

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Made in Taiwan

Dave Edwards

Earlier this year, on January 8th to be exact, I received an email from a colleague enquiring whether I would be interested in travelling to Taiwan to give a few talks and run some workshops on art therapy. 250+ emails later, having accepted the invitation and made all the necessary practical and travel arrangements, I touched down at Taoyuan airport in Taipei at 4.20pm local time on Thursday 27th May 2010.

I was greeted on arrival by Hsiu-Jung Wang, the current President of the Taiwan Art Therapy Association (TATA). I knew very little about TATA prior to my visit, but according to the information available on the Associations website the Taiwan Art Therapy Association was founded in 2004.¹ This was as a direct result of Taiwanese art therapists feeling professionally isolated, locally within Taiwan itself as well as globally. Initially this small group of art therapists met on a monthly basis to exchange information and support each other in order to develop professionally. As the number of art therapists increased – many of whom had trained abroad, in either the UK or USA - it became necessary to create a larger organization and the Taiwan Art Therapy Association was founded.

Since the Association held its first annual conference in Taipei 2004, TATA has established a tradition of inviting art therapists from overseas to give speeches and run workshops for its members and other interested parties. Beginning with Dr Marcia Rosal (former president of the American Art Therapy Association) the list of speakers preceding my visit included Joan Phillips, Judith Rubin, Chris Wood and

¹ http://www.arttherapy.org.tw/about_en.php

Caroline Case. Despite the sleepless nights and frantic bouts of writing that followed, I was certainly flattered to have been invited to join this distinguished group.

After hurriedly catching up with what we had each been doing during the past few years – I had first met Hsiu-Jung when she trained as an art therapist in Sheffield during the mid-1990s - I was dropped off at my hotel; arrangements having already been made for a colleague of Hsiu-Jung – Tiffany Tsai - to take me sightseeing the following day and then on, by train, south to Taichung (the third largest city on Taiwan) where TATA were holding their annual conference.

In late May Taipei (the political, economic, and cultural centre of Taiwan and largest city on the island) is warm and humid. Fortunately the National Palace Museum, our first stop, has recently reopened after extensive renovation and now comes equipped with air conditioning. The National Palace Museum, a must see landmark on the itinerary of any visitor to Taiwan, is a huge institution of global significance housing many of the most important artefacts from China's cultural heritage.² According to Wikipedia, the museum's permanent collection consists of over 677,687 objects and artworks, encompassing over 8,000 years of Chinese cultural history from the Neolithic age to the late Qing Dynasty, making it one of the largest in the world.³ The National Palace Museum is also one of the most visited museums in the world, which may account for the fact that on the day of my visit the museum was swarming with mainly elderly tourists from mainland China.

² <http://www.npm.gov.tw/en/home.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Palace_Museum



Fig.1

Before catching the very modern and efficient high speed bullet train to Taichung, Tiffany and our driver Max, took me to visit two of Taipei's most important temples; the Lungshan Temple and adjacent Confucius Temple. For all its aspirations to modernity, religious life in Taipei (in its many and varied forms, most notably Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) is alive and kicking and very much part of daily life. Having been woken up at some unearthly hour by the fire crackers and loud percussion sounds accompanying the procession making its way to the temple near my hotel early one morning during my stay I can confirm this with some certainty.



Fig.2

Sightseeing over, it was time for work. Art therapy is a relatively new profession in Taiwan, so my hosts were keen to the make the most of my experience and expertise. For my part, in addition to running two workshops, this also involved giving three papers, with each of these being delivered to substantial, if very different audiences.

The first of my 'speeches' – 'On Becoming a Profession: The history and development of Art Therapy in the UK' – was delivered to a large audience at the Department of Special Education, National Taichung University. My paper was in two parts, the first of which traced the development of the art therapy profession in the UK from the 1940's through to the present day. In part two, I discussed the role of the British Association of Art Therapists and the Health Professions Council in maintaining and developing professional standards for art therapists working in the UK. In this part of my paper I outlined the importance of clinical supervision, continuing professional development and evidence based research in relation to this process of professionalization.

Although the number of TATA members is currently only around 100, of which less than 30 are professional (practicing) members of the Association, there is considerable interest in art therapy in Taiwan within teaching, nursing, occupational therapy, social work and the medical profession. Indeed the position of art therapy in Taiwan at this point in time is very much as it was in the UK when the British Association of Art Therapists was formed in the late 1960s; a comparison that formed the basis of my paper.

If art therapy in Taiwan is distinguished by any one thing it is by the kind of pioneering spirit that characterised art therapy in the UK from the 1960s through to the early 1980s when many of the principles that govern the practice of art therapy today simply did not exist. At the present time art therapists in Taiwan have yet to develop an agreed code of ethics and pretty much anyone who wishes to can call themselves and art therapist or what they do art therapy. Though often taken for granted by younger generations of art therapists, it was extremely difficult for art therapists in the UK to convince those responsible for the provision of health care that individuals who initially trained as artists could play any role, let alone a significant one, in the treatment or rehabilitation of traumatized children, bewildered adolescents or adult psychiatric patients. The self-sacrifice, dedication and determination displayed by art therapists in Taiwan facing and seeking to overcome similar difficulties is often well beyond the call of duty.

Amongst those art therapists I met and talked to while in Taiwan, particularly amongst those who trained in the UK and USA, there appears to be a considerable degree of unanimity regarding what art therapy is, how it should be practiced and what kind of training and experience is required to do this safely and competently. Establishing a register of art therapists who have undertaken a professional training in art therapy and who meet agreed standards of clinical practice – a strategic aim of the Taiwan Art Therapy Association - will undoubtedly help advance the cause of art therapy in the country. Developing indigenous postgraduate art therapy training courses along with a code of ethics to underpin professional practice will be important landmarks in relation to this.

The afternoon of the conference and the whole of the following Sunday morning were taken up with two, three hour long art therapy workshops, each on a different theme. In the first of these workshops – ‘Who am I?’ – the participants (some 25+ in all) were invited to explore the issue of identity through a series of art based exercises. My second workshop – ‘Institutions and How to Survive Them’ – was aimed at providing participants (on this occasion there were slightly fewer, just over 20) with an opportunity to explore through the process of making and sharing images the mixed feelings they may have about the institution in which they are training or in which they currently work.



Fig.3

In the feedback I received when I submitted the first draft of this report I was asked whether the themes that developed in the different workshops were any different from those that might have emerged had I been running them in the UK. Having thought about this a good deal since I find that for me this is an impossibly difficult question to answer with any certainty. In some respects my response is very definitely no. The personal experiences people shared were very personal and often culturally specific. Much of this was, I'm sure, lost in translation, despite the best efforts of all concerned to communicate with each other through unfamiliar visual or verbal languages. Quite apart from the restrictions of language, not everyone who participated in these groups was familiar with art therapy or with the use of art for self-expression.

On the other hand, some of the conventions so often taken for granted when running workshops in the UK, such as the observation of spatial and temporal boundaries were evidently alien to at least some of the workshop participants. Starting and finishing on time and working with such relatively large numbers in an unfamiliar setting certainly proved to be challenging. It also had its surreal moments as when we were joined by the University's accountant who presented me with a number of forms that required my signature (there and then!) and an envelope containing what I later discovered, much to my surprise, was a substantial amount of money in Taiwan Dollars. Fortunately, I was ably supported by my translators and both workshops seemed to go well with the production of some fascinating imagery alongside much animated discussion.

With the passing of time my memories of these workshops has faded, and I regret not having kept more detailed notes. What does remain in my memory, however, was the willingness of the participants, despite the understandable awkwardness of such encounters and all the limitations imposed by language, culture and experience to engage so openly with the image making process. The energy and enthusiasm of the participants, along with their openness to sharing experiences and to learning from myself and from each other was truly humbling. This generosity of spirit was all the more impressive given the personal and professional difficulties described and occasionally porous boundaries within which the workshops took place. For some of the workshop participants, being a pioneer art therapist has been extremely difficult, not least for those returning to work in Taiwan after studying and working abroad.



Fig.4

My second paper, 'Learning about feelings: An introduction on art therapy' was given at the very modern and very prestigious National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art in Taichung on Sunday afternoon.⁴ Perhaps the residents of Taichung don't have anything better to do on a Sunday afternoon, but when I saw the venue and size of

⁴ <http://www.ntmofa.gov.tw/english/>

my audience (by my estimate some 200+) I was more than a little nervous. Luckily my audience was both polite and attentive, notwithstanding the fact that some of the finer points of my paper were, I was told later, lost in translation. While not entirely my fault, I do bear some responsibility for this.

Before I set off for Taiwan, part of the lengthy email correspondence referred to above concerned whether or not I would be sending copies of my PowerPoint presentations in advance of my arrival. In Taiwan it appears to be a tradition to make translations of PowerPoint presentations available to read alongside the paper being given. This assumes, of course, that all speakers will use PowerPoint whatever their subject. Nevertheless, while I was planning to use PowerPoint to show the images that accompanied each of my papers, I've never warmed to it as a medium for delivering content. It was ironic, therefore, that while travelling to Heathrow to catch my flight I should find myself reading an article in *The Independent* on the misuse of PowerPoint, particularly by the US military (Manjoo, 2010). When it comes to appreciating the limited and limiting qualities of PowerPoint, I'm inclined to agree with the US Marine Corps' General James N Mattis who, according to the New York Times, is quoted as declaring that 'PowerPoint makes us stupid' (Bumiller, 2010).

My third and final 'speech' – 'On Becoming an Art Therapist: How artists become art therapists in the UK' – was to a more familiar and more modest, in terms of size, (only 100+ individuals this time) audience of art students and their professors from the Department of Fine Art and the Department of Social Work at Tunghai University.



Fig.5

Situated in attractive grounds, Tunghai University is the younger of Taichung's two universities, having been founded by Methodist missionaries in 1955. My paper, as its title suggests, examined the process by which an artist might train to become an art therapist in the UK. Largely based on my personal experiences of training and working as an art therapist over the past thirty years, of the three papers I delivered while in Taiwan this was probably the one I most enjoyed writing and presenting.

On the free Monday between my second and third speeches I was able to do a little more sightseeing, including visiting the Sofa Garden (a new facility for learning disabled adults located in beautiful countryside) and the Sanyi wood sculpture Museum.⁵ After a very satisfying lunch of local (Hakka) cuisine my hosts (Mei-I Chen and Albert Liu) took me to one of the many wooden duck manufacturing workshops to be found in the forests outside Taichung.⁶ Alongside textiles, plastic toys, bikes, laptops, computer chips and, so I was told, saxophones (which, to my embarrassment I misheard as sex phones), the label 'Made in Taiwan' can often be found on the beautifully carved and hand painted wooden ducks typically found nowadays in most UK craft shops.



Fig.6

⁵<http://wood.mlc.gov.tw/english/index.asp>

⁶ <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/culture/hakkaint/>

Later, after yet more food (and thinking back, I appear to have eaten my way through a large number of formal and informal meals on this trip!) where we were joined by two art Taiwanese art therapists who had originally trained in Sheffield I was taken on a sightseeing trip to the Yi-Chung street night market in Taichung. And, of course, no trip to a night market would be complete without sampling yet more of the local (in this case sausage based) cuisine.

Having delivered my final paper, and eaten yet one more meal, I headed back north to Taipei, again by bullet train, accompanied by my 'minder' Albert. A week earlier I had left Sheffield full of feelings of anticipation and anxiety. Indeed right up to the day of my departure there was some uncertainty regarding whether or not I would ever get airborne. The BA cabin crew strike was ongoing, and Eyjafjallajökull (the troublesome Icelandic volcano) had not long since finished erupting causing enormous disruption to air travel across western and northern Europe during April and May. I returned to the UK, via Hong Kong's majestic new airport, in the early hours of Wednesday June 3rd, jet-lagged but full of positive memories of people and places I had the rare privilege of meeting and visiting.

My visit to Taiwan would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of individuals and organisations. Thanks are due to Dr Ho Jean-Tong and the Department of Special Education at the National Taichung University, Hsiu-Jung Wang and her colleagues in the Taiwan Art Therapy Association, particularly Mei-I Chen and Tiffany Tsia, and Albert Liu.

Biography: David Edwards qualified as an art therapist in 1982, having trained at Goldsmiths College, University of London. In addition to being employed by the University of Sheffield Counselling Service, David works privately as a clinical supervisor. He is also an Associate Lecturer with the Northern Programme for Art Psychotherapy in Sheffield. A former member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Art Therapy, David has lectured and published widely on art therapy and related topics. His book *Art Therapy* was published by Sage in 2004.

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