



THE SUN BROKE THROUGH the clouds to light up apartments and office buildings in Taipei, capital of Taiwan, as seen from the balcony of the Grand Hotel.

Taiwan democracy OK

Two trips to island in a year let editor see plenty of change

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In two trips this year, I've been able to see a complete change of government in Taiwan, or the Republic of China, and that in itself is an accomplishment. Last fall, we toured Taiwan with a delegation of American editors and publishers. Cynthia and I had visited five years before with a similar group, early in the presidency of Chen Shui-bian.



ON STAGE, Vicki Harris of Lincoln, Neb., traveling with American newspaper editors, was drafted to be a part of a Chinese variety show in Taipei.

Chen, often controversial and never shy, was a landmark figure in the history of what we used to call Nationalist China, the government established by Dr. Sun Yat-sen on the mainland in 1911 and moved to the island of Formosa, or Taiwan, in 1949 as the Communist prevailed in the civil war.

President Chiang Kai-shek and his son ruled under martial law for nearly 40 years, with only the Nationalist Kuomintang party allowed. It was only after the old dictator's death that things began to change. Martial law ended in 1988, but it wasn't until 2000 that an opposition candidate would prevail, validating the democratic process. That year, Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party, won with 39.4 percent of the vote in a four-way race, the first member of an opposition party to be elected president.

The peaceful transfer of power belied the bitter enmity between the two. Chen's party espoused independence for Taiwan, while the Nationalists had always claimed to be the legitimate government of all China.

Oddly enough, the claims of their old enemies disturbed the Communist government on the mainland not half as much as the push for independence. "One China" was something both always agreed on.

Chen met with delegations of American publishers and editors twice, in 2002 and again last year, speaking always in Mandarin Chinese through an interpreter. At the first meeting, he dared us to invite him to our convention, a provocation the State Department might not have allowed.

Six years ago, Taiwan, though prosperous and economically powerful, seemed something of a backwater. Women working in offices dressed from the 1960s, pastel suits and pale hose.

In fashion-conscious Hong Kong, on the mainland, women wore the latest fashion. "Wrecked" jeans, with bleached stripes up the legs, were all the rage. There was lots of color. Not in Taipei.

This year, Taipei had changed. New buildings, including the Taipei 101, pierced the skyline. Women wore colorful outfits and wrecked jeans. A cabinet minister appeared wearing a denim jacket, no pale suit.

Chen, nearing the end of

his second term, talked about his push for membership in the United Nation, citing the admission of both Korea as an example. The government complained that the U.N.-sponsored World Health Organization not only wouldn't admit Taiwan, but barred Taiwanese reporters from covering its sessions.

By the time we met with Chen the second time, even he probably knew his party stood little chance of winning either the January parliamentary election or the spring presidential vote.

He had started his second term on a wave of popularity following a botched assassination attempt — he suffered a minor gunshot wound while in a Jeep — though opponents claimed the shooting was just an election ploy.

The term ended as it had begun, in controversy, after Chen's wife and close supporters were charged with looting the public treasury. Only presidential immunity kept prosecutors from charging Chen himself, but he's now under investigation.

Ma Ying-jeou, the Kuomintang candidate, and a former mayor of Taipei (as Chen was), won the presidential election as predicted.

The transfer of power back to his party sealed a milestone in the history of a democracy, shifting power from one party to another and back without violence or bloodshed. The Taiwanese are proud of that accomplishment.

What the future holds for their democracy, faced with the reality of a Communist government and 1.3 billion mainland Chinese, no one knows. (Taiwan's population is only about 22 million.)

Will the island be dominated by its far larger neighbor, or will its powerful economy and democracy allow it to preserve its hard-won freedoms, even in the face of its larger neighbor? We shall see.



AMERICAN EDITORS and others filed into the Tomb of the Martyrs (above), the Republic of China's equivalent of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for the changing of the guard and a presentation. It's hard to get the Taipei 101 building (below), then the world's tallest, into one picture. Builders in Dubai have since surpassed its height, but the building still attracts hundreds of tourists each day for an ear-popping elevator ride — and eye-popping view.

— Herald staff photos by Steve and Cynthia Haynes



AS PRESIDENT of the National Newspaper Association and leader of its delegation, Steve Haynes of Oberlin (right) had the honor of placing a wreath at the Tomb of the Martyrs.

