

Subscribe
Today!

reasononline
Free Minds and Free Markets

"A brilliant
magazine, written
and edited by
brilliant people."
Dave Barry

[home](#) | [about](#) | [search](#) | [subscribe](#) | [advertise](#)

May 2005

Barbie's Taiwanese Homecoming *A plastic, fantastic tale of globalization*

Holiday Dmitri

Ku Tsuei-eh, who doesn't speak a lick of English, calls the plastic pop princess by her given Chinese name: Bahbi wa wa. The prim 49-year-old founder of Taiwan's recently opened Taishan Doll Museum gushes girlishly about the "product of her youth"—the Barbie dolls she used to dress during the 1980s as a contractor for the toy maker Mattel.

Barbie is revered like a messiah in Taishan, a municipality nine miles southwest of Taipei that the blonde doll transformed from an agricultural village of 5,000 to a manufacturing center nearly the size of Boston. When Mattel first broke ground here in 1967, Taiwan was still considered an underdeveloped country. But the Barbie factory, which was quickly followed by three others on the island, helped unleash an astonishing, foreign investment-led economic miracle. The island nation's economy grew by an annual average rate of 9.5

percent from 1960 to 1989, and by 6.4 percent from 1990 to 1995, shifting from subsistence farming to industry and services.

By the late 1980s, however, Barbie had moved on to cheaper labor markets such as Indonesia and China, leading Taiwanese workers to complain, just as Americans have in recent years, that their jobs had been “lost,” “stolen,” or “outsourced” to low-cost Third World labor. But the impact that Mattel left on the town, and the country, was indelible. Barbie generated enough momentum for Taishan to continue to thrive long after she left.

“Taiwan presents a textbook case of the economic and political merits arising from globalization,” says Christopher Lingle, an economist at Francisco Marroquin University in Guatemala and the author of *The Rise and Decline of the Asian Century*. “Its linkage to the global trading system brought enormous riches that have been widely shared. These material improvements provided the national self-confidence that transformed Taiwan from a dictatorial, one-party political regime to one of the most vibrant democracies in Asia.” The island, which is approximately the size of West Virginia, is the fifth largest economy in Asia, among the top 25 economies on the planet, and America’s eighth biggest trading partner.

“At one point, more than half of the Barbie dolls worldwide were made in Taiwan,” says Ku, who chairs the Taishan Township Office and Community Rebuilding Team, the group that spearheaded the creation of the Taishan Doll Museum, which opened on April 24, 2004. “Barbie shaped the lives of many Taishan residents. Now we’re using her popularity to shape ours.”

I’m a Barbie Girl, in a Barbie World

For two decades, the famous doll with the golden tresses and torpedo breasts was the symbol of financial opportunity in a country where no one looked like her. As word of mouth about Taishan spread, people traveled from all over the island to claim their piece of the plastic.

Ku was one of them. For five years, she made around NT \$360 (\$10) a day if she worked hard, sewing Barbie's outfits in her spare time. It was good money, she says—"so good you wanted to work all day and didn't feel like sleeping."

Ku was part of the unsalaried freelance labor force not included on Mattel's 8,000-employee payroll in Taishan. While body shaping, spray painting, hair implants, and packaging had to be done at the factory, other facets of Barbie assembly could be contracted out. It's estimated that a third of Taishan's population freelanced for Mattel in the early 1980s. Housewives like Ku were the perfect candidates: They could watch their kids while sewing dresses for Barbie. In fact, many of the women earned more money than their farmhand husbands.

Chou Su-Chin, a former factory worker, started packaging dolls in 1971 when she was 17. She still carries around her old Mattel ID badge. She has shared other souvenirs of her Barbie tenure with the museum, where she volunteers. Chou flips through a photo album of her early years at the plant. This was where she met her husband; that's him in the photo singing at a Mattel party; there she is with her colleagues in the day's fashionable mini-chun (miniskirts).

"Mattel helped me have a family," says Chou. She and her future husband came to Taishan with little in their pockets but were able to save enough money with the free room and board that Mattel offered to eventually buy their own home.

Besides the dollar-a-day salary (much better than the 60 cents a day that the average worker earned in the 1970s), Mattel offered perks far superior to those offered by the typical employers of that place and time. Single girls and the factory's few bachelors were offered room and board at no cost; employees could enjoy free language and math classes, complimentary uniforms (not mandatory), access to an on-site health clinic, and overtime pay. There were extracurricular clubs as well: dancing, sports, fishing, photography, flower arrangement,

and more. Mattel threw their workers parties and invited famous Taiwanese singers to perform. During special holidays, there would be a bus to take the employees home to see their relatives. Even the food was reputedly good: rice porridge and steamed buns for breakfast, vegetable and meat dishes for lunch, and meals on Sunday, their day off.

Chou, Ku, and other nostalgic Mattel workers see Barbie as a link to significant times in their lives: their youth, marriages, first home purchases, and child rearing. Many employees began working for Mattel in the '70s during their teens and stayed until the plant shut down in 1987. Some were students from southern Taiwan still in high school who worked part-time. "Mattel couples" like Chou and her husband were common. In fact, it wasn't unheard of for a whole family to work at the factory.

The women who worked there had a reputation for being as beautiful and precious as the dolls they made. And with more than three-quarters of the employees being female, the saying went, "If you can't find a wife, go to the Mattel factory." The men did. Every day after closing time, local young men and soldiers stationed at the nearby military base would gather outside the factory gates, hoping to meet their own "Mattel beauty." "Even the town mayor was looking," Chou says.

Cover Girl of the American Dream

Mattel showed the world that Taiwan had a vibrant labor market that could produce things faster and more efficiently than her neighbors. But as the other countries in the region industrialized and became "Asian tigers," Mattel eventually left the island for cheaper pastures. While some former employees pursued opportunities elsewhere in Taiwan, there was no major drop in Taishan's population. With the skills many Mattel laborers learned and the money the company generated in their community, the initial unemployment didn't last long.

The resourceful people of Taishan turned into small businessmen, starting their own companies in the textile and plastic molding industries. Eventually those industries too moved to China and Southeast Asia because of lower labor costs. Again Taishan residents had to find another means to generate local revenue.

Gone are the days when America's major exports to the world came directly from her land or her factories. Today, it's the mass production of the culture industry—movies and CDs, fast food and sneakers—that the world craves.

The cover girl of this American Dream is still Barbie, Mattel's most successful product line, which garners approximately \$1.5 billion per year. Since Barbie's creation in 1959 by Ruth and Elliot Handler, the plastic princess (named after the Handlers' daughter Barbara) has established herself as the world's most popular fashion doll and a cultural icon. According to Mattel, three Barbie dolls are sold somewhere in the world every second.

Barbie's presence in countries like Taiwan suggests the strength of America's cultural influence. In the last four decades the Mattel doll has represented 45 different nationalities; today she graces the aisles of toy stores in more than 150 countries. America's sweetheart has evolved, reflecting the current times and fashion (from UNICEF diplomat to Harley Davidson biker, country star to astronaut), but one thing remains constant. Barbie's cross-continental popularity derives from one particular quality: Her ability to embody infinite possibility.

Now Barbie could become the main tourist attraction in an Asian town. Instead of traditional clay teapots or jade jewelry, Taishan wants its claim to tour-guide fame to come from an 11-and-a-half-inch borrowed artifact from modern Western culture. That is, Ku and her colleagues are trying to re-brand their hometown as Barbie Town.

Museum of a Living Doll

The entrance corridor to the Taishan Doll Museum is a time capsule of photos recording the history of the city during the Mattel era: glamour shots of glowing Mattel girls; images of Mattel weddings; a snapshot of workers meeting the company's CEO, Bill Auer; a picture of a group of young girls (presumably the workers' children), each holding a doll with the Mattel logo while Taiwan's national flag flies in the background.

The museum's first room is the Hall of History, which familiarizes visitors with the origins of doll manufacturing and the transformation of Taishan industry. Next comes the Museum of Dolls, an introduction to the different cultures of dolls around the world that showcases Barbie in various sartorial styles. Some are even dressed in traditional Asian garb from Taiwan's aboriginal tribes and in Chinese Cheongsam silk gowns.

The museum has a doll-making classroom where Taishan residents can learn to design and make clothes for Barbie. Some of the best examples are on display. The youngest contributors are schoolkids; the oldest, an 81-year-old woman who created a Barbie decked in army desert fatigues.

It's not difficult to find other museums with a more substantial selection than Taishan's 400 Barbie dolls. The Strong Museum of Rochester, New York, has more than 1,500 Barbies; Holland's J&M Barbie Museum carries around 2,500; and in Hawaii there's the Hawaii Loves Barbie Doll Museum, with about 5,000 plastic dolls. It's hardly a contest, though, for the Mother of All Barbie Collections: Evelyn and Robert Burkhalter's Barbie Hall of Fame Museum in Palo Alto, California, which held 21,000 dolls, but was recently purchased by Mattel. Only Mattel's collection was larger.

It's not the size that counts, Ku stresses. "We've got history," she says. "The others don't."

Taishan's history is a rags-to-riches tale of how an American

company came into a poor country and brought jobs for its citizens. Because Mattel raised the whole city's standard of living, even after the toy company's departure, the town was able to thrive by adapting to the free market. Only now, instead of Barbie making, Taishan is Barbie marketing.

Holiday Dmitri is research director for Tony Snow at the Fox News Channel. Her website is holidaydmitri.com.

