

# BECOMING A TRAVELLER IN YOUR OWN CITY

## 在自己的城市旅行

*Renowned Taiwanese architect Peter Lee explores forty of Taiwan's noteworthy buildings via his favorite approach to travel: straying from the path. Visiting each of Taiwan's major cities, Lee guides readers to a deeper appreciation of the local culture and architectural landscape.*

During the pandemic, the international tourist industry ground to a halt and remaining inside one's borders became the norm. Fortunately, sensible health policies helped Taiwan to largely avoid lockdowns, and residents continued to enjoy freedom of movement within their own cities. It was under these conditions that *Becoming a Traveller in Your Own City* was born. In distinction to other travel writers, city sleuth Peter Lee focuses on Taiwan's architectural edifices, and employs a Japanese approach to travel known as *meisō*, which translates as "straying from the path".

The book arranges its sights into seven thematic chapters: "Setting Out", "Forgotten", "Healing", "Oddities", "Pilgrimage", "Rebirth", and "Utopia". In "Setting Out" the author lays out his motivations for writing the book. Next, he explores "Forgotten" buildings, such as an unusual avant-garde Catholic church in Tainan. In the following chapters, he undertakes a "Healing" journey, which includes a train ride on the seaside Fangliao-Taitung line, and introduces readers to some local "Oddities", such as a curated tour of some of Taiwan's most bewildering statuary, representing everything from monsters, to dinosaurs, to Daoist gods, Buddhas, and even giant insects. Next up, he visits "Pilgrimage" sites, including a church used as a set in a popular music video, and sites undergoing "Rebirth", such as the colorfully refurbished waterfront of Keelung harbor. Finally, the author seeks refuge in the "Utopia" of buildings and architectural



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designs far removed from the rush and clamor of daily life.

Packed with observations that draw on the author's wide-ranging knowledge of film, architecture, and cultural peculiarities, *Becoming a Traveller in Your Own City* takes readers on a tour of buildings and sites that inspire the imagination, or grant a fresh perspective, encouraging readers to explore their familiar environments with new eyes.

## Peter Lee 李清志

Scholar, professor, columnist, and radio show host Peter Lee is dedicated to educating and elevating public awareness about architecture and metropolitan culture. He holds a master's degree from University of Michigan, and serves as an associate professor of architecture at Shih Chien University. He has been awarded two Golden Bell broadcasting awards, one for Best Cultural Radio Show, and one for Best Host of a Cultural Radio Show.

# BECOMING A TRAVELLER IN YOUR OWN CITY

By Peter Lee

Translated by Chris Findler

## Chapter 1: Setting Out

### 1 Traveling Domestically

COVID-19 hit the pause button on globalization. Riding the wave of globalism, it spread around the planet faster than any other epidemic in history, only, ironically, to bring globalization to a complete standstill.

Over the past century, advancements in aviation made moving between countries extremely common and easy and the rise of budget airlines made jetsetters out of young people of modest means. If you opened a flight tracker app on your cellphone, you would discover that skies the world over were almost always packed with planes. Enjoying *xiaolongbao* in Taipei one day and sipping *café* in Paris the next became a way of life for many. This all came to a surprising, sudden halt by a tiny, invisible virus. The previously unimaginable began to occur. Travel by plane and cruise ship became things to be dreaded. Established travel agencies unexpectedly found themselves faced with insolvency. International travel became unthinkable, something to fear. We used to jaunt about the globe, but now we had to cool our heels for a spell, because to slow down the virus, we had to slow ourselves down first. Taiwan was lucky. Due to the hard work of healthcare workers and the general public's willingness to cooperate with them, ours became the only "untouched land" in a world racked by the disease. We were able to avoid local outbreaks and community-acquired infections for a long time, so we could travel freely domestically. We were the envy of the world. Many people in Taiwan like to travel to and are well-acquainted with metropolises like Tokyo, London, and New York, but are relatively unfamiliar with and indifferent to cities in Taiwan. When you can no longer travel abroad, why not seize opportunity to travel domestically?

As a "city detective", I spend a great deal of time going around and checking out my own town trying to find new and interesting places and things. I have a few tips for those who would also like to explore their own towns:

*First, view your city through the eyes of a tourist.*

*Be sure to explore the backstreets and alleys on foot.*

*Strive to be perceptive, sensing the joys and hardships of local residents.  
The pandemic put the brakes on the world.  
Our complicated, busy lives have gradually slowed down, becoming simpler.  
Now is the time to cherish warmth, kindness, and the little joys of life!*

## **2 Stepping Out of Tianlongguo**

Unable to travel abroad during the pandemic, people set their sights on local trips, many becoming aware of beautiful places that they had previously overlooked.

The epidemic was so severe that the world was almost entirely engulfed in chaos and danger, but life in Taiwan, the only exception, continued as normal. We could not go abroad, but we could travel freely domestically, making us the envy of people around the world.

I actually went “abroad” many times during this period of time. By “abroad”, I do not mean out of Taiwan; rather, I mean I left “Tianlongguo”. Literally “Celestial Dragon Kingdom”, Tianlongguo is a term of derision used locally to poke fun at those who live in Taipei. Borrowed from the Japanese manga *One Piece*, it indicates a privileged class of self-absorbed individuals who feel it is beneath their dignity to live like or even breathe the same air as the common people.

I do not think the descriptor Tianlongguo really applies to me. That said, I have lived in Taipei for quite a while, so I have to admit that some of the attitude has rubbed off on me without me even realizing it.

So what makes somebody a citizen of Tianlongguo? Based on my humble observations and analysis, the people of Tianlongguo do not leave the “Kingdom of Taipei” unless it is to make a beeline to the Taoyuan Airport to catch a flight to Tokyo, Paris, or New York to vacation and shop. To them, everywhere else in Taiwan is tedious, uninteresting, and not worth wasting precious vacation time to see. A Tianlongguo citizen, therefore, might have visited Tokyo and Kyoto countless times, but never have set foot in Taitung. They may have scoured the backstreets of Paris, but have no idea what Tainan’s Old Capital has to offer.

The same was true of me. Almost all of my vacation time was spent abroad; very little of it was spent roaming about Taiwan. It wasn’t until I was no longer able to travel internationally that I finally opted to step out of the Kingdom. I fooled myself, saying that I was “traveling abroad”, but I was actually only leaving the Kingdom. I took this time, to visit places I had never seen before, including Yilan, Hualien, and Chishang as well as Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Taichung, Puli, Jiji, and Tainan.

The first thing I noticed is that the air outside of the Kingdom is different.

The Kingdom is so stifling that everybody has to duck into air conditioned buildings and cars. They have no idea what a natural breeze feels like. I discovered that when you leave the Kingdom and head for the south, which is known for its heat, you can actually feel cool breezes under the trees. You don’t even need air conditioning. The open-air cafés and shaved ice shops are nice and comfortable despite the fact that they don’t use AC.

Later, I discovered the laidback way of life and simplicity of Provence in Chishang. In the Hsinchu Train Station, I experienced the golden proportions of classical architecture from the Italian Renaissance. I found the elegance and antiquity of Kyoto in the Asuka Antique Store tucked away in an old building in Tainan. Early in the morning at the Lalu, a hotel on the shore of Sun Moon Lake, I enjoyed the tranquility and seclusion of an alpine lake in Europe. I felt déjà vu as I gazed at the raw concrete of Taichung's Zero Space so reminiscent of Ando Tadao. Riding the Jiji spur line reminded me of traveling in the mountains on the Kyoto Eizan Electric Railway. Getting lost in the back alleys of Tainan brought to mind the time I got disoriented in the maze-like streets of Venice.

The day I was sitting on a terrace at the Lalu Hotel trying to decide if the tranquil waters of Sun Moon Lake were covered with a rising mist or low clouds, I found myself transported back to the banks of the Switzerland's Lake Lucerne. The last time I came to Sun Moon Lake, I was in elementary school. I came with my parents and we stayed in the Teachers' Hostel. The waters of Sun Moon Lake are still unruffled, but my parents are no longer here to enjoy them. I had long forgotten about Sun Moon Lake's beauty and tranquility, but the pandemic brought me out of Tianlongguo, allowing me to rediscover the lake's wonder and helping me re-experience the feelings I shared with my family when last we were there.

I learned that when you step outside of Tianlongguo, you can discover wonders and pleasures similar to those found when traveling internationally. As the COVID epidemic continues to rage around us, I'm going to continue leaving Tianlongguo and discover more of Taiwan.

### **3 Travel Inspired by Old Photos**

Due to COVID, I have been visiting local travel destinations and have realized that Taiwan is a wonderful place in the process. The epidemic has actually given us the opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with our own land. It's like somebody who spends their life exploring outer space, but when they return to Earth, they realize that they don't even know their own planet.

I was once racking my brains trying to plan a unique travel itinerary for the New Year's holiday for my family. As I was tidying up my study, I came across a black-and-white photo of my family on a trip to Yehliu when I was in elementary school. In the photo, we were all standing next to the renowned Queen's Head rock formation. My impish little brother braced one hand against her neck as he pretended that he was about to scale up the side of her head.

A yearning stirred within me. I wanted to go back to Yehliu, back to Queen's Head, back to where the photo was taken to revisit the place that my family had been.

Beyond reasons of nostalgia, I wanted to assess for myself just how much scenic spots in Taiwan had changed over the years.

The photo must have been almost 50 years old. I couldn't believe that I hadn't been back there in half a century. But there were reasons. For one thing, everybody knows and has been to places like Yehliu, Sun Moon Lake, and Alishan. They're old hat. They lacked draw. For another,

after Taiwan opened up to mainland Chinese tour groups, these passé tourist sites were once again packed with visitors. This time, however, due to the sheer number of sightseers, many of them lacking manners, the scenic spots were now characterized by thronging crowds and bedlam, discouraging locals from going.

In recent years, however, with the decline in mainland Chinese tourists, tranquility has returned to Yehliu. Authorities have also made vast improvements to the area. Street vendors have been relocated to shopping streets and amenities, like restrooms, parking areas, and even signage, are now first-rate. Most importantly, the Geopark has been restored to its original beauty and visitors can once again come appreciate its natural landscape.

In the past, visitors went primarily to hyped up attractions at Yehliu, like the Queen's Head and the Fairy Shoe. The remainder of their time was spent eating and drinking at the seafood restaurants. You might think that that's a sad excuse for a travel excursion, but my memories of my family's outing at Yehliu are just like that. I can only recall the Queen's Head, the bronze statue of Lin Tien-chen, and the seafood joints. Part of the reason I wanted to go back was to fill in the blanks of my memory and discover the real Yehliu.

When I returned to Yehliu almost 50 years later, I found myself amazed as I stood in the Geopark gawking at the bizarre rock formations fashioned by wind and sea. It turns out that there is so much more to see than the Queen's Head; all of the geological formations are incredible. I walked among the giant mushroom rocks and gaped at the otherworldly formations that were all around: honeycomb rocks, earth rock, tofu rocks, marine pot holes, and candle rocks. Fossil creatures could be found everywhere in the ground beneath my feet. I felt like I was exploring an alien planet. Yehliu is one of the world's most beautiful places anywhere and should be on everybody's bucket list.

The natural beauty of Yehliu was first captured by photographer Huang Tse-Hsiu, who slipped into the park before it was opened to the public. In 1962, he held an exhibition titled *The Forgotten Paradise – Yehliu*, allowing the public to behold the beauty of the bizarre rock formations on the Yehliu coast from his black-and-white photographs. I took a photo of the Queen's Head during my latest excursion to Yehliu and compared it to the black-and-white one taken by my family when I was a child and noted that part of the queen's neck was much thinner. I'm afraid that within the next few years, she might "lose her head". To protect Queen's Head, visitors are no longer permitted to touch it.

My trip taught me the true meaning of the Chinese phrase "uncanny masterpiece of the gods" (鬼斧神工) and revealed to me the area's spectacular beauty. I realized I was wrong about Yehliu and left there with wonderful memories.

## **Chapter 2: Forgotten**

### **4 Forgotten Masterpiece in the Countryside**

If you travel in the countryside outside Tainan, you'll see an impressive pyramid on the horizon towering over the nearby fields like some monument. This structure, it turns out, is the main steeple, cross and all, of Jingliao Holy Cross Church.

60 years ago, German architect Gottfried Böhm was asked to design a Catholic church in rural Taiwan. Due to its remote location, it didn't attract much attention, not even from local architects. After he was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1986, however, Böhm began to be noticed and people suddenly remembered that he had designed a place of worship in Taiwan.

Most of Böhm's architectural works are located in Germany. Jingliao Holy Cross Church was his first outside of Germany and is the first structure in Taiwan to have as its designer a Pritzker Prize recipient. You could say that Böhm has architecture in his blood. His father and grandfather were architects. He followed in their footsteps and his son followed in his. While his father designed traditional Catholic churches, Gottfried took a modernist approach. Heavily influenced by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, Böhm's architectural style leans toward the Bauhaus School, but his designs are simple, geometrical, and imbued with a certain classical monumentality.

Jingliao Holy Cross Church is composed of geometric blocks, including a pyramid-shaped church and structures capped with conical spires. The aluminum sheeting that covers all of the structures glistens in the sunlight. The spires are topped with symbols. The cross on the main building represents salvation through Christ, the rooster weathervane perched on the entrance clock tower signifies vigilance, the dove above the baptistery symbolizes the Holy Spirit, and the crown atop the tabernacle denotes the sovereignty of Christ.

For local farmers, the appearance of a metal pyramid in the Tainan countryside 60 years ago was radical and out-of-place, and some residents pointed out that the poor feng shui of the site. Interestingly, Böhm never actually came to Taiwan. He drew his designs in Germany using photos of the site provided by Catholic monks in Taiwan. The main structure's roof was actually not derived from the Egyptian pyramids; rather, it was inspired by the temporary thatched-roof pavilions erected by local farmers. These pyramidal structures, propped up by four large bamboo poles, appeared in the black-and-white photographs taken for Böhm's reference.

The church interior is filled with ingenious details. For example, the large, solid conical copper cover of the baptismal font in the baptistery, conceived by Böhm and fashioned by German craftsmen, echoes the church's spires. To facilitate missionary work, the Catholic Church adapted to local culture, incorporating a traditional Chinese incense burner. (In scripture, incense smoke represents prayers rising up to heaven for God to hear.) On one side of the assembly hall, there are even ancestral tablets, indicating that the Catholic Church shares in the local belief that deceased ancestors must be honored with the proper funeral rites.

During our visit to Jingliao Holy Cross Church, we were warmly received by French priest Father John, who took us up to the roof deck to show us the church's architecture from various angles. Details of the metal spires were especially clear when viewed from the roof. He escorted the group through a secret entrance into the pyramid's interior to see the church's structure. I enjoyed watching a priest in medieval monastic garb leading us up and down the stairs. As we

strolled along paths in the nearby fields to look back at the church's spires, I was struck by how surreal the whole scene was. It was like we were no longer in Taiwan. That feeling was reinforced by the fact that we were being led around by a foreign priest. It was like we were on some curious pseudo-overseas excursion.

Taiwan is an amazing place that has been cross-pollinated by many cultures. If you take the trouble to open yourself up to new sights and experiences, you can discover many unexpected things.

## **5 Forgotten Architect**

During a recent architecture tour in Taiwan, I noted works by Hsiu Tse-Lan. This female architect is well-known, because she designed Yangmingshan's Chungshan Hall, but many believe that since she was a favorite architect of Chiang Kai-shek that she was very conservative in her design. If you study other works by her, however, you will discover that she was actually quite the avant-garde rebel.

She did, indeed, design vintage Chinese-style buildings for her authoritarian boss, but that's the fate of architects. They have to cater to the demands of their patrons. However, I learned that whenever she had the opportunity to work freely, she would unleash the wild creativity within. In university, while reading an architectural magazine, I was astounded to see photos of the church she designed for St. Viator Catholic High School in Taichung. Known as Viator's Ark, and built in 1966, the church is like some fantastic extraterrestrial creature. Though it is meant to be a dove, theologically a representation of the descent of the Holy Spirit, alumni of St. Viator refer to it as "the old hen".

Architects say that this building reminds them of the Tower of the Sun from the 1970 Osaka World's Fair, another bizarre, avant-garde edifice that fairly reeked of surrealism!

After graduating from college, I set out for Taichung's St. Viator Catholic High School to check out that crazy church. I felt like I was going on a pilgrimage to see a flying saucer from outer space. When I arrived at the school's old address, I looked everywhere, but couldn't find it. After asking a few locals I learned that an urban planning project laid a road down through the campus in 1983. The school was relocated, the church torn down, and the area became the Viator New World apartment complex.

Later, after I began to teach architecture at the university, Jingmei Girls High School would ask me to speak to students in their advanced placement language class. I enjoyed my annual visit to Jingmei, partly because the students in the advanced English program were hard workers who diligently took notes as I lectured, and partly because it gave me the opportunity to see more works by Hsiu Tse-Lan. From the administration building to the library, every building on campus was completed according to her design. The curvilinear forms of their exterior walls are in no way inferior to the works of later deconstructionist Frank Gehry.



Arguably, Jingmei Girls High School is the finest school campus designed by Hsiu. The graceful front gate, administration building, and library are all accentuated by towering palms. If you draw a straight line from the arched white front gate to the administration building, and another from the library to the arts building, they would intersect at a perfect right angle, forming a prototypical campus layout.