

My Taiwanese Background and Me: How My Anomalies Contribute to My Identity

By MeiJade Hsu

Whenever I'm introducing myself to someone, I always brace for their response: either they're going to get my name right and not ask the dreaded question, "Are you Chinese?", or I'm going to say, "No, I'm Taiwanese" and teach them how to pronounce "MeiJade."

And, in addition to that, I have to be prepared to respond to a likely "Isn't Taiwan part of China?" or "What's that [Taiwan]?" with a thirty-second crash course on East Asian geopolitics or a lesson on geography that attests to Americans' depressing command of it.

Having been socialized from an early age on what it means to be a Taiwanese American, I've had to experience this frustrating and tiresome scenario over and over again for most of my life. At one point a couple years ago, I was so fed up with having to educate every new person who came my way on what Taiwan was that I actually asked my parents whether I could just pass myself off as Chinese. Maybe that way, I could spare myself a lot of trouble AND fit in with the Chinese kids at school. And besides, what was so wrong about pretending to be Chinese? I mean, didn't Dad's family come from Fujian in China — albeit nearly three hundred years ago?

They said, "No."

However, as I've grown and matured and stopped trying to be like everyone else, I've come to better appreciate my Taiwanese heritage, having acquired an understanding of Taiwan, its people, its history, and its society.

Although English is the language I speak the most, I can be proud to call Taiwanese my mother language and the language that I speak at home.

Although I am most fluent in English, I can cherish my ability to communicate with my relatives in both the U.S. and Taiwan in Taiwanese, to make them proud that I, an American kid, speak Taiwanese better than Chinese, let alone know how to speak Taiwanese at all.

And although I am, first and foremost, an American, I can be proud of Taiwan for rising out of 50 years of foreign colonization and 38 years of martial law to become one of the freest and most democratic societies in Asia, for defying all odds to hold off a powerful neighbor for 70 years, and for engineering the economic "miracle" that transformed it into the highly developed country that it is today. All of this I can do.

However, while I can take pride at what it means to be a Taiwanese American, I haven't forgotten that my duty is due, first and foremost, to the United States, and that, although I am American, my Taiwanese and Asian heritage can affect my experiences in American society.

For instance, I've noticed that, as Asians, we are often left out of the national discourse, overshadowed by other racial and ethnic groups. It's ironic that, in a society that prides itself on being a cultural "melting point," nearly six out of a hundred people are all but ignored.

The same couldn't be more true of the deep, shadowy, and convoluted world of politics, a field that I'm interested in going into as an adult.

There are reasons of our own causation that are responsible for this overwhelming lack of representation. I mean, everybody knows that Asian parents want their kids to grow up to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, or programmers, right? It's no coincidence that of the two accelerated academic programs at Montgomery Blair High School, Asians and Indians constitute 57% of the students in the one specializing in STEM (the Magnet Program) — and 11% of the students in the one specializing in the arts and humanities (the Communication Arts Program).

Thus, Asians like me who want to go into the arts, the humanities, or politics are seen as an anomaly.

But that's okay. A lot of what has constituted my identity has been anomalous, whether it be by being among the few kids at school who are Taiwanese, having a name that few people can get right on the first try, or not being Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, South Korean, Filipino, Mongolian, or any other Asian ethnicity that people guess me to be, but rather Taiwanese.

Therefore, rather than letting my anomalies hold me down, I should accept and embrace them as just what they are: parts of my identity.