

# Understand Taiwan

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Understand just what makes the Beautiful Isle such a diverse and wild place.

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# Taiwan Today

In many ways, Taiwan is stalled. The economy is sluggish and politically the country is acting at cross purposes: voting to strengthen ties with China but resisting any attempt to dilute local identity. Tsai Ing-wen's presidential victory in 2016 may have ignited hopes for a new mode of dealing with Beijing, but it also raised fears of renewed tensions. Yet Taiwan continues to develop as Asia's most open, tolerant and liberal society. If there's a national mood, it might be sunny pessimism.

## Best on Film

**A Brighter Summer's Day** (Edward Yang; 1991) A film set in the 1960s about the agonies of youth and tensions between mainland migrants and the local Taiwanese.

**Seediq Bale** (Wei Te-sheng; 2011) A two-part epic about the 1930 Wushe Rebellion.

**City of Sadness** (Hou Hsiao-hsien; 1989) This film about events around the 2-28 Incident finally broke the taboo against discussing the tragedy.

**Stray Dogs** (Tsai Ming-liang; 2013) Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, this is a serious film about poverty and a dysfunctional family in Taipei.

## Best in Print

**Formosa Betrayed** (George Kerr; 1965) A compelling, detailed first-hand account from an American diplomat of post-WWII Taiwan including the 2-28 Incident.

**Taipei People** (Pai Hsien-yung; 1971) A short story collection about mainland immigrants in Taipei in the 1950s.

**A Chinese Pioneer Family: The Lins of Wu-feng, Taiwan, 1729–1895** (Johanna Menzel Meskill; 1979) A readable historical account of one of Taiwan's most powerful families, from the first immigrant to contemporary business and cultural leaders.

## The Mewling Tiger

Where did it all go wrong? The story is still being written but a few clear themes are emerging.

First of all there has been gross overinvestment in China. Since the late 1990s Taiwanese firms, with their advantages in language and culture, have invested some US\$120 to US\$200 billion in China, but only a fraction of that at home. Currently there are over 70,000 Taiwanese companies with operations in mainland China.

There's also been a lack of R & D and business upgrading. Too many Taiwanese companies moved to China for the cheap manufacturing rather than as part of a sophisticated industrial restructuring. Now with wages rising in China, and firms there capable of handling production (and design) themselves, many Taiwanese companies are finding themselves outdated and unneeded. That said, more and more Taiwanese are joining mainland China's creative industries such as animation, or high-tech fields like integrated circuit design, where Taiwan still enjoys a technological edge over the mainland.

In 2013 it was estimated that 600,000 of Taiwan's 23 million people spent more than half of the year abroad. Three of every four were in China.

## Identity Questions

In a 2016 poll on national identity that was conducted just days after Tsai Ing-wen's ascension to the presidency, a record high of over 80% said they considered themselves exclusively Taiwanese, while only 8.1% identified themselves as Chinese and 7.6% as both. This is a massive change from 20-odd years ago, when under 17% considered themselves Taiwanese. In addition, over 51% of respondents indicated a preference for eventual independence, compared to 15% who favoured unification and 25% who wanted to maintain the status quo.