

Country report: Taiwan, Republic of China

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Historical and Political Background

Formally known as the Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan is a 36,000 sq. km island bordered by the East China Sea, Philippine Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. For many years the island was known as Formosa, a Portuguese word meaning "beautiful isle." The Portuguese visited the island in the 16th century; it was a Spanish colony from 1626 to 1642 and a Dutch colony from 1642 to 1662. It was reintegrated into Chin dynasty China in 1683, and was ruled by that country until 1895, when it was ceded to Japan following the Sino-Japanese War. Japan relinquished control after World War II. In 1949, the Chinese Republican government led by the Kuomintang Party (KMT) was defeated by the Chinese Communists and forced to retreat to Taiwan. The Republic of China government has administered the main island and numerous smaller islands since that time.

Fertility and Economic Development

According to the first census ever taken, Taiwan had a population of 3.12 million in 1905; it took forty years for that figure to almost double to 6.02 million. To reduce population pressure and to promote economic development, in the 1960s the ROC government promoted a family planning program that encouraged couples to have three children or less. As a result, Taiwan's population growth rate fell from 3.16 percent in 1961 to 1.1 percent in 1990. In 1992, a new policy encouraged couples to have two children; this plan was promoted in response to a rapidly aging population and the potential for major labor shortages. However, the growth rate has continued to decline; in 2003 it fell to 0.43 percent. The country's current population is 22.6 million, or 626 persons per square km.

The population structure of Taiwan has undergone significant change during the past five decades due to sharp declines in fertility and mortality. The fertility rate declined from 7.0 in 1951 to replacement level in 1983 to a historical low of 1.2 in 2003 (Fig. 1). From 1951 to 1958, the infant mortality rate fell by more than half, from 99 to 47 per 1,000. The current figure is less than 6 per 1,000. Taiwan has very strict rules regarding immigration, therefore current estimates are that the country's population will continue to grow to 23.1 million in 2013, then start to decline.

The steady decline in fertility has resulted in a) a decreasing proportion of children between the ages of 0 and 14, from 42 percent in 1951 to 20 percent in 2003, and b) a growing proportion of elderly citizens 65 years and older, from 2 percent to 9 percent within the same period. The current old age dependency ratio shows that each elderly individual is supported by an average of 7.7 persons of working age; that number is expected to fall to 3.4 by 2025. During the same period, the youth dependency ratio has decreased from 27 to 12 – in other words, each child between the ages of 0 and 14 was supported by 3.6 persons of working age in 2003; by 2025 that number is expected to increase to 8.3.

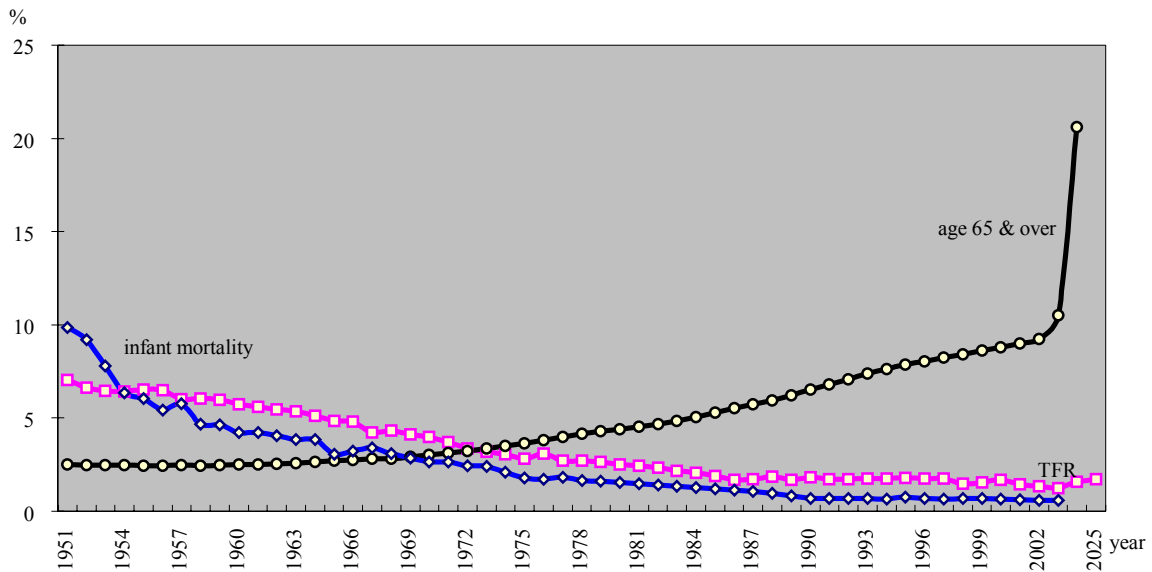


Figure 1: Total fertility rate, infant mortality rate, and percentage of persons over the age of 65 in Taiwan, 1951-2003. (2010 and 2025 are projected figures)

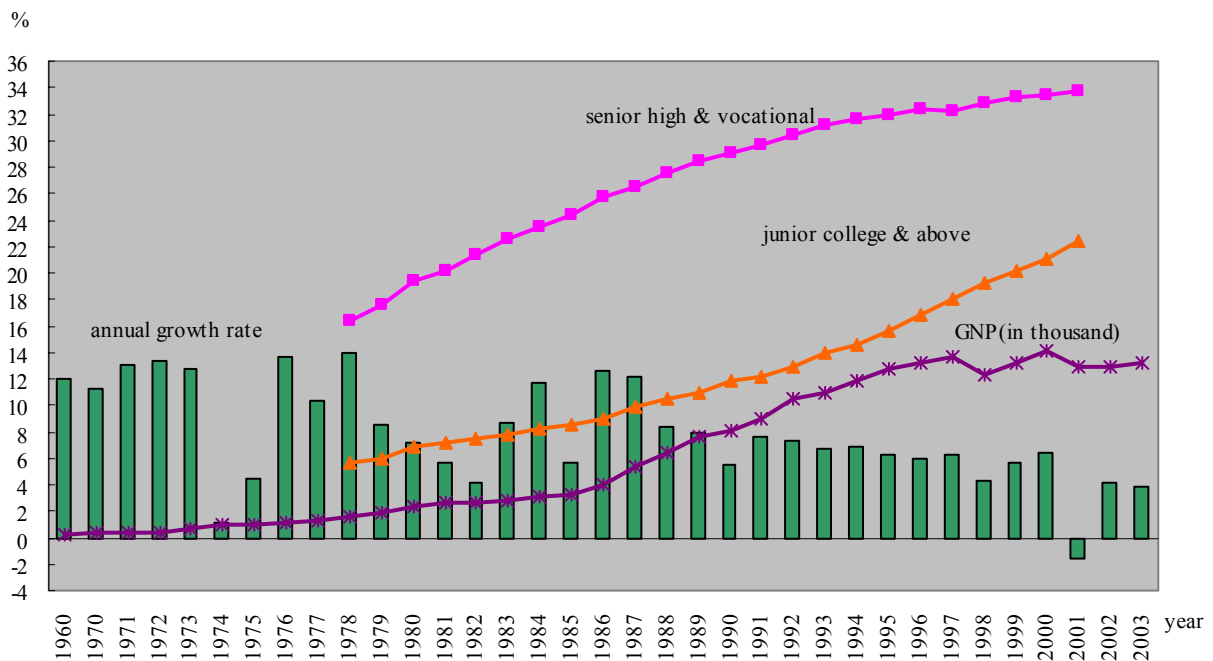


Figure 2: Annual growth rates of GNP, GNP per capita, and female educational attainment in Taiwan, 1951-2003.

During the past five decades, there has been a steady – and sometimes very rapid – improvement in living standards and women’s social status in Taiwan. The annual growth rate in real GNP stayed above 10 percent for most of the 1970s (the exceptions were 1973 and 1974, during the international oil crisis) and in 1984, 1986, and 1987. This led to Taiwan’s designation as one of the “Four Asian Dragons” (Fig. 2). The growth rate declined

steadily in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and is now approximately 4 percent. The country's period of rapid economic growth is reflected in its per capita GNP, which grew from US\$196 in 1951 to US\$13,157 in 2003 (Fig. 2).

Female Educational Achievement and Labor Force Participation

Economic achievement has been accompanied by improvement in educational attainment and social status for Taiwanese females. Taiwanese females were allowed to vote in the 1940s when the island was returned to Chinese control. However, women's participation in Taiwanese political activities has been minimal compared to male participation. In 2001, only 22 percent of the country's 225 legislators were women.

Greater advancements have been made in terms of educational achievement. Similar to other patriarchal societies, Taiwanese females have historically received much less schooling than males. However, the situation changed in 1968, when compulsory education was expanded from six to nine years. As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of all Taiwanese females holding a high school or vocational school diploma doubled from 16 percent in 1978 to 34 percent in 2003. During the same period, the percentage of Taiwanese females with at least a junior college diploma increased from 5 to 26 percent. For Taiwanese males, the figures were an increase from 20 to 34 percent for high school diplomas and 10 to 30 percent for junior college diplomas or higher.

Increases in educational attainment have also led to greater employment opportunities for Taiwanese females. The percentage of Taiwanese women working outside the home grew from 33 percent in 1966 to 42 percent in 1983, but it has hovered at approximately 45 percent during the past two decades. Most females join the labor market after graduating from high school or college, but more than half give up their jobs to get married and to raise children. The available statistical data indicates that the higher the level of educational achievement, the less likely a Taiwanese woman will leave the labor market to fulfill domestic responsibilities.

Over the past 25 years, labor force participation rates for Taiwanese females have steadily increased for all age groups except 15-24, reflecting increased school attendance and fewer young women and adolescent girls entering the job market (Fig. 3). On the other hand, an increase in age at first marriage and delayed child bearing has contributed to increases in labor force participation by Taiwanese women between the ages of 25 and 34.

Life Expectancy and Living Arrangements for the Elderly

According to Chinese Confucian doctrine, adult children are charged with taking care of their parents, with the bulk of the responsibility falling on the shoulders of daughters-in-law and other females. However, changes in social structure and social values since the 1970s (especially the shift from an agrarian to industrial economy) have led to a steady decrease in the number of seniors living with their adult children (Fig. 4). Currently, about 68 percent of all elderly Taiwanese co-reside with their adult children, down from almost 100 percent. Another 15 percent live with their elderly spouses, and 9 percent live alone. This trend is expected to continue, especially with the above-described decline in fertility, increase in labor force participation by females, and an added emphasis on individualism and privacy among Taiwanese.

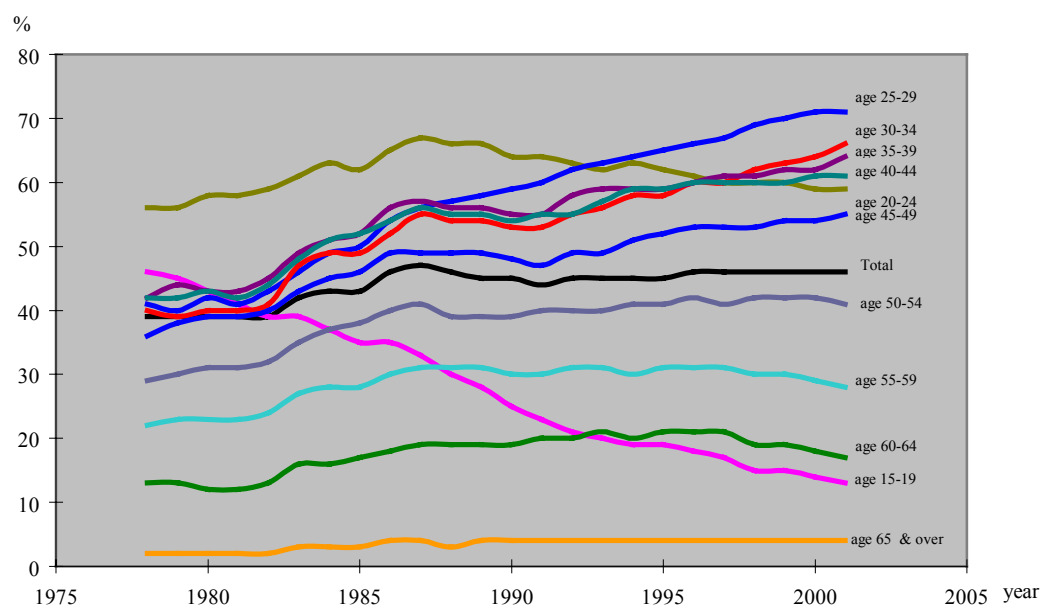


Figure 3: Female labor force participation rate by age group in Taiwan, 1978-2003.

Improvements in medical technology, sanitation, and nutrition have resulted in steady increases in life expectancies among Taiwanese between 1951 and 2003—from 53 to 73 years for males and from 57 to 79 years for females (Fig. 4). Over the same period, life expectancies for Taiwanese age 60 and above increased from 13.32 to 18.76 years for males and from 16.47 to 21.94 years for females. The mandatory retirement age for Taiwanese is 60 for laborers and 65 for all others, male or female. Most retirees receive a monthly pension or a lump retirement sum from their employers. To date there is no universal pension or social security scheme for senior citizens, but the government is planning to introduce one in the near future. Currently, just under half (47%) of all Taiwanese age 65 and older are financially supported by their children.

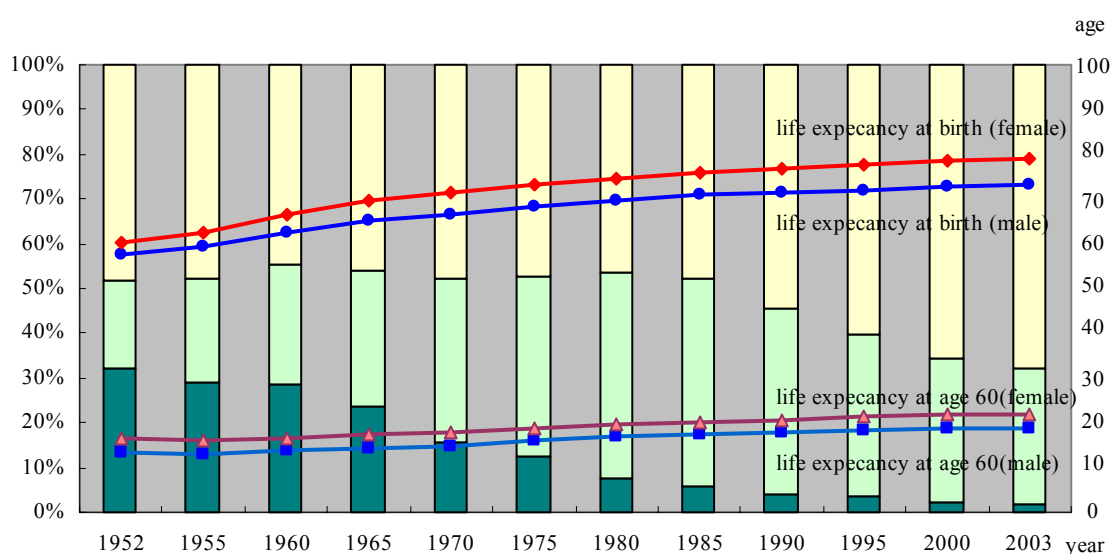


Figure 4: Life expectancy at birth, life expectancy at age 60, and gross domestic product by industry in Taiwan, 1951-2003.

■ gross domestic products by agriculture □ gross domestic products by industry □ gross domestic products by services

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Source: Hoff, A. (2004) Autumn Newsletter 2004 of the Research Committee (RC11) on the Sociology of Aging of the International Sociological Association (ISA). Berlin: German Centre of Gerontology, pp. 12-16.