

Taipei Memories

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Introduction

I wasn't ready for the flight from JFK to Taipei. Part of me wished that I could stay in Cambridge because of how comfortable and familiar the place was for me. I didn't want to fly thousands of miles across North America and the Pacific Ocean, only then to navigate Taiwan all over again.

But I knew that choosing to spend my summer in Taiwan was a good decision. I lived in Taiwan from ages eight to thirteen because of my dad's job, and had grown to love Taiwan for inspiring me to learn Chinese language and culture. Despite having no relatives in Taiwan, I always wanted to visit ever since I left in 2016, and 2023 was the year that gave me this opportunity. It was now or never.

When I boarded the plane and heard the EVA Airlines flight crew speak with a Taiwanese accent that felt oddly comforting, I realized there was no turning back. Taiwan was the place where I could relive these cultural experiences and immerse myself in the language again. I was going to embark on a pilgrimage of revisiting the past and reconnecting with my past self.

The Last Week

I couldn't believe that my summer in Taipei flew by so quickly. My first day in the city was so foreign and disorienting, even though I had lived in Taiwan before. But that was seven years ago, a time when I was barely a teenager. I'd forgotten the intense sunlight and humidity, the tropical scenery, the soft-spoken accents I picked up around me. I felt like an alien that got dropped off in a completely different world, trying to make sense of this unfamiliar place around me.

Two months later, however, my surroundings felt so familiar. After walking along the main road many times after work in the lab, I gradually developed a mental map of the stores and alleys around me, from the local bento box shop to the cozy café that had books and cats.

My stay in Taipei was meant to be temporary; it was time for me to go back to the U.S. I missed my friends at MIT, the runs along the Charles River, and the concerts at Symphony Hall. Despite this, my heart felt heavy as I walked along the main road after work for the last week. It wasn't even time to board the plane yet, but I was going to miss Taipei.

As I got closer to departure day, I started taking as many photos as possible because I didn't know when I would visit Taiwan again. I treated this summer as if it were my last one. One photo I took was the sunset in the alleyway near the apartment. I saw so many sunsets on my walks from the lab to the apartment, but it wasn't until my second-to-last day that I realized the golden scene in front of me was my last one. I never thought of counting sunsets to mark the fleeting passage of time.

Seeing the sunlight spill through the narrow lane and illuminate the buildings around sunset made me want to stretch time and let this moment linger. To be in Taiwan just a little longer. The aspects I was going to miss here were things that people in Taiwan found to be normal and day-to-day, but left an imprint on me.

The Last Day

The last day was an emotional rollercoaster, unlike any that I experienced in my life. So many memorable things happened that day, but one moment that stood out to me was the meaningful conversation my housemate, Li Huey, had with a security guard.

Li Huey wanted some nice pictures of us before I left, so we went to a nearby pond with Taipei 101, the iconic skyscraper, in the distant background. It was a sunny morning, and a security guard took photos of us. Before we went back to the apartment, Li Huey struck

up a conversation with her, as the guard was curious about what her relation to me was. Li Huey introduced me as her summer housemate, saying that I was a Chinese American who had lived in Taiwan before, and came back this summer to do research and travel. Li Huey explained that today was my last day, as I was leaving for the airport in the afternoon.

As the conversation progressed, Li Huey also became more comfortable talking about herself, confiding that she was Malaysian, not Taiwanese. From first impressions, it isn't obvious that she came to Taiwan at the age of 19 for college and has lived there for nearly thirty years. At some point, her voice started to quaver, saying, “*Dà jǐe* (oldest sister), do you understand how much she loves Taiwan, even though she isn't Taiwanese and has no family here? Do you know how much I love Taiwan too? Will there even be a Taiwan in the future?” She started sobbing as tears flowed down her face, her body shaking.

What she said touched me, as she highlighted my complex relationship with Taiwan: I had no family in Taiwan, but I still felt a strong connection. No matter how hard I tried to assimilate, I was still considered a foreigner. An American.

While my Chinese was fluent, my ambiguous accent was an obvious giveaway, as I didn't have the gentle Taiwanese lilt. My conversations with others were fine, but I always sensed this invisible cultural gap between me and the locals, simply because my upbringing was not exactly like theirs. Comprehending language was one thing, but understanding subtleties in conversations such as slang and jokes wasn't as natural.

Even Li Huey, an overseas Chinese, considered me an outsider, as she told me a month before I left that I was simply an American. In other words, the passport I held took precedence over my ethnicity. The comment felt a little invalidating. Why I couldn't be seen as Chinese *and* American, instead of choosing one identity over the other? Was I not Chinese enough? Regardless, this didn't stop me from loving this place for the warmth and hospitality

the people exuded, the coexistence of tradition and modernity, and so much more. Where could I have these intangible qualities back in the U.S.?

A Week Later

I was back at MIT for orientation leadership training, happy that I got to move back to my dorm again and meet my friends. Killian Court had a vibrant green color, the sky was gorgeous, and sailboats dotted the Charles River. I was accustomed to my surroundings, but my mind still ruminated on the eighty days in Taiwan, trying to articulate the vague sense of nostalgia for abstract things.

I missed how older strangers like the hairdresser and lady at the bus stop called me *mèi mèi* (little sister) even though I was a college student. Hearing strangers use this word to address me felt intimate and endearing, a strange sense of closeness I never experienced in the U.S. These were people who had no blood relation to me, yet viewed me as if I were part of a large family. I loved that this word went beyond the formal definition of “little sister,” as *mèi mèi* was a way for strangers to express their friendliness towards me.

It wasn't just the use of kinship terms that made me miss Taiwan. It was also terms of respect used in my lab such as *xué jǐe*. There is no direct translation of *xué jǐe* into English, but the closest thing to *xué jǐe* is “older school sister,” a term used instead of directly calling a woman by her first name in the academic setting. While I never got used to addressing others *as xué jǐe*, I secretly envied how natural it was for my peer to call the older women in my lab *xué jǐe* when she asked for help and guidance. Honorifics like *xué jǐe* weren't just used to show respect and admiration, but also to foster a tight-knit, sister-like relationship.

Besides how personal the language felt, I missed the various interactions I had with strangers, from the time the optician fixed my glasses for free to the train station manager who welcomed me when I approached him with questions for directions. I also cherished the

interactions I saw among other strangers that made interactions in the U.S. pale in comparison. I thought back to the time the local breakfast shop owner chatted with the customer while making her egg omelet, asking how life was. I liked the continuity that family-owned businesses offered, recognizing the faces of regular customers, and building small but meaningful relationships over time.

I also reminisced about how friendly the people were in my lab, welcoming me despite knowing that I would be gone a few months later. I was moved by these acts of kindness, especially when the lab technician brought me lots of local fruits like wax apple and longan, fruits that I barely ate in the U.S. I also appreciated that I was invited to play badminton and table tennis with the other labs, people from other labs who cheered on me and were happy to play with me on doubles.

There were so many facets of Taiwan that I longed for, like the slower pace of life and the unique atmosphere in the shops I frequented. But my mind kept going back to the people and the language, things that were distinctive to Taiwan and couldn't be found elsewhere.

Half a Year Later

Ever since the new academic year started, my yearning for Taiwan gradually dissipated. While I missed the delicious food and the rich culture that Taiwan offered, the classes and assignments took up my attention. I am well-adjusted to life in the U.S., but I still think about Taipei from time to time.

I remember the neighbors' cooking wafting through my window during dinner. The family lived in a different apartment block, but their window was so close to mine that I could put a ladder between the two to form a bridge. The familiar, savory smell reminded me of the stir-fry in a wok, the wonderful aroma of sauces and oil that rose to the air.

I could easily picture a warm, loving family enjoying a good, home-cooked meal in a small kitchen. When I imagined this scene, I couldn't help but think of my mom, as that was how she indirectly demonstrated her love for me growing up. I wondered what their life was like, as I heard the murmurs of their conversation or the distant humming of their TV in the night.

It isn't just recollections of my neighbors that I find memorable. I think of the Taiwanese folk music that played outside in the early morning, a nice way to begin the day fresh and new, like the crow of a rooster. Music that made me recall sounds I heard in the local temple, chant-like and spiritual. I liked immersing myself in this lifestyle, something that I wouldn't find in college dorms or back home.

Besides sounds and images, taste occupies a major part of my memories of Taipei. So much of my fondness for Taiwan boils down to food. Many of the foods I ate were served to relive the past, but I also had some new gastronomic experiences, like *you tiao* (fried dough) and salty soy milk at Fu Hang –the eclectic combination turned out to be a delightful surprise.

I won't forget the joy I felt from eating passion fruit for the first time after seven years, the sweet and sour juice that clash together, acting like fireworks that go off in my mouth. I still remember the electrifying Proustian moment I had when I had sweet potato soup in the mountains of Yangmingshan, the sweet ginger taste evoking a childhood memory I had of my mom's cooking in Taiwan. Even foods with simple tastes are memorable, such as the warm yellow millet porridge I had at Song Jiang, a restaurant I frequented as a kid.

I still have songs from my memories in Taiwan playing in the background of my mind, especially the iconic Teresa Teng song about the moon and love that played in the dumpling shop, her sweet voice drifting in the background. The lyrics made me feel nostalgic and sad because they reminded me of my upbringing, the times when my parents played this

song in the car when I was a child. Teresa Teng passed away at the age of 42, so the song always reminded me of life's ephemeral nature.

Whenever I hear these tunes, eat these foods, or look at photos, I am back in Taipei, Taiwan: a place where I am not from, but a place that feels like home nevertheless.