

The Father of foot reflexology

Father Josef Eugster, largely credited with making foot reflexology well-known in Taiwan and the world, speaks to EU HOOI KHAW on how it all started.

I FELT really good after a trip to Taiwan recently. In the space of seven days I had a foot reflexology massage three times, a taijia massage and literally had my hip knocked back into shape!

The reflexology expert I made the trip with, Germaine Yv, even experienced a face massage, referred to as a non-surgical facelift. The last is new and fascinating — the massage uses chi (life energy) to massage away those lines and wrinkles, even fat on your face. So say goodbye to double chins, eye bags!

We were in Taiwan on a private visit to Father Josef Eugster, a Swiss priest who has been largely credited with starting the foot reflexology ball rolling in Taiwan, and subsequently in Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Europe and the US. Now reflexology centres in those places carry his name.

The priest is based in Chang-Bin in Taitung, east of Taiwan, so we made our way there with Eugster who had picked us up to attend his lecture for the Nurses Association in Taipei. It was a six-hour journey by train through a scenic and agricultural part of the country. The train whizzes past stretches of beach and sea before arriving in Chang-Bin which, translated, means Long Beach. And there is a website with this name on it.

Chang-Bin is mostly populated by indigenous people (the popular Taiwanese singer A-Mei belongs to this group), who look like a darker group of Chinese, but whose language is peppered with words like *ku*, *kanai*, *haci*, *shaiwa* (which means the same as Baka Malaysia), which we definitely identified with.

I had my feet massaged by one of these people at Eugster's parish centre, a humble building set amidst lots of fruit trees and flowering shrubs. It is here the locals can come and have a foot massage on certain days of the week, and pay the women doing it. It's generating income for the disadvantaged. One indigenous woman, who had lost her husband to cancer, has managed to pay the hospital debts, build a new house and bring up six children through doing this.

Eugster had tutored these women in reflexology skills, giving them a chance for a new life and lifting them out of their poverty.

Eugster, who speaks five languages — German, English, Mandarin, Hokkien and the indigenous language — has been in Taiwan for 33 years.

"Reflexology started in Taitung city in 1978," he said.

He had rheumatism in his knees, and his limping was noticed by a fellow missionary, Brother Lawrence.

"He asked me why I was limping, and when I told him, he laughed and said it was very simple. I had to work on my feet.

"He said that the problem in my knees came from my kidneys and adrenal gland. He worked on my feet and gave me the reflexology book, *Good Health for the Future* by Schwester Hedl Masafret."

Eugster started massage his feet and hands and drank more water.

"After a few days I felt the difference. I had more energy. After a month the pain was gone. Then one day when I was praying, I thought this is my mission."

One Sunday after serving mass, he

met one of his parishioners, a farmer called Chen Chi Niam, who had severe back pain. "He said he had seen all his doctors, spent all his money, and he thought he was ready to die."

"In the afternoon when I went to his house he had washed his feet and they were smelling of perfume! I started to exert a lot of pressure. He was shouting and screaming. I went to his house for two days, but on the third he had gone into hiding in the neighbour's house. I brought him back, gave him the massage and told him it was the last time I was going to work on his feet. I was disappointed and went home."

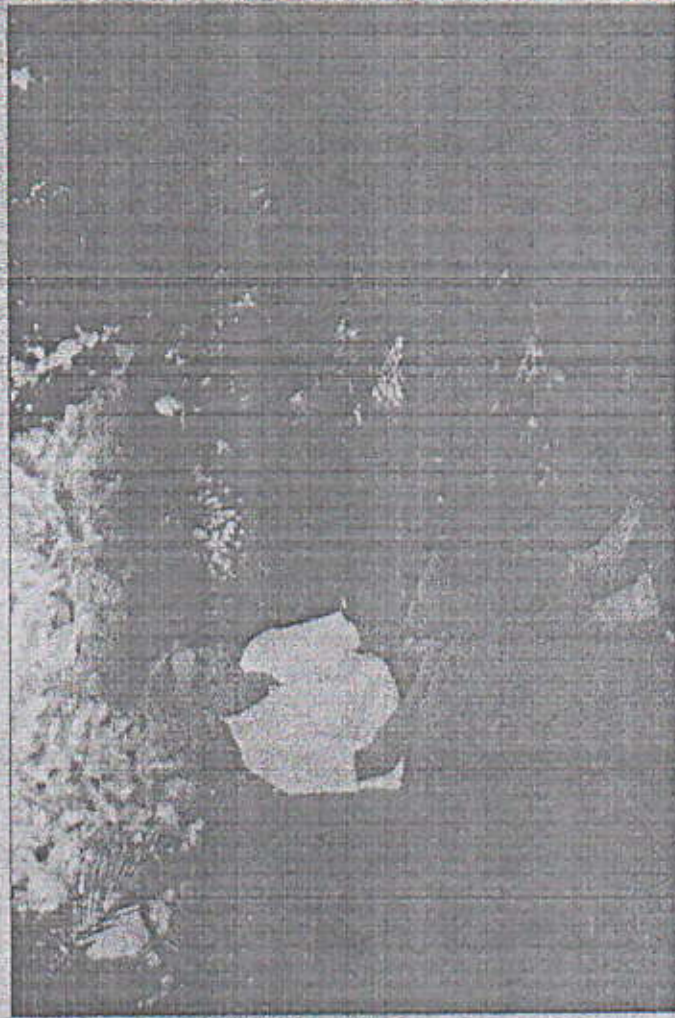
But at 9pm Chen, 74, called him and told him he was better. "He said I could do it on him again but without so much pressure. He died, aged 84, recently."

After Chen recovered, all his relatives came with some kind of probability or other. The priest was kept so busy that he decided to teach the skill to some people.

"We started offering foot reflexology in the parish, twice a week for two years." Then a well-known announcer of a police radio station called Li Wen came to know about Eugster. She was suffering from a tumour in the thyroid and her eyes were bulging. The doctors had advised an operation.

"Her husband came to see me and asked if I could help. I insisted on seeing me. After four or five days, the neighbours asked if we were killing pigs every day!"

"I worked on her for two weeks every day. I continued another week and went back to Taipei. A doctor she saw found that the tumour had nearly gone and her eyes had gone back to



HEALING HANDS: Eugster with his feet on a foot reflexology path in his parish centre

normal. She asked me to give her an interview on the radio. A Taiwanese TV station heard the interview and sent a team. They were with him for two days and when the programme came on, his telephone rang off the hook. Worse, hundreds of people appeared at his parish centre and he could hardly get in.

He and 10 of his reflexology students worked on these people day and night. Then the health ministry sent him a telegram and told him to stop. Eugster was happy to comply but these people were furious and wrote letters to the ministry to appeal. Then the vice-president of Taiwan called and asked him to treat his wife, who had been suffering from headaches for years. He worked on her feet for 10 days and her headache was gone.

Then the director of a hospital in Taipei, whose wife Eugster had also successfully treated for headaches, offered him the use of the hospital for reflexology, so that Taipei people did not have to go to Taitung anymore for the treatment.

But the poor priest bore the brunt of those whose business had suffered

from his reflexology success. He received threatening calls and letters and was placed under police protection. His superiors did not agree to him doing it, "but in the gospel Jesus was healing people's diseases and was preaching at the same time."

Then the Malaysians and the Japanese came to know about foot reflexology, and with this encouragement, he started the Rwo Shur Association in 1982. Rwo Shur is the Mandarin word for Josef.

He worked closely with two teachers — Josef and Thonet Chen — who helped him promote foot reflexology. And it went to different places. Now one of the brothers, Michael, is currently the chairman of the Reflexology Association of Taiwan, which has 480 members to date. There are 5,000 reflexologists in Taiwan and 20 per cent or four million of the Taiwanese go for foot reflexology regularly or do it at home.

Thousands more, like Eugster, use the health paths made of various shapes and sizes of stones to massage their feet.

Eugster now advocates a new and

easier method of doing foot reflexology, using a special stick or a plastic bar called the Josef bar which he invented. There are a few things to note, he says:

1. It's extremely important to note that reflexology does not have to be deadly painful — it depends on the situation.

2. Sometimes tools help us to do a better job, to do less harm to the patient and to ourselves.

3. The location of the reflex zones is in between the bones on the feet and each one has 28 bones.

4. We know from the Chinese medical point of view that the brain is the master mechanism of the body. We follow the way of the energy flow from the head to the spine, the dorsal, lateral and lumbar.

5. Yin and Yang and the five elements complement each other.

6. The treatment must be according to the condition of the client, for instance, if the patient is very sick, it must be only for 10 minutes.

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