THE TAIWAN STORY

How a Small Island Will Dictate the Global Future

Kerry Brown



The Taiwan Story

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Dedicated to the memory of Frank Charles Clark
1936–1993

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Timeline

230 CE	One of the earliest mentions of Taiwan island in Chinese-language sources.
1349	First account of Taiwan by a Chinese visitor, Wang Dayuan. From this period, settlers from the mainland arrive to live on the island.
1620s	Settlement of Taiwan by Dutch and Spanish. The Dutch start to construct Fort Zeelandia in 1625.
1642	Control of Taiwan by the Dutch, after forcing the total withdrawal of the Spanish.
1644	Collapse of the Ming Dynasty and establishment of the Qing Dynasty. Rebel forces under Zheng Chenggong make Taiwan a stronghold.
1661	The Kangxi emperor comes to the throne at the age of six. In the following sixty years of his reign, there is a major expansion of Qing-controlled territory.
1662	Zheng's forces defeat the Dutch and expel them from Taiwan. The anti-Qing Tungning Dynasty is established under Zheng, who dies shortly afterwards and is succeeded by his son, Zheng Jing.
1683	Qing conquest of Taiwan and end of the Tungning Dynasty. It is made a prefecture of Fujian province for the next 205 years.
1721	Start of a series of rebellions, first by Chinese settlers and then by Taiwanese indigenous peoples; parts of Taiwan island are marked off as beyond Chinese control. The

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rebellions continue throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

1860 Convention of Beijing after the Second Anglo-Chinese War opens up parts of Taiwan to foreign trade.

1884–5 French attempts to annex Taiwan by force are repelled by the Qing army.

1887 Taiwan upgraded from a prefecture to a separate province with its own governor and some autonomy from China.

1895 Chinese forces beaten in the Sino-Japanese War. Treaty of Shimonoseki cedes Taiwan to Japanese colonial rule until 1945.

1911–12 Collapse of the Qing Dynasty and establishment of the Republic of China.

1930 Uprising against the Japanese by indigenous Atayal Taiwanese met with violent reprisals.

1943 Cairo Declaration agrees that, in the event of Allied victory in the Second World War, all Chinese territories seized by Japan will be returned to the Chinese government, including Taiwan.

1945 Defeat of the Japanese, and retrocession of Taiwan to the Republic of China. It becomes a province with its own governor.

1946–9 Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists under Mao Zedong, during which 2 million people flee the mainland for Taiwan.

1947 28 February Incident: Chinese governor Chen Yi violently represses a local protest. Forces arrive from the mainland and instigate a reign of terror.

1949 Defeat of the Nationalists in China and relocation of the Republic of China's government under Chiang Kai-shek to

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Taiwan. Martial law is declared, lasting until 1987. Foundation of the People's Republic of China in Beijing.

1950 Attempts by the Communists to launch an invasion of Taiwan are permanently postponed after the North Koreans invade South Korea, starting the Korean War. United Nations forces wage war against the North Koreans, who are massively supported by the Chinese. As a result of the war, the US commits to Taiwan's defence.

1955 Clashes between Chinese and Taiwanese forces (known as the First Strait Crisis). US–Taiwan mutual defence treaty, signed in Taipei at the end of 1954, is implemented.

1958 Second Strait Crisis: People's Republic forces trying to take Kinmen (sometimes called Jinmin or Quemoy) and Matsu islands are repulsed.

1971 Taiwan loses its seat at the United Nations after a majority of countries vote for the People's Republic to replace it representing China.

1972 Visit by US President Richard Nixon to Beijing, and signing of the Shanghai Communiqué which 'acknowledges' that there is only one China, and that Taiwan is part of China.

1975 Death of Chiang Kai-shek. Succeeded as president of Taiwan by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, in 1978.

1979 US shifts formal diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China. US Congress passes the Taiwan Relations Act, stipulating that it must be consulted over Taiwan's security.

1980 Aftermath of the Kaohsiung Incident in southern Taiwan: heavy prison sentences are handed out to the leaders of the pro-democracy protests.

1987 Martial law lifted, after thirty-eight years. Democratic Progressive Party legalized and starts contesting elections.

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1988	Death of Chiang Ching-kuo. Succeeded as leader of the Nationalist Party by Lee Teng-hui.
1991	First fully democratic elections for the Legislative Assembly. The presidency remains appointed rather than directly elected.
1995	Visit of President Lee Teng-hui to the US to give a speech results in Chinese military exercises in the strait, and the US deploying two aircraft carriers to the region.
1996	First presidential election on the principle of universal franchise for all Taiwanese adults over twenty-one. Lee Teng-hui wins an overwhelming majority.
2000	First election of a Democratic Progressive Party candidate, Chen Shui-bian, as president.
2008	Nationalist Party returns to power under President Ma Ying-jeou.
2010	Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement between Taiwan and China, resulting in direct air, postal and tourist links, and free trade of some goods.
2012	Ma Ying-jeou re-elected as president. Xi Jinping comes to power as leader of the Communist Party in China.
2014	Sunflower Protests force the Ma administration to abandon plans for a common investment agreement with China.
2015	Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping are the first leaders of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China to meet in person (in Singapore).
2016	Tsai Ing-wen, the Democratic Progressive Party candidate, is elected president.
2019	Protests in Hong Kong over a new national security law and proposals for extradition legislation subjecting Hong Kong and Taiwan nationals to the Chinese justice

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system – seen in Taiwan as the end of any possibility of using the 'One Country, Two Systems' rubric to manage Taiwan's status.

2020 Tsai Ing-wen re-elected as president. The 'Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region' law is passed by Beijing.

2020–23 COVID-19 pandemic: Taiwan experiences one of the lowest mortality rates in the world, despite never imposing a national lockdown.

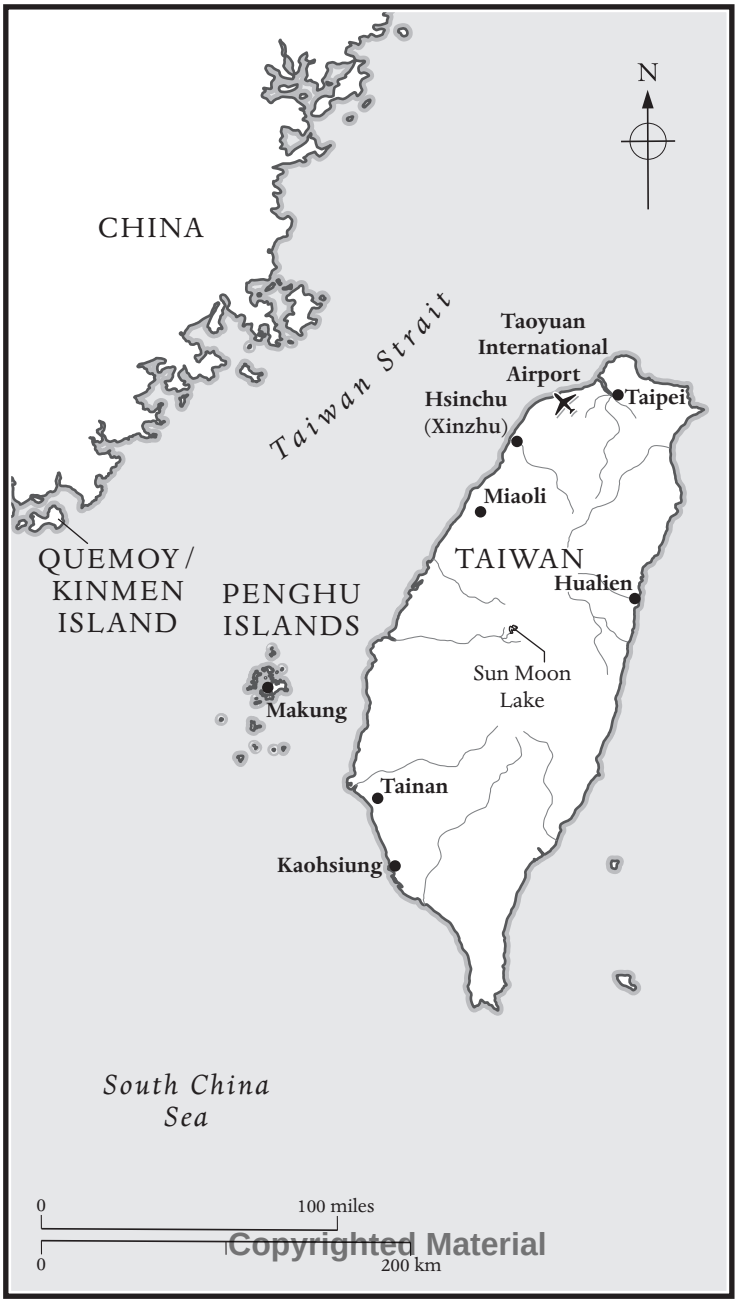
2022 Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, becomes the highest-ranked American official to visit Taiwan since 1996.

2024 William Lai Ching-te, the Democratic Progressive Party candidate, is elected president.

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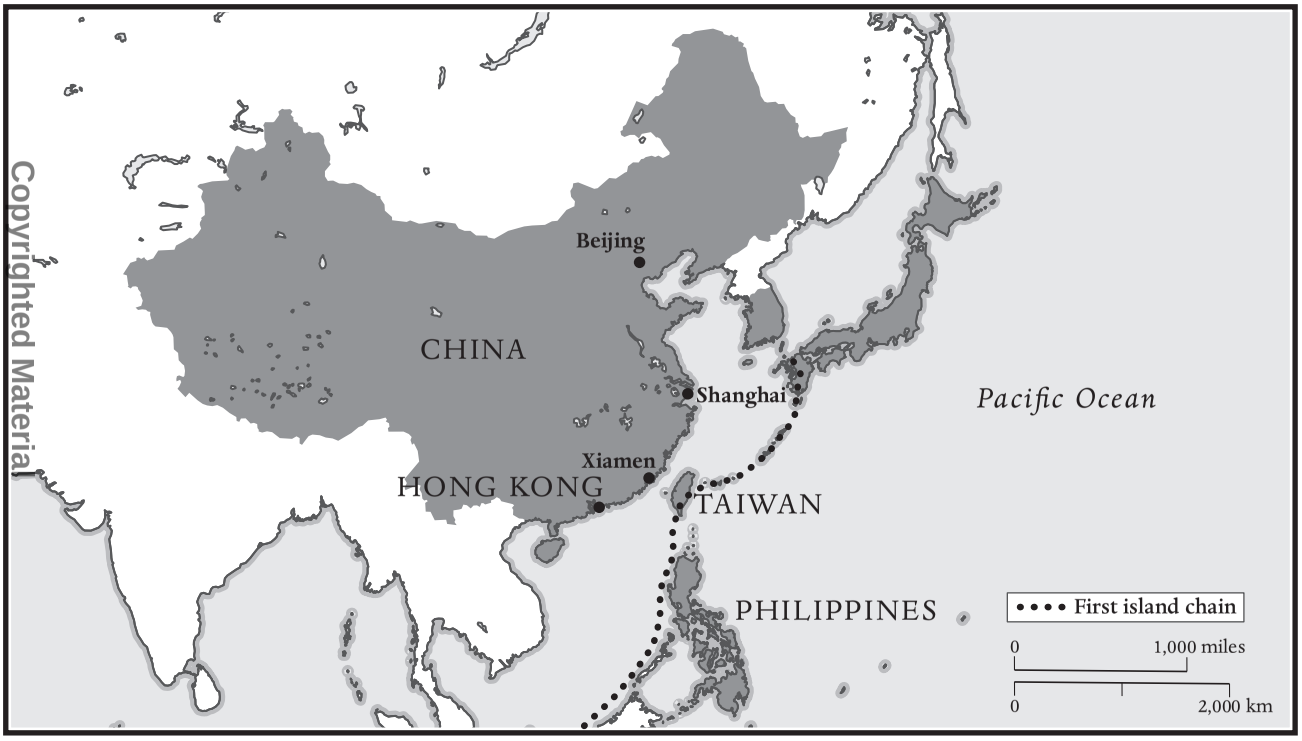
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Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait



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China, Taiwan and the South China Sea region



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A Note on Terms

Discussion of Taiwan is beset by the problem of how to refer to the key players. 'Taiwan' was originally the name of the main island (one of more than 160) that today constitutes the 'Republic of China' (ROC). The Republic of China has been in existence since 1911–12 when the Chinese Qing Dynasty collapsed. After the Civil War in China between 1946 and 1949, the Republic's government moved to Taiwan island, and from that point was largely known as the 'Republic of China on Taiwan'. While this is its official name, the shorter 'Taiwan', or 'the island', are used in this book for ease and clarity.

Before the Civil War, the Republic of China was governed by the Nationalist Party. It is often referred to by its Chinese name: the 'Guomindang' (GMD), in the modern transliteration system from Chinese to English (called Pinyin); or the 'Kuomintang' (KMT), according to an older transcription method. In this book, 'Nationalist Party' is the sole term used. The victor in the Civil War was the Communist Party of China (CPC), which created the 'People's Republic of China' (PRC) in 1949. It continues to rule the mainland today. In this book, any of 'People's Republic of China', 'PRC', 'China' or 'the mainland' are the terms used.

There is a rich and complex history of other terms used to refer to Taiwan in English-language material. 'Formosa' is the term used in some of the earliest literature. 'Free China' was one expression deployed in the past, presumably to distinguish Taiwan from the 'unfree China' – as people saw it – that existed

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on the other side of the 130 kilometre stretch of water called 'the strait'. For the Olympic Games, Taiwanese athletes march under the curious title of 'Chinese Taipei', something enforced by mainland imperatives so as not to confer any hint of recognized sovereignty. In the case of the World Trade Organization, Taiwan was able to join it in 2001, only a few minutes after the People's Republic (despite technically qualifying some years earlier), but as a 'customs territory'. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other media outlets call Taiwan a 'self-governing island'. On some websites, to the irritation of many, Taiwan is downgraded to a 'province'. Others label it a 'de facto independent state'. Taiwanese proudly speak of being inhabitants of a 'jewel island'. The more military-minded of them have called the place 'an unsinkable aircraft carrier', or a 'shrimp caught between two whales'.

In this book, Taiwan is sometimes referred to as a 'country'. I've used this word, not because I assume per se that Taiwan is a country, but out of respect to the many Taiwanese I know who believe the place where they live is a nation, and that it should be accorded that status. I've seen the humiliation and hurt that Taiwanese feel abroad when they encounter people or places that deny the existence of where they come from, despite knowing all too well that it is real, even if that is contested by its neighbour. As will become clear, I am not an activist supporter for Taiwan independence, and my use of 'country' should not be read as such. It is simply a recognition of the term that many of those people at the very heart of this issue use – the Taiwanese themselves.

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Introduction

What does it mean to be Taiwanese today? To see the name of the place where you live figure in so many news reports, most of them stating that if there is a Third World War, this is where it will start? To have think tanks, media commentators and politicians speak about you as a 'problem'? To be saluted as one of the world's key economies because your country produces the most advanced semiconductors, which the rest of the planet relies upon? To know that, despite this, 90 per cent of the leaders of those other countries don't actually recognize your home as a country at all? And that, above all, you are seen as sitting – through accident of birth – at the heart of arguably the greatest geopolitical challenge of the twenty-first century?

To be Taiwanese in the twenty-first century means that the outside world sees you as part of a matter that needs to be 'managed', a conundrum to be 'solved', a potential flashpoint that needs to be 'contained'. You are involved in something many people, particularly if they are other governments, try to keep 'ambiguous' in order to preserve the current status quo, because they fear what might happen if anyone dares to question it. To be Taiwanese these days means to have a stronger feeling than most people in the world that your fate is not entirely in your own hands. All it needs is one American president to say they recognize Taiwan as a country, or one Chinese leader to say they want Taiwan to return to their fold immediately, and your life will be turned upside down. Being Taiwanese has many meanings. But one thing that most people who are

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citizens of this island wish they had more of is normality. For the situation concerning Taiwan and its status is anything but normal.

I am not Taiwanese. But for more than thirty years I have dealt with what is euphemistically called 'the Chinese-speaking World', within which China and Taiwan sit alongside one another. I have ended up with a complex set of experiences and interpretations of what Taiwan means. They arise from my many visits to the island since the turn of the millennium, and from my friendships with people in and from Taiwan. And because most of my professional life has been spent researching and writing about Taiwan's partner in this issue: China.

I often feel as if I have ended up with two distinct brains. One I use when I go to the People's Republic of China (PRC), a country whose 1.4 billion strong population constitutes a fifth of humanity. For decades, I've listened to the opinions, histories, attitudes and ideas about Taiwan expressed by Chinese officials, friends and colleagues. Often these occur at interminable public occasions, such as formal banquets with those that work in the administration, or government-supported conferences and seminars. Sometimes they crop up in the middle of totally unrelated informal conversations. I'm told that Taiwan *is* China, that it has always been part of China. With a stern, admonishing look, people tell me that it needs to come back to China, and that outsiders had better keep out of the matter. At the beginning of my career, before I knew much of the history of why these two places today have the relationship they do, I could tell that this was something that people in China felt extremely strongly about. They had a limited appetite for hearing the opinions about this issue of any outsider like me, especially when they ran contrary to what they themselves believed.

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But I had the reverse experience in Taiwan. It was like stepping across some magical threshold from one order of reality into another, where everything was instantaneously turned upside down. Those opinions and ideas about the island that were made across the waters were spurious, people told me. But, they quickly added, they were claims made by a bully. They would go on to argue that China was a place that Taiwan had never really belonged to, but with which it had had merely a loose, sporadic association in the past.

As I have travelled back and between these two environments over the years, I have had to acknowledge more and more that Taiwan is indeed different – though the crucial issue is to what extent. Sometimes I feel like I am teetering on the edge of accepting that it is, in fact, a completely separate place. But then the realist in me starts arguing that – for now at least – there is a link with the far larger and more populous country across the strait that can't be ignored, because of the consequences that might follow if it is. Feeling perpetually uncertain, and beset by doubts about the strength of my own position, I imagine I have become a little like the Taiwanese themselves.

I first went to Taiwan in 2000, when I was based in Beijing as a diplomat at the British Embassy. In those days, Taiwan really did feel like the 'renegade' province it was labelled by the People's Republic. There were no direct flights. I had to go via the special territory of Hong Kong (part of China but, as we will see in more detail later, enjoying an unusual status after its return by the British to Chinese rule in 1997), which added hours to the journey. Even on a first visit, Taiwan somehow felt more intimate and easier to relate to than the vastness of the mainland I had come from. The capital, Taipei, had none of the massive, open boulevards of China's centre of government, Beijing. The island was a hard place to classify. The year

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I had spent in Japan a decade earlier made me alert to the very distinctive aesthetics of that country: often simple, almost austere and sparse (Zen gardens come to mind, and the pure, clear lines of Japanese architecture). Taiwan carried a hint of this, with its tatami mat floors in older housing, the style of some of its buildings, and its little streams of water flowing beside streets. It had the same profusion of small shops and eateries in tiny alleys that I remembered from Japan, sometimes with sliding doors at the entrance and red paper lanterns hanging from the eaves.

The issue of Taiwan arose from the ruins of the Second World War. What was then a unified Republic of China in effect split in two after the three-year Civil War. The defeated Nationalists, who had ruled the country up to 1949, fled to a part of the territory they had governed since 1945, after taking it back from half a century of Japanese colonial control: Taiwan island. There they continued their regime. The Communist victors on the vast mainland created a new regime, the People's Republic of China. However, both sides claimed that they were the legitimate government of the once-united state, and that the other were usurpers. In the beginning, at least, both vowed to one day achieve reunification.

The conflict that resulted from this split formed one strand of the Cold War through the 1950s and into the 1970s. It pitched an ally of the West against a country run by Communists (even though the Chinese proved highly idiosyncratic Marxists and fell out with their Soviet Union patrons in the late 1950s). Any hopes of an immediate resolution, in which one side prevailed, steadily faded. Over the 1970s, largely led by politicians such as Richard Nixon in Washington and Mao Zedong in Beijing, a framework was painstakingly constructed, which recognized only one China, and fudged the issue of what precisely this

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meant, in order to manage if not resolve this division while it endured. It meant that everyone could work around the dispute, have relations with either party and not need to decisively choose sides. This was the ultimate diplomatic example of having one's cake and eating it.

Such a situation was deliberately riddled with ambiguity. The simple term 'China', for instance, could either mean 'Republic of China' (Taiwan) or 'People's Republic of China' (the Communist mainland). Games were played with words so that people 'acknowledged' the position of either entity – Taiwan or China – without ever committing themselves to saying if they actually agreed with what was being said. For all the inelegance of this strict focus on semantics, it at least preserved the peace. Unlike many other global conflicts, the dispute between China and Taiwan over the latter's status has not, so far, led to war or outright conflict, testifying to the usefulness of all this playing around with words.

Another reason for the absence of overt conflict is the position of key third parties, of whom the United States is the most important, and the ways they have, up till now, restrained risky attempts at resolution by the two protagonists either side of the strait. Enjoying a trade and political relationship today with both Taiwan and China, the US has achieved this refereeing role by creating a policy of 'strategic ambiguity'. This implies strong interest and commitment by Washington to the security of Taiwan, but no cast-iron promises about what it might do should China ever decide on a full-on assault. The fact that no one knows how America would respond were something drastic to happen has made everyone cautious about trying to force a resolution. It has avoided Washington being manipulated by Taipei and curbed the more impetuous and zealous instincts of others.

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For more than four decades, from the 1970s until the early 2020s, this position of ambiguity has preserved at least some boundaries within which Taiwan's status has remained untampered. The island under this protective umbrella has continued to travel along its own distinct path, becoming a democracy and enjoying relative self-determination. But as we look to the future, the Taiwan issue is likely to become increasingly vexed. All the painstaking diplomatic work of the past few decades is under pressure like never before. Key elements of the situation are changing, from the economic and military capacity of China to the rising sense of unique identity within Taiwan itself and the posture of the US. The question of whether the issue of Taiwan will continue to be manageable or will serve as the catalyst for a conflict that could escalate and threaten the rest of the world is becoming more and more urgent. Many worry that the possibility of war is now far likelier than at any time in the last half-century, with Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu declaring in 2023 that a conflict by 2027 was something 'we need to be serious about'.[1]

One major change prompting these concerns is the way that Chinese power and nationalist ambitions have risen in recent years. Beijing's newly acquired economic capacity is increasingly proving to be a game changer. Up to the 1990s, the People's Republic could express its claims for reunification forcefully but had limited capacity to do anything about them. It had neither the technology nor the military equipment and the financial resources. Today, all that has changed. China is the world's second-largest economy, has the largest navy (in terms of number of vessels, though for the most technologically advanced assets, such as nuclear submarines, the US is still way ahead) and ranks after only the US in terms of military expenditure. It can think about doing things that were

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never an option in the past. Now, it has the motivation *and* the means. The question for many is no longer whether China can actually do anything, but when it will act.

One result of this change in China's situation is a worrying number of people who believe the West needs to respond by pushing back. This would involve scrapping the ambiguity over Taiwan's status in the face of China's more overtly aggressive and threatening position. In America, in particular, politicians have increasingly moved towards far stronger and clearer expressions of willingness to defend Taiwan. A few have even suggested full recognition of the island's independence. However well intended this demonstration of solidarity is, it risks ramping up the very resolve of the government in Beijing that it is meant to counter. This is because it appears to lead to the one outcome that China has stated categorically it will take any measure to avoid – a separate Taiwan nation. Putting these two standpoints beside each other, it is easy to see how perilously close the world is to outright military escalation.

It may be that our best approach is to admit that we are playing for time. We are all like an audience watching a play where the protagonist looks to be in an impossible trap, waiting for a brilliant twist that delivers them from disaster. Long term, there are hints of developments that might give us hope. Somewhere, somehow, the key factors that dictate the problem and make it so intractable today will change – the priorities of the leaders in China, or the thinking in the rest of the world about big issues like sovereignty and identity. One of the few bright spots in this scenario is the remarkable dynamism of China and Taiwan themselves. Unexpected change should not be dismissed out of hand, because in some spheres (such as the rapid economic growth in both places over the last decades that has had such a material effect on people's lives) it has already happened.

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But we have to be absolutely vigilant today. We have to remember that this issue remains volatile, unpredictable and potentially highly destructive. In faded lettering, worn by time, but still stamped across the front of the Taiwan issue is the label 'Highly Dangerous: Handle with Care'. We need to be clear about precisely why the label was put there in the first place, and understand with real clarity what the mismanagement of this issue – by Beijing, Taipei, Washington or anyone else – will mean for the region and for the rest of the world. If this matter gets out of hand, it will have economic, security and diplomatic consequences for everyone. This book will contemplate that scenario and how it might unfold.

A great deal of ink has been spilled over this issue. Taiwan is many things, but underanalysed is not one of them. Despite this, the vast majority of conferences and symposia, and many of the reports on and studies of the island, have taken a wholly external perspective. I have been present at many of these events. They talk of Taiwan's foreign relations, and the responses of key partners like China and the US. But it is as though Taiwan's domestic world does not exist. It is as if someone has described in great detail and with immense care the outside of a box, without thinking to look inside it.

In this short book, I will reverse that approach and plot a kind of journey from the inside out. I will begin by asking who the Taiwanese are, how they live, and how they identify themselves. 'Taiwanese' and 'Chinese' have a close relationship, but it is a layered, complex one, and one that has clearly changed over the past decades. The question today is whether being Taiwanese relates to China in a way that is similar to a resident of New York saying they are a New Yorker and also an American (and therefore a citizen of a larger entity they recognize they belong to and have obligations towards), or more like a

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