

My Taiwanese Background and Me

The first time I came to America for a long-term stay was in third grade. Nine years old, I had no knowledge of the English language beyond basic words like “boy,” “apple,” and phrases such as “How are you?” and “I’m fine, thank you.” But the brain is really quite amazing, because I’m not sure exactly how, or exactly when, but I found myself understanding what people were saying. I could read—from picture books to chapter books to short novels. I wrote. Poems and short stories and essays. I didn’t worry about grammar; I relied on instinct instead.

I went back to Taiwan for fifth grade. My biggest worry was: what if I can’t catch up in the Chinese classes? I’d missed two years of education in the Chinese language—I didn’t know as many Chinese characters as my classmates, nor as many proverbs and idioms. Not surprisingly, it was a bit of a struggle. Sometimes I wouldn’t know how to pronounce a certain character, or how to write a certain word, and I’d have to ask the person sitting next to me (who was nice enough to answer). Eventually, though, I settled in, gradually closing the gap between my classmates and myself. I learned the characters I didn’t get to learn, and the words I never learned to write. I loved the language.

I came to the US again in seventh grade. This time, my parents told me, I’ll probably be staying—for the rest of my life. My first year of middle school was rough, the transition from a Taiwanese educational system to an American system intimidating, yet fascinating. But I went to school, I made friends, I lived. I fell in love with the public library and its stocks of books. I met people from China, from India, from Korea, from Russia. The cultural diversity in the US made it so that I never wanted to forget where I came from, never stopped being proud of my own culture, my own country: the island they call Formosa.

Even as shy and introverted as I was, I wanted to let people know: I’m Taiwanese. Not Chinese, not Korean, not Japanese. I wanted to let people know that Taiwan is beautiful. I wanted to share the culture of my homeland with this new, foreign world I was in. I wanted to tell my friends about Taiwanese dramas, about *tangyuan*, about Chinese folklore. The first time I shared my country with America was in my Latin class. I made a video presentation on the city of New Taipei. I showed my class pictures of the Shihfen Waterfall, the Lin Family Garden, and of course, all the magnificence of the Taipei 101.

From a young age, my family has trained me to work hard in the things I do, to have high expectations of myself. They have taught me that life is not always easy, and that I must be willing to put forth work in order to achieve. I developed a sense of responsibility, learned how to manage time efficiently, and strived for excellence. I was one of the few students from my middle school that was invited to take AP Biology in ninth grade, and I seized the opportunity. Although there were times I was tired and simply did not want to study, I picked up the 1200-page textbook, and read. That year, I scored a 5 on the AP exam.

In ninth grade, I decided on a whim that I wanted to learn Japanese. I enjoyed anime, I found languages interesting, I loved reading. I thought that if I know one more language, I could read a lot more books. So I started teaching myself Japanese, from hiragana to katakana to how to say “How are you?” The more I learned, the more I realized—I was fortunate. I was lucky to

know Traditional Chinese, to know the abstract meanings and the shapes of those characters, because the Japanese language has so many kanji that are Traditional Chinese characters, words that bear connections to my language. So although learning a new language is always hard, my knowledge of Traditional Chinese helped me as I explored Japanese. I'm thankful to my Taiwanese background for aiding me in my pursuit of my interest.

Now, in tenth grade, I'm still hard at work to master the Japanese language, as well as practicing and expanding my knowledge of Chinese through books and songs. I challenge myself by taking various AP classes, of which my favorites are AP Psychology and AP Chemistry. I am a member of the National Junior Classical League and the National Mathematics Honors Society. I help out in the community by volunteering at the public library and through my school's Key Club. I attend events hosted by the Baltimore Taiwanese Women Association with my family and help my mother tutor students learning the Chinese language. I also participated in local Asian culture festivals. I enjoy reading, drawing, and practicing Chinese calligraphy.

My life is a jigsaw puzzle of unlimited proportions, and I'm always searching for new pieces to add to the collection. In the process of doing so, I hope to better understand the parts I've put together already, to preserve the roots of my heritage, the oldest, most basic parts of who I am and who I will be. Taiwan is part of that.