

# HARBOUR DREAMS —Kaohsiung

**Preface**  
The city of Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan is considerably more relaxed than the capital Taipei. But behind city hall doors, a formidable team is seeing through some ambitious plans.

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Chu Chen is a short, plump woman with a halo of tiny black curls framing a round face. In her seventh year as mayor of Taiwan's second largest city, Kaohsiung, she smiles the practised smile of a politician but she has a pleasant twinkle in her eye that suits the image - that of the caring aunt - she likes to convey.

At her deputy's vast office, the mayor sits on a plush two-seater sofa. Chen's full frame is almost swallowed up by its black leather. To her right are **11** officials, pens and notebooks at the ready for when the mayor starts speaking. It's difficult to tell whether the mayor's underlings are watching her every move out of pure reverence or because they're a bit frightened of her. The public may know the mayor as affectionate "Auntie Chen" but when you sit right next to her, you know she's a no-nonsense kind of woman.

"I knew the price for fighting for freedom and democracy was jail," she says, pausing and smiling as her entourage waits for her to continue. "When I started in politics **40** years ago I never thought I'd be running for mayor in any city but I've earned people's trust because they recognise my effort fighting for social revolution."

Chen was born in the summer of **1950**, the year after the defeated nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek fled mainland China and took control of Taiwan. He

and his supporters set up the Kuomintang (KMT) government and initiated KMT-rule under martial law. Political parties were banned, indigenous Taiwanese were often barred from administrative posts and civilians were tried for sedition in military courts.

Chen was among those who fell foul of the regime. In her late twenties she was tried for treason and spent six years in jail together with other pro-democracy activists protesting against the KMT in Kaohsiung. The journey from prison to the mayor's office has been a long one - and now that she's here Chen is wasting little time.

Chen gets up at **05.30** every day and takes a brisk **30**-minute walk before reading the daily newspapers. She's at city

hall for **08.00** when the morning's first meeting starts. The mayor surrounds herself with a carefully groomed team of deputies and officials.

Wearing a snug-fitting white blazer over a grey turtleneck, the petite Shyh-Fang Liu cuts a stylish figure as one of Kaohsiung's deputy mayors and mayor Chen's right-hand woman. Partly educated abroad, Liu left her job as a chemical engineer to enter politics **20** years ago and is today heading up Kaohsiung's green strategy, including arguing with central government in Taipei about the urgency to implement a local carbon tax. The mayor's team belongs to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which Chen co-founded in **1986**, the year she was released from prison under an amnesty for political prisoners.



- 01 View of Kaohsiung
- 02 Kaohsiung city hall
- 03 Julia Chan from Dadong Art Centre
- 04 Gushan Ferry point
- 05 China Steel Corp
- 06 Path along Love River
- 07 Mascots for the 2009 World Games
- 08 Pensioner at Zhongyang park
- 09 Horizon shipyard
- 10 Steven and Andrew, designers
- 11 Drying mullet roe



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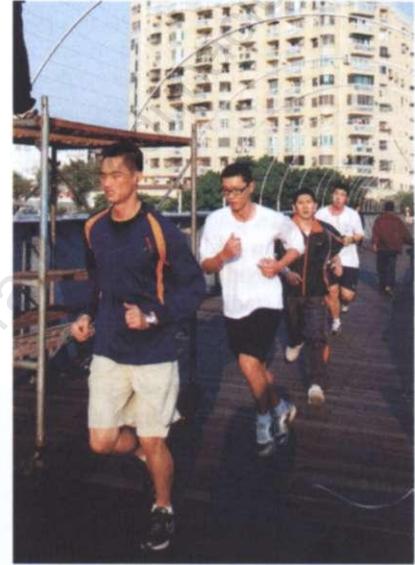
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## Local luxury yacht industry

John Lu, wearing deck shoes, chinos and a smart chequered suit jacket, tours an Explorer-series luxury yacht docked at one of his three Kaohsiung shipyards. The Horizon Group CEO and chairman of the Taiwan Yacht Industry Association is happy: he's just about to sell the 148ft boat. The estimated retail price for the vessel is nearly €22m – making a €3.7m profit.

Along with the city's other 19 yacht builders, Lu is hoping to cash in on the growing interest for boating in Taiwan and China. Taiwan ranks as the world's seventh largest producer of luxury yachts and Kaohsiung is the largest boatbuilding hub on the island. As Taiwan's top yacht builder, Lu is set to double local production once Kaohsiung's new luxury yacht-building park opens next year.



It is still the main opposition to the **KMT** and the **DPP** holds sway in the southern regions of Taiwan.

Head south on the high-speed train from Taipei and you'll notice the landscape becoming tropical and verdant. The hotter climate down here also seems to make Kaohsiung a more languid and relaxed place compared to the chillier capital in the north. The south, with its left-leaning politics and working-class demographic, is a place where people come to settle rather than somewhere that big businesses set up, although more private investment is being attracted here, too.

"In southern Taiwan they're very local in how they deal with things. There's community spirit. People help each other out and they work together," says the



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president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Kaohsiung, Brian Aiello. "This local character will be an advantage if used properly in terms of bringing in foreign investment."

It's in the environment of community spirit that Chen has thrived. First on her to-do list has been to transform this port city from chokingly polluted industrial heartland to a place with a focused sustainability and liveability agenda.

The modernisation push was jump-started with the **2009** World Games - the event that celebrates sports not featured in the Olympics. Kaohsiung's Love River was cleaned up and a first-rate metro system was opened along with the snake-shaped sports stadium designed by Japanese architect Toyo Ito.

Chen's signature project is a **6750m** waterfront redevelopment plan that exemplifies what Kaohsiung is all about: a city where traditional industries (in particular local yacht and shipbuilding companies) continue to flourish alongside newcomers in the tech and creative sectors. The plan includes a bulbous convention centre, a music venue, cruise terminal, marina and a public library. A light-rail system will wrap around the harbour-front developments and the sprawling downtown Kaohsiung.

Though the grand scheme has yet to be fully realised the waterfront is already being put to good use. The disused railway tracks that run alongside the water's edge have been turned into a well-used bicycling lane. Follow the tracks and you'll come across Pier **2**, a collection of former warehouses that have now been taken over by arts groups, animation companies and exhibition halls as well as large-scale sculptures and public art that stand beside the bicycle path.

When you reach the railway terminus, the tracks ebb out into a green sea of cropped grass. Even on weekday afternoons, crowds of students, young couples, dog-walkers, pensioners and people exercising come together here. "We've opened up these spaces to the public so citizens can have face-to-face contact and directly interact with one another. Good, innovative and even crazy



01 Surfer, Kaohsiung beach  
02 Cadets at Chung Cheng Armed Forces Preparatory School  
03 Roundabout inside Zhongyang Park  
04 Betty, near Pier 2  
05 Cyclist on a bike path near the former British Consulate at Takao  
06 Dadong Art Centre  
07 Dream Mall  
08 Mayor Chu Chen (right)



03 ideas can come of such meetings. It's a base for creativity," says Yi-Der Lee.

As the young chief secretary at Kaohsiung's Urban Development Bureau, Lee beams when he talks about the possibilities that come with turning disused industrial sites into green outdoor spaces. "Our responsibility is not just to make these places within Kaohsiung city more sustainable but also more liveable," he says.

Lee belongs to the group of forward-thinking professionals who have studied abroad - Lee got his PhD in spatial planning from the University of Leuven, Belgium - and who've come back home to make a difference. Lee concludes: "I want to contribute what I've learned abroad to my home country to make it better, to make it a place where Taiwanese and foreigners want to live."



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Others are attempting to do the same. North of the city centre the Metropolitan Park stretches out behind the immense construction site where the Wei Wu Ying Centre for the Arts is being built. Located on the site of a former military compound and designed by Dutch architect Francine Houben of Mecanoo Architects, the undulating structure will accommodate a concert hall, amphitheatre and recital hall. With 6,000 seats, it's set to become Asia's largest performance venue when it opens in **2014**.



### Female detective agencies

It's not just Kaohsiung's top politicians who are strong-headed women. Drive across downtown and you'll see huge billboards advertising the services of female detectives who work for firms such as Woman International Detective Company or Lady 007. These detective bureaux exist in all of Taiwan's big cities but they are becoming particularly high in demand in Kaohsiung, where women spy on husbands they suspect of having affairs while on business trips in China. If the private eyes manage to catch the cheaters red handed (and film it for court evidence), the wives are much more likely to be granted divorce, as well as higher alimony. Also available are "anti-mistress" classes on how to spot suspicious husband-behaviour.

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Despite its ambitious size, however, not many people in Kaohsiung have heard of the project. In contrast, a bit further out of town, the Dadong Art Centre, also designed by a Dutch practice (de Architekten Cie) in co-operation with local firm MAYU, is well known across Kaohsiung and even draws visitors from other parts of Taiwan. Opened with local government backing in March last year, it has helped revive the surrounding area of Fengshan. "Dadong is unique," says Julia Chan, who works in the programming department. "With this up and running, we hope that people will not only focus on Taipei but also notice that Kaohsiung is flourishing. People will pay attention to Kaohsiung. I think that's a good thing for Taiwan."

Many are taking note of the changes. Brisbane's Asia Pacific Cities Summit comes to town at the end of this year, bringing together city governments across the region in an effort to strengthen business ties. And as long as Kaohsiung has Auntie Chen with her international-minded deputy by her side, this formidable female force will fight on until it gives Taipei a run for its money. — (M)