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Although it is only a strait away, Taiwan sounded like an imaginary place for quite a long time - it was so beautiful but distant. Since grade school, my peers and I were able to point out where Taiwan was on the map of China, and had learned folk stories about Taiwan's Ali Mountain and Sun Moon Lake. Nevertheless, Taiwan was never on my bucket list of places to visit. Never before had I heard about anyone traveling to Taiwan: people from mainland China were not allowed to travel there until 2012 due to historical and political conflicts between the mainland and Taiwan.

My history class, geography class, political science class, "Cross-Strait Relations" TV comments on CCTV and things adults said invariably referred to Taiwan as "Taiwan province." Even though I was never aware of that stressed word "province," I internalized it. When a transfer student from Taiwan introduced himself by saying "I'm from Taiwan," I wondered why he missed that "province." Clearly I did not realize that this word was deemed as unnecessary whenever we say other provinces such as "Hunan" and "Tibet."

My world was in such accord that alternative views were never touched upon until I became close to the Taiwanese student. The friendship and understanding that came with it led me to reconsider those things that I had learned over the past years. When he talked to me about how he was taught to be Taiwanese, and that Taiwan was its own country, I came to the realization that we were on the same boat - that while I could not make sense of Taiwan's want for independence, the Taiwanese also could not make sense of the unification that we wanted.

As my worldview expanded and knowledge increased, I began to also see Taiwan as more than an island with 23 million residents, on a larger political scale. Its location, political ideology, ex-

periences with colonization and sovereignty were so significant in the Asia-Pacific region that Taiwan gradually stands out as an academic focus of political exploration and analyses - Taiwan is no longer simply what I knew of it in the first place.

The summer of 2016, thanks to Kellogg Institute for International Studies and Prof. Peter Moody's support, I went to Taiwan to probe, to a deeper extent, Taiwan's relationship with China, specifically from the perspective of the younger generations. What views do first-time voters in first-tier universities hold? What is the significance and influence of the self-identification they choose?

Life in Taiwan

My first impression of Taiwan was filled with the uncomfortable feeling of the stiflingly hot air of early May. The temperature reached 80°F - a number that I hardly see at Notre Dame before mid-summer.

Besides the weather reminding me that I was closer to the equator, I sometimes mistakenly thought that I was in China. Like China, there were patches of skyscrapers, and under their shadow, districts of ordinary apartments; like in China, people spoke Mandarin Chinese and most looked no different. But when I walked on the street, the blocks unfolded and began to reveal stories of its own: I saw people kneeling down piously and bowing to the ground at temples and heard chanting in the early morning; I observed people motorbiking with their helmets on, and I saw the clear sky unlike the polluted one in China.

I soon discovered more differences despite the resemblance: Taiwan indeed had skyscrapers, but they were not built on eminent domain and were seen as perpetual private property rather than something that you can own for only 70 years as is the case in China. Taiwan had ordinary

apartments, but people living there had the right to vote and can freely criticize their government; Taiwanese spoke Mandarin Chinese yet they kept the traditional Chinese writing system that the mainlanders discarded and simplified. Admittedly most Taiwanese looked Chinese, yet there are aboriginal peoples, and new immigrants, who are equally embraced by the society; and there are freedom of religion and press, enforcement and obedience of law and regulations, and access to a clean environment. Despite only being a strait away, Taiwan is distinct.

My time in Taiwan was filled with novelty, exploration and little things that made me feel loved and blessed. During my two months there, I was present at the presidential inauguration and heard the powerful speech of the first female president of Taiwan; I experienced an earthquake registering a 4.8 on the Richter scale; I prayed and drew divination sticks at Xingtian Temple; I lined up at 8 AM to buy the most highly rated traditional rice-pudding during the Dragon Boat Festival; I travelled to all major cities and I learned the Taiwanese accent to such a degree that, when I went back to Beijing, my colleagues at my internship company all asked if I was from Taiwan.

I came with no friends and little practical knowledge of life in Taiwan, but by the time I left, Taiwan has become a place that has shaped my personality and worldview in ways that I had not foreseen.

-1-

The dorm manager waited for me to check in at a dorm at National Chengchi University on a Sunday morning. He led me into my room, introduced the facilities, and reminded me about

things that I should be careful about, one of which was about classifying the garbage and taking it to the garbage dump located a five minute walk away. I was confident in my ability to classify garbage due to my experience in the U.S., and a few days later, I brought the garbage, which was separated based on "recyclable" and "non-recyclable" to the garbage dump. To my surprise, the worker there told me that I would be fined because I classified the garbage in a wrong way.

With an aim of recycling as much as possible and creating an environmentally friendly society, Taiwan, especially Taipei, is very strict when it comes to classifying garbage. Leftover food, metals, paper and plastics should all be separated, or people might face a fine. After finding out that I had no prior knowledge on recycling in Taiwan, the worker said that he would not charge me as long as I re-classify the garbage I brought.

When he finished his sentence, he kneeled down, unknotted the bags, and helped to re-classify the garbage *with me*. Then, he pointed at the staple on the left side of a stack of paper, saying, "Here you need to stitch out the staple because staple counts as metal. Don't hurt yourself."

"Is this part of your job? Re-classifying the garbage to such detail? Will there be consequences if you fail to make sure that there is no wrongly classified garbage?" I blurted out the questions.

"Oh, no. I'm just doing some extra work out of my wish for a better world."

I was ashamed, by my natural assumption that he was merely fulfilling his duties as a worker, but also impressed by the worker's dedication. I always heard people saying that the most beauti-

ful scenery in Taiwan is its people, and I highly echo it. From the tour guide who quietly drove from the beach to the city center to buy local desserts for me to taste, to the unknown auntie who brought me to hospital when I got food poisoning and asked for help, I encountered so many people who embraced the world with open arms and saw their mission in a scale larger than earning money and living a comfortable life of their own. Those people I encountered daily made me really reconsider my attitude towards life - as life is not always about self-fulfillment, but making a positive impact everyday.

-2-

For a whole week straight, a Youtube video sparked a wave of discussion and a call for introspection and improvement. In the video, a self-proclaimed “civics teacher” used a series of insulting words to shame an old man, who came to Taiwan in 1949 with the Nationalist Party, which retreated from mainland China as it lost the Chinese Civil War to the Communist Party. This “civics teacher” accused the old man, and those who are like him, of exploiting Taiwan’s welfare and resources, and said he should “go back to China.”

People were outraged. Invariably, every one of my news feeds and almost every comment I read in the comments section of that video were shaming this “civics teacher.” People’s unanimous stance on the matter shocked me, because in the democratic Taiwan, I was so used to seeing politicians debating on TV and students talking politics and arguing for their differed views.

“Why is everyone’s attitude so solid on the issue? Aren’t there people thinking the same as the civics teacher?” I asked one of my friends from National Taiwan University.

“Because this issue matters to our country, as we see everyone - Benshengren (Han-ethnic people who came to Taiwan before 1949), Waishengren (Han-ethnic people who came to Taiwan after 1949), new immigrants and aborigines all as Taiwanese. It’s not an issue about whether or not we should build nuclear stations anymore.”

This answer straight-forwardly pointed out something about the Taiwanese people: They use their voices and fight for their often-times differed stances, but on core issues that are concerned with respect and citizenship, most of them are anti-racist and inclusive.

From my observation, race in Taiwan does not usually play as much a role in society as it does in China or the U.S. In Taiwan, people would never be asked to check an ethnicity on an application form, nor is there information of race on Taiwanese citizens’ ID cards. Due to my research, I asked my interviewees what race or ethnicity they consider themselves to be, and except for one student saying “aborigine,” others all said that they are Taiwanese - that they recognize the place they were born in, and they do not care about issues that could possibly divide one from another in the same nation.

The weakened focus on “race” and “ethnicity” is only one of many phenomenons I see in Taiwan that could largely unite society. In fact, the respect for people of different colors and backgrounds was something that impressed me. People were so protective of other citizens that, in most circumstances, they tolerated no discourse that might cause tension among racial groups. Admittedly, I have had unpleasant experiences due to my identity as a Chinese person, but for

the most part, when it comes to non-citizens like me, Taiwanese were careful not to hurt my feelings. For example, instead of asking directly “Are you from China/the mainland/Malaysia?” people normally asked me where I was from to avoid making racial and national assumptions. Moreover, they always offered me extra attention and help because I am not a local. Taiwan is somewhere that made me realize that it is not GDP that makes a place great - it is a harmonious society that respects people and knows that everyone deserves to be loved.

There were many other moments that had great significance to me, but they are hard to extract out and be told singly. If I were asked to talk about my biggest takeaway, it would be the universal values such as freedom, democracy and human rights. Taiwan is only a strait away to the mainland, and its people’s pursuit of truth and rights have made me more confident than ever of the same for people of the mainland and elsewhere. I am very thankful for everyone who made my experience wonderful, but I also understand the importance of myself being open-minded and respectful. In today’s world where distrust, ethnocentrism and confrontation pervade, respect and willingness to learn and make a difference should never be devalued.