

Origami in Taiwan

2009: Forty of my origami sculptures were exhibited at the National Taiwan University (NTU) gallery in Taipei in March of this year during their Azalea Festival. The purpose of the exhibit was to communicate NTU's appreciation of nature to the general public. The exhibit moved to the Chiang Kai-Shek gallery for the first two weeks of April. Both exhibits were the brainchild of Dr. Hon-Tsen Yu, a professor in the College of Life Science at NTU. Dr. Yu and I were classmates in graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley where he was known as "Alex". Here he is overlooking Taipei.



I learned that many Taiwanese learn English in school and adopt an English name. The exhibits had the full support of Dr. Grace Chu-Fong Lo, the Dean of the College of Life Science. Dr. Lo is committed to exploring effective ways to teach the public about science and its exploration at NTU. Alex told me this was the first time in his memory that the NTU museums had supported an exhibit in a public space outside of the University. For me, these were my first one-person shows.

The exhibit on campus was held in the NTU History Gallery, thanks to the support of Ms. Kuang-Mei Lin who is the Associate Director of the NTU Library. Ms. Lin made available a fantastic exhibit space in both the entrance hall and upstairs of the NTU History Gallery. Prior to the shows, I shipped my work to Alex along with the folding diagrams of a simple ox to commemorate the "Year of the Ox". Volunteers and hired professionals transformed these into a fantastic exhibit with the coordination of Wei-Wang Kuo whose nickname is Wan Wan, an NTU Zoology Museum staff member.



The exhibits were announced with fantastic posters that detailed eight origami workshops I would give and a lecture on Andean conservation. The outside wall of the NTU History Gallery was decorated with a banner running down its right side (below left). At the opening of the exhibit on March 7th, I pulled a cord with Dean Lo in the downstairs foyer of the building to reveal over 400 ox heads folded by Wan Wan, staff, and students at the College of Life Science.



Upstairs the origami was grouped according to habitat (e.g., forest, tundra, desert, etc.), and some themes such as mythology. I was surprised to find ceiling to floor-length banners placed between my wall-hung origami sculptures. The banners had descriptions of my work written in mandarin accompanied by my photo, and some crease patterns.



Back row: Wei-Wang Kuo, Dr. Hon-Tsen Yu, Ms. Kuang-Mei Lin, Dr. Chu-Fong Lo, Ms. Shu-Fen Cheng, Ms. Diane Wang, and Ms. Kwei-Mei Wang

Front row: Ms. In-Chu Ho, Ms. Yi-Chin Wang, Me, Ms. Li-Yuan Wang, and Ms. An-Ming Chang

Prior to my work being transferred to the Chiang Kai-Shek gallery, I went over there with Wan Wan to look at the space. My expectations were much more modest than what I discovered. The gallery is on the ground floor of an enormous mausoleum dedicated to Chiang Kai-Shek who fled with his army to Taiwan from mainland China in 1949.



Visitors to the mausoleum can climb a hundred steps to a huge hall under a blue pagoda-style roof. There under a 40+ foot ceiling is a large statue of Chiang Kai-Shek flanked on two sides of the room by an honor guard. The mausoleum is at the head of a gigantic plaza named “Freedom Square”. The sides of the square include gardens and two huge ornate buildings with gold roofs for performances of art and music. This wasn't a gallery location per se. It was a palace!



The entrance to the gallery was behind some pillars that lined an enormous marbled corridor. I read with some disbelief “Andy Warhol” on one of the pillars. “That is where your banner will be going” Wan Wan explained. “And the wall behind it is where your exhibit will be moved to.” I was happy the public did not have to pay to see my work.



Alex and Wan Wan told me that many people were responsible for the CKS show. One of the earliest supporters was Joan Chang (nicknamed Dong Dong), secretary of the Taipei Zoological Foundation. This talented woman (seen in the photo to the left) had lived in Japan for many years and spoke fluent Japanese and English beside her native Mandarin. She convinced the Director of the Taipei Zoo, Jason Yeh, to support the exhibit, and recommended it be moved to the CKS gallery. This would not have happened without the support of Yi-Yi Tsai, Head of the Exhibit Department at CKS Gallery, and the financial support of Alex’s Aunt and Uncle.



The opening was attended by 30+ people who heard introductions by Alex, Jason Yeh, and Tseng Tsan-Chin, the Vice-Commissioner of CHK Memorial Hall. Then I gave the audience a tour of the exhibit with commentary on the work. Later in the day I was interviewed by Wang Chien-Ying and Ms. Vicky Chen for Business Weekly, a popular magazine in Taiwan, and a television spot aired in the evening by Eastern Broadcasting Company.



Approximately 100 schools had been sent announcements for the exhibit. A class showed up the day after the opening while I took some pictures of the show. All the orange clad students wanting me to autograph their notebooks. I had what Andy Warhol called “15 minutes of fame”.





The giant red and white flying squirrel designed for these shows lives in Taiwan's forests

Each of the two hour workshops I taught were attended by 25-45 participants, either adults or children accompanied by some of their parents. The workshops were advertised on the posters and programs printed by NTU. Registration for them filled up quickly. By the fourth workshop, these eager folders had gone through nearly half of the several thousand sheets of kami I brought from California. I panicked at the thought of running out of paper. Wan Wan took me to several paper stores where we found a few packages of pre-cut squares of paper, but it was too soft for the models I wanted to teach. We bought some huge sheets of 130-240 gram weight paper which Wan Wan cut into squares. I emailed my wife Susanne, who was joining me in Taipei in a few days, to bring more paper. Despite not having much origami training, I was impressed by the natural ability of these folders.





In general they were more able to receive visual information that comparable groups I had taught in the United States. Perhaps their more intensive schooling and learning of Chinese characters contributed to this ability. Alex's daughter Grace often works on her homework until after 21:00, and she is in second grade! An ophthalmologist explained that this intensive staring

at objects short distances from the eye such as during homework is the reason why so many of Taiwan's children wear glasses.

My trip allowed me a rare opportunity to see parts of Taiwan and mainland China, an



experience I shared for two weeks with my wife Susanne and our two teenagers. I gained enormous respect and appreciation for the accomplishments in both places. Despite the very dense population in Taiwan's cities, the surrounding steep mountains are covered in lush sub-tropical vegetation. Huang-Chi Chen, one of Alex's graduate students, drove me and my family to Taroko National Park on the east side of Taiwan. Along the way we saw factories to process gravel for

cement and facilities to create marble slabs for countertops and floors. These factories looked like giant octopuses, some with conveyor arms stretching kilometers up mountain sides. Taiwan was and still is one of the world's major suppliers of marble. The deposition of marine sediment and its subsequent metamorphosing and uplifting as the Philippine Oceanic Plate collided with the Eurasian Continental Plate had created a band of marble along this coast that in places was several hundred meters thick.

In great wisdom the government of Taiwan preserved one of the most scenic deposits of marble in 1986. Taroko National Park (92,000 ha in size) straddles the Liwu drainage. The river has cut a deep gorge through the marble layer. The result is a spectacular display of polished rock with pocked by caves and stream holes.





The road up the Liwu gorge was an engineering masterpiece with tunnel after tunnel along vertical cliffs. Parts of it were the old Cross Hehuan Mountain Road built in 1914.

The Central Cross-Island Highway that replaced the function of this road was built in 1956-1960 at a cost of 212 lives and 780 people wounded. My two children saw some of the park's Formosan macaques while hiking one of the park's trails.

Dong Dong (below with hat) and her colleagues led me on a tour of Taipei's Zoo and its new panda house.

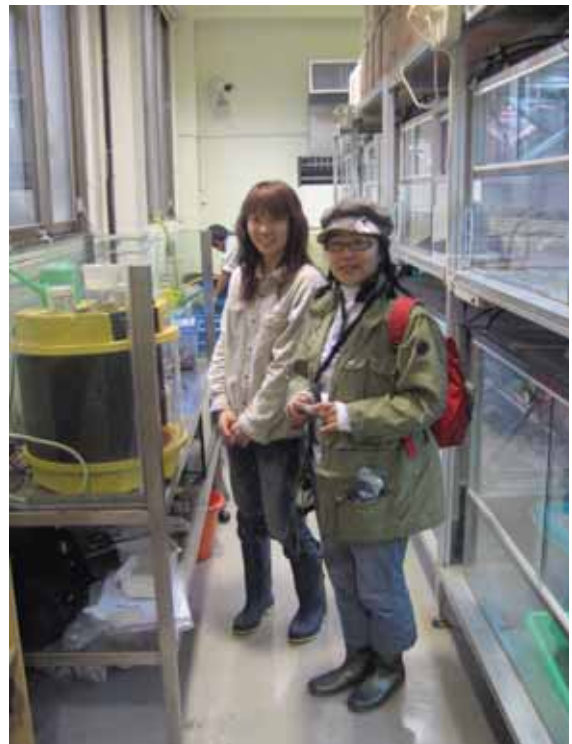


At first I thought the huge circular panda house was much too large for its two occupants. The pandas were sitting in one of their two glass-enclosed rooms holding bamboo shoots with their opposable thumbs.



It dawned on me later that the facility was not built for just the two pandas that recently were given to the zoo by China's government. The Taipei Zoo with 3.5 to 5 million visitors a year is one of the most popular zoos in the world. The panda house had to be big enough to receive 30-40 thousand visitors a day such as occurred during the Chinese New Year.

We toured the Formosan section of the zoo in a pouring rain. The animals in more than half the enclosures were hidden. Where I don't know. There didn't appear to be a dry spot in the enclosures. The only animals that appeared happy were a large wild boar eating the moist herbs in his enclosure, and a Chinese otter swimming in a pool. After an hour and a half we ate in a nearby restaurant with Dr. Eric Hsien-Shao Tsao, a colleague of Alex's. Eric was in charge of the animal rescue operation at the zoo's conservation center. Here were the animals confiscated by customs officers and police. It included tigers, cobras, gibbons, dwarf newts, and tortoises from all over the world. The later were in concrete closet-sized enclosures both inside and outside the rescue center. A worker was down on her knees in one outside enclosure going over every square inch with a propane torch to kill harmful bacteria and parasites before



putting tortoises in it. I wondered how effective it was given the puddles and rivulets caused by the rain pouring on everything.



One of the gibbons in the Rescue Center

My lunch of stinky tofu produced a huge amount of gas in me that I tried to discretely excrete in cage after cage during the afternoon visits to the quarantine area and the animal hospital. Jason Chin, DVM, was in charge of the hospital. He showed us the pangolins curled up in boxes kept at between 20 degrees centigrade in winter and 26 degrees in summer. Some had lost their tails in traps. Others had broken backs and were used in the zoo's outreach education program. The hospital had rows of giant leather boots for elephants with injured toes, and models of gorillas and other animals to practice using the dart blow gun on. Jason was especially proud of the plastic coke bottle bottom with a hole in it used to deliver anesthesia to the penguins.

During the afternoon I was led into see the orangutan cages. A huge male danced back and forth in a ten by ten foot dark enclosure. Nearby a mother cowered with her infant on a platform in her enclosure. Two others in adjacent cells lift themselves up to see what the intrusion was through tiny windows. I could just make out their dark heads and fingers curled through the grill. This at 18 animals is the largest orangutan conservation project outside Borneo. I imagined they would prefer to be in their outside enclosure.



The part of mainland China we saw shared the poor air quality of Taipei, but did not display the lush greenery we saw on Taiwan's hills and mountains. We flew with Alex and his family and two other couples, one with two grown children, to Xi'an, a "medium-sized" city of 8.2 million people. Xi'an is the largest city in central China and was the capital for 13 of China's dynasties dating back to 1045 BC.

Near Xi'an we saw the terracotta warriors that guarded the tomb of emperor Qin Shi Huang (259 BC - 210 BC). Six thousand of these warriors have been reassembled in their original battle formation. There are an estimated 2000 more warriors in pieces and/or buried in long houses. This is perhaps the world's biggest jig saw puzzle. We also went to Huayin, 120 kilometers east of Xi'an, and took a cable car up Hua Shan mountain, one of the five most sacred peaks in China. There we hiked along the ridgeline from temple to temple.





My wife Susanne Tilney hiking to the West Ridge of Hua Shan

I learned from seeing Xi'an and our subsequent destinations of Shanghai (23 million people), Suzhou, and Hangzhou that China is a well-developed nation with many happy people. My mother was accustomed to telling me as a child to "eat up, people are

starving in China.” Everybody appeared to be healthy to me, and the quantity of food offered us was staggering and delicious. I miss my hot spicy noodles and stewed vegetables for breakfast. China’s leaders recently have authorized better housing, schools, and health care for farmers. We saw evidence of this as we bussed between cities. Unlike Taiwan, there are no hordes of motor scooters in the cities we visited. China’s government has offered incentives for people to buy cars which are as much a status symbol as transportation. Xi’an experiences an additional 200 cars on its roads each day. This contributes to the air pollution the country is now famous for. Although paper was invented in China, I saw little evidence that origami was popular other than the folded paper “money” that is burned in Buddhist temples. An enormous bookstore in Hangzhou had only three titles on origami. In summary, I was expecting to see a country that was developing with some religious restrictions. Instead I saw a modern nation where people could worship as they pleased as long as they did not antagonize politicians. Recently travel restrictions were relaxed between mainland China and Taiwan. There are now direct flights between Shanghai and Taipei. More than ten times the previous number of Chinese visitors come to Taiwan on these flights. We saw busloads of them on our trip to Taroko. Alex overheard one of those tour leaders in Taipei’s airport tell his group to behave properly. “Taiwan has its own laws and regulations” the tour leader said in Mandarin. This would be an uphill battle for this group I thought. Many in this group had stood up to get off our plane well before it reached the gate.



We later heard that a tour leader of one of these groups had unexpectedly died while showing his group the treasures Chang Kai-Shek took from China that are now housed in the National Museum in Taipei. Apparently the group didn’t care what happened to their tour leader as long as they could go shopping in the “night market”, a section of the city devoted to popular shops. That pushy nature is a big difference I noticed between the people of mainland China and Taiwan. The latter are much more willing to give their countrymen space when they need it on the road while driving, or in a crowded street. Several other aspects of Taiwanese culture calm the nerves of its crowded citizens. The predominant colors one sees are muted tones.

For example, buses are painted in soft pink, purple, and green. The shapes of cartoon characters are rounded, not angular or jagged. Soft music is preferred and played in areas of transition for people such as in school entrances and elevators. What a contrast with my culture of rap music, saturated color advertisements, and drivers who act like they own the road ahead of them, not to mention the gun ownership and violence.



View from my hotel window in Tapei

It is too early after my trip to know how these experiences will shape the future design of my origami. However, I expect to be influenced, perhaps by the figure-ground relationships of the ink on silk paintings, or by the objects of worship and mythology. I think it is hard for many Americans to appreciate cultures in Asia because their reference is from knowing only a few hundred years of history in their own country. I am hampered by this. My trip to Taiwan and mainland China was very humbling. Although many people made it possible, I am most indebted to Alex (Dr. Hon Tsen Yu), his family, and the National Taiwan University. I hope to return some day and use origami to support the care I saw between its citizens and their natural environment. Perhaps with some success for origami there, more people in mainland China will likewise discover what their ancestors initiated with the invention of paper.