

What does it mean to be Taiwanese?

A photo essay.

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What Does it Mean to be “Taiwanese”?

Melissa Brown writes that “A specific identity is formed by individuals who share common social experiences...” (Brown 211). During my time in Taiwan, I have reflected on the shared “social experiences” that have shaped Taiwanese identity. From the contentious political reality of Taiwan as an independent state to its long history of colonization and occupation, especially regarding the island’s indigenous peoples, the shared social experiences of Taiwanese people are often viewed with diverse and contradicting perspectives. Taiwanese identity, like any identity, is hard to define – but I see it as a fluid combination of these shared experiences, a complex mixture of influences, ideas, beliefs, and cultures that have resulted in the construction of a unique identity. Though the amount of people identifying simply as “Taiwanese” seems to have increased in recent years as a response to aggression from the People’s Republic of China, the distinct habits and customs of Taiwanese people have been present for hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years. In particular, the natural environment, the various cultures that have settled and occupied the island throughout the years, the period of martial law followed by democratization, Taiwan’s contentious political status, and its interactions with other countries in the modern era of globalization have all contributed to the formation of a distinct Taiwanese identity. The photos presented in this essay will explore these diverse factors in greater detail.

Natural environment is one of the most basic forms of experience – most people who identify as “Taiwanese” relationship to the physical island that makes up Taiwan. environment inherently grants a unique identity to Taiwan residents, as the sea surrounding the island has a isolating effect. In the modern era this effect is less but even today, the main island of Taiwan is only accessible boat, limiting access to the island from outsiders. I found Taiwan best exemplified at Qingshui Cliff near Hualien. The cliffs emphasizes the grandness of the sea and the isolation



1 - Qingshui Cliff, Hualien

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while also highlighting Taiwan's mountainous terrain. This area showcases the natural beauty of Taiwan and helps explain why Taiwanese settlement is located mostly on the west coast – the rugged cliffs, while beautiful to look at, are very hard to live on. Qingshui Cliff represents the isolation from the outside world that early settlers of Taiwan must have felt, and the distinct aboriginal culture that developed as a result.



2 - Breakfast from Fu Hang Soy Milk, Taipei

In contrast to the majestic natural beauty of Qingshui Cliff, the hustle and bustle of city life dominates the capital city of Taipei. Even outside the city center, most residential areas are densely populated, especially when compared to the sprawling suburbs seen in most of the United States. Convenience seems to be key – scooters are more efficient than cars or bikes for getting around the city, convenience stores are located on every corner to serve every imaginable need, and even the night markets seem designed to get food off the stove and into your stomach as soon as possible. This is especially clear in the traditional Taiwanese breakfast served by Michelin-rated Fu Hang Soy Milk. What better way to quickly consume a bunch of carbs and energy than eating a fried dough

stick inside a roll of bread?

Of course, governments often play a role in creating a identity, especially through the construction of memorials. Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, completed in 1980, is one of recognizable landmarks in Taipei due to its grand stature elegant design. Charles D. Musgrove writes that the main influences for the hall were “...the Lincoln Memorial, the Taj Beijing's Temple of Heaven, and the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum Nanjing” (Musgrove 302). These influences are evident visiting the hall – as an American, I was immediately struck similarity to the Lincoln Memorial, particularly in the steps up to the hall and Chiang Kai-Shek's seated figure inside the deliberate choice of influences displays how the



3 - Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial, Taipei

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at the time viewed Chiang as the true political leader of China, and as someone to be revered and respected, even in death. However, the site has also become a common site for protests, despite its intended reverent nature. The varied uses of this site and opinions on Chiang Kai-Shek himself demonstrate Taiwan's robust democratic culture, which is held as an ideal by many Taiwanese people we talked to. A core value of democracy is allowing for debate and disagreement, and this can be seen in the

multiple ways the hall has been characterized throughout the years, as both a memorial and a protest ground, and, officially, as both “Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Square” and “Liberty Square.”



4 - National Palace Museum, Taipei

Taiwan’s connections to mainland China, both culturally and politically, have also played a role in Taiwanese identity, as most Taiwanese citizens are ethnically Chinese. The National Palace Museum in Taipei, which houses one of the largest collections of Chinese art in the world, best represents the impact that Chinese culture has had on Taiwan. The museum also reflects the views of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party at the time of the museum’s establishment; as Kirk Denton notes: “The [KMT] also projected—to the people on the island it ruled and to the world—the notion that

Taiwan was the true heir to the Chinese cultural tradition” (Denton 26). The grand stature of the museum building itself, and its design reminiscent of traditional Chinese architecture, chooses to define Taiwan within the context of its cultural ties to China, and establishes it as the “true” representation of China. Whether this view of Taiwan is accurate or not, it is undeniable that several aspects of Taiwanese identity do come from the shared Chinese cultural history of most of its inhabitants.

Religion is another particularly significant aspect of daily life – temples can be found all over the country, both in and smaller communities. The goddess Matsu is undeniably popular deity in Taiwan, and her likeness could be found in every temple we visited during our trip. Matsu is seen as a sailors and seafarers; her popularity in Taiwan can thus be attributed to the seafarers who made up Taiwan’s first settlers. However, despite Matsu’s popularity, many temples are dedicated to multiple deities. This is best displayed at the Matsu Temple in Tainan, which not only houses Matsu



5 - Grand Matsu Temple, Tainan

above), but several other deities from Buddhist and Daoist tradition. Taiwan’s religious culture thus reflects the diversity of influences that have served to shape Taiwanese identity overall.

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6 - Chihkan Tower, Tainan

No discussion of Taiwanese identity would be complete without discussing the island's colonial history and the various outside forces that participated in it. Perhaps the best example of these competing influences is Chihkan Tower in Tainan. This site was originally known as “*Sakam*” by the indigenous Siraya people, which is where the name “Chihkan” originates from. Chihkan Tower pays homage to this indigenous history today by housing a large collection of Siraya documents. The site was then taken over by Dutch, who named it Fort Provintia as part of their broader colonization of southern Taiwan – the walls of the former fort are still visible to this day. As John R. Shepherd notes, “The history of Taiwan as a Dutch colony is largely a story of Dutch relations with the aborigines...” (Shepherd 27) and Dutch presence on the island was largely for the purpose of trading with aboriginal peoples such as the Siraya, despite the growing Chinese presence on the island. However, after the Dutch defeat by Zheng Cheng-gong and later takeover of Zheng's government by the Qing dynasty, the site was rebuilt to the form that appears before us today, which is very clearly inspired by Chinese architecture. Chihkan Tower thus represents three different parts of Taiwanese identity throughout history – the aboriginal peoples native to the island, Dutch colonization, and eventual Chinese settlement.

The Japanese occupation of Taiwan also had significant Taiwanese identity, and remnants of Japanese colonization seen in daily life (as opposed to European colonization, influence has largely been confined to museums and sites). As June Teufel Dreyer notes in *The Evolution of a National Identity*, “...fifty years of Japanese colonial rule (1945) contributed to the development of distinct habits and of the Taiwanese people...” These habits have been in many elements of modern Taiwanese culture, from “*bian dang*” lunch boxes inspired by Japanese bento, to crossings resembling the famous Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo. The Beitou Hot Springs in Taipei is one example of how attitudes towards the natural environment have persisted in modern Taiwan. Although the name “Beitou” comes from the indigenous Ketagalan word “*Kipatauw*”, or “witch”, describing the area as an evil witch's steaming cauldron, Beitou has since become famous for Japanese-style hot spring resorts, including some with staff clothed in traditional Japanese dress. The hot spring resorts seen throughout



7 - Beitou Thermal Valley, Taipei

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Taiwan, in places like Beitou in Taipei and Jiaoxi in Yilan, can be attributed to the influence of Japanese onsen culture, which has led to the modern perception of these natural phenomena as places of relaxation and rest.



8 - Presidential Office Building, Taipei

The impact of Japanese occupation can also be seen in the Presidential Office Building in Taipei, which bears a striking resemblance to Tokyo Station. This building was the colonial seat of government during the Japanese occupation, meaning that the current Taiwanese government continues to rule from a building built by a foreign power. Though built by the Japanese, the Presidential Office Building has become a national symbol of Taiwanese democracy. Inside, the building is covered with slogans emphasizing “Power to the People”, and exhibits inside are dedicated to the ethnic groups that make up Taiwan, including all sixteen federally recognized indigenous groups, as well as Chinese ethnic groups such as the Hakka. Once again, the variety and diversity of influences that have resulted in this undeniably important building reflect the complexities of Taiwanese identity.



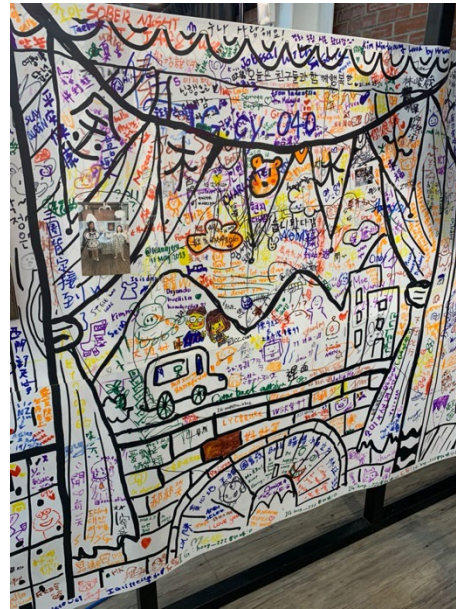
9 - Ximending, Taipei

Modern Taiwanese identity is perhaps best represented by Ximending in Taipei, especially for the younger generation, who frequent many of the shops in the district. The name “Ximending” is itself a reflection of the many different forces that have influenced this area in the past; as Joseph Allen notes in *Taipei: City of Displacements*, “The way in which one pronounces 西門町 is an ideological as well as a linguistic choice” (Allen 185). The character “町” is typically pronounced as “tīng” in Mandarin, however, because it is an uncommon character in Chinese, it is frequently pronounced as its main radical “dīng (丁)” instead. The usage of the character “町” originates from the Japanese name for the district, “Seimon-cho”. The

name Ximen, meaning “West Gate” in Chinese, also alludes to the old city gates of Taipei during Qing rule. However, despite the long history represented by its name, modern Ximen is filled with phone accessory and fast fashion shops, trendy pop songs, and advertisements of the latest trends. It also serves as the LGBT+ center of Taipei, represented by the prominent rainbow crosswalk in the photo above and emphasizing Taiwan’s status as the first Asian country to legalize gay

marriage. Overall, Ximending is uniquely Taiwanese in both its history and its modern conception as a tourism and shopping district.

Finally, I conclude my discussion of Taiwanese with this art installation from the Red House in Ximen, a Japanese market and later Chinese Opera theater that serves as a center for local arts. To me, this piece how Taiwan wants to present itself to the world, which is an important piece of identity as well. A lot of the messages clearly written by tourists from other Asian countries like Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but there are many in Chinese and English as well. Throughout many of the areas we visited, Taiwan was referred to as the “Heart of promoted as a place where people from all over the travel to and enjoy. This part of the installation also the cities and mountains characteristic of Taiwan and has the five elements of traditional Chinese culture written across the top. Overall, the chaotic nature of the piece describes how I feel about defining a Taiwanese identity. It’s messy and complicated and has influences from all over the world, and the overall meaning of the piece, like Taiwanese identity, is ultimately up to individual interpretation.



10 – Art Installation at the Red House, Taipei

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