

Being Taiwanese in America

As a Taiwanese American, I've always felt a pull to both Taiwan and America. Though I only go to Taiwan at most once a year, it has always felt like my other home. When I am in America, I miss the smell of diesel from the motorcycles, the 7-Eleven on the corner, the hot, sticky air as I walk down the street. I miss the smell of fried food at the night market, the rush of people in the metro stations, the neon lights in the city at night. I miss my family, the food, the culture. But in Taiwan, I can't help but think of the quiet, clear mornings in my neighborhood, my friends, who I can speak English to, and the comfort of my own room. In both countries, I'm always a little homesick for the other.

In the Taiwanese American community here in the United States, I've found a different kind of family, and with it a sense of community belonging. When I was just a few months old, I started going to Washington D.C. Taiwanese School. The *akofngs* and *amars* would feed me homemade food, cooked with the recipes they brought over from Taiwan. As I got a little older, I called them my best friends, because they treated me as their own family. They were my stand-in grandparents when my own were miles away, too far to talk to and play with. When I was old enough to walk and talk, I started taking Mandarin and Taiwanese classes, formally learning the languages I already spoke at home. To many, Chinese classes are boring and mandatory, another class your parents force you to take. Sometimes, as I walk up the stairs to the classroom, it feels like a waste of time, a long hour and a half that I could spend doing something else. But I will always be thankful to my parents for "forcing" me to continue taking Mandarin and Taiwanese classes. By always speaking Mandarin at home, and continuing to take classes even in high school, I am maintaining the bond I have with my family in Taiwan. I am keeping my family's culture alive as it continues down the generation, and eliminating the language barrier that is so common in families these days. Often, I will see on TV or in books, or even in my own friends, the longing to connect to their culture, to learn the languages of their parents, sometimes a little too late. At a younger age, they didn't want to make the effort to learn a second language, or eat traditional food. And sometimes, people are bullied, made fun of, until they see their culture as irregular, unnatural. I am grateful that I have always had a community that supports me, that encourages cultural growth, and that tells me: you belong.

In middle school, I started volunteering at Taiwanese School events. At the Mid Autumn Bazaar, I would help set up events and stalls that helped raise money for the school. Usually, I manned the ring toss, where I would set up and run the game, collecting money and giving out prizes. At Taiwan Fun, I would help organize and run activities, with traditional games and crafts, like Chinese calligraphy and paper lanterns, or Taiwanese trivia. At the Winter Solstice and the Mother's Day celebrations, I have helped coordinate and organize the events and the performances put on by the various Mandarin and Taiwanese classes. I also help set up decorations and other items needed for the events, serve food to everyone at dinner time, and then clean up when the event is over. I always like to help out wherever I can, even in small places, like passing out ice cream to the younger kids during Uncle Kenny's ice cream day. I want to give back to my community, and help the next generation of kids get the same feeling of family and culture that I did when I first walked into the building.

I attend Richard Montgomery High School, where I am in tenth grade. My school is fairly diverse, and my peers are from many different backgrounds, so they understand what it is like to be part of the minority majority. I used to play a game when I first met someone, where I would ask them to guess my ethnicity. And almost every time, the first guess was Chinese. After they ran through all of the Asian countries they could think of, even the South Asian countries to which I bear no resemblance, did I say, "I am Taiwanese." Some people have never heard of the country. Others think I said Thailand. But often, the answer is "Isn't that a part of China?" Sometimes I grow tired of having to repeat my truths, of telling people again and again, "Taiwan is not a part of China." In seventh grade, I did a research project on why it wasn't, how Taiwan was its own independent country, why some people believed otherwise. It was frustrating to explain that I know Taiwan is a sovereign nation, with its own government, currency, flag, but still many countries and organizations refused to see it as independent. Despite these difficulties, I am always proud to say that I am Taiwanese, to defend my culture and my identity. Everytime I see Taiwan, not the Republic of China, included in a list of countries, or on a map or a globe, I smile. Whenever I see Taiwan or a Taiwanese person recognized in the news or even in fictional shows and stories, I am glad to see more representation. I always hope that one day, Taiwan will be included in the U.N., participate in the Olympics, not as Chinese Taipei, and that other countries across the globe will recognize Taiwan as Taiwan, not as the Republic of China.

Sometimes it can feel difficult to connect with a country that is thousands of miles away when I am accustomed to American living. In my Taiwanese American community, I have found a way to balance my identity, to retain my Taiwanese ethnicity while living in America. You don't have to be one or the other, or lose touch with your identity just to fit in. Embracing every aspect of your background is the best way to be true to who you are.