

Taiwan: Sweet Potato of the Pacific

Van James, Honolulu, Hawai'i



Map of Taiwan and detail with mainland China.

In the shape of a sweet potato (Taiwanese call themselves “son’s of the sweet potato,” *hanji ah gyen*), Taiwan is an island country smaller than Switzerland that sits on the Tropic of Cancer in the western Pacific a little more than one hundred miles off the coast of mainland China. With a population of over 23 million people it is highly ranked in terms of public education, health care, freedom of the press, economic freedom and human development. It has a highly skilled workforce and is known to be one of the most highly educated countries in the world. It is no wonder that Waldorf education is flourishing on this relatively small, Chinese-speaking garden isle.



Ci-Xin Waldorf School in Ilan, Taiwan, is the largest Waldorf school in Asia.



Shan Mei Zhen Waldorf School



Shan Mei Zhen Waldorf School in Taichung, as many other schools in Taiwan, hosts teacher training classes at various times throughout the year.



The first Taiwanese Waldorf kindergartens were started in the 1990s by Chuen Sue Chang at Ilan on the east coast and by June Lin in Taichung on the west coast. Ci-Xing in Ilan grew quickly with government support and is now the largest Waldorf school in Asia. Leichuan Waldorf School likewise flourished and now has several kindergarten groups, a grade school and a full high school up to class 12. Many other schools followed so that there are presently about 60 Waldorf kindergartens, 30 grade schools and 6 high schools throughout the country—and still growing.



Leichuan Waldorf School and class eleven students.



Many schools have mentors regularly visiting from Europe, America and Australia who help teach classes and carry-out teacher training programs. But most of the daily work is carried-on by Taiwanese teachers and very committed parent communities. A Union of Taiwan Waldorf Schools was recently founded and greater communication between the various schools is now happening. Taichung, the city with the greatest concentration of Waldorf schools (10 kindergartens, some with as many as 8 groups; 6 grade schools; and 2 high schools), will host the bi-annual Chinese language conference in April of 2019, the hundredth anniversary of Waldorf education.

Taiwanese have many sayings about the sweet potato, a “foreign potato.” Most of these sayings suggest a common earthiness that flourishes and gives up its benefits just because of this earthy quality. The Taiwanese, coming originally from mainland China, are landed guests of a native aboriginal culture, and like the sweet potato have taken root on this island home and have prospered here. Waldorf education, another foreign potato, is adapting and flourishing in a very similar way and it is indeed sweet to see.



Front entrance (upper right) and greeters at the Hai Siann Waldorf School in Taichung.

