Taiwan is often described as a Chinese island. In many ways this is a fair enough description; the population of Taiwan is made up overwhelmingly of speakers of Chinese, and Taiwan’s culture is intimately related in many ways to the culture of the mainland’s southeastern Fujian Province. However, it is important to note one major way in which it is not “Chinese”: during the last 109 years, Taiwan has been ruled by the ruling government of China for a total of four years. For the remaining 105 years, it has been ruled by regimes Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese that have not controlled the Chinese mainland. This century-plus of independent development has not made Taiwan “non-Chinese” so much as “culturally Chinese, but with a difference.”

For these reasons, the scholar or student who wants to study China must also understand Taiwan. And while the Chinese mainland has been closed to free research by foreign scholars for much of the past half century, Taiwan has provided an open environment for research and has generated an enormous body of English-language literature on topics for which there is no comparable research for mainland China.

Clearly, despite the fact that it is often overshadowed by its giant neighbor, the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan is worthy of a study on its own account. One of the twentieth century’s most startling examples of economic success—and of the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism—Taiwan is also a shining example of intellectual productivity and artistic creativity.

This book is an account of some of the many ways that people in modern Taiwan approach daily life. It is, of course, not exhaustive. That would not be possible. Our goal has been to touch a wide range of different aspects of everyday life and to convey something of the world as people in Taiwan experience it. What is happiness? Who matters? What does it mean to be Taiwanese?
The intended audience is North American college students, and for this reason we have deliberately tended to avoid technical jargon and have taken pains to outline our theoretical points in a clear way that should be easy to understand. Our authors are from a range of disciplines and approach their topics in many ways, including, in some cases, open advocacy and direct condemnation. We hope that this will keep the readings interesting, but also that it will facilitate different kinds of classroom discussions—not just about Taiwan, but also about how to study broad cultural themes in a large population. Recognizing that many American college students study Chinese, we have included Chinese characters in a table at the end for many of the terms mentioned in the text.

The book begins with a history of Taiwan and then moves directly to essays on highly specific topics, each with brief introductory remarks by the volume editors, which are intended to summarize some of the main points. We recommend that instructors assign the historical chapter first, since it provides useful background for the rest. Other chapters can be assigned according to the instructor’s preference.

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