



Taiwan, Taipeh, and Taoyuan

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TAIWAN, TAIPEH AND TAOYUAN

Impressions and observations, November, 1988, by Mason Gaffney

Marco Polo began a grand tradition of Chinese travelogues and I am one to honor tradition. Friends and relatives who care little about my quotidian routines have been kind enough to ask about my recent trip. I did nothing heroic but, as you know, the world honors people for what they publicize, not what they do.

The professional purpose was a conference on Real Property and Land as Tax Base for Development, at the Land Reform Training Institute in Taoyuan, near Taipeh. The Conference was another story in itself, and was of great value. These notes are of more general interest and come from morning strolls. I recommend taking notes when traveling; writing fixes the furtive insights, like dreams, that novelty and solitude and movement evoke.

Land Use

Taoyuan is a place of mixed uses. Really mixed, cheek by jowl. No one ever heard of zoning, I infer; and the market needs a lot more churning before "sorting and arranging" land uses by priority as per the textbook. Within a mile of the hotel there are factories, warehouses, rice and truck farming, retail, low and high-density residential, a railroad, schools, temples, a place for morning exercises, oil refining with flaring, trucking, dumping and incinerating, military training, many fish ponds, driver training facilities (quite elaborate and specialized), cemeteries, shrines, woodlands, and doubtless more uses. Cottage industry means small machine shops among retail shops, farms and residences. On Main St. there is a small textile spinning mill, open-fronted like the shops.

Farm plots come large -- rice paddies -- and small. The small are vegetable gardens, with raised beds, tended meticulously, often but not always by older women. I never saw one party gardening without another standing by chatting, so the activity while laborious is not disagreeable or servile. It inspired me to follow Candide and tend my own garden, applying some of their excellent ideas.

Farms and gardens are mixed in everywhere, even on busy business streets. Here as elsewhere, FHIP (Farming Has Its Privileges). Our seminar learned that farmland classification means land taxation at a lower rate; and for the last two years, no tax at all. Sounds like home.

Houses and apartments are tidy, but tiny. 3-story blocks are common -- walk-ups, of course -- in alleys feeding into Main St.

Cemetery plots are scattered and ubiquitous, usually on slopes.

Customs and social structure

Shoes and sandals are left on front porches. Perhaps this comes from the long Japanese occupation, 1895-1946. Slippers are provided for guests, both on China Airlines and in the hotel.

Yards, if any, are guarded by heavy grilles and fences or walls. Dogs are few and small and meek.

The hotel provides no shampoo.

Morning commuters take fast-food breakfasts from the many storefront sellers along Main st. The fare is pastries and a kind of greenish roasted nut.

Outside our hotel there is a pavilion with three low-cost ramadas 'neath which five or six staid adults took their slow, low-intensity morning exercises whose name I may butcher: ta-chung? It was all very 'sixties and zen, and no doubt conduces to personal uplift and serenity in these trying times and general brouhaha. I hear Jerry Brown is trying a comeback, too. Nostalgia City!

But there is a seamy side: recreational use exempts the land, which is otherwise never used, from tax. I wager the placid calisthenists were the landholder and his heirs maintaining their history of tax-exempt use.

On the hillside above town stand two tall phallic temples, a mile or two apart. Neither is easily reached, and I had other priorities, but they are certainly dramatic and distinctive. The more accessible temples one stumbles on here and there feature brightly-colored figures on the roofs, with much Mandarin red on pillars and fretwork. These are not tourist pieces but workaday temples tucked away in ordinary neighborhoods. The symbolism is opaque to occidental eyes, but hints at a rich lore of legends and myths.

Pedestrians one meets generally avoid eye-contact, unless and until one says "how-ma" (something like "hello"), and often not then. Girls with shaven heads and dark brown-black robes (Buddhist nuns?) pop out from time to time, seeming to live among everyone else, behaving normally. I surmise these are girls. Cue-ball heads cum long robes succeed in neutering these consecrated ones, which I guess is the idea, unless it be to improve their time in swimming meets. I knew an American law student who did that for Olympics tryouts in the '60s; she also shows around a foto of herself streaking before the U.S. Supreme Court. Now she is a judge in Contra Costa County, or at least ran for one; and her sister married Steve Wozniak. Our society is so

forgiving until age 30; after that the walls close in. I think theirs close in younger.

Prices are set by bargaining, apparently enjoyed by all. I prefer the American system of fixed published prices, initiated they say by American Quakers in the 18th century. But "when in Rome", so one bargains. Clever Anglophones bring calculators for displaying offers, and save big bucks. Chinese merchants understand arabic numerals, which are on the currency itself. Elevators also light up in arabic.

One may also identify a \$NT500 bill as a "Chiang Kai-shek", but "one Sun Yat Sen" could mean any of several bills (are there only the two national heroes?) Besides, Sun Yat Sen is now officially Mandarinized to Sun Wen -- quite an indignity for the revered Father of His Country who of all people should know how to say his own name. But he was a Cantonese, sacrificed to linguistic uniformity.

Anyway, I picked up a tie, jade, sandals, some silk, and only wish I had spent much more, for there are bargains and quality. I like gray cat's-eyes best but could not bring myself to pay for them, remembering them lying free on the beaches of Biak, 1945. Oh, the fortunes we might have made given perfect knowledge and foresight and rational expectations and all those Chicago School assumptions. When I think of all the easy Dutch guilders I could have taken off soldiers just released from long prison camps, with six years' back pay -- how was I to know the guilder remained a hard currency?

On the 2nd floor of Holiday Hotel is a disco, whose rumblings bothered my sleep on the 6th. If you can't lick 'em j'ine 'em, so I dropped in to observe the young idea at play. They dance conservatively on a spacious hardwood floor to live music, but mostly sit in booths and converse, such as one can over the din. There was this gorgeous shapely chanteuse, her nubile form barely camouflaged by a clinging flesh-colored slit-skirted gown, but no one gave her merchandise any attention or applause, perhaps out of courtesy to their eclipsed dowdy dates. Most drinks are obscenely high, in lieu of a cover charge, but I was allowed to nurse a cheap can of the standard Taiwan Beer which is, well, potable.

The military presence is intimate. We were within earshot of a heavily used firing range. Soldiers stand guard at rigid attention before public buildings and toll booths. I write below of a jogging platoon asserting its right-of-way. This is a beleaguered nation long on a war footing; but civilian life pursues the even tenor of its ways without much apparent interaction, although the absence of police makes one wonder if

soldiers don't double in that role. Democracy here is an infant, and I think Amnesty International has had some business.

Level of living

Beggars are rare but there are signs of some distress. I thought those were people dwelling, not just courting in parked cars, but one hates to pry. Families move into the concrete shells of apartment blocks under construction. They run unsheathed electric lines across muddy streets for lights and TV. Here, as at home, the actual hierarchy of human needs is not always what logic or Maslow would predict. Escape from harsh reality is valuable when reality is harsh.

One can see porters balancing two pails on a shoulder-pole, but this is rare. Older women keep busy at handicrafts and gardening, but chat amiably as they work. Housing is cramped but not desperately so, and I would be happy to occupy one of the garden apartments, which look totally livable. There is also the odd Great House secluded behind gates and shrubs, and some in-between houses.

Business hours are long, which is good for customers. It may be hard on employees, but they don't look miserable and seem to get more pleasure and society from their work than many Americans from their clubs and vacations. Our hotel restaurant is open from 6 AM to 12 PM, offering an 8-page menu all that time. The hotel cashier opens at 6 AM too, ready to change your currency at a better rate than I got in L.A., where even banks lack this service, except a few which are highly specialized with short hours in a prime location, with clerks behind bars.

Greeters are on duty in the restaurants, mostly trim girls whose smiles light up the street outside. They may use 3-4 people where we use one, but these people are all doing something and are totally customer-oriented: every store is a Nordstrom's, at 1/3 the price. A typical sullen, off-putting American clerk wouldn't last half an hour here, and good riddance.

Environment, safety and health

The attitude here, as with traffic (infra), is strictly saue qui peut. People must be concerned because many drivers wear face-masks, and folks leave shoes at the door. But the notion of public action is evidently alien. One of our seminar speakers noted the Chinese attitude is don't waste time pressing for public action, rather use time to make more money and find your individual solution. Ayn Rand and James Buchanan would love it. Which Reaganaut was it told environmentalists to shut up and use gas masks? But mainland communism, I surmise, was an extreme reaction to this extreme individualism.

Beautiful fresh greens are stored a foot from the gutter in one market on Main St. And I used to think Grant Av. merchants looked careless! Trash and garbage are dumped in a pile, evidently a designated pickup spot, on the side of a street. But trash is dumped anywhere, everywhere, and stays. Littering is the way of life. I did see one garbage truck -- it was indifferently sealed and spread papers freely as it sped along using its bulk and klaxon to claim right-of-way. Sanitation is not a high priority.

It may make sense to let sleeping trash lie. Collected trash is apparently hauled uphill and upwind to a place of perpetual smolder, whose miasma often wafted our way.

On one upland amble, past some superior view lots, my olfactories were assaulted by a terrifyingly toxic fume from the window fan of a shed. Working around upwind I saw they were drying the glaze on tubs, discharging the malignant effluent directly onto a public walkway. It's the one unattended store of goods I saw in Taiwan.

Inside shops conditions can be worse. Clearly there is no OSHA, no workmen's comp, and no king of torts. Gears and blades work unhoused, and workers unguarded. Progress has its price, but I can't say where they hide the cripples, I saw none.

People smoke constantly and intrusively; there are no refuges. They probably think smoking is raising their standard of living, poor souls. Will they learn nothing from our history but the blunders?

Taiwan's nuclear power plants are finished faster than ours, and have less downtime, making them economical. No pesky buttinsky environmentalists, you see. But considering the slipshod construction I observed (infra), and the cavalier insouciance toward ambient air, I fear Taiwan is cruising for the next Chernobyl.

Materials and technology

Bamboo is the universal scaffolding, but otherwise this is not a bamboo economy. Stone and cement are widely used. Sewer grilles are of stone. Buildings are of cement, with tile roofs. Wood seems scarce. Some old telephone/power poles are wooden, but new ones are of cement, hollowed, with holes for climbing. In a warm humid climate I suppose wood decays too fast. Taiwan is mostly mountainous, and near the untapped tropical forests of the Philippines and New Guinea, so it may not be shortage of raw material. Some older buildings and commercial stalls are wooden.

Some of the construction seems unskilled, or at least hasty, for a land of abundant skilled labor. My bathroom tiles were cockeyed, for example, and the closet door didn't hang right, and

the chain lock was crammed onto the molding where it never belonged, and that sort of afterthought craftsmanship; and the ventilator grille was missing and the heat didn't work anyway. The room was otherwise spacious and comfortable, and the Japanese elevators were marvels of speed and efficiency, but one wonders about the local building trades.

Every new block of buildings is trenched, the way campers ditch a tent. Trenches are a foot wide and two deep, cement lined, leading to storm sewers. They expect rain and prepare well. Trenches are left open, and watch your step. Some may double as sanitary sewers, but I was not moved to examine this point closely.

I can, however, speak to the toilet paper situation, asking pardon for any indelicacy. The local product is superior: heavier than ours, and finely scored. Don't squeeze the Charmin, just toss and replace with Taiwanese Tissue.

Water

Water is thoroughly under control and beneficially used. Terraced paddies call for close control, of course. There are also many fish ponds. You would expect mosquitos, yet the air is free of bugs. The ponds are all artificial and the water never stagnates, moving fast enough to discourage bugs and slow enough to avoid washouts.

No one bothers to prettify the ponds as parks, or remove trash and old tires. The snowy egrets don't seem to mind and they are beauty enough. Nor do the fish mind as the farmers scatter fish-feed. They take the fish with some circular bamboo contraption at the end of a pole. This must be one of the world's best sources of cheap protein for us to emulate.

The streams are full of little checks and dams to slow the fall. Water must be recycled many times moving downwards paddy to paddy, and there must be an invisible network of rights to return flows, and obligations to provide same, undiminished and unpolluted. Here is a social system that deals with spillover benefits and costs; but institution-builders will have to move faster to catch up with the mopeds (infra), and galloping urban expansion.

The worst abuse of downstream rights I saw was a farm woman scrubbing clothes in a stream by her door. I can imagine there are worse ones, considering what they do with solid and gaseous wastes.

Urban water pressure must be low, for every large building has its own water tank on the roof, shiny and modern. I saw no fire hydrants.

Farming and food

Leafy green vegetables are started, and many are finished, in intensive gardens, on beds raised 6" or so, about 6' wide. Paths between them serve as drains and access ways for workers in Wellies. They were starting seedlings in mid-November. Subtropical climate helps, but so does intensive TLC, including hand-watering in this rainy clime.

Rice-straw is saved in old-fashioned haycocks, taking on earthy shades of ocher, sienna and umber evocative of Monet, Van Gogh, or Cézanne in Provence, and of November Vermont hillsides after leaves have sered and October tourists retreated to furnaces in Boston and New York.

Mud is dug from ponds, rich in fish-manure, and returned to the soil.

Space over streams and ditches is used by covering them with bamboo racks at 45 degrees and training melon vines (withered now) over them. I am moved to try this at home with cukes, melons, tomatoes and boysenberries.

But who needs melons when you have papaya trees? These they grow, and I hope appreciate. Our consumers certainly pay well for the fruits.

Taiwanese tomatoes are from nostalgia County: they taste good, with actual flavor, something California consumers have not known since UC advanced Progress and Agribusiness with the square, packable, green-pickable, pesticidable, storable, gas-ripenable, tasteless blah commercial product of today. I resolved to plant more home tomatoes next year, but didn't have to wait: dear wife planted cocktail tomatoes this spring which just keep bearing sweet, real tomatoes.

Chinese farmers keep ducks. How did we get the notion you have to shoot a wild one to eat one?

Our group ate in a spacious cafeteria. The smorgasbord offered American food, badly done; and Chinese food which always included spinach, a small salted fish, rice soup ("good for digestion"), tofu, another green or two including seaweed, preserved eggs, and assorted exotic whatnots, the kinds that let you pig out without getting fat. Someone always greets you; someone else takes your chit which must be for a specific meal and date, and no substitutions, they take the fine print seriously. The greeter also bows when you leave, leaving you feeling important, which is really good for digestion.

They recognize differences in rice. The American product they consider not good for digestion, too processed.

I never met a Chinese dish I didn't like -- until those trotters at the Taipeh University Club. The flesh between pig's toes, the menu explains, is a great delicacy. I bit, but was not converted.

Cook's Tour

Yes, we did some standard sights: Grand Hotel, National Palace Museum, Handicraft Mart. Like any great city Taipeh has more other sights than you could do in a year. You could make a career of the Palace Museum alone, full of mainland treasures which the fleeing KMT did not neglect to ship over to comfort their exile. I only wondered how many loyalists got left behind as a result.

Our excellent hosts provided the tour. In return we were expected to stick with it, and they provide sheepdogs to keep everyone on schedule and in place. This could be annoying, but our sheepdogs were so good at their job --how do you hustle foreigners along and remain charming and gracious? -- I was lost in admiration and went meekly with the herd.

Jaded readers may drop out here, although I will miss you. But to me the following is the most vivid and meaningful part, which was originally first because it was tops in my consciousness. I put it last later (aren't word processors wonderful?) because it is the longest section, and gets into some -- shudder -- economic issues. But stay! I read recently Americans find money more interesting than sex, and follow the story of Jim and Tammy Bakker mainly to find out how much they filched. Besides, this is mostly about traffic, on which everyone is an expert.

Traffic, streets, and the interface with private land

In Taoyuan, a fast-growing suburb of Taipeh, our group was housed at the Holiday Hotel (no relation to a Holiday Inn), a twelve-story modern building oddly sited on the urban fringe, at the end of a side street a mile from the main drag (which I'll call Main Street), which in turn feeds into a modern freeway.

Taiwan is on balance charming and I love it, but like us they have some problems one observes. On said Main Street there are no real sidewalks, but an occasional white line offering illusory protection from vehicles, of which there are many. I walked against traffic, dodging and weaving among the furnishings of the open-fronted shops, which spill out towards the white line at will. The presence of small children walking to school made me feel secure, but falsely so. Oncoming traffic violates the white

line with impunity. I was learning to watch and dodge this hazard when I was startled by an approach from the rear: they violate the white line in both directions.

Vehicles wend whither and park where the owner listeth, outside the white line, on the "sidewalk". The potential in any standing vehicle can go kinetic at any time, in either direction, or sideways for that matter. Most of these intrusive vehicles are mopeds which can appear from nowhere, accelerating fast. Anything else will slip in too where there is cranny enough.

A mile away, near our Holiday Hotel, there is a broad new street with curb, gutter and sidewalk, through vacant land, with no traffic and no destination, for it dead-ends in a rice paddy where, one surmises, the money ran out. The end looks for all the world like a dead end in an orphan subdivision of suburban Chicago of my youth, and probably has a similar origin in speculative finance. There is some comfort having company in folly; but more sorrow that others have not learned from our mistakes.

Conditions on Main Street suggest crowding and land shortage. This is a crowded country, but that is not the problem. It is a deficit of social organization and planning. Traffic is forced onto Main Street because there are no parallel streets finished, even pedestrian ways; and Main St. is constricted by its own shops that spill onto the turf of pedestrians. Traffic and commerce are seeking each other, reaching out to each other, but at the interface each damages what it seeks in anarchistic self-seeking along the vital edge of contact.

Behind Main Street lies a good deal of empty land and paddy land. Perhaps we can see ways to solve our own problems by thinking how they could solve theirs. Main St. needs widening. Land cost could prohibit this because the new lanes would take commercial frontage. The solution is to recognize that the new wider street would create as much frontage as it destroys, mostly for the same landholders, so there would be little net loss of land value. The shops would simply back off onto land now in lower uses, or no use at all.

The net loss of land would come from lower uses, farther back. I walked around -- there is a lot of empty land.

The way these things usually work we make our agencies buy frontage; and then give away the new frontage free, even though it is worth more than the old. This unbalanced, giveaway approach to property rights in land makes it hard and costly to widen streets where new lanes are needed; and drives agencies instead to build new streets where they aren't needed, building to standards based on what Main St. should have been.

Another choice is to build a parallel highway de novo, to carry through traffic. Sometimes this is best, but how much of the benefit of a north-south freeway is offset by its blockage of east-west traffic? On balance we need more of the widening option, and less of the lengthening and parallelling options, in road planning. The key to making it work is Dr. Sun's Rule of Frontage Exchange at Zero Net Cost.*

There is also the cost of moving buildings, but if you saw these buildings you would not be overwhelmed by that.

The common vehicle is the moped or vespa. It's a sight to see fifty or more crowded up -- not lined up -- before a red light, milling for the race, and then jam it like an army in rout, going sauve qui peut (in California one learns sal si puedes) with seeming disregard for each other and assuredly for anyone mad enough to walk in front of the swarm. It is a zestful experience, like running the bulls, as I well recall from my earlier life as an urban cyclist. It must add excitement and romance to humdrum lives, although the faces hardly show the thrill of it. The socially approved expression seems to be impassive, slightly troubled, eyes straight ahead, intent on furthering one's individual progress, even as the merchants whose wares clutter the walks.

Nonetheless the moped is incomparably more socially efficient than the 4-wheel auto for its purpose. It gets people around on otherwise inadequate street space. It rains a lot, but they cope with wrap-around ponchos with hoods, or slicker hats out of Captains Courageous.

One leaves the modern international airport on a modern expressway and sails along in the 20th century until turning off at Main St., which is suddenly old China. The first impression is that the expressway was overlaid on old settlements, but Taoyuan is a new city. Main St. just looks old: it's the mileage.

The anarchy is often countervailed. Children pour out of alleys to pick their way through the merchants and gutters to school, and the occasional monitor herds them onto their side of the white line: the children, at least, know their place. In front of the school stands an older child in military posture, and inside the schoolground wall everything appears crisp, clean and orderly. There is an adult greeter who shepherds the children the moment they step inside, in an effective cajoling manner we learned on our own tours is a highly developed indigenous art.

* (In veritas, I can't certify that Dr. Sun ipse dixit, but it is clear from his attitudes he would have; and the attribution lends indigenous verisimilitude and modesty.)

I never saw a traffic policeman except those few directing traffic at exceptionally busy crossings, standing on pedestals, wearing white gloves and nose-masks. But amazingly in five days I saw but one traffic collision of any kind, so there is some kind of restraint and courtesy beneath the apparent chaos.

Stores and restaurants are open-fronted, even when they do not spill onto sidewalks. The invitation to shoplifting is small, because everything is attended, constantly. One would like to attribute this to Chinese honesty, but alas, new dwellings come with barred windows, even up to several floors high. Old dwellings, in contrast, practise the open door policy, and as a casual ambling stroller I often felt embarrassed to find myself glancing directly into private living quarters.

Why the contrast? Taoyuan is on the urban fringe. The older dwellings house farmers and small-town relicts; the new dwellings are for urban transplants. There is quite a culture clash in process.

Two blocks from our 10-floor hotel there are terraced paddies, where the 4-lane street with sidewalk dead-ends. One can pick his way through these on footpaths atop the 2-4 ft. rises which terminate each terrace. Doing so I saw a head moving with preternatural speed a few hundred feet away, also among the paddies. Thus I discovered the network of low-cost, low-intensity bikeways. These are blacktopped, 4-6 feet wide, and delightful for strolling, although the major use is utilitarian. They are eminently sensible in the circumstances. Evidently no city engineer with unvarying "standards" has yet imposed his iron rules on all road-builders.

This being China the narrow bikeways are also used by 4-wheelers, often with one pair of wheels on the shoulder. This poses an interesting problem when two of them meet. The general rule of right-of-way is lex fortioris. Pedestrians, of course, have the least fortitude in these encounters. The one exception to that was a platoon of soldiers in training, jogging in lockstep: no vehicle cared to crowd them over. Nor did I. They were young and earnest, wiry and fiery, slim and trim, lean and mean.

The vehicle problem can only worsen. In my short walks I passed by two large training grounds for drivers -- mostly cab drivers today, fortunately, but not for long. The dead-end thoroughfare is also mainly used by drivers-in-training. The automobilization of Taiwan is in full cry, and may Heaven protect them, they still probably think it is Progress.

China shows no signs of beginning to tame the insolent chariots, and the individualistic culture may lack any social

mechanism for doing so. We are none to give lessons, but their prosperity could bring more sorrows than joys. In my darker moments I dream of an individualistic technological solution, a Great Equalizer for the machine age: a small laser beam projector, hand-held, which could disable offending vehicles. Unlike our famous neutron bomb it would be adjusted to damage property but not personnel. Sounds weird, but do you have a better idea?

Most of the mopeds are Japanese. There is one Chinese brandname, and the odd Italian. Japan is the industrial power. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere we once spent Billions to abort, and then more Billions to restore and nurture, is alive and dominant.

Taipeh streets, now, that is another story. Taipeh, a city of 2.5 millions, compares favorably with much of Manhattan as to cleanliness and appearance. I saw only two beggars. It has sidewalks, too. Trouble is they are preempted as moped parking lots, and by sidewalk vendors. You can do business with the vendors, but the mopeds are only a bleeping obstacle. And when they get up and go, just look out.

Streets and walks are jammed - very. Inside the shops the density is starkly lower. Instant personal service is the rule, courteous and often charming. They seem to enjoy sign language and other primitive means of bridging the language barrier.

Taipeh is laid out in a grid. There are few other concessions to foreigners seeking their way. Maps are barely readable. Once every six blocks or so a street sign is subtitled in English, but it's important to keep your bearings lest you panic. Once disoriented you've had it. You could go in a straight line to the next English subtitle, but by then you may have lost an hour, and whatever you were planning to catch is going to have left, the culture being mercilessly punctual. Mercilessly? Once you're on the bus it's a blessing. Taiwan is "hurry-up, hurry-up", but it's hurry-up and then don't wait, a fair bargain. Elevators are programmed to take the same attitude, doors close fast and firmly, but another comes along directly.

At one desperate point I broke a rule and hailed one of the ubiquitous cabs to make my bus. The driver, no Anglophone, understood my finger moving on the bilingual map. It was a good experience, fast and cheap. I also got a look at the world from the other side of the windshield. I wonder if my pedestrian face looks as startled and frightened as the pedestrians we nearly killed?

Demand for land is very high. The China Post, 19 Nov 88, p.12, reports a land appraisal at \$1,330/sq. ft., corner of Chungshan N. Rd., Sec. 2, Lane 50, and Nanking West Rd., Lane 23 (I don't

understand the sections and lanes, either). Those are U.S. \$; in \$NT it is 25 times that number. Corner of Chungshan and Nanking is quite a way from what seems like the 100% location, although near a center of the Mass Rapid Transit System. Still, the highest land price in central L.A. is less than half that.

Taipeh collects a land value tax graduated from 1% and rising to 5.5% for parcels above a certain value. Valuations are not current, and there are apparently many loopholes, but just supposing someone paid 5.5% on \$1,330/s.f., that is \$67/s.f. per year for holding land. "Hurry-up" indeed, that would attract a landholder's attention and make him hustle. Did I hear Art Laffer say taxes make us work less? Not this one! Taipeh speaks well for whatever system makes it run, and Dr. Sun Yat Sen would be most pleased, for he was an ardent Henry Georgist.

The tax is full of loopholes, like ours, but there are the fewest loopholes for commercial land in Taipeh, which could explain a lot. They have wisely closed one of our loopholes, that is for land held by government agencies but not used for the agency's purpose. The appraisal I saw in the China Post was on excess land the Rapid Transit Authority was disgorging. Bureaucrats have to live on budgets, too, you know.

Even Marco Polo had to write la comedia es finita (or was that Ruggiero Leoncavallo; and is that real Italian? -- no matter). I join Marco in commending this fascinating land which teaches us so much and which, as it adopts some of our good and bad ways, shows us our caricature in a fun-house mirror.