Taiwan, May 2014 – Elly’s notes

Taiwan is green, mountainous, and extremely beautiful; and there was never a dull moment! While I was here, an earthquake hit (5.9 with Fenglin as epicenter where I happened to be) and torrential rain warnings were issued. This was minor compared to the start of martial law in Thailand, the Vietnam-China conflict, the flooding in Europe, and the elections in the Ukraine and the European Union, among many other things. Tragic were the stabbings during the first week I was there (an attack by a mentally unstable 21-year old) that occurred on the Taipei subway killing four and wounding 24. This was an event that unleashed many discussions especially about mental illness (rarely addressed), suicide, parental responsibility, and the death penalty.

Landscapes
There is so much beauty in Taiwan. Yangmingshan National Park is a bus/metro ride away from Taipei and has lots of mountains, hiking trails, and hot springs. My first day in Taiwan started there after Ivy had first picked me up at the airport. We went to Jinshan, Yeliou, Keelung, and Ruefeng, following the coastline, and then back inland to Shifeng, Pingshi, and back to Shenkeng and Taipei. My last but one day, I went to the mountains to the South of Taipei went floated in a gondola across wooded terrain of Maokong.

The entire island, as much as I have seen of it, is stunning. Very well-known is Taroko Gorge (see below). The east coast only has one road and one rail line linking it (with people having trouble getting train
tickets) and it is very mountainous; the middle was hard to get to while I was there because of the heavy rains; the West is flatter and, therefore, more populated. The island’s population is 23 million of which 7 million live in Taipei and over 2 million in Kaohsiung.

Taiwan lies in a very active earthquake zone and the most recent one to bring massive devastation was in 1999. Other dangers include mudslides, caused by excessive rain and planting certain crops like betel palms and coffee, and typhoons. We took the 24 to its end and saw the area where mudslides in 2009 had devastated villages and killed many many people. Many survivors were relocated in Rinari.

Food
My friend Ivy introduced me to lots of shau chi ‘small food’ or street food. Below are some delicacies. There are many recipes for thousand-year-old egg and stinky tofu. I think both taste wonderful as did all of the others shown below. I didn’t try chewing a betel nut although there were many stores all over the country selling these nuts from the areca palm tree. There are some issues about the girl sitting in the betel selling booth but they are being addressed. I tasted the flowers in a dish and they had a very special gentle taste, hard to describe.
There was lots of good fish and interesting fruits, e.g. that of the betel nut tree and Buddha fruit, aka *annona squamosa*. 
The recipe for bubble tea, also known as pearl milk tea, that I found online seems easy but much less romantic than getting one from a special place in Taipei. Supplies for this tea involve tapioca pearls extracted from manioc, which travelled early on from South America to Taiwan.

Villages and cities
On the first day, we visited villages along the Pingxi Branch Railroad. At one of them, Houtong, the station used to have monkeys but is now mainly taken over by cats (and some dogs). The cats lie around and get petted and fed by (mainly Taiwanese) tourists. The railroad still runs and at the Pingxi Station the train tracks are shared by the train when it comes in and the people launching lanterns, which we also did. Pingxi is a delightful place, again with many cats and dogs that presumably take the train from
cat village. Dogs walk around freely everywhere and take a nap; some are in very bad shape though and I’d love to start a stray dog rescue center!

Building styles are eclectic and varied. I enjoyed looking at the various highrise buildings and regret not taking more pictures of some particularly interesting ones in the Keelung area. There is a good mix of old, medium, and new that makes the cityscape very appealing.
In the middle of the city is Treasure Hill, a hill-side community that’s been made into a showcase of a ‘green’ urban preservation. What started as a squatter community has been sanitized into galleries and living space.

People and politics
Treasure Hill is not far from the area of the Sunflower movement. There are a lot of protests about the increasing economic ties to mainland China, in particular about the recent Cross Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The current governing party is the Kuomingtang (or Guomindang) which is the party that fled mainland China in 1949 after being defeated by the Communists. It was originally led by Sun Yat Sen and later by Chang Kai Shek and was the only party in power in Taiwan until the later part of the 20th century when Martial Law was lifted in 1987. The KMT, currently again in power, supports unification with the mainland and there were lots of protests of March and April this year mainly by student organizations, e.g. those at National Taiwan University, which is in the general area of Treasure Hill.

There is also a protest movement about nuclear energy and, just before I arrived, the government agreed to halt the construction of the 4th nuclear energy reactor. My Lonely Planet guidebook (p. 185) reports that one can visit the 2nd nuclear power plant, north of Yehliu. We drove past
it but it didn’t look inviting. And around the Taipei Dome building site, various protesters are camped out on the sidewalk, seemingly (I couldn’t talk to them) protesting the new dome.

The original Taiwanese came as several waves of peoples 10,000 or so years ago who later spread to Polynesia to become the Austronesian language family. Taiwan is seen as the homeland of the Austronesian family. We visited some old caves on the east coast that were inhabited early on. We also visited the Truku, Amis, and Paiwan Centers. Of the earliest indigenous groups, the Amis are the most populous and their language is well-described and still spoken; pride in being indigenous is on the rise so the languages may survive.

On the west and north coasts, there were Dutch and Portuguese influences in the 17th century and then Chinese and Japanese later on. Large groups of Chinese came in the same period and the majority of the current Taiwanese are Southern Min with quite a presence of Hakka. Both groups still speak their
languages, although the Hakka do less so. There is not a lot of work in linguistics on the Hakka but there is a brand new cultural Center in Taipei.

The Japanese also occupied Taiwan and there is a lot of Japanese influence on the food and building styles. We saw a mixed traditional-contemporary performance at the National Center for Traditional Arts about a Taiwanese ‘Robin Hood’, Lioa, trying to get the better of the Japanese. Lioa lived in the time of Japanese occupation and fought injustices (not too successfully I am sorry to say).

Mainland Chinese tourists are currently only allowed to visit in groups so there are busses of mainland Chinese at all of the major tourist spots. Taiwanese can visit the mainland (The People’s republic of China) and work there relatively easily. The current Taiwanese government wants more ties that direction.

Some more practical things that I found fascinating were the garbage collection system. The garbage is collected by a truck making a happy sound (something like an Italian ice cream truck sound in The Netherlands and my American friend who has lived in Taiwan for a while suggested this link for the sound). People are then supposed to hand their garbage to people sitting in the back of this truck. The people on the right in the picture below are about to hand the garbage in pink bags over. The garbage in front was left by people on the street and I am not sure when it was collected. Laundry gets to dry outside on the street, even in the cities, and results in a very colorful street picture.
Temple inside a cave on the east coast
Outside Sandimen

Transportation
Ivy and I rented a car (and I drove and she navigated) from Taipei down the east coast, then crossed at Daren and went to the southernmost point at Kenting. From there we went up and inland and then to Hsinchu for a conference for a few days and back to Taipei. The driving was relatively easy in the country and through villages, as long as we knew where we were going. Driving the cities is harder with all the scooters and people going everywhere and nobody minding red lights. My American friend who has lived in Taiwan a long time explains the tendency not to follow any rules as a reaction to the strictness during the martial law regime. Taxi drivers frequently have cameras so that they have proof whose fault
an accident is. Taipei has a great subway, which is extremely clean due to no eating/drinking/chewing betel nuts rules; one doesn’t need a car in the city.

Art scene
I did the usual sights, the famous National Palace Museum was good with great calligraphy and painting sections (I have to admit that the bronze cauldrons didn’t speak to me). In an adjacent building, they had an Escher exhibition and that was fun to see; I didn’t know he had travelled so much. Both buildings were packed with people. Great was a smallish (free) exhibit at the SOKA Center across the street: beautiful contemporary Chinese-style works on paper. The Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines was next door and that was ok but nothing compared to what Ivy and I had seen in the middle of the country.

I also went to Songsan Cultural and Creative Park, the MOCA, and the Arts Solo 14 Fair which all give some sense for the contemporary arts in Taiwan. The highlight, however, was the Taipei Fine Arts Museum: just amazingly inspiring! There were 2 major retrospectives (one on Li Yuan-Chia and one on Dean-E Mei) and 2 urban thought/landscape projects. Both Li and Mei really inspired me and I was looking for watercolor material but will wait!

Taiwan is fascinating and there are lots of things/places I would love to visit and revisit!