

The Diversity of Taiwanese Culture and Customs

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1. Introduction

Taiwan is an island, neither large nor small, with an area of 36000 square kilometers, and is separated from the mainland by the 200-kilometer wide Taiwan Strait. Taiwan has always been the smallest province, both during the Qing Dynasty, and after the establishment of the Republic of China, but is also a very special province: even though ethnic Han settlers have lived on this island for only 400 years, it preserves more of their traditional cultural practices and customs, and has also incorporated more western ones, than any other Chinese community: this is the result of both geographical and historical circumstances.

How has Taiwan, more than any other place, preserved these traditional cultural practices and customs? The residents in Taiwan, aside from the aboriginal, Austronesian languages-speaking population, have all emigrated from the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong. During WWII, Taiwan's population was around 6 million. The culture and customs of that time could only be considered regional, and not representative of the Chinese community. But in 1949, the government evacuated to Taiwan, along with 2 million of its people - including many elite members of society and academia - the cultures and customs of the Han people and those of other minority groups from their various provinces came with them. It has been 60 years since then, and the first generation refugees have had children and grandchildren, with the population in Taiwan now exceeding 23 million, and traditional Chinese culture and customs still hold sway. In the meantime, Mainland China has had many political movements, including the Cultural Revolution, that destroyed traditional culture and customs, attacked Confucian philosophies, nullified traditional Chinese characters, and suppressed religions. As a result, traditional culture and customs have been lost in Mainland China, along with the traditional codes of ethics and conduct. Members of the public can no longer read the classics for themselves, and traditional religious beliefs are almost extinct. Therefore, Taiwan preserves more traditional cultural practices and customs than anyplace else, even though it is a fairly small province.

On the other hand, how has Taiwan been able to incorporate more western culture and customs than others? This is because over 400 years, Taiwan has been under the rule of Portugal, Spain, Holland, Zheng Chenggong (better known as Koxinga the pirate), the Qing Dynasty, Japan, and the current republican government. Taiwan's exposure to western culture was, among the provinces, first, longest, and its contacts more abundant than the rest. In the late Qing Dynasty, it was the most advanced and modernized province. During the 50 years of Japanese rule, it also learned from Japanese culture. When the republican government took over, it encouraged students to study abroad, especially in the US, Germany, England, and Japan. Over 60 years, those students who came back to serve their country have brought back a deep understanding of western cultural and scholarly expertise. Unlike Mainland China, which remained isolated for a long period of time, Taiwan was able to absorb much of western culture and customs.

Taiwan's cultural uniqueness and diversity are the results of the rich blending of traditional and western cultures and customs.

2. Ethnic, Educational and Political Diversities

The population of Taiwan is around 23 million people. We can observe its society from three aspects: the origins of the tribes; educational backgrounds; and politics.

We can start with ethnic differences. The Taiwanese aboriginal population is around 400,000, with 14 different tribes. All of the tribes have different languages and cultures. The majority of Taiwan's population, however, is emigrants from different provinces in the Mainland, which includes Han people, and many other minority ethnic groups. Among these people, those who resided in Taiwan before 1945 are called "islanders." They are the majority in Taiwan, and speak Taiwanese and Cantonese. Those that came to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949 are called "Mainlanders." They speak different Han dialects, and other languages. Even though the Mainlanders are the minority, many of them are elites in the political, military and business realms. In the past 20 years, there have been more and more workers and spouses from Mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The number has exceeded 900 thousand, and is still growing. Compared with any other province in Mainland China, Taiwan has the most diversified demography.

As for education in Taiwan, in 2008, there were 2,527,718 college graduates, which is 10.97% of the entire population. There were 800,000 with a master's degree or PhD. Currently there are 1,188,706 students in college and graduate programs,

5.1% of the population. As to the educational background of the population - some received Japanese-style education during the Japanese rule; some received education in the Mainland during the War of Resistance against Japan; some received graduate education in western universities; some were educated locally; and some also were educated in Southeastern Asia. The educational background of our people is extremely diversified.

Taiwan was governed by the Chiang Kai-shek family under martial law. However, over the past two decades, Taiwan has developed into the only political system in the Chinese community under a competitive, democratic, multi-party system. There have been two party alternations already. The TV and radio stations host many political commentary programs and the passion and fervor that Taiwanese people demonstrate during the election season is an interesting phenomenon; much of this fervor can be explained by factors like the voter's ethnic identity and educational background, and Taiwan has many of each.

3. Origins of Taiwanese Culture and Customs

I will now examine four aspects of Taiwanese culture and customs, to see if they are from Chinese traditions, or western culture.

Let's begin with daily activities. As for food, Taiwan offers, of course, traditional local cuisine, and traditional cuisines from different provinces in the Mainland -the different styles of cooking that Taiwan boasts of cannot be paralleled by any single province in Mainland China. The richness of Taiwanese cooking also much surpasses that of Japan and Korea. In urban areas, you can find French, Italian, American, Mexican, Japanese, Korean, and Thai restaurants everywhere. This goes to show how open-minded the Taiwanese are. As for clothing, people are pretty westernized in Taiwan. Young men and women seek to follow fashion like the rest of the world. Some people still prefer traditional clothing, like *Tangzhuang*, or cheongsam (the mandarin gown), and no one will give them strange looks. As for housing, it has also basically been westernized, though some people in farming villages still live in traditional residences. As for transportation, it's completely westernized. Almost every household owns a car, and millions of young people ride scooters.

As for festivals, traditional festivals have been preserved well in Taiwan. People still reunite with their families on Chinese New Year's Eve, hang lanterns during the Lantern Festival, visit cemeteries on Tomb Sweeping Day, eat *Zongzi* (glutinous rice stuffed with different fillings and wrapped in bamboo leaves) during the Dragon Boat Festival, worship Zhinü (the weaver girl) on Chinese Valentine's Day, admire the moon and eat moon cakes during the Moon Festival, worship ancestors during the

Double Ninth Festival, eat Tāngyuán (glutinous rice balls) on the winter solstice, and so on. Holidays from the west, like Valentine's Day, Japanese Valentine's Day, and Christmas are also very popular among the young people, even though most of them are neither Catholic nor Christian.

Next we will look at funereal and worship practices. The Han people mostly practice traditional funereal rituals, but those with religions will perform their own religious ceremonies. Ancestor worship is common in Taiwanese society, and the Spirit Tablet occupies a prominent place in most households, excepting those whose religions forbid them to practice ancestor worship. People from the same household might hold different religious beliefs, but there is little dispute or opposition on account of it. This is mostly because, traditionally, the Han people have not had any monotheistic beliefs, and so are not set against other gods.

Because of this, many religions thrive in Taiwan. There are more than 20 religions registered with the government, including Buddhism, Taoism, I-Kuan Tao, Catholicism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Some of the religious sects registered have developed locally. As for temples, there are even more of them than there are religions. The density of temples per square kilometer might be the highest in the world: In 2007, there were 11,561 temples, and 3,190 churches registered with the Interior Ministry. Any native will know that there are still more thousands unregistered. These religious groups have tremendous fund-raising capacities. Aside from the Catholic and Christian churches, Buddhist organizations have also founded several universities and hospitals. Among these Buddhist organizations, Tzu Chi Foundation is an international organization, and has been most enthusiastic and effective in their humanitarian relief efforts.

As can be seen from the above, Taiwan has undoubtedly preserved traditional Chinese culture and customs, but has also incorporated western culture and customs into their traditional practices.

4. The Fusion of Diverse Cultures and Customs

While Taiwan has preserved its traditional culture and customs, it has also absorbed other customs. How do the two traditions work together without antagonizing each other? We can look at some examples.

We can first take a look at birthday celebrations. Ancient Chinese did not celebrate birthdays, as the day someone is born is also a day of great suffering for the mother. The Chinese started celebrating birthdays as a result of influences from India, and only became popular after the Tang Dynasty. A lot of people still feel that this is

not a Chinese thing to do, and therefore do not celebrate their birthdays; examples would be the renowned Chinese Buddhist monk Hsing Yun, and K'ung Te-ch'eng, the 77th generation main line-descendant of Confucius. Usually older people will celebrate their 60th, 70th, or 80th birthday. The Japanese also celebrate the 77th, and they call it the “joy birthday,” because in cursive script, the character “joy” looks like “77.” The 88th birthday is called the “rice birthday,” as the character “rice” has the number “88” in it. Some Taiwanese will also celebrate their “joy birthday” or “rice birthday,” which reflects how the Taiwanese are willing to accept other cultures. At birthday celebrations, traditionally the host and the guests will have birthday noodles and steamed Longevity Peach Buns. Now, at birthday parties, you will see birthday noodles, birthday buns, and there will also be happy birthday songs, birthday cake, and candle blowing. As a result of the fusion of Chinese and western traditions, birthday parties are even more fun.

Then there is also Valentine’s Day for the young people. The younger generation in Taiwan celebrates western Valentine’s Day, Japanese Valentine’s day, and Chinese Valentine’s day (Qixi Festival). Probably no other country celebrates three Valentine’s Days, from three different cultures, all in the same year.

Then there are wedding photos. The bride and the bridegroom, sometime before they are married, will hire professionals to take large quantities of pictures, and then put them into a huge album—this also seems to be a Taiwanese innovation. The bride and the groom will often spend more than one day having pictures taken at various scenic spots. The bride wears a white wedding dress, and the groom, a suit; or they’ll both be in Chinese traditional clothes, or Chinese Ming-style formal wedding clothes, or Japanese wedding kimonos, and so on. They might spend tens of thousands of NT on it. It seems like they do not want to miss wedding apparel from any culture. On the wedding day, when the groom goes to pick up the bride at her family’s house, the bride will burn incense and bid farewell to her ancestors. This is entirely in keeping with traditions. But at the wedding banquet, at night, the bride will be in her white wedding gown and walk down the red carpet to the music of the wedding march. This is entirely western. So the newlyweds and their friends and family can experience several different cultures, all in one wedding,

Lastly, we can look at funereal practices. In Taiwan you can see many different styles of funerals. At some funerals, you can see both Buddhist monks and Taoist monks, which tells you that the Taiwanese are not too concerned about religious differences. In the funeral procession, there are often both traditional Chinese bands and western bands. At the memorial service, the family will be in traditional mourning attire, while the friends and other participants will be in western suits. Even in the

same cemetery, there are different styles of tombs, each made under different rituals and for different religions. The different practices do not encroach on each other, but simply accept the others' existence. No one finds any of this odd.

From the example of Taiwan, we can say that the key to the blending and fusing of cultures and customs is the degree of openness of the people.

5. Conclusion

Because of historical circumstances, Taiwan has preserved most Chinese traditions and culture, including Confucian philosophies and traditional Chinese characters. This is the ideal place to study Chinese culture. Also on account of historical circumstances, the Taiwanese are not opposed to foreign cultures. We are used to party politics, and are warm and friendly to foreigners. Taiwanese people, with their open minds, blend foreign customs with traditional customs, and eventually come up with a diversified Taiwanese culture. This is what is so special about Taiwan.