Red is the traditional color for weddings in Taiwan. Money is given in even amounts as a gift and tucked inside a red envelope. White is the color for death.

The Dutch established the first capital city in Taiwan in the southern city now known as Tainan.

Portuguese sailors named Taiwan Ilha Formosa, meaning “beautiful island.”

Baseball is the national sport in Taiwan.

Oscar-winning film director Ang Lee was born in Pingting, Taiwan, in 1954. He later trained at the Taiwan Academy of Art.

Taipei’s National Palace Museum is home to the largest collection of Asian art in the world. The pieces include paintings, calligraphy, and bronze, jade, and porcelain sculptures.

Taiwan is home to a wide variety of wildlife, including black bears, flying frogs, salamanders, leopards, and rock monkeys.

The popular Asian drink bubble tea, or Boba, originated in Taiwan in the 1980s. The drink is usually made from tea mixed with fruit or milk, with tapioca balls floating in it.

Flag

The flag of Taiwan was most recently adopted on 28 October 1928. The blue rectangle symbolizes liberty and justice; the white sun stands for equality and brightness; and the red field represents union and sacrifice. The sun also symbolizes progress, and each of its 12 points represents one traditional hour of the day (which equals two regular hours).

National Image

The national flower of Taiwan is the Mei (plum blossom). This five-petaled flower blooms in the winter and is very hardy. As a result, it symbolizes the courage and determination of the Taiwanese people.

Land and Climate

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

Taiwan is an island about the size of Belgium or the state of Maryland. Shaped like a tobacco leaf, the island is located about 100 miles (160 km) east off the coast of mainland China. The government of Taiwan also controls the Penghu Islands (off Taiwan’s west coast) and several islands near China’s coast (Chinmen, Matsu, and Wuchiu). A north-south mountain range forms the backbone of the island and covers
two-thirds of it. The majority of Taiwan’s rivers are found here. The highest peak is Yu Shan (Jade Mountain), with an elevation of 13,110 feet (3,996 m). To the west of the central mountain range is a fertile plain, which contains the majority of the population and most of the farmland. Taiwan’s landscape includes everything from snowcapped mountains to bamboo forests, hot springs, beaches, and white-water rapids.

Taiwan’s north has a tropical climate, with warm, humid summers and cold, rainy winters. The higher elevations see some snowfall in the winter. Southern Taiwan is warmer, and rain falls mostly in the summer. Typhoon season runs 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 experiences a series of small earthquakes every year and occasional larger quakes.

Population

Population: 23,359,928

The three largest cities are the capital of Taipei, the southern commercial city of Kaohsiung, and Taichung, in the west. Native Taiwanese make up 2 percent of the population. Known as yuanzhu min, meaning the original people, they hail from several ethnic groups, some of which maintain their native languages and traditions. The rest of the population is made up of ethnic Chinese—Taiwanese and mainland Chinese. The mainland Chinese migrated to the island after World War II. The Taiwanese are descendants of migrants who left China much earlier, between the 17th and 19th centuries. 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. Most residents also speak Taiwanese, the language of the first Chinese immigrants. Mandarin is spoken mainly in formal situations and taught in school. In everyday conversation, kids generally use Mandarin, while older people often speak Taiwanese. In southern Taiwan, Taiwanese is more common. Both Taiwanese and Mandarin are tonal languages, meaning each one-syllable word can have many different meanings, depending on the tone (voice inflection) the speaker uses. Mandarin contains four different tones, and Taiwanese has eight. For instance, the Mandarin word ma can mean “horse” or “mother.” Hakka, another Chinese dialect (way of speaking or pronouncing), is also spoken on the island. Some older people know Japanese, and the native peoples speak their own native languages. English is a popular second or third language for students and is commonly understood in cities.

Can You Say It in Mandarin Chinese?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Mandarin Chinese</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>Ni hao</td>
<td>(KNEE how)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-bye</td>
<td>Zai jian</td>
<td>(dzai JEN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Qing</td>
<td>(CHEENNG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Xie xie</td>
<td>(SHEH sheh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Shi</td>
<td>(shur)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bu shi</td>
<td>(BOO shur)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Religion


Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Taiwan. The majority of the population practices a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Confucianism, which focuses on respecting your ancestors, is not so much a religion as a way of living your life. Followers do not believe in any specific god. Buddhism teaches a belief in reincarnation (the belief that after death your spirit is reborn in another body) and in karma, or the belief that doing good things brings good luck, while bad deeds bring bad luck. A small percentage of the people are Christians of various denominations.

Time Line

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10,000 BC</td>
<td>People from Malaysia and Polynesia settle on what is now Taiwan and several smaller islands nearby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1200s</td>
<td>People from the southern Chinese mainland provinces (similar to states) of Guangdong, Hunan, and Fujian begin to settle in the west of Taiwan, pushing the native peoples east into the mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1517</td>
<td>Portuguese sailors sight the island on their way to Japan and name it Ilha Formosa (Beautiful Island)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1624</td>
<td>The Dutch occupy the island, building forts on the south side of the island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1644</td>
<td>China’s Ming dynasty falls; many people flee to Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1662</td>
<td>Chinese Ming general Cheng Cheng Kung defeats the Dutch and rules the island for a short period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1683</td>
<td>China’s Manchu Qing rulers make the island a part of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>An English merchant by the name of John Dodd founds Taiwan’s booming tea industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>French forces invade northern Taiwan and occupy it for nine months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Japan takes over control of the island as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki at the end of the Sino-Japanese war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Taiwan is controlled once more by China under its Nationalist Kuomintang government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Government troops from the mainland kill more than 25,000 people on Taiwan while putting down an uprising against General Chiang Kai-shek’s rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>The Chinese Communist revolution takes place and the Nationalist government flees to Taiwan; China becomes the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Taiwan signs a defense treaty with the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Taiwan’s seat in the United Nations is taken away and given to China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Chiang Kai-shek dies, and a period of political reform begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>The mainland government tries to prevent Taiwan from holding democratic elections by conducting missile tests near the island; Lee Tung-hui becomes the first democratically-elected president of Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>A massive earthquake near Sun Moon Lake kills two thousand people across the island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early Tribes

Traces of settlements in what is now Taiwan date back ten thousand years. But very little is known about these early settlers except that they were most likely fishermen, hunters, and farmers, they used boats to travel across the sea, and they made pottery and other artifacts. Chinese immigration to Taiwan began as early as AD 618, during the reign of the T’ang Dynasty. Waves of immigrants continued to come across the Taiwan Strait from China’s Fujian and Guangdong provinces (similar to states). They settled on the western coast and displaced many of the native tribes living there. The tribes were forced to leave their villages and move farther inland to the mountains. The Chinese immigrants began growing rice and sugarcane, and the area soon took part in a booming trade industry with China.

European Arrival

In the 16th century, Portuguese explorers came to the area in search of trade. The first Portuguese sailors saw the island and named it Ilha Formosa, meaning “beautiful island.” After the Portuguese came, the Dutch were not far behind. Dutch forces invaded the island in 1624. They built a series of military forts and took over the many trading posts. Spanish traders soon joined them on the northern part of the island. The two groups fought over control of Taiwan until the Dutch finally drove the Spanish out in 1641. The Dutch reigned supreme for the next few decades until General Zheng Cheng Gong of the mainland Chinese Ming Dynasty led a rebellion and forced the Dutch out in 1662. Cheng became known as Koxinga and ruled Taiwan as a national hero. He passed control down through his son and grandson until Manchu troops from the mainland arrived to take control of the island once more.
**Chinese Control**

China continued to maintain that it had the right to govern Taiwan. In the 1970s, the United States began trying to mend its relationship with mainland China, which weakened Taiwan’s position as independent and separate from China. The United Nations also admitted China as a member, taking away Taiwan’s spot at the same time. For the next few decades each side insisted it was the “real” China, and though there were no real military conflicts, both governments refused to recognize the other. Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT) leadership established a harsh dictatorship, ruling Taiwan with an iron fist. Though the economy thrived, people’s rights were strictly controlled and limited. Upon his death, his son Chiang Ching-kuo took over the government and ruled for a decade. After his death the first democracy (government by the people) gradually came into existence, and different political parties were allowed to take part in the day-to-day affairs of the government.

**Taiwan Today**

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 president directly elected by the people. Soon many people began calling for independence. These Taiwanese have their own separate identity and culture and do not want to remain a part of mainland China. Meanwhile, China’s government continues to warn Taiwan not to declare independence, threatening to invade if it does. In 1997, many pro-independence politicians won local offices, and Taiwan got rid of its provincial government to show greater China that it was no longer a province (similar to a state). In 2000, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected president, ending 50 years of KMT rule. In recent years, China and Taiwan have entered into discussions for the first time in 60 years. Though years of tension remain, Taiwanese leaders have chosen to communicate rather than fight.

**Japanese Occupation**

After more than two hundred years of Manchu rule, war broke out with Japan over who controlled Korea. Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War, and Japan immediately took control of Taiwan as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. At first the Taiwanese were not happy about being under Japanese control. But their attempts at rebellion were quickly crushed. Japan occupied the island from 1895 to 1945. They built railroads and new buildings, schools and farms. The economy responded well to these improvements, and Taiwan became known around the world for its high quality sugar and rice. The Japanese did crack down on any feelings of Taiwanese patriotism, however. People were expected to learn Japanese instead of Chinese, and it became the preferred language taught in schools.

When World War II broke out, Taiwanese soldiers were forced to fight as part of the Japanese army. When Japan was defeated in World War II, Taiwan became a part of the Republic of China once more. China was in the middle of a fierce civil war at the time, and when Mao Zedong’s Communists won against General Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists, the Nationalists gave up and fled to safety in Taiwan. With help from the United States government, Taiwan was able to keep China from invading throughout the 1950s and 1960s.
Games and Sports

Baseball is incredibly popular among both boys and girls. There are more than one thousand Little Leagues in Taiwan, and the Little League champions always do well in the Little League World Series. Taiwanese people love attending baseball games, where food vendors sell instant noodles to the crowd. Many people also enjoy watching baseball games on television. Taiwan has professional baseball and basketball leagues. Biking is growing in popularity among people of all ages. Skipping and jump rope are popular kids’ games, as well as a game called diabolo spinning. The diabolo is like a large yo-yo. The player moves the diabolo with a long cotton string attached to a stick at either end.

Holidays

The most important patriotic holiday is Double Ten 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 (government in which the power rests with the people and the head of state is not a monarch). People celebrate with fireworks, parades, and folk dancing and martial arts demonstrations.

Buddhist holidays are set according to the Chinese lunar calendar. The new year (in the spring) is celebrated with fireworks, feasts, and temple worship. Most people take the week off from school and work. Many families hold family reunions on New Year’s Eve. Elders give children “lucky money” tucked in special red envelopes, or hung bao, to wish them good luck. People get up early on New Year's Day, and throughout the day, relatives and friends gather to gamble for fun on mahjong (a tile game), dice games, or cards. New Year’s celebrations stretch 15 days into the new year and come to a close around the time of the Lantern Festival. Streets are hung with colorful lanterns, and people come out and celebrate in the streets.

The summer Dragon Boat Festival centers around the death of the famous poet Chu Yuan, who is said to have thrown himself into the river. People in Chu Yuan’s time celebrated by dropping rice dumplings into the water to distract the fish from the drowned poet. Today, people eat the dumplings themselves. Dragon boat races are held, representing the search for the poet's body.

Food

Taiwanese people usually start the day with a light breakfast of steamed buns, rice, or fried bread sticks with coffee or soy milk. Kids often prefer toast or sandwiches. Rice is eaten with every meal, and noodles and a variety of sauces are also very common. The main meal is served at dinnertime and includes soup, rice, and meat and/or vegetable dishes. One commonly eaten vegetable is yam leaves, which taste and look like a milder, slippery version of spinach. It is usually cooked with salt and garlic. Tea is brewed and drunk throughout the day. People often go to night markets to buy street foods such as omelets, chou dou fu (a strong-smelling tofu known as “stinky tofu”), milk tea (a creamy tea drink), and shaved ice with fruit. Many types of fruits are eaten in Taiwan, such as apples, bananas, strawberries, pineapples, and watermelons. Another common fruit is a fruit called lychee, which has a thin shell that you split to reveal the sweet, juicy fruit inside.
People typically eat with chopsticks and a soupspoon. Each person at the table has a personal bowl of rice. Diners serve themselves from dishes at the center of the table, placing small amounts of food in their rice bowls at a time. They hold the bowl near the mouth to eat, and when they are finished, they place their chopsticks side by side on the table.

**Schools**

*Adult Literacy: 96%*

Education is very important in Taiwan. Schooling is free, and children are required to attend six years of elementary school beginning at age 6 and three years of high school beginning at about age 12. Secondary school is divided into two levels: junior (ages 12 to 15) and senior (ages 15 to 18). After graduating, students may choose between training for a particular job 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.

Subjects taught generally lean toward literature, sciences, and mathematics. Subjects like art and physical education are not considered as important. Girls are encouraged to take home economics classes, while boys take military training courses. Students spend 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 use computers and other technology in their daily lessons. Parents are quite involved in their children’s education, helping with homework and meeting with teachers regularly to discuss students’ progress.

**Life as a Kid**

Weekdays are very busy. School starts at 7:30 in the morning and ends at 4 in the afternoon. Taiwanese students learn about mathematics, science, history, geography, Chinese, English, P.E., music, and art. Kids usually attend after-school activities, like taking piano lessons or attending *cram school* (a specialized school designed to help students pass exams). Education is very important in Taiwan, and kids are expected to get good grades in school, which is why many children are sent to *cram schools* from an early age.

Weekends are much more fun and relaxed. Both boys and girls like to watch cartoons, read comic books, play video games, listen to music, and play outdoor sports or go biking in good weather. The Taipei rapid transit system is very convenient, so many children in Taipei go out with their friends to see a movie and are back home before dinnertime. Kids enjoy going to night markets with their parents. These outdoor markets have delicious food and affordable clothes. Most children love eating at night markets because they have so much tasty food, including oyster omelets, stinky tofu, fried chicken breast or nuggets, and *boba tea* (tea mixed with fruit or milk, with tapioca balls floating in it).
**Government**

Capital: Taipei  
Head of State: Pres. Ma Ying-jeou  
Head of Government: Premier Mao Chi-kuo

Taiwan is a multiparty democracy (government by the people). 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 (changes) 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 (similar to states) of China. The voting age is 20.

**Money and Economy**

Currency: New Taiwan dollar

Taiwan has maintained a growing economy for three decades. Taiwan’s work 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, timber products, and high-technology items.

**Getting Around**

Before the 1990s, people mainly traveled by bicycle, motor scooter, motorcycle, and public transportation (buses and trains). As more people purchased cars, city traffic jams became a problem. A rapid transit system has helped address this problem in Taipei. Taxis are inexpensive and readily available. Many people, especially in the country, still ride bicycles, motor scooters, and motorcycles, but more and more can afford to buy imported cars.

**Culture Facts & Contacts**

**Ghost Month**
In Taiwan, the seventh month in the lunar calendar is Ghost Month. On the first day, the gates to the underworld are believed to open, allowing ghosts to walk among the living. People offer food and burn incense and joss paper for their deceased ancestors. Joss paper is a special kind of yellow paper that is said to be money for the dead to use in the afterlife. Houses, cars, and even cell phones made out of paper are also burned as offerings. Most Taiwanese burn their offerings on the fifteenth day, called Ghost Day. On the last day of the month, ghosts return to the underworld and the gates are closed.

There are several things people are expected to avoid doing during Ghost Month in Taiwan. One should not whistle, especially at night, because it attracts spirits. Clothing should not be hung out to dry overnight, because ghosts may attach themselves to clothes they like. Umbrellas should never be opened indoors, because it is believed that spirits like to rest underneath the shade of umbrellas. Locals also avoid rivers, lakes, or the ocean, since it is believed water ghosts might steal the bodies of the living.

Learn More

Contact the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, 4201 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016; phone (202) 895-1800; web site www.roc-taiwan.org/us. Or contact the Taiwan Visitors Association, phone (212) 867-1632; web site www.tva.org.tw.

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Taiwan

The seven national parks in Taiwan are home to a great variety of marine, plant, and animal life, many of them endangered species.

Mount Yu Shan is the highest point in Taiwan, at 12,966 feet (3,952 m).

The lowest point in Taiwan is found along the South China Sea, at sea level.

The islands of Taiwan are part of a large archipelago, or chain of islands, formed millions of years ago by the movement of the earth’s tectonic plates.