

Introduction

I was born in Osaka, Japan. My mother is Caucasian American and my father is Japanese. Until I started the first grade my parents made it a rule that my mother would speak to me only in English, while my father would speak to me only in Japanese. It worked out well, and I was bilingual by the time I could talk.

After going to the first grade in a Japanese school, my English started to slip. It was then that my parents decided that in our home we will speak only English. My upbringing included occasional visits to the United States. The result was that I became bilingual, bicultural, and binational. When I started high school, I quit the Japanese school and began to homeschool in English because I wanted to go to a university in America, and Japanese schools, while good at teaching English, could not help me with English as much as could homeschooling.

My homeschool program required a foreign language, and at first I chose Spanish, but I could not understand the concepts without a teacher there with me, for the grammar was entirely new. I looked into different languages, and decided Mandarin Chinese was a good choice because that language shares grammatical elements of both Japanese and English. The Chinese characters were familiar; perhaps 30% of them are the same as Japanese kanji characters I learned as a child.

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So I came up with the idea of going to China to continue learning Mandarin. I had been studying Chinese for about a year at this

point. My mother suggested making contact with a religious community and mission where I might serve as a volunteer; doing so would improve my language skills, and and I could be helpful to other people in some way.

I talked to the sister at the church my family attends. The sister was a member of the Daughters of Charity. When I asked about the possibility of my going to Taiwan or China, she put me in touch with the superior of the Taiwanese community for the Daughters of Charity.

Going to mainland China was out of the question since there was not such a Christian community in China that felt safe for me to visit because of strict laws governing Christian groups. The idea of going to Taiwan became increasingly attractive as I found out more about the Daughters of Charity in Taiwan, their missionary work, and languages. The languages they spoke in that community were mainly English and Mandarin. Also, because the Japanese military had occupied Taiwan for half a century—until 1945—many older people in Taiwan spoke Japanese. So a full year before going to Taiwan, I had the trip planned. My Taiwanese adventures began in January, 2010.

As I write this it has been almost a year since my experience in Taiwan, and my knowledge of Mandarin Chinese is fading a bit. After spending 6 months in the United States for university study—my first time in the U.S. for such a long period—English now dominates my linguistic life, and studying Mandarin has been replaced with learning Italian at the University of Dallas.

Though my primary goal in going to Taiwan was to get comfortable with Chinese, what I gained from going was more than any language could offer. What happened to me in Taiwan now feels something like what happens to a baby when it starts to walk. The process does not come from force of conscious will or systematic training. For a baby, being able to walk gives an entirely new perspective on the world since the height, sight, and most of all the ability to reach things once unreachable opens up possibilities unimaginable before. But of course I cannot remember how it felt to walk for the first time, and now it is impossible to articulate completely the emotional impact of my experience in Taiwan.

When people asked me why I was going to Taiwan, I said that I

was going to solidify my Chinese while helping others in some small way. But another motive for going, one I didn't see clearly myself, was a desire to force myself out of my comfort zone, to test myself on how strong I really was, and to learn how being bicultural might affect my perceptions of cultures I am unfamiliar with. I gave little thought about hardships that I might experience in Taiwan, nor did I have high expectations. In fact, I had no expectations at all, which was useful, for I was not disappointed with anything. Now, in retrospect, one goal was to gain wider experience with living, which is something I did, and this journal is a testimony to that.

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