

Buddhist Activities in the Medical Society of Taiwan

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History of Taiwan

Taiwan is an island nation located on the west coast of the Pacific Ocean, east of China, south of Japan, and north of the Philippines. It is thirty-six thousand square kilometers in size, and has a population of twenty-one million. The majority of the inhabitants are descendants of Chinese immigrants.

In 1492, shortly after Columbus' discovery of America, a Portuguese sailor passed by Taiwan and gave it the name of "Ilha Formosa." From 1624–1661, the Dutch ruled the southern part of Taiwan, while the Spanish controlled a small northern area from 1626–1642.² In 1661, Koxinga of the Chinese Ming Dynasty took over Taiwan.³ In 1684, the Chinese Chin Dynasty started governing Taiwan. This government lasted until 1895 when Taiwan was transferred to Japanese rule, as China lost in the war with Japan.⁴ In 1945, after the Second World War, Taiwan was given to the Republic of China.

Early Medical Services

The Dutch were busy with commercial activities and did not introduce any medical services into Taiwan. During the Chinese rule from 1661 to 1895, the main medical service in Taiwan was Chinese herbal medicine.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries introduced modern medicine into Taiwan. In 1872, Rev. Dr. James Laidlaw Maxwell of England opened a Presbyterian Hospital in southern Taiwan which became the Hsin-low (New Building) Hospital in Taiwan.⁵ In the same year, a Canadian missionary, Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay, started a biblical mission in Ho-boe (now Tan-shuei), a coastal village in north Taiwan.⁶ He started the practice of modern western medicine in north Taiwan. His work led to the founding of the Mackay Memorial Hospital in Taipei in 1912, currently the largest Christian teaching hospital in Taiwan. In 1896, Rev. Dr. David Landsborough set up the Changhua Christian Hospital in Changhua, central Taiwan.

The first government owned clinic of western medicine was founded in Taipei by the Chin governor, Liu Ming-chuan, in 1886.⁷ On June 20, 1895, the Japanese ruler founded the Taiwan Hospital in Taipei.⁸ Four years later, the prototype medical school was started in this hospital. Together, the school and hospital became the most important teaching center of modern medicine in Taiwan. They became, respectively, the Medical College of the National Taiwan University and its affiliated hospital, the National Taiwan University Hospital.⁹ This remained the only center of medical teaching for sixty years and is still one of the leading centers of medical teaching, research, and service. 1

Current Medical Services

There are now ten medical schools in Taiwan and numerous hospitals of various sizes ranging from fifty beds to more than two thousand beds. There are more than twenty thousand practicing physicians, with yearly medical graduates numbering more than one thousand. A national health insurance program was just launched on March 1, 1995. Taiwan is heading towards "Health for all."

Religions in Taiwan

With most of its population descending from Chinese immigrants from either the seventeenth century or the last fifty years, Taiwan supports the Chinese religious traditions. Over seventy percent of the population are loose followers of a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Christians (including both Protestants and Catholics) are the second largest group. Moslems and followers of other religions constitute a minor portion of the population. All sects of religious teachings are growing freely now.

Buddhism in Taiwan

Nearly all of the Chinese Buddhist sects existed in Taiwan. However, the practice of Buddhism was mixed with Chinese Taoism and Confucianism. It was not popular among the intellectuals until approximately forty years ago. Religious teaching and practice were not allowed in the public schools, nor in public offices, nor in the government owned hospitals.

In 1960, a retired professor of engineering, Chou Shuen-teh, initiated the promotion of pure Buddhist teaching in the colleges. On April 8, 1960, with his help, a Buddhist student association, the Chen-shi (Twilight) Society, was founded in the National Taiwan University. The next year, he published a journal, *Torch of Wisdom*, aiming at the promotion of Buddhism among college students.¹⁰ The journal has continued up to the present, expanding in size and circulation. Gradually, Buddhist societies were established in almost every college and university in Taiwan. Many college students began to go to temples to receive religious teachings and learn religious practices. The monks and nuns, previously primarily located in temples in mountainous areas, began to enter urban areas and teach the intellectuals. Quite a few college graduates became monks or nuns. These efforts have revitalized Buddhism in Taiwan.

Buddhist Hospitals in Taiwan

Since modern western medicine was introduced into Taiwan by Christian missionaries, most of the religious hospitals are owned by Protestant or Catholic churches. Scattered clinics of individual physicians associated with Buddhism mainly practiced herbal medicine. In 1965, the first Buddhist hospital was established in Taichung City in central Taiwan, and named Bodhi Hospital. Its services combined western and herbal medicines. Then, in Hualien County in eastern Taiwan, a great Buddhist nun, Ven. Cheng-yen, established the Tz'u-chi Charity Foundation. It gradually gained tremendous social support all over the nation and expanded its charity activities not only in Taiwan, but also into mainland China, Africa, and even California. This Foundation opened the Buddhist Tz'u-chi Hospital in Hualien in 1986. It soon became the best and largest teaching general hospital in eastern Taiwan. In 1989, the Buddhist Tz'u-chi Nursing School, and in 1994, the Buddhist Tz'u-chi Medical School were successively started in Hualien. The Tz'u-chi Foundation is planning to build more hospitals in areas where they are needed.



Figure 1: A Buddhist devotion room in the National Taiwan Hospital

Buddhist Activities Among Health Care Professionals

In the mid 1980s, Buddhist societies were gradually formed in several large hospitals.¹¹ In 1987, the Tzu-kuang (Mercy Light) Society was established in the National Taiwan University Hospital. The group provides regular teaching sessions and activities for the hospital staff as well as for Buddhist followers among the patients and their families. In 1991, a Buddhist devotion room (Figure 1) was opened on the tenth floor of the newly built east wing of this two thousand bed hospital. It attracts many patients, families, and hospital staff members every day. (The hospital also provides a chapel for the Protestants and Catholics.)

On the third floor in the basement, a prayer room for the dead has been provided. It allows family members to gather and pray with the corpse for eight hours. This was done to meet the needs of Buddhists of the Pure-Land sect, who believe that providing a peaceful environment for the family and friends to pray with the corpse for eight hours after a person's death is very important in increasing the chance that the dead person will enter Amida Buddha's Pure-Land. It is certainly quite useful in relieving the sadness of the survivors.

Buddhist Medical Associations

In 1990, the Buddhist societies of various hospitals gathered to create a Buddhist Medical Association.¹² The author was selected as the first president. The purpose of this Association is to facilitate the friendly gathering of Buddhists working in the medical field so they may exchange experiences and ideas and strengthen their practice of Buddhism. It also serves to extend medical assistance to monks and nuns when they are sick.

Buddhist Lotus Hospice Care Foundation

The members of the Buddhist Medical Association were eager to provide a Buddhist style of hospice care in Taiwan. After several years of preparation, the Buddhist Lotus Hospice Care Foundation (Lotus Foundation) was finally born in July of 1994 in Taipei.¹³ The author became the president. In cooperation with the Catholic Kong-tai Medical Education Foundation and the Christian Chinese Hospice Care Foundation, the Lotus Foundation wishes to make hospice care accepted in this country. At present in Taiwan, there are only two hospice wards. One is in the Christian Mackay Memorial Hospital and the other is in Cardinal Tien's Hospital. Each has eighteen beds.¹⁴ The Lotus Foundation plans to build a Buddhist Lotus Hospital to promote Buddhist style hospice care in Taiwan. In the meantime, the Lotus Foundation is trying to persuade general hospitals to open hospice wards and to provide training for related personnel. As the initial response to this effort, the National Taiwan University Hospital is planning to open a seventeen bed ward for hospice care in June of 1995. Persuading the National Health Insurance Program to cover hospice care is also an issue. Both the Buddhist Medical Association and the Lotus Foundation will continue the promotion of Buddhism among health care professionals.

Notes

- ¹ Professor of Neurology, Vice-superintendent, National Taiwan University Hospital. President, Buddhist Lotus Hospice Care Foundation. President, Taiwan Buddhist Medical Association.
- ² W. M. Campbell, *Formosa Under the Dutch* (London: Kegan Paul, 1903; reprint, Taipei: Southern Material Center, 1987), pp. 25–75. Also, H. D. Lin, ed., *The History of Taiwan* (Taipei: Chung-Wen Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 10–20.
- ³ Lin, *History of Taiwan*.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid. and P. H. Chou, ed., *105 Anniversary of Mackay Memorial Hospital* (Taipei: Mackay Hospital Publications, 1985), pp. 1–4.
- ⁶ Chou, *Anniversary*.
- ⁷ Lin, *History of Taiwan*.
- ⁸ T. Y. Tai, "National Taiwan University Hospital – An Overview in Annual," *Bulletin of National Taiwan University Hospital*, 1993: 4–5.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ R. C. Chen, preface to *White Gown and Goddess of Mercy* by the Buddhist Medical Association (Taipei: Yuan-shen Publication Co., 1992), 2–4.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ R. C. Chen, "Hospice Care in Japan," *Psychosomatic Review* 5 (1994): 8–20.
- ¹⁴ Y. L. Lai et al., "Continuing Hospice Care of Cancer – A Three-Year Experience" *Journal of the Formosan Medical Association* 93 (1994): 98–102.