



TAIWAN:

the crossroads of cultures and ideology

**JULIA BASTIAN reports
from a tiger economy**

TOURISTS visiting Taiwan are left in no doubt about the prosperity of this banana-shaped island south of Hong Kong. One of the four Asian 'tiger' economies, it produces a large share of the world's information technology.

At first Taipei seems much like any international capital city but the high-rise buildings are surely higher and more numerous, and wonderfully illuminated at night. The hotels are more comfortable, the flyovers more impressive and scary, the trunk-roads wider.

Unemployment is said to be less than 3%. There would seem to be intense emphasis on education at all levels, and a great willingness to work. A welfare state does not exist as we know it in the U.K., yet there is little evidence of poverty or rough behaviour.

Travelling to this "silicon" country in time to check out their millennium celebrations was an unforgettable experience. I saw in the new century before it dawned on the rest of the world. On the stroke of midnight every Taiwanese produced a mobile to communicate with friends and family, recorded the scene with state-of-the-art cameras, while firecrackers down in the street competed with singing and shouting and honky-tonk music.

Across the Taiwan Strait the communist leaders on mainland China were looking resentful and menacing. Taiwan has for long been a problem for Beijing and for the international political community. Washington is eager to avoid being drawn into a military conflict in the event that China carries out its threat to reunify Taiwan forcibly with mainland China.

TAIWAN held presidential elections in March despite bullying from communist China. After 50 years of Nationalist rule the victory of Mr Chen Shui-bian opens the way for Taiwan to become Asia's most promising democracy. Taiwan does not wish to become a giant Hong Kong and is well aware that Beijing offers comradeship at the point of a gun. Mr Chen says he will hold talks to resolve their differences through dialogue. This energetic 49-year old has a dream – to achieve Taiwanese independence and a place around the United Nations table. In 1971, a few years before the death of General Chiang Kai-shek, the Republic of China – Taiwan – lost U.N. membership. It was replaced by the

People's Republic of China. This has remained a constant irritation.

Over the centuries Taiwan became the home of many political exiles. Importantly, it was Chiang Kai-shek who, having been elected president of the Republic of China in 1948, withdrew the following year to Taiwan, taking with him thousands of soldiers, merchants, monks and much treasure trove, now on show at the National Palace Museum. The Nationalists rescued some 4,000 crates full of bronzes, tapestries, paintings, books and art objects which would have fallen into the hands of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai during the Civil War. Chiang's idea was to launch a re-birth of classical Chinese culture in Taiwan.

It was Chiang who also initiated the land reform programmes and it was these which helped to launch the industrial revolution that has brought the island such phenomenal growth. Years before in Japan he had met up with revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, Founder of the Constitution. Dr Sun had been influenced by the books and lectures of Henry George which served as a foundation for developing a prosperous society.

Dr Sun had a dream for China – spelt out in his book *San Min Chu I*; it was to collect the rent of land for the people. Today, the Taiwan fiscal system does indeed embrace a land tax, but this is just one tax among many. The island has adopted, like Europe and Japan, a value added tax, so the ultimate benefits of land reform have yet to be achieved.

ALSO travelling in Taiwan recently was Jeffery Smith, Editor of *The Geonomist*. He was invited to speak to legislators and advisers to the government to explain how a tax shift off industry and on to land value, could be beneficial. He hopes their Sustainable Development Committee will investigate the benefits of collecting revenue from the value of land. Since the terrible earthquake last September, which caused the loss of tens of thousands of lives, there has been much talk of reconstruction. Perhaps their idea of a Housing Voucher, funded from site value, could be distributed to buy or lease land and buildings in the distressed areas.

THE MOST spectacular experience during my visit was the drive from Hualien on the East Coast through the Taroko

Gorge, rated Asia's most beautiful highway. This engineering marvel is awesome. It takes traffic across the island, opening up the great central mountain range, with breathtaking ascents and descents.

Our friend Shu-hui took us to one of the numerous Buddhist temples in Taipei to hear worshippers chanting mantras. The local people bring fruit and flowers to offer and light tapers to throw on the brazier. Numerous religions flourish in this tolerant and diverse cultural climate. Buddhism has been practiced since the 16th century. Recently exiled Tibetan monks fled to Taiwan and are making Tantric Buddhism popular, in competition with many other "isms". Alongside Arabian-style mosques and churches of various types is a building for a quite new religion designed to appeal to people seeking to reaffirm their moral beliefs in the face of today's rapid social changes. I-kuan Tao and Tien Te Chiao are two with considerable followings. But there are plenty of happy Taiwanese who say they get on quite well with no religion at all.

Confucianism is not a religion. Much of the theory concerns principles for the cultivation of an ethical life, leading to harmonious relationships. Over the centuries these Confucian principles have found their way into politics, economics, morality and education and have become deeply ingrained in social affairs, not only in Taiwan but all over Asia. Needless to say the teachings of Chairman Mao are not at all popular here.

One of the most lively places to be for entertainment, even in the pouring rain, is the Street Opera. It takes place on an elaborate stage with the good guys and bad guys clearly defined by their costumes and face paint. This unique theatrical art form combines shrill voices with dancing, mime and acrobatics.

Night Markets seem to trade into the early hours, vibrant places that provide bargains of every kind. One offers the largest collection of computer and electronic equipment anywhere in the world with hundreds of high tech shops crowding adjoining alleys. We investigated a derelict gold mine and hunted for jade bargains in tiny shops. We tasted fish balls in a seaside cafe and took a trip on an exact replica of London's Docklands Light Railway.

The exceptional kindness and hospitality of the Taiwanese made the trip unforgettable.

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