

# How Taiwan fell prey to the wolves of China – and Japan

By Christopher Harding  
REBEL ISLAND  
by Jonathan Clements

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In this year of consequential elections, first off the blocks was Taiwan. Shortly before the January 13 vote, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and his Taiwanese counterpart, Tsai Ing-wen, reminded the world, in their New Year addresses, what was at stake. Xi expressed his determination to see “all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait... bound by a common sense of purpose”; Tsai insisted that Taiwan was an independent country whose future should be decided democratically, rather than by a widely expected invasion by People’s Liberation Army forces. Allegations swirled of Chinese meddling in the election in favour of the Kuomintang (KMT), seen as friendlier than Tsai’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). It was all to no avail: the DPP candidate, Tsai’s successor, Lai Ching-te, was elected, and cross-Strait relations will remain tense.

In his new history of Taiwan, *Rebel Island*, Jonathan Clements reminds us just how recent Taiwan is as a single democratic polity. If we were to imagine the island’s history as a calendar year, he says, beginning with the arrival of the first humans, 20,000 to 30,000 ...

years ago, then it wouldn’t be until late December of that year that most of what we consider “Taiwanese history” plays out.

“Prolonged and enduring ties with the Chinese on the mainland,” Clements writes, “are initiated around Christmas.” Democratic Taiwan doesn’t arrive until New Year’s Eve.

Taiwan’s long prehistory is the all-but-unknown story of disparate groups, speaking different languages, making their lives on an island roughly the size of Switzerland. That island has been far enough away from mainland China and the Japanese archipelago to have escaped lasting absorption into either, yet near enough to be a convenient hideout for people dodging the jurisdictions of both. Hence Taiwan’s indigenous peoples have entered the historical record, largely in Chinese, Japanese and (latterly) European writings, as barbarous irritants to be negotiated, bribed or violently compelled into vacating areas coveted by smugglers, pirates and colonialists.

Clements laments this partial understanding of the island’s indigenous groups, while sharing – with justified relish – accounts of cultural interactions gone awry. One Chinese traveller of the early 1600s, Chen Di, was disgusted to find that a group on Taiwan prized, as a delicacy, not just the intestines of deer, but the contents of those intestines: recently swallowed grass. “When Chinese see it, they retch,” Chen noted, before adding that when those people “see

Chinese eating chicken and pheasant, they retch... who can say what is right or wrong when it comes to taste?”

While the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French came to Taiwan in search of raw materials, such as sulphur and camphor, to the Japanese and Chinese, the island has been about more than making money. For Japan, during its half-century of colonial rule there, between 1895 and 1945, Taiwan offered the chance to claim top-table status as an imperial power and a civilising force: the Japanese gave Taipei a modernising makeover, and created much of the island’s infrastructure.

For China, as Clements shows us, Taiwan has served as the emergency refuge of embattled mainland armies not once but twice. When Manchu troops stormed southwards through China in the mid-1600s, the leader of the fleeing Ming forces, Zheng Chenggong (also known as

Koxinga), crossed over to Taiwan and established a short-lived administration there. The island was eventually absorbed into the Qing empire, as – writes Clements – “an unloved appendage”.

Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists did much the same 300 years later, as the Communists gained the upper hand in China’s civil war. At the turn of the 1950s, some two million people made the journey across the Taiwan Strait: a top-heavy retreat, Clements tells us, with military officers bringing their families and fortunes, while



lower-level soldiers had to leave everything behind. For years after his death in 1975, Chiang's coffin was kept above ground, maintaining the fiction that his forces would

one day retake the mainland and he would rest in its soil.

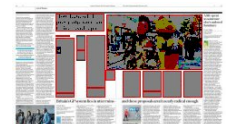
Clements's pacy and engaging account offers a valuable counterpoint to today's news coverage of Taiwan, which tends to picture it as a plucky David to China's menacing Goliath. Though relatively brief, and focused more on big-picture narrative than the country's cultural traditions or modern society, *Rebel Island* offers a compelling portrait of a perennially fragmented place, subject across centuries to a succession of claims on its territory, resources and identity – of which Xi's is but the latest.

Rather than attempt predictions about if or when a battle for Taiwan may come, Clements notes that a major feature of recent Taiwanese life has been the attempt to include its indigenous peoples in accounts of its history – via new archaeological and linguistic research – and in plans for its future. Some of these groups have formed political parties of their own, while the DPP hopes that a patchwork identity for Taiwan will serve to dilute mainland China's historical and cultural claims. Perhaps such initiatives will bear fruit; but perhaps there isn't time. The island's fate remains, as ever, largely out of its hands.

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*Christopher Harding's books include The Light of Asia: A History of Western Fascination with the East*

Allegations  
swirled of  
Chinese  
meddling  
in this  
month's  
Taiwanese  
election  
– albeit  
in vain





**Stick it to them:**  
protesters in  
Taipei dress as a  
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Pooh (a satire  
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