

# Diary of Small Town Physician

Text and Photo by: Yao-Lin Yang,  
Attending Physician of Pain Management,  
Department of Anesthesiology, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital

*I always visit the place several times a year.*

*Kuanshan, once again, I have come.*

I packed a camera and Michio Hoshino's last photography book into the bag and drove along in the night towards Kuanshan, composing the first page of my long journey ahead, "The first night of the small town physician".

## Day 5

The rain last night was relentless. I woke up this morning and the soil in the field is still moist. Under the dawning light, moisture slowly evaporates and condenses near Earth's surface, forming a long thin stretch of haze. The haze would gradually move according to Earth's surface, appearing as a crawling dragon if you looked from afar, wagging its head and tail. The frequent winter rain along the Huatung Rift Valley differs from the summer blaze and vibrant blue sky. The winter morning is often saturated with clouds and mists, a spectacle of its own. I love to travel alone with my camera, stand on a mountain top, overlooking the clouds dancing over the entire plain and imagine myself as Michio (a reputable Japanese photographer who shot a series of Alaskan scenery, known for his ecological photography) standing amid the bitter Alaskan cold, waiting for a decisive moment. As I hold up my camera and trying to capture the moment, none of the shots came out



**A winter morning of the Huatung Rift Valley. The cloud often group and travel like a crawling dragon.**

right, so I simply put it down and just stand silently, appreciating the beauty of the flowing clouds. Perhaps this is a piece of serenity every morning before I begin my work, it was not meant to be captured. And perhaps life is too, you can never seize what you grasp or comprehend what you see, much like the dazzling show of cloud and mist. Some things you simply never want to know or understand. As the sun rises, the mist soon dissipates...

### **Day 8 3/4**

After I became an attending physician, as far as I can recall, I have

never went home and dine with my parents on New Year's eve.

I resent New Year. During every New Year, people from the north begin traveling south, while people from the south travel north; people from the west travel east for a vacation and people from the east travel west to visit their families. The result of this mass migration on a national scale is congestion everywhere you go. It is exhausting just to think about it. Then there were several years when I didn't quite get along with my parents. We would stare at each other during those New Year's eve dinner, not knowing what to say. It probably tormented



The market in front of the Tianhou Temple. Piles of fangerines signify the arrival of the Chinese New Year.

everyone. I stopped going back after that, and “on duty” became my best excuse...

During every New Year vacation, most doctors would be away on scheduled leave, all the clinics in the 50 km radius of Kuanshan are closed and we become the only medical resource available. The ER is always packed like a warzone. If I have nothing important to do, I would spend the New Year in the ER to help out, and I am usually free and eager to work. So generally when Superintendent Pan ask for help, I rarely refuse. The first thing Superintendent Pan spoke to me this year was, “Thank you for your help this month. Would don’t you come and help out during New Year from now on”. I frightened a little upon hearing the request.

On a New Year’s eve, masters from the Jing Si abode came to visit us. The superintendent Win-Him Poon actually commented on me in front of the master that I was willing to do anything! Perhaps it was because I often aided him when understaffed. Sometimes I did it due to some kind of sympathy, since it was quite a challenge to be a superintendent in a small town. He has to undertake outpatient clinic, ER and surgery; sometimes taking a 2 hour train to Hualien for meetings and join humanities events. The level of

dedication far surpass a little physician such as myself. Sharing his work for a day would perhaps give him a day of rest.

Tomorrow is New Year’s eve, the homebound crowds and tourists will swarm this town. Anything can happen during New Year, whether it be drink and drive, disturbances, gastrointestinal bleeding and perforation from binge eating or the onset of cardiovascular diseases due to winter coldness. The emergency room would become a battlefield in world wars, and today is only the peace before the storm.

## **Day 10**

There is one annoying thing about New Year is the lack of food available, particularly in a small town.

While everyone was reunited with their family on New Year’s eve, a physician and I with 3 other nurses in the ER had no time to eat. Outside, the fireworks soared through the night sky. I swallowed down my saliva, reminding myself what Buddha taught us about the benefits of not eating after noon. A woman came to ER with a cut on her finger, perhaps while preparing for New Year’s eve dinner, a piece of skin and nail lost. From my experience in the surgery room, the wound cannot be stitched. It requires cross finger

or flap surgery and sometimes even some bone shaves before stitching up. I explained to her in detail why she had to visit a major hospital. However she could not fully comprehend the fact that a seemingly minor injury could not be stitched right away and even requires surgery and anesthesia, so she turned hysterical and even asked me if I graduated. I was sympathetic of her having to deal with the accident at a night of reunion, and I knew she was at the stage of denial and anger, with all the frustration released on me. I finally understood why no one likes to be an ER physician! I must look as young and handsome as I did when I was 25 years old, or so I comforted myself.

The night was late. There were most likely no food available other than convenient stores. I swallowed a tangerine and fell asleep.

### **Day 12 & 23/24**

Since my parents knew full well that I would never return for the New Year, they came up with a solution: Every year, they would drive all the way from the west to this remote little town Kuanshan to visit me. Sometimes I felt guilty, but then again, they never had the pleasure to vacation in the eastern Taiwan, a drive along the coast amid the splendid scenery can be rather



**The superintendent Win-Him Poon is exhausted and fell asleep on the ER bench for approximately 3 seconds. Another long night awaits him.**

relaxing. Parents, sometimes you just have to let them be!

They came for two nights and left in a hurry. Perhaps they realized I did not have the time to accompany them. Dad would feel anxious without anything to do, he said. Like me, he is a restless soul. We ate several meals, they nagged at me, and my mom said that been nagged at by parents is also a gesture of filial piety.

I had a small break around evening, so I stood at the entrance of ER and watched clouds overflowing the coastal

mountain range, like a waterfall. A spectacle of the rift valley. The weather of Provincial Highway 11 on the other side of the mountain must be pretty rough, perhaps some surging waves. As a steady stream of vehicles occupied the small town streets, the sky began to drizzle...

I was ready to fetch my dinner and all of the sudden patients swarmed in. A 3-year old girl slept in her bedroom when the electrical cables caught on fire, and no one noticed the fire until explosion occurred. When she was transported to the ER, her nasal hairs charred and her face covered in soot. Although there was no sign of respiratory distress, but the risk of inhalation injury was still there. The textbook procedure is to intubate no matter what, but I hesitated while watching her innocent face. Should I intubate or should I observe a little while longer? Behind every medical decision, a life's future is at stake. What if I made a mistake? Sometimes I felt like everything that happened here had far surpassed the weight I could bare...

Bleeding. Stroke. Ambulance back and forth transporting patients until there weren't enough. The ICUs of the entire Hualien-Taitung region were full. Where would the next patient go? Hospitals nationwide were probably facing similar predicaments, and yet the chaos would continue for few days

more before recovering.

As the commotion came to an end, the vegetarian restaurant closed too. Another night without dinner. I am certain I will lose some weight before this year is gone!

### **Day 13**

The New Year vacation felt like a decade long and the patient counts showed no sign of decreasing. When I am busy I do not need to eat or sleep, but when a break emerges, I would lose the sympathetic tone and immediately entered a zone of absent mindedness.

### **Day 14**

A patient discharged from ER suddenly pulled out from his bag 200,000 TWD in cash, wanting to donate to Tzu Chi hospital! Superintendent Pan said, "A doctor who came to assist last year did not take any salary, but donate some of his own earnings before he left." The size of this small town can never sustain a hospital like this. The reason why Kuanshan Tzu Chi Hospital can survive signifies the passion and benevolence of Taiwanese people. In a world not so perfect, such a kind gesture shined a ray of hope.

## Day 18

The New Year is finally over. Everyone back to their work post, so are my colleagues. The tourists gone, leaving the town to its slumber. The passing of this spring festival should signify the arrival of spring!

I love the ambience of the town in early spring. There are few days in spring where the fields are filled with water, reflecting the blue sky and white clouds and the blue white house, as if a broad mirror embeds between heaven and earth. Because of the seedlings in the fields, the reflection is not entirely symmetrical. The scene would sustain for no more than 5 days, as the seedlings grow taller and the water dries up, the reflection will vanish. I am always sentimental towards sceneries that are ephemeral, like life, always attempt to grasp what you cannot seize...

The seedlings have been sown, with each and over one a new hope! The coming season will be another splendid and bountiful harvest!

## Epilogue

**Lots of people do not understand why I would be associated with an emergency room in a small town. Few years ago, I was so frustrated of being a small time physician in a major hospital and wanted to transfer to a small town, and Superintendent Poon's condition was to work shifts in the emergency room.**

**To me, been a small time physician in a major hospital is not pleasant at all, you have to do research and write theses. I am not the genius type, none of my theses would advance the progress of medicine, so the world is not at loss if I do not write at all. Furthermore, I had problems with the interpersonal relationships inside the hospital, so I prefer to move to a small town, buy a piece of land, plant some sunflowers for others to pick for 10 dollars each. If I have some spare time, then I will work in the small town hospital with anesthesia.**

**The small town, at the time, was facing staff drought. Although there were doctors in every department, everyone had to take turn working in ER, so every one of them are armed with knowledge and skills of every discipline. The shortage of staff was the reason why I was forced to work in**



**The ephemeral scenery is just like life itself, you can never seize it. The seedlings have been sown, with each and over one a new hope!**

ER. My transfer, of course, did not go through, but the memory of serving in the ER of a small town hospital truly made an impression...

Kuanshan is a tourist town, where tourist would flood in during vacations. After a night in ER, I had an illusion of reduced lifespan by several days. It is a kind of job where you would never hesitate to reject no matter how much they pay you. I am not the type of doctors fearing workload, yet I could not help but feeling fatigued. More often than not Superintendent Poon could not find available staff to work

the ER, so sometimes from Monday to Friday, or even the weekends, he had to work in ER consecutively and resume outpatient service on Monday morning. To be honest, I am not quite sure how he managed it. For I know how devoted he is to manage a small town hospital, I can hardly refuse his request when he fails to find anyone else. During a year where the Ching Ming Festival fell right on a Monday, which, in addition to the weekend, became a three day holiday, the type of holiday where no one would be willing to take shift in the desolate Kuanshan. Therefore, the



superintendent had to work a 3-day shift. He asked if I could help. Although I had my own shift to work on Monday at Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, I had the help from senior resident physicians. As colleagues, I agreed to assist the Sunday shift, so he would at least have a day in between to rest. After a night of torment, I drove back to Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital early Monday morning. During the drive I thought to myself, with the help of senior resident physicians, I should have time to sleep in the hospital the entire day even if I pulled an all nighter the day before. Right as I stepped into the hospital at precisely 8am, my cellphone rang, informing me that a cardiac surgery awaits me in the ER, leaving me stunned and speechless. Perhaps good deed does not reciprocate with good

rewards. I truly felt, after that week's workload, an out of body experience.

Few years ago Superintendent Poon told me that he had not had a vacation during Ching Ming Festival for 8 years, no time to swept his ancestors' graves. I counted, the record should be 10 years by now. I believe he's never seen his hometown for over 10 years. Many people took the town as a vacation spot, while many doctors dedicated their lives for this town that would otherwise have no hospital. I sometimes feel ashamed watching them, so I wish sometimes to at least contribute a bit for them or for the town's people...

We are no geniuses. We will not, throughout our entire life time, discover some anticancer genes or some anti-aging genes, and win a Nobel prize for it. What this town needs is not some



genius doctors who knows everything and never make a mistake. We can never be like a medical center, filled with doctors of all departments, and solve every patient's issues by sending them to specialists after a consultation. Sometimes we can only buy them some time so they can survive until the transfer is complete.

In the past two years, the amount of doctors who are willing to work at countryside have increased. The town now has resident orthopedic surgeons, neurosurgeons, chest physicians, cardiologists, and gastrointestinal physicians. They abandoned the luxurious city life, sacrifice their New Year vacation to combat any emergencies. I am only a second-tier doctor who deals with flu, diarrhea and simple wounds, so that they can either

rest or focus on other trauma patients. We may not be the best hospital, but we try to make this town better, so while everyone unites with their families during New Year vacation, the townspeople can live their lives with us to rely on. Sometimes, you may feel, working with these doctors through the most hectic days and nights in an entire year, is a jubilant and rewarding task. When you witness them tormented and sleepless, attempt to stay awake when fatigued, you would understand that in this medical world, which is on the verge of collapsing, there are many doctors who possess incredible passions. Because of them, you would see in the midst of utter darkness, a glimpse of hope...