

TAIWAN/MATSU ISLANDS

# Where Taiwan touches China

by Alessandro Gandolfi



Nangan. The military stronghold of Tiebao (Iron Fort) not far from the village of Renai, consists of a tunnel inside the promontory that used to house military amphibious forces.





## THE MATSU ISLANDS ARE THE STRATEGIC FRONT LINE IN THE CASE OF A POTENTIAL INVASION

**An outpost between Taiwan and China and the front line of a potential war between Taipei and Beijing, the archipelago of the Matsu Islands is arguably the most strategic front in the world. Situated a mere twenty or so kilometres from the coast of mainland China, the archipelago is home to naval bases and missile sites.**

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“The process of unification can no longer be put off,” stated Xi Jinping in 2019, “because the Taiwanese independence goes against history.” So, if ever the Chinese dragon invades Taiwan it will all begin in the Matsu Islands, where Chinese naval encroachments and incursions into Taiwanese airspace have been taking

place for years. The local population is undeterred, however. Over time they have become accustomed to military exercises: explosions and gunshots can be heard daily and they have even transformed the islands’ numerous tunnels and bunkers into tourist attractions.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic the islands attracted up to 200 thousand visitors a year. Today that number is just under half. They come almost exclusively from Taiwan and disembark here from ferries or planes to taste the local kaoliang liquor (a traditional brew made from sorghum) and to photograph the enormous nationalist slogans left over from the time of General Chiang Kai-shek. These include statements such as “We will retake the continent,” “We will fight until the end,” and “Let’s kill Mao the traitor.”

Once populated by fishermen, the Matsu Islands, which number 19 in total but only five of which are inhabited, survive thanks to visitors and the soldiers who guard the border. There are three thousand military personnel in total, a quarter of the population, and they can be seen occasionally jogging or enjoying a coffee at the archipelago’s only Starbucks.

In recent years, in spite of the potential danger, a number of young people from Taiwan have decided to open cafes or small hotels. “The war? We don’t think about it,” says Ren Huiyin, an employee at a travel agency. “We focus mainly on guided tours, and we hope that the Chinese tourists blocked by the pandemic will soon return. The Matsu Islands are an intriguing border destination also for them.”



Beigan. Taiwanese tourists watch a promotional video about the island at a local visitor centre.



Nangan. Three children play in bumper balls at the village fair.

Nangan. Lin Jia Jyun rows through the vast Beihai tunnel that she manages for tourists together with her brother Long. Dug mostly by hand by soldiers between 1969 and 1971, the tunnel is 18 metres high, 10 metres wide and 640 metres long. It was created to shelter military vessels.





Nangan. Community vegetable patches in the main village are situated right in front of Lianjiang County hall.



Nangan. Pupils play badminton in the gym at the Zhongzheng school.



Beigan. In the small village of Tangq, 90-year-old Chen Xian Mei takes a break from working in her vegetable patch. Widowed 20 years ago, she has sold fish at the market all her life. "I remember many years ago General Chiang Kai-shek came here in person and had his photo taken with me and my youngest son."

Nangan. A military vessel is anchored off the western coast. From this point China is around 17 kilometres away. Martial law was abolished in the Matsu Islands in 1992 but until that year 50 thousand soldiers were stationed on the archipelago: today just three thousand remain.





Nangan. Two people wait for a bus after sundown not far from the Matsu Tianhou Buddhist temple.



Nangan. An old photo of a canon pointed towards China hangs in the bathroom of the Temple of the White Horse, on the western coast of the island. Mainland China is around 14 kilometres away.



Nangan. Pupils eat at break time at the Zhongzheng school.



Nangan. A local fisherman walks back from the beach through a path. Today Matsu relies on tourism but its economy was once based on fishing.



Matsu Nangan Airport. A poster of the island welcomes tourists arriving by plane.



Nangan. Local people relax and have fun at a picnic.

Nangan. One of the tunnels with double doors in the Dahan fort, one of many built along the coast of the island in the post-war period (this one in 1975) to respond to attacks and potential Chinese invasions.





Nangan. Political activists take the ferry to the nearby island of Beigan to campaign a few weeks before the administrative elections.



Nangan. A man exercises on a running machine at a municipal centre for the elderly.



Nangan. Tourists at the Matsu Blue Tears Ecological Museum visit an exhibit explaining the curious phenomenon of the local bioluminescent algae.

Nangan. From the peak of Mount Yuntai it is possible to see Beigan Island (front), which is part of the Matsu archipelago, as well as the coast of mainland China just 12 kilometres away.





Nangan. At the "918" restaurant a family has dinner beneath an enormous poster of a warship. For almost 40 years the Matsu Islands have lived under the threat of a Chinese military invasion.



Nangan. A member of the coastguard looks out to see from a ship in port prior to departing for a monitoring mission. A particular problem experienced locally is the theft of sand from Taiwanese waters by Chinese dredgers.



Nangan. Tourists pose for a photo in front of the granite statue of Matsu, the goddess of the seas in Chinese mythology and protector of fishermen and sailors.



Nangan. A man looks at his telephone in the back of a shop near the Buddhist temple dedicated to the Queen of the Heavens (Matsu Tianhou).

Nangan. Taiwanese tourists visit the island's most revered temple, which is dedicated to the goddess Matsu, or the Queen of the Heavens (Matsu Tianhou), protector of fishermen and sailors. Built at the end of the 18th century, it is claimed that the temple houses the tomb of the goddess.





Nangan. A volunteer cleans a poster of a political candidate three weeks before the Matsu Islands hold administrative elections.



Nangan. Jeremy Liu (right), general manager of the Matsu Liquor Factory Industry, checks the ingredients together with an employee. The company produces liquor made from sorghum as well as rice wine.

Nangan. A woman walks on the beach in front of the village of Jinsha.



