

十五

'til one day while eating
some stinky doufu
I saw something strange
which was certainly a clue
in an old woman's cart
was the same jar I'd found
as a nine year old kid
digging holes in the ground



Chapter 15 – Taiwan, All the World's a Stage

Taiwan was my “ground zero” for learning about China. It was kind of like experiencing snow or running into the ocean for the first time or maybe even a first kiss. One has all sorts of notions about what one might feel, but the experience itself is different in a multiplicity of ways. Lots of huge events occurred while I was in Taiwan. In 1973, I met my wife, Cristy, an amazing young woman from El Salvador whose father was Chinese and mother was Salvadorean. Chiang Kai Shek died on April 5 (my birthday) in 1975. The USA recognized the People's Republic of China as the official government of China on January 1, 1979. I learned a new word from Armed Forces Radio Taiwan during that period which was used in reference to the relationship between the USA and Taiwan: “Denormalization.”

It wasn't until I moved there, that I began to have a sense of Taiwan's history. For nearly 50 years, until the end of WW2, Taiwan had been colonized by the Japanese. Soon after, in 1948-49, nearly two million supporters of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Nationalists (KMT) descended on this small island, a little larger than the state of Maryland. Most of the KMT soldiers and their dependents ‘set up house’ in makeshift villages called 眷村 juàn cūn. These villages were poorly constructed on public land with building materials scavenged from neighboring communities. They were built as temporary shelters, since the KMT had every intention of returning to the mainland.

In 2008, 賴聲川 | Lài Shēngchuān (Stan Lai) wrote a play called “寶島一村” Bǎodǎo Yīcūn (“The Village”.) It told the story of a military dependent village (眷村 juàn cūn) where KMT soldiers lived when they first arrived in Taiwan, and where many families continued to live for generations. There were nearly 900 of these villages in Taiwan of which about 30 still remain. In the jiancun, former soldiers from all over China were thrown together. At first these villages were put together with whatever materials could be found. There were communal toilets and showers, and electrical wires were strung randomly to provide power where needed. Houses were about 6-10 ping in size (a ping is approximately 6' square). In the play we peeked into the lives of families whose common language was Mandarin (國語 Guóyǔ) even though many of the wives were Taiwanese. In the early scenes of the play, the audience is privy to conversations where soldiers would talk about reuniting with their families and living out their lives in their ancestral villages in China. But sadly, that never happened. Most of them were young men who had left their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wives and children. Many never saw their mainland families again. In the play, we experienced children growing up in the “juancun” and – with the villagers – mourned the death of Chiang Kai-Shek (蔣介石). The play began in 1949 and then jumped to the interval from 1968-1975, before finishing up in the period of 1987-2007.

At the end of the play, as the audience leaves the theatre, each person in the audience is given a paper bag with one of Grandma Qian's warm pork buns (包子 bāozi) inside. Bāozi was a staple in the village throughout the generations. "The Village" was warmly received in Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, Singapore, Macau, Hong Kong, and in the United States. I don't know anyone who has seen *The Village* without being incredibly moved. I saw "The Village" several times - in Shenzhen, in Macau, and in Hong Kong. The show was personal to most of the people in audience as most had grown up with family or friends who had similar experiences.

Parting from mainland China in 1949 started out like a group of strangers taking refuge in an emergency during a big storm. Everyone expected to return home after the storm subsided. But the storm that separated the Nationalists from the Communists turned out to be catastrophic to the families. It left a gaping 90-mile wide Taiwan Strait between China and Taiwan which has yet to be bridged. No armistice nor cease-fire was ever officially signed between the two warring parties in the Chinese Civil War. Today, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) is an organization set up by the People's Republic of China for handling technical and business matters with the Republic of China (Taiwan). The ROC counterpart to ARATS is the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF). In 2018, there were approximately 2.5 million mainlanders visiting Taiwan every year and nearly 5.5 million people from Taiwan visiting mainland China annually.

To support my Chinese studies and living expenses in Taipei in 1973-75, I taught English at English language centers (補習班 bǔxí bān) during the day, and two nights a week, played guitar and sang (often with Stan Lai and friends) at the Idea Coffee House near the present-day Sogo Department Store on Zhong Xiao East Road. Idea's physical space was small, dark, and sparsely furnished and neither the food nor the coffee were anything to write home about, but we had an impressive collection of musicians and musical instruments and played some pretty decent music. Folk, blues, jazz, country, pop. We bought pirated American and European albums and cassette tapes from Caves Book store for the equivalent of about 25 cents per tape and would transcribe the music and words as best we could. Most of the people who played were Chinese in their early 20's, but I was fortunate to be one of a sprinkling of 外國人 wàiguó rén (foreigners) who became a regular at Idea.

Flash forward 50 years. In October 2023, the 1970's band(s) from Idea got back together for three sold-out shows in Taipei's 1,000 seat Metropolitan House, for three performances of "艾迪亞曾經在此" (Àidíyà Céngjīng Zài Cǐ - "Idea was Here".) The playwright and musical director, none other than Stan Lai. Cristy and I left Taiwan in 1975 and were married in Los Angeles. Cristy had been a regular at 1970's Idea, so she and our daughter Ana were both able to join the rest of the audience in singing along with performers in all three of our 2023 shows.



100th performance of 寶島一村 "The Village" - Stan Lai and actors

艾迪亞曾經在此 "Idea was Here"- Stan Lai and actors

