On Wednesday, September 12, 2012, the East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted Director General and Ambassador Daniel Liao’s public lecture entitled “Taiwan Today”. The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Houston made this event possible. Over sixty people attended this informative lecture.

The event started promptly at 5:30pm as Julius Gribou, Executive Vice Provost and Senior International Officer, introduced Ambassador Liao. After the opening remarks, Ambassador Liao took the stage and explained his lecture topics, which included facts about Taiwan and its economy, the U.S.-Taiwan economic relationship, cross-strait relationship, viable diplomacy, and Taiwan’s 2012 presidential election.

Ambassador Liao outlined the physical geography and demographics of Taiwan, which in 2012 had an estimated population of 23.25 million and estimated size of 14,000 square miles, roughly the size of Rhode Island. Although Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, Ambassador Liao also mentioned that it is a member of the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Trade Organization’s Plurilateral Agreement on Government Procurement (WTO/GPA), and has been invited as an observer of the World Health Assembly (WHA).

The U.S.–Taiwan economic relationship is strong: Taiwan being the 10th largest trading partner to the U.S. and the largest per capita importer of U.S. farm products (2011). In addition, the U.S. was the 3rd largest trading
Partner for Taiwan and Taiwan’s largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI). Taiwan was also Texas’ 13th largest export market in 2011.

Ambassador Liao went on to discuss the cross-strait relationship with mainland China, stating that President Ma’s policy towards China is shelving controversies and pursuing a win-win solution. One example of this new relationship was the change from “checkbook” diplomacy to “viable” diplomacy. With this change in diplomatic philosophy and admittance into international organizations, such as WHA, Taiwan is now allowed to offer international relief, including recent global disasters the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Taiwan now has 128 countries granting visa waivers or landing visas to Taiwanese passport holders - including Canada, Japan, Australia, and most European countries. With U.S. nomination, Taiwan will soon become a member of the Visa Waiver Program.

“Roughly 90% of the Taiwanese population has friends and family in the United States,” Ambassador Liao revealed, “This change will allow visitors to the U.S to spend as much as an additional $4,000 which would have been otherwise spent on the visa applications process.” Ambassador Liao is hopeful that membership will be approved by the end of 2012.

Ambassador Liao was able to give the attendees an interesting and informative look into modern Taiwan. “I was surprised to learn that Taiwan is very strong and home to millions of people,” UTSA Language student Robert Fisher commented, “especially since its roughly the size of Rhode Island.” UTSA’s East Asia Institute was proud to host Ambassador Liao and to promote the awareness and understanding of Taiwan.