

T A I W A N ---- R E L F E C T I O N S

My first time to Asia was very rewarding. However, I felt a bit overwhelmed at how Westernized Taiwan is. Even to the point of being more Americanized than America is! Everyone feels compelled to buy clothes and "things" --- purses, toys, food, popular CD's and more clothes. --- at the night markets.

As a city, Taipei was very nice. The main streets and new subways system gave it the double appearance of a cosmopolitan city like New York. But behind these streets hidden, in the small alleyways, there are street vendors all over the place, especially coming out at night. It seemed like a huge Chinatown. I have never experience anything like the night market in Shi-Ling. It was so packed on the weekend, you just moved with the flow of the crowd, because you had no other choice or time to stop. Maylee looked very happy. She had met so many international friends and knew all the shortcuts around Taipei.

The thing I liked best about Taiwan, was definitely the food. And not just the taste of it, but the availability of it. You didn't have to walk more than a block before you could get a pearl milk tea and a dumpling from a street vender. And then when you continue to walk to your next destination, if you get hungry again, there are plenty of food stands just around the corner.

We went to most of the major cities, and they all seemed the same, all very busy, lots of cars, and stores. I met my uncle, aunt, their son and wife, and their two daughters who live in Zhong Li. They were all extremely nice and bent over-backwards to make us feel at home. We had a very nice dinner on one of our last nights. Dad's friends and cousin from elementary school came, and also his elementary school teacher. Wang Lao Shi gave me a small jade charm to remember my trip by.

I also had time to spend with Dad in his hometown, where he grew up and went to school. We saw his old home and he showed me the path he took when he walked to school across the river. It was touching to watch him retrace the paths and streets and to stand next to him as he reflected on how much had changed since he was a young boy. The biggest change was the river which had been damned since and was now very low. The Taoist temples of the town were especially colorful and gave the town character. We entered several and drew our fortunes on sticks. I was extremely impressed at how Dad kept in touch with his good elementary school friends AND even his teacher. I asked them what he was like growing up, and they all said he studied all the time! And he always worked hard.

I had a good time...took the train to Ken ting-and went snorkeling, saw temples, had professional glamour pictures taken with Maylee, met her international friends, went to Yang Ming Shan hot springs, saw the Taroko Gorges.

But beyond the touristy sights, I think the experience made me reflect on where and who I want to be. I felt a good feeling of being the same and different all at once when I went to Taiwan. I definitely felt Chinese and was happy to be around so many Asians-- but because I couldn't talk fluently in Chinese, I can't say I felt like a native. I felt like a foreigner, but who was special by simply by being an American: I was happy, because I didn't want to simply blend in with the fashion and style of the Taiwan youth. I felt I had a unique perspective, that was somewhat critical at how westernized Taiwan was, and privileged as someone who could distinguish between the competing influences in Taiwan.

When I went to San Francisco last summer in 2000 with mom, I had the odd opposite feeling. I felt for the first time, I could definitely categorize myself as an "Asian-American." I didn't feel any uniqueness at all when I was in San Francisco. When I was riding the bus or walking down the street, I felt as if I was looking in the mirror. So many ambitious and smart looking Asian girls, who are neither distracted or yearning to fit in and be accepted as an "American" or who feel sad or disappointment that they can't say they are fully Chinese. I should have felt good to discover this very big set of Asian Americans--that can feel comfortable and be successful.

But that seems too easy. I don't want to settle and say I have found my place and be content with simply saying I am an Asian American. I want to be myself and continue to challenge myself. I don't need to be restricted to any stereotypes or obligations. I want to learn and live according to my personal desires. Of course I say this with an acknowledgement that I am extremely lucky to even come up with such bold goals. Not everyone has the opportunity to do so, in fact very few do---I have been fortunate enough to have parents who care and work hard enough to give me such an opportunity. This makes me feel even more compelled to seize it and capitalize on it. But I know I must do this with in reasonable boundaries---that are of course obvious to me, for I am not a reckless idiot.

Going to Taiwan made me realize I will never be fully Chinese, nor fully understand that culture. This can only come with really growing up there when one is young, and has not been mentally wired yet. Taiwan made me feel a distant to my family---my cousins, uncles, and aunts. Something I have always felt. It has very much motivated me to learn Chinese (and hopefully a little Korean). I am not having an identity crisis or feel lost. In fact I feel very much empowered and in control with my life. But I still yearn to go and see something new, learn about it, and make myself a better person. I have gained a lot of confidence over my years, but now I feel I need to test it with real experiences. I will learn Chinese simply for its beauty and the art of communication and I will travel over Asia, expanding my horizons, along the way. After this year of traveling, I know I will be prepared for medical school, focused and poised to do my best and very much excited for the challenge. ~Maylon