

# GOING PLACES PROFESSIONALLY...

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One of the interesting and fun parts of an academic physician's professional life would be the ongoing opportunities to participate in the activities of professional societies. Along with the many conferences held by international, regional and national societies, one can take some time to enjoy the sights and sounds of the places visited. Some time back, I was invited to Taiwan to participate in the commemorative activities organised by the Taiwan Society of Nephrology for the 30th anniversary of the performance of peritoneal dialysis in Taiwan.

Upon arrival in Taiwan, I met up with Dr Chiang Chih-Kang from National Taiwan University. He had kindly taken part of the day off to show me some of the beautiful sights of Taiwan. We left the city of Taipei for the more rural areas along the coast. The rugged rock formations, coupled with the multi-shaded blue sky and crashing waves, were a sight to behold. We visited an art museum with an eclectic collection of art by the famous Taiwanese artist Ju Ming (one of his pieces is permanently displayed outside the National Museum of Singapore). He is probably most famous for his sculptures of human forms in *tai chi* (a form of Chinese martial art) poses.

## The island's rich history

Taiwan has a fascinating history. The rise and fall of regional and international powers impacted immigration to the island of Taiwan over the years. The "original" inhabitants of Taiwan are probably non-Han Chinese aborigines. In fact, Dutch colonisation activities predated, and were probably more vigorous than those of the Chinese Empire in the 1600s. Chinese arrivals and activities intensified during the fall and retreat of the Ming dynasty. Subsequent Qing Dynasty imperial concerns about European activities resulted in more active immigration on imperial orders

and the transfer of many families from the Fujian province. This is probably the reason why *Minnan* (a Southern Chinese language), instead of Mandarin, was widely spoken in Taiwan until more recently. Before we think that is the end of its history, Qing Chinese was defeated by Japanese imperial forces; Taiwan was ceded to Japan, and remained under Japanese administration for 50 years. This period saw a remarkable modernisation of Taiwan, including the construction of their rail network. However, it is also interesting to note that this period was also marked by multiple political developments and a diversity of Taiwanese views, ranging







### Legend

1. One of Ju Ming's famous tai chi sculptures
2. A glimpse of Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Centre's many towers and its giant buddha statue
3. The famous Shilin night market in Taipei
4. Sights of the rugged coasts of Taiwan

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from those who wished to remain as Japanese imperial subjects, to return to Chinese administration (unification with the mainland), and of course for outright independence (in line with the trend of decolonisation with the dismantling of the European Empires after the Second World War). In fact, the current political situation of Taiwan and China is best described as complicated, and there will probably be no last word on this matter.

### City sights

While in Taipei, one should visit the National Palace Museum, where many Chinese "national treasures" from the imperial collections can be viewed. Arguably, the retreat of *kuomintang* troops from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan, following their defeat by the Communists in the 1949 Chinese Civil War, probably saved these "treasures" from being destroyed in the subsequent Cultural Revolution. In the evening, one can visit the famous Shilin Night Market.

When my Taiwanese hosts discovered that my ancestors were originally from Fujian province, and my name (like most Chinese Singaporeans' names that are transliterations of our Southern Chinese dialects) was in Romanised *Minnan*, I was treated like a long-lost cousin!

### Outside Taipei

Visiting Taiwan is not complete without a trip to the rural areas and other tourist sites. Following the conference activities in Taipei, we rode the bullet train to the city of Kaohsiung. The Taiwan High Speed Rail was completed in 2007 and is based on the Japanese Shinkansen technology. It serves 90% of the Taiwanese population and makes commuting between Taiwanese cities easy and convenient. Kaohsiung is a more recent name of the city, which was originally called Tako. Again, it is possible to see European influences, such as the site of the

former British consulate. When I visited Kaohsiung Medical University (a private university), it was amazing to see the older buildings being conserved while modern buildings tower over them. The aerial view of the port of Kaohsiung – the largest harbour in Taiwan – from my hotel room at sunset is best described as "awesome".

I also visited Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Centre, to have a good view of its many towers and the huge Buddha statue. Driving through smaller towns and villages, I also enjoyed delicacies, such as the unique oyster noodles, in different restaurants. In addition, no visit to any Taiwanese city is complete without a trip to their local night markets to imbibe the culture of the place.

All too soon, my trip to Taiwan came to an end. I enjoyed the warm hospitality and down-to-earth nature of my Taiwanese hosts and friends, and look forward to visiting them again. ♦