The History of Taiwan

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Introduction

Taiwan’s history is an extraordinary narrative of resilience, adaptation, and transformation. Perched on the edge of the Asian continent and lashed by winds and currents from both the Pacific and South China Sea, the island has long served as a vital crossroads—a meeting place for diverse peoples and a focal point for global ambitions. Taiwan’s story stretches back tens of thousands of years and unfolds through epochs shaped by human migration, conflict, colonization, and daunting social evolution.

From the first settlement by Paleolithic peoples, Taiwan became home to unique Neolithic cultures whose descendants formed the rich tapestry of indigenous Austronesian societies. For millennia, these communities developed sophisticated traditions, adapted to their environment, and charted new courses across the oceans, embarking on voyages that would ultimately define the Austronesian world. The legacies of their myths, oral traditions, artistry, and kinship networks continue to shape the island’s cultural landscape today.

The early modern era brought outsiders from distant shores. European explorers and traders recognized Taiwan’s strategic and commercial significance, leading first the Portuguese and then the Dutch and Spanish to its coasts. The ambitions and rivalries of these newcomers upended regional dynamics, spurred Han Chinese migration, and set the stage for cycles of conquest and resistance. In the shadow of falling dynasties on the Chinese mainland, figures like Koxinga and the Zheng family established the first Han-led governments, forging new patterns of settlement, labor, and administration.

Taiwan’s incorporation into the Qing Empire and subsequent cession to Japan marked dramatic shifts in identity and development. Japanese colonial rule ushered in unprecedented modernization—railways, industry, and education—while introducing new forms of social discipline and resistance. The traumatic transition at the end of World War II, as Taiwan reverted to Chinese rule under the Kuomintang, brought its own turbulence: political repression, the tragedy of the February 28 Incident, and the exodus of millions from mainland China would fundamentally alter the island’s fabric.

Yet amid adversity, Taiwan remade itself again in the latter twentieth century. Statesmanship, reform, and the collective will of its people propelled Taiwan through a rapid economic transformation and, ultimately, a peaceful democratic revolution. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Taiwan stood not only as an “Asian Tiger” but as one of the most robust democracies in East Asia, with a distinct identity shaped by its complex past.

Today, Taiwan’s evolution continues, positioned at the heart of global economic networks and caught in the crosscurrents of geopolitical rivalry. Its journey, from islands of hunter-gatherers to a vibrant and modern society, is a testament to the adaptability and indomitable spirit of its people. This book tells the sweeping story of Taiwan from its earliest beginnings to the present day, tracing the historical forces, struggles, and aspirations that have created one of the world’s most fascinating societies.

CHAPTER ONE: Earliest Human Settlements and Paleolithic Taiwan

Taiwan, an emerald island rising dramatically from the western Pacific, carries secrets within its ancient soils and submerged coastlines—secrets of human tenacity and adaptation stretching back into the deepest reaches of the Paleolithic era. Long before recorded history, before the arrival of Austronesian navigators or European ships, Taiwan was a silent stage for some of humanity's earliest forays into East Asia. The story of its first inhabitants is pieced together from fragments: stone tools, fossilized remains, and the geological narratives etched into the land itself.

Imagine a world vastly different from today, a world shaped by colossal ice sheets that gripped the northern latitudes. During the Pleistocene epoch, often referred to as the Ice Age, global sea levels plummeted as vast quantities of water were locked away in glaciers. This dramatic drop in sea level exposed vast swathes of continental shelf, transforming coastlines and creating land bridges that connected previously separated landmasses. For Taiwan, this meant periodic connections to the Asian mainland, forming a vital corridor for early human migration. These land bridges were not permanent fixtures; they waxed and waned with the ebb and flow of glacial cycles, but their intermittent appearance provided crucial pathways for animals, and eventually, for our distant ancestors, to venture onto the island.

The earliest conclusive evidence of human presence on Taiwan dates back an astonishing 20,000 to 30,000 years. These initial inhabitants were hunter-gatherers, their lives dictated by the rhythms of nature and the availability of sustenance in a challenging environment. Their existence was a testament to remarkable ingenuity and resilience, as they navigated a landscape that was simultaneously rich in resources and fraught with dangers. These weren’t settled communities with agriculture or pottery; they were nomadic groups, constantly on the move, following game and foraging for edible plants.

One of the most significant archaeological discoveries shedding light on this period is the Changbin Culture, primarily identified through excavations along the eastern coast of Taiwan. The site of Baxian Cave (Eight Immortals Cave) in Taitung County is particularly notable, revealing multiple layers of human occupation. Here, archaeologists have unearthed a treasure trove of artifacts, predominantly stone tools that speak volumes about the daily lives and technological capabilities of these Paleolithic people. These tools were primarily made from local river cobbles, shaped through a process known as flaking—striking one stone with another to detach sharp fragments.

The tools of the Changbin Culture include choppers, scrapers, and points, each designed for specific tasks. Choppers, as their name suggests, were used for heavy-duty work, perhaps for breaking open bones to extract marrow or for felling small trees. Scrapers were essential for preparing animal hides, transforming them into clothing or shelters, while points might have been hafted onto spears for hunting. The sophistication of these tools, though rudimentary by modern standards, demonstrates a profound understanding of materials and an ability to craft implements crucial for survival in a wild landscape. Their technology was honed over generations, a practical knowledge passed down through oral tradition and direct mentorship.

While direct fossilized remains of these early inhabitants are scarce, the presence of their tools paints a vivid picture of their subsistence strategies. They would have hunted a variety of animals, from deer and wild boar to smaller game, utilizing their stone weaponry and their intimate knowledge of animal behavior. Coastal resources, such as shellfish and fish, would have also played a significant role in their diet, especially during periods when the island was more isolated. The environment would have offered a bounty of plant foods as well: fruits, nuts, roots, and tubers, all requiring careful identification and preparation. Their survival depended on a deep ecological literacy, understanding the seasons, the flora, and the fauna of their island home.

The question of how these early humans arrived on Taiwan is intertwined with the island's geological history. As mentioned, lower sea levels during glacial maxima would have periodically connected Taiwan to the mainland, making migration by foot a distinct possibility. However, even during periods of connection, the journey would not have been trivial, involving crossings of rivers and potentially dense forests. Alternatively, or perhaps in conjunction with land bridge crossings, some scholars suggest early forms of seafaring. Simple rafts or dugout canoes could have facilitated short-distance coastal movements, especially as resources on the immediate mainland became scarce or as populations expanded. The very act of reaching Taiwan, regardless of the precise method, speaks to an adventurous spirit and a remarkable capacity for exploration.

These early Paleolithic inhabitants lived in small, mobile bands, probably extended family groups, making their way across a vast and untamed land. Their social structures would have been egalitarian, with leadership emerging based on skill, experience, and wisdom. Decisions would have been communal, driven by the immediate needs of survival and the pursuit of resources. Life was undoubtedly harsh, with constant exposure to the elements, the threat of predators, and the ever-present challenge of finding enough food. Yet, they thrived for thousands of years, leaving behind their subtle signatures in the archaeological record, a testament to humanity's enduring capacity to adapt and persist.

The Paleolithic period in Taiwan gradually transitioned into the Neolithic, a shift marked by revolutionary changes in human society. But before the advent of agriculture and the rise of settled villages, these early hunter-gatherers laid the foundational layers of human history on the island. Their silent journeys, their crafting of tools from stone, and their mastery of a wild environment are the opening chapters in the grand narrative of Taiwan—a story that begins not with empires or nations, but with the quiet footsteps of its very first people. They were the original pioneers, the true "formosans," who first discovered the beauty and bounty of this unique island.

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