

THE CHAPEL BY THE SEA

公東的教堂

World renowned photographer Nicholas Fan was invited some years ago to visit the Le Corbusier-designed Le Couvent Sainte-Marie de la Tourette outside Lyon, turning his trip into the book *The Convent on the Hill*. After his return to his native Taiwan, he was surprised to come across a similarly important chapel built sixty years earlier on the east coast, attached to the Kung-Tung Technical Senior High School. The four-storey avant-garde structure was Taiwan's second modernist building, built around the same time as Le Corbusier's masterpiece was gaining fame around the world.

Kung-Tung Technical Senior High School was built under the leadership of Father Hilber Jakob. His intention was not in fact to open a school, but after living in Taiwan for some years he came to the conclusion that education was the most important catalyst for improving people's everyday lives. He imported the German dual education system, with its equal emphasis on theory and practice, and inaugurated a new era in Taiwan's technical education. The school trained many talented carpenters and technicians, laying a solid foundation for Taiwan's furniture industry.

In the past decades, the chapel at Kung-Tung has been a site of pilgrimage for the island's architecture students, though still a hidden treasure among a small select circle. Deciding that it deserved greater attention among the wider public too, Nicholas Fan resolved to document this remarkable building and its story in this book. Consisting of beautiful photographs and immediate and arresting prose, it is a love letter to a part of Taiwan's history that risks being forgotten forever.

Nicholas Fan 范毅舜

Nicholas Fan has a master's degree from the Brooks Institute of Photography and has exhibited in Washington D.C., the Leica Gallery Frankfurt, the Alain Couturier Gallery in France, as well as numerous venues all over Taiwan. His photographs have been used by Leica, Sinar, Hasselblad, Ilford and Kodak for exhibitions and promotion, and Sony Taiwan supports him with the equipment he uses from day to day. Hasselblad named him one of the world's one hundred and fifty best photographers and he is the only Chinese



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photographer to have been included in a Leica exhibition. He has published nearly fifty books in Taiwan.

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By Nicholas Fan. Translated by James Laughton-Smith.

Preface

Taitung once used to seem as distant as a foreign country to me.

I probably knew more about European history and culture than I did about Taitung and its natural surroundings. I was not alone in this. Many of my friends who received their degrees abroad, knowledgeable about world affairs and professionally accomplished, have never been to Taitung. They know more about the United States, all the way across on the opposite side of the Pacific Ocean, than the largest city on Taiwan's east coast.

I'm ashamed to say that my knowledge of Taitung comes mostly from my study of the Swiss missionaries of the Bethlehem Missionary Society (SBM), who have been serving in Taiwan for the last sixty or so years.

In the summer of 2008, I published a book called *The Swiss Men of the Coastal Mountain Range*. In it, I mention a missionary called Brother Buchel Augustin. He loved trekking and set up the Siangyang Hiking Club. He taught me the best spots to star gaze, dip in outdoor hot springs, enjoy the plum blossoms and even where to watch planes take off and land. The missionaries would swim every day in an artificial lake right on the coast next to the Pacific. We dubbed it the King of Pools because it was so big.

The SBM missionaries have left their mark all along the east coast. Over the last sixty years, they have built churches, a hospital, a special education centre and even founded a school. Most of them were young men in their late twenties and thirties when they first came to Taiwan. Today, they speak fluent Mandarin, Hokkien and even the languages of the Amis and Bunun tribes. Some have passed away but a few are still alive.

I have spent the last twenty-five years travelling all across the European continent and I lived on the east coast of America for a long period. In contrast, many of the missionaries feel so strongly about Taiwan, their adopted home, that they wished to be buried here even after their passing.

Getting to know these missionaries forced me to reassess my values.

For example, what is success? Is it fame? Or is it having lots of money? Brother Buchel Augustin still sleeps on the same old bed he has slept in for the last forty years, in a tiny, unbearably hot room with no air-conditioning. He still uses a 1960s-style plastic wardrobe that is old enough to be a museum exhibit. Father Gassner Ernst has fewer winter coats than the average woman has designer handbags. And yet they live full and contented lives, especially on Sundays when they run around holding Mass in different locations around town. At his advanced age of eighty-four, I often worry about Father Vonwyl Gottfried and how his congregation, who love him dearly, will cope if, heaven forbid, he passes on.

I felt at the time that my book *The Swiss Men of the Coastal Mountain Range* contained all I had to say on the subject, despite it being a slim volume of only three chapters. I have never liked writing about the people or things I care for, for fear of somehow losing those feelings, that they would no longer belong to me. Moreover, the subjects of my writing may not like what they find in the pages of my books and that would be uncomfortable. But I wrote a

second volume about them, in part because their stories are so beautiful and also in part because they gave me the chance to review my own life and values from another perspective.

Life is full of unexpected twists and turns, as they say.

In the second part of *The Swiss Men of the Coastal Mountain Range* I included too many personal secrets and struggles and it brought me to a crossroads in my life. I decided to move to the United States for good, give up my artistic endeavours and find a stable job so that I could put down roots. In 2010, Taitung County government selected my book as part of the international One City, One Book project. They contacted my publishers repeatedly to invite me back to Taiwan to give a speech. Right from the start I had no intention of accepting the offer (not because I thought I was too important, but because I was afraid it would undermine my determination to leave behind my art). However in the end, because I had an early draft I needed to deliver to my publishers, I decided to combine both tasks and make a brief trip back to Taiwan. It was by accident that during this short trip I happened upon the beautiful chapel in Taitung built by the Bethlehem Missionary Society half a century before on the grounds of Kung-Tung Technical Senior High School.

But as I feared, the building and the story behind it once again took me on a journey into the unknown. And the completion of this book, one I never planned to write.

Missionaries from Afar

‘God sieves slowly, but His sieve is very fine. You can’t afford to confuse diamond and glass.’

Unknown Roman historian

One cold winter’s night, I was chatting with Brother Buchel Augustin at their church in Taitung.

‘Many architecture students come to visit churches built by the Bethlehem Mission Immensee. I’m always surprised that their favourite is the one at Kung-Tung Technical Senior High School.’

‘That’s quite understandable. Didn’t Brother Julius Felder design it?’ I asked off hand.

‘Of course not!’ Brother Augustin exclaimed. ‘It was designed by a professional architect. Brother Felder and I were yet to arrive in Taiwan.’

Brother Augustin has been living on the island for nearly fifty years. It felt like there was a lot left for me to discover about this place, despite all the research I had done for my previous book about the SBM missionaries.

I cycled to Kung-Tung the next morning. The scenery along the way was more or less as I remembered it from my first visit to Taitung City thirty years ago. Taiwan’s decades of miraculous economic growth made it the envy of the world. But aside from disrupting our collective memories, it made me even sadder to think that perhaps the magnificent coastline, leaning up against the mountains, might one day be buried under fields of concrete, all in the name of progress. Unlike the locals, I was sometimes thankful for the city’s slower pace of development.

It was the holidays and the Kung-Tung campus was deserted. As far as I was concerned, at one point it had been a nationally renowned technical senior high and many of Taiwan’s future furniture magnates had been students of the school. At that time, students of the school would secure employment even before graduating, such was the

school's reputation; employers knew that pupils received a strict yet solid training from the Swiss missionaries.

The first time I went to see the chapel building I was completely staggered by the modern exposed structure so beloved of so many people in Taiwan in the past decade. Just a few years ago I had been a resident artist at Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette, designed by Le Corbusier—the father of Kung-Tung Chapel's architectural style—and I had once made the arduous journey across western France to visit Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut, a classic of modern architecture. My pilgrimage to see the works of Le Corbusier left a deep impression, but now I felt ashamed to have been unaware of a comparable building in my own back yard.

As I stood outside the grey, decrepit building, I felt a rush of emotions. Even in this rapid information era, I knew nothing about it. I thought of the high school's founder, Father Hilber Jakob, who had come to Taitung in 1952. He would likely be a good place to start if I wanted to look for clues.

Moulding the Memories and Emotions of an Era

As I stood inside the beautiful Kung-Tung Chapel, I contemplated the space and an impression indistinct at first became clearer and clearer in my mind.

People told me that even just before he died and as long as his health allowed, Father Hilber Jakob insisted on holding Mass for students in the chapel. They described how many times he had to practically clamber up the steps on all fours to reach the chapel at the top of the building, but he wouldn't accept any help. His nurse was particularly frustrated by his stubborn determination, forced as she was to follow him from behind and push him up.

Perhaps it's hard for us to comprehend the devotion of these missionaries?

Two thousand years ago, the Roman governor of Jerusalem Pontius Pilate was forced to condemn Christ because of protests from the Jewish crowds. In Pilate's mind, he had not committed any crime. However, the Jewish priests and leaders viewed Christ's message of love, equality and the virtue of forgiveness as fundamentally opposed to the mainstream values of the time and they denounced him as subversive. At Passover, the crowds went against all common morality and allowed for an innocent Christ to be condemned while a bandit was set free. Pilate was troubled and asked Jesus why he had come. The carpenter's son answered, 'To testify to the truth.' 'What is the truth?' Pilate asked. But Christ remained silent.

Pilate asked the question all of us want answered.

Father Hilber Jakob, who spent the best part of his life in service to Christ, never answered this question directly. However, in that little room where he lived in the corner of the third floor leading up to the chapel on the fourth, I seemingly found some clues: his modest little room with its shabby bathroom was unbearably hot in summer and freezing in winter. Jakob chose to live in those poor living conditions so that he could fit in with the apprentices. And just like the monks' rooms in Le Corbusier's La Tourette monastery, his small quarters only had room for a bed, a desk, a cupboard, and nothing else.

Suddenly, I had a realisation about what Christ might have meant when he chose not to answer but to make his point through action: the truth cannot be expressed in words. Only through our deeds are we able to grope our way through the fog of life, and from that we gain strength. Just like the trembling light of the candle, though insignificant, can light the way ahead and bring comfort in the dead of night.

It is often the case that as people age, they turn their backs on the materialistic values that once seemed so alluring in their confused youth. In the ocean of our memories, the people and stories of Kung-Tung Chapel are like the stars that exploded in the night sky hundreds of millions of years ago—although time has passed they still give off a beautiful and moving light.

Even more so, this place resembles a fable: Taiwan has gone from wealth to comfort, from equality in poverty to a rich-poor divide. In just a few decades of this so-called economic miracle, how many of our values have we lost? Just as we reach a stage where we begin to appreciate Kung-Tung Chapel, the building has fallen into disrepair and is even a little unsafe. And the spirit of Father Hilber Jakob and his generation will eventually become like a legend made to be forgotten.

A building at the end of the day is still only a building. Kung-Tung Chapel, however, allows us to keep alive the memories and emotions of an era. Those memories and feelings allow us companionship in the emptiness of our universe; they are a force that keeps us afloat against the tide of materialism and peer pressure.

Justus Dahinden, the Ever Prolific Architect

It was a rare opportunity to be able to meet with this man of nearly ninety who was still practicing his art with as much energy as ever. Words like ‘master’ were insufficient to describe a man of such dedication.

With most of the SBM missionaries deceased and the fifty-year-old chapel building in a decrepit state, I, like many others, assumed that its architect Justus Dahinden had also died. So I was surprised when Brother Laurenz Schelbert called the office run by Dahinden’s son for information about the architect and learned that Dahinden himself was at that moment holding a meeting with his staff and was told to call back shortly.

The next day the eighty-eight year old Dahinden returned the call and happily answered our questions. He felt extremely proud that a building he had designed in his youth was still being noticed and appreciated, and he looked forward to our visit.

Dahinden’s headquarters were in an upmarket area of Zurich. Dahinden, whose Chinese Zodiac sign was the ox, had hung an eye-catching statue of a bull’s head on the wall at the entrance to his fancy office. I could not imagine how, back in the day, he had happened to have this connection with Taiwan. The Kung-Tung Chapel was reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s design, and although Le Corbusier was peerless in his architectural achievements, in person he was quite a difficult personality.

I was curious as to what kind of person Dahinden would be. Would he be easy to get along with?

When we entered the office, Dahinden and his son came down to greet us. He was dressed in flowing black clothes and he wore his hair in a most artistic fashion. He was in fine fettle and still had the passion of a young man burning in his eyes.

Dahinden admitted that he was surprised so many people in Taiwan liked his chapel. He was embarrassed to confess that the design had only been part of a doctoral thesis. Although it was an interesting building, it could not be said to be one of his best, he said, especially when the whole building was so entirely reminiscent of Le Corbusier, a style that every architecture student at the time was trying to emulate. In addition, due to the passage of time, there were a lot of details about the chapel that he no longer remembered.

At this, our conversation fell into a lull, so I took out my book *The Convent on the Hill* and showed it to Dahinden. As soon as he saw it, his eyes lit up. Taking the book, he flicked through it carefully and declared to Brother Schelbert, 'This is a man who knows what he's doing. He's not just any old photographer.' Suddenly, as I was still formulating my next question, he stood and said, 'Let's go! I'll show you my house and a church nearby that I also designed. As for my artistic philosophy, you can read my book for that.'

As we were walking, he turned to me, put his arm across my shoulders and said, 'Young man, you're the first photographer I've ever had in my home. Take any picture you like!' I liked him immediately. Oh, how wonderful is the world of art! Passion is enough to break down barriers of age, culture and religion.

Dahinden's influences include Frank Lloyd Wright and Gaudi, as well as other pioneers in the field including the Japanese modernists. It wasn't that his style particularly moved me, but that I was so happy to be in this man's company and enjoying his creations. Dahinden said to me that as an architect who served others he had never wanted people to have to adhere to or adapt to his work.

All of a sudden I realised that while Kung-Tung Chapel was designed in the Le Corbusier style, it was charged with a passion that Le Corbusier's buildings rarely possessed. The chapel was welcoming with an almost childlike humour, and yet it had an ease, in stark contrast to Le Corbusier's haughty and severe attitude, which often seemed to see itself above the ordinary man.

Dahinden's home was full of museum-grade paintings from the Orthodox Church. The most impressive feature was a stove placed in the centre of living room rather than against a wall, around which was arranged several comfortable sofas. It was a design that had people and the joy of sharing at its heart. 'Young man, in the winter, my friends come to visit and we sit around the stove and drink beer, eat, and talk. We have so much fun that no one wants to leave!' Dahinden told me proudly.

These days, art has become detached from life and is championed for its own sake. But here, it was suddenly clear to me that the architect wasn't motivated by money or reputation but by a love of art and life, and above all else a love of people. He enjoyed God's gifts to the full.

During my brief time with Dahinden he rarely discussed theory, choosing instead to share his insights and work in a more direct, physical manner. This included inviting me into his private home.

Art enriches our lives and can even help us grow. As they say, 'In the chaos of existence, providing an antidote to the nihilism of our era is art's greatest function. It can't save our souls, but it makes our souls worthy of saving.'