



by Anthony J. Venuti

PhD. Student, Traditional Medicine Department

Back in 2006, as a recent graduate with a Masters degree in Chinese Medicine, I decided to move to Taiwan for 'one year' to study the Chinese language. While not critical to practicing the medicine, it just felt to me strange to not understand the language of the modality. Cut to ten years later, and I not only find myself still here but experiencing something new about this incredibly diverse island nearly every day.

Many factors have contributed to my decision in making Taiwan my home for the last decade, but being a man who values his life, I must first point out the biggest, little one. She stands 148cm to my 181cm and 40kg to my 105kg, but from the day I met her, the woman who would later become my wife, has had the most profound influence on my life and my geography. More than anyone she has helped me navigate Taiwan's hectic streets, its foreign culture and most of all, its language.

● Around the island







● Hiking Mt. QiXing

This brings me to the second factor as to why I have stayed in Taiwan so long, that being my serious miscalculation, gross underestimation and sometimes frustratingly painful realization that the Chinese language is hard! Looking back on it now I realize how naïve I was to believe that I could come here and study the language for one year and come away with any kind of usable skills outside simple conversation, never mind the depth that would be needed to delve into the classics and theories of Chinese medicine.

Getting off the plane my first time to Taiwan, without knowing a single phrase of Chinese, my families' sentiments, "you are crazy", were echoing in my head. I made my way to the Information Counter where a very nice woman, in broken English, handed me a map and circled a hotel near Taipei Main Station which I then showed to a taxi driver who shuttled me to where I would spend my first night. Upon arrival at the "hotel", and I use this word lightly, I paid the cabbie his fare and

tipped him 100 NTD, which was met with a huge smile and the man rushing to help unload my bags, then over the top *xie xie, xie xie*, before driving away. Over the next few weeks this scene was reenacted over and over, it was only later that I would discover no one tips the cabbies or waiters, or anyone for that matter. As a New Yorker, failing to tip a cab driver is an offense that could very well get you run over.

Checking in to my room, I was confronted with an issue that would become a recurring theme in my Taiwan adventure, that being some things on this island were just not designed for people my size. No matter which way I lay on the bed my feet would hang off the end, but after a healthy dinner of Pringles and bread from the nearby 7-11, and exhausted from travel, it did not matter much as I lay down and slept for ten hours straight.

The next morning I awoke seriously jet lagged and disoriented, and to my horror, covered in bed bug bites. In the corner of the room on the floor lay my worldly possessions, a back pack, duffel and sleeping bag, and though I had sworn come hell or high water I was going to stick it out in Taiwan for at least one year, my open-ended return ticket to the U.S. was looking pretty good right about then. After a shower, which was my first experience in the 'all in one' bathroom system where you can sit on the toilet, brush your teeth in the sink and shower all at the same time with the added benefit of everything in the room being completely soaked afterwards, I went out to explore. At the Dante's Coffee next to the hotel I learned the invaluable age old form of communication that is hand gesturing. Thank goodness they had



pictures on the menu, I pointed at a breakfast sandwich and a cup of coffee that were both delivered to me with a big smile, even before I tipped the waitress, and things were starting to look up.

It is amazing how clearly I can recall those first few hours in Taipei. Over the next month things would continue to come together. I was able to secure a small apartment and a job teaching English. More importantly I was able to enroll for the upcoming semester at the Mandarin Training Center of National Taiwan Normal University (Shi Da). It was in this classroom setting and on this subject that, for the next several years, I would expend the majority of my time and energy.

Before moving to Taiwan I asked one of my favorite teachers, a native Chinese speaker, for some advice on how to go about studying Chinese. He told me that I should envision myself standing at the base of a VERY tall mountain. Had he told me that the mountain was Everest<sup>2</sup> I may have turned and run in the other direction, but always being a glutton for punishment

and never wanting to back away from a challenge I resolved myself to get to climbing. So I took the first step, back to school, page 1, "ni hao".

This first class was a truly international affair, one Canadian, an Israeli, two Japanese, a Korean, a Russian, a missionary from Africa and this American. Although we were all starting from the same place it quickly became apparent that we were not all at the same level. The gentleman from Africa was preparing to go to China on a mission and he spoke his native dialect along with six other languages. By the end of that first semester when my biggest thrill was being able to recognize 台電大樓 on the sign at my MRT station, this man and the teacher were already engaging in full-on conversations. Had he not been one of the nicest people I had ever met I may have had to hate him. Earlier I said that my expectations for learning Chinese proved to be unreasonable but it became clear that, though Chinese is a skill that with hard work and discipline can be learned, people have very different aptitudes for language. Also, putting those of us who were brought up with the Romanized





alphabet next to Asian students who were taught from birth about characters, stroke order and counts, in a class where reading and writing are as important as speaking is just plain mean.

My teacher had been right, learning Chinese was like mountain climbing, with many peaks and valleys and plateaus to move past. I began my studies in Shi Da's MTC and later moved over to National Taiwan University's (Tai Da) Chinese Language Division (CLD), did several semesters one on one at The Language Institute (TLI), and had countless language exchanges and tutors. Finally I decided I needed to go all in on my studies and enrolled in Tai Da's infamous International Chinese Learning Program (ICLP). One year of some of the most intense study I have undergone to date in any subject, and the saying, 'you get out what you put in', was never truer. Along the way as my Chinese progressed more and more opportunities would present themselves. After several years of study I was given an opportunity to study in the clinic of one of the best zheng gu tui na doctors I have ever seen, but after completing the ICLP the most fortunate door in my career would be opened

for me when I was offered a spot in National Yang Ming Universities, Traditional Medicine Department. My goals when moving to Taiwan were set very high, and I have always had great expectations of myself, but studying for a doctorate in this setting was more than even I could have imagined or hoped for.

The last two and half years have been spent studying along side, who I would consider to be, some of the most brilliant minds in the field of medicine. Once again I have found myself in the position of being at a disadvantage. The language of medicine is a whole different beast, but when faced with the 'sink or swim' scenario there is really only one viable option. With the work being done in this department I would not be at all surprised if one day a Noble Prize was awarded to one of the researchers. I truly believe that some day a compound will be found, or a method developed that will help in the treatment of countless illnesses throughout the world and to have my name in any way associated with this department is not only an honor but will be the highlight of my career.

Bridging the gaps between Chinese and Western



● Practicing my craft



medicine has been one of the greatest barriers to entry for Chinese medicine in becoming a recognized, primary health care option on the world stage. Even with thousands of years of empirical data, proven efficacy and safety, in today's heavily biased Western medical model the tenants of Chinese medicine find it difficult to find their place. Another critical question being tackled by NYMU's Traditional Medicine Department, which is primarily research based, is how to fit Chinese medicine into the Western medical paradigm without compromising, that which makes Chinese medicine unique, its basic principles. Undoubtedly cooperation between the two is the way forward and the development of a "global medicine" would be of the most benefit to the world as a whole. Lofty aspirations to be sure, but to set the bar any less high would be to not live up to the possibilities of the opportunity and do a disservice to all of the hardworking people involved.

The opportunities to study in Taiwan have exceeded my expectations, but I would hate to portray my time here as all work and no play. Over the years I have rowed in a Dragon Boat Festival, circled the island on a motorcycle with my wife on the back, surfed some of the best breaks in the world, run river rapids, climbed mountains, encountered snakes and monkeys, joined in traditional ceremonies, prayed in ancient temples, and the list goes on and on. My menu has included cow brains, fried bees, the effervescent stinky tofu, squid, internal organs of all kinds, coagulated ducks blood, century eggs and more night market snacks than I can remember.

My family has also grown more than I could have envisioned. Friends and family had in fact foreshadowed me meeting a nice little Taiwanese girl, which I shrugged off as their wishful thinking. Turns out they were prophetic. Though the prevailing question remains, "When are you two going to have kids?", we are quite happy with our furry little girl named Mosa (after Formosa), a lab mix who has taken over the household and moved me from second to third in the pecking order.

This place that I have called my home for almost a quarter of my life has become so much more than just a place to hang my hat. It is impossible to know where the future will take my family but for sure there will always be close ties to Taiwan and it will forever have a special place in my heart.



● Halloween