



Taiwan

Its People & Its culture

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September 2, 2013: That is the date of my arrival to the island of Formosa. Before setting foot in Taiwan, I thought I already had some idea of what the culture in this nation was about. Part of the notion I had was due to some documentaries about the developments in Taiwanese agriculture, science and technology I used to watch as a child in the 1990s –since from an early age, I have been attracted to the Asian culture. On the other hand, this notion came –I am sure– from my own imagination, which tended to naively exaggerate and generalize some facts.

12:00 Midnight: That is the exact hour I got to my dorm after the almost 24 hour journey to this beautiful country. I pictured in my mind how the next day would be when I walked by the city's streets and with each step, how the smell of all kinds of soups and broths being cooked in the Taiwanese houses would engulf me. I could imagine how it would be to go to the night markets and see all kinds of shops selling steamed buns, boiled fish in herbs, vegetable soups with noodles, lots of seafood in soy sauce, and how I would see people drinking hot tea at all hours. I could envision

the orderly and structured fashion in which the city would be organized, its cleanliness, the respect of each of the citizens towards each other and towards us foreigners, but also I could envision some seriousness in the air. And yes, I have to say that some of the things I had imagined were here, but not all and not just these –it was also much, much more.

I was surprised that the variety of steamed foods went beyond the ones I had thought, but I was even more surprised to know that they also had a lot of deep-fried, stewed, barbecued, grilled, roasted, and baked foods; seafood wasn't the only kind of meat available, with pork and duck mainly served

too. I was also amazed with the fact that, while I knew soy could be used



for different kinds of dishes, it is much more versatile –you can assess this fact just by having a look at the great array of different kinds of tofu you can buy. I was really impressed by such a rich cuisine.

But what was even more pleasant about their culture, is that I was even more wrong about the country and its people. Yes, it is a highly organized and clean country, but this structured way of behaving and coexisting isn't the result of an imposition, and surely enough it also isn't about the air of strictness and



Utilizing one of the many free services of the Taiwan NHI system



Onward to a good time at Waiao beach



● Hanging out with some colleagues

seriousness I had imagined before. At first, when you arrive, you'll notice a kind of shyness in the people, but then you realize it isn't as much shyness as consideration towards each other, a kind of respect rooted in the deep understanding and recognition of the others' needs. It is by this awareness that they can go beyond the concept of organization and order and into an impressive willingness to serve. You can see this more clearly in the way they treat the elderly: when they yield their seats to them in the public transport, or the carefulness with which they help them climb stairs or take them for a walk.

I remember my first months in Taipei: and as it always happens in a new place when trying

to adjust, you are compelled to buy things for your room that will make your living much easier, so I turned to the Taiwanese buddy that had been assigned to me. When I messaged Elijah, he almost immediately began flooding my inbox with information about the places (maps included) where I could find what I was searching for. There were so many messages that –after sincerely thanking him for his attention– I had to tell him I had enough tips, and even after that I still received a couple more. So, I began to wonder if there was something even more profound in their culture than the necessity of identifying the need of someone and addressing it; and yes there is, and it's simple: joy.



● Having fun at Yehliu

If we really think about it, being helpful and being serious are not mutually exclusive traits. But when a Taiwanese helps you, there is the shy smile after your "thank you"; there is the bow of their head after their "you're welcome"; there is the sincere happiness in the understanding that joy is received from helping others –which by the way, isn't any kind of joy.

And it is in this rejoicing that the essence of the Taiwanese culture is built on. It is in this warm feeling where their willingness to serve and work hard for the benefit of them and the others is born. It is by this virtue that Taiwan is what it is. And maybe, it is by this same culture of generosity and solidarity that I was drawn in the first place to the island and its people.



● International Health Program teachers and students' lunch



● Meeting Dawen, a rising Taiwanese musician