

Learning firsthand about Taiwan

history, urban space and society

Rachel Leng (凌惠穎) is a graduate of Harvard and Duke Universities and a former Miss Singapore titleholder who currently works in Seoul. Rachel was interviewed by **Hans Chen** about her recent visit to Taiwan

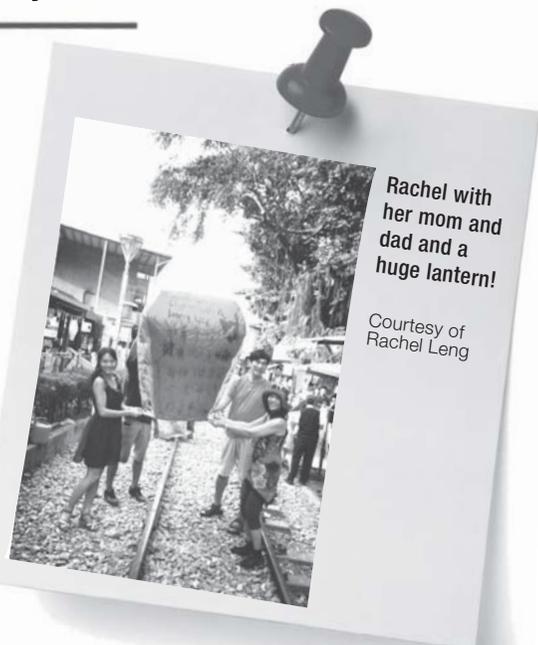


What are the sights that most impressed you on your trip to Taiwan?

I loved the sights in Taipei as a city, but the surrounding mountains and natural wonders left me in awe as well. In Taipei itself, the museums and night markets left the strongest impression on me. I had heard a lot about the National Palace Museum and had been really excited about visiting the landmark for the first time, and it certainly did not disappoint with the massive collection of historical artifacts. I particularly enjoyed the exhibits with jewelry and calligraphy/paintings.

During my trip, I also spent a lot of time at one of the local hot spring resorts. I love hot springs, and have been to a number of ryokans for onsens in Japan, and was curious to see how the resorts in Taiwan would compare. I left very impressed: the quality of water and views were all very nice, the seafood was great, and there really is nothing to complain about for the price. I also had a great time exploring famous sightseeing spots such as the scenic Nanya Rock Formation (南雅風化石), walking through the historic gold and copper mine tunnels in Jinguashi (金瓜石) that were used by the Japanese as a prisoner of war camp during World War II, visiting the Houtong Cat Village (猴硐貓村) and writing wishes on a colorful lantern and releasing it into the sky at Shifen. That Taiwanese food streets and night markets are some of the best goes without saying, and I thoroughly enjoyed walking around Shilin (士林), Ningxia (寧夏) and Tonghua Night Markets (通化街夜市). It was also a great experience to dine at Taipei 101's busy Din Tai Fung (鼎泰豐).

Also, everybody I met in Taiwan was so kind. There were always people around to help me when I got lost, or to introduce to me a little more about Taiwanese culture and history where relevant when I was traveling alone. Also, as a girl, I was very enthralled by the



wide selection of Asian beauty products available for women in Taiwan.

Did what you expected before your trip match your experience of Taiwan? In what ways did it exceed expectations? In what ways did it fall short?

As I grew up in Shanghai, I always had a lot of Taiwanese friends and heard a lot about Taiwan from them. There were also certain Taiwanese cafes which my family frequented often. For my master's program at Harvard, I worked with Professor David Derwei Wang, a renowned Taiwanese scholar, and spent a significant amount of time reading about Taiwan and studying about its history, urban space and society.

Taiwan, to me, was a place that had inspired so many stories and so many life memories through all the books and movies I was familiar with. Actually being in Taipei itself thus gave me a sense of déjà vu in a way, as I felt I had already been in the city before physically visiting it. It was a wonderful place,

full of excitement and activity, and yet enough reprieves of nature and quiet for rejuvenation. I would say everything in Taiwan exceeded my expectations in almost every way. The city got me excited at every corner with so many things to do and so many places I wanted to visit and see with its delicious food and superb downtown vibes, and the natural surroundings just a short drive out from the city.

What foods did you find the most delicious?

Taiwanese breakfast is amazing: I had youtiao and doujiang almost every day. As I visited during the summer, bubble tea and mango ice (刨冰山) were also a daily necessity. Other foods I loved were the pork braised rice, panfried buns, beef noodle, and Taiwanese sausages. Of course, I couldn't leave Taiwan without having had stinky tofu at least a couple of times.

In terms of culture, how did Taiwan benefit your research? Are there exclusive resources available for your field here?

I visited Taiwan with the help of a research travel grant from the Harvard Fairbank Center. I was interested in issues of migration and diaspora and how people in Taiwan related to the ethnic or national identity of "Chineseness" and to Chinese heritage. In particular, I focused on the Sinophone Malaysian/Taiwanese group (the "Mahua" community).

Many Malaysian Chinese individuals and families move to Taiwan as a means to reconnect to their roots and to get a better understanding of "traditional" Chinese culture and society, and much of their experience is one of liminality and wandering where they feel they are often caught in between different cultural roots.

In Taipei, I had the opportunity to meet with publishers who do a lot of work with Mahua authors, including the chief editor of Lingking, one of the largest presses in Taiwan. I had the unique opportunity to purchase books that were not available outside of Taiwan from the Eslite bookstore, as well as meet Taiwanese



authors, including Zhu Tianwen and Huang Jinshu, pertinent to my research work. Meeting with professors who work on the subject of national or ethnic identity politics in Taiwan was also transformative in helping me shape the direction of my dissertation work.

Additionally, I really enjoyed my time spent doing readings and research at National Taiwan University — the library had an impressive collection of materials on the subjects I was looking for. I would definitely say that my time in Taiwan provided me with key insights to channel into my research and writing. These personal experiences were very important to help me gain a better understanding of how people live and think on the ground. My final dissertation work ended up receiving an Honorable Mention for the 2015 Joseph Fletcher Memorial Prize, a prestigious award from Harvard University for scholarly excellence.

When you come to Taiwan again, what is the next destination you want to visit?

There are too many places I still want to go to! I only spent about a month in Taiwan, so definitely did not get to visit as many places as I would've liked. I would definitely want to spend more time exploring Taipei — I feel like there is just so much to the city that you need to spend at least several years there before you really start getting to know it better. I'm also still very drawn to the abundance of nature with all the mountains and forests in Taiwan. When I have the chance to go back, I want to travel to more places such as Hualien for the national park and ocean, the Penghu islands (澎湖列島), climb Yangming Mountain, and the Kenting National Park (墾丁公園). I also want to go to the Alishan (阿里山) area one day with my family — it is one of the places my parents really wanted to go and I hope to be able to take them back there sometime. ■



Independent presidential candidate Shih Ming-teh (施明德) recently called on the government to increase the minimum wage in order to protect the rights and interests of all people in Taiwan. Speaking in a press event earlier this week, he argued that Taiwan is stuck in an argument over unification or independence that negatively affects people's ability to choose a government that supports their own personal interests. Shih urged that current minimum wage levels be increased to NT\$27,199 a month, up from NT\$20,008 currently.

If you have been following this issue, why don't you share some thoughts to be published in next week's PrimeTalk? Send submissions to community@chinapost.com.tw and include your real name, nationality, contact number, some photos and a profile. Specify "Eye on Taiwan" in the subject line and ensure your submission is between 300 and 500 words. Writers whose pieces are selected for publication will receive one month's free subscription to The China Post. ■

Dimitri Bruyas, PrimeTime Editor