

# *It Was Truly About the Friends Made Along the Way*

7/5/24

*Vivian Lin*

For my first time abroad, I'm already amazed at all the things I was able to do in the first three weeks of being here in Taiwan. It hadn't really hit me until I was on a bus to Jiufen on my first free weekend, and as amazing scenery passed by my window the further we traveled, I marveled at where I was right at that moment: on a bus, free of expectations, with exploration and discovery being the only thing on my mind. Shameless to say, tears began to well up in my eyes as I had these thoughts: "I'm here. I'm actually here. I'm here through my own efforts, and this is real. I feel... free".



I was wandering at the university bookstore on the NTHU campus when I saw postcards for sale. On a few of them was beautiful photographs of a place full of luscious scenery. I was fortunate enough to be accompanied by a friend who recognized the place, and that was how I set Jiufen as my first destination.

Trekking up the mountain against the heat of Taiwan was no easy feat, and there were many times when I led my party astray, but the landscape was breathtaking and magical. When we finally reached the end of our destination, which we realized was a point we had already been at previously, jokingly, with as much exaggerated grandiose as I could muster, said in feeble Chinese: “It was not about the destination, but about the journey!”

While it was half-poking fun at our arduous trek, for me, the journey was really what made Jiufen so memorable. The times of helping each other out when one led the others astray, running for cover from spontaneous rain, and losing each other in the crowds to find each other over and over again made the journey what it was. And it was an indicator for the people that would help me over and over again through the course of my journey at NTHU, who spotted me money when I needed it, who accompanied through late nights of studying, and who made convenience store runs for me for medication or supplements.



*Caption: My resilient crew who trekked up the mountain in 90+ degree weather with heavy backpacks, but uplifted spirits. I mistakenly led us down the mountain when the tea house was up top. Despite being exhausted, they knew how badly I wanted to see this tea house, and thus we started our trek back up the mountain again...*





*Caption: A-Mei-Cha, a famous teahouse in Jiufen, Taiwan that is said to have inspired the setting of Spirited Away. It was difficult to navigate to via Google maps, showing that technology only goes so far, but after asking a local, we made it pretty quickly. Talking with the locals is definitely the way to go!*



*Caption: On our way to finding the A-Mei-Cha Tea house in Jiufen, we stopped by Fushan Temple. Warm-spirited hosts invited us in, explained to us the history, and even offered us a meal! Before we left, they bestowed upon us protection charms, a gesture I was moved by. Today as I took my second zhokao (Chinese weekly exam), I gripped onto it tightly.*

In the end, my cohort has been what has absolutely been making this trip, and I'm incredibly grateful for my new group of friends who are all so uniquely talented people! Some of my new friends have many more years on me, who have experienced a wide range of different experiences. Some are younger than I, who seized the opportunity to see more of the world and do so in a way that brought meaning to them. And what strikes me is that we're yet all at the same place, with the same goal in mind: to improve our Mandarin. I am awed and inspired by all of them in some way, and find myself extremely fortunate to have met such curious and lively people who have made my stay in Taiwan so enjoyable and manageable so far.

This blog is to my program friends, who have made my first three weeks already so unforgettable.



*Caption: Taiwan is so green, filled with wildlife and nature. I feel so at peace, seeing these blankets of trees stretch across for miles and miles.*



# *Connecting the Past and Present*

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Beneath all the wonders of traveling through the beautiful landscapes of Taiwan, I lay in bed thinking about two things: my family and my identity.

My family was the reason I pursued furthering my Chinese studies: to be able to communicate with them better, to learn more about their history and culture, and maybe take a few steps in their shoes. Seeing people of all ages working extremely diligently in their business in Taiwan, I have begun to understand my parents who work just as painstakingly to care for their family. Watching children here working at their family business and diligently attending cram school helped put my parents' expectations for me into perspective.



*Caption: My host family took me out to try mango shaved ice and peanut pudding! En-En, the daughter, gives her capybara a seat at the table. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the sweet treat, and I will sorely miss this delicious dessert when I go back home.*



*Caption: With my host family on our first family weekend - seeing their support for their daughter shown proudly throughout their house reminded me of the relationship I yearned for with my parents growing up.*

*When I went to their house, her artwork was displayed proudly throughout the house. Her mother proudly showed me her dancing in dance class. And in return, she also spreads love to those around her as well, gifting me a capybara keychain on our first visit, and being a wonderful tour guide.*

It was interesting wielding this dual identity in Taiwan: I felt more at home when I was living in the dormitories with my other American friends, yet my friends and the locals turned to me when we were out and about Taiwan to help translate or navigate. I could understand what was asked of me in most circumstances, yet my American identity was revealed when I struggled to find the right vocabulary, or expressed myself loudly with my friends.





*Caption: Shopping in Taiwan was incredibly fun: getting to pick and choose between Western styles and Eastern products helped me connect and express my two identities. I also had financial power, which was absolutely lovely. I will sorely miss these affordable prices.*

I realized that being an Americanized Chinese person is in its own, an unique identity. For too long, I had felt ashamed of my Asian features and culture in America, as it was a difference that was pointed out to me over and over again. And in Taiwan, once my Chinese showed signs of roughness, the people would stare at me a little longer than I was comfortable with. But instead of taking these reactions as signs that I should hide my differences, I have come to understand that these are differences that ultimately make up part of my identity and who I am. They reflect my history, and even a bit of my parent's history. My broken Chinese is not an indicator of my incompetence, but an indicator of the strength of my family's culture that had made it through years of assimilation into the United States. My features are made up of my Chinese mother and father, yet the makeup and style I adorn have strong Western influences. I am my history, and I am learning that these factors all simply make up... me. And... that's pretty cool.



*Caption: My language partner and I heading back to campus after baking a cake together! She mentions that we communicate almost effortlessly, which I thank my Chinese background for. Yet our conversations halt at my inputs, when I struggle to find the right words, haha. Time to work even harder in class!*

Taiwan has been an amazing place to come to reflect on my past and present, and I am so excited to come away with more than just more Chinese phrases in my arsenal, but more beautiful experiences, personal insights, and more vivid hopes and dreams.



Caption: At the Miaoli Cape of Good Hope - a beautiful countryside view, with the ocean right beside you. A feeling of yearning settled within me - I will miss this beautiful greenery. This feeling of peace.

By living amongst other beautiful things, you may come to realize that beauty resides in you too. I certainly did.