

Review of documentary on Taiwan: "Invisible Nation," invisible for a reason

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Invisible for a reason

A dear friend we have not seen for some time invited us to attend a viewing of "Invisible Nation" at Stanford on Thursday evening. It was a chance to visit with an old friend and pick up a light dinner promised by the organizers. By the time we got there, all the bento boxes were taken. It was the first of a list of disappointments. Invisible Nation is billed as a documentary on Taiwan and is beginning to be shown around America. By traditional standards of journalism, a documentary film is supposed to inform and educate by presenting unadulterated facts and let the viewer come to their own conclusion. "Invisible" makes a mockery of the term of documentary. It is an unabashedly adulation of Tsai Ing-wen and blanket endorsement of Taiwan as a model democracy.

The flaws of Invisible are many, mostly by calculated omissions of history and personal information. The film portrays Taiwan's history beginning with the Dutch colonization of the island and claims that the only time one government controlled both the mainland and Taiwan was from 1945 to 1949. The government was the short reign of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang that reclaimed Taiwan after the end of World War II, and ended when he had to flee from the mainland to Taiwan. This is most misleading at best and outright lie at its worst.

Koxinga, liberator of Taiwan, not in the narrative

The film fails to even mention Koxinga, aka Zheng Chenggong, the end of Ming dynasty leader who resisted the takeover of the mainland by the Manchus and retreated to Taiwan by evicting the Dutch from the island. Zheng's grandson eventually surrendered to the Qing imperial court in Beijing. For centuries thereafter, Taiwan was part of China until the Beijing government lost a sea war to Japan and Taiwan was ceded to Japan in 1895. Invisible also does not mention the Potsdam Declaration that stipulated the terms of Japan's unconditional surrender, drafted by the allies, in which Japan was to hand Taiwan back to China. Throughout the war, United States was insistent in recognizing Taiwan as part of China. This recognition persisted when President Richard Nixon went to China and reaffirmed by President Jimmy Carter and by every American president ever since. The mockumentary did correctly attribute the actions of Lee Teng-hui for the political turn away from the heavy-handed rule of the Nationalist government. Lee succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek who led the retreat from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949. The son took over in 1978 and began to liberalize and loosen the control of the island. He selected Lee to be his vice president because Lee was a Taiwan native born. Chiang was probably unaware that Lee also went by his

Japanese name, Iwasato Masao. In fact, Lee/Iwasato, a native speaker of Japanese, was known to confide to visiting dignitaries from Japan that his allegiance leaned more to Japan than to China. In fact, his older brother was killed in action during WWII as a member of the Japanese imperial army and his name is enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo among other war dead and some convicted war criminals. After WWII, there were many Japanese that remained in Taiwan. They took on Chinese surnames and merged into the local society. The question of divided loyalty and the influence of an estimated hundred thousand Japanese that stayed along with their descendants on Taiwan's politics has not been studied.

A Bian not in the narrative either

In the case of Lee, after he assume the leadership of the Taiwan government, he gradually undermined and weakened the KMT organization that paved the way for Taiwan to elect its first president from the KMT opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, thus ending KMT's 55 years of continuous rule. Somehow, the name of Chen Shui-bian that should have figured prominently in the documentary was not mentioned even once in Invisible. Chen Shui-bian not only became the first president from DPP, he cleverly manipulated and divided the opposition and became the only president to win with less than 40% of the votes. He also became the first Taiwan president to be immediately imprisoned for wanton corruption at the end of his term of office. He was the kind of president that would give any democracy a bad name and one can hardly blame the director of the documentary for leaving Chen out of her story. Aside from being a blot on Taiwan's modern history, Chen ordered a consequential rewrite of school children's history textbooks. Obliterated in the revised textbooks was any reference of Taiwan's linkage to China's history, culture and ethnic origin. A generation of young Taiwanese people grew up not knowing that their ancestors did not spring out of the ground but came across the Taiwan Strait from southern Fujian for many generations. That the Taiwan dialect sounds almost exactly the same as Minnan dialect off southern Fujian. That if they had a chance to study Chinese history, they would know that as early as the Han dynasty around 200 BCE, the mainland already knew about the island offshore. Small wonder that the generation of young hotheads, that spearheaded the sunflower protest, screamed for freedom but did not appreciate Taiwan's economic dependence on trade with the mainland. Every year, Taiwan's trade surplus with mainland more than offset the entire trade deficit with the rest of the world. There is a consequence of Beijing's deliberate policy to give Taiwan special preference. The sunflower protesters were not as violent as the Hong Kong protesters of 2019 but they nevertheless destroyed public property, invaded the government parliament, and insulted publicly elected officials. All of which was recorded in the mockumentary. But since it was in the name of fighting for democracy, what's the big deal of breaking a few laws along the way? Of course, not all Taiwan's youth are lunkheads. The intelligent, high achievers understand that their future lies with the fast-growing mainland economy. Many live on the mainland and are working for Taiwan companies located in China. Some are even working for locally owned companies in China. The sunflower children may not care about economy, jobs and a career. But the serious-minded young people do.

A progressive image of DPP

The film naturally featured many remarks and speeches by Tsai Ing-wen, the current president of Taiwan. Other talking heads include her admirers and followers, even transgender cabinet ministers. The film brag that Taiwan was the first in Asia to recognize same sex marriage and protect the rights of the LGBTQ. Certainly, a show of progressive mindset that is even steps ahead of the U.S. The film also included a clip of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's drop in visit to Taiwan, against all advice but to the thrill of Tsai and the DPP. The most powerful woman in Washington meeting with Taiwan's first woman president. Could not have gotten any better than this. Thank goodness, Invisible did not include the video of Tsai bestowing a beauty pageant sash on Pelosi. Also not included was any discussion on how Pelosi having stepped on the red line, greatly raised the cross-strait tension and prompted threatening hostile reaction from the PLA. But there were a lot of folks the film could have interviewed but did not. They could have interviewed the Taiwanese living and working on the mainland on their perspective of the cross-strait relations. They could have interviewed the vast majority of the people on Taiwan that prefer the status quo, neither for unification or independence. They could have asked the persons on the street on what they thought of the relations with Uncle Sam: Will the US really come to fight alongside the troops of Taiwan? How do they feel about Washington forcing the Tsai government to buy old outdated weapons? How do they feel about being forced to buy tainted pork from American farmers? What do they think of Biden's strong arming Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing into moving their advanced chip fabs to Arizona, and then run into unforeseen labor problem, cost overrun, and construction delays? Has Biden shown any respect for Taiwan's "sovereignty?" Taiwan is an invisible nation for a simple reason. Taiwan is not a nation but a province of China. Simple as that.

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