

Chapter 22: Asian Interlude (1975-1976)

I'm leaving on a jet plane,
Don't know when I'll be back again.

John Denver¹

A. Prelude

As described in Chapter 21, in the spring of 1975 I accepted a job as a teacher of conversational English at Feng Chia College in Taichung, Taiwan.² The weeks after I had decided to go, but could not yet quit my job as librarian at Cohen & Uretz because I did not yet have my visas, were highly stressful. The Meatball LSD experience of 1971 (see Chapter 18.C) was still so recent that I did not have the Buddhist skills of equanimity and living in the moment even as modestly developed as I have today. My mind was in Taiwan (which I knew nothing at all about) but my body was still in Washington (in a job without much to do), my visas were in limbo, and I was in needless self-induced agony. My letters of the time were pitiable to read.

However, my visas finally came through. One was for Taiwan, of course, and the other was for Japan. My good friends Les and Makiko Wisner were living in Okinawa in the Ryukyu Islands south of Japan – Makiko was from there, and Les had met her when he was stationed there in the army. Okinawa is not far from Taiwan, and I decided to go there first and stay for a while before arriving in Taiwan a couple of months early to settle in, learn some Chinese, and prepare for my adventure. I corresponded with Dr. Fook Tim Chan, the head of the English Department at Feng Chia, who sent me a fancy contract all in Chinese – this included my Chinese name *Fei Li-p'u*.³

I decided to drive across the country to Los Angeles and fly to Okinawa from there. Adam and Victoria and I piled into my orange Austin and headed for Los Angeles, stopping at Creedmoor, North Carolina to visit the house where I lived as an infant during World War II. We had pictures of the house as it was then (I show one in Chapter 1). The lady in the house didn't seem to want to let three Yankee hippies in, but the house was right next to the police/fire station, where we explained the situation and showed our pictures. The police reassured the lady, and we were allowed to look around. It was a dump in 1945 and was still a dump, but interesting to see. We continued through New

¹ From his song "Leaving on a Jet Plane" (1966).

² *Feng* is of course pronounced *Fung*.

³ The first two syllables have fourth (falling) tones, while the last is third tone (falling then rising). Thus: Fei Lì Pǔ.

Orleans to Los Angeles. Adam's lung collapsed in Arizona and we had to deal with that, but we got there in time for the famous Suzie Wong Party at Christopher's house.

I spent a few days at Christopher's house in Los Angeles. The Suzie Wong party is probably described in its full lurid detail in Christopher's own papers (maybe the ones ordered kept sealed in lead vaults for 300 years) – it is enough to say here that it was a great party. I left a few days later for Okinawa.

B. Okinawa



Okinawa was the seat of the independent Ryukyu kingdom (emblem at right), which fell under Japanese domination in 1609 and was used by Japan as a front for trading with China, which did not permit direct trade with Japan. Japan annexed it, along with the other islands in the Ryukyu chain, in 1879. During World War II there was a huge battle for Okinawa, which was the last important territory remaining before the anticipated American assault on the home islands of Japan. Okinawa fell to the Americans, but not before virtually all the monuments of the Ryukyu kingdom,



and notably Shuri Castle in the heart of the capital city of Naha, were completely destroyed. The Americans occupied Japan after the war, and when the main occupation ended in 1952 they kept Okinawa for another 20 years. It was retroceded to Japan only in 1972, three years before I arrived there. At that time, and still today (2010), there is a very large American military presence in Okinawa, our most forward Pacific base in Asia except for Korea. It was with this occupation force that Les Wisner was stationed in the army in the late 1960s.

I arrived in Okinawa sometime in the summer of 1975 – I forget the month now, and my passports from that period have vanished. I stopped in Tokyo's Haneda Airport just long enough to see Fujiyama out of the airplane window, looking just as it did in the pictures, and change planes for the flight to Naha. I have never been in any other part of Japan.



Les and Makiko met me at the Naha airport and took me back to their house in the village of Yomitan, in Nakagami District on a peninsula jutting out from the western shore of the island (red arrow on map above). I see on Wikipedia that the 2005 population of Yomitan was over 38,000 people, but that was definitely not the case in 1975. Then Yomitan was a sleepy rural village. Les and Makiko lived in a more-or-less old-style Japanese house – less traditional in that it had some modern conveniences, including a telephone and electricity (which failed from time to time) and running water (although no indoor toilet), but more traditional in that it had *tatami* mats on the floor and sliding *shoji* panels for interior walls, and a proper shrine to the ancestors of the people who owned the house (Makiko and Les were just renting).

The house stood inside a yard – there were some papaya trees and palms and other tropical vegetation. Tall grass grew in the yard, and every so often Les would mow it. Why mow it, I asked – why not just let it grow? Because of the *habu* (poisonous snakes) who lived in the grass – indeed a *habu* killed their dog. Okinawa was hot, and when I was there in the summer it was even hotter – we used to bathe using a garden hose as a shower. The heat of the sun warmed the water in the hose so it was a warm shower – even a cold shower would have been welcome in the heat of an Okinawan summer. In the afternoons it rained – usually between 2 and 4 PM rain came in such heavy storms it fell almost horizontally, and then it was over for the day. All this seemed very strange to me. Also strange were the geckos who lived on the walls and ceilings – they were very silent and graceful and ate the huge Okinawan cockroaches. We used to watch them necking on the walls.



The house was near the end of a long road, which I remember as unpaved but perhaps it wasn't. At the beginning of this road, where it joined the highway to Naha, there was a local sushi parlor – not a fancy place, or expensive, because it was still just a small village. I used to go there from time to time and order sushi by pointing to what I wanted. I learned the Japanese words *tako* (octopus) and *neko* (cat), which allowed me to make a small joke in Japanese. I also learned *mizu* (water). And so on days when I didn't eat Makiko's delicious cooking at home, I would walk to this sushi parlor and eat as much delicious cheap fresh sushi as I could hold.



After the sushi parlor, the road continued past houses on their own plots of land until it came to a sort of roadside shrine. I remember that this spot had even more mosquitoes than the rest of Yomitan, and it was impossible to stay and marvel at the romantic nature of the site without being eaten. I used large quantities of Cutter's

mosquito repellent, and at home also horrible green mosquito coils made of pyrethrin (above left) – you lit one end and it burned in circles like deadly incense. It is a wonder I did not poison myself, or maybe I did. A few houses beyond the mosquito shrine there was a barn with some enormous pigs, and a few houses beyond that was the house where Les and Makiko lived.



Makiko had a job – she was a guide (in fact, chief guide) at Expo '75, a sort of World's Fair held on Okinawa in 1975-76. The site later became a park. Les had various gigs – he taught English to the children of wealthy Okinawans, and took photographs for the American representatives at Expo '75. Here they are shown as they looked then. Les had a darkroom in an outbuilding on their property, which was air conditioned when he used it for



work. I worked out a deal with him that I would sleep in the darkroom, with the air conditioning on, and pay for the extra electricity. It was a life-saver – it was too hot and humid for me to sleep in Okinawa in the summertime without air conditioning. When I turned out the lights at night it was *completely* dark, as you would expect a darkroom to be. There were almost no mosquitoes in there, but there were rats, and I will never forget awakening one night to feel a gentle experimental nibbling on one of my toes.

Here's an extract from a letter to Adam in September 1975.

Living as I was in Les' darkroom, I had two lives. Inside it was dark except for a small lamp I used for reading, and it was cool, and I lay on my back reading John O'Hara novels, more American than which there ain't none. Then I would open the door and it was 95° and brilliant with sunshine, and everyone spoke Japanese, and the clouds were the clouds of Okinawa, which are unlike those of anywhere else, and there was Les, whom I had not seen for three years, since my SF hippie days, sitting cross-legged on the *tatami* in a *kimono* drinking tea and talking Japanese, and I did that for a while and went back into the darkroom, and the sun went out and the temperature dropped 30°, and instead of Okinawa I was in a speakeasy in New York in 1931 (*Butterfield 8*). After a while nothing seemed real.

When Les and Makiko were not working, we hung around the house smoking dope and drinking the horrible local arrack and talking long into the night. We went over Les' portfolio of photographs again and again, as we had in San Francisco – he was in the process of deciding where to go to school to finish his degree (he ended up at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence). We watched Armed Forces television – especially a program we called *Mistake-a-Minute News* – and also *sumo* wrestling, which I came to enjoy.

We also spent some time exploring Okinawa – they knew it well, but it was all new to me. I remember swimming with them in the delightfully warm waters of the South China Sea (right). You needed rubber shower shoes there because the sharp coral would slice your feet right open. I remember cutting my foot on a coral and having the wound close up immediately in the salt water. We went into Naha a few times to visit people, including Makiko’s mother (who ran a small coffee bar) and her famous Fat Uncle, and the amazing Yamagawa-san, who knew everyone and everything about Okinawa and could arrange anything that was needed. He took us on sushi feasts and other jolly occasions. It was very pleasant.



- I mentioned the special clouds. Here’s what I wrote to Adam: Huge tower-shaped clouds, vast cloudbanks that float over Okinawa as if it were not there (the highest point on the island is less than 500 meters), clouds like you see out of the window of an airplane, only right next to you, clouds of six or seven different types in the sky all at once, clouds in four colors, black clouds with the sun behind them, cloudbanks in layers, three or four deep back to the horizon. O...⁴

I visited the elaborate houses of some of Les’ patrons, to whose children he taught English, and some of his other friends. There was not much tourism in Naha, for me anyway, because all the interesting sites had been destroyed in the war. The approach to Naha was pretty grim, lined with bars appealing to American soldiers. Every so often special advanced aircraft would fly overhead to or from Kadena Air Base. We did take one trip up to the wild north of the island, stopping to visit Soma, the potter – Les and Makiko collected quite a lot of Okinawan pottery. The illustration shows a typical piece, although not from their collection.



I had a really good time in Okinawa, relaxing and hanging out with my friends and exploring the environment. I had never been to Asia before, and although I had been a tourist overseas I had never *lived* outside the United States (unless you count a summer at the American School in Lugano, Switzerland in 1958, see Chapter 30.D). It was good to have nothing much to do – I read a lot, mostly American fiction. It was in Okinawa I developed the habit of not reading about the place I am visiting while I’m there – there’s

⁴ Ellipsis in the original.

enough of that all around me, for reading I like to escape to somewhere else. So I read John O'Hara and Norman Mailer and John Steinbeck and other authors in Les' cool darkroom, but I also read *Okinawa: History of an Island People*, by George H. Kerr (1958), and *Typhoon of Steel: The Battle for Okinawa*, by James H. Belote (1970).

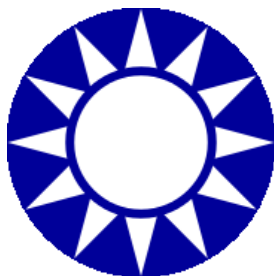
In order to prepare myself for Taiwan, I also studied a book with the grossly misleading title *Chinese Is Easy*, by Ralph E. Bucknam (1963). Let me tell you, on the level here –



Chinese is not easy. I thought I would learn from this book at least how to write *kanji* (as Chinese characters are called in Japanese), but at the start I made the mistake of ignoring stroke order. I spoke French without paying any attention to gender – surely I could do the same for Chinese stroke order. So I tried copying the characters as they appeared on the printed page. This does not work. In order to understand the character, and construct it properly, and tell it apart from similarly structured characters, and use a dictionary, you just *have* to do it their way. Once I accepted this I learned how to do it, and *kanji* began to make sense.

It was so pleasant idling in Okinawa, and hanging around with Les and Makiko, and not working, and reading John O'Hara, and eating sushi, that I kept putting off my trip to Taiwan. Originally I planned to stay in Okinawa only a few weeks, and then get to Taiwan early to settle in and get used to the place before starting work at Feng Chia College. But the weeks stretched into months, and I didn't feel like leaving, and I seemed to be welcome to stay, so I stayed. But finally, after about four months in Okinawa, leaving could not be postponed any longer. I arranged for a ticket on an overnight ferry called the *Hiryu* (dragon), and one day I shipped out of Naha bound for the north Taiwan port of Keelung.

C. Taiwan



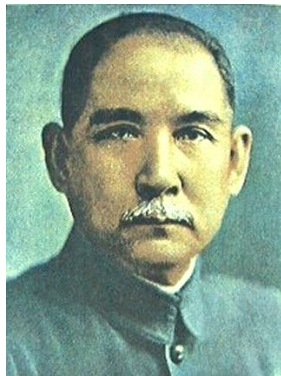
As the *Hiryu* entered Keelung Harbor on Friday, August 29, 1975 – to be faithful to the romantic Somerset Maugham impulse that brought me there I should have said *teeming* Keelung Harbor – Christopher was waiting for me in the crowd. I descended the gangplank with my bag in hand, wearing the Japanese straw sun helmet I had bought in Okinawa, shaped like an explorer's pith helmet



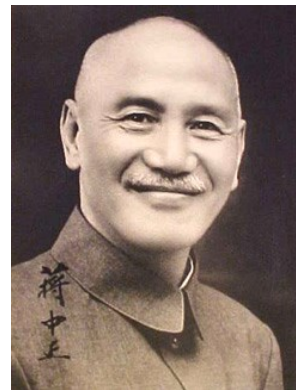
and with a completely unauthorized American army officer's brass eagle cap badge in the center. I had shoulder-length hair and a thick beard and had been up all night. I must have looked quite a sight.⁵

Christopher was in Taiwan quite independently of me – he had gone there to work on his Chinese language skills and to get the Chinese bug out of his system. I'm not sure it is completely out even today – for more on this see his own papers. In those days (1975) an American couldn't go to the *real* China – I forget now whether it was the Americans or the “red” Chinese who made this impossible, but there it was. So Taiwan was the best he could do. Anyway he had just moved to Taipei.

- Christopher remembers that the Taiwan customs officials tore a page out of an atlas I had with me because it showed Taiwan as a country separate from China. I don't remember this happening, but it would have been in character.



The Chinese Revolution of 1911 overthrew the Great Ch'ing Dynasty, and the imperial system, and established a Republic of China on the western state model under the leadership of Sun Yat-Sen (left) and his Kuomintang Party. Sun Yat-Sen was soon elbowed out of the way, in a series of coups and intrigues too tedious to recount here, and by the time of the war with Japan (which began in China not in 1941 as with



us but in 1931) the Chinese Republic (although not all of its territory) and the Kuomintang (KMT) Party had fallen into the hands of a Chinese military gangster called Chiang Kai-Shek (right). It was Chiang, idealized by Henry Luce, whom the Americans recognized as the head of the allied Chinese government during World War II, although he spent most of his energy fighting Mao Tse-Tung's Communists rather than the Japanese.⁶

After the war Chiang and Mao fought it out and Mao won. In 1949 Chiang and his KMT clique fled to Taiwan with all the money and art works they could carry, and the great chefs of China. Mao did not pursue him – he preferred to consolidate his control of the mainland, did not want to confront the Americans who were Chiang's protectors, and

⁵ I chose the map on preceding page because of the flag, but by only showing a small part of China it makes Taiwan look bigger than it really is. Actually Taiwan is only a little larger than Maine, and a little smaller than Indiana.

⁶ Henry Luce (1898-1967) was the influential and reactionary editor of *Time* magazine.

found it convenient to have all the rebels confined on an offshore island rather than in China making trouble. The Communists abolished the Republic of China and established the *People's Republic of China*. So depending on your ideology, Taiwan was either a small rebel island not worth conquering at the moment, or the provisional refuge of the legitimate Chinese government during the momentary emergency of the bandit insurrection, which had by then temporarily held the mainland for 26 years but was due to end shortly with a glorious reconquest under the heroic leadership of President and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek who had just died, leaving his son, the sinister Chiang Ching-Kuo, as successor president and destined *reconquistador*. There were people who pretended to believe this.⁷



Most Chinese people in Taiwan spoke Mandarin despite its southern location, because of the KMT colonization – actually Taiwan was not part of China until it was conquered from the Dutch in the 17th Century, and was Japanese from 1895 to 1945. Chiang Kai-Shek and Sun Yat-Sen were on the money and the stamps. The years began with the Revolution of 1911, so I arrived in the Year 65.

Christopher brought me to his house on T'ung An Chieh, a small residential street in a quiet neighborhood which I

⁷ According to immutable Kuomintang ideology, the Republic of China established by Sun Yat-Sen in 1911 still ruled China, and was based in Taipei only as the *provisional* capital because “temporary bandit control” in the other provinces kept it from its permanent national capital at Peiping (which the Communists call Beijing). Since *temporarily* no elections could be held in the other provinces of China, the Legislative Yuan (one of the five branches of Sun’s republic) was still composed of delegates from all over China who had been elected before 1949 (although a few replacement members were added in 1969 under “Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of General National Mobilization for the Suppression of Communist Rebellion”). The Taiwan *provincial* government met in its own building in Chung-Hsing Village in rural Nantou County, where I once fell off a motorcycle. Constitutional revisions in Taiwan in 2005, unimaginable when I was there, have reformed this absurd situation, although Taiwan does not dare call itself officially a separate country from China for fear of Chinese military retaliation – now it is the mainland rather than Taiwan which is basing its policy on fantasy.

remember, perhaps falsely, as being somewhere near a canal or river levee. He shared this house with a group of young American Bohemians, most of whom were drawn to Taiwan for the same reason Christopher was – either to learn the Chinese language or get closer to their Chinese roots. Christopher insists he has Chinese roots. I remember Mary (left in the picture above), a hearty lass from Minnesota, and Donna, a beautiful but moody Chinese-American from North Carolina, and Jack, a wild Boston Irishman who spoke very fluent Chinese and was deeply interested in ancient Chinese seals. There was also Herbert, whose sometimes-resident girlfriend Rosa we called *Rosa Pu-tsai* (“Rosa is not here”) after what we had to tell people who came looking for her. There was a young Chinese violinist Mary had enveloped as a lover, and (often) Christopher’s boyfriend Vincent (center front in the picture, next to Christopher). There were few secrets in the T’ung An Chieh house, because in Chinese style the partitions which served as walls did not reach either to the ceiling or to the floor.



I came back to the T’ung An Chieh house many times after this, but this first time I only stayed for a couple of days, to get ready to proceed by train to Taichung, where the college was (right). Taichung was a dull provincial city toward the middle of the island (*chung* means *middle*) – just how dull I had as yet no idea.⁸



Actually the college was not even in Taichung, but in a suburb called Seatwen (*Hsi-tun* in the Wade-Giles transliteration; pronounced sea-TWUN). They sent a car to meet me at the station and brought me to Faculty Hostel #1 on the campus of the Feng Chia College of Business and Engineering, now Feng Chia University (seal at left).⁹

In those days students in Taiwan were assigned to colleges *and departments* by a system similar to that used in the United States to assign students to medical schools. There were then 16 colleges in Taiwan (there are many



⁸ While I was still in Washington, I imagined from the entry in the gazetteer that Taichung was a better place than Taipei because of the altitude, supposedly better climate, history, and so forth. Alas, the map is not the territory, and Taipei, bad as it was, was better than Taichung. Washington, of course, was incalculably better than either one.

⁹ The seal, new since my day, shows rice for agriculture, a cogwheel for engineering, and at the center a piece of ancient bronze spade money for business.

more today). There was an examination and a list. The top-scorer could choose any department in any college. The second-highest scorer could choose any place except the one already taken by the top scorer, and so on down through all the colleges and departments until they were all full. If you were a male student and didn't get a place, or didn't take the place you got, you had to go into the army as a private soldier. Even if you did go to college you still probably had to go into the army afterwards, but it went easier for you and you could be an officer. Feng Chia College was 16th out of 16 in popularity, so most of its students would have preferred to be somewhere else. Since departments were assigned in the same way, Feng Chia students of hydraulic engineering, for example, usually didn't want to be hydraulic engineers, but it was all the college education and draft deferment they could get. Above is a picture of the dreary Chiu Feng Chia Memorial Hall, brand new when I got there.¹⁰

The Faculty Hostel was a sort of dormitory, with private rooms arranged around a central atrium – it was like 60's motel, except without private bathrooms. Everything was made of cement in the depressing Taiwan fashion. The floors were terrazzo, which got very cold indeed in the wintertime. I had a bed, a bookcase, a desk, some chairs, and that was about it except for lots more poisonous pyrethrin mosquito coils, and even mosquito netting which didn't work very well. There was a common room downstairs with a television (all the programming was in Chinese), and a subscription to a pathetic English-language



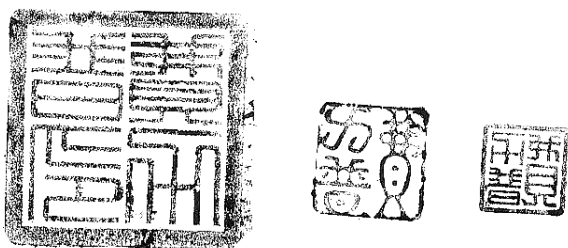
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newspaper called the *China Post*. Magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* were censored before they could enter the country, civil servants meticulously cutting pictures of Mao Tse-Tung out of individual issues with scissors (sometimes they blacked out the faces of Communist leaders with marking pens). The Faculty Hostel had no eating facilities – there was a sort of cafeteria in another building but they served mostly *congee*, a kind of Chinese porridge, with unseasoned bread sticks, so I didn't eat there. There was a telephone in the common room, and the porter (who lived in a tiny space beneath the stairs) would shout for me if I had a call – *Fei Bo Shih – tien hua!* (Dr. Phillips! Electric Speech!). I was assigned a student called Liu Chen-Hsiang, who

¹⁰ Feng Chia has apparently developed a lot in the years since I taught there, and most of its important buildings were built after my time. For a look at it now see <http://en.fcu.edu.tw>.

spoke pretty good English, to look after me and help me find my way around. He was very helpful to me for most of my stay in Taiwan.

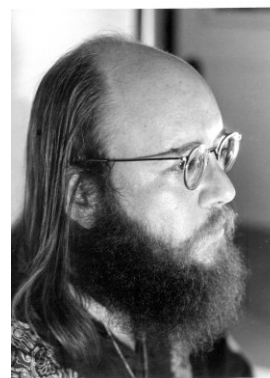
So I settled into this strange world. I already had a Chinese name, *Fei Li-p'u*, given to me on my contract. It was made phonetically out of *Phillips*. I changed the middle character *li* from the one given to me, which meant *profit*, to one which meant *power*. Later I changed the *fei* also, which was a character only used in transliteration, to one which meant *air*. Above left I show my original name, written by me, and my later name, beautifully written by a calligrapher outside the Metropolitan Museum in New York. She had it framed as a sample – I was amazed to find it and bought it frame and all.



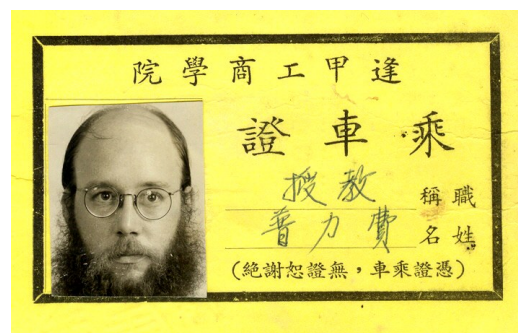
I also had a chop made – this is a seal with the Chinese character for a person's name, kept in a little plastic case with a tiny pad of vermilion ink. Without the chop you couldn't do any legal transactions and couldn't get paid. I was called *Fei Bo-shih* (pronounced BAW-shir, or *profound scholar*), meaning Dr. Fei – doctor for

my J.D. degree. Here are three chops – the big one is a collector's chop, for use on pictures; the second is one I had made using antique seal characters; and the third was the regular chop I used for business purposes. The images should be red, but the old red ink dried out. Unlike western stamps, made of soft rubber, these are of hard plastic and it is hard to get a good impression from them, especially using thin western ink.

I was a stone hippie in those days – at left is a picture of me taken at the time (by Les Wisner), with shoulder-length hair, steel-rimmed spectacles, a long beard, a necklace (made of a sort of agate called *wen szu* (old stone)), and a dashiki. I must have been quite a shock to the College administration, not quite their idea of a Washington lawyer. I remember a boozy welcoming banquet when I sort of rested my head on the President's



shoulder. They asked me to cut my hair – I think I did, but let it grow back in.



Dr. Chan, the department head, had learned English in Hong Kong, and spoke it very well although with an accent. He had the English teachers record scripts for his language laboratory, scripts he had written in an obsolete British style

(“go to the bad” as an idiom, for example). These were so ridiculous we had a lot of trouble recording them without breaking into laughter.¹¹

My job was to teach conversational English. English was mandatory, and the students had taken it for years in secondary and high schools, but just about none of them could speak it at all. I discovered, when I tried to teach, that it was almost impossible to get students to talk in class. This was because they had been brought up in the traditional Chinese way, to listen to what the teacher says and learn it by rote, perhaps repeating it in Chinese, but *never* volunteering anything or speaking in their own words. This might work for learning arithmetic or *San Min Chu I* (the Kuomintang ideology), but it is not much use for conversation. They were very good at standing up when I entered the room, but no good at all at participating in class.

I tried everything I could think of to get students to talk. I became a *character* (maybe not such a stretch), teaching in my academic robe (right), strutting up and down like Groucho Marx, smoking the chalk like a cigar, saying outrageous things.¹² My classes became so popular that students who were not even registered began coming, and it was standing room only in the back. But almost no one ever said anything. I had a student who spoke good English stand up front with me and translate as I explained that no one can learn conversation without speaking, and begging people to respond to my questions. I got just about no response. I instituted a system where grades would be determined by the number of check marks in my grading book, and anyone who spoke in English got a check mark *no matter how wrong* what he said was, and *every mark was good* – there were no bad ones. So the more you spoke, the higher your grade, whether you spoke well or poorly. No help. I wrote simple stories and had the difficult words translated into Chinese – I attach the first one as Document 22-1. I tried to walk them through *Jonathan Livingston*



¹¹ The yellow card above is my faculty identification card – the top line, reading right to left, is the name of the college.

¹² The picture at the right is actually not of me. It is *Immortal in Splashed-Ink*, by the Sung Dynasty painter Liang K'ai (painted around 1200), in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. For a brief discussion of this painting see www.terebess.hu/zen/liangkaj.html.

Seagull, by Richard Bach (1972), a popular and simply written fable of the time, and talk about it in class. Nothing worked.

Even though nothing worked, I enjoyed teaching on a performance level. I wrote to Joel Solkoff in February 1976:

The reason teaching gets me high is that I am a ham of the most brazen sort, and teaching enables me to get a group head of 50 or 60 people and play it like an organ and draw all of that attention to myself and then send all the energy back out again, and all for constructive and not manipulative purposes.

I found this even more true later at Golden Gate University Law School, where the students understood English and were a lot more responsive. See Chapter 27B.7.

The other English teachers had the same problems, and no one had any solutions. But I was determined not to fail *anyone* no matter how poorly he was doing. These students were in the worst college in a bad country, studying subjects they didn't care about, trying to stay out of the army. Did they need to flunk English also? I remembered being forced to study German in college and failing it repeatedly. At least I could avoid imposing similar problems on my own students. So I never failed anyone, but I don't think I taught them much English either. Here's an extract from a letter to Joel Solkoff dated "October whatever" 1975.

I think I know more Chinese now than I ever knew German. On the other hand, my English is being destroyed by reading student papers. I assigned my students in the mathematics department a paper on infinity. The results are full of sentences like this (a random choice): *How can we known the number is infinite, is we confused with its number at all?* Or how about this, from my urban planners class (subject: what makes a city beautiful?): *Did the city beauty then why? In city has much green tree that it row by road, this can comfortable us then we walking.*

I understand that there are no suffixes to inflect in Chinese, and no grammar in the sense that we have grammar. This must be what that sounds like in English.

Life at Feng Chia College was very boring. There was no real way to connect with most of the students, as most of them did not speak English. There was nothing of interest to me going on at the college anyway – it was business and engineering and *San Min Chu I* and inscrutable Chinese things. The library's English language collection was pretty bad, although I did eventually get visiting faculty borrowing privileges at a neighboring college called Tung Hai University. Tung Hai had lots of books by P. G. Wodehouse, which I read through at a fast clip. My fellow teachers were a mixed lot, mostly Americans with one Canadian and one overseas Chinese man from Sarawak. But as at T'ung An Chieh, they were mostly either Chinese-Americans there to get as close to their roots as they could while still unable to visit the mainland, or people trying to learn

Mandarin. As I fit in neither category, I didn't have a whole lot in common with most of them.

The school provided a student to tutor me in Chinese, and I did try to learn it. After I figured out how characters worked it was easier, but the language was still almost impossibly difficult. I am not good with languages anyway. Having no alphabet meant that knowing a character did not tell you either what it meant or how to pronounce it. So there was no reinforcement from reading signs – it was all meaningless unless you happened to know the meaning already. Sometimes the characters indicated their pronunciation and sometimes they didn't – to tell one from the other you had to know already how to pronounce them.

Even when you knew how to pronounce a character, Chinese words have only one syllable, so there are not very many variations to choose from. There are about 400 syllables available. Even counting each one four times (one for each tone: rising, high, falling, and falling-then-rising) makes only 1600. As some of these were null sets, with no actual Chinese words corresponding to them, there were only 1200 word-sounds for the whole language. Not enough. The paucity of syllables meant that most Chinese “words” were really two characters used together – every word was a sort of idiom, like *tien-hua* (electric speech) for *telephone*. This meant that you could see a sign *and* recognize every character and *still* not know what the message was.

There was a kind of phonetic alphabet called *bopomofo* (pronounced *baw-paw-maw-faw* after the first four syllables), which you could use to spell out the sounds of Chinese words – this system (see right) is not used in the mainland.¹³ I learned it, though, and learned the radical system (named after the 214 root [*radix*] elements of Chinese characters), and how to use a Chinese dictionary, incredibly cumbersome as any dictionary has to be without an alphabet. I think the verdict is in – alphabets are the way to go.

ㄅ	B	ㄊ	X	ㄟ	EI
ㄆ	P	ㄓ	ZH	ㄠ	AU
ㄇ	M	ㄔ	CH	ㄡ	OU
ㄈ	F	ㄕ	SH	ㄢ	AN
ㄉ	D	ㄖ	R	ㄣ	EN
ㄊ	T	ㄗ	Z	ㄤ	ANG
ㄋ	N	ㄘ	C	ㄥ	ENG
ㄌ	L	ㄙ	S	ㄦ	ER
ㄍ	G	ㄚ	A	ㄛ	I
ㄎ	K	ㄛ	O	ㄜ	U
ㄏ	H	ㄜ	E	ㄝ	IU
ㄐ	J	ㄞ	EH		
ㄑ	Q	ㄟ	AI		

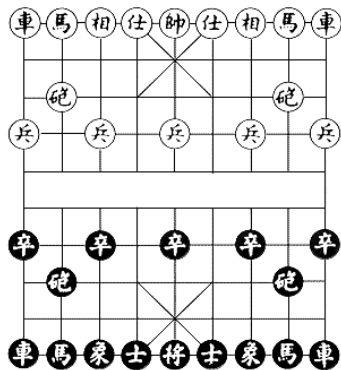
The tones were very difficult, but critical (that is, phonemic) – a difference in tone could change the meaning of a word like *bi* from *nose* to *vagina*.¹⁴ There were also classifiers –

¹³ The colors show the stroke order.

¹⁴ A *phoneme* is a sound distinct enough from another sound in a given language that the difference between them can determine meaning. Thus in English *b* is phonemic, because it distinguishes *bat* from *cat* (which therefore form a *minimal pair*). I just ignored tones, the way I ignored gender in French or German. When they sing, Chinese people don't bother with tones either.

ten sheep used a different word between the number and the noun than *ten biscuits*. Fortunately there was a universal classifier you could use for everything, but that didn't help you to recognize the proper classifiers when other people spoke them to you. And there were no verb tenses. In German I would have liked no verb tenses – in Chinese this made everything harder. Eventually I achieved a vocabulary of about 400 words, and could sort of make myself understood in a crude kind of way, but it was much harder to understand what people were saying to me.

I got pretty good at writing Chinese, and still have a half-way decent hand, although as the images of my name show it cannot compare with proper calligraphy. I amuse myself on San Francisco buses figuring out the stroke order of the characters in the Chinese advertisements. But I usually don't know what the words mean. It was very isolating – I had no one to talk to except a few teachers. David Chan, the American-born son of Dr. Fook Tim Chan, became a good friend, but it was lonesome.



I was paid pretty well by my standards, circa 1975, but I had nothing to spend it on. So I indulged myself by hiring a student (the president of the local chess club) to teach me Chinese chess (left), a game significantly different from western chess, and that passed some time. And I read a lot. I explored Seatwen, which was then a small town. There was a street with the college gates at one end and a collection of shops and stalls at the other. I used to go up and down this street several times a day – the other teachers and I used to eat at a basic restaurant in the town. We called it Vietnam Joe's, I forget why – the owner spoke English, and would cook us tough gristly steaks in the American manner.

There were stalls along the way which sold Chinese sausages and dumplings, which I sometimes bought and took back home with me, and places to buy the cheap rough unfiltered cigarettes I preferred, called without any irony Long Life cigarettes. My students couldn't understand why a high-class person like a teacher would smoke low-class cigarettes instead of the American-style filter-tips sold as upscale products. At night this road was lit with the lanterns of the stalls and was quite festive in a Chinese sort of way. At the Christmas season the lamp-posts outside the college gates were decorated with kitschy Santa Clauses and snowmen and candy canes – quite foreign to the local culture which was not Christian and had no snow – and the loudspeakers blared out "Frosty the Snowman" in Mandarin. Pretty gruesome. You couldn't drink the tap water in Taiwan – you needed *kai shui* (boiled water), either certifiably boiled or from bottles.

Beyond the road to Vietnam Joe's there was another road, heading away from Taichung City, which led to Seatwen itself, "[as drab a place as can be imagined](#)," I wrote in 1976.

There was a movie theatre there I sometimes went to, in spite of not being able to understand a single word of the awful Chinese genre films which played there – warriors and martial arts and ancient court scenes. Every so often the college showed a film in English, or maybe dubbed in Chinese with English subtitles – I remember seeing *Death Wish* there, with Charles Bronson (1974). Every film shown anywhere in Taiwan was always preceded by a trailer with the national anthem – *San Min Chu I* – this showed President and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and his wife the dragon lady Madame Chiang (the Gissimo and the Missimo, the Americans called them during the war) in a green Cadillac convertible.

I went into town a few times – I bought a space heater there, in Chinese supplemented by cartoons I drew showing a bald man with a beard shivering with cold, and then smiling at his heater. I will never forget seeing a paralyzed boy rolling down Seatwen High Street like a log – presumably his family could not afford a wheelchair for him. I bought a motorcycle in Seatwen, and got a student to teach me how to drive it. It was blue and on the gas tank it had a decal of a lady wrapped in the coils of a huge snake, so I called it Snake Lady. Its papers showed me to be the fifth owner of this machine, which actually ran pretty well once I got the hang of it. I got a motorcycle because a car was impossible. To protect their domestic auto industry, which was not much, Taiwan put a prohibitive tariff on small imported cars. There was no such tariff on luxury cars like Mercedes-Benzes, but I could not afford those, so a motorcycle was all I could get. It was kind of fun and I'm glad I learned to drive one, although I wouldn't do it now.

Among those students to whom I could talk I was deliberately iconoclastic. I was a hippie in the true 70s fashion, remember, and Taiwan was a notably repressed place politically, socially, sexually, and every other way. I taught the students not to accept ideologies, to think for themselves, to have sex if they wanted to and could find someone to have sex with, and not to expect the Kuomintang government to reconquer the mainland of China soon, or ever. If the mainland people are just waiting for the KMT to arrive and will rise up to join them, I asked, why has this not happened? If there was ever any prospect of Chiang Kai-Shek doing this, why did he never even try it in 26 years? Some of these ideas had never occurred to the students. The wonder is that the secret police didn't come and throw me out of the country, or into prison.

Every so often when the monotony of reading P. G. Wodehouse novels in Faculty Hostel #1 got too much for me, I would go into Taichung City, which was not much either – in a 1976 letter I called it “[something like an especially ugly Chinese Newark.](#)” Looking back on this I think it was very unfair to Newark. I would check into a hotel and go have dinner somewhere – I found a place that specialized in penis dishes like ox pizzle, said to augment virility. I already had all the virility I needed, and lots more than I had any immediate use for, but for the novelty I occasionally ordered the penises anyway. Yum – chewy! Sometimes I would go to a movie, never any better than the incomprehensible

fare offered at the Seatwen theatre. And then the next day it was back to Feng Chia. What a pit that place was!

Here's an extract from a letter to a friend, dated June 1976, just after I returned to San Francisco:

Taiwan is a dismal little country, a two-bit fourth-rate petty dictatorship addicted to rhetoric of the falsest and most insistent kind. *Everything* in Taiwan is based on the "fact" that the Kuomintang Party rules a united, free China, and has without interruption since 1911.... And apart from this nutty, false, cruel political preoccupation, the rest of life in Taiwan is also pretty miserable. It is a place where no one cares, feels, or thinks deeply about anything except money, where sexual repression reaches poetic heights, where all the cities, indeed just about everything built by man, is dingy and ugly, where ... but why go on?

- Christopher read an early draft of this chapter and said it didn't reflect quite enough loathing. I have not added any new loathing to the text, but readers are advised to multiply any loathing they notice by a factor of four.

One way I amused myself was to come to Taipei to visit Christopher's *ménage* at T'ung An Chieh. Usually I flew up for a weekend or longer. The train was cheaper, but I had more money than I could spend anyway, so why not fly? I used to get a taxi to pick me up at the school gates, and then I would direct it through the back roads to the airport (Seatwen was on the same side of Taichung City as the airport, so there was no need to go into town). It was all very rural back then – rice paddies with water buffalos – I remember one time my taxi was blocked by a huge flock of domestic ducks being herded from one spot to another. The flight from Taichung to Taipei took about an hour, and Taiwan looked very beautiful from the air. Much of it was rice paddies, so you could see the sun reflecting in the lines of water between patches of the brightest emerald green. Ireland has nothing on Taiwan when it comes to green. Then I would land at Taipei airport and take a taxi to T'ung An Chieh.



The scene at T'ung An Chieh was much more lively than Feng Chia, to put it very mildly, and the people much more to my taste. It was good to spend time with Christopher (*Fei Hai-Ch'ing*, as he was called in Taiwan) and his group of refugee hippies. We ate in the night market stalls, which was fun, and visited the National Palace Museum, full of art treasures Chiang and the KMT had stolen from China. There were some other things too – I remember movies (*Blazing Saddles* was one) and similar events

on American bases and campuses where Christopher or Jack taught English. There were parties – we longed for drugs but couldn’t find any except a kind of German tranquilizer called Norminox.¹⁵ Christopher and Mary sang raunchy songs like *Don’t You Feel My Leg*; his rendition of *My Girl* was famous. I did occasionally travel around Taipei on Jack’s motorcycle – it was a really lousy town, cement and naked light bulbs in the traditional Taiwan fashion. Taiwan has democratized since my day there, and people say Taipei is now a gleaming modern city. You couldn’t prove it by me – I have not been back since 1976 and never intend to go there again.¹⁶

I also traveled around on the island, first by bus and then more widely when I got my motorcycle. One place I liked was a government guest house at Li Shan (Pear Mountain) in the central mountains (right). It was very scenic, and the journey reminded me of those misty jagged hills in the classic paintings at the National Palace Museum. Of course there was nothing for me to do once I got there – it was a kind of elaborate version of my overnight stays in Taichung. I went by bus the first time – getting down that mountain in a speeding bus was a scary experience indeed – and went several more times by motorcycle.



I made an extended tour of Taiwan by motorcycle, getting as far south as Kaohsiung. (I never made it to the east coast, where the aboriginal people lived.) The countryside was pretty but there was nothing in the cities that interested me particularly. I had good maps of each county and covered a lot of territory. It was hot inside my motorcycle helmet, and my glasses used to steam up. Once, outside a small town (it was the “provincial capital” Chung-Hsing), a child darted into my path. I swerved to avoid him and took a spill – the marks on my helmet were a salutary lesson about what would have happened to my head if I hadn’t been wearing it.

¹⁵ Metolquizolone, the same as Quaaludes. Norminox has since been withdrawn from the market “due to risk of addiction and overdose.”

¹⁶ I did stop in Taipei on my way to Bangkok in December 2007. This time I did it right by staying inside the airport and leaving the country within three hours.

I also took a trip by air to Peng Hu, called in English the Pescadores [Fishermen] Islands, in the Taiwan Strait between Taiwan and China. This was a really remote location, and made Taiwan seem like a happening place by comparison. The people painted the horns of their cattle red. It was the most exotic spot I had ever been to, except for Morocco in 1963 – this was my first trip abroad since then.

My mother arrived in Taiwan while I was there, to visit Christopher and me. I declined to see her, a decision I have never regretted. A person can domineer just so far.

Toward the end of my stay in Taiwan Les and Makiko showed up to visit, on their way back to the United States from Okinawa. They were going to Providence, Rhode Island, so Les could finish school at RISD as planned. We had a good time in Taiwan – I took them to Li Shan, and Les had a photographic project that was a lot of fun. He had a poster of Chiang Kai-Shek mounted on cardboard and asked people to pose with it. Vietnam Joe was one of his subjects. The army and the police did not detect the irony and made things easy for what they thought was his patriotic project, even arranging for him to get his exposed film past airport security as Friend of the Regime. The pictures still exist and are quite valuable now – maybe I can get Les to leave a set to the Phillips Family Papers in his will. Here's the one of Vietnam Joe.



D. Escape

As noted, I was lonesome, isolated, and bored in Taiwan. I still liked the idea of being an expatriate, but it was clear I had chosen the wrong country to do it in. In fact, of course, as explained in Chapter 21, I never really *chose* Taiwan – it just where Adam's college friend's father happened to be looking for teachers. I began looking into teaching somewhere more interesting – there were, for example, a lot of pretty good English-

language private secondary schools in India. With my fancy degrees I thought I could shoehorn myself into one of those for the following year. I had heard stories of native speakers of English making a precarious but acceptable living in countries like France and Italy. I began making plans and writing for catalogues (this was before the Internet and e-mail – you actually had to send letters and wait weeks for replies).

But as my dissatisfaction increased, my temper grew shorter, and one evening I snapped. I remember it quite well – the starter pedal came off my motorcycle, *again*, for the fifth time, after I had tried four times to tell the repair people, in Chinese translation ... well, why rehash that now? It was the very last straw. I had a moment of blind rage, in which I would have thrown the motorcycle against a wall if I could have lifted it, and then I went to the department office (no one else was there) and called Christopher in Taipei. I said to him: tell me it is OK for me to get the hell out of this two-bit peanut country! Well, what could he say to that but yes? So I decided on the spot to split for home.

However, it was not as easy to leave as a person might think. For one thing, to leave Taiwan you needed an exit visa. I was under contract for a few more months (and had accepted a \$650 plane ticket for signing) and it was illegal to leave the country permanently while you still had a contract. So no one could know what I planned to do. I arranged to make a “visit” to Hong Kong in a week when school was in recess. It was OK to go to Hong Kong – other teachers did this often – as long as I had a round-trip ticket and came back. So I got an exit visa on this premise. Jack Tobin came down from Taipei and collected most of my stuff – it was mainly books – and smuggled them out of the college and up to T’ung An Chieh by train, to forward on to me later (actually it took a long time and many pleading letters to get the stuff sent, and some of it never arrived). I went through my gradebooks and completed them so that all my students would have passing grades, and gave them to a confederate to hand in after I left. And then I went to the airport, flew to Taipei, and changed planes for Hong Kong. I had some bad moments when my plane was delayed – who knew what would happen to me if I were discovered? But in the end I took off for Hong

Kong and never came back.

When I got to Hong Kong I found Chunking Mansions, a small hotel on an



upper floor of an office building on Nathan Road, Kowloon, and settled in for a couple of weeks of relaxation and tourism. The relief I felt at being out of Taiwan was really sweet. Just to see the British flag was a thrill – I felt like I had escaped from hostile territory and been rescued at sea by a British warship. To be able to speak to everyone in English – what a pleasure! It was a kick to see Hong Kong being both Chinese and British – red double-decker buses, and policemen in British-style uniforms, speaking British English, but very Chinese at the same time.

I went back and forth on the ferries. The Star Ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island (above left) was my favorite – it was seven minutes or so of calm between the intense activity of the two shores. I hear they are replacing it now with a tunnel. I went up to the Peak on the cute little tram (above right). I went to Cheung Chao Island with Donna, and visited some places that Christopher knew about, and had a good time looking around. This was the first real foreign *tourism* I had done since 1963 – Okinawa was different –



and I enjoyed it hugely. I went with Donna and some of her family by hydrofoil for an overnight stay in Macao. We stayed at the very smart Hotel Lisboa, and just as Hong Kong was double-exposure Chinese and British, Macao was double-exposure Chinese and Portuguese, the pastel colors much like Portugal (see the *praça* at left). I am glad to have seen both those places before their unfortunate retrocession to China.¹⁷

I got sort of sick in Hong Kong – a kind of flu, nothing serious, but I did go to Queen Elizabeth Hospital to get some antibiotics. When I was finished there I asked where I could go to pay my bill. Bill? They didn't know what I was talking about. Of course it was all free.

¹⁷ I went back to Hong Kong in 1999, and it didn't feel all that different from 1976. The main difference was that in 1975 an American couldn't cross the border into China – I went right up to the border and looked in, but that was as far as I could go. In 1999 I could have gone in, but didn't have time as I was just there on a 12-hour layover on my way to Singapore and India.

My plan was to be home by the Bicentennial on July 4, 1976. I had arranged with Ron Green to stay with him for a short time when I arrived back, and after about two weeks in Hong Kong I got on a plane for San Francisco. I wrote to Dr. Chan from Hong Kong explaining what had happened, and never used my ticket back to Taipei. I arrived back home in plenty of time for the Bicentennial. Ron Green picked me up at the airport with a joint in his hand.

My stay in Taiwan was sort of like being in the army. It was unpleasant at the time, but after it was over I got to appreciate some of the experience. It was good to have tasted living overseas, even if it was the wrong country. I'm glad to have learned about Chinese characters. The whole experience sort of inoculated me as far as China (and Japan, and Korea, and Vietnam) are concerned – I have not much interest in seeing more of any of them. I know this is sort of short-sighted, and there is lots to see there, and China is the Happening Place, and people come back saying how interesting it is. I know I *should* want to go there myself. But I really don't. India is different. Europe and India and the United States are enough of the world for me to explore in the time I have left, I think – never mind about China.



Document 22-1: The Elephant Story

The scene (地點) is Taichung City. A student is waiting for a bus.
An elephant (象) comes up^{to} him.
ELEPHANT: Excuse me. Can you speak English?
STUDENT: Yes, I can. I am a student at Feng Chia College
and everybody there learns English.
ELEPHANT: Good. I am lost. Can you give me directions?
STUDENT: Certainly. ~~English is spoken widely in~~
~~India.~~ But I didn't know elephants could speak English.
ELEPHANT: I am an Indian elephant! English is spoken in India.
STUDENT: I meant that I didn't know elephants could speak at all.
ELEPHANT: We seldom need to speak. We speak only if we need
something, and we seldom need anything. But now I need
directions.
STUDENT: Of course. Where do you want to go?
ELEPHANT: I want to go back to India.
STUDENT: To get to India you will have to go first either to
Taipei or to Kaohsiung.
ELEPHANT: Fine. Where do I start?
STUDENT: First you take the bus...
ELEPHANT: I am too big. I cannot fit into the bus.
STUDENT: Are you too big to fit into a taxicab?
ELEPHANT: Yes, I am too big for that too.
STUDENT: Then there is nothing you can do except walk. You must
walk to the Taichung airport, and there you can take an
airplane to Taipei. Once you are in Taipei you can take
another airplane to India.
ELEPHANT: Thank you. Is this the road to the airport?
STUDENT: Yes, it is. By the way, how did you get here from India?
And why did you come?
ELEPHANT: That, my friend, is a long story. Goodbye.