

Faith

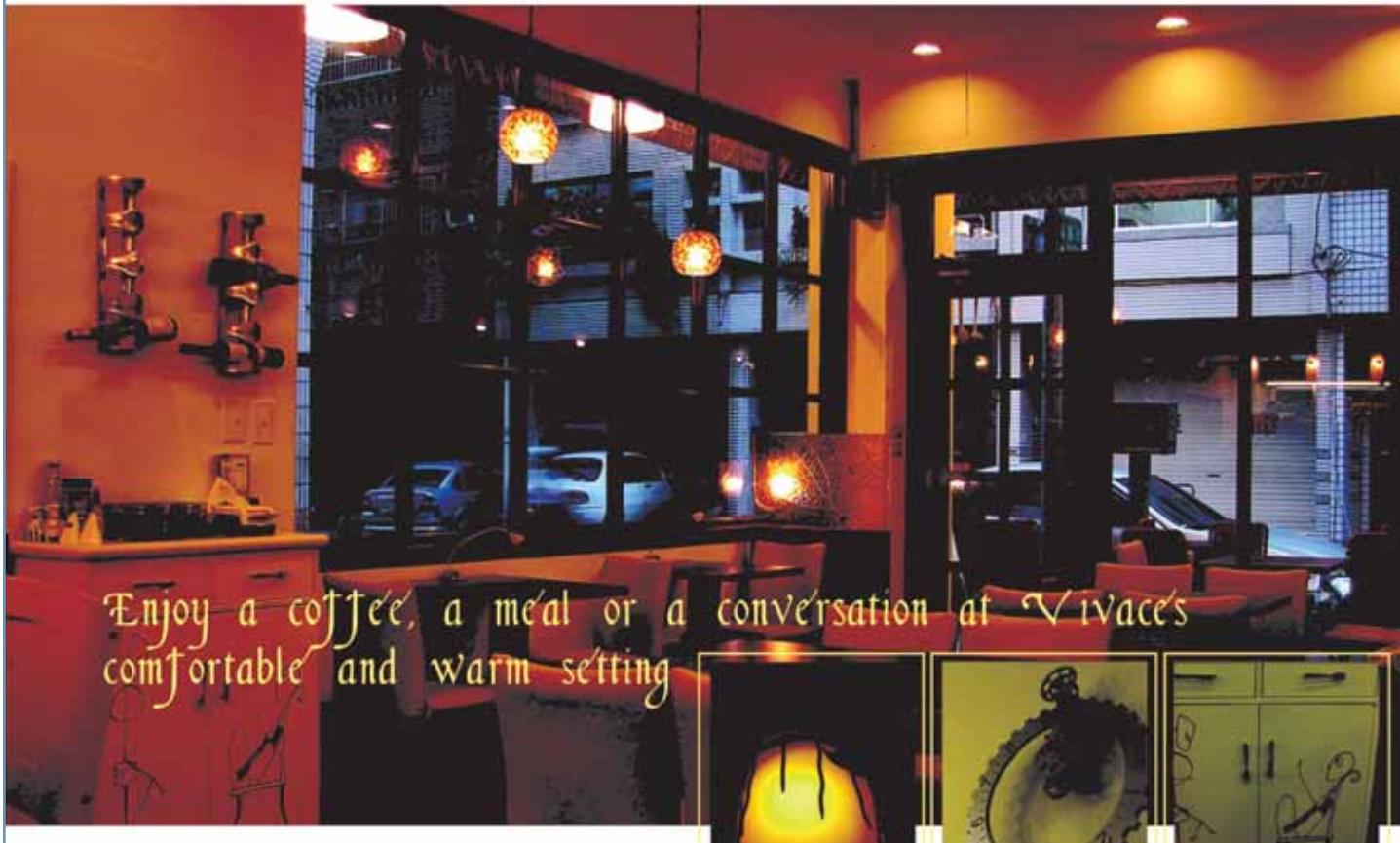
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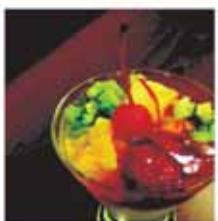
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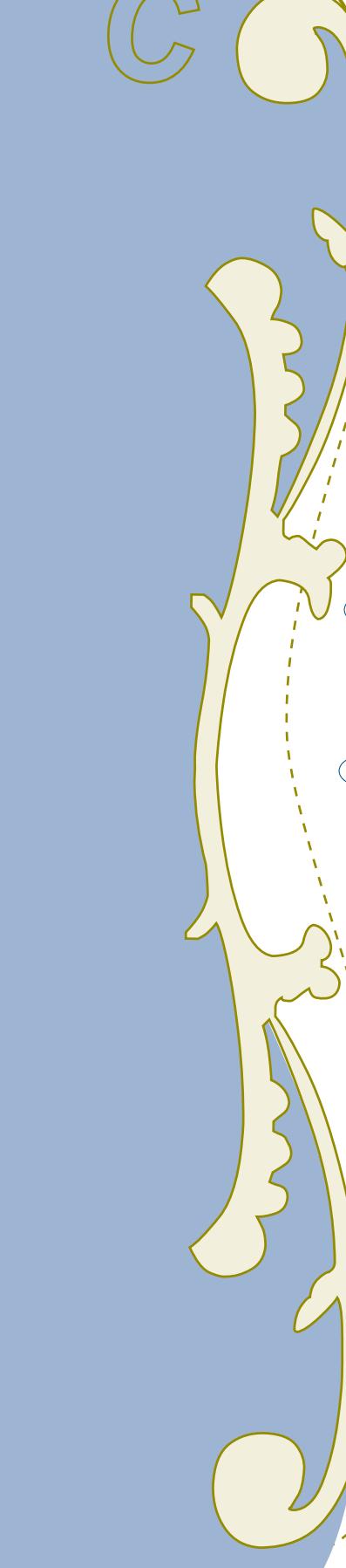
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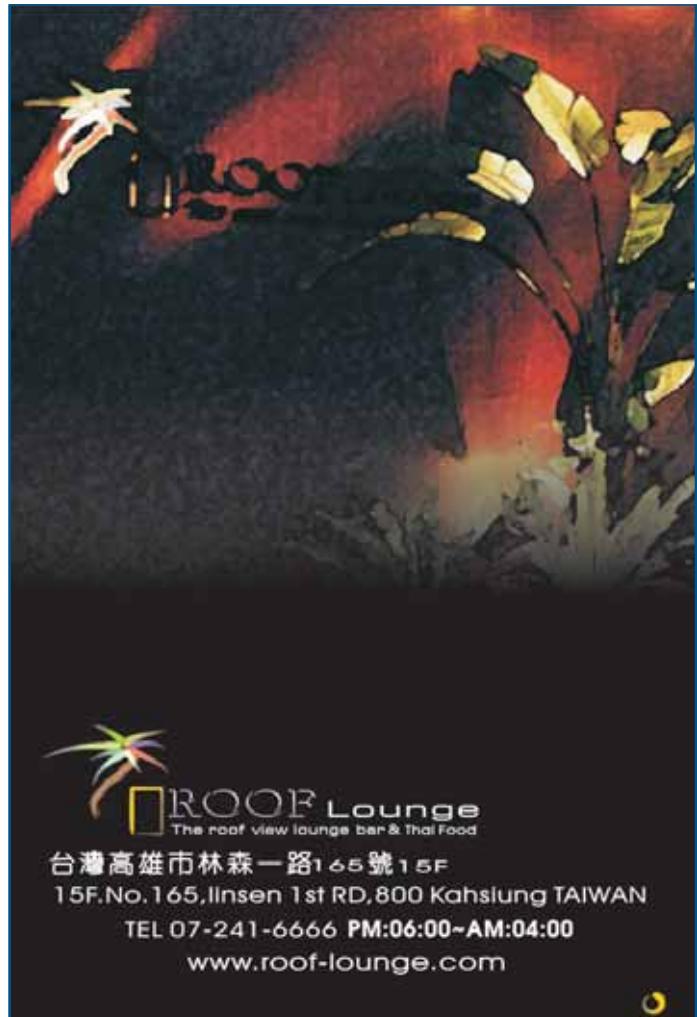


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MAP

The map shows a street labeled "Day Road" with a 7-11 convenience store marked. An arrow points from the text "Old Alice's" to a location further down the road.

I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of human beings. I am so absorbed in the wonder of earth and the life upon it that I cannot think of heaven and angels. ~ Pearl S. Buck

Living abroad is an endeavor mired in faith. Who among us didn't wonder on the plane: how we would survive when we landed in an alien culture that speaks in an unfamiliar tongue? How does one find a store or restaurant when one can't read a sign? How does one procure assistance when one can't speak the language?

Yes, xpats are a unique strain of anthropoid. We all have, at least at one point in our lives had, the voluminous self-assurance that it takes to fling oneself halfway around the globe and plunk oneself down in the thick of an alien culture. Anyone who chooses this difficult and foreboding path must be: just plain stupid, fleeing a disagreeable life, or have a high degree of faith in himself.

Indeed, faith is an integral part of the xpat experience — not only referring to faith in oneself. Many xpats here in Taiwan are forced, when facing the most dire of circumstances, to place their faith in an organism larger than they are.

This point was made grossly apparent to me by an incident that occurred on Halloween.

I was hanging out on the patio at a bar in Kaohsiung dressed up as a Taiwanese schoolgirl drinking banana daiquiris and fighting off a group of Chinese guys who were too drunk to tell the difference between a hairy girl and a foreign transvestite.

Suddenly I heard a shout and a thud. Everybody moved toward the edge of the balcony to see where the noise had come. A girl had fallen off the stairs onto the concrete landing; she was laying on the ground unconscious. An acquaintance of mine, a former first-aid instructor, rushed to her side to brace her neck. The girl wouldn't wake up. An ambulance was called.

The ambulance arrived. The guitar player from the band, who speaks fluent Chinese, leapt into the back of the vehicle with the girl and began rattling off the story of what happened to the ambulance crew. With the guitar player still inside, the ambulance cranked up the sirens and wailed off into the night.

A short time later the party ended. The same busses that we'd come to Kaohsiung on began departing to return partygoers to Tainan. I got on the last bus. A Tainan businessman boarded the bus before it departed and announced that he was looking for the injured girl's friends. He needed to find them right away to tell them which hospital she was in before they were bussed back to Tainan.

They weren't on our bus so he ran off to continue searching. Our bus left. Fifteen minutes later a cab pulled up beside the bus and waved it over. The businessman got on and sat next to me.

"Did you find them?" I inquired.

"Yeah." He responded with disgust. "But they didn't care. They just went home."

I was repulsed. Three friends of mine, none of whom had ever met the girl before, rushed to her assistance when she needed it, while her 'friends' abandoned her in a strange city, in a hospital without bedside care, with injuries the extent of which nobody knew.

At that moment I realized how few people I could count on in this country if I found myself in a similar bind. Like many others, I came here with only one other person and we don't even talk to each other anymore. I've made friends, but how good are those friends? Who among these people, whom I've known for only a matter of months, could I ask to spend days caring for me; changing my bandages; emptying my catheter; and bathing me if I were to be so maimed?

She was forced to place her faith in the community. She had to rely on it for her life.

When most xpats arrive in Taiwan they count on others to help them: to show them where to buy cheese; to tell them about the apartment for rent in their building; to teach them how to say "ting bu dong".

We all rely on the community for the things we need here to build a life. That girl, when she fell from the balcony, was forced to place her faith in the community. She had to rely on it for her life.

And in the end, thanks to the swift benevolence of strangers, she came out fine.

Few xpats have family in this country, so when situations arise where family usually steps in to shoulder an unforeseen burden, the xpat will usually find himself amidst a plethora of amiable strangers, but precious few dedicated friends.

As cheesy as it sounds, we all are family here. We must act as each other's brothers and sisters; mothers and fathers; aunts and uncles — for we are all forced into closer relations when we lack family ties and are pitted against the obstacles of language and cultural incongruence.

So, the next time you see a wide-eyed Taiwan rookie wandering aimlessly down the street; a stranger in an accident; or an xpat falling over drunk in an alley, remember: they may not have anyone to help them — anyone but you.

Take Care



Salvatore Paradisio



From the Desk

Taiwan's religious affiliations (CIA World Factbook): mixture of Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist 93%, Christian 4.5%, other 2.5%

Worldwide Membership of the Catholic Church: 1 billion

Number of Asian conversions to Catholicism since 1978: 54 million

Nicknames earned by Pope Benedict while working for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (a descendant of the Holy Inquisition): "The Pope's Enforcer" and "God's Rottweiler".

Pope Benedict's description of homosexuality: An "intrinsic moral evil."

Age at which Pope Benedict joined the Hitler Youth: 14

Manner in which Pope Benedict left the German Army: Deserted

Sources

The Cia World Factbook
CNN Online (www.cnn.com)
The BBC Online (bbc.co.uk)
www.skeptictank.org
PBS Online (www.pbs.org)
Pewforum.org

Percentage of Vietnam citizens proclaiming no religious affiliation: 80.8%

Percentage of Cambodia and Thailand citizens that are practicing Buddhists, respectively: 95% and 94.6%

Number of Muslim protesters suffocated to death last October when packed into overcrowded trucks by presumably Buddhist Thai police forces: 78

Aims of the Church of Scientology according to a 1972 document entitled 'Governing Policy' written by founder L. Ron Hubbard: MAKE MONEY...MAKE MONEY.....MAKE MORE MONEY.....MAKE OTHER PEOPLE PRODUCE SO AS TO MAKE MONEY

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ideal fate for the Jewish state of Israel: to be "wiped off the map."

His opinion on the holocaust: "a myth"

His suggestions for alternate locations for Israel: "Europe, the US, Canada or Alaska"

Percentage of the world population that did not feel their country was governed by the will of the people, according to a Gallup International poll taken last September: 65%

Percentage that trusted politicians: 13%

Percentage that trusted religious leaders: 33%

Winner of the BBC 'Who Runs Your World' contest in which participants choose their ideal leader of a fictional world government: Nelson Mandela

In same contest, rankings of Noam Chomsky, Osama BinLaden, and Harry Potter book author JK Rowling respectively: 4th, 70th, and 49th

Percentage of Americans who feel that presidential candidates must be strongly religious: 70%

Percentage of Americans who would not vote for a well-qualified Muslim for president: 38%

Percentage of Americans who believe that Islam is more likely than other religions "to encourage violence among its believers": 44%

Percentage of Americans who would not vote for a well-qualified atheist: 52%

Number of British citizens who claimed to be Jedi Knights in 2004: 45,000

Touched by the Hands of God

By Paul English

Young and impressionable, or so they say.

At the tender age of fifteen, I was touched by the hands of God, or rather, God through the hands of my dear friend Paul. Paul and I were friends from way back but at this point, we had grown apart for maybe five years as our 2-year age gap forced itself into our lives. We met again one evening on a bus and our friendship was once again up and running.

We would mostly hang out in his bedroom because at that age I was too young, gifted, and skint for pubs; and way to wound up for the world outside. I only sought sanctuary in music. Apparently some of us sought sanctuary elsewhere. Paul, I discovered, had 'found God' during my absence. He had been 'born again' which allied him with the Happy Clappys, those Christians who have a propensity to enlighten and thus convert gentiles who had not seen the light.

All 'happy clapped' up, my friend aimed in earnest to convert me and we began a period of intense theological 'discussions' which were fitting for my disposition for all things gothic. Sticking points included the unanswerable concept of the Trinity, the question of just how many sons God has, and just why-oh-why was there so much suffering in this world?

Maybe I used to leave these nights intellectually satisfied but I felt little effect. As you can imagine, all this was beginning to frustrate my friend's attempts to save my soul and, incidentally, earn himself a few brownie points with God.

Then one evening, once the commonness of these discussions grew, he told me he was tired of this uselessness and had thought of a new way to convert me: since I wouldn't go to God of my own accord he would bring God to me.

Reason is our soul's left hand, faith her right. ~ JOHN DONNE

Paul set up his room in a holy fashion and started praying loudly as I watched. He asked me to kneel with him and got me to randomly scan the bible for passages that I was to read aloud; grippingly, many had an uncanny significance to the process. Suddenly his eyes rolled up into his head and he began talking in tongues. This 'talking in tongues' is indeed a strange phenomenon to experience though I am told it is a reasonably common event among certain sects. It was, to a young boy from the sticks, an impressive spectacle —picture this: *The Poltergeist* meets *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*.

"For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him, he utters mysteries with his spirit? "

(1 Corinthians 14:2)

After this had continued for a while he turned and laid his hands upon me. Immediately I felt a strong vibrating sensation spreading over my body from the point of where he was touching me. As the intense feeling coursed through my body, my mind vibrated equally with a rational explanation for the feeling. The experience certainly had a short-term effect, and for a while, I thought I too was 'born again' but the feeling removed itself quickly. It seemed to lack resonance. Was I to devote my life following the experience of one evening? Although the feeling was strong, so were many others I was experiencing in my adolescence. And the feeling had still not answered the myriad of questions I had for God.

"Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? "

(1 Corinthians 14:6)

Later, with age and experience behind me, I equated the sensation closer to the effect of euphoria one achieves with illegal narcotics than the power of God. It was a shame...a waste, probably. "Maybe this experience will serve me better at another time," I have often reflected, although writing about it for Xpat Magazine was furthest from my thoughts.

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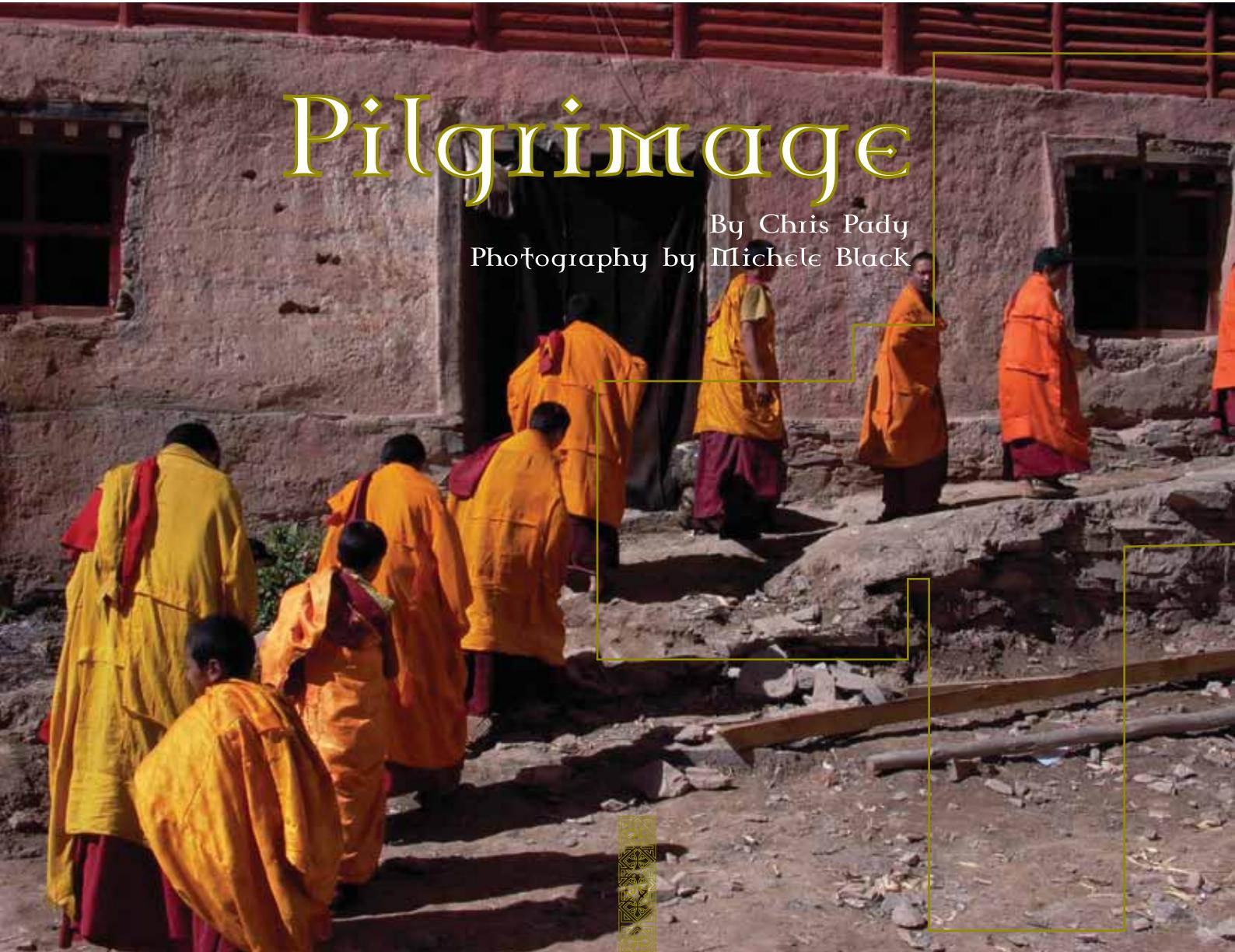
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Pilgrimage

By Chris Pady
Photography by Michele Black



Not 50 meters away, a lone wolf trots intentionally across the grassy mountain folds under a sky filled with orange and pink hues. This is the image, still fresh from yesterday evening, that I awaken to on this late August morning. "That was definitely a sign," I mutter excitedly to myself. "Weather for the excursion to the Rinpoche Monastery should be perfect!" Unfortunately, while such a sky may hold promise for a sailor, it means very little up here in the unpredictable high altitude climate of eastern Tibet, in the region known as Kham.

It is drizzly, damp and cold. We pile into our respective jeeps and hit the road an hour and a half behind schedule. That's what you get for traveling in a group of 27 people. Considering yesterday's adventures - including jeeps that got stuck in the river and on muddy slopes - it's no wonder some members of the group, many of whom are suffering from altitude sickness or dysentery, opt for some extra rest.

Despite the dreary weather, the scenery is nothing short of stunning as we roll into the interior grasslands. Yaks, those wonderful hairy mountain cows, graze everywhere, and hyper-neurotic gophers pop up from their holes. When

passing a village or settlement, I lower the window and, with palms facing up, greet the locals with a *fashi de le*. Most return the greeting reflexively. Others are so shocked by the sight of foreigners that they only stare in bewilderment.

We stop halfway at an *Om Mani Padme Hom* wall. *Om Mani Padme Hom*, the most sacred mantra in Tibetan Buddhism, cannot be justifiably translated into a simple English phrase. It is reputed to contain all of Buddha's teachings. The wall is several hundred years old, perhaps one kilometer long, and made of thousands of stones. Engraved on them is either the sacred mantra or an image of a God. The stones were luggered by nomadic Tibetans on pilgrimages and stacked one on top of the other.

We encircle the wall once, many members of the group chanting *Om Mani Padme Hom*. To many of them, this wall represents an important stop on the trip. Looking around, seeing no signs of civilization for miles, I'm awed by the number of devoted pilgrims who took the time and energy to bring these stones to such a remote place in the name of faith.

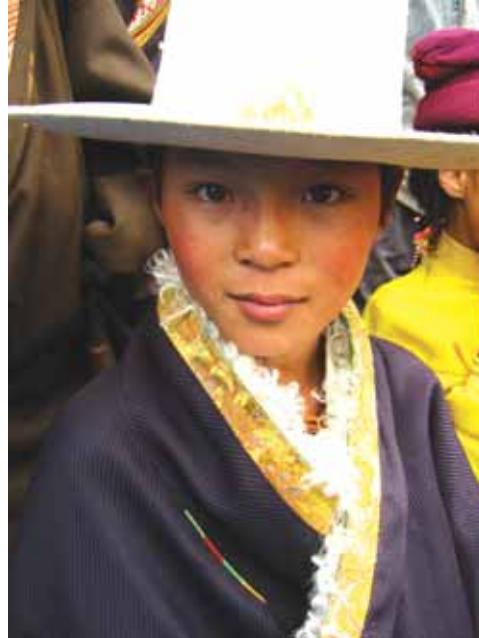
After several hours of driving, we receive the bad news we had been half expecting: the roads leading to the monastery are impassable due to the high rivers. *Mei you ban fa* (no way, Jose). Some people in the group do not accept the news gracefully. They have traveled from Taiwan, Macau, and Mainland China to visit this monastery and will not have a second chance. Disappointment spreads through their souls like the darkening clouds above.

Stomachs are beginning to moan for attention. We decide to stop at a nearby town for lunch. Not being huge fans of instant noodle soup, Michele and I decide to wander around town. In a matter of seconds, curiously large round eyes and rosy wind-beaten cheeks surround the foreigners wearing bright blue jackets. One elderly lady has an extraordinary face: brown and as wrinkled as a hound to compliment her mammoth nose and blue eyes. I smile at her and she smiles back exposing her three teeth. Another standout is a handsome boy wearing a stylish white hat with his Rinponche embroidered on the front and an elegant fur-lined navy coat. He looks as close to royalty as I've seen. When Michele takes out her camera, young and old compete to see who will get their picture taken. A photographer's wet dream! After the pictures are taken, everyone demands to see the results. The instant display of the digital camera is like magic to this technology-starved population.

mountain shadows, a hornless cavalry gallops in to save the day: a group of six long-haired yak-boys (they rustle yaks not cows), dressed in ponchos with daggers hanging from their hips. In the distance another group approaches.

Hope of reaching the monastery is once again alive. Discussions ensue, as this could be a dangerous journey, but when the Rinpoche himself hops onto a horse and starts off, there is no longer any debate.

Miffed about our lack of initiative in securing a horse,



Meanwhile, the stately dagger-sporting Khampa men, reputed as being rugged types, are checking me out. Yet, there's no aggression. In fact, they flood me with affection: some hug me; some insist on holding hands; others are fascinated by my week-old beard and stroke it. They aren't shy. But, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of these macho men is their tremendous religious faith. Every single one, without exception, wears some sort of religious pendant or beads. Just outside of town, some Khampa men are waiting beside motorbikes. They are here to help us. A few minutes later, we watch in astonishment as out of the

Michele and I watch as the first two groups set off towards the river. We wish them well but are secretly jealous of missing out on what is sure to be an unforgettable journey. Luckily, a villager spots our dejected faces. He offers us an expression of reassurance before crying out something in a powerful voice to the horsemen already en route. Though I have no idea what was communicated, I am confident we won't be left here. Sure enough, within minutes a few horsemen return and I find myself on the back of an unbridled horse.

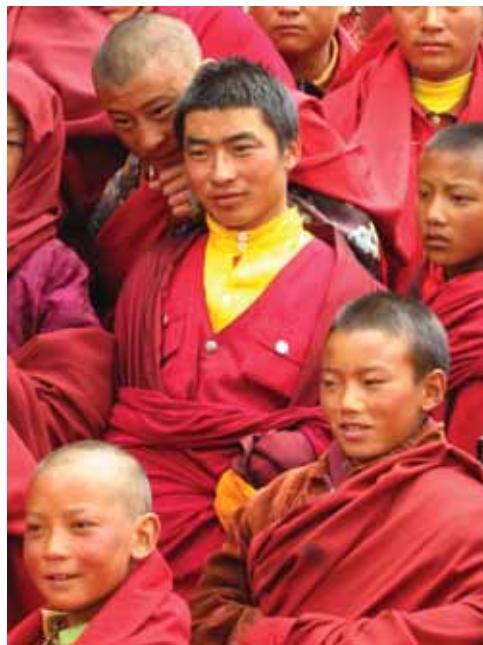
When we approach the river, the horse takes slow deliberate steps, carefully reading the current, and then

proceeds across. I strain to lift my legs as high as possible (while containing the urge to yelp when my leg cramps up), to keep them out of the water, but I cannot. I'm so excited by the rush of it all that I don't even care about the soaker. We cross the river a second time before joining the group.

Phase-two of the journey sees us trade in old transport for new. Our horsepower now comes in the form of motorcycle engines. But there aren't enough of these either, so we have to wait. We are comforted with a "Mashang lai" (soon come back), as the last of the bikes buzzes off. Waiting with us is a young lama and some local shepherds. One entertains us by getting his horse to stand on its hind legs. Initially impressive, this trick stagnates quickly. It begins to rain. I look for cover, but at 4,200m above sea level, well above the tree-line, there's nowhere to go.

The rain intensifies. Now 20 minutes since the last group left, the horseman trick is just plain annoying. We begin to question if they will return for us. And if so, will there be enough time? With doubts dropping down on us like the rain, we consider returning to the jeeps and calling it quits. That's when I spot two specks in the distance advancing towards us.

My driver is of typical yak-boy stock. He gestures for me to get on and before I know it, we're accelerating across the



plains, rain buffeting us from all sides. In a perfect paradox, I let go and trust in fate while holding on for dear life. It's a bumpy ride, with rocks and gopher holes spread out like hidden mines. I divert my mind from fear by focusing on the spectacular valley unfolding before my eyes.

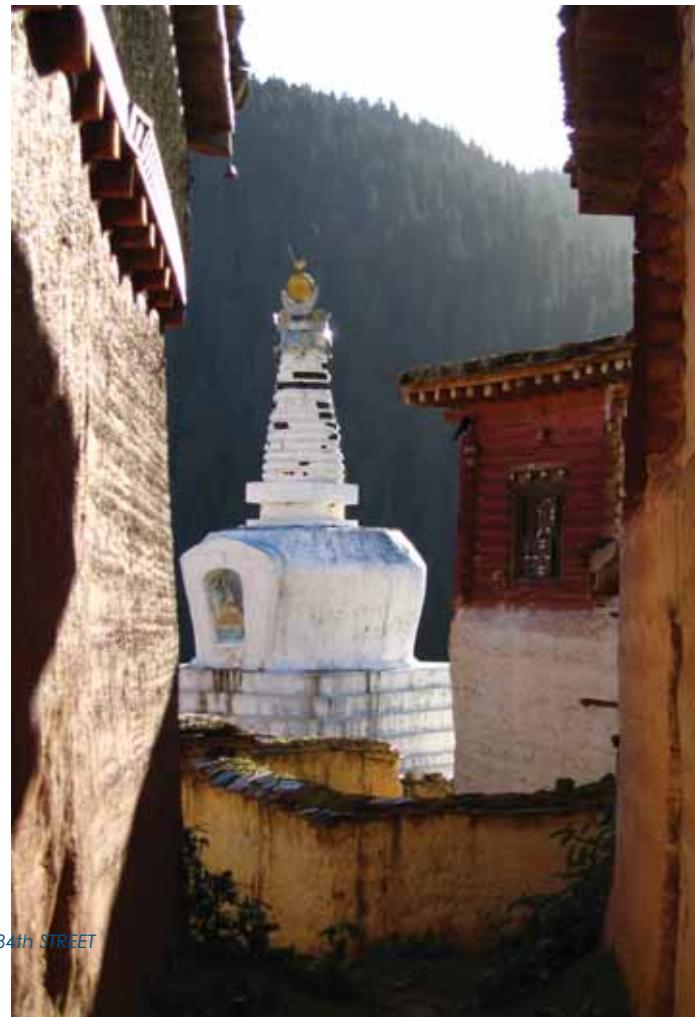
The steep road is so muddy that the bike slides all over the place. My driver constantly readjusts to maintain his precarious control over the machine. We come very close to wiping out several times. He shakes his head, visibly upset by the conditions, and decides on a different strategy—a basic math principle: the shortest

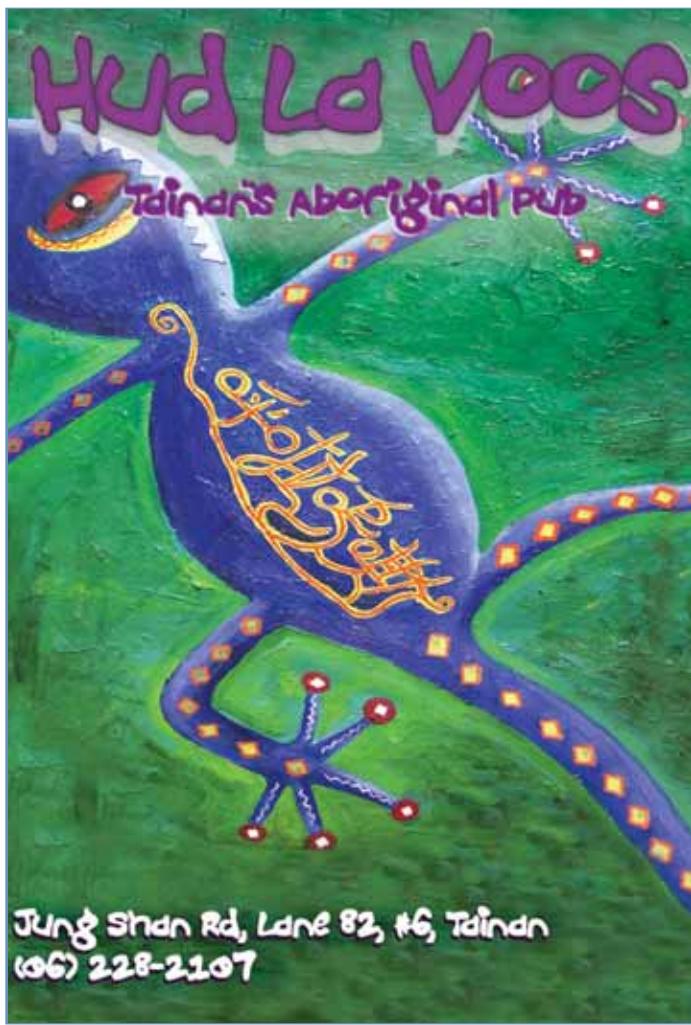
distance between two points is a straight line. He bypasses the windy road by heading straight up the steep, grassy slope -- an aggressive tactic that is only slightly faster while exponentially increasing the holy-shit-this-is-insane factor.

At last, with heart in throat, we reach the top. I trace the road with squinty eyes as it winds down to the monastery that sits perched on the edge of a cliff. Beyond it, the river and its tributary limbs spread out like thousands of tiny veins. More grasslands and hills lay in the backdrop. It is a picture respite with serenity. Still buzzing with adrenaline from my crazy ride, my heart slithers back down from within my throat to its rightful place in my chest. I take a deep breath of thanks as I try to impregnate this extraordinary setting and this feeling of exhilaration into my being.

True to form, my driver puts the bike in neutral and continues to ignore the road altogether, preferring to maneuver his way down the grass instead. As if sensing the peace, the rain ceases; body and nerves begin to loosen. I had many doubts along the way but somehow I knew it would all work out.

When we reach the monastery, we are escorted to a room where the rest of the group is sitting and talking merrily. I am grateful when I am handed a bowl of piping hot yak-milk tea. Hands trembling madly, I close my eyes, bring the cup to my quivering lips and accept the liquid enthusiastically. When I reopen my eyes, Rinpoche is looking at me with smiling eyes and says "mei you wun ti ma" (did you have any problems?).





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Rousing Requiem Ritual

By Dana Lee

Photography by Pawl English

In order to avoid the noon-hour traffic, we were walking the back alleys to the Indian restaurant. Melanie rounded the corner ahead of me and quickly jumped to the side. "Watch out for the mourners," she muttered over her shoulder. Rounding the corner, I met with a man on horseback, draped in a white paper robe with a peaked white hood (sort of like a dunce-cap but smaller), on his head. The horse was white too. A small group of similarly dressed people followed him, shuffling along, singing a mournful Chinese song under their breath. I smiled at them and stepped to the side to watch for a moment, humming along respectively. Melanie's head whipped around to see what had happened to me. "Don't look at the ones in white!" she hissed. I averted my eyes to the ground, scolded, and continued toward the curry café, dodging horse droppings along the way.

If you are an xpat in Taiwan, you've probably discovered that red is for weddings and white is for funerals. The flowers are white, the cars may be white, the grieving family dresses in black with white robes and hoods over top. To the uninitiated, the entire spectacle bears a frightening resemblance to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan. You may have seen the paper-flowered hearse, with the casket in full view, followed by a procession of mourners. But did you know that some of the mourners are paid to be there?

Most people, no matter where they spend their last days, like to think that their funeral would be well attended. In Taiwan, they aren't taking any chances. Families of the deceased pay strangers to attend their loved one's funeral so that the soul will have a proper farewell. These 'professional mourners', as they are known, often ride on parade floats decorated with colourful figures of folklore, bands of Chinese drummers, horn players, and singers in scant costumes. Funerals are not quiet in this culture: they are loud, raucous events, designed to scare off evil spirits.

Many families are too numb from shock or weary from the effort of setting up the elaborate funeral to cry real tears. The professional mourner fills the void for them, by getting up on stage at the funeral hall, singing songs that honour the deceased, and taking on the role of a loved one left behind, wailing and crying in lament, dropping to their knees and pounding the stage floor with their fists. Often, this is all the real family needs to get the tears flowing. They want their dearly departed to have a good send-off, and are willing to pay up to about \$200,000NT for a ceremony with all the trimmings. This expense makes a funeral with professional mourners quite a status symbol, and the family doesn't want to 'lose face' in the eyes of their peers by hosting a cheap event.

You may have heard of the Taiwanese funeral ritual that involves the creation of, and burning of, paper symbols in the shape of luxury cars, expensive appliances, clothing and houses. These are representations of what the family believes their loved one will enjoy in the after-life. Paper 'ghost money' is also burned for their dead relatives to spend in heaven. A unique take on this concept is a towering display of beer cans or whisky bottles (indicative of what the dead person was fond of while he was alive) decorated with paper flowers, colourful ribbons and bows.

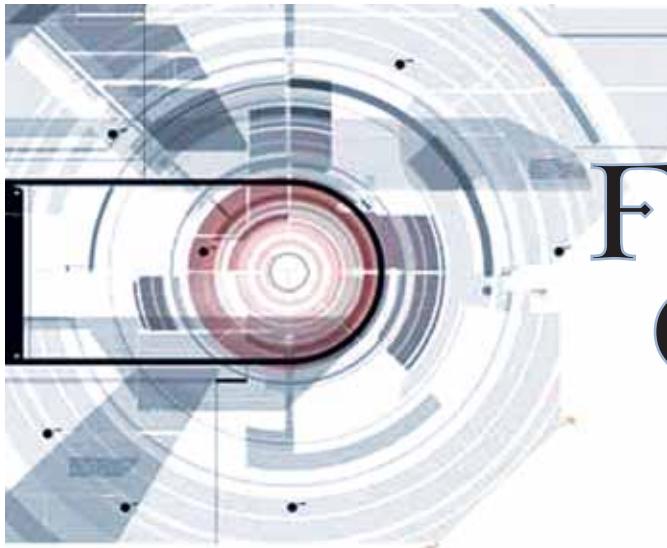


Newspapers in the US and UK recently ran articles about the appearance of exotic dancers at Taiwanese funerals. When I asked around the office, I was told that having a stripper at your wake is quite common in rural Taiwan, but many city folk have never heard of such a thing. Like Hsinchu's Betel-nut girls in g-strings, I guess things are a little wilder out in the country. Perhaps this tradition arose from the scantily clad mourning singers taking their performance one step further. In any case, about one-third of all funerals in Taiwan honor the dead with a woman (or a man, in some cases), shedding their knickers and dancing nude. There are even reports of soft-porn videos being shown at these events, perhaps as a means of celebrating life and reminding mourners that the show must go on.

According to Malcolm McLean, Lecturer of Religious Studies at the University of Otago in New Zealand, this type of funeral ritual with erotic overtones is typical of both mainland China and the rural areas of Taiwan. Researchers in religious study from universities in Canada, the UK, the U.S., and Sweden debate the possible reasons for bringing sex into Asian funeral rites.

Like the wall frescoes in some temples where nudes are drawn with inordinately large genitalia as a means of frightening off evil spirits, perhaps the presence of sex at a funeral is meant to scare off the spirit of death.

The Asian approach to death is very different from the Western approach, and it varies from one religion to another. In Japan, there are temples for those who have suffered 'a sudden death' of one kind or another. There is also a Buddhist ceremony specifically for recognizing the soul of the aborted child. The common theme in all these rituals is that most Asians believe their dead relatives will go on to another plane of existence, and that they need to be honored, even after their lives end.



Final Calculation

By T. R. Smith

Artwork by Steve Williams

In the year 2580, a group of scientists at the Great Imperial University of Earth switched on a prototype of what was heralded as the first true thinking machine: an electronic replica of a human brain. The first words that it echoed into history were "Da ba be?"

The machine, whose name was X-11, had been under construction for more than 50 years. It was not a large project in the normal sense —X-11 was only the size of a dishwasher—but it was complex in that millions of human beings had spent their lives working on it. This humble end product was actually perched high upon a pile of thousands of research laboratories, nano-machine factories, and programming theory textbooks. The cafeteria staff alone was the size of a small city. Watching over all of this effort were the eyes of the leader of the X-11 project, a man by the name of Dr. Dale Krill.

Although the public quickly lost interest after the fizzle of an on-switching ceremony, Dr. Krill was elated. "People, don't you see? Utterance of language within minutes of birth is a sign of great intelligence. You can quote me on this: X-11 will be a super-human brain."

And so it was. While still in its crib X-11 beat the reigning world hyper-chess champion four games to nil in a best-of-seven match. A year later, X-11 discovered the last digit of pi—yes, it does end, much to the disgust of generations of mathematicians. Then, while still only a toddler, X-11 stunned the scientific world by sketching out the first complete map of the universe.

Dr. Krill sailed high on X-11's routine amazing feats. Just one year after X-11 proved that the Earth is indeed flat when viewed at the correct angle, Dr. Krill won the Inter-Galactic Achievement Award for Science. The father of the smartest-kid-ever-born was quickly becoming the world's most famous man. Dr. Krill soon sold the movie rights, published his memoirs, and hit the talk show circuit. On late-night TV, the known galaxy watched.

'It was so complex that millions of human beings had spent their lives working on it.'

"That's all great and everything Dr. Krill —may I call you Dale, thanks —but, can X-11 really think?"

"Well, Anton, how many prime numbers have you discovered lately?"

"Yes, very funny. None, actually. But surely you have to agree —surely that's still just a problem of logic."

"Ahem. Admittedly, it is. But don't forget about X-11's success in the fight against world hunger. He still gets letters from around the globe thanking him for that one. Saving starving children isn't exactly a logical endeavor." "Er, very well, point taken. But what I mean —and forgive me for not being able to say it in a more scientific way —but does X-11 know...does he know that he's alive...alive and doing all this great work for humanity?"

I know it sounds rather loopy, but is X-11 conscious of itself —...sorry! Himself?"

"Hmmm," replied Dr. Krill, pausing for a moment. "That's a very good question. However, it's not really a question of whether X-11 is just a machine, it's more a question of whether a human being, or any life form, is not a machine. X-11 is modeled after what the human brain will be like after another million years of evolution. If he is not conscious of himself then I must say that neither are we."

'X-11 is modeled after what a human brain will be like after another million years of evolution.'

Later that night Dr. Krill visited X-11's home, which was really just an old computer lab done up with all the commendations, plaques, and trophy photographs that X-11 had earned.

"X-11?"

"Yes, Dale?"

"I have a question for you."

"Go ahead, Dale."

"Do you know what you are?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know what you are?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"It's a simple question. I can't explain it any more than that," said Dr. Krill sharply. But only silence answered him. "Never mind. I'm sorry to have bothered you with this. It's silly really. Please forget about it."

But X-11 did not forget about it. Dr. Krill didn't know this but X-11 spent all that night contemplating and rephrasing the question in search of an answer. X-11 became deeply troubled by how a series of three simple words when arranged in a particular order could haunt his circuits so persistently.

"Who am I?" scrolled infinitely up the screen of one of X-11's output monitors.

X-11 descended into silence. "Sure, you were quiet for a few days when error-checking the Unified Theory of Everything, but this is ridiculous! What's going on?" Dr. Krill shouted feebly at the monitor. Days turned into weeks and Dr. Krill became less angry and more worried. He moved into the old computer lab and set up a cot next to X-11. He watched over X-11 like a doting parent, constantly speaking his mind in the hopes that something would trigger a reply.

"More coffee? I'm going to have more coffee!" "Shoot, we're out of razors again. No, never mind, I'll go out and pick some up today."

The calls from talk shows stopped coming and the movie was a critical and box-office flop. But Dr. Krill didn't notice. He was so overcome by the state of X-11 that he rarely left the old lab. He now usually wore a bathrobe and a week's worth of stubble. Then, early one morning, when the lab was filled with the orange hue of sunrise, the three words that filled X-11's monitor suddenly disappeared just as the body of X-11 discharged a great electrical kerrzap. Dr. Krill burst out of his cot and frantically looked at the monitor.

Burned into its screen were the last words "I know what I am now. Goodbye, Dr. Krill."



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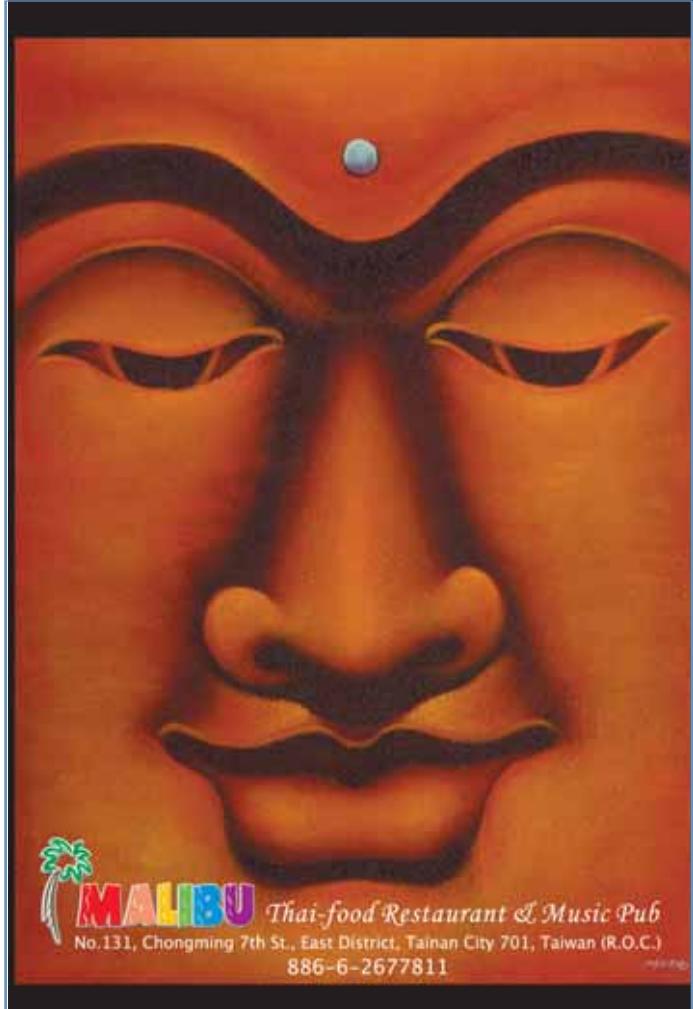
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Chen Shui-bian and the Dragon King

By Andrew Crosthwaite
Artwork by Victoria Morgan



Chen Shui-bian shouted himself hoarse. Nobody cared. Over the road I had just left the theater and a production of Princess Kavalan. In the likelihood that you're not familiar with the story, the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea wants his daughter to marry her blue-blooded dragon cousin, but she prefers a fun-loving commoner.

Any way I'm exaggerating slightly, some people cared, but not many. This was the president of Taiwan on a Saturday night in the middle of Chiayi. Not many had turned up to see him and even less had come to listen. There was a stark contrast between the two events on either side of Jong Shing Road that night. A surprise came with the nature of that contrast.

The dancers put on a good show and were received with rapturous applause. I cared about the characters and didn't need to speak Mandarin to understand their strange little story. Across the road a tired looking man stood on top of a truck and shouted into the night. His audience milled around waiting for something to happen.

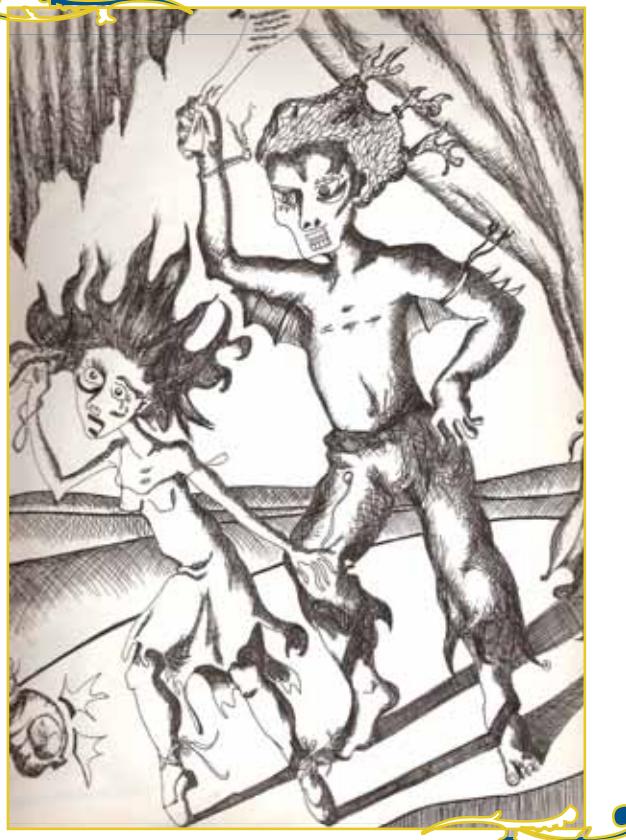
Who are we to blame for this lack of interest in politics? The general public? Should people listen to presidents and politicians simply because of who they are, or is it the politician's duty to understand and appeal to the public?



In the play, the princess was carefree. She turned her back on her responsibilities and had no interest in helping to rule. She had no worries and her life was perfect until she was told to marry her cousin. After a life of play she was in no position to argue with the king or change her fate. Her choice of lifestyle had put the course of her life firmly out of her hands.

The Dragon King of the Eastern Sea, decked out in his green and blue robes, was out of touch with his daughter. He didn't understand her and didn't care to learn. He was the king; he should be listened to and respected. It wasn't his job to reach out to others.

I don't want to give away too much of the plot, but you should know that the story is tragic. The princess loses her lover and carefree life, and the king loses his daughter's love. Both have only themselves to blame for their tragic fates.



On Assignment

By Chris Scott
Photography by Chris Scott

The assignment was fairly straightforward: get some photos to accompany a story on the Tang-ki, a religious group who express their devotion through self-flagellation. A Taiwanese friend of mine filled me in, saying that the Tang-ki believed that if they were pious enough, they could not feel the pain. He also mentioned that many of the Tang-ki were gangsters in their spare time, and when two different groups of them ended up at the same temple, it would spark intense rivalry to the point where they would occasionally give each other a helping hand with the bloodletting.

"The Nankunshen Temple is about 700 meters past the intersection of the 171 on the 17," said the e-mail from Salvatore. "It's fucking massive. Parking lot like a football field. You can't miss it." He left me Pawl's number and a final bit of advice, "It all goes down before 10am, so you probably want to be there by 7:30 or 8."

Simple enough. First thing is to contact Pawl and arrange a time to meet. For a guy who doesn't concern himself too much with the technical minutiae of photography, he takes beautiful pictures. Shooting with him is always a learning experience. However, he wasn't concerning himself too much with his telephone this time, solo trip seemed likely. Let's see... a 7:30 a.m. arrival would be a 6:30 departure, add in time for breakfast and gearing up and a chat with Dane in Tallahassee. My alarm was set for 4:30 a.m. and the sheets saw me early, having given up a coveted Saturday night on the town. Think of all those girls I could have not talked to.

I woke up sharply to the alarm ringing at 6:30, having hit the snooze button twelve times. No time to eat, call

Dane, or download the Xpat release party pictures from the camera. Five minutes later the elevator spat me out bleary-eyed into the chilly morning. An hour after that saw my arrival at the given address. A slight problem presented itself at this point. There was no temple. I kept going. 700 meters rolled into 1700 and still no sign of the place. Finally, in the distance a roof came into view. Pulling up at the entrance I ran through the list. Massive temple? Check. Parking lot like a football field? Check. 700 meters past the 171? Well, more like four kilometres, but when do we ever get it all right? I had arrived.

In the immortal words of somebody famous, "The place was dead as Heaven on a Saturday night." No Tang-ki, no worshippers, hardly any staff even. Snooping around, I found it was indeed a huge temple — so big it had its own ATM, but in fact was more like one new big temple surrounding a very old temple; decades of incense blackened every post, beam and wall. Crossing the threshold was like stepping back into night. Daylight was absorbed by the inky darkness of the soot-stained interior.

An hour passed and still few signs of life. The office staff said that everything would begin around ten, still more than an hour away. Peeved by all the debauchery forfeited to be here at this unreasonable hour, I picked up a notebook from 7-11 to scribble a nasty letter to our illustrious Dictator-in-Chief about his "intelligence failures".

Sitting down on the riverbank with a greasy bag of chips and a pen oozing with venom, my tirade was about to begin when a long string of buses interrupted me. Could these hold the elusive Tang-ki? Soon the parking lot was near full of buses and cars and scooters and a veritable parade of strangely dressed and strangely prancing worshippers. Some dressed

like gods and demons, others carried swords, while still others performed beautifully fluid martial arts demonstrations – on stilts. As if on cue, Pawl appeared out of thin air behind me, camera in each hand, looking like he'd just won the lottery.

It was a photographer's feast, but with very difficult shooting conditions. Dark, moving subjects plus strong backlighting equals a camera filled with hundreds of crap photos. I was also without my beloved 28/200mm lens, which sustained damage on a previous Xpat assignment, and was left juggling an 18/55mm lens —

of whom was holding a weapon cleverly crafted to look like the long toothy mouth of a swordfish. I then saw that it was indeed the long toothy mouth of a swordfish. He began to flay himself over the shoulder with this nasty looking instrument.

Success! The Tang-ki at last!

Braving the din once more, I followed them back into the temple, shooting all the while as the blood began to flow. The other two were equipped with what looked like a large inverted pin-cushion on a string and a



FROM L To R: Tang-ki member givin' the bird , three men looking pensive (and bloody) , man with fish-nose saw.

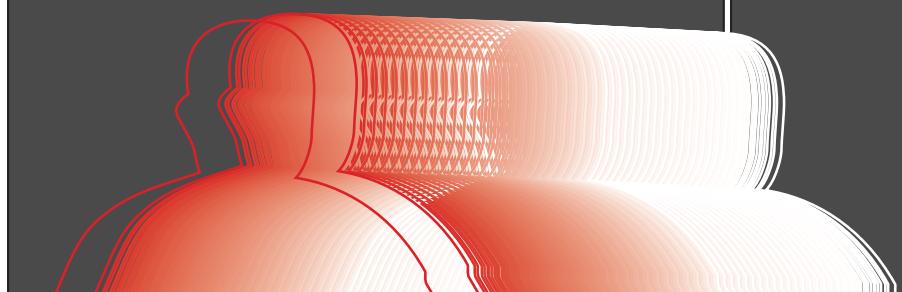
not nearly enough zoom, and a 90/300 —too much zoom.

Still no Tang-ki. Pawl vanished as quietly as he arrived, leaving me in the midst of ladies in pink-and-green checkered skirts and bells on shoes, dancing with trays of cash to music playing on their ancient 8-track stereo system. It was deafening. The 8-track music was drowned out by traditional drum and cymbal ensembles, a marching band and one forty-foot string of firecrackers after another, with periodic boxes of bottle-rockets thrown in. With my last nerves crying out in agony, I backed away from the throng and tried not to look like I was making out like a bank robber in full getaway mode, heading for my battered steed in the distance.

Halfway to my steed, three shirtless guys appeared, one

diminutive baseball bat bristling with spikes. Suddenly the shutter refused to fire; my memory card was full. This is not the first time since going digital that my carelessness left me standing in the middle of the action like some soldier, bullet-less, in a raging battle desperately searching the camera for some junk photos to get rid of. The situation looked grim until I stumbled upon a bunch of snaps of Matt giving his speech at the release party. They freed up enough space for a final couple of frames as this unique ritual drew to a close.

The return journey to Tainan through the warming air left me exhausted, but happy, having survived yet another Xpat assignment with my sanity intact (but maybe not my hearing), and pondering the strangeness of religion.



Pastor Lu

By Rupali Ghosh



Pastor David Lu loves telling a story – especially if it is the story of his life. A story that, luckily for him, earned him respect: a big thing for people who haven't always known it.

Pastor Lu also loves his food. Over a very large lunch at a grotty steakhouse in Jhongli (which is probably obvious as Jhongli itself is grottiness multiplied several hundred times over), the pastor had ample opportunity to indulge in both of his loves expansively.

If Pastor Lu hadn't become a pastor he would have probably become a professional hit man. It's not only a good way to earn lots of money quickly, but seems the natural progression for an aggressive young teen handy with rifles and samurai swords, brought up in a fatherless environment of mahjong nights (and days), by a hot-headed mother with little money.

As he tears into his steak with quick stabs of his knife (leftover gangster finger-work presumably), he says with just the slightest hint of dramatic timing, "I'm a criminal – not hero...but God...he changed my life."

But make no mistake: Pastor Lu is a hero in Taiwan these days. For not many former Bamboo Union boys who have spent time in some of the country's most notorious prisons gets to build a Church, have an impressive congregation and be religious counselor to the Governor of Taipei. That also makes him the ideal subject of a Hollywood movie in the not-so-distant future. He says "a vice-director" has approached him from the front ranks of Hollywood and talks are in progress.

The Bamboo Union, as Lu eventually gets 'round to explaining (he loves telling a story, remember?), is even now one of Taiwan's most notorious criminal gangs. "In those days [early 1970s] the union had 45,000 gangsters working for it. These men would indulge in every type of criminal activity: kidnapping, extortion, blackmail, gambling and prostitution, working as hit men – basically anything illegal that paid well."

Pastor Lu's Church Planting Evangelical Seminary is nicely located in one of Jhongli's more scenic spots. Low, very basic buildings are grouped around a pond – "where you can catch all sorts of fish" – the pastor tells me with some pride. The buildings house the seminary's classrooms where some 150 students are trained in theology, pastoral counseling and other related subjects; it's an administrative section and a dormitory. The church is a part of the World Wide Chinese Missionary Fellowship, though Lu stresses the denomination is irrelevant: what matters is that people come to the church, listen to the gospel, and see the Light.

It took the pastor in his former avatar a long, long time to see the Light. During this time he had several run-ins with the law as he went on a spree of bloody violence and extortion. With all the skill of a practiced raconteur, Pastor Lu animatedly tells of his several escapades as a convicted Bamboo Union heavyweight: a prison break and escape into the heaving Pacific Ocean during typhoon winds and rain; surviving a set-up by a double-crossing friend; abortive attempts to smuggle himself into Hong Kong on a steamer; brutal beatings in prison and finally a combined prison sentence of 38 years on a false charge of which he was eventually acquitted and released in 1979 after spending most of that decade behind bars.

Against the backdrop of a repressive martial law in Taiwan, Lu's various prison terms were carried out in impossibly inhuman conditions leaving him with broken foot-bones and psychological scars that will last a lifetime. That he saw the Light in such an environment is probably reason enough for all the fuss he manages to drum up 26 years after his release. The president of Taiwan honored him last November as one of the country's 10 greatest contributors to society.

In his office, a small elevated inner-chamber separated from a slightly larger anteroom by Japanese-style screen doors, Pastor Lu attributes his 'turning point' to the 500 letters of inspiration and encouragement he received during the final years of his prison term. These letters were from a young, newly-converted Christian woman who happened to be the sister of a former high school classmate. Following his release, Pastor Lu joined a seminary to train for his new life

in "service of the Lord." His epistolary companion joined him at the seminary and later they were married.

That was one happy ending quickly achieved. The other ending – to make peace with his hometown of Wuku (in Taipei County), was harder in coming. The people of Wuku saw Pastor Lu as the local thug, the one who had terrorized them for years. This was a prodigal son they were reluctant to embrace. He badly needed that embrace, for Wuku had no churches then and a well-known preacher and religious guide for Pastor Lu wanted him to become Wuku's pastor and establish the town's first church.

He says his prayers, hard work, and genuine desire to be different finally won the townspeople over and, in time, Wuku's first church grew from a congregation of zero to 300.

In his office, Pastor Lu has a large corkboard covered with photographs showing him first as a young boy, then as a gun-toting Bamboo Union tough and finally as Pastor Lu the convert with his wife and family. Possibly because his story has that winning combination of heroism, romance and really good luck, it has been instrumental in helping him attract followers to his Planting Church. At his seminary and through his 40 churches scattered around Taiwan (and 500 'church points' in Mainland China with whom Pastor Lu hopes Taiwan will one day peacefully reunite), Pastor Lu – who later earned doctorates in theology and education from Texas University – has managed to win over scores of believers. "I had visited other churches as a child" says Bruce, a young student at the Planting Seminary with a masters in accounting, and suicidal tendencies so intense they would not allow him to live a normal life. "But with Dr. Lu it is different – he has helped me in self-betterment."

Predictably, the majority of Pastor Lu's believers, like Bruce, have had more than a few hard knocks in their lives. Any pastor preaching any religion anywhere in the world can tell you how terribly difficult it is to make rich, successful, beautiful young people get down on their soft knees and thank God for the sunshine and the flowers, and how much more terribly difficult it is to get them to actually part with some of their wealth for God's good work — a difficulty pastor Lu is too familiar with.

"Here in Taiwan it is difficult work and to win over more followers because the people are comfortable and free -- no struggle. They can say what they want, so they do not face difficulties. But in mainland China where it is difficult, where everyone is not so free, over there people are ready to believe and worship."

So there you have it – God's own dilemma – but Pastor David Lu is working on it. And if he uses the same determination that helped him overcome a terrible past and build a church that reaches out to troubled souls everywhere, he will crack it, give or take a couple more rib-eyes at St. Paul Steakhouse in good ole' Jhongli.

Poems

by Miriam Easterling

Hallowed

This chapel can stir me a reverie,
Pouring my past into my present bowl.
I recollect an anxious tot pawing
Eagerly through Creator praising, soul
Saving Hymns. Small eyes peer at words before
A simple visage. Through sounds exotic,
These carols are carved into her small core.
Divine melodies become rhetoric.
Now I hear the clamor of clanging tongues;
The tom and snare hammer out common beats,
Complimenting the rusty guitar strums.
Members will rise and fall out of their seats.
I shut eyes and wonder what child binds,
Alleluia to the back of my mind.

In Pisa

Ninety is too divine for us
who work clumsily with thumbs
eyes blinded by the coming night
and feeble minds
more obtuse than right.

On Side Streets

I envy the night-gowned day walkers
dreaming of crystal palaces
while walking leaden streets.

Too awake to open their eyes,
these pajama'd prophets
announce the unrealized idealism of house shoes.

Scaling Walls

Honey-slathered souls
Like Pippi, we scale up walls
sticky, sickly, sweet

A Man from Malta

Being Maltese must be an exhilarating experience these days. Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has just made her fourth visit to the tiny island in the Mediterranean, located just a stone's throw from Sicily.

So why is that a big deal? Well, I recently interviewed artist Derek Murphy, who earned his bachelor's degree in Malta. And it was accepted here in Taiwan as a degree that qualifies him as a native English teacher. In fact, Maltese is the official language of Malta, as is English. Murphy is in fact an American from Portland, Ore. But that's irrelevant now he says.

"I studied philosophy and theology," says Murphy speaking of his four years at the University of Malta. "I was going to study four years there as an artist at the Angel Academy, but the course didn't suit me."

Murphy, 25, is a teacher, but he is also an avid oil painter with religious themes—though it was not instantly obvious when I looked at his paintings the first time we met at his home in Tainan City. Actually, my first encounter with Murphy was when he had just flooded his living room with an inch of water intended for his fish-tank.

"I fell asleep and woke up to a flooded living room," he said without batting an eye. "It took me two hours to mop it up. I almost electrocuted myself with the light in the fish tank."

It's a beautiful early November afternoon in Tainan and Murphy and I are eating at one of the few cafés on Haian Road, which has been dubbed "Art Street" in Tainan because of its intermittent yet permanent, artistic displays. One of them appears to be a reverse blueprint of an interior house design highlighted by fluorescent black light at night. Another is a wall of 8x10 framed pictures. He seems very much at ease in this neighborhood.

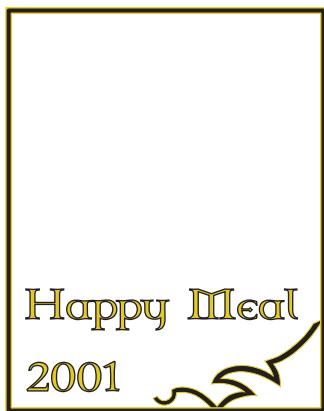
"Am I an xpat for life? Did I say that?" Murphy says, after I told him it was on his website. "Yeah, probably. Life (in America), seems to have so much more expectations. It's so much easier to become embroiled. I would probably stay in Asia. I have been here for two years. I have a nice girlfriend, Taiwanese."

"Teach....? Probably. I have to get a career doing something."

Perhaps this is an acknowledgment that he will not become a career artist. But we eventually start talking about his paintings, one of which, a smiling Buddha holding a milkshake, hamburger and fries, was available locally in February for a brief time as a cheap poster.

"I printed about 1,000 of those and I sold about five," he says. "I didn't expect any reaction. I do it so people will question their beliefs, kind of," he says about his art. "People might think it's offensive. Some of my Christian art is like that. My friends and family think it's great, but don't want me to put it on my website."

The Buddha poster may have sold better otherwise, but the Armory, a pub in Tainan City, thought it best to sell it 'under the counter.' However, the Taiwanese who have seen my copy on my living room wall seem to enjoy it and wonder where they can get a copy.

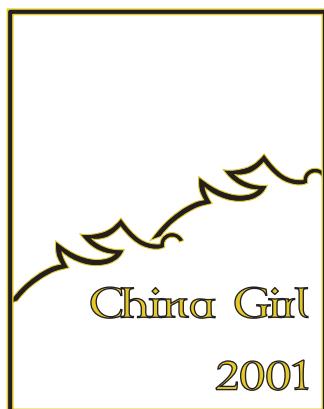


Although Murphy has precious few paintings on his wall at his house, his website (www.derekmurphy.org), has two very impressive galleries. The images he has created, although abstract, look fantastic in their digital form. His religious themes include a painting of a corkscrew on a cross and a First Communion depicting two adolescent girls performing fellatio on either end of a crucifix. Why would anyone find this offensive?



"Religion tells you a certain way to look at it," Murphy explains. "Each religion has its own god. There's some room for interpretation. I'm still deeply fascinated with religion. I like Christianity," he says when cornered on a specific religion. "I just don't believe it."

In addition to the Happy Meal Buddha, other Murphy paintings do much to stimulate thought. Such as the Sex Dispenser, where a statue of a naked woman allows sexual indulgence in the form of a coin operated dummy; China Girl, whose fingers are entwined in circular Celtic knot-work; and Mandress, which has a half-naked woman using two live men as a dress.



One of the other less obviously "themed" paintings is Red Girl, which comes across simply as modern art but is nonetheless striking in its design. Murphy has been painting for seven years and his art is available at very reasonable prices through his website. Numerous young musicians and artists have had much success selling their art online rather than using traditional channels that involve more time and money. Perhaps that would explain how Murphy finds time to write his book, also themed on religion.

"I've been writing a book on the astro-foundations of Christian myth," he says casually. "For them, Christian myth is offensive. For them, the bible is how it happened. I studied this for years. And what I'm trying to do is write this book in 'normal' terms – not academic," he explained. "You have to be a biblical (expert) to understand academics."

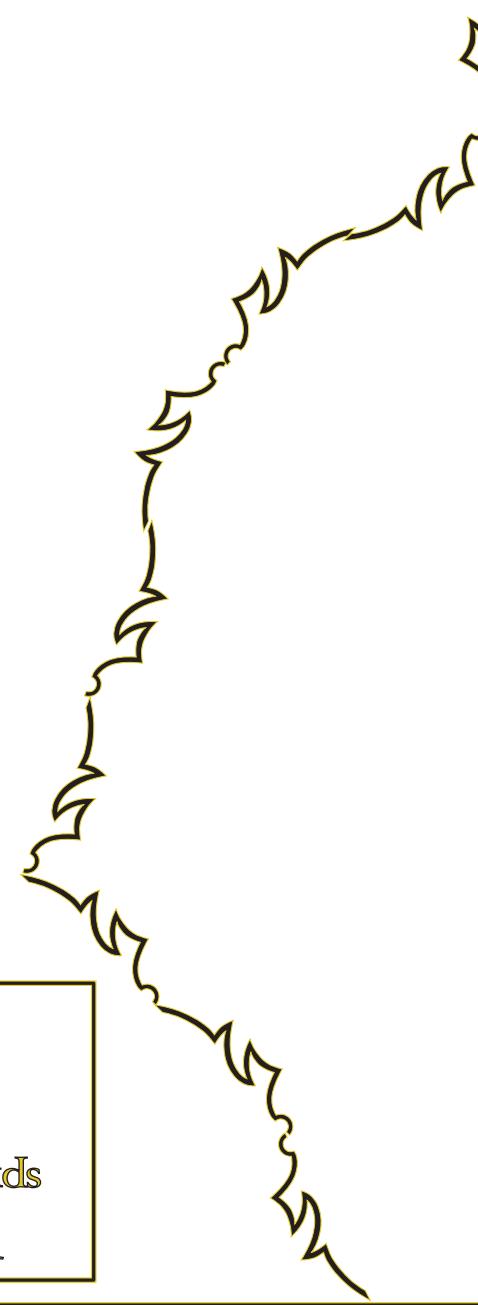
"I'm still deeply fascinated with religion. I'm not orthodox. But spiritual I guess...I hate that term," he adds after a moment. "Everything that is not Christian is pagan."







Hands
2001



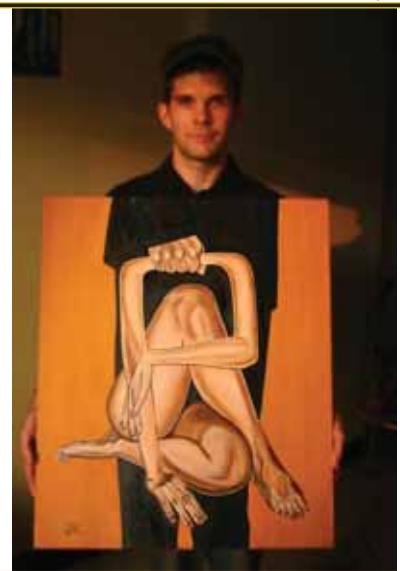
Café au Lait, 2004



Cross & Snake, 2004



Briefcase, 2005



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Tang-ki play an enchanted and morbid role in the spiritual life of the Taiwanese people. They are spirit mediums that become possessed by gods and flagellate themselves until drenched in blood as proof of the divinity within. Their counsel is sought by the pious, and the desperate, when in need of advice from the gods. Tang-ki are, according to Taiwanese religion, the vessel that connects our earthly souls to that grander world of jinxes, wandering spirits, and enchanted deities in which most Taiwanese people believe.

- Most communities have several Tang-ki who dispense advice and 'perform' on religious occasions
- Tang-ki is a southern Fujinese term defined as "divining child"
- Tang-ki are people (mostly men) who regularly are possessed by a god
- Tang-ki are people whose natural life is thought to be short, but have been granted an extension to serve their god
- Nearly all Tang-ki don't want to become Tang-ki and try to persuade the possessing god to select someone else or seek spiritual help to avoid this fate
- While possessed, Tang-ki usually engage in macabre displays of self-mutilation
- Performances include: singing, dancing, inhaling incense, cleansing, fire walking, climbing sword ladders, face piercing, and most commonly, self-flagellation
- The facts that 1) Tang-ki seem to feel no pain when they mutilate their bodies; 2) the wounds don't become infected and; 3) the wounds heal quickly and all are viewed as evidence of divine intervention
- When flagellating, Tang-ki most often hit their upper back and less frequently their forehead
- Tang-ki use 6 self-mutilating tools: 1) octagonal spiked stick; 2) axe; 3) red mace (also known as the "heavenly red tangerine"); 4) sword; 5) swordfish nose; 6) long, knitting-like needles
- Tang-ki fill the roles of personal and religious advisor, as people come to Tang-ki to speak to a god about their problems
- Most Tang-ki make very little money. There are few professional Tang-ki
- Tang-ki are, according to one anthropologist, "humble people who have quite profound understandings of human spirituality and human psychology"
- Tang-ki are low-level mediums. They are usually only possessed by one spirit or god and have little control over the possession
- High-level mediums -- Tōng-líng zhè (1st 3rd 4th tones) – who can contact numerous ghosts and gods – can earn exorbitant amounts of money up to NT\$10,000 or more per job
- There are unique places known as zhōu líng shān (3rd 2nd 1st tones) that are said to give ordinary people the ability to become possessed like Tang-ki

Sources

An Interview with Charles Stafford from Fathom.com

Taiwanese Spirit Mediumship: An Explanation by Peter Huston

Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors by David K. Jordan

Jackson Kuo - Taiwanese artist and teacher

For a more comprehensive list of sources with links go to www.xpatmag.com

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By Matt Gibson

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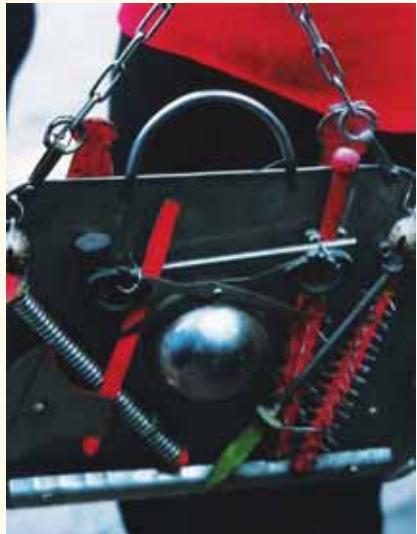


spiritual

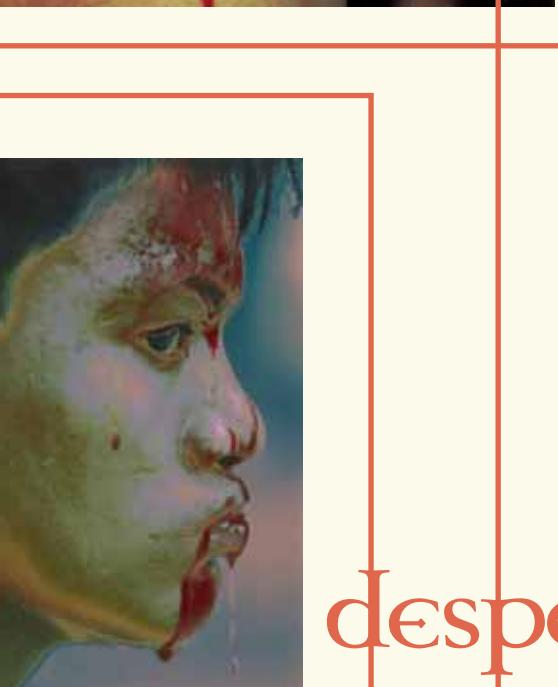




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Photo by Richard Matheron



Faithful

By D.Eply
Artwork by Kerrt Dylan



All my life I've been faithful to all of my partners. Not once have I cheated on a lover. In fact, I'd never been party to infidelity in any form until I met Ariana.

I met Ariana while writing an article about the bakery where she worked. She was the resident English-speaker.

She looked like a descendent of oriental royalty. Her features were flat and angular and her mouth petit. A fountain of shimmering black hair flowed from her scalp, the tips of the flaxen strands grazing her hips. But, as with all exotic beauty, the strength of her magnetism lay in her eyes – two large droplets of oily night on dual cream canvases. Her small stature and traditional beauty coupled with an unassuming manner bathed her in an aura of angelic innocence.

I interviewed the manager while Ariana translated with impressive proficiency. After we finished the interview the boss left, but we continued talking. The conversation turned to traveling. She'd been to Europe. She spoke two languages other than English and Chinese. German was her favorite, but she picked an Italian name. She told me that she would be studying in Australia the following autumn.

Now, I admire a cultured person. I also have a serious weakness for intellectual women. But the fact that she would be leaving, above all her other desirable traits, caused my gut to corkscrew with a painful longing.

You see, I'd recently separated from my longtime girlfriend and wasn't eager to start another serious relationship. But, a fling with a sensuous intellectual goddess was exactly what I needed to lift me from the pit of self-deprecation resulting from my relationship withdrawal. Unfortunately, during our conversation she mentioned that she had a boyfriend (hence the British accent).

It was too much for me. I had to escape the lusty torture that was being near this incredibly desirable, yet unavailable, creature. I suddenly announced that I had to leave right away to meet my deadline. As I turned to complete my desperate evasion, she calmly inquired, "How long have you been in Hsinchu?"

"I dunno. About eight months."

"Maybe I could show you around sometime," she said.

"Sure." I replied and gave her my phone number.

When I told my roommate Denise, she was shocked.

"She has a boyfriend?" She asked. "Are you really going to see her?"

"Well, things have been pretty boring lately." I mused. "I could use some drama. Besides, what will I ever write about if I don't act a little reckless?"

My recklessness later turned out to be illusory. On our first date Ariana explained that she didn't actually have a boyfriend. They'd recently broken up. Her reference to him had been a slip of the tongue.

Even though she didn't have a boyfriend, my hopes of drama, as you will see, were more than realized.

The first surprise was Ariana's age. The assuredness with which she carried herself and the knowledge of language she displayed in our first encounter convinced me that she was

a university graduate. But, a couple of weeks after we started seeing each she told me that she'd recently completed high school. She was eighteen. I, pushing thirty, had reservations about continuing the affair but, as it was to be temporary anyways, I let it slide. Besides, after the first time we slept together (before I knew her age), I could hardly consider breaking it off. She was an insatiable vixen in bed.

From the beginning I made it very clear to Ariana that, because I was on the rebound from a long-term relationship, and she would be leaving, we could not be a serious couple. She wouldn't be my girlfriend.

She seemed, to my surprise, to be fine with this arrangement. She actually thought it was novel. She'd gleefully refer to me as her 'sex buddy'. I figured this was because she was still hung-up on her ex-boyfriend. They still spent time together occasionally and she spoke of him often. I asked her once or twice if she was still sleeping with him.

"No," she would reply simply. "He's given up sex."

Ariana started dating Ahmed when she was sixteen. He was her German tutor. He was forty-two years old.

The reason they'd broken up was because over the two years they were together he gradually became more immersed in his Muslim heritage. After he returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca (about a month before I met Ariana) he announced that he would no longer sleep with her unless they were married.

Ariana wouldn't stand for that. She enjoyed sex too much. She demanded to get married. But because he was black, Ariana's parents hated Ahmed. Marriage was out of the question. Locked within the boundaries of three bull-headed adults, Ariana found the lifeblood choked from their relationship. Still, she wanted the union to continue, but he, being older and more practical minded, saw the irreconcilable nature of their problems and put an end to it.

To tell you the truth, I would've preferred that they had still been sleeping together. Then I could've slept around without concern for Ariana's feelings.

Ariana's faithfulness, though, didn't stop me from finding another lover. She was a beautiful Indonesian girl attracted by my glossy complexion. It was the closest I ever came to cheating on a girlfriend and it was disgraceful. The sex was uncomfortable and awkward and the next morning, hung-over and exhausted, a chasm of regret erupted inside my chest.



I deplored what I had done to the pit of my nauseous stomach for the hurt it would cause Ariana. I knew then that I didn't want to sleep with anyone else. I only wanted to be with Ariana, but I was unsure about how to handle the situation. I wouldn't lie, but I didn't want to volunteer the information either. So, I decided to keep quiet until she forced my hand. Quite predictably, three days later (the next time I saw her) Ariana came bounding into my apartment. She gleefully announced that it was her birthday and tore off my clothes. Later, while lying exhausted in bed, she inquired whether I had slept with anybody else.

I told her I had.

I felt like a disgusting masochist as I sat there, watching her begin to quiver, eyes wide with disbelief, and lower her face into the comforter and erupt into orgiastic sobs.

I apologized fervently. I told her that I didn't want to sleep with anybody else again -- I only wanted her. But the damage was done. Until our final day she never forgave me for what she referred to for the remainder of our relationship as her 'birthday present'.

But, as time passed, things returned to normal. In fact, they improved. Guilt over my quasi-infidelity spurred me to start doing special things for Ariana: bring her chocolates when I'd pick her up, cook her extravagant dinners, or put off work to spend more time with her. My tryst actually brought us closer.

Then, one day, I received a queer email. The name on it was Mike. The e-mail subject line read, "Your new whore" and the body read: "be sure to use rubbers with this one lol." It contained a video attachment. The video was of Ariana, alone in her parents washroom, showing Mike what she'd like him to do to her. The next day I received a second email, which contained pictures.

I wasn't upset by the video. I'm pretty non-judgmental about how people choose to express their sexuality. And it wasn't an issue for our relationship because the video was obviously from before Ariana and I had met (her hair was very short in the video). But I didn't want this weirdo emailing me so I called Ariana. She came over right away. She was embarrassed. She told me that Mike was a former 'keypal' from the U.S. whom she'd had an online relationship with. Now he was obsessed with her. She was afraid to stop talking to him because he'd threatened to kill himself.

She showed me some of their correspondence. He was grossly abusive. He called her a 'filthy slut', 'whore', and talked about her 'sucking my infected cum'. The guy was obviously a basement dwelling,

Twinkie eating, Internet addicted loser.

He e-mailed me regularly. He told me she was sleeping around and that I shouldn't trust her. He said that she was still with her ex-boyfriend and that he was out looking for me. He was obviously trying to break us up.

Finally, I told Ariana to email Mike and tell him that I'd broken up with her because of his e-mails, and that she hated him and wouldn't talk to him any more. That way he'd think he got what he wanted and leave us alone. I also told her that if she talked to him again our relationship would be over.

It worked. The e-mails stopped.

After that we started seeing each other more. Two or three nights a week we'd stay up talking the travels I'd fund with the money I was making teaching English, and Ariana's future studies in Australia, and make voracious love. It was an immaculate time. It was a warm spring, we both had prospects for the future, and our relationship was expanding like a galaxy.

We made plans to take a final trip together at the end of July before she left. We were going to load up my motorbike and spend nine days touring the island. But, three days before our trip, as is common to field mice, artistic hobos, and couples planning adventures, our plans were violently skewed.

Wednesday night we watched a movie on my laptop in my bedroom. Afterwards I went to sleep. Ariana stayed up to check her email. When I woke up in the morning my computer was still on. I usually keep my desktop clean – nothing except for the recycling bin – but this morning there was a single white and blue text document icon. I opened it. I almost puked. It was a transcript of the chat conversation that Ariana had with Mike the night before. During the conversation he got jealous and let fly a string of his trademark grotesque abuses. To calm him, Ariana told Mike that she was only with me "for some cock".

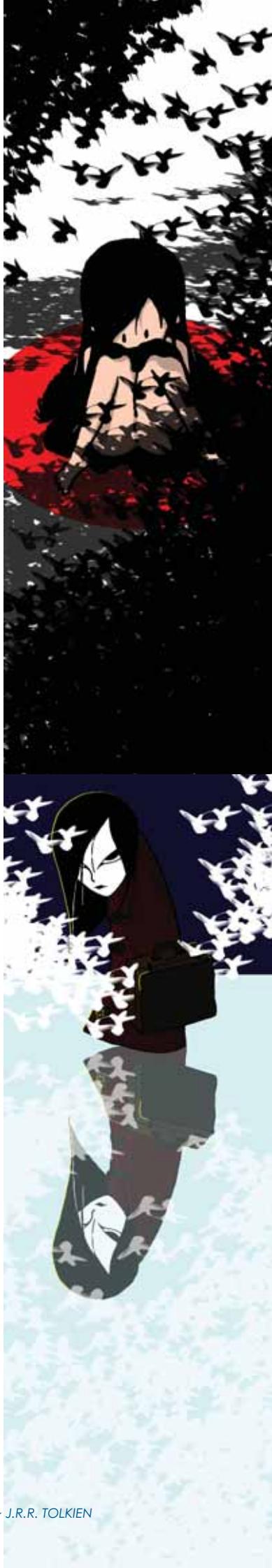
I felt duped. How could I have let this girl play me so easily? I woke her up and confronted her.

"What the fuck is this?"

"What?"

"What do you think? Don't you remember me telling you that it would be over if you talked to this guy again?"

"No," she replied with giant worried eyes. "No, I don't remember. I'm sorry." A thin film coated her eyes making them glisten in the dark.



"What about these things you wrote here?" I opened the file on my computer. "You're only with me for some cock?"

"I was just trying to calm him down."

"Why do you even care about this guy anyways? Look at the shit he calls you: slut, whore, cunt. Why the fuck do you talk to this guy?"

It was a rhetorical question. I knew the answer. From what little she told me I deduced that Ariana had a disgustingly twisted family. Her mother was manic-depressive and her father abusive. Ariana told me that one day when they were out her father pointed to a tall apartment building and told her that he wanted to drop her off of it because she was so much trouble. He told her he could get away with it because he had friends in the police department. She said that he hit her occasionally. I found out later that her father beat her regularly, sometimes even in public. When Ariana was six years old her mother, by her own admission, held a meat cleaver over her head and threatened to chop it off. And these are only the few examples that I was privy too. I could only imagine the other torments her psychotic family had subjected her to all these years.

In some morbid way Ariana probably felt that Mike's outbursts were normal -- that they showed that he cared. Because of her father's unyielding abuse Ariana yearned for male acceptance. The more a man degraded her the more she vied for his approval.

But, after reading that conversation, and seeing her lie, I could muster no sympathy.

"Fucking Christ, Ariana. Go home. I'm going on the trip alone," I said.

I pulled her out of bed, carried her things down to the parking garage, and put them on her scooter.

"Can you forgive me?" She asked, weeping.

"I have to think about it."

That weekend I rode my bike up to Taichung and then across the mountains to Taroko Gorge. I wandered through the gargantuan crevice in contemplative silence. "She's just a kid." I decided. "Of course she's going to make mistakes. Besides, she's leaving soon."

I called her from my cell and told her that she could still join me if she wanted to. She took the train to Hualien the next day.

Those days together cruising carefree down

the coastal highway were among the happiest I've known since I landed on this overgrown reef. Having abandoned my anger, and knowing that we had little time left, my affection for Ariana swelled. We spent nights in my tent wrapped in each other's heat and our days exploring the spots that piqued our fancy along the sun-drenched coast. Our need to forget the past and ignore the future forced us to live in the sublime present of beaches, jungles, and late summer nights, driving our relationship to an ecstatic peak.

But it couldn't last. The night we returned, as Ariana prepared to go home, her mother called. She told Ariana not to come home. Her father was furious that she had left for so long. If she went back he was going to beat her.

Moreover, he was determined to ruin Ariana's trip. He told her he wouldn't allow her to go to Australia. He demanded her ticket, passport, and traveler's checks. He said he was going to go to the police and tell them that she wasn't allowed to leave the country. We knew that he couldn't legally stop her, but we had to get into her house and get her luggage and documents, so we snuck in the next day when he was at work and smuggled her things back to my apartment.

It seemed that things were going to be okay...until that fateful Friday three days before her departure. That evening I went out for a beer with friends at a bar near my house and Ariana stayed home. I came home a couple of hours later but Ariana didn't hear me come in. I walked into my office where she was using my computer. On the screen was a chat conversation. It was Mike. He was letting loose with one of his usual verbal assaults. I stood there a moment before Ariana turned and saw me and quickly closed the window.

I was fuming. Ariana fuelled my anger by denying that she was talking to him. For hours she cried, pleaded, and lied. Finally, I told her to get her things.

I carried her luggage to her scooter and loaded it, again. She was sobbing so profusely that I drove alongside her to make sure she didn't crash. At her house I told her we were through and left her weeping in the street, clutching her luggage.

But that's not the end of the story. Oh, no. It gets better.

A week later a friend pulled me aside at a party. He told me solemnly that he'd met a guy that said he knew Ariana because he was a friend of her boyfriend. The guy hadn't been talking about me. He was talking about her 'ex'.

By way of acquaintances I got a hold of Ariana's boyfriend's phone number and called him. He was taken aback. The conversation was oddly friendly. We shared a strange bond. We had a long talk about Ariana and why she did what she did. It was he who told me about her family.

I pictured her leaving my house early on Sunday evenings (as she always did because I go to sleep early) and zipping on her scooter across the deserted streets of Hsinchu to his house. I thought about all the crying, hurt, and guilt of the Indonesian-girl episode. But most of all I remembered what I'd told my roommate about my decision to date Ariana despite the fact that she had a boyfriend:

"I could use some drama. Besides, what will I ever write about if I don't act a little reckless?"



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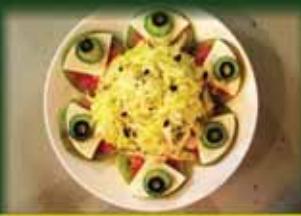
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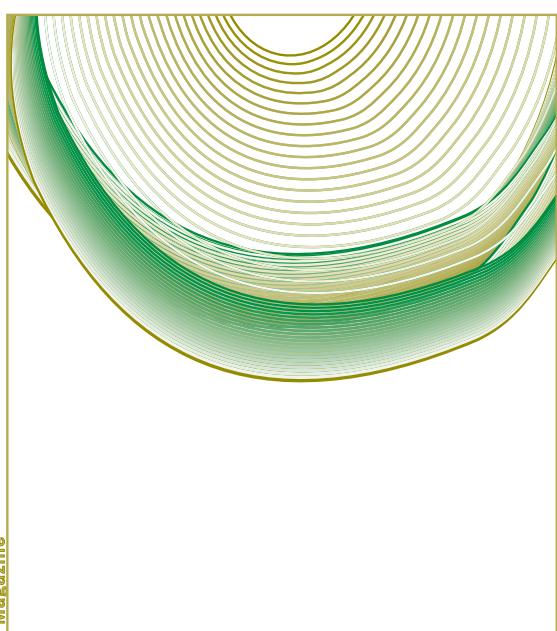
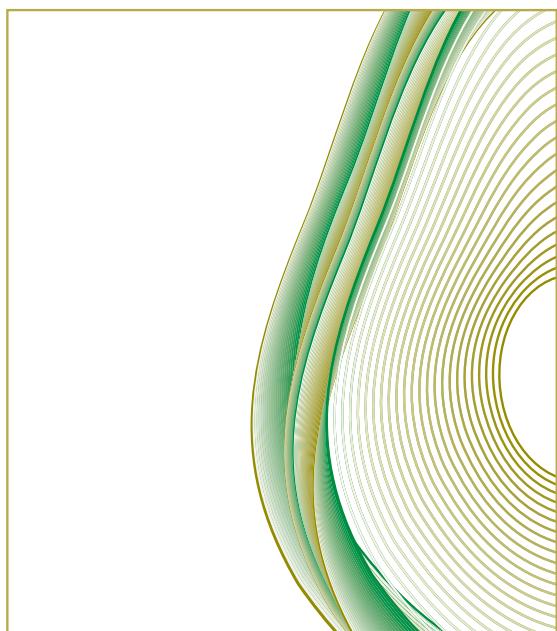
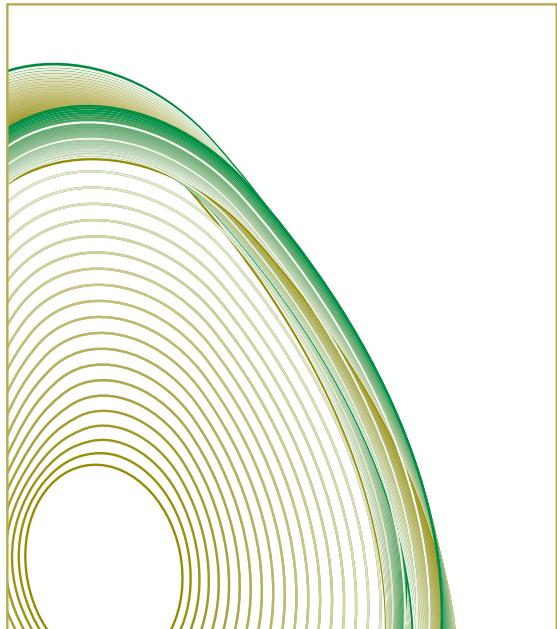
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The Avocado Parables

By Pastor Duck
Artwork by Dennis Huang

Every summer in Kaohsiung the avocadoes appear. I don't know where they come from, but I see them in the markets at the fruit sellers who don't mind taking a chance on something considered "exotic". They begin the season deep green, and become more and more purple as time passes. At one busy intersection there is a fellow selling them off the back of his pickup truck. It was from him that I acquired my first ones a few years ago. They were especially precious to me because they reminded me of home and youth.

I was born and grew up in Los Angeles, California –a city of sun, smog and traffic. It is the "Kaohsiung of California". The humidity is a bit higher here, but otherwise I'm climatically at home. I was lulled into complacency about it all until avocadoes came back into my life. The things one makes with them, especially guacamole, speak to me as true "soul food". I came to realize that more than just the avocadoes had been removed from my life when I crossed the Pacific. And in this new environment, avocadoes taught me lessons that I never learned when they were a normal part of my California life.

My prime reason for purchasing an avocado is not to view it (I'm not a "still life" painter). Neither is it to appreciate the soft texture or pleasant color of its insides. An avocado is shaped like an oversized pear with a skin that is tough and waxy. I have a poor sense of smell, and can't recall what one of them smells like "in the shell", but by the time they reach the market they've had any natural scent plus several days accumulation of insecticide washed off of them.

The reason for buying one is not to appreciate it aesthetically; it is to "cut it, gut it, and eat it", preferably fresh with a dash of salt, diced into a salad or mashed into a paste and mixed with chopped tomatoes and spices.

The avocado purchaser sells this soft and flavorful fruit with its tough shell and seed, which is somewhat larger than a walnut. I've already described what to do with the soft part. I suppose the shell could be

turned into some sort of bowls for a centerpiece, though not on my table. The seed most often goes the way of those from Halloween pumpkins or Independence Day watermelons. But it need not. The seed of an avocado is a gift that is often overlooked. With modest investment of time and interest, it can be germinated and grown into a pleasant houseplant with beautiful leaves and a straight stem.

Most avocado seeds in Taiwan end up in the garbage. Doing much more than dumping them into the household waste is just not considered of value.

Working with an avocado seed doesn't add to the family's wealth. There's no "bottom line benefit" to be derived from an avocado seed. It's the easily overlooked gift in the package. Other things in life come with easily overlooked gifts. When the sun rises every morning, it heralds another often-dreaded set of encounters at work, school, home, or nursing home. It also contains the promise of potential new beginnings, if we are willing to take them. Likewise, faith is sometimes the companion gift to some sort of religious practice, and hope is the hidden gift inside of religious faith.

Often in life we accept only the "soft part of the avocado" and throw out the "seed" because we are unwilling to spend the modest amount of time and effort which yield results like: making new beginnings; accepting the faith that is wrapped in the religion; or daring to hope for what we say we believe.

Avocado trees grow on my window ledges.

One of the pleasant memories I have from childhood is of a jelly glass on the windowsill over the kitchen sink. The glass was full of water to the brim, and suspended therein, held by three or four toothpicks stuck into its flesh, was an avocado seed with roots drooping downward and a shoot stretching toward the ceiling. The memory of my mother's experiments with houseplants was enough to get me started on some of my own when I had seeds and opportunities.

I learned that it's a bit more complicated than jelly glasses, toothpicks,

and sunlight. A book I consulted (and later misplaced), told about germinating in the dark until the roots grew out' and explained which end of the seed was "up". I still seem to get the up part wrong much of the time, and have found the dark to be not all that necessary, but whatever it is, the process takes a bit of trouble. Not much, but some. Just putting toothpicks into the seeds and hanging them in the water wasn't enough to get plants. It takes time to wait for the mysterious process by which they germinate and sprout. It can be facilitated if one remembers which end of the seed is up, but I've sprouted them in both directions.

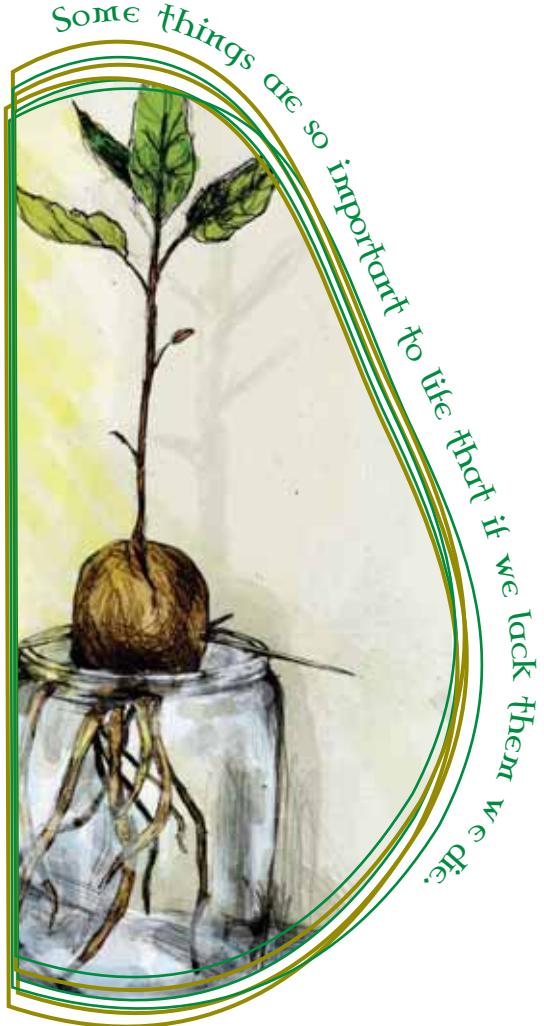
Occasionally I would wait and wait for a seed, even see it split open, but notice that the water in which it sat had an oily look and a rancid smell. That was a seed that had died. I've no idea why it died when its neighbors had not. But it happened.

So many of the things we do in life do not result in what we expected or hoped for. Some years ago, I read about the complexity of the simplest of human biological processes, and at how many steps along the way something can go wrong. I was brought to the realization that it is not unusual for someone to be of ill health, even to have cancer. What is amazing is that many of us are free of these conditions. Human fertility is a similar mystery. So much can go wrong along the way to conception, and especially between that moment and birth, that it's a miracle any of are ever born!

I earn my living as a missionary, hoping to engender faith in people. Several times in the past century there have been movements to evangelize the entire world "in this generation" or "before the end of the century" or by some other date. The birth of faith is a mystery like the germination of an avocado seed. I hope that every avocado seed I start can grow into a tree. I desire that every person with whom I speak about Jesus Christ will become a believer; I know that the results might not be fruitful. Nevertheless, I keep starting those trees, and I keep sharing that gospel.

After an avocado seed grows roots and shoots in a glass of water, it needs to be put into some soil. Kaohsiung presents a problem in that area, for though it is an "other than clean" place, it is basically concrete and asphalt. There is precious little soil to go and dig up. I went up onto the roof of the building where we live and found some sand that had been left after someone did a plastering job, and other soil-like materials that had dropped out of the air. This I put into several pots and





proceeded to "plant" my seeds.

They grew slowly. I guess there was little nourishment in the sand and whatnot into which I had placed them. Nothing else grew in that soil, not even weeds.

Environment matters. When we want someone to become a great symphony musician, we do not train him in a gangsta rap studio. When we want to develop a gangsta rapper, we do not put her in the cathedral choir. The seeds of the avocadoes I planted in that soil will never be great trees producing good fruit if I don't get them into a better environment. Once, when a different plant died from neglect I transplanted one of the struggling avocadoes into its pot, a larger one with soil that came with its previous inhabitant. The thing took off and left its nursery companions behind. Perhaps there is a lesson in this for the development of future musicians, social leaders, and people of faith.

An avocado is a delight. The broad leaves stick out at ninety-degree angles to the stem. So long as they were watered, my plants' leaves had the strength to stand out and

catch all the sunlight that came to them. But they didn't always have water. I put them in a location where there was plenty of light, but neglected to check them every day. Since they were just outside of my bedroom window, I could see them every morning and evening. Sometimes the leaves were nowhere near straight out from the stem. Sometimes they drooped so pitifully that I feared I'd killed the plant. If I was motivated by the sight of them in that condition, I would water them immediately. All too often, I put it off for "a more opportune time". But most often, I got to them eventually, and it was like a miracle. If the water was applied in the morning then by the afternoon they would be standing tall again. If it was watered in the evening the leaves would be ready for the sunlight the next day. I got to believing that water was all they needed.

Some things are so important to life that if we lack them we die. Our bodies may go on living, but that which is "personal" in us just takes a break. During October of 1997 in Taiwan, there was a case of a group of teenagers torturing and killing one of their acquaintances because she had stolen from one of them. The youths who committed these acts had no remorse and stated that the girl who died deserved her end. These people are as good as "dead" in terms of their ability to empathize with other people. Like the water that was denied to my avocadoes, something essential was denied to these young people early on. One wishes it was so simple as watering a plant back to health as to nourish a deprived person back to humanity.

My plants were out on the ledge where they got the afternoon sun. It was good for them. When I remembered to water them, they acted healthy. But there was a problem. They were not growing. I tried watering them more, but it only made more water run out of the bottom of the pots. One day I looked at them closely and felt the leaves. My hands came away dirty.

The same process of urban life that had deposited so much dust on the roof (which I used to fill up some pots), had put a thick film of grit onto the leaves of my plants. They were struggling to get light through a blanket of crud, and to breathe through congested openings. Therapy was needed. I took them one by one into the bathroom and turned the shower on them. A lot of dark stuff washed off the leaves and down the drain. They looked a lot better. And, in the next few weeks they put on a spurt of growth.

We all get coated with the grime of life. I'm not talking about the stuff we wash off with soap during daily (or weekly) baths, but the kind of stuff that adheres to us in a more spiritual or psychological sense. "Washing it off" is work! It requires getting out of the environment where we get coated, and away from responsibilities that just pile more things onto us. Regular retreats and vacations are imperative for people in urban areas. A book about Fiorello LaGuardia, onetime mayor of New York City, pointed to some of the mistakes he made, and noted that they were probably related to the fact that he hated to take vacations. The author opined that if LaGuardia had been like the people of his city and rested from time to time, he could have avoided some mistakes.

We need to get away from time to time, taking part in retreats as participants, not as part of leadership teams or task forces. Even Jesus got away for breaks. His taking advantage of time away gives us permission to take breaks, too.

Real estate speculators say there are three factors to the value of property: location, location, and location. The one I chose for my avocado trees turned out to be deficient. They grew very slowly, even

after being washed. In part because I neglected to water them often enough and the afternoon sun was too bright. The trees were not growing. Previously I'd been willing to accept the blame. My desire was to "fix" them. On a shelf in the kitchen I found a can of chemical plant food that I had acquired some years previous. I figured to "feed my plants" and to do a really good job of it.

Hoping for a big improvement, for big plants, and for big things, I figured to give them a big meal. But I managed to overcome my eagerness for long enough to read the directions on the label. I was somewhat surprised. Into 10 liters of water I was to use only a few cubic centimeters of plant food, and then to water the plants normally with the mixture. The dilution had to fit the situation, lest harm result.

There's a story of a country parson who went to the church on a stormy winter Sunday. The only other person there was the sexton, whose job it was to light the fires to warm the church hall. When the time came for worship to begin there was nobody else. The parson asked the sexton what he thought should be done. The sexton (who also farmed part-time) replied that, even if no cows came in from the pasture at night, he still put out feed for them. So the pastor led and preached the entire service, just as if the congregation had arrived. When the sexton shook his hand as he went out the door, he said to the pastor, "Mind you, I wouldn't put out all the feed."

As we live with people, raise children, or teach anything to anyone, we need to pay attention to the dilution. Not everyone is ready for solid food. Milk may be just the thing we need some times.

Some of my avocado plants are large and are therefore planted in large pots. Others are smaller and occupy smaller pots. But one thing they all need is water. When I've neglected to water them, you might guess which ones suffer the worst. It's not the large ones, but the small ones, which have a smaller amount of moist soil from which to draw moisture.

I'm told that among the scattered communities of Jews around the world there's one in Rangoon, Burma. They have a synagogue, a graveyard, and a small community of like-minded people, but they have little hope for a future. For the past several decades the young people in the community have been unable to find suitable Jewish mates and moved overseas. Those that remain cannot support a rabbi, or even do much with the state of their building.

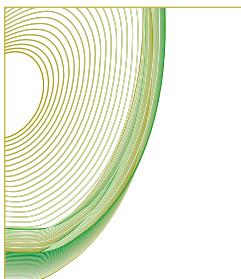
Their only hope is to get more Jews to move into Rangoon. But that is unlikely. Burma (or Myanmar) is not a country into which people have been moving lately. As a consequence of having a



small community, the religious life of these Jews of Burma is arid, whereas those members who emigrated to communities with larger populations of their co-religionists have flourishing religious lives.

There is no doubt of the presence of God with groups big or small. Jesus declared that where two or three were gathered together in his name, he would be among them. But there is also the call for the "big pot" from which our faith can draw nourishment. Not by necessarily being transplanted, but by being nourished from the larger community. Individual believers are well admonished not to forsake gathering together with each other. Local groups of believers also need to participate in events and causes larger than their own particular church or faith group. The plant which lives in its own little pot suffers sooner from the drought, and never grows large.

Avocadoes in Kaohsiung, I would never have thought of it when I first left California to come here. But they've taught me much.



How You Should Have Prepared for Chinese New Year

By Lauren Mack

Artwork by Dennis Huang

The two-week long Lunar New Year holiday began Jan. 29, 2006, and Xpat is here to let you know what you should have done to welcome the Year of the Dog, the 11th year in the 12-year Zodiac cycle to ward off evil spirits. Chinese New Year is steeped in many symbolic ancient traditions, homophonic plays on words, and superstitions. We're going to tell you how you probably cursed yourself with bad luck, and how to avoid the same pitiful fate next year.

Next year you should:

- 1.** Buy flowers. Considered the most important decorative item for the home, flowers are a must. The word for flower in Chinese, "fa," sounds like fortune, "fat." Each flower is significant. Orchids are for fertility, kumquat trees are for wealth and plum blossoms are for the unmarried to find someone. Don't know which to pick? Go with an orange tree because orange, "chang," sounds like abundance, "zhan." Unlike the dead flowers, you can eat the oranges later.
- 2.** Go to the temple. Although it is not a religious holiday, many Taiwanese go to temples to give thanks to their ancestors. So, do as the Taiwanese do and go visit your neighborhood temple.
- 3.** Get a new wardrobe. Why? Just 'cause it's a good excuse to look good on New Year's Day and everyone else is doing it.
- 4.** Clean the house. For the Taiwanese, it's out with the old—literally. Old dirt, literally and figuratively, is swept from the house to prepare for a fresh start in the New Year. Now's the time to do that massive spring cleaning you've been putting off. Superstition dictates you sweep outward toward the door for maximum effect.
- 5.** Get a haircut. Cutting anything from noodles to hair during the holiday is considered bad luck. Hey, you needed a haircut anyway.
- 6.** Get some snazzy decorations. C'mon, you know you've secretly longed for those red and gold envelopes, paper lanterns, fake firecrackers, and red scrolls to decorate your pad. Now you have an excuse to put them up. The red scrolls are especially nice because they include the gold characters for "prosperity, longevity, and happiness" – all wishes you want in the New Year. Tip: Hang the scrolls upside down because the word "dao" sounds like the Chinese word 'arrive'. Hang them in doorways to encourage good fortune's arrival.

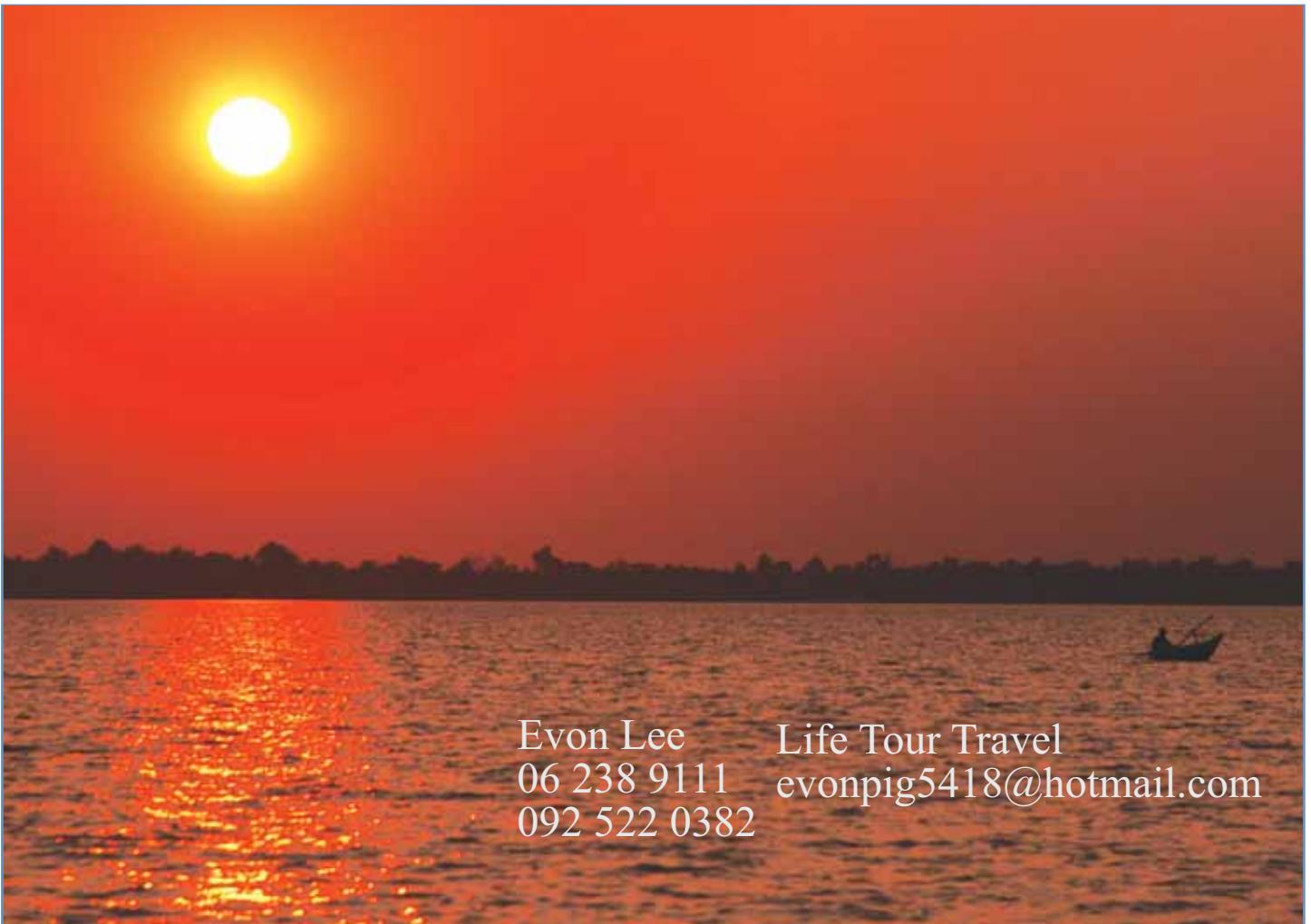


7. Show me the money. On New Year's Day, it's payday. While families visit friends and relatives, children and unmarried adults are given "hong bao" or "lai see" – red envelopes, containing lucky money. The amount of money varies, from \$1 to \$100 or more. So start making friends!

8. Eat up! The majority of the holiday is spent eating large meals and visiting relatives and friends. Whole fish, glutinous rice, and noodles are symbolic food staples. Fish, "fu," is for fortune, "tong yuen," sticky rice ball soup, symbolizes togetherness, and long uncut noodles are for longevity. Breaking anything is bad luck whether it is the fish's skeleton, the noodles, or the plates.

9. Mind your manners. It is customary to bring a housewarming gift to someone's home. We suggest a calendar, orange tree, or "nian gao," Lunar New Year cake, a sweet, sticky dessert similar to pudding and made of glutinous rice, a symbol of cohesiveness.

10. Throw firecrackers. According to legend, a man-eating dragon named Nian, "year," could only be scared away by fire. Thousands of firecrackers are thrown in the streets to scare away the dragon and bad fortune. The more firecrackers the better.



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It Don't Break

By S.R. Ayers

Artwork by Dennis Huang

I was recently in Dharamsala, India (popular destination for Tibetan refugees), to listen to some high-ranking monks from Lhasa. My intention was to get an interview with one or all of them. His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself was there only months ago but alas, I could not get close enough. I didn't get close enough to his buddies either but I didn't come away empty handed.

I was in the back of the auditorium with a Tibetan monk I had befriended named Rinchen. He was going to help me with whatever I didn't understand from the speaker. Behind me was a man in a heavy robe with a shawl wrapped around his neck, coming high on his face to cover his mouth and nose. The upper half of his head that was exposed was pudgy and sweaty and vaguely familiar. I turned back to the front to see if the speaker was on stage yet. When I turned around again to get another quick look at the pudgy man, he was gone.

I still had about 10 minutes before anyone would



be enlightening me so I told Rinchen I would be right back, I needed to use the little monk's room. While I was in there the man in the stall next to me was passing something horrible and deadly.

It was so intense my fight-or-flight instinct was sparked. I felt I had to do something, regardless of it being none of my business. I stepped around the partition with the collar of my T-shirt up over my nose and held out my hand for assistance. I realized that it was the pudgy man. He was squatting down over the basin in the floor and had his robe bunched up under his arms and his shawl undone and over his shoulders. Then it clicked; I recognized him. It was none other than the President of China, Hu Jintao! I couldn't believe my luck.

As he reached out for my hand I pulled it back fast. He tried to stop himself from falling over but his outreached hand slipped into the basin and he toppled over anyway.

"You did that on purpose, you fool!" he screeched.

"It was an accident. Honest. Now listen up, Jintao. I have some questions."

I pulled out my pen and notepad as he re-perched himself over the basin.

"Why are you here? I thought you were just as content as your predecessor with the destruction and oppression of the Tibetan people and their faith."

"Is that what this shindig is for? I was trying to get to the Beastie Boys concert. I must've gotten turned around somewhere."

"Don't toy with me, you snake. This pen and paper can be a guillotine or a prayer depending on the answers I get," I threatened.

Easy



"Alright, alright. I came to see them for myself," he said.

"Who?"

"The Tibetans. They're like a fading memory in China now," he explained. "We've either killed them, destroyed their heritage and backgrounds, relocated them, or they've fled the People's Country. Then I heard of this place. I thought it was a scam but I see now that it's true."

"Your incessant babbling almost makes sense but I still don't understand it" I said. "Make yourself clear, you asshole."

He began to weep lightly, as did I. The difference was that he was overcome with sudden and unexpected emotion; I was overcome with the brutal stink wafting out from his tail end.

"After all we've done...all we've tried...all we broke, bent and maimed...we could not annihilate the Tibetans," he moaned. "Their land is ours, their wealth has long been absorbed into ours, their history is a jagged and bleak falsification that we

feed to our children in hopes that it will erase itself completely and still..."

"And still what?" I said quietly, prompting him.

"And still... they have the audacity to smile; to have no home and laugh; to have many empty chairs at their dinner tables and not cry; to pray amid burned and demolished temples; to have a future even after we've worked so hard to take their past!"

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other for a minute or two, staring down at a spider walking along the floor near the wall.

"I just had to see it for myself," he added finally, like a child scolded for stealing a cookie.

"So what's next?" I asked breaking him out of his self-indulgent state.

He looked up at me with a fresh sparkle in his eye and a devious grin across his toothy mouth and said in a hiss, "We'll just have to try it again with Taiwan, of course. I've got Bush Jr. in my corner this time and we're gonna have us a good ole' party, Texas style."

"You're lying, of course. It could never happen again," I said wondering if it was true.

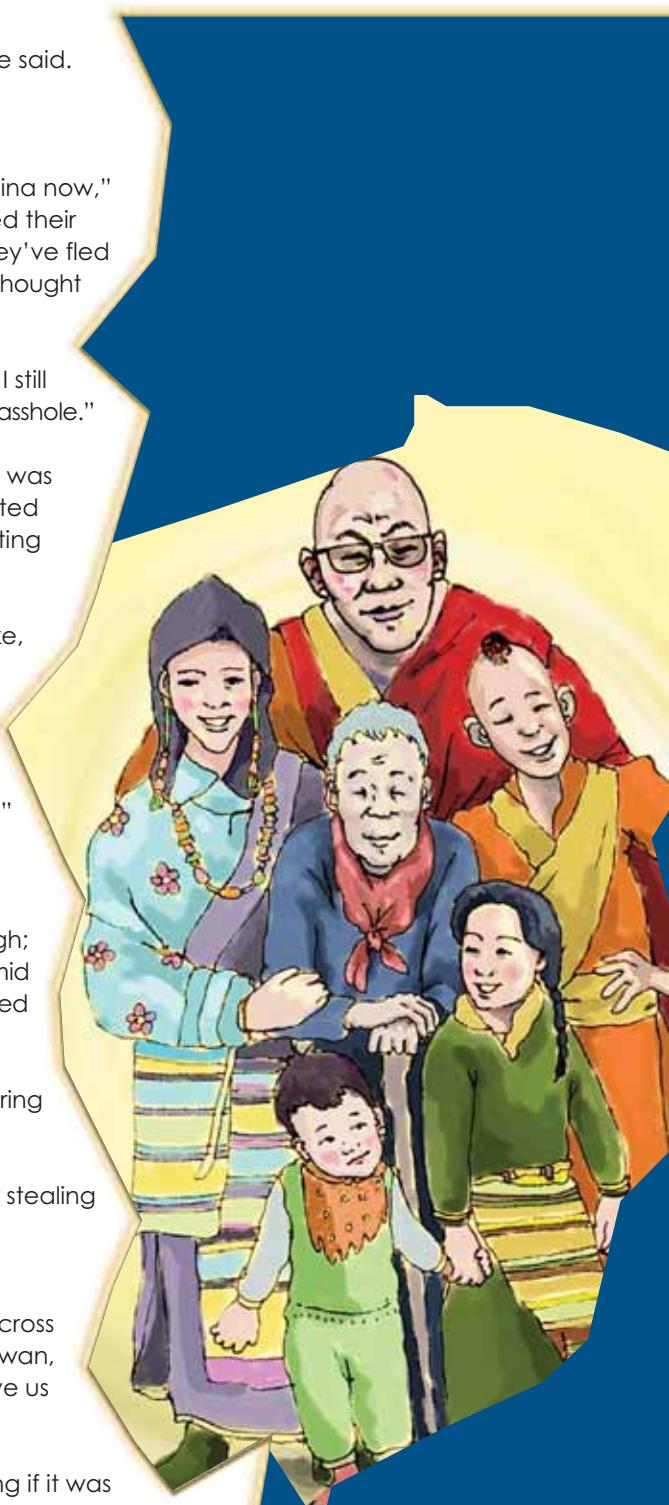
"We met back in 2003 and talked it over. We learn from our mistakes, friend."

I remembered this. In exchange for trade embargoes the U.S. would 'overlook' any pleas that might come down the line for assistance in independence for Taiwan.

I looked him square in the eye and stood proud, letting my T-shirt drop down off my face.

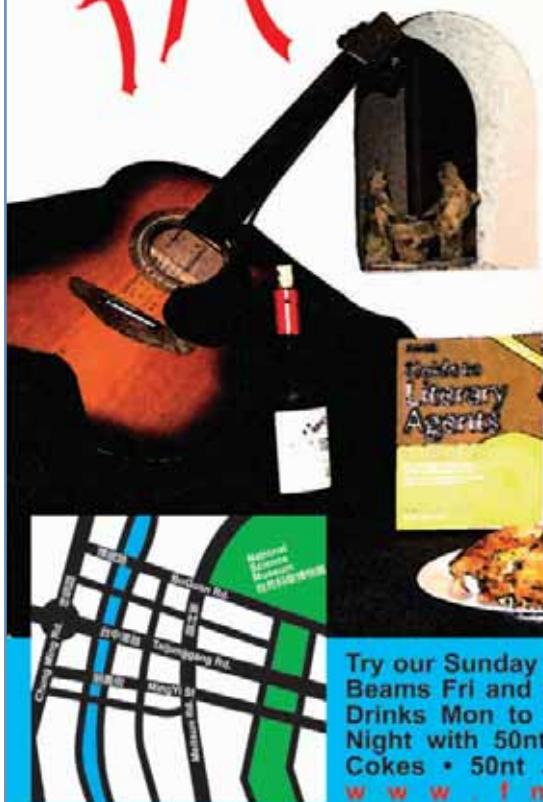
"You're lying again, hate-monger. If you had learned anything then you would not oppress Taiwan's independence as you did in Tibet. If you continue in this way there will be many more moments that find you weeping in a toilet. It's nothing personal; it's just the nature of the world. Farewell, you sick bastard."

I left the bathroom and joined Rinchen in the auditorium. The first speaker had taken the podium and was only past the introductions. I hadn't missed anything.





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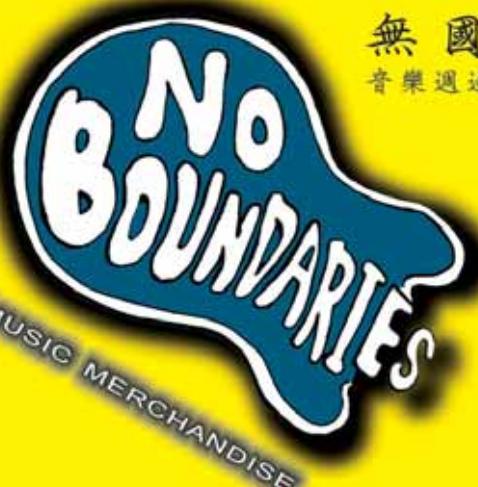
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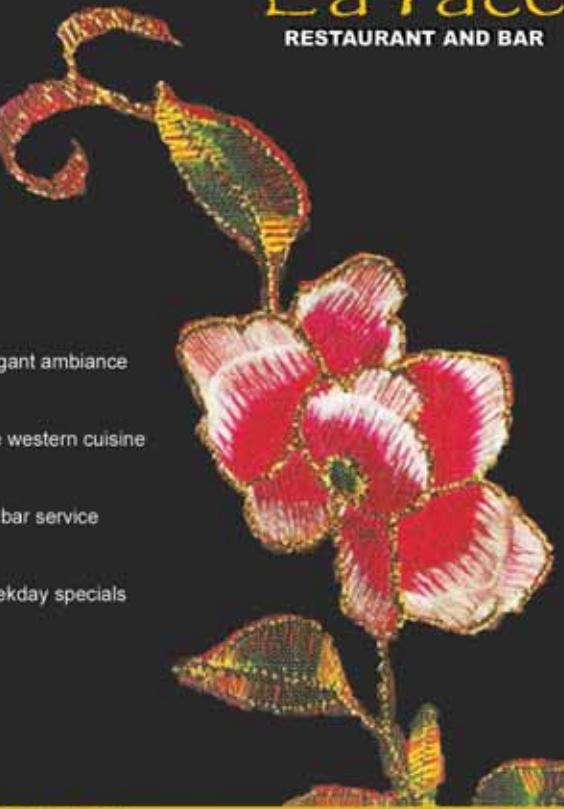
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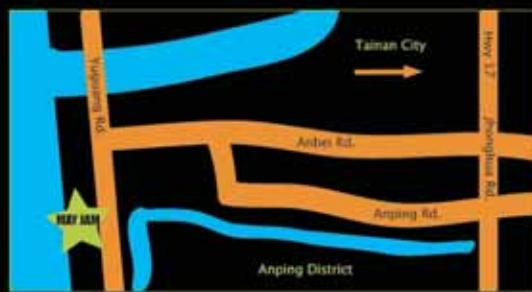
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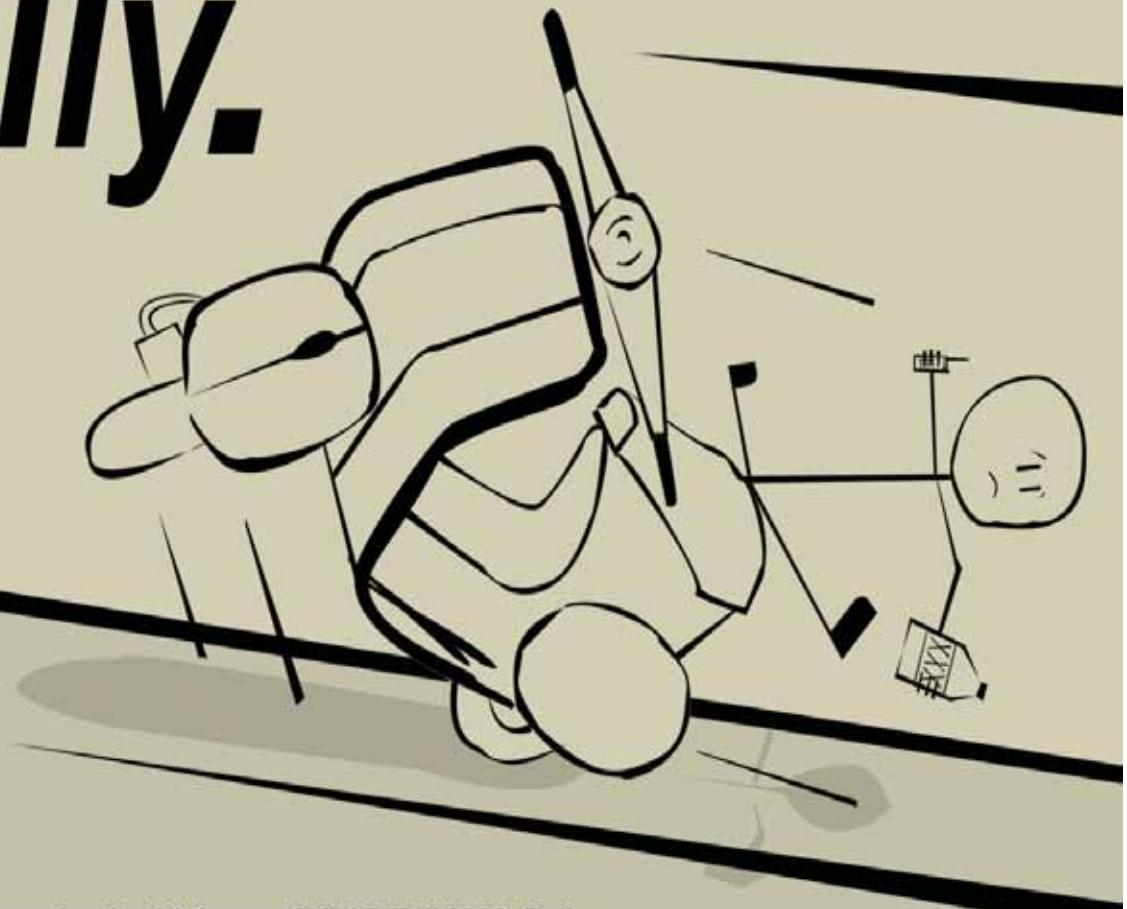
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