

My Taiwanese Background and Me

My name is Mandy Hsu, I am a sophomore student at Poolesville High School in the Humanities House. I have been in the MAGNET system since fourth grade, stayed throughout middle school, and now through high school. I have been learning violin since kindergarten, started playing in MCYO in fourth grade, and played in PVYO from seventh to ninth grade. Every Saturday morning, I volunteer at the George B. Thomas Learning Academy. At the academy, I help out in classes of different grade levels, teaching subjects such as reading, spelling, and math. I've been volunteering for three years so far, and plan on continuing in the future. However, perhaps the most important extracurricular in my life is that every Sunday, I attend Washington D.C. Taiwanese School (WDCTS).

I have been going to WDCTS since I was two, when it was located in the old Cabin John middle school. The community helped me embrace and hold on to my Taiwanese roots, as a person born and brought up in America. As I continued to attend WDCTS, I discovered that so much of the school community feels like a family. When most of our relatives live halfway around the world, it's easy to feel disconnected from Taiwan. However, at WDCTS, the parents can discuss their shared home country together, and the kids can discuss shared experiences as Taiwanese-Americans. When I started middle school, I also started officially volunteering at all the events that WDCTS took part in. At the Mid-Autumn Bazaar, I would run the ring-toss, or help sell food at the stands. During Taiwan Fun, I would show kids how to do the arts and crafts at the station I was in charge of, teaching them a bit of Taiwanese history and traditions at the same time. One year at the Mother's Day celebration, I was even a co-host! Whether it be the Mid-Autumn Bazaar, Taiwan Fun, the Mother's Day celebration, or any other activity that WDCTS also took part in, I was sure to be there. I loved being in an environment that not only helped promote Taiwanese culture, but was also a place for me to meet other Taiwanese people, people I typically would not have found as easily on my own. WDCTS opened up a lot of these doors for me to truly experience Taiwanese Culture as a Taiwanese American.

At WDCTS, I'm also lucky to be learning not only Mandarin, but also Taiwanese. Learning Mandarin naturally opens up my world to many more opportunities and experiences. Learning Taiwanese gives me more of an appreciation for Taiwan. It gives me a sense of community with other Taiwanese people, especially my parents and my relatives. After becoming more fluent in Modern Taiwanese Language (MTL), I started helping Koklioong Lawsux with the content on his website, which provides resources for people learning Taiwanese through MTL. Since last year, I have been a teaching assistant for Taiwanese classes, and I help the students learn how to read and spell Taiwanese words using MTL. I grew up in love with learning the Taiwanese language, and I hope to pass on that love to the students I teach.

Almost every summer since I was born, my parents would take me back to Taiwan to visit my relatives. I have always known Taiwan as my second home country. I embrace the hot weather of the summers and the loud noises of the motorcycles. At nights, I navigate the streets of the night markets. During the days, I follow my aunt through the bus system, finding relief in the cool shopping malls of Taipei city. Sometimes, my grandfather takes the family on a hike up and down one of the great mountains of Taiwan, that always seem to stay cool despite the

sweltering heat on the land below it. Other times, my grandfather takes the family up mountains to learn about the natives who live and grow tea leaves there.

Staying close to the culture of Taiwan shows me that my heart is big enough to love both Taiwan and the United States. I don't have to pick a side when someone asks me what nationality I am. When someone tells me that Taiwan exists solely as a Republic of China, I have the experience to tell them no, Taiwan is too unique to just be a part of China. Taiwan has its own culture and language, and doesn't need to be classified as part of another larger whole when it is already a whole all by itself. There may always be people asking, "Taiwan? Is that the same thing as Thailand?" or "Taiwan? Don't you mean China?" and although some people see "Chinese" and "Taiwanese" as interchangeable terms, I always feel more pride in telling someone that I'm Taiwanese than I ever would if I just said that I'm Chinese, just because it's easier for them to understand.

Every time I look at a map of the world, the first thing I do by habit is check that Taiwan is on there too. When I was younger, I'd sometimes find maps that didn't have Taiwan on it or perhaps have it in the same color as China, to signify that it's the same country. When I watch the Olympics, I always hope that I see country listed as Taiwan, and not Chinese Taipei. Everytime I see someone list the countries in Asia, I check to see if they wrote Taiwan or Republic of China, if they even list it at all. My heritage will never be something I take for granted, because I know what it's like to have it not exist in the eyes of others. My love for Taiwan is something that will stay with me my whole life and I hope to be able to influence the same love in others as well.