

Q & A

Vanessa Hope on Taiwan, the Invisible Nation

The documentary filmmaker gained unprecedented access to Tsai Ing-Wen, the first woman President of the world's only Chinese-speaking democracy.

BY JONATHAN S. LANDRETH — JANUARY 14, 2024



CULTURE POLITICS

Vanessa Hope is an independent filmmaker whose 2015 documentary All Eyes and Ears told the stories of the U.S. Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman, his adopted Chinese daughter Gracie Mei, and blind legal advocate Chen Guangcheng, to explore the complex links between the U.S. and China. In this lightly edited transcript of a recent interview, Hope discussed the production of her most recent work, Invisible Nation, a documentary featuring Tsai Ing-Wen, the first woman leader of the self-governed island in East Asia whose 23 million people have called it the Republic of China since 1949. Invisible Nation is screening on the international film festival circuit on the eve of the presidential election in the R.O.C., a.k.a. Taiwan, where, on January 13, citizens went to the polls to choose Tsai's successor from a multiparty field.



Vanessa Hope.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Who calls Taiwan the *Invisible Nation* and why?

A: We, the filmmakers, came up with that title after filming with President Tsai, people in her administration, and with Taiwanese people in Taiwan. On the ground we witnessed discrimination toward, and a lack of diplomatic recognition of, Taiwan in international organizations, and the world's scant understanding of Taiwan as a democracy and a meaningful and important country, economy and society.

If the International Olympic Committee, the World Health Organization, and all but 12 of the 193 United Nations member states don't recognize Taiwan, what keeps hope alive?

The people of Taiwan showed President Tsai the way with an incredible sense of resilience and defiance in the face of military threat and aggression from China. Her strategy was to showcase the strengths and importance of Taiwan's democracy and to link it with other democracies around the world, to suggest that we, in democratic countries, are all in this together and that we're stronger together. Taiwan is not the only democracy in Asia, but it is one of the most progressive and at the forefront of a lot of democratic change.

Can *Invisible Nation* be viewed as a plug for the rest of Asia to follow Taiwan's path from authoritarianism to democracy?

Definitely. Taiwan is an inspiration and a reminder, not just for all the countries in East Asia, but for the United States and other countries around the world, to understand how to move from authoritarianism to democracy. Even if you wouldn't describe the United States as an authoritarian country, we have many authoritarian-minded people in our government. To be able to recognize the difference between authoritarianism and democracy in every way is really important.

What moved you to make this film?

I lived in Taiwan in 1995-96, the year of their first direct presidential elections. I was in the IUP Chinese language program run by Stanford University. I loved studying Chinese but I was doing too well on the exams and they were worried about me having a life outside of

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	50
BIRTHPLACE	New York, NY, USA
CURRENT POSITION	Co-Founder Double Hope Films, Filmmaker, Writer/Director/Producer

school, so they pushed me to borrow a teacher's camera and do something when Lee Teng-Hui became the island's first democratically elected president. I ran around filming the inauguration weekend. It was really exciting. Many journalist friends were covering the election and also the missile crisis. China was firing at the island all year to potentially prevent the democratic elections in Taiwan. If Taiwan became a democracy, then China would face a greater challenge: that all of the people of Taiwan would someday need to vote to choose whether or not to unify with China.

MISCELLANEA	
FAVORITE FILMS	My husband Ted and I watched 200 films in 2023 alone. I recommend <i>Four Daughters</i> by Kaouther Ben Hania; <i>Apolonia</i> , <i>Apolonia</i> by Lea Glob; <i>Barbie</i> by Greta Gerwig; <i>Past Lives</i> by Celine Song; <i>Occupied City</i> by Steve McQueen; <i>To Kill A Tiger</i> by Nisha Pahuja; and <i>The Monk & the Gun</i> by Pawo Choyning Dorji.
FAVORITE MUSIC	Lately I've been alternating between the mellow French rapper Jok'Air, the Linda Lindas — who were so great when I saw them open for Blondie last year — and Karol G.

Living in Taiwan that year changed my life. I went on to work at the Council on Foreign Relations to better understand what was going on. I wrote an op-ed for the *L.A. Times* arguing against missile defense for Taiwan because at the time everything was pro-China engagement. The idea was that economic liberalization would lead to political liberalization and we just needed to support China's rise and everything would be peaceful.

Everything has changed since Xi Jinping came to power. For my first film, *All Eyes and Ears*, I followed President Obama's Ambassador to China, Jon Huntsman. Taiwan was just a little part of that look at the U.S.-China diplomatic relationship. I knew Taiwan deserved its own film and that the people of Taiwan deserve to have their voices heard. They are muted, and the country of Taiwan has been invisible.

I was tracking developments when I thought they might elect their first female president, and I was there in January 2016, when Tsai Ing-Wen won. I had joined an international delegation to monitor that the elections were free and fair. We visited the various political parties' headquarters, we went to the de facto consulates of Japan and the European Union and the United States. It was a fascinating trip and it was completely electric to be in the audience when Tsai won the presidency. It was historic that they had elected their first female president and I started putting this movie together.



Tsai Ing-wen celebrates her victory in Taiwan's presidential elections. Taipei, January 16, 2016. Credit: Philippe Lopez/AFP via Getty Images

How did you gain access to President Tsai and earn her trust?

I had read a book called *Sex and World Peace* by Valerie Hudson and other authors, that my executive producer, GERALYN DREYFUS, knew was on the minds of the [Compton Foundation](#) in San Francisco. They were giving out grants to focus on women, peace and security. So that reinforced my thinking that if I could get a grant and propose this idea, and have initial funding, then maybe I could follow through with a film about Taiwan with Tsai at the center. Tsai was elected President in January 2016. In November, we got the grant from the Compton Foundation. The proposal I then wrote and submitted to the President's office in Taipei, with the help of our local producers, took them six months to review. In April, they

said, "Come back to Taiwan. We cannot guarantee you'll get a meeting with President Tsai, but why don't you film other interviews and see what happens?"

“ One of [Tsai's] strengths is how calm and grounded she is, especially in the face of increasingly violent rhetoric from China. ”

When we did get a meeting with President Tsai we pitched her and her whole team, who had already reviewed our proposal. At the end, as she was leaving the room, she nodded in agreement and said, "Yes," and closed the door behind her. The whole room erupted with excitement, our team and her team. Then her administration told us to return in two weeks, which was really tough because I needed to put together the rest of my team and financing and figure a lot out, but we did it. Our first filming was in May 2017.

Tsai is smooth on camera. Did she ever exhibit stress in talking about China's threatening reunification by force?

President Tsai is incredibly composed. One of her strengths is how calm and grounded she is, especially in the face of increasingly violent rhetoric from China. That said, during the protests in Hong Kong in 2019-20, I went back to Taiwan and interviewed Tsai. At one point, I referred to the tanks that China was rolling toward Hong Kong. They didn't ever roll into the city but you could see them. That was the one time I saw her composure crack a little. Thankfully there is a body of water between Taiwan and China. She was trying to stay composed, but you could feel the heat from China, and she could feel it too.



Stills from *Invisible Nation*. Photos by Laura Hudock, courtesy of *Invisible Nation*.

The Hong Kong protests against Beijing rule burned bright but were snuffed out in the end. How is Taiwan under Tsai different?

The historical circumstances are different, and that is in Taiwan's favor. Taiwan has never been controlled by the People's Republic of China, and it was never promised back to China in a handover situation the way the British did with Hong Kong in 1997. In Taiwan, the idea of not wanting to be the next Hong Kong was always clear, and encouraged Taiwanese to see themselves as beacons of democracy.

Can you share an example from the film of how China suppresses Taiwan?

With the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, the world was reminded that Taiwan has so much expertise in medicine and health given that they had dealt with the SARS epidemic in 2003 so well. When COVID happened, Taiwan's response was also really impressive, led by President Tsai's first vice president. Taiwan ended up being able to help countries in the rest of the world, but it's a big problem that China doesn't allow Taiwan into the World Health Organisation and that Taiwan is not in the UN. In the film we see a video call in which a reporter from Hong Kong interviews the head of the W.H.O. and he hangs up on her when she tries to ask about Taiwan. That was shocking and unfortunate.

Taiwan had a whole #TaiwanCanHelp campaign that fit President Tsai's strategy of showing how important a global stakeholder Taiwan is and how responsible and how much it has to contribute to the world. It's a loss for the world that Taiwan is not allowed to participate in important international organizations whose aid can be life-or-death for some.



Tsai Ing-wen attends the Global Health Forum in Taipei, October 23, 2020. Credit: [Office of the President](#)

What subjects were off limits?

There was a progression over time. During our edit, I lived in Taiwan from July 2022 through February 2023, a period when the changes that were happening for President Tsai as a politician encouraged her to become more open and accessible. Still, during that period, questions about cross-Strait relations were off limits. As tensions rose and China cracked down on Hong Kong, and COVID spread, at first there was increasing openness, but then, when Russia invaded Ukraine, the sensitivities were so high that Tsai wasn't giving interviews anymore.

What was it like making a documentary in the world's only Chinese-speaking democracy?

That's something I thought about all the time while filming in Taiwan, especially right off the bat, in May 2017. The first floor of the presidential office building where President Tsai works, and where her administration is housed, was host to a museum exhibit called *Power to the People*. Tourists came and we filmed a lot of that. That was a stark contrast to when I shot my first film with Huntsman in China, where people in the government are off-limits to filmmakers, let alone journalists, so many of whom have ended up in Taiwan after getting kicked out of China. Taiwan embraces freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and recognizes its importance to the grassroots movements that are the very development of and strengthening of democracy. Basically, China and Taiwan are night and day.



From left to right: Michael Geier, additional cinematographer, Danielle Turkov-Wilson, executive producer, Ivan Orlic, producer, Ted Hope, producer, Vanessa Hope, director, Cassandra Jabola, producer, Mike Veldstra, executive producer, at the international premiere of *Invisible Nation* at IDFA International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam. Credit: [IMDb](#)

Who funded *Invisible Nation*, what was the budget, and how long did it take to make?

We kicked off with a big grant from the Compton Foundation, then many more supporters got involved. We really lucked into a producing partner and financier in Ivan Orlic and Patrick Tendai Pupajena at Seine Pictures in Los Angeles. That was how we made it to the finish line. I can't reveal the budget because the film is still on the festival circuit and seeking distribution. That said, our budget is pretty typical of most docs these days.

How long did it take? There are very few films with sitting heads of state. Most films with politicians in them are on the campaign trail. But with *Invisible Nation* I always wanted to just follow the story and follow this female president. I didn't want to be seen as making a campaign film or some kind of propaganda to help her get elected. We knew she could serve two terms and understood from the beginning that we didn't know if she was going to win reelection in 2020. But once she was running again, and Hong Kong happened, it was clear we couldn't stop. It was a remarkable seven year journey.

Talk about Nancy Pelosi's visit to Tsai in Taiwan and her comment in the film about the importance of female leadership.

Pelosi mentions that maybe female politicians would be less ego-driven. The importance of gender equality to peace and security is something that is not well enough understood or appreciated, and it's a pretty cutting edge field. When I first worked at the Council on Foreign Relations, the [Women and Foreign Policy Program](#) didn't exist. I worked for [Elizabeth Economy](#), a respected woman in foreign policy. Now there are more. One of them, [Rachel Vogelstein](#), is now in President Biden's administration. The book I recommend, *First Political Order*, was partly financed by the Department of Defense, so they understand it, too, so maybe there's hope.

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	<i>The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide</i> by Valerie M. Hudson, Danna Lee Bowen & Perpetua Lynne Nielsen
MOST ADMIRE	James Baldwin & Tsai Ing-Wen.
	What a conversation that would have been!

With Western polls showing majority negative views of China, is there burnout among film companies considering films about China and Taiwan?

The fact is that the majority of film distribution companies want to be in the China market. Therefore, they want to not offend the Chinese government. And since most of them don't hire China experts, Taiwan experts, international relations experts, they steer clear of pretty much everything and anything that could possibly be construed as offensive to Beijing in any way. It's a huge problem because even films that could be considered pro-China and are trying to say something positive about Chinese history — those also are avoided. You just don't know, so everyone is self-censoring. That makes any film with anything to do with China whatsoever, almost impossible to finance and distribute.

Who do you most hope will see *Invisible Nation* and why?



A screening of *Invisible Nation* at SPOT Huashan Cinema in Taipei, November 27, 2023. Credit: @mhar4 via X

I hope everyone in the world can see the film. I'm literally traveling the world with it. We had an international premiere with five screenings at the [International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam](#). The film is also scheduled to screen or appear in major documentary film festivals in 2024 in Australia, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, New Zealand, Poland, and South Korea. I'm excited to share it in Taiwan, officially. We did two private screenings there. We didn't want to be an influence before their presidential elections on January 13, so we always planned to distribute after the election. Our screening schedule is kept updated on Instagram at @invisiblenationtw.

I want Americans to see it. I think U.S. democracy has been backsliding, and part of it has to do with not prioritizing our values, what matters in democracy, and instead prioritizing business and the military industrial complex and engaging authoritarian countries that have more influence over us than we do over them.

“ **The U.S. has been so hypocritical about democracy in its foreign policy for so long it's hard to believe that we believe in it. Taiwan shows you what it is.** ”

Diplomacy in foreign policy is the idea that, yes, engage China economically, but at the same time, speak up for democracy, human rights, universal values, and don't let their bad ways influence our good ones if we can hold on to them. If that idea of diplomacy took hold in the film world, then the film world would better understand how meaningful it is to speak truth to power, to stand up for democracy, to show that we care about people in China, people in Taiwan, not simply making money and prioritizing profit.

Many people in the United States don't know what a functioning democracy looks like. The U.S. has been so hypocritical about democracy in its foreign policy for so long it's hard to believe that we believe in it. Taiwan shows you what it is.

In the film, [Matt Pottinger](#), a former National Security Advisor under Trump, offers so grave a warning about China's military threat as to provide fuel to the China hawks in Congress. Does that voice help Americans understand Taiwan?

There's a fear in Taiwan that Taiwan is going to be the perpetual orphan left alone to face this giant, authoritarian threat. That was missing from the movie, and Pottinger could speak to it. I kept arguing with him that I care about peace and diplomacy and asked why the U.S. is so terrible at coming up with diplomatic solutions that are current, that reflect reality, that deal with authoritarian countries and dictators. Pottinger firmly believes the best deterrent for Taiwan is to show that it will defend itself and the other countries in the region militarily — otherwise they're going to get it, and it isn't going to end with them.

That's why we end the film with President Tsai's last words. Hers is always the voice that de-escalates, basically saying she hopes more Taiwanese people go out into the world and show the world Taiwan and that Taiwan's voices can be heard, that Taiwan can be seen.

Now that the people of Taiwan have chosen the DPP's Lai Ching-te as their new President, how will that affect outgoing President Tsai's legacy?



What Taiwan Wants Us to Know

BY BOB DAVIS

The Taipei government is keen to show the island is more than a political football between the U.S. and China.

Congratulations are in order—to Taiwan, President Tsai and democracy. The Democratic Progressive Party holding onto the presidency for an unprecedented third term is a win for all. Taiwan and President Tsai, and now President Lai, show the world that regardless of size, gender, race, ethnicity or what the bullies who enforce their will on weaker people say, speaking truth to power, holding power accountable to reality should be respected. Tsai's legacy means that Taiwanese asking for equal status, treatment and representation in the world to which they contribute so much may one day be achieved.



[Jonathan Landreth](#) is a New York-based writer and editor who started reporting from China in 1997.



COVER STORY



Chairman Mike

BY BRENT CRANE

Rep. Mike Gallagher is both a rising political star and Capitol Hill's loudest China hawk. As chairman of the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, he is also — for better or worse — driving America's China policy.

THE BIG PICTURE



Taiwan's Election at a Glance

BY AARON MC NICHOLAS

A guide to this month's vote which will determine who runs the island for the next four years.

Q & A



Alicia García-Herrero on China's Shifting Ties in Latin America

BY ALEX COLVILLE

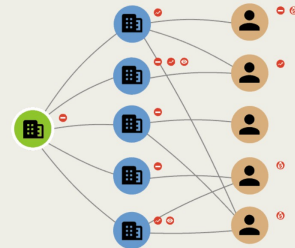
The economist discusses the different approaches the region's countries take to Beijing, the impact of Javier Milei's rise to lead Argentina and the pluses and minuses of China's economic influence.

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