

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

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A protest movement blossoms

Nearly 20 years ago, a group of residents in Meinung mobilized to prevent the construction of a dam. In the process, they gave the ailing community a new lease on life

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ON THE NET:

Meinung People's Association:
mpa.ngo.org.tw

Community College of Chishan District in Kaohsiung:
Blog: www.wretch.cc/blog/cmcu
Official site: cmcu.king.tw

TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan:
www.tasat.org.tw

RECOMMENDED LISTENING:

Singer-songwriter and Meinung native Lin Sheng-xiang (林生祥) was an active participant in the anti-dam movement. He and poet and lyricist Zhong Yong-feng (鍾永豐) crafted music that vividly portrays life in Meinung since the movement started. Lin sings in Hakka, and all of pair's albums come with printed translations of lyrics in Mandarin and English

PLANTING TREES by Lin Sheng-xiang. Many of the stories in this album are based on Meinung today

LET US SING THE MOUNTAIN SONGS by Labor Exchange Band. This album of rousing folk rock launched Lin Sheng-xiang's career as a singer and songwriter, and also helped to inform younger generations in Taiwan about the anti-dam movement. A classic of Taiwan's underground rock scene

NIGHT MARCH OF THE CHRYSANTHEMUMS by Labor Exchange Band. This second and last album by Labor Exchange Band presents fictional stories of a Meinung farmer who struggles to cope with the "modern" world. This epic, uplifting album touches upon themes of globalization, economic decline in Taiwan's rural areas, immigrant spouses, and labor rights, and is considered by many to be the band's best work

IN the early 1990s, the quaint farming town of Meinung (美濃) in Kaohsiung County faced a major battle: the government was forging ahead with plans to build a dam to supply nearby industries, but a group of residents in this Hakka community stood in the way.

Concerned with safety and environmental issues surrounding the project, a group of about 300 residents, which included farmers and college students, launched a grassroots movement that put a temporary halt to the construction of the dam in 2000, which remains in effect today.

But the anti-dam movement didn't stop there. Energized and emboldened by success, the activists turned their energies towards other issues affecting Meinung, ranging from the environment to the town's declining agricultural industries.

Their efforts gave birth to a number of community-based projects that continue in Meinung today. The central organization behind these projects is the Meinung People's Association (美濃愛鄉協進會), the group that led the protests against the planned dam. The association has been the catalyst for several newer organizations, including a community college and a support group for immigrant spouses from Southeast Asia.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION

Today, the association sees its role as drawing on "the collective strength of the anti-dam movement" to foster "local industry, organic farming, education, and culture," says Arthur Liu (劉孝仲), vice chief of the association's board of directors.

One of the association's ongoing projects promotes Meinung's "cultural spaces." The group's members are restoring several tobacco barns, an important part of local culture in Meinung as the town was once a major supplier

for the state-run Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corp (TTL, 台灣菸酒公司).

Liu says that preserving such buildings helps maintain a sense of identity and heritage. "If we have self-confidence in our own culture, our own architectural spaces, then we won't [blindly] throw away that which was originally ours," he says.

The association aims to foster Meinung's local agricultural industry. The town's main crops, which include rice and papaya, are often subject to unstable market prices, says Liu.

In an alternative approach, the association has promoted organic food production by putting local producers in touch with organic farmers to learn new skills. The association started an organic farming class, which led to the establishment in 2001 of a community college devoted to Meinung's agricultural industry.

A NEW SCHOOL

When the Community College of Chishan District in Kaohsiung (高雄縣旗山區社區大學), started, its classes were tailored to addressing issues relation to farming and agriculture, says Chiu Jing-hui (邱靜慧), an association member who helped establish and run the school, and currently works there as a full-time administrator.

The classes covered new farming techniques, including organic farming; marketing strategies; the implications of Taiwan's entry into the World Trade Organization; and alternative trends such as the Slow Food movement.

Today the curriculum has a broader appeal, with classes ranging from Japanese conversation and traditional Hakka singing to yoga and Chinese painting.

But the goal of the school, says Chiu, remains the same: to provide the area's agricultural communities with an educational platform. Last semester, enrollment was around 750 students, most of whom were aged between 40 and 65, she says.

The school also offers four-day workshops on issues facing Taiwan's agricultural industries and villages, which are attracting a new set of students, says Chiu. Many of these students are NGO workers, farmers from outside of Meinung, and younger people from the city, she says.

HELPING NEW TAIWANESE

The association's community efforts also extended to the creation of an advocate group for immigrant spouses from Southeast Asian countries. While working as an anti-dam activist in the late 1990s, Sung Chang-ching (宋長青) was among a group of association members who volunteered to teach Chinese literacy classes for Southeast Asian spouses in Meinung.

At the time, there was little support for the spouses beyond basic Chinese-language classes, Sung says. "We discovered that outside of teaching language ... they actually had more urgent needs in daily life ... It's not like they could just learn the language and then [simply] solve difficulties encountered in daily life." These difficulties included basic needs such as obtaining a health insurance card or an ID card, she says.

The literacy class caught on, and was incorporated into a nationwide government program created in 1999 to help new immigrant spouses adjust to life in Taiwan. A few years later, volunteers and scholars in Meinung applied their experience to starting the TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT), which now runs support services and offices in Meinung and Taipei.

BACK TO THE BATTLEFIELD?

Despite this blossoming of community action, the threat of the dam still looms on the horizon. Former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) pledged that the dam would not be built while he was in office, but President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has not made a similar commitment.



Top: A view of Meinung's Zhongzheng Lake, which residents also call Meinung Lake.

Above right: A group of activists at the East Gate in Meinung protest in the late 1990s against a government plan to build a dam nearby.

Right: Sanheyuan, the traditional U-shaped house with a courtyard, were once commonly used by Hakka families in Meinung. Left: A view of the mountains north of Meinung from the Home Inn, a guesthouse in the western part of town.

PHOTOS BY DAVID CHEN AND COURTESY OF MEINUNG PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION

Messing about in Meinung

Thanks to the Taiwan High Speed Rail, you can leave Taipei in the morning, and find yourself pedaling through the countryside of Kaohsiung County after lunch

By virtue of its picturesque mountains alone, Meinung (美濃) township is worth a visit. Shortly after arriving on a warm summer afternoon, I watched the clouds and mist roll in and shroud the peaks, constantly shifting with the whims of a moody storm. It looked like a slide show of Chinese landscape paintings. By sunset, the skies cleared into hues of pinks and blue, leaving just enough time for a leisurely bicycle ride.

Provided there's good weather, bicycling remains the best way to explore this popular traditional Hakka town. Most of the historical sites downtown can easily be covered within a day or two. Pleasing sites include the East Gate (東門樓) and Zhongzheng Lake (中正湖), which die-hard Meinung residents refer to as Meinung Lake (美濃湖).

Meinung has a set of color-coded bike paths that take you through many of its smaller roads. Though some of the lines aren't very clearly marked, don't worry about getting lost — the mountains should keep you oriented, or listen for the sound of cars to get back on to the main road.

Part of the fun, however, can be losing your way, as you soak in the sights of rice paddies, palm trees and running brooks. You'll catch an occasional whiff of manure (you're in the country after all) or the sweet smell of flowering betel nut trees. As you ride, look out for the *kaiji bogung* (開基伯公), or roadside altars, which look like headstones.

I stayed at the Home Inn (湖美茵), a genial guesthouse at the western end of town. The area offers a generous view of the mountains, which you can enjoy while sitting on a bench in front of a large pond. If you walk around the surrounding gardens, you're bound to run into the inn's pet geese, which seem to only be concerned with chasing each other.

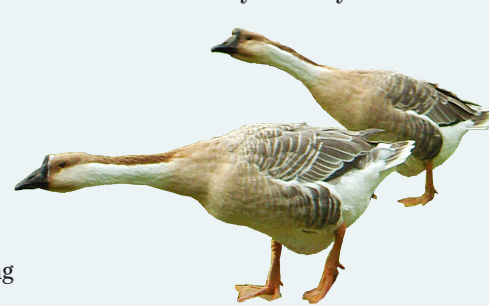
A room for two runs NT\$1,800 on weekdays and NT\$2,100 on weekends, which may seem a little steep for the budget-minded, but the rooms are very well-kept and the grounds are scenic enough that you could spend the whole day sitting outside, lost in a book. The proprietor (and one of the leaders of the anti-dam movement), Sung

Yung-sung (宋永松), comes out occasionally with a pitcher of cold, fresh mint tea, made from freshly picked sprigs of the herb. Otherwise you're pretty much left alone; weekdays are especially quiet.

With its spacious grounds and large dining facilities, the Home Inn also accommodates small gatherings, with catered meals available on request.

Getting there is a little tricky, though — you'll have to either drive or rent a bicycle by the bus station in downtown Meinung. It's a 15-minute ride on a bicycle.

And thanks to the High Speed Rail, you can leave Taipei City in the morning and find yourself pedaling through rural southern Taiwan by the early afternoon.



IF YOU GO

PLACES TO VISIT:

>> Meinung Hakka Museum (高雄縣美濃客家文物館), 49-3 Mintzu Rd, Meinung Township (美濃鄉民族路49-3號), call (07) 681-2943
Meinung Kiln (美濃窯), 6, Ln 496, Fumei Rd, Meinung Township, Kaohsiung County (高雄縣美濃鎮福美路496巷6號), call (07) 681-7873
www.mei-nung.com.tw

PLACES TO STAY:

>> Home Inn (湖美茵)
52, Ln 782, Zhongshan Rd Sec 2, Meinung Township, Kaohsiung County (高雄縣美濃鎮中山路二段782巷52號)
Rooms range from NT\$1,800 to NT\$3,200
For more information, call (07) 681-7828
On the Net: blog.yam.com/homeinn

Jhong-Jheng Lake B&B (中正湖山莊民宿)
30 Fumei Rd, Zhongzhen Borough, Meinung Township, Kaohsiung County (高雄縣美濃鎮中圳里福美路30號)
Rooms range from NT\$1,500 to NT\$3,500
For more information, call (07) 681-2736
On the Net: www.5658.com.tw/zzhu