

Sleepy Taiwan island plans casino

By Cindy Sui BBC News, Matsu

Calm waves roll up onto the shores of Matsu as birds chirp. It is quiet throughout the day practically everywhere on this island chain, located northwest of mainland Taiwan.

But this peaceful atmosphere could change soon.

The economy of Matsu once depended on the 50,000 soldiers stationed here when it was an important military outpost in Taiwan. It defend against a Communist takeover during the Cold War.

But now only 5,000 soldiers live here, partly because of improved relations with China. The population of civilians is around the same - many young people have moved to mainland Taiwan for jobs.

That is why a majority of Matsu's voters recently agreed in a referendum to allow casinos to be built here for the first time. It is part of the long-held dream of Taiwan's Kuomintang ruling party to build a casino industry in Taiwan, after seeing the success of Macau and Singapore.

Many of Matsu's residents consider casinos a necessary evil. For decades, they have felt neglected, waiting for better transport, including a bigger airport that would allow planes to land in foggy and windy weather.

"It's very important for us to have more Chinese tourists here. It will help our economy, create more jobs and improve our infrastructure, especially by building a bigger airport," said Hung Hsien-Chang, chief engineer of the local tourism bureau.

'Unpredictable'

Even though relations with China have improved to the best level since the war ended, the islands see only about 7,000 Chinese tourists a year. Matsu wants a lot more and sees casinos as the easiest way to get them - the operators, not government, will have to foot the investment bill.

On top of a hill, Mr. Hung points to an island across the water where one operator, Weidner Resorts Taiwan, wants to build a huge casino resort and a new airport to accommodate the tourists.

There are few buildings on the island now. But its green hills could be dotted with high-rise hotels soon. Weidner expects 4.5m Chinese tourist-gamblers a year. Many could easily take the half-hour ferry ride over.

An influx of Chinese gamblers could dramatically change Matsu's calm atmosphere. But promises of convenience and prosperity have won over the local residents.

Back then it was two political parties (the Nationalists and Communists) feuding with each other, it actually had little to do with us ordinary people”

Su Mei-bao Matsu resident

Weidner Resorts has also promised to build a college town, as well as a causeway linking the two main islands. It estimates the casinos will earn NT\$10bn (\$344m; £221m) a year in gaming and tourism revenue and has offered to give Matsu residents as much as NT\$80,000 a month in subsidies.

But not everyone is convinced. Stationary store owner Chen Shu-lian is worried about the dangers of relying economically on a China that is undemocratic and unpredictable.

"We can't be sure about Communist China's policies. Tomorrow they may suddenly decide not to support our gaming industry and not spend money here. This will hurt us," said Mr. Chen.

There are fears the same could happen in Matsu. The islands lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate so many visitors. Water and electricity may have to be supplied from China, which is only 20 km away - much closer than mainland Taiwan.

Question

1. Have you ever been to casino? How do you feel about it or do you have any special experience?
2. Do you AGREE or DISAGREE with building casino in Taiwan?
3. For people who agree with having casino, can you tell others about the reason why we should build casino and would it make any influence to our economy?
4. Do you think having a casino will destroy the natural environment in Matsu?
5. Will it have any difference in our culture if we have a casino?
6. Give some examples that you think what might happen in our society if the casino build?
7. Can we build in the inland of Taiwan?
8. What will happen in following year? People get richer? Or everyone has stable and well-paying job?
9. If there is no casino in Matsu, what else can they do to keep their living?
10. If you win a large quantity of money, what will you do?