

# Fire Service in Taiwan

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Repairing damage after the passage of a typhoon, rescuing people from buildings that have fallen down entirely or settled as a result of an earthquake, fires in the bamboo forests in mountains above 1500 m above sea level is completely exotic for us. For firefighters on the island at the edge of the world - a normal day's work.

## History of Taiwan

The island of Taiwan was originally inhabited by aborigines of Austronesian origin. Today, more than a dozen of their peoples are part of the ethnic mosaic of Taiwanese society. Their integration into society is a living proof that the fusion of the best elements of Confucian and Western civilizations, which is Taiwanese society, was able to outweigh the worse side of „human nature.”



The island itself, named by the Portuguese in the mid-16th century Formosa (literally, *beautiful island*), became a „model” Japanese colony in 1896. This was the period when modern civilization was instilled on the island, including railroads... and fire brigades.



Chunlin (芎林) County Fire Brigade, c 1900. photo: Hsinchu Fire Museum

The island, already Taiwan, returned to Chinese control in 1945. Its complicated history was made even

more confusing by the arrival of remnants of the National Government, which lost the civil war with Mao Zedong in 1949. One of the focal points of the political-civilizational conflict was the Japaneseization of the island's inhabitants, perceived by newcomers as collaboration with the newly defeated enemy.

Japan, as the geographically closest center of civilizational influence, is viewed very positively by the people of Taiwan. The oldest buildings in the cities date from the “colonial” period or are modeled after Japanese architecture. A Japanese footprint also includes a Toyota fire truck from the 1980s on display at the Fire Museum in the city of Hsinchu, home of the famous semiconductor manufacturer TSMC, commonly called the „windy city” due to its geographical exposure to northern winds. The vehicle, shown in the photo below to children and parents by Mr. Andy (黃莆迪), is equipped with a hand-powered siren with a shield that makes up the name of the Japanese city of Osaka.

At the museum, kids can, among other things, crawl through a dark maze filled with artificial smoke or hide under a commonly seen, solidly designed school bench in an earthquake simulator. The masterfully thought out event draws a surprisingly large number of families with young children - even in the early morning hours outside of the weekend when I visited as well. Absolutely impressive.



At the museum, we learn some interesting facts from days bygone. One of the more common causes of fires in the 20th century. These were the dried peels of pameo fruit burnt in steel bowls. The smoke they emitted was traditionally used to repel mosquitoes.

Next to the exhibit we see a photo of a completely burned bed, under which the perpetrator of the fire put the bowl. Reportedly the elderly lady has survived.



## Cultural curiosities

An exotic place means strange customs and mores. These also appear in the way firefighters function. In Chinese culture, it is customary to show respect by holding or handing something, especially a business card, with two hands. The same is true when making toasts. From the head of one of the Fire Service HQ in Hsinchu, Mr. Lin (林靖亞) and his retired colleague Mr. Yu (余儒効), I snorted two interesting stories. Firefighters are exempt from the etiquette order, although the younger generation is no longer aware of this exception. Well, holding a glass with the fingers of both hands is akin to the gesture of praying for the dead. This taboo is similar to not sticking chopsticks into a bowl of rice - the chopsticks in the bowl resemble aromatic temple incense, lit for the departed spirits in a shrine. Firefighters, not having the safest job, prefer to stay on safe side.

Another, already decidedly local Taiwanese custom, of the kind that raise a smile, is that you will not see a beautifully decorated artificial pineapple on the duty desk. Its presence on the store counter, usually paired with a \$50 coin stuck to a calculator always present on the counter, is supposed to attract customers and their money. The superstition comes from a play on words of the Taiwanese language (台語). Whenever I get a chance, I describe the Eastern European equivalent to the Taiwanese: dragging a banknote received from the first customer across all the goods displayed on the bazaar counter. The firefighters, even those bored to death with their lack of work, are not happy that „something is finally happening”.

## Centers of crisis management

It is not only the museum that deserves a separate mention, but the exceptionally cleverly designed educational centers, present in every major city. In them, children learn about safety rules, including how to talk to emergency number operators.



On the other side of the line the crew of ultra-modern Emergency and Rescue Command Center await calls. Below we see the call-center for the 119 emergency number, and also what I myself have called a ‘situational awareness gathering center’.



In the photo above, on the left, shift chief Mr. Tsai Chin-Hung (蔡志鴻) demonstrates to us the screen of the nationwide seismic sensor network. Their virtually zero report time (about 3 seconds) allows for instant coordination of services and activation of automatic procedures such as emergency stopping of high-speed trains. On the right, duty officers take calls. Color-coded signal lamps at each of the posts inform the duty officer about the type of call being received. They all keep an eye on, among other things, sixteen television channels with local news. Various—including unofficial—sources of data provide general and detailed information on situations requiring intervention in the entire capital city.

A completely inconspicuous, but perhaps the most important element of this picture are small bottles of water, standing by the monitors of the duty officer. The water comes from a blessed Buddhist spring and is meant to remind those working that all their daily efforts are to save lives.

## Who rides to the rescue?

We drive past fire station buildings without thinking. And they are watched over by people who must keep themselves in constant physical and mental condition. I observed routine training in a typical firefighting unit in the Bade (八德) district of Taoyuan (桃園) city.

It turns out that one of the exercises is the equivalent of the „elephant game” we know from the immortal joke of the Polish military. Firefighters in full gear and wearing breathing apparatus are playing badminton, in the picture Mr Lai Peng-Yu (賴鵬宇).



Chou Yu-Sheng (周祐陞), is a section commander in the Urban Search and Rescue Corps in New Taipei City. His team is sent to the most difficult tasks. He told us the story of one of the most memorable episodes of his service. They were lowering themselves into a car wreck about 1,000 meters down the virtually vertical walls of an inaccessible part of the beautiful Taroko Gorge, a major tourist attraction on Taiwan’s east coast.



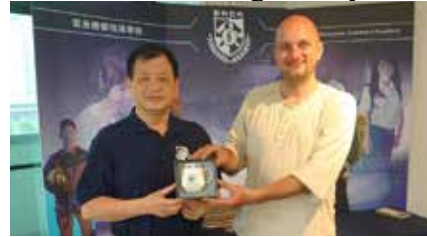
The Taiwanese mountains are not granite, but most often fossilized layers of uplifted bottom sediments of ancient seas, and in some places compressed volcanic tuff. This and exertion in a stifling climate and under tropical sun, is not a favorable environment to maintaining caution. Mr. Chou’s twin brother climbed a boulder blocking the team’s path. The misjudged ground beneath the boulder gave way under the man’s weight. Chou grabbed his brother by the collar but began to slide down with him. The third team member grabbed him by the waist. Only that worked.

Motor memory, reflexes acquired in training, and teamwork. These three elements are the most important. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, in Confucian culture there is no place for showing off and heroes. We’ll learn more about that in a moment. In the meantime, capitalist collectivism ensures that Mr. Chou’s

„there’s no other Cossack like me” will never come out of his mouth, even if he didn’t have a twin brother.

## Where men like this are made?

The Taiwanese invited me to visit two training centers. To the one in New Taipei (all the cities of the capital metropolitan area administratively merged into one) was invited and personally guided by the Deputy General Manager, Mr. Chen Tsung-Yueh (陳崇岳), presenting, among other things, an impressive virtual training facility.



When Mr. Chen returned to his duties I was invited to put out a virtual fire in the simulator, I dared to entertain my hosts. I produced the local equivalent of a 2 PN coin from my pocket and began looking around for a coin slot. It worked perfectly. We all felt like good old friends then.

The largest training center is located south of Taichung City, in the central part of the island, in Nantou County (南投). Cadets here learn things that are familiar to us, like how to extinguish an airplane, but also exotic tasks such as how to extinguish the omni-present in Taiwan scooters, or karaoke clubs with characteristically arranged interiors, both recreated for training purposes.



The center also trains dogs and their handlers from the K9 unit. I was invited to observe the exam, after which the cadets will power rescue bases such as this one in the capital’s Sanxia township (三峽). The photo shows Mr Chen Pai-Tsun (陳柏村) and the base’s Kuang dog during routine training.



The center's manager, Mr. Li Yong-Fu (李永福), meticulously took advantage of my arrival. I was asked to give a two-hour presentation on Poland as a form of cultural exchange. I've thrown at the gathered cadets a plenty of interesting facts about Christian civilization, Europe and Poland. I talked, among other things, about the extent of the cultural zones of Europe: culture of drinking red wine, beer and vodka... and about Slavic immunity to the effects of the latter, developed by training and hard teamwork.

The audience also learned about our greatest victorious battles of Poland's history and better times when we were able to win decisive battles. Chronologically at Grunwald in 1410 (stopping German colonisation process), conquering Moscow in 1612, relieving Vienna in 1683 and in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920 when we stopped Soviet Union from invading the whole of Western Europe.

After the presentation there was enough time to teach the cadets the most necessary phrases when dealing with Poles. These were the two most popular toasts "to your health" (Pol. *na zdrowie*) and "our throat, your health" (Pol. *gardło nasze, zdrowie wasze*). In the picture below the students of the center in a set of two hundred people greet our firefighters on their feast day with a loud and well pronounced "na zdrowie".



## Mountainside fire in Alishan

One of the most beautiful and crowded areas of Taiwan is the Mount Ali massif (Alishan), which is the source of Taiwan's most prized green tea, known as high mountain tea. The property and life of local residents and beauty of the place itself is guarded by,

among others, the Fenqihu (奮起湖) post, whose crew poses for the photo below.



At the time I started writing this article, a major fire broke out in that area on a hillside covered with bamboo forests and tall grass and bushes. With several weeks of no rain, the local fire and forestry departments suddenly found themselves fully committed.



The violence of the elements was so fierce that it was impossible to stop the fire from jumping over State Road 18. The fire even managed to jump over the so-called half-tunnel, which is a common construction in areas particularly vulnerable to falling stones. In the photo below, we see a shot from inside the half-tunnel, above which the fire is raging high above. The rocky debris, no more kept in place by plant roots and thermally expanded, was falling onto the highway, forcing the closure of traffic for an extended period of time.



The ferocity of the element meant that the fire could not be stopped from jumping over State Road 18. The fire even managed to jump over what is known as a half-tunnel, which is a common protection in areas particularly vulnerable to falling rocks. In the photo below we see a shot from inside the half-tunnel, above which the fire is raging. Boulders and stones, stripped of their binder in the form of plant roots, were falling onto the highway, forcing the closure of traffic for an extended period.



Bamboo groves are a source of bamboo shoots, which sprout between April and June. They are also used as building materials - bamboo is still used today to make construction scaffolding of amazing strength. Growing bamboo, which essentially grows on its own, is a significant cash injection for people living in mountainous areas where little else grows well except coffee, tea, and bamboo.



## Drills at a petrochemical installation

Taoyuan City in the northwest of the island is a cluster of chemical industry installations. After a serious accident at one of the plants in 2015, in which six firefighters lost their lives, regularly scheduled drills are conducted even more meticulously.

In the photo below, we see people who mastered the highest possible safety culture as they report to the city's Fire Service's chief, Mr. Yin Ming-Kun (殷明坤), just after completing a drill I was invited to observe. Participants practiced

evacuating casualties, decontamination, and all the other skills needed to deal with plant fires and chemical spills. The six fallen need no other memorial than the dedication and dutifulness of those who continue to serve.



## Typhoons and earthquakes

These two elements will not be experienced in Poland. We get a distant taste of a typhoon from the storms that hit our country every few years, sometimes uprooting entire hectares of trees. But in Poland they are not accompanied by torrential rains, lasting several days, which, despite the extensive anti-flood infrastructure, cause mudslides, flooding, collapsing bridges and washing away roads. And people killed. In the mountains smaller and larger stones on the roads are an everyday occurrence. They are removed by two-man patrols just before dawn. The driver's companion, mindful of the conditions below, of course, simply throws pieces of rock their way.

The Taiwanese have known these dangers since childhood and for generations, yet there are rarely casualties. Firefighters and other services have their hands full. They carry, often on shoulders, the elderly from mud-soaked village homes, remove boulders and piles of rock rubble, fallen trees, and tons of mud from the roads.

The most dangerous typhoons are those that come after a period of no rainfall, when the crusted ground does not absorb rainwater. Such was the case with the famous typhoon Marokot in 2009, which, among other things, cut off electricity and access to mountain villages for weeks, killing about 500 people across the island.

In the 2018 photo below, we see a road carved into the wall of the aforementioned Taroko Gorge, all covered with rock rubble washed out by the down-pour. Occasionally, an entire section of the drupe is completely buried. On the left down there is a raging, roaring element of mud and water, into which has turned a modest and crystal clear stream, quietly humming every day to the delight of tourists.



Not counting the rare bumps in Silesia, we are lucky to live far from tectonic zones. We do not experience the rocking of skyscrapers, collapsing and overturning of older buildings, collapsing streets and roads. We don't have to reinforce concrete with steel in a seemingly completely exaggerated manner - as in the following construction of a half-tunnel a few hundred meters from the one engulfed in fire. There is little to suggest that architects give more steel than concrete in such structures.



One of the most spectacular of the destruction from the seismic tremors is a hotel in the city of Hualien. Its body collapsed and tilted entirely, filling the space left by the volcanic tuff washed out by the groundwater.



Nothing, however, appealed to my imagination like the unassuming, idyllic panorama of the water dust of the beachfront by the fishing village of Su'ao (蘇澳). This rare phenomenon is a gentle nudge from Typhoon Mangkhut, the most powerful typhoon of 2018. At the whim of the elements, this typhoon turned further south to ravage with its gigantic energy the Philippines, over 1,500 kilometers away. To the inhabitants of the "beautiful island", the elements only threatened with a finger. This time.



## An interview with the Deputy General Manager, Mr. Hsiao Huan-Chang

Not all Taiwanese folks let out a sigh of relief when danger passes sideways past their homes. There are some who, pack up their gear, say goodbye to their loved ones and head to those who were unlucky this time, wherever they live. When a typhoon, earthquake or other disaster hits an area, all surrounding countries send rescue teams, medical staff, firefighters, rescue searchers. As many as are needed. For as long as it takes.



Thanks to superb assistance of Han Shun-Hsu (許涵舜), who handled all my itinerary, I spoke with Director Hsiao (蕭煥章) about this international cooperation and other details of the work of Taiwan's uniformed services. I asked him about the details, his perspective from the top of the service ladder, and the vision behind the agency he co-manages. Listening to his descriptions and comments was one of the rare moments that gave me a sense of living in the 21st century.

During crises, mutual aid efforts are coordinated at local levels. This was the case, for example, in sending rescuers to Fukushima, Japan, in 2011. The capital city of Taipei deploys teams to Japan, New Zealand, El Salvador, Indonesia, among others. Under the GCTF (Global Cooperation Training Framework), Taiwan has a policy of cooperation with countries to the south, including Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. The list goes on.

I began to inquire about particularly heroic acts of bravery or sacrifice among the rescuers, hoping for some good stories for this text. And here came the most interesting moment of the conversation. I heard

the simple words: „We work as a team and don't try to become heroes.” A similar philosophy seems to apply to foreign deployments. When asked about „vision in one sentence,” Director Hsiao replied: „We are bound by the brotherhood between firefighters and we stick together. We exchange experiences, learn from each other, and help each other. When needed and to whom needed.”

The kids in the photo below are at an age where they still barely catch on to what's going on around them. But thanks to the work and sense of responsibility of the invisible everyday heroes, they can eat dinner during the day („eat the meat, you can leave the rice”) and sleep soundly at night. They can also peacefully learn drawing, languages and - which is immortalized on a Taiwanese banknote, the equivalent of our hundred - geography. They live in a place where they are sure to pick up good role models. Maybe one of them will become a fireman or a rescue officer.



At my earnest request, Mr. Hsiao took time away from more pressing matters to talk to his colleagues, the top bosses of the National Fire Agency. Especially for you, gentlemen firefighters, on your feast day, the fourth of May, they raise a toast. Here's to you guys. A makeshift toast, because it's toasted with what anyone had - nothing else will pass during duty hours. But on the way to Taiwan there is already an appropriate beverage, with which your Polish bosses thank you both for your openness and for the models that thanks to this openness we can watch, admire and follow.



Pictured from left: Director General Chen Wen-Long (陳文龍) in the center is accompanied, from left, by three deputies and the Secretary General: Hsiao Huan-Chang, Jiang Chi-Jen (江濟人), Shieh Jing-Shiuh (謝景旭) and Phong Juen-Yee (馮俊益).

## An ending with an unexpected Ancient Chinese and American flavor

One of my favorite movies is *Backdraft*, a 1991 Ron Howard film with an epic score by Hans Zimmer. On me, then a teenager, the story of the dedicated work of Chicago firefighters made a colossal impression. What I remember most, however, is a completely unseen scene, which is a perfect illustration of manipulating the enemy, as advocated in the ancient treatise *The Art of War*. The essence of the famous Chinese master's teachings is to learn the deepest motivations of the opponent and harness them for one's own purposes.

The film's fire inspector, played by Robert De-Niro, appears at the annual parole board hearing of an arsonist. The elderly man being questioned beautifully demonstrates his complete rehabilitation. The committee is mesmerized. Then the inspector breaks in: "What will you do with the old ladies? What will you do with the whole world?" The idealistic arsonist cannot deny his identity. From his mouth twice falls the answer of heart and soul: "Burn! Burn everything!". "See you next year," quips the inspector concluding the committee meeting.

The profession of firefighting, as with so many others, should come with a calling, an understanding of what a useful service it is to the local community, the country as a whole but also beyond. Its essence is a sense of responsibility for the safety of others.

Perhaps this sense of responsibility and community will germinate in the kids who, dressed in miniature fireman's uniforms and tiny helmets, crawled with laughter through the smoky maze or climbed under the table shaken, fortunately not by a real earthquake, but just by the museum machinery.

It seems proper for me to wish the firefighters reading this text and candidates for this profession to be guided on their way in life by equally strong heart motivation as the arsonist in the movie mentioned above. Oriented in the opposite way, naturally. ■