In 1952, H. Maclear Bate wrote, ‘if any Government ever lacked an adequate propaganda organisation, it is Chiang Kai-shek’s ... a clever propagandist would find an inexhaustible fund of material in Formosa which could be capitalised’, and he concluded by observing, ‘Never has so little been done with so much.’ This chapter and the next will confront Bate’s criticism, and demonstrate that the ROC does have a propaganda organization, one that predates its move to the island of Taiwan. Although this organization is far from perfect, it is nevertheless ‘adequate’ given that it must perform in difficult circumstances. Moreover, the discussion will highlight how, in ‘selling Taiwan’, the propagandists are also actively reinforcing the ROC’s diplomatic endeavours.

In coming to terms with the style of diplomacy it has been forced to adopt, the ROC on Taiwan has developed an intricate organizational structure which incorporates both diplomacy and propaganda. In some ways this structure creates even more problems for the ROC; responsibility often overlaps between several departments and several audiences (including the large and fragmented community of overseas Chinese), inhibiting the effective dissemination of a single message. We know, for example, that in the period immediately after the Second World War, the success of the ROC’s propaganda was limited because it was divided between individual parts of the government. The persistence of this problem weakens the power of the ROC’s propaganda.
Propaganda is also restrained by a number of factors which its practitioners assume are beyond their control. The delicate issue of diplomatic recognition is generally considered the most difficult to surmount. So to compensate, and to maintain a high international profile, propagandists may seek ways of generating interest in Taiwan among the foreign media. This is far from straightforward. The problem of diplomatic legitimacy is aggravated by the professional culture of news organizations and the way that news agendas are defined. The Central News Agency (CNA), Taiwan's only nationwide news agency (since March 1946) with 30 overseas offices and 40 correspondents, provides general news about Taiwan to more than one hundred English and Chinese-language newspapers throughout the world. This means that the use of news is beyond the control of the CNA. Once it has distributed its collection of reports around the world, the criteria of news value, editorial judgements and likely audience interest assume control of the stories and determine whether or not the reports will be used by the foreign media.

One could take the argument a stage further and consider how external political actors exercise an influence over the news agenda. The prominence of the People's Republic of China has determined which issues that are important to Taiwan are treated as news by the foreign media. The coincidence in 1996 of Chinese missile tests with elections in the ROC meant that media interest seized upon the more dramatic story instead of the more routine.

However, for two key reasons these are unhelpful ways of viewing the international environment and the ROC's position within it. First, we must accept that the media are required to operate according to their own professional responsibilities and interests. This means generating an audience for the news that they decide is important, prioritizing the costs of news coverage, and ultimately making profits for their company by capturing a share of audience ratings.

Second, such explanations devolve responsibility for the method and success of propaganda activities away from the actors themselves and on to the international community. It seems obvious to blame the absence of formal diplomatic relations with the world's major powers for the ROC's low profile and lack of media interest. Recognition would certainly make their job much easier, but have the ROC's team of propagandists developed the kind of machinery which can overcome, indeed exploit, the problems and challenges they face? Does the absence of formal diplomatic relations really make any difference to the job which they are assigned to do? And have they devoted