

A Farewell Letter from AIT Director W. Brent Christensen

As my time as AIT Director draws to a close and I prepare to leave Taiwan, I want to take this opportunity to tell you what this experience has meant to me. It is not an exaggeration to say that this has been the honor of my life and the fulfillment of a career-long aspiration.

The first time I left my hometown at age 19, it was to come to Taiwan. From that early age, Taiwan became synonymous for me with the ideas of exchange and understanding, exploration and adventure. Taiwan represented both disorienting foreignness and unexpected opportunity, as I tried new food – like shuijiaos and qiu doufu – and learned to navigate my way through streets crowded with bicycles and scooters. And struggled to make myself understood with my rudimentary Mandarin. But all the while discovering the kindness and generosity that welcomed me wherever I went.

It felt appropriate for me to serve my first tour as a U.S. diplomat in the place that first sparked in me a lifelong interest in Asia – and in Taiwan in particular – and in cross-cultural understanding and shared purpose, or in other words, diplomacy. After that, my career took me to other places, but mostly still in the China region. But the memories of my experiences in Taiwan stayed with me. And finally having the opportunity to serve as the top U.S. diplomat to Taiwan was the culmination of all the years that came before. It is clear that I have a lifelong connection to Taiwan, or “yuanfen,” that has led me to return again and again.

People often ask me why I have such a fondness for Taiwan. “Isn’t it obvious?!” I always think. But when forced to explain my affection for and professional fascination with Taiwan, I usually come back to a few themes.

First, dynamism and constancy; progress and preservation; innovation and tradition. Every time I return to Taiwan, I am immediately struck by the many ways Taiwan has advanced as a society. Taiwan’s democracy grows more mature, its economy more prosperous, its environment more cared-for, and its arts and culture more vibrant.

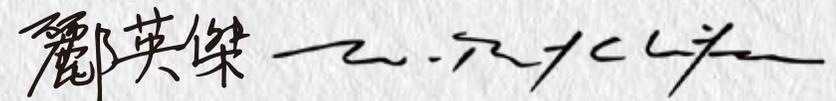
Taiwan’s industry continues to set the benchmark for global innovation in some of the most sophisticated technologies, but at the same time, Taiwan society is remarkable for its stability and cultural continuity. Taiwan’s people, despite their relative wealth and stature, continue to be modest and unassuming. Taiwan’s most ancient traditions are alive and well. Cultural and historic sites are restored and preserved. Young people may learn calligraphy techniques handed down for generations, but then share their work on Instagram.

Second, for the United States, Taiwan exemplifies the intersection of shared interests and shared values. Our partnership is about making sure our economies are beneficiaries rather than casualties of technological development and ensuring that technological development advances rather than undermines our principles. Our shared values of freedom, diversity, equality, and transparency inspire our efforts to build the resilience of democracies around the world. And we continue to find new ways to contribute to global problem solving, both because it benefits our own peoples and because we share the belief that this is what it means to be a good neighbor in the 21st century.

Finally, I associate Taiwan – and the broader U.S.-Taiwan relationship – with hope, promise, and growth. This friendship has expanded and flourished over the past 40 years; I believe every person who has done this job walked away knowing they left this partnership better than they found it. I will similarly leave AIT with a sense of accomplishment and success, knowing that the U.S.-Taiwan partnership is deeper and stronger than ever, and feeling immensely proud of my small role in getting us there.

But more than any of these things, I will remember the ways that Taiwan has touched me personally. I will always remember my first Christmas in Taiwan – and my first Chinese New Year. I will remember the warmth of Taiwan friendship, the faith of my fellow church members, the taste of a mango bing on a hot summer day, the echo of “Fur Elise” from the recycling truck, the fragrance of jasmine blossoms in village alleyways – these are just some of the memories I will treasure. I will remember the long dinners with dear friends, full of laughter and stories. And I will remember their many kindnesses. I will remember all the ways big and small that you, the people of Taiwan, touched my life and the lives of my family. And for that, I thank you.

I may be leaving Taiwan, but Taiwan will never leave me.



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