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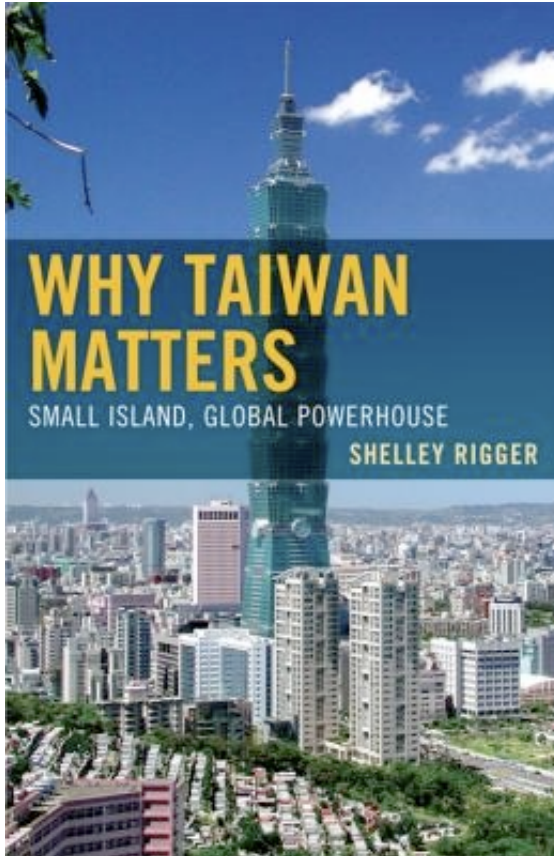
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Excerpt: *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse*

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By Shelley Rigger



Taipei 101, the blue-green glass tower that reigned for six years as the world's tallest building, is everywhere in Taiwan. Its image appears on advertisements, magazine covers, brochures, guidebooks, and billboards; the soaring structure itself is visible from nearly everywhere in Taipei City. As ubiquitous as Shanghai's Oriental Pearl TV tower—and considerably more graceful—Taipei 101 has become the iconic image of contemporary Taiwan.

Patterned on the tiered design of traditional pagodas, the 101-story tower consists of eight cubical sections with gently sloping sides rising out of a massive 20-story base (a less generous description: a stack of Chinese takeout containers). The topmost floors and spire take the shape of a stupa, a Buddhist monument, and the building is decorated with traditional motifs symbolizing fulfillment and health. Taipei 101 is an engineering marvel, the world's tallest building—built atop a tectonic fault, stabilized by a massive, gilded sphere perched on giant pistons twelve hundred feet above the ground. According to C. Y. Lee, the architect who designed it, Taipei 101 blends recognizably Chinese elements with cutting-edge global aesthetic and technical standards. In his words, the building embodies “Oriental philosophy and Western technology.”

Lee's magnificent building is beautiful from any angle—from any angle, because Taipei 101 stands completely alone. Unlike skyscrapers in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and New York, Taipei 101 does not compete for sunlight with a forest of similar buildings. It was constructed at the edge of Taipei as part of a redevelopment scheme to update a sleepy residential neighborhood. The next tallest building in the city is less than half its height, and three miles

away. Taipei 101 thus stands absolutely alone; no man-made object obstructs the views from its eighty-ninth and ninety-first floor observation decks. On a clear day, one can see the point where Taiwan disappears into the Taiwan Strait to the west and the East China Sea to the north.

When he accepted the commission, architect Lee knew he was designing a building that would embody Taiwan's grandest aspirations. Originally envisioned as a typical office complex—a sixty-six-story tower flanked by two smaller buildings—investors and politicians talked themselves into something far more ambitious. Given the mandate to design the world's tallest building in a city in which fifty stories had seemed massive just a decade before, Lee predicted, "The location and height will reshape the Taipei skyline. The impact will be enormous; it will be [an] icon not only for Taiwan but to the world as well."

C. Y. Lee accomplished his mission: Taipei 101 is a magnificent building, an icon, unquestionably. But does Taipei need an iconic building? Did it make sense to spend almost two billion dollars constructing this behemoth in a city with plenty of office space? Why expend vast resources engineering solutions to typhoon winds and frequent earthquakes when there was ample vacant land nearby? What does it say about Taiwan that the island would become the home of a project so expensive, so hubristic, so gratuitous and disproportionate?

It is easy to dismiss Taipei 101 as the product of an overeager society of strivers with a serious inferiority complex—and that possibility is not lost on the building's neighbors. Taiwanese are proud of the achievement, but not too proud to make fun of the building and criticize everything about it—from its architecture to its feng shui. As a symbol of contemporary Taiwan, Taipei 101 cuts two ways. It captures Taiwan's vitality and optimism; the fact that Taiwanese could finance such an undertaking reflects the island's extraordinary economic dynamism. At the same time, the building's solitary profile parallels Taiwan's isolation. From a distance, it can look fragile, lonely, and exposed.

Taipei 101 may be a vanity project, but if ever there were a country that could be forgiven such a folly, it is Taiwan. For centuries, even as its economy and culture flourished, the island was regarded as a political sideshow, the object of other nations' attention, never as the subject of its own history. Taiwan and its people have been traded back and forth among great powers, their fate decided in distant capitals, their voices absent from the negotiations.

Since World War II, however, the island has developed an identity and aspirations of its own. Its people have resisted outsiders' efforts to absorb, subjugate, and marginalize their homeland. Keeping Taiwan alive as an autonomous actor in international politics and economics requires determination and energy. It also requires creativity, as Taiwan has been forced to work outside the world's conventional structures and practices. The qualities that made Taipei 101 possible—ambition, invention, perseverance, and a strong tolerance for risk—are the same qualities that allow Taiwan to survive and prosper as a major global player.

The purpose of this book is to explain what it is about Taiwan—an island slightly larger than Belgium with a population a little less than Ghana's—that has won it such a prominent role in global economics and politics.

To understand why Taiwan matters we will explore how the people living there built a society capable of economic and political feats so astonishing that scholars call them "miracles." We will also consider the unique international predicament that compels Taiwan to seek the global limelight and that powers its domestic politics. We will see that Taiwan matters for practical reasons (its companies make most of our notebook computers and flat-screen devices) and moral ones: Taiwan proves that a determined nation can attain democracy, freedom, and prosperity peacefully. And I will try to persuade you that Taiwan matters for a more fundamental reason: it matters because its people, like all people, are ends in themselves, not mere instruments of someone else's destiny.

Taipei 101 is at the eastern terminus of Hsinyi Road. At the western end stands a tall building from another era, Taiwan's presidential office. In its day, it too was a skyscraper, with a two-hundred-foot tower rising above a magnificent marble entrance flanked by massive, elaborately decorated six-story wings. The building was completed in 1919 as a headquarters for the governors-general who ruled Taiwan for fifty years on behalf of the empire of Japan. In 1895 the Qing Dynasty ceded the island to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki—a treaty whose legitimacy Chinese nationalists deny. Japan viewed the island as an opportunity to prove its bona fides as a rival to imperialist powers in Europe. Within a decade, Tokyo was ready to declare its Taiwanese colony a success, and in 1906 it invited its best architects to submit designs for a government building capable of crowning its achievements.

The winning design took years to build, but the result was the imposing, ornate building that still stands today. It was badly damaged by U.S. bombing during World War II, when Taiwan served the Japanese empire as a source of food and soldiers. After their surrender in 1945, the Japanese cleared out and, following renovations, new occupants moved in. The flag they hoisted atop the tower belonged to the Republic of China.

The ROC had been established in 1912 after Chinese revolutionaries striving for democracy and development overthrew the Qing Dynasty. From the beginning, the Republic faced profound challenges. Warlords—independent military leaders loyal only to themselves—controlled much of China. Differences in political ideology and personal loyalties drove vicious infighting within and between the two main political camps, the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In the 1930s, Japanese expansionism deepened the crisis facing the struggling ROC state, forcing Chinese of all political stripes to concentrate their energies on resisting Japan's occupation of eastern China. But when World War II ended, conflict between the KMT and CCP reignited and the Chinese Civil War began. Four years later, in 1949, the Communists proclaimed a new Chinese state, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the defeated ROC government fled to Taiwan. Its president, Chiang Kai-shek, moved into the building at the west end of Hsinyi Road.

For the ROC government and the 1.5 million refugees who joined the exodus to Taiwan, the island was not a homeland but a place of exile. For the next forty years they devoted themselves to the task of keeping the Republic of China alive in the hope that it might someday return to the mainland in triumph, drive the Communists from power, and restore itself as the reigning Chinese state. To this end, they built Taiwan into a launching pad from which to mount their campaign to "recover the mainland."

The 6 million people already living in Taiwan when the refugees arrived had a very different view. For them, Taiwan was the only homeland they had ever known. Though their ancestors had lived in Taiwan for centuries, most families could trace their origins to the mainland, and many had been eager to see the end of Japanese colonialism. Still, the ROC's policies reduced Taiwan to a pawn in a fight between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party—two entities whose goals and aspirations had little relation to those of ordinary Taiwanese.

The Kuomintang's driving ambition was to recover mainland China, but the economic policies it adopted in pursuit of that goal were transformative. Under the protection of the United States, which regarded Taiwan as a crucial bulwark against Communist expansion, the KMT adopted a state-led economic development plan that soon put Taiwan on the road to prosperity. As chapter 3 details, the little island was a global leader in light manufacturing by the 1970s. It continued to clamber up the value chain in the 1980s and 1990s to take its place as a leading high-tech center, a story we tell in chapter 6.

Economic growth did not bring political reform, at least not right away. As the likelihood of an ROC return to the mainland diminished, more and more Taiwanese began to question—at first in secret, and then more openly—the ROC's determination to prioritize its mainland recovery project ahead of the island's social and political modernization. Some—nearly all of them living

outside Taiwan, beyond the reach of Chiang Kai-shek's secret police—even went so far as to advocate making a clean break, that is, declaring Taiwan independent, not just of the PRC or the ROC, but of China itself.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan's political system evolved from single-party authoritarianism under the KMT to multiparty democracy, and the debate over how Taiwan should view its relationship with the mainland emerged into the open. Many longtime residents believed that decades of subjugation to the KMT's "mission" had prevented Taiwan from developing its own sense of nationhood and pursuing its own destiny, while those who subscribed to the KMT's view feared that allowing Taiwan to claim a status separate from China would foreclose forever the possibility of a non-Communist China. When the People's Republic of China weighed in with its preferences, it became clear that redefining Taiwan's identity could also bring it into a potentially catastrophic confrontation with Beijing.

The PRC maintains that Taiwan has been Chinese territory for centuries, so it is Chinese territory today. Beijing does not recognize the ROC's legitimacy; in its view, the Communists' victory in 1949 extinguished the Republic, leaving the PRC as the only state representing the Chinese nation. The fact the Chinese government does not currently rule Taiwan is a historical anomaly that must be rectified.

For decades, the PRC's position was the inverse of the ROC's: it swore to "liberate" Taiwan, to annex it to the PRC by force. In 1979, a new generation of PRC leaders, determined to open China to the world, traded in that policy for a less bellicose objective: "peaceful unification." Since the early 2000s, Beijing has emphasized patience, arguing that unification need not come soon. Still, its bottom line is firm: Taiwan must not renounce unification. If it does, say PRC leaders, China's sacred territory will be severed, and that is an outcome they refuse to accept. As Premier Wen Jiabao put it in a 2003 interview with the *Washington Post*, "The Chinese people will pay any price to safeguard the unity of the motherland." Myriad policy statements and comments from Chinese leaders leave no room for doubt: the price they are willing to pay includes war.

Taiwanese see the situation very differently. They are at best deeply ambivalent about unification. The reasons for Taiwanese people's reluctance to unify with the PRC have changed since the 1940s, but the fact of that reluctance has not. In the early decades, Taiwan's government taught its people to resist the PRC out of loyalty to the ROC; it was the PRC, not China, that was to be rejected. Over time, though, the appeal of "China" has faded.

As the island's democracy grew and deepened, the political gulf between Taiwan and the mainland widened. Today, many Taiwanese resist the PRC because they value the political and economic freedom they enjoy as citizens of an ROC whose jurisdiction is limited to Taiwan. They still oppose folding Taiwan into the PRC, but they now see little benefit in giving up what they have to become part of any Chinese state headquartered on the mainland—even a non-Communist one. "Little Taiwan" is enough for them, not least because 1.4 billion mainland people and their leaders inevitably would dominate a unified Chinese state.

If few Taiwanese are ready to risk losing their way of life for an abstract notion like the territorial integrity of China, there is little more enthusiasm for putting that way of life at risk for a different abstract notion, Taiwan independence. In the parlance of pollsters, the mainstream preference, one shared by three-fourths of Taiwanese, is to "maintain the status quo." The Chinese phrase used in surveys translates as "preserve the way things are now," and that captures well what most Taiwanese hope to do, recognizing that "the way things are now" includes not foreclosing the possibility of unification someday and continuing to fly the Republic of China flag today. As U.S. Senator James Leach has said, Taiwan can have democracy or independence, but not both. Increasingly, too, Taiwan's economic prosperity rests on maintaining cooperative relations with China, which is its top target for trade and investment.

This, then, is the central dilemma facing Taiwan: how to live both freely and at peace. The PRC insists that if Taiwan does not at least pay lip service to unification, war is inevitable, but the vast majority of Taiwanese prefer to avoid unification as long as they can. Navigating this narrow passage is the central challenge facing Taiwan's leaders and voters. The high stakes and limited options help to explain why Taiwanese pursue politics with such uncommon passion.

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