

My Taiwanese Background and Me

“But you know that Taiwan’s part of China, right? You’re Chinese.”

I have heard statements like this dozens of times. In middle school, I decided to just accept this label of “Chinese”. One of the most common scenarios occurred when people asked where my parents were from. My answer of “Taiwanese” was met with blank stares and people asking, “Did you mean Thai?” Those who were slightly more culturally aware would attempt to convince me that being Chinese and being Taiwanese was one and the same. Most Chinese students were especially adamant that Taiwan was part of China - trying to argue against so was like speaking to a brick wall. There were few Taiwanese kids in the area, and even fewer in my school.

So I decided to be Chinese. It was simpler to identify with a country that everyone was familiar and okay with. I didn’t know much about the island of Formosa. What I did know was that identifying as Taiwanese was not on the top of my priority list; fitting in seemed far more important. Also, it wasn’t like I *felt* particularly Taiwanese. To be honest, I was more Arnold Palmer’s than bubble tea, more American than Taiwanese. As a result, I didn’t feel particularly motivated to learn more about my own culture and heritage.

But I particularly remember one night where I found myself discussing Taiwan with my father. It was an assignment for English class: to interview someone about a significant event in their lives. I wasn’t the most proactive student, so I decided to interview my own father. I didn’t know that my lazy decision would permanently change my outlook on my ethnicity and culture.

My father explained how the island was colonized and passed from country to country. He talked about his own experiences as a student under martial law. His professor was arrested for his political views and due to guilt by association, my father almost was as well. Yet despite his hardships, he never once doubted that he was Taiwanese. I found the same to be true for my mother, our family friends, and every Taiwanese person I met.

I realized that there was no use denying it -- no matter how distant it seemed, Taiwan will always be apart of my blood and culture. I am not Chinese, and I cannot claim I am just American. I am Taiwanese from the food that I eat to the values of hard work, dedication, and acceptance that my parents taught me.

I decided to never be Chinese again. I have not called myself Chinese since middle school and will continue to do so in the future. Although in middle school, there was perhaps one other peer in the school that was Taiwanese, that figure has increased to five in high school. I am confident that it will continue to increase as I enter college and the workforce. I will be able to share my experiences with these peers and learn how being Taiwanese has affected them too.

However, being Taiwanese will not only affect me now -- it will continue to affect me in college. I plan to join a Taiwanese student association in college if one exists. If not, I plan to create one. It is important for peers of similar backgrounds to be able to gather, and such an association would facilitate this. I also plan to take a Taiwanese language class if offered at my

university. Doing so will help me gain increased fluency and perhaps help me gain greater understanding of my own culture.

My identity will continue to follow me into the workforce. I may not be Chinese, but being Taiwanese means I am quite familiar with both cultures. I am fairly fluent in Mandarin, and although I am not fluent in Taiwanese, I know enough to understand the language and interpret meanings through context. This means that I have greater access to the Chinese and Taiwanese markets. With the world becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, the demand for workers who can speak a foreign language grows. People who can speak Chinese are especially desired due to China's high population. Being Taiwanese will indirectly help me gain valuable job opportunities and promotions.

Outside of the workforce and college, I plan to visit Taiwan annually. I can visit relatives and experience Taiwan for myself. I also plan to bring friends with me so I can spread Taiwanese culture to those that aren't Taiwanese. Hopefully, my mother will teach me her recipes so I can learn how to make traditional Taiwanese dishes as well. In the future, I plan to immerse myself in the culture and reconnect with my roots.

To me, growing up Taiwanese means annual visits to my relatives in Taiwan, moped rides down the streets of Kaohsiung, and tours of night markets. At the same time, it also means seeing "Chinese Taipei" plastered on the screen during the Olympics instead of "Taiwan". But it is the knowledge that I am part of this thriving and perseverant community that is confident of its own identity, even when others are not, that makes me truly Taiwanese and has enabled me to proudly label myself so.