

Taiwanese culture comes together

Festival this weekend at the Plaza of Nations showcases 150 Taiwanese entertainers

Kenneth Hsieh, VSO assistant conductor, will play piano with members of the VSO and Taiwanese virtuoso Kevin Tsai.



In Taiwan, she's called a Ba Bi wa wa. The doll with the torpedo breasts and hour-glass figure was first manufactured in Taiwan in 1967 when Mattel broke ground on the first of four Barbie plants in the country. In its heyday in the 1980s, Taiwan manufactured half of all the Barbies made worldwide.

And it was in the small town of Taishan outside Taipei that Barbie achieved a cult status unlike few places in the world. In Taishan, Barbie became more than a molded piece of plastic — it became part of a generation's way of life. Upwards of three-quarters of the workforce at the Barbie plant were women who had a reputation for being beautiful — as well as hardworking.

"If you can't find a wife," went the saying in Taishan, "go to the Mattel plant."

At its height, the Taishan Barbie factory employed about 8,000 people, paying them a dollar a day compared to the national average of 60 cents a day.

Although the dolls were far too expensive for the workers to buy for their children, they figured out ways to smuggle out body parts until they'd assembled a full doll.

Ku Tsui Ei remembers playing with her own Ba Bi wa wa as a child and then sewing buttons and floral patterns on dresses as a pieceworker. She



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worked on and off for almost six years until the mid-1980s in her living room for Mattel, sewing for upwards of 12 hours at a time while running a wholesale plastic business.

Ku recalls the pressure trying to meet Mattel's exacting standards and not knowing if a doll she worked on would later be discarded because it was deemed flawed for having too little hair or too many eyelashes.

"There was a sense of accomplishment when the dolls weren't returned," Ku said through translator Kerry Chang. "It was empowering to be making the money and making more than my husband."

By 1987, however, it was all over in Taiwan. In the brutal world of outsourcing, Mattel found cheaper labour in China and Indonesia and the Barbie jobs all left the former agricultural village.

But the fond memories remain. Last year, Ku was part of a unique group of former Barbie workers who opened the Taishan Doll Museum located on the fourth floor of the Taishan Township Cultural Center.

But the museum isn't just for nostalgia's sake. Since Mattel left, Taishan hasn't been the same and the doll museum is one way Ku hopes to bring more tourists and employment to the area. She said the museum has attracted about 30,000 people to see its revolving display of 1,000 Barbies.

"People in Taishan feel that the dolls are part of themselves," Ku said. "They're part of the town and its spirit."

Ku is in Vancouver with a selection of dolls from the museum for this weekend's Taiwanese Cultural Festival at the Plaza of Nations.

She's among more than 100 people being brought in from Taiwan for the festival, described as the biggest celebration of Taiwanese culture outside of Taiwan.

According to Charlie Wu, the festival's executive coordinator, there's nothing else like it



The Amis Aboriginal Percussion (top photo), paper sculptor Hung Hsin-Fu and rooster lanterns will be part of the entertainment at the Taiwanese Cultural Festival.

anywhere — not even in Taiwan.

"People from Taiwan have said that it's better than anything in Taiwan," Wu said, "because everything is gathered under one roof. In Taiwan, you'd have to go to many different places to see it all."

Now in its 16th year, the festival has grown from what used to be a concert seen by several hundred people to a three-day event produced by the Taiwanese Cultural Society that last year attracted more than 50,000 people.

With a budget of \$1 million, the carnival-style event has about 150 Taiwanese entertainers, performers, scientists and artists. Exhibits and events range from paper sculptures and bonsai to kite demonstrations and dragon boat races.

If you don't speak Mandarin, don't worry said Wu. During the day, events are in both Mandarin and English. During nightly entertainment, however, the language is Mandarin.

Wu said the main idea behind the festival is to show the many influences on Taiwan's culture from countries such as China, Japan and Portugal as well as its own indigenous people.

"Taiwanese culture is very multicultural — just like Canada," he said. "We're just trying to show Taiwanese culture and be a part of the Canadian multicultural mosaic. We want to share what we have with the rest of the community."

With China's continuing claims to Taiwan, there's an underlying political subtext to

the festival as well. Unleashed and Beyond is meant to highlight Taiwan's separate cultural and political development since 1949 when the Communists under Mao Zedong formed the government of the People's Republic of China on the mainland and Chiang Kai-shek established the nationalist government of the Republic of China in what is now Taiwan, which is also known as Formosa. Five years ago, Taiwan became a multiparty state and saw the rise of an independence movement.

"We want to do to make people understand that Taiwan is a unique culture and place," Wu said. "Taiwan has been on its own and developed something on its own."

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