

Taiwan features extensive cultural and economic history

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Over the past few weeks, Citizen freelance writer, Kira Wronska Dorward reported from Taipei, as she discovered its new vitality and beauty. This is her sixth log.

We arrive late at night in Taiwan, not in the best of shape. My mother had been quite ill on our last night in Cambodia, and we had just spent 11 hours flying from Siem Riep through Ho Chi Minh to get to Taipei. Antsy to get to the hotel and veg out, I race through the extremely long hallways connecting our terminal to what they call 'Immigration,' and was taken aback when I was asked to provide fingerprint identification at customs. This is something I had never encountered before in all my travels and, after some difficulty getting the hang of 'rubbing' my index fingers up and down the scanners properly and having my picture taken, I was let into Taiwan without comment. However, being asked for fingerprint identification at a border had me wondering what exactly the political situation is in a country for customs to request such stringent entry regulations.

When people think of Taiwan, they most likely think of a far-off island in the South China Sea that makes our electronics and cheap plastic toys and may or may not be Chinese. The truth is Taiwan is the product of an incredibly complex cultural and economic history, and is struggling to retain its independence on the world stage with the looming shadow of mainland China always in the background.

First arriving at the wrong hotel, then getting into an altercation with a cab driver who drove us to another hotel which also did not have our reservations (despite his insistence that it did), we eventually find our accommodations in the middle floors of an extremely tall office building opposite the main metro station. Essentially, if this was Toronto, our hotel would be in the office towers next to the Eaton Centre but, because this is Asia, it's like that on steroids. In the main lobby, only half the elevators go to certain floors, and since it's all in Mandarin we have to play roulette. The next morning, with mom still very ill, I go out in search of food. Crossing the street did seem to have some sort of order to it, though I could not discern the pattern and followed the horde of locals that swarmed at every crosswalk. There is no lack of choice near Taipei's Main Station, from vendors selling take-away boxes of select-your-own Chinese food to an incredibly busy McDonald's and, for some reason, a plethora of 7-Elevens. It reminds me of a better lit version of a scene from Blade Runner when Harrison Ford is ordering food in what seems to be an Asian city. Everything Western and Eastern is available in Taipei. It's both modern and futuristic, with perhaps the only thing to be desired being more wide-spread English.

I speak two words in Mandarin: she-she (thank-you) and nihau (hello). It serves me well enough if I combine it with miming and pointing at what I want to buy, but it's clear English is not as predominant here as I might have thought. In fact, modern Taiwanese is based on a dialect of Mandarin from the Fujin province of China, where the majority of mainland immigrants came from. After the Civil War began in China and the government fled to Taiwan, a Mandarin educational system that is maintained to this day was set up by the government. Older generations of Taiwanese speak Japanese from the days when Taiwan was a province of Japan, exploited for its rich production of sugar cane.

The fact that Taiwan was a province of Japan and the Qing dynasty from 1895-1945 is forgotten in the wake of the rise of Communist China and the subsequent politics of the 'One China Policy' enacted by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s to appease mainland China, which remains the status quo today. Taiwan is still recognized as the 'Republic of China' but is a completely independent nation with a multi-party democratic system. If this seems incredibly confusing, it's because it is!

For 50 years Japan ruled Taiwan as a province, mostly interested in its production of sugar cane. The Japanese rapidly improved the infrastructure of the island nation and built highly effective railways to transport sugar and sugar cane back to Japan. After the end of World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan was ceded to China (although international disputes continue to this day), and later Taiwan became the seat of the exiled Chinese government during the Chinese Civil War. This is why Taiwan is officially the 'Republic of China' while not actually being Chinese. Understandably, in the handing back and forth of the island in the last century, the Taiwanese have developed a resentment towards both mainland China and the Japanese, and wish to continue as a sovereign nation.

Not just politically volatile, Taiwan also sits on a fault plate that caused two earthquakes while we stayed there. I noticed the small chandelier in my room tinkling while the room seemed to sway. I waited, listening for panic and alarms, but everything seemed copacetic. So used to these minor disturbances, the Taiwanese build their structures to be earthquake proof with reinforced concrete steel and cement. I was not aware of this at the time and, as we were on the eighth floor of a high-rise office building, I was worried, but trusted the natives to know how to weather a storm, or an earthquake in this case.

The most efficient hotel maids I have ever seen come in briefly afterward and clean the room with frightening proficiency. In fact, the experience feels a little like an onslaught as they grab almost full water bottles out of my hands and flush them down the toilet

while I uselessly explain in English that I was drinking that. They are in and out in less than ten minutes, and it kind of feels like the after-shock of the earthquake.

When I return home to Caledon, I ask Caledon East Guardian Pharmacist Phil L. H. Sun, who was born, lived and trained in Taiwan, what he thinks about Taiwan's political future. The former President, he tells me, made it very clear before he left office that, if China tried to take Taiwan by force, there would be a major war. As this area of the world is the most heavily armed in terms of missile defense, it's a very delicate situation. The Taiwanese, says Phil, are used to the constant threat from the mainland, but it's clear the national sentiment is 'If you're going to take us by force, we're not going to make it easy.' Phil also goes on to acknowledge that China and Taiwan undeniably 'share a culture and a history but, over the last hundred years, Taiwan has felt mistreated by the mainland.' With an extremely high GDP (19th in the world), Taiwan is an attractive target for reintegration to China. Is it possible? I ask Phil.

'China has to go through a political reform - it's possible with economic improvement. If China reforms, it would not be difficult for Taiwan to join again.'

Until then, however, I see why they need the fingerprint scanners at the airport for 'foreigners'.