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A History of Taipei

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Introduction

Taipei, the pulsating heart of Taiwan, is more than just an administrative capital or a center of commerce. Its story is a testament to centuries of transformation—of indigenous roots giving way to waves of migration and settlement, of colonial struggles and resilience, and of relentless adaptation in the face of modernity. This book, *A History of Taipei*, aims to chart the city's remarkable journey from an ancient basin inhabited by indigenous peoples to a sprawling metropolis at the crossroads of cultures, industries, and identities.

The origins of Taipei are embedded deep within the Taipei Basin, an area nourished by the Tamsui and Keelung rivers and surrounded by mountains. For millennia, indigenous peoples, most notably the Ketagalan, shaped the land and its patterns of life. These original inhabitants left their imprint on the region, but their world would be transformed by the arrival of Han Chinese settlers in the 18th century. Under the Qing Dynasty, immigration, trade, and urban formation began to take root, setting the stage for Taipei's evolution into a key center in northern Taiwan.

The city's destiny changed dramatically at the close of the 19th century. Following Taiwan's cession to Japan after the First Sino-Japanese War, Taipei became the nerve center for Japanese colonial administration. The colonial era ushered in a sweeping agenda of modernization, reorienting the city's urban design, economic structure, and daily rhythms. Infrastructure projects and modern buildings changed the face of Taipei, while the interplay of adaptation and resistance among various residents forged new cultural contours.

World War II and the subsequent handover of Taiwan to the Republic of China marked yet another tidal shift. The postwar era brought with it new hopes and grave challenges: political unrest, the imposition of martial law, and large-scale migrations that redefined the city's demographic and social composition. The scars and memories of these changes continue to influence Taipei's collective consciousness.

In the late 20th century, Taipei became synonymous with Taiwan's economic miracle, its skyline rising amidst rapid industrialization, urban migration, and burgeoning prosperity. The move toward democratization and social liberalization in the post-martial law period energized the city further, positioning it as a beacon of cultural innovation and civic engagement in Asia.

As the book unfolds, each chapter will explore a distinct era or facet of Taipei's history, elucidating the complexities, struggles, and triumphs that have shaped the city. From indigenous roots to the drive for a smart, sustainable, and inclusive future, *A History of*

Taipei invites readers to see the city not just as a capital, but as a living archive of resilience, reinvention, and enduring significance.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Human Settlement in the Taipei Basin

Long before bustling markets, towering skyscrapers, or the complex tapestry of modern urban life took root, the area now known as the Taipei Basin existed in a state of wild, untamed beauty. This large geological depression, cradled by surrounding mountains and fed by the converging waters of the Tamsui, Keelung, and Xindian rivers, was a landscape profoundly different from the metropolis we recognize today. Its story, and thus the earliest threads of Taipei's history, begins not with concrete and steel, but with the natural forces that shaped the land and the very first humans who found their way into this fertile, watery expanse.

The basin itself is a relatively young geological feature, formed over millennia by tectonic activity and the erosive power of its rivers. Its low-lying, often marshy terrain, punctuated by occasional hills, created a unique ecosystem. Lush subtropical forests covered the mountain slopes, while the basin floor was a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands, and riparian habitats along the meandering waterways. This environment, rich in biodiversity, provided ample resources for early inhabitants willing to navigate its challenges.

Evidence suggests human presence in Taiwan extends back tens of thousands of years. While specific archaeological finds directly within the deepest layers of the Taipei Basin painting a detailed picture of the earliest occupants are still subjects of ongoing research and interpretation, it is clear that people were living on the island and utilizing its varied landscapes long before recorded history. These early inhabitants were mobile hunter-gatherers, their lives dictated by the seasons and the availability of food resources across the island.

Entering the Taipei Basin would have presented both opportunities and obstacles for these ancient wanderers. The dense forests offered game – deer, wild boar, and numerous bird species – while the rivers and wetlands teemed with fish, shellfish, and aquatic plants. Gathering edible plants, fruits, and roots would have supplemented their diet. The challenges included navigating the often-flooded lowlands and potentially encountering less friendly neighbors, whether human or animal.

Life for these earliest inhabitants was intrinsically linked to the natural cycles of the basin. Their movements would have followed the migrations of animals, the ripening of fruits, and the ebb and flow of the rivers. Shelter might have been temporary, utilizing caves or building simple structures from natural materials found readily in their environment – wood, reeds, leaves. Tools were crafted from stone, bone, and

wood, designed for the fundamental tasks of survival: hunting, fishing, preparing food, and making simple implements.

Stone tools, unearthed in various locations around the fringes of the basin and in other parts of northern Taiwan, provide tantalizing clues about the technological capabilities of these prehistoric peoples. Scrapers, points, and cutting tools speak to a practical understanding of their environment and the materials it offered. These artifacts are silent witnesses to a way of life honed over generations, adapted to the specific conditions of the island.

The rivers were undoubtedly central to their existence. The Tamsui River system, acting as the primary artery of the basin, would have served as both a source of sustenance and a pathway for movement. Early communities likely established temporary camps or more semi-permanent settlements along riverbanks or on slightly elevated ground to avoid the worst of the flooding. Access to fresh water was paramount, and the rivers provided it in abundance.

Communication and social structures among these early groups are largely matters of inference. Living in small, mobile bands was likely the norm, facilitating efficient foraging and reducing pressure on local resources. Knowledge would have been passed down through oral tradition – stories, myths, practical skills related to survival, and an understanding of the basin's complex ecosystem.

The Taipei Basin, in this deep past, was not a blank slate but a dynamic environment shaped by natural processes and subtly influenced by the activities of its human occupants. Their impact would have been minimal compared to later eras, consisting primarily of managing resources at a local level and perhaps some very early forms of landscape modification, though evidence for this in the earliest periods is scarce.

While we can speak generally about early human life in similar environments, piecing together the specifics of the Taipei Basin's first residents requires careful archaeological work. Each layer of sediment holds potential secrets about their diet, their health, their social practices, and their relationship with the changing climate over millennia. It's like reading a book with many missing pages, requiring educated guesses to connect the fragments.

The transition from purely nomadic hunting and gathering to more settled ways of life, including early forms of agriculture, would have occurred gradually over vast periods. Whether this shift happened independently within the Taipei Basin or was introduced by later migrations is part of the larger story of human movement and cultural diffusion across the island of Taiwan. The basin's fertile lands certainly offered potential for cultivation once the techniques were acquired.

Imagine the basin floor before extensive drainage and development – a vast expanse

of wetlands, mist rising from the water in the cool mornings, the calls of unseen birds echoing across the landscape. The surrounding mountains, cloaked in dense forest, would have seemed much closer, their peaks often shrouded in clouds. This was the world inhabited by the first people to call this place home, a world demanding resilience and a deep understanding of the natural world.

Their technology, though seemingly simple to modern eyes, was perfectly adapted to their needs. Stone axes for clearing brush or shaping wood, bone needles for crafting clothing from animal hides or plant fibers, nets and traps for fishing and hunting – these were the tools that allowed them to thrive, or at least survive, in this challenging yet bountiful environment.

The concept of "place" for these early inhabitants was likely tied not to fixed locations for long periods, but to a deep, intimate knowledge of the basin's geography, its resources, and its spiritual significance. Certain groves, rocks, or river bends might have held special meaning, places for gathering, ceremony, or accessing specific resources. Their connection to the land was fundamental, shaped by necessity and reverence.

Interactions with groups outside the basin would have been limited but likely occurred. Travel between valleys and across mountain passes, while arduous, was possible. These interactions could have involved trade, exchange of knowledge, or conflict. The basin, while a distinct geographical unit, was not isolated from the broader human story unfolding across the island of Taiwan and the wider region.

Over time, as populations grew and perhaps new waves of people arrived, the human footprint on the basin would have become more pronounced. While Chapter Two will delve into a later, more documented indigenous society, it is important to recognize that the story of human presence here began much earlier, with people whose names and specific histories are lost to the mists of time, but whose presence shaped the initial human experience of this unique landscape.

Their shelters, perhaps simple lean-tos or huts, have long since returned to the earth. Their fires have gone out. But the tools they left behind, occasionally uncovered by chance or careful excavation, serve as tangible links to this distant past. They remind us that Taipei's history isn't just about recent centuries of urban growth; it's built upon a foundation laid by people who lived in harmony, or perhaps sometimes in struggle, with the natural world of the basin for millennia.

The slow passage of time in this early era meant that changes were incremental, measured not in years or decades but in generations, perhaps even centuries. Environmental shifts – variations in rainfall, temperature, or river courses – would have significantly impacted their lives, forcing adaptation and potentially leading to movements within or out of the basin.

Understanding this period is crucial because it establishes the fundamental human connection to the Taipei Basin. It highlights that the land was inhabited, known, and utilized long before it became a focal point of regional power or international trade. It was a home, shaped by human hands and feet navigating its terrain, interacting with its flora and fauna, and finding ways to subsist within its confines.

While the archaeological record for the earliest periods within the precise confines of the modern city center might be sparse due to subsequent development and the basin's hydrological nature, evidence from surrounding areas provides context. Sites in the foothills and along the coast offer glimpses into the broader patterns of prehistoric life in northern Taiwan, allowing us to infer the likely activities and presence within the basin itself.

Imagine the sounds of the basin in those days: the rustling of leaves in the wind, the cries of animals, the murmur of the rivers, punctuated occasionally by human voices, perhaps the rhythmic striking of stone on stone, or the crackle of a cooking fire. These were the soundscapes of early human life here, a world far removed from the constant hum of traffic and urban activity we hear today.

The natural resources available dictated much of their material culture. Wood from the surrounding forests would have been used for fires, shelters, and tools. Bamboo, abundant in the region, would have been incredibly versatile, used for building, crafting containers, and perhaps even early forms of boats or rafts for navigating the rivers. Clay from the riverbanks could have been used for rudimentary pottery, though evidence for this in the very earliest layers of settlement in the basin is limited.

Their understanding of the basin was probably encyclopedic in its own way. They knew where to find the best foraging grounds, the safest river crossings, the locations of useful stone deposits, and the habits of the animals they hunted. This deep ecological knowledge was essential for their survival and was undoubtedly passed down from elders to the younger generation.

The basin's geology meant that certain areas were more suitable for long-term habitation than others. Higher ground, less prone to flooding, would have been preferred for establishing more stable camps, even if these were occupied only seasonally. The distribution of archaeological finds, however scarce for the earliest period directly in the basin center, can help infer these patterns of land use.

The sheer scale of time involved in this early history is difficult to grasp. We are talking about millennia, periods so long that landscapes can change significantly, river courses can shift, and climates can alter. The people living in the Taipei Basin during the earliest periods would have witnessed some of these slow, geological and environmental transformations firsthand.

This early human presence in the Taipei Basin set the stage for everything that followed. While the indigenous societies that flourished later, particularly those encountered by early Han Chinese settlers, developed more complex social structures and lifeways, they inherited a landscape that had already been known and lived upon by humans for a very long time. The land itself held the memory of these earliest occupants, even if their stories were not written down.

The rivers, the mountains, the basic shape of the basin – these enduring natural features connected the lives of the earliest inhabitants to those who would come later. While their technologies and social organization would evolve dramatically over time, the fundamental relationship between humans and this specific geographical place began in these deep, prehistoric periods.

It's worth pausing to consider the resilience required to survive in such a natural environment with only rudimentary technology. Facing unpredictable weather, wild animals, and the constant need to find food, these early inhabitants demonstrated an incredible capacity for adaptation and ingenuity. Their success, measured over thousands of years of presence, speaks volumes about their skills and knowledge.

The concept of "territory" for these early, likely nomadic or semi-nomadic groups, might have been fluid, based on resource use rather than fixed boundaries. They would have followed the resources as they became available across the basin and its surrounding areas, their movements dictated by ecological rhythms rather than political lines on a map.

Understanding this initial human colonization of the Taipei Basin provides a necessary prologue to the more recent chapters of its history. It grounds the story in the very earth of the place, reminding us that the urban landscape of today sits atop layers of natural history and the faint traces of lives lived long ago, in a world that would be almost unrecognizable to modern eyes.

The transition from prehistoric life to more complex indigenous societies, and eventually to the arrival of external settlers, was a gradual process spanning vast stretches of time. Chapter One focuses on the initial steps: the first human footsteps in the basin, the first attempts to live off its bounty, and the deep connection formed between people and this particular pocket of land and water on the island of Taiwan.

While the details of their daily lives remain largely a mystery, obscured by the passage of millennia, the fact of their presence is undeniable. They were the first stewards of the Taipei Basin, shaping their lives around its contours and resources, leaving behind the faint echoes of their existence for future generations to ponder as they built a vastly different world upon the same ancient ground. This early period, though difficult to fully reconstruct, is the essential starting point for the long and layered history of

Taipei.

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