Environmental Case Study
Living in Taiwan

Taiwan and its nearly 22 million people faces the Peoples Republic of China with its nearly 1,250 million people across the Taiwan Strait. The main island of Taiwan is just 160 km (100 mi.) from mainland China, but Taiwan also administers several smaller islands, such as Quemoy and the Pescadores, close to the mainland. The Peoples Republic of China claims Taiwan as an outlying province and prevents it from becoming a member of the United Nations. A formal declaration of independence by Taiwan (it calls itself the Republic of China) would lead to international incidents.

Taiwan experienced many changes up to the 1900s. It was part of the Chinese Empire from 1660 to 1895, when many Chinese from the nearest provinces, especially Fujian, moved to the island and brought their southern Chinese languages. Taiwan was then occupied by Japan until the end of World War II in 1945. They brought a harsh regime, but also left behind an educational system that included all the young people. They largely eliminated tropical diseases, built good roads, communications, and harbors, and encouraged intensive rice agriculture. Taiwan's population trebled in the first half of the 1900s. When the Japanese were forced to leave, however, they committed many atrocities and left hatred for them that lasted for many years.

The Chinese Nationalist Government, dominated by the Kuomintang party, took over the island as the Japanese left in 1945, but Taiwan was the one province they retained when the Communist Party proclaimed the Peoples Republic of China in 1949. The defeated Kuomintang leaders and soldiers fled with their families from the mainland to Taiwan. They held on to independence with economic, trading, and military support from the United States. They came from all parts of China, making up 15 percent of the Taiwanese population, and brought the northern (Beijing or Mandarin) Chinese language. All of these peoples now call themselves "Taiwanese," but the southern Chinese languages are now being promoted in schools along with cultural and artistic features that mold a nation.

The Kuomintang government instigated marshal law that was only relaxed in the 1980s. It emphasised the importance of manufacturing and export sales, moving from products demanding cheap labor to high tech goods such as machinery and electronic components that are now the main exports. Taiwan built a huge positive balance of trade, which prevented it from suffering with the rest of eastern Asia in the later 1990s recession. Taiwan produces most of its own armaments, spending twice the proportion of national income on them compared with other world countries - although the amount decreases each year.

Lee Thong grew up in Tainan, the fourth and oldest city of Taiwan. Among its buildings are the oldest Confucian temple that has the oldest school on the island and the first commercial street. Her father has a small factory producing crafted wooden hairclips and she has a brother and two sisters who are in their twenties. The sisters all live at home and have their own rooms. Her mother does not have a job outside the home, and grandmother has lived with the family for 30 years. Lee and her sisters all did well at school in what is probably Asia's best educational system, progressing through high school to university and getting jobs locally. Her brother is a computer programmer in the United States.
Lee studied International Trade at Taichung University and works for a local company in marketing domestic and industrial passive infrared sensors that are used to turn on lights and sometimes in alarm systems. Most of the customers are in Japan and Europe. She works out of an office in Tainan that employs 16 people. Most employees (550), however, work in the company factory in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, just inland of Hong Kong in southern China. This is a common situation for Taiwanese firms, which finance factory production using cheap Chinese labor and take advantage of tax breaks in Special Economic Zones on the mainland and then carry out the marketing. The Taiwan government limits investments in Chinese mainland factories to those that need more production workers, hoping to keep the most important industries in Taiwan.

People living in Taiwan mostly enjoy a good standard of living with incomes that are high compared with those on the mainland, but are not up to Japanese levels. Lee's family buys their food needs from the huge choice available in the local market. Their diet is mostly of rice, vegetables, meat and fish. Taiwan's farmers are often able to grow two crops (rice, sugar cane, citrus or subtropical fruits) a year in the subtropical climate with plenty of rain.
The warm ocean current off the east coast has plentiful tuna fish. Local restaurants serve typical Chinese menus, but there are also the multinational fast-food outlets familiar around the world. Travel is easy by bus, train, or air, and a high-speed rail line is being built to reduce the travel time from Taipei the largest city (north) and Kaohsiung the largest port (south) from 4-5 hours to 90 minutes. Although Lee’s family has a car, she and her sisters have motorbikes - the main form of personal transport in Taiwan. She enjoys going to the beaches on the southern tip of Taiwan and the mountains in the center of the island that rise to 4,000 m (over 13,000 ft.). Lee is less interested in other forms of recreation enjoyed by Taiwanese people, such as the karaoke clubs. She sometimes watches TV with the family. There are four free channels and many families have satellite TV reception with programs from around the world.
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Taiwanese people also enjoy a good health service that is funded partially from government sources, personal income, and employers’ contributions and partially from payments for individual visits to the doctor or hospital. The government supports pension plans and provides pensions for its own employees such as teachers.

The good conditions that Taiwanese people enjoy today are the result of many factors being combined. The Japanese legacy in infrastructure, education, and public health from earlier in the 1900s, the U.S. support particularly after 1949, the strong Kuomintang military government that for long put national needs before individual incomes in gaining overseas markets, the entrepreneurial skills of individuals working in family businesses, and the growing wealth of the people all contributed to the high levels of well-being that mark the island today. There is a continuing tension between Taiwan (calling itself the Republic of China) and the People's Republic of China, but the Taiwanese seek to build on the advantages of a productive economy, good education system, and overseas links to guarantee their future as a separate political entity.

[Website: http://www.tbroc.gov.tw]. This is the tourist bureau site.