

EDITOR'S CORNER

Rapid Methods in the Far East

Catherine, my wife, and I had a most enjoyable time in March, 2000 traveling through Japan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore where I gave lectures and conducted several workshops related to Rapid Methods and Automation in Microbiology. Passing through Japan was an interesting experience because I was a student in Japan from 1961 to 1965 for my B.A. and still communicate in Japanese. The place is expensive!! Just a simple meal for two ran more than US\$100.00. A breakfast with some miso soup, fish, pickle and rice was US\$30.00. So, be sure you have a lot of money before going there.

Next stop: Hong Kong. It is a huge concrete Jungle. The airport is super modern, efficient and beautiful. We stayed at the Hong Kong University Official Guest Residence-Robert Black College. It is located on a mountain slope overseeing the harbor and Kowloon. Due to the misty air while we were there we could hardly see anything across the harbor. The place is so full of people that I did not venture out of the campus and just enjoyed the tranquility of the surroundings. Catherine did a lot of touring around and even hiked up the mountain at 4:30 a.m. I declined the invitation for the climb since it takes more than one hour just to go up and I had to give a lecture that same day. In another word, I chickened out. My host, professor Harold Corke, is a faculty member in the Department of Botany. They just moved into a new, well equipped building which houses Botany, Zoology and Environmental Sciences. The building and facilities are world class and can match any university facility in the U.S. for biological sciences research and teaching. I gave a lecture on Oxyrase to the faculty and students on the first day and then gave a four hour workshop in the afternoon of the next day with about 35 people in the audience. I was a bit surprised that the students were very quiet. I, being originally from Hong Kong, remembered that students were quite vocal when I was there. Only people who asked questions were from industry. I even found a person who attended the same high school I attended. He emphasized that he was there 20 years after I had graduated!! Am I showing my age that much?

Off to Bangkok. Good news. Bangkok is far more efficient than 8 years ago when we went there. The first time we went there the traffic was truly at a snails pace. One car moves at one time along dusty and pot-hole filled roadways. One can almost eat a meal just going across the city center because children and vendors will be knocking at your window selling food, drinks, newspapers, candies, etc. while the cars are standing still. Now they have a lot of overpasses so that traffic moves rapidly around the city. I am impressed. My former students, Dr. Pravate and Dr. Koranee Tuitemwong, were great hosts. They took us around and provided us with a super hotel room and facilities. The workshop held at King Mongkut Institute of Technology was very successful with more than 40 participants in the class. We went through the "standard" battery of rapid methods, diagnostic kits and immunological tests in the laboratory and I gave lectures to cover the entire field. Although the students were quite shy in the lecture hall they were lively and inquisitive in the laboratory sessions. It was quite interesting for me to look into the audience while I spoke and saw a completely homogeneous group of people with all black hair, same skin color, same height and great smile. There was not a single person of another race in the room until the last day when an Australian showed up. He

surely looked different in the crowd!! I must have done a good job because Dr. Tuitemwong told me that I received rankings of 4.2 to 4.9 out of 5.0 (I was hoping to have a couple of 5's). Sightseeing with another former student Dr. Kwantawee Vichienroj was fantastic. We went to the famous floating food market in the canal zone a bit out of Bangkok and sampled some delicious dishes. As a true food microbiologist I only ate things that I can peel off the skin (such as banana and lychee), sipped juice out of newly opened coconuts, drank only piping hot soup, tea or coffee. I never accept ice cubes under any circumstance because the source of the water making the ice cubes is unknown to me and may carry *Salmonella*, *E. coli* or the likes. Of course I had a good excuse to consume beer and wine along the way to make sure I would not get sick from the local water.

Last stop was Singapore. The workshop was planned for a whole year in a very progressive Institute called Ngee Ann Polytechnic under the direction of Dr. Doreen Tan, a charming young lady expecting her second baby. No *Listeria monocytogenes* was studied! The workshop was very well organized and presented. This was the second time I worked with this group in an intensive workshop. I was very impressed with the expansion program in Biotechnology in this Institute. Many new laboratories and classrooms were developed since my last visit one and a half years ago. Since school was in session the workshop participants and the regular students were running into each other all day long. It was great to see such enthusiasm in young people. They also invited Catherine to present a lecture to their regular students on "Teenager Survival Kit, A Positive Approach" because Catherine has a Ph.D. degree in Adult, Occupational and Continuing Education and the organizers like Catherine's dynamic and energetic personality. They all enjoyed the session.

The workshop was world class in content. We had a lot of the regular diagnostic kits, immunological tests, viable cell count procedures, etc. Students were really impressed by having hands-on experiences working with BAX system and the RiboPrinting System under the direction of Stefen Phang who was the director of the previous Singapore workshop and is now working for Qualicon. We packed in a great many experiments in the busy three days and the participants went home satisfied and exhausted.

The entire experience was very positive and I can see a lot of excitement in rapid methods in the Far East both from the potential user's side and especially from the vendor's side. The level of interest and expertise of rapid methods has moved very fast in the region in the past 3 to 4 years. The market is huge if you think about the population base in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, and other countries. These countries are now becoming more aware of Rapid Methods and Automation in Microbiology and are more receptive to changes in applied microbiological methodologies. I sensed a lot of positive energy in this field after the trip. Well, Hong Kong University has already expressed interest in having me back next year to do a "wet" workshop and other countries may also invite me to another tour of the Far East in 2001. Just thinking about the delicious seafood is enough temptation for me to go back to the Far East soon as we do not have an ocean in Kansas to catch sea creatures.

Have slides, will travel.

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