Japanese (1937–45). After Japan was defeated, the civil war continued. Mao's growing army forced Chiang's troops and the ROC government to flee to Taiwan in 1949, where Nationalists expected to regroup before returning to the mainland.

When a return proved impossible, Chiang declared the KMT the legitimate government of all of China. Plans by the mainland People's Republic of China (PRC) to invade the island were blocked in 1950 by the United States. In 1954, the United States signed an agreement to protect Taiwan in case of attack from the mainland. Much of the world recognized the ROC as China's, and thus Taiwan's, legitimate government.

KMT Rule

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KMT Rule
The KMT ruled Taiwan as a one-party state under martial law beginning in 1949. The National Assembly members who took office before the ROC government moved to Taiwan held power until the late 1980s, when lifetime legislators were replaced with elected local representatives. After Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, his son Chiang Ching-kuo succeeded him as president. Taiwan directed its greatest efforts at modernization and developed a thriving economy. After martial law was lifted in 1987, a multiparty democracy began to emerge. The KMT's Lee Teng-hui, elected president by the National Assembly in 1990, became the first native Taiwanese to lead the country. In 1996, Lee became Taiwan's first directly elected president. In 2000, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected president, ending 50 years of KMT rule. Chen narrowly won reelection in 2004 but resigned as party leader when the DPP suffered a major defeat in January 2008 parliamentary elections. In March 2009, he went on trial for corruption charges.

The KMT returned to power in 2008 with the election of Ma Ying-jeou as president. The KMT faced criticism in September 2009, after Typhoon Morakot triggered floods and mudslides that left hundreds dead. Outcry over the government's poor response prompted the resignation of Premier Liu Chao-shiuan. Despite this setback, the KMT remains in power, and Ma was reelected as president in 2012.

**PRC-ROC Relations**

Both the ROC and the PRC have committed to the "One China Policy," under which there is only one legitimate government over all of China, though they naturally disagree as to whether the ROC or the PRC is that government. Many countries now officially recognize the PRC over the ROC. In 1971, the PRC was admitted to the United Nations in Taiwan's place. In 1979, the United States normalized diplomatic relations with the PRC and broke them with the ROC. However, Taiwan-U.S. relations continue on an unofficial basis, which has been a source of conflict between China and the United States.

The PRC also upholds the "One China Principle," which states that there is only one "China," of which Taiwan is a part. Many Taiwanese oppose the "One China Principle" and see the island as having a separate identity. On the strength of Taiwan's booming economy and new democracy, voices calling for the island's independence grew louder in the late 1980s and 1990s. China clearly opposes this view and has warned Taiwan not to declare independence. Warnings have included military movement and threats of invasion. In 1997, many pro-independence politicians won local offices, and Taiwan dismantled its provincial government—a symbol of Taiwan's status as a province in greater China.

In the late 2000s, cross-strait relations (a term used to describe relations between mainland China and Taiwan) began to show signs of improvement. In 2009, China and Taiwan entered into direct dialogue for the first time in 60 years. Though tensions still exist, Taiwanese leaders have chosen dialogue communication over confrontation. Some are even beginning to more openly advocate complete unification with the PRC. During his 2012 reelection campaign, Ma Ying-jeou said that strengthening ties with China is a priority for his presidency.

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**Recent Events and Trends**

- **Female presidential candidate:** Tsai Ing-wen became Taiwan's first female presidential candidate when she unsuccessfully challenged Ma Ying-jeou in the 2012 presidential election.
- **Protests against China trade deal:** In June 2013, Taiwan signed a trade deal with China that many students and activists oppose, claiming it will give China more influence in Taiwan and weaken democracy. As the legislature prepared to ratify the deal in March 2014, hundreds of protesters stormed the Taiwanese parliament building to oppose the deal, while thousands more demonstrated on Taipei's streets. In 2013, China allowed Taiwan to sign trade agreements with other countries for the first time in Taiwan's history.
- **Local elections:** In November 2014's local elections, Taiwan's ruling party, Kuomintang, suffered major losses to the Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan's main opposition party. In response, the premier and his cabinet resigned, and the president, Ma Ying-jeou, stepped down as leader of the Kuomintang party. Ma will complete his remaining two years as president, however.

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**THE PEOPLE**

**Population**

- Population: 23,359,928
- Population Growth Rate: 0.25%
- Urban Population: NA

The three largest cities in Taiwan are New Taipei, the southern commercial city of Kaohsiung, and Taichung, in the west. Indigenous Taiwanese constitute only 2 percent of the population. They are divided among several ethnic groups, some of which maintain their native languages and traditions. The rest of the population is comprised of Taiwanese (84 percent) and mainland Chinese (14 percent). The latter migrated to the island after World War II. As the mainland Chinese who came after 1947 pass away, their children (with no memory of the mainland) feel that Taiwan is their real home.

**Language**

Taiwan's official language is Mandarin Chinese. However, most residents also speak Taiwanese, the language of the first Chinese immigrants. Mandarin is spoken in formal situations and in school instruction. In everyday conversation, young people generally use Mandarin, while older people often speak Taiwanese. In southern Taiwan, Taiwanese is more common. Both Taiwanese and Mandarin are tonal languages. Each one-syllable word can have many different meanings, depending on the tone (voice inflection) with which it is spoken. Mandarin contains four different tones, and Taiwanese has eight. For instance, the Mandarin word ma can mean “horse” or “mother” and can even function as a question mark. Hakka, another Chinese dialect, is also spoken on the island. Some older people know Japanese, and the aboriginal peoples speak their own native languages. English is a popular second or third language for students and is
widely understood in urban areas.

Although the official language of Taiwan and mainland China is the same (Mandarin Chinese), vocabulary and idiomatic differences exist. In Taiwan, schoolchildren use a simplified character system that helps them “sound out” a word—something impossible to do with the standard characters, which must be memorized. Westerners have developed various systems of romanization (representing Chinese characters and words in roman letters) that have been adopted by the government to help foreigners sound out names, read signs, and follow maps. The average Chinese would not understand or use romanization. Romanization systems differ; for example, the character for “please” can be written *Qing* or *Ching*. Pronunciation remains the same (chezeng).

**Religion**
Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Taiwan. Ninety-three percent of the population practices a combination of Buddhism and Taoism. Rituals come mainly from Buddhism, and adopted Buddhist beliefs include a belief in reincarnation and in karma, or that good deeds bring good fortune while bad deeds have negative consequences. Confucianism, a philosophy that orders social patterns and relationships, forms the basis of society's value system. Though Confucianism emphasizes ancestor veneration, it is not regarded as a religion and does not proclaim loyalty to any specific deity. About 5 percent of the people are Christians of various denominations.

**General Attitudes**
People in Taiwan generally are reserved, quiet, generous, and friendly. Frankness or abruptness, especially in offering criticism of any kind, is avoided. Causing public embarrassment or bringing shame to anyone (a “loss of face”) is unacceptable. Even if one disagrees with another person, one would not express opposition to that person in public. Loud or boisterous behavior is regarded as being in poor taste.

The Confucian ethic of proper social and family relationships forms the foundation of society, although some say that economic prosperity is eroding that foundation. Schools and government foster the tradition of respect for and obedience to parents. An individual’s actions reflect on the entire family, and people act with this in mind. Taiwanese are group and community oriented. Young men must serve either in the military or by performing community service. As society changes, people are adjusting to new social patterns and concepts. When new ideas conflict with traditional ideas, tensions increase between the older and younger generations. Traditionally, men and women do not show affection for each other in public, although this is changing in the larger urban areas. While people value material possessions, they most desire a good education. They appreciate those who are diligent and hardworking.

**Personal Appearance**
Western-style clothing is the norm in Taiwan. People, especially in large urban areas, enjoy the latest fashions. Older people prefer conservative clothing. Cleanliness and neatness are the most important factors in appearance. Western suits and ties are the most common attire for businessmen. Businesswomen wear skirts or pantsuits. For everyday wear, women usually wear jeans or other casual clothing. Most women reserve dresses for special occasions.

**CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES**

**Greetings**
Asking others if they have eaten (*Chyr bau le meiyou?*) is a common Chinese greeting that stems from the tradition to never let anyone go hungry; it was always polite to ask if others had eaten and offer them a meal. Today it is used simply as a “How are you?” The greeting *Ni hau ma* (How are you?) is somewhat formal; it is used when people have not seen one another in a long time. More common greetings are *Ni hau* (Hello), *Zao* (Morning), and *Ching tzuo* (Please sit); the latter is spoken to visitors in the home. After initial greetings, polite questions may follow.

When being introduced, Taiwanese nod the head and smile. They may also shake hands, although handshaking is most common in business and on formal occasions. A slight bow shows respect. Acquaintances and close friends grasp each other's hands to show hospitality, sincerity, and warmth.

Chinese names are arranged with the family name first, followed by a one- or two-syllable given name. Acquaintances and friends call one another by full name. Otherwise, one generally addresses others by their surname followed by a title: *Yu Shian sheng* (Mr. Yu), *Wang Shiau chie* (Miss Wang), or *Kao Jing li* (Manager Kao). People do not address others by last name alone, and they rarely use given names alone. Friends who have adopted Christian or Western given names may address one another by that name.

**Expressions**
One points with the open hand, not the index finger. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm down. People commonly “write” a character in the air when explaining it. Young female friends often hold hands in public. Putting one's arm around the shoulder of another usually is inappropriate. However, individuals converse within touching distance and may touch each other's arm or shoulder while talking. Shaking one hand from side to side with the palm forward means “no.” People do not use their feet to move objects such as chairs or doors. While sitting, one places one's hands in the lap. Winking is impolite. One gives an object to another usually with both hands. In conversation, one refers to oneself by pointing to the nose. When posing for photos, people often smile and hold up two fingers in a V.

**Visiting**
Visiting is an integral part of Chinese culture. Social visits occur mostly in the home. Friends and relatives may come unannounced, but most people prefer advance notice. While a day's notice is acceptable, one week is generally more appropriate. For special occasions (wedding, birthday) or
official functions (business, politics), hosts send invitations to their guests. In these cases, the scheduled event is held in a public place or restaurant.

People usually remove their shoes before entering a home, and they wear slippers inside. Guests acknowledge and greet the elderly first. It is polite to stand when a guest, a superior, or an elderly person enters a room. Visitors are likely to receive tea, candy, fruit, nuts, pastries, or a soft drink. Dinner conversation often centers on the meal—how it was prepared, what ingredients were used, and where the ingredients were obtained. First-time visitors present hosts with a small gift such as fruit. Friends and relatives take gifts when visiting on important holidays such as the New Year. People exchange gifts with both hands and do not open the gifts in the presence of the giver. Visitors are careful not to admire an object too much, as the host may feel obligated to present it as a gift.

Eating
Breakfast is usually light. People generally have steamed buns, rice, or fried bread sticks. Young people often prefer toast or sandwiches. Breakfast is usually accompanied by coffee, milk, or soy milk. For lunch, working people eat at cafeterias or restaurants. Dinner, the main meal, includes soup, rice, and meat and/or vegetable dishes. Tea is brewed and served throughout the day. After-dinner snacks are common. People often go to night markets to buy street foods such as omelets, chou dou fu (translated as “stinky tofu,” a strong-smelling tofu), milk tea (a creamy tea drink), and shaved ice with fruit.

At more formal gatherings, many different dishes will be served. Families generally only serve a few dishes at a typical meal. At a wedding banquet or another special occasion, tables are large and round, representing perfection and harmony. People typically eat with chopsticks and a soupspoon. Each person at the table has a personal bowl of rice. The diners are served or serve themselves from dishes at the center of the table, placing small amounts of food in their rice bowls as often as necessary. They hold the bowl near the mouth to eat. Bones and seeds are placed on the table or on a provided plate but never in the bowl of rice or on a plate of food. Leaving rice in the bowl is impolite. Children are taught to finish all of their food out of respect for farmers and parents. When finished, a person places the chopsticks side by side on the table.

Dining out at restaurants or outdoor night markets is convenient and popular. At a restaurant, a host expects to pay. Guests may offer politely to help but do not insist. If using a toothpick, one covers the mouth with the other hand. It is not proper for adults to eat while walking on the street.

LIFESTYLE

Family
Structure
Families in Taiwan traditionally have been large, but dramatic economic change and a government family-planning campaign have reduced the number of children in the average nuclear family to one or two. The government is now encouraging parents to have more children. Elderly parents commonly live with their children. In rural areas, larger extended families may share the same home. As many young people leave rural areas to seek better economic opportunities in the cities, the traditional extended family structure is changing.

Parents and Children
Children, particularly sons, are expected to care for their aging parents. Some elderly parents from rural areas move to cities to live with their grown children. Others choose to stay in their own home. Grown children may support their parents financially or hire home health care workers to assist. People living away from their families return home for holidays and visits, a tradition that most Taiwanese take very seriously.

Although family members do not openly display affection in the Western manner, Taiwanese families have a deep-rooted unity and sense of obligation to each other. Family members will agree rather than cause disunity. Parents generally support their children until they have finished their education or until they are able to support themselves. Children generally yield to the counsel of their parents or to the advice of the oldest member of the extended family. Older siblings are expected to act as role models for the younger siblings.

As Taiwan’s divorce rate increases, the number of single-parents families has also grown. Grandparents often help care for children in these families and may also provide financial support if possible.

Gender Roles
Gender roles are less clearly defined than in the past. More women now work outside of the home and receive an education, compared to in previous generations. In more traditional families, men are still seen as the leaders of the family. However, an increasing number of couples manage the family together, although the condition of a family’s home is seen as a reflection on the woman more than the man. Women are often responsible for cleaning, cooking, and laundry, while men usually take care of household repairs.

Housing
Urban
Taiwan is densely populated, so few families live in single-family homes. An urban apartment is the most common dwelling. These range widely in size, but an average family has a two- or three-bedroom apartment with a living room and small kitchen. A large section of a living room wall is often devoted to the family altar, where people pay respect to their ancestors. A typical altar is adorned with gold statues and red candles. Family photos decorate the room. Washing machines, air-conditioning, televisions, and computers are common amenities.

Rural
Many rural families still live in traditional single-storey brick houses. The center rooms are set aside for the family patriarch and matriarch, while married sons and their wives occupy the rooms on each side of the house. Due to land scarcity, many of these traditional houses are being razed and replaced with apartment buildings.
Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Young people start dating in groups at around age 14. Students concentrate on their education and associate with peers but seldom date as couples. Serious dating generally begins once people are working or pursuing higher education. People generally meet while socializing in groups. One-on-one relationships develop from there.

A typical date may be going to a movie, dining at a restaurant, or going on an outing with other couples. People generally marry between the ages of 27 and 31. Families and friends of older single people often try to arrange dates for them, and dating at an older age is much more marriage oriented.

Engagement

After a couple gets engaged, the groom's family visits the bride's family to get acquainted, drink tea, and discuss wedding plans. At this meeting, it is customary for the bride to serve tea to her future in-laws, the groom, and her parents. After this meeting, preparations for the wedding begin. Today, some couples choose to simplify the process by not meeting with the families for tea. Couples may also light incense and pray to the bride's ancestors as part of the engagement. Couples exchange rings to symbolize their engagement.

Marriage in Society

The majority of Taiwanese expect to marry, although a growing number chooses to remain single or to live with a partner before or instead of marrying. Marriage is seen as a union of both two people and two families. Arranged marriages are less common than they were in the past. Occasionally, arranged marriages take place among the upper class and are often related to political or business interests. However, young people generally feel free to choose their own spouses, but they seek their family's approval.

Weddings

Marriages are finalized civilly at the local Household Registration Office, where the couple registers their residence. Once they complete the registration, their marriage is granted. Christians usually have an additional church ceremony, which generally follows the form of Western wedding ceremonies. All guests rise when the bride enters, escorted by her father. The bride and groom stand before the altar, take their vows, and exchange rings. The priest announces that they are married, and the bride and groom kiss. Both Christian and non-Christian weddings include a wedding reception in the evening.

Before the reception, the groom picks up the bride and drives her back to his family's home. Then the couple rides to the wedding banquet with the groom's family. The groom enters the reception hall first. The bride follows, escorted by her father. The bride's father places her hand in her husband's, and the bride and groom walk to the front of the room with their parents. The families thank the guests for coming, propose a toast, and the banquet begins. After dinner, the couple and their families mingle with the guests. At many weddings, the bride throws her bouquet and the single woman who catches it is said to be the next to marry. After the reception, the bride and groom stand at the door to see their guests out.

Divorce

While Taiwan's divorce rate remains quite low compared to that of many countries, it has increased significantly in the past few decades. Many blame the divorce rate on a shift from family focus to individual focus. There is some stigma associated with divorce, particularly for women, who generally find it much harder to remarry than men do.

Life Cycle

Birth

A woman who is expecting is treated with great care by those around her. Her family may encourage her to rest and to avoid exertion and doing chores. Some families believe that a pregnant woman's use of scissors or other sharp tools can be a risk to the baby's development. Many believe in a god of pregnancy that protects unborn children. Families avoid rearranging furniture during the pregnancy so as not to displease or frighten the god. A mother is expected to rest for a month after giving birth; she may spend the entire time in bed, often cared for by her mother or mother-in-law. New mothers are encouraged to eat nutritious foods, especially chicken made with black sesame oil. Male babies were traditionally more highly regarded than female babies, and today, red "good luck" eggs are still given to family members only when a boy is born.

A baby is considered age one when he or she is born. One month after the birth, the family celebrates by sending food to relatives and friends. A typical meal to send would include fried rice with two red eggs and a chicken drumstick. To celebrate the birth of a baby girl, people send honey cake. Some parents consult fortune tellers when naming their children. Names chosen this way are said to be associated with the child's fate.

Milestones

Important milestones for young people are turning 18 (when one is considered an adult and may drink legally and obtain a driver's or marriage license) and 20 (when one may vote and sign contracts). Males are regarded as adults when they finish their education and military conscription, usually by age 23 or 24. Women are traditionally considered adults when they marry, though this is changing as more women pursue careers and marry later.

Death

After a death, Buddhist families invite a monk to come and chant sutras (Buddhist scriptures) in hopes that this will aid the deceased in the afterlife. Relatives and friends come to visit in the days following the death. The deceased is usually kept in a coffin in the family home for one to four weeks after the death. Funerals are scheduled on auspicious days according to the lunar calendar. Taiwanese funerals are times of mourning but also have a festive atmosphere. A colorful funeral procession accompanied by loud music is the norm. A truck decorated with flowers and a portrait of the deceased leads a motorcade of jeeps and trucks covered with wreaths. Mourners parade behind.

The traditional funeral color is white. Close relatives dress in white and wear different colored hoods representing their relationship to the deceased. Other attendees can wear any
color as long as it is not too bright. Friends and relatives give white envelopes containing money to the deceased's immediate family. After the cremation, the family of the deceased holds a banquet to show their gratitude to those who helped with the funeral.

Cremation is typical, as grave sites are expensive. After the cremation, the ashes are placed in an urn, which is stored in a columbarium. Family members visit the place 30 days after the funeral and one year after the funeral. Close relatives traditionally do not engage in any fun social gathering for one hundred days after the funeral. As a sign of mourning, many people wear a small white patch on their shirt sleeves for a month, although this practice has diminished in recent years.

Diet
Rice is eaten with nearly every meal. Soup, seafood, pork, chicken, vegetables, and fruit are common foods, as are noodles and breads. Sauces are an important part of each meal. Most foods, including vegetables, are stir-fried. When a household meal includes soup, people usually do not also drink a beverage. They drink tea for leisure or with visitors; soy milk is a common breakfast drink. Many types of fruits are eaten in Taiwan, such as apples, bananas, strawberries, pineapples, and watermelons.

Many people believe in the medicinal properties of certain foods. Herbs are an important part of many diets, and soups are often made to serve certain purposes, such as to encourage growth in children or to nourish recent mothers. In the winter, people eat ginseng chicken soup and stewed ribs with herbs to discourage colds and stay healthy.

Recreation
Sports
Baseball is extremely popular among the youth, and Taiwan's Little League champions consistently do well in the Little League World Series. People also enjoy basketball, table tennis, baseball, and badminton. Many people also enjoy watching baseball games on television. Taiwan has professional baseball and basketball leagues. Taiwan competes in many international sporting events (including the Olympics) as Chinese Taipei.

Leisure
The most popular forms of recreation in Taiwan are watching television and movies, listening to music, and using the internet. On weekends, many people see movies, spend time with friends, go shopping, or take excursions to the countryside. People also enjoy card games. Biking for recreation (not just as a means of transportation) is growing in popularity among people of all ages. The elderly enjoy folk dancing and tai chi (a martial art) for exercise and relaxation.

Vacation
A growing number of people choose to vacation abroad in mainland China, other Asian countries, Australia, or the United States. Others choose to tour Taiwan. Older people often prefer to take guided tours. Amusement parks are popular with families with children.

The Arts
Taiwan's arts reflect mainland traditions. Government patronage has raised interest in the traditional arts of calligraphy, painting, and Chinese opera. Calligraphy is studied in school. A similarly high level of interest lies in the crafting of chops (small engraved stamps). Furniture making, jade carving, mask painting, and paper cutting are also traditional arts that have gained increasing popularity since the 1980s. Interest in puppetry has grown in recent years, particularly among the younger generation.

Elaborate costumes and makeup are an important part of the popular Chinese and Taiwanese operas. In addition to a rich tradition of folk songs often performed in Chinese operas, the aboriginal peoples of Taiwan have their own unique musical forms, which vary among different tribes. Many performances begin with one voice improvising to a set rhythm. Others join in, frequently accompanying an improvised group dance. The government promotes traditional aboriginal arts, including singing, dancing, painting, and sculpture.

Holidays
Public holidays include the ROC's Founding Day (1 Jan.), Chinese New Year, Memorial Day (28 Feb.), Tomb Sweeping Day (5 April; held on the anniversary of Chiang Kai-shek's death), the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Double Tenth National Day (10 Oct.). Several holidays and festivals in Taiwan are held according to the lunar calendar, so their date according to the Gregorian calendar changes.

Chinese New Year
Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, is celebrated with fireworks, feasts, temple worship, and ancestor veneration. Most people take the week off from school and work. Many families hold family reunions on New Year's Eve. These generally consist of festive dinners. Elders give children money in special red envelopes to wish them good fortune. People get up early on New Year's Day and wish one another a prosperous new year. Throughout the day, relatives and friends gather to gamble for fun on mahjong (a tile game), dice games, or cards. New Year celebrations are said to officially end 15 days into the new year, which coincides with the Lantern Festival. Streets are hung with colorful lanterns, and people come out and celebrate in the streets.

Tomb Sweeping Day
On Tomb Sweeping Day (also known as the Ching Ming Festival), families gather to clean the tombs of their deceased family members. Offerings are made and special foods are eaten. The Hungry Ghost Festival also honors the deceased. On this day, it is believed that ghosts are free to roam the earth again. People prepare elaborate meals as offerings for the dead. They also burn paper replicas of possessions that the ghosts may need in the afterlife, such as money, vehicles, and clothing. It is believed that burning these things allows the ghosts to use them.

Festivals
The summer Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival are the other two most important annual celebrations. The Dragon Boat Festival centers around the death of the famous poet Chu Yuan, who is said to have thrown himself
into the river. People celebrate by dropping rice dumplings into the water to distract the fish from the drowned poet. Dragon boat races are held, representing the search for the poet's body. The Mid-Autumn Festival, also called the Moon Festival, is celebrated with moon cakes (round pastries) and pomelos. In recent years, barbecues have become popular ways for families to gather and celebrate.

**Patriotic Holidays**

The ROC's Founding Day is not widely celebrated. The most important patriotic holiday is Double Tenth National Day (the tenth day of the tenth month), which commemorates the Chinese revolution of 10 October 1911, when the Qing Dynasty was overthrown and replaced with a republic. People celebrate with fireworks, parades, and folk dancing and martial arts demonstrations. Other patriotic holidays that are celebrated, though not officially, include Labor Day (1 May), Armed Forces Day (3 Sept.), and Constitution Day (25 Dec.).

**SOCIETY**

**Government**

*Head of State: Pres. Ma Ying-jeou*

*Head of Government: Premier Mao Chi-kuo*

*Capital: Taipei*

Taiwan is a multiparty democracy administered through fourteen counties (hsien), three municipalities (shih), and five special municipalities (chuang-hsia-shih), which include Taipei and Kaohsiung. The president is head of state. The head of government is the premier, who is appointed by the president. The president and vice president are elected by popular vote on the same ticket to four-year terms. The primary lawmaking body is the Legislative Yuan. Members are elected to four-year terms. In 2007, constitutional amendments reduced the number of seats in the Yuan from 225 to 113 and eliminated the 300-seat National Assembly, once a powerful body that "represented" all provinces of China. The voting age is 20.

**Economy**

*GDP (PPP) in billions: $926.4*

*GDP (PPP) per capita: $39,600*

Despite setbacks such as the Asian economic crisis (1997–98), Taiwan has maintained a dynamic economy for three decades. Early growth was fueled by an efficient agricultural sector and then by numerous small cottage industries. The system could easily adapt to global economic trends until it grew strong enough to help set those trends. Its foreign reserves are among the largest in the world, and its companies hold considerable international investments. Taiwan's labor force is highly skilled, and a strong middle class enjoys a high standard of living. Taiwan is now a major exporter of textiles, electronics, machinery, metals, and high-technology items. The 2008 global economic crisis led to a sharp decline in demand for Taiwan's exports, prompting government measures aimed at strengthening the economy, which included strengthening economic ties with the mainland. The currency is the New Taiwan dollar (TWD).

**Transportation and Communications**

*Internet Users (per 100 people): NA*

*Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): NA*

*Paved Roads: 99%*

Before the 1990s, people mainly traveled by bicycle, motor scooter, motorcycle, and public transportation (buses and trains). As more people purchased cars, urban traffic jams became prevalent. A rapid transit system has effectively alleviated congestion in Taipei. Taxis are readily available and reasonably priced. Many people, especially in rural areas, still ride bicycles, motor scooters, and motorcycles, but more and more can afford to buy imported cars.

Nearly all households have telephones or cellular phones, and Taiwan's communications system is among Asia's best. Internet use is very high. Taiwan has one of the least-restricted presses in Asia, leading to hundreds of private radio, television, and newspaper businesses communicating a wide range of views.

**Education**

*Adult Literacy: 96%*

*Mean Years of Schooling: NA*

**Structure and Access**

Education is very important in Taiwan. The attendance rate nears 100 percent in most areas. Schooling is free and compulsory for nine years (six years of primary school and three years of secondary school). Students must provide their own books and uniforms. After completing compulsory education, students must pay tuition to continue their studies. Children enter primary school at age six. Secondary school starts at about age 12. Secondary school is divided into two levels: junior (ages 12 to 15) and senior (ages 15 to 18). After finishing their required education, students may choose between studying for a vocation and preparing to enter a university. Students who wish to learn the skills needed to perform a particular job enter vocational schools, junior colleges, or institutes of technology. Those who plan to attend a university continue on to the senior level of secondary school. Although students are not required to attend senior secondary school, most choose to complete it.

**School Life**

Subjects taught generally lean toward the more scholarly, such as literature, sciences, and mathematics. Subjects like art and physical education are less emphasized. Girls are encouraged to take home economics classes, while boys take military training courses. Secondary education is academically challenging, with students investing large amounts of time studying in addition to their hours spent in school. In recent years, class sizes have been reduced from 40 to 50 students per class to 25 to 35 in order to improve the quality of education. A growing number of classrooms incorporate computers and other technology into their curriculum. Parents tend to be quite involved in their children's education, helping with homework and meeting with teachers regularly to discuss students' progress.
**Higher Education**

Loans and scholarships are available for those students who cannot afford further education. University education usually lasts four years. Admission to universities is based on scores on national entrance exams, which are given in January and July of each year. Most students take the exams in January and then again in July if they are unsatisfied with their scores in January. Students work hard to prepare for these tests, sometimes studying sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, for an entire year. Many students travel abroad for higher education. While some of these students stay and work abroad for a period of time, the vast majority eventually return to Taiwan.

**Health**

Taiwan has a modern healthcare system. Private insurance programs cover the needs of most citizens, and the government provides care for those who cannot afford it. Most people enjoy good health. A new regional system, designed to create public health facilities and offer basic care to all people, has been established. While nearly all Taiwanese are now insured, challenges remain in funding and maintaining quality health care. The infant mortality rate is one of the world's lowest and the life expectancy is among the world's highest.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**Country and Development Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Taipei</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>23,359,928</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area (sq. mi.)</td>
<td>13,892</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area (sq. km.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Inequality Index</td>
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<td>GDP (PPP) per capita</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult Literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infant Mortality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Currency</td>
<td>New Taiwan dollar</td>
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