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## In tune with Taiwan

**Heavy metal band wins emigre fans on U.S. tour urging U.N. recognition, but some worry that message isn't reaching American audiences.**

By David Pierson

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Lead singer Freddy Lim carefully drew black and red veins over his white-caked face while his mates in the heavy metal band adjusted their combat boots and studded leather gear minutes before they took the stage at the House of Blues on the Sunset Strip.

Chris Chou, a 53-year-old Taiwanese American real estate agent, eagerly awaited the start of the show. He was drawn less by the music than the message, which helped him lure friends to this and other shows by the band.

Beside him, dozens of middle-aged and elderly fans in dresses and shirts with stiff button-down collars applauded as the band appeared.

"I saw people in their 70s and 80s at the Santa Ana concert," Chou said. "They stayed all night. It was such an exciting experience for them."

The band is Chthonic (pronounced Thon-nick, a Greek word for spirits of the underworld). It plays a fast, driving metal sound, enough to pop hearing aids out of ear canals. But it also has a unique theme song that calls for the United Nations to recognize Taiwan as an independent nation. The lyrics for "UNlimited Taiwan" include:

*We have the land,  
the strength, the power.  
Rise up, overcome,  
take it over.  
Ignored too long,  
we became stronger.  
Tear down the walls  
and let us run over.*

The words have created a rallying point for the small but spirited Taiwanese independence community in the U.S.

Chthonic, one of Taiwan's most popular bands, was paid by the Taiwan government to travel to America this summer and fall. The result has been one of the most unusual scenes in rock music.

Taiwanese American volunteers across the nation



**Chthonic:** a Taiwanese black metal rock band that sings about the island's independence, culture and need to be embraced by the world's formal institutions performs at the House of Blues in West Hollywood. (Carlos Chavez / Los Angeles Times)



**Face of Independence:** Freddy Lim puts on his makeup before a performance. He says of older fans: "We felt a little strange in the first few concerts as we saw them, since it's really not the music of their age. But we understand that they appreciate what we do and want to support us because we share the same ideal."

(Carlos Chavez / Los Angeles Times)

mobilized to welcome Chthonic to their cities, making sure they had home-cooked Taiwanese squid soup, comfortable beds and even free medical attention.

The mostly middle-aged supporters turned out in droves at concerts, diving into a sea of metalheads.

"There are a lot of old people who don't usually attend concerts like this. They feel the need to come to all Taiwanese events to be united," said Herlin Chien, 28, a doctoral candidate in political science who saw the band at the House of Blues. "We feel we are excluded from the international scene. That's why we have to work so hard to be visible. We want our little voice heard."

Since Chthonic arrived in America in July, Taiwanese Americans have treated them as if they were the Beatles.

At almost every stop along the tour, Taiwanese organizations held picnics and parties. Supporters waved Taiwanese flags and attended the concerts, even though some used wheelchairs and breathing apparatus. One band member got help finding a Taiwanese acupuncturist in Denver to treat a strained neck.

When Julia Yang, a 54-year-old Taiwanese American retiree in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., learned that Chthonic would play a concert in her hometown last month, she quickly rounded up 10 volunteers and planned a picnic.

The day the band was supposed to arrive, they readied themselves with dishes of sticky rice, sushi and squid soup to feed the musicians. They had two doctors on hand in case the band had any ailments.

Then she got word that Chthonic's RV had broken down near Hartford, Conn. Yang and a friend drove a van 100 miles to meet the band and shuttled the group and their gear back to Poughkeepsie to make the show just in time.

"Being Taiwanese, I have to contribute a little bit," Yang said. "They're playing 50 shows. I did little compared to what they're doing for Taiwan. They're amazing."

The next day, Yang drove the band to Boston. There, she and her friend roamed the concert floor and soaked up the atmosphere. She said she got goose bumps when the crowd shouted "Taiwan!" after Lim asked the throngs of fans where the band was from.

"It was kind of loud, but I can take it," said Yang, whose sister attended a Chthonic concert in Detroit. "In the beginning, I felt very old. But then I saw other older Taiwanese in their 50s and 60s."

Lim was so appreciative that he wrote about Yang and her friend in an entry for the band's website, saying: "They are our heroes!"

He said it took time to get used to people who could pass for his uncles and aunts screaming at his shows.

"We felt a little strange in the first few concerts as we saw them, since it's really not the music of their age. But we understand that they appreciate what we do and want to support us because we share the same ideal."

When Darice Lee, president of the North American Taiwanese Women's Assn., attended a Chthonic show in Santa Ana with 40 other members of her group, she was expecting the worst.



**Spirited Support:** Members of the Formosa Foundation pose with a flag before a Chthonic concert. Taiwanese American volunteers across the nation mobilized to welcome the band with parties and home-cooked meals. (Carlos Chavez / Los Angeles Times)

"I saw the band's website and I was kind of frightened," said Lee, 63. "I thought, 'Are these those heavy metal guys who wear all black and have earrings and even rings in their noses?'"

When they arrived at the concert hall, Lee and her friends were assigned to the balcony. Chthonic was the fifth of six bands, which gave the women and their husbands a two-hour sampler of other heavy metal acts.

"When the music started it was all the same screaming and we didn't know what they were talking about," she said. "Then we saw the audience in front of the stage not sitting down and pushing each other around. I thought they were fighting. Then I realized they were just playing."

Lee said a friend offered her cotton balls to put in her ears. Jarring as it was, Lee said she cherished the experience.

"They were so beautiful in their costumes with their faces painted," she said. "Freddy was doing the same thing as the others, screaming and swinging his hair 'round and 'round. I could not hear the lyrics, but I could feel that he was screaming to tell the world the U.N. is unfair to Taiwan; that Taiwan was unlimited."

These are trying times for Taiwan, an island nation of 23 million people. China, which has considered Taiwan a breakaway province since the 1949 communist revolution, has increasingly stymied the democratic country's long-held and, some would say, futile mission to join the U.N and World Health Organization. "It's very difficult to be heard now because of China and their one-China policy," said Paul Chang, a spokesman for the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles, which acts as a de facto embassy because there are no official diplomatic relations between the United States and Taiwan. "Most countries accept that fact. We have to try other ways to get our message out."

The Taiwanese government has long employed unorthodox methods to gain sympathy, including paying for airports, bridges and schools in smaller countries with seats at the U.N. But even that is becoming a losing proposition.

Taiwan was recognized by 65 nations in the 1970s. Today, only 24 mostly poor countries consider Taiwan independent.

Now, Taiwan hopes Chthonic's music can make a difference. But is the band really having an impact on American attitudes about Taiwan or simply boosting morale among independence backers in the U.S.?

At the House of Blues concert, Chien wondered whether Chthonic was doing much more than preaching to the converted.

"I had a feeling not everyone downstairs may catch the message, but they may begin to wonder what the connection is between Taiwan and the United Nations," she said.

Others had the same sinking feeling.

Minhsu Wang, a native Taiwanese, shook his head as he watched the Taiwanese supporters jockey for snapshots with the band while holding Taiwanese flags.

"It's embarrassing," said Wang, 25, who sometimes has to tell American friends the difference between Taiwan and Thailand. But for some older fans, the struggle must be measured in very small steps. And Chthonic's unlikely heavy metal tour across America seems like a step in the right direction.

"The band may not be talking to the right audience at the right location," said K.C. Chen, a San Gabriel Valley accountant who is heavily involved in the pro-independence Taiwanese American community. "But, I mean, we just have to do whatever we can."

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