

Memories and Reflections from My Trip to LA

Tsao, Aili, Jinshan Elementary School

As I was waiting in front of the station gate where I was planned to be picked up for the airport, I got my husband's call. He was calling to see if I was on the bus already. I had known that I had been under huge pressure; however, when I heard his voice through the line, my tears just broke out from my eyes and I found that how alone and how 不捨 I was to leave both my husband and my little baby in Taiwan. I was surprised by myself, because I didn't expect that kind of reaction happening on me. I mean, it's only 17 days, and he's an adult; he can deal with it well. Plus, men need practice. Well, at least that was what I had been telling myself, but....Anyway, I missed them already, and I even wondered if this was a good idea to come this long way and suffer the discomfort of the seat and the dryness of the long journey and look how America looks like. I hoped it would be worth it.

The plane took off from Taoyuan International Airport at around 9 and a half tonight, 30th of October, and after more than 12 hours of flying, the same plane we were on landed at LA International Airport at 6:40 pm on the same day. It felt like I traveled back to the past in a time machine!

At the arrival gate, first I was surprised to see so many yellow and brown faces instead of white! No wonder they say that America is a melting pot of races; you can see most of the races on the planet right here at the gate of America.

Next day, we took a brief trip in the downtown of LA. The first stop was Walt Disney Music Hall. One of the buildings was pretty special, with its irregular designs shining with silver lights. Shame though we didn't have the chance to get in and maybe even watch an opera, because it was too early. We also found a woman in Halloween costume, and we suddenly remembered that the day was Halloween. I found that a lot of people, especially kids, were wearing Halloween costumes on the street, too.

At a glance out of the bus window, 3 helicopters resting on the top of the building popped into my eyes. Some people said they were merely toys, and they really did look like toys, but they were real. It was a police department building. And then there was this building with tiny narrow windows. It was a prison. We wondered on why the windows of a prison should be so small. Are they afraid that the prisoners would look out the windows and see how beautiful the world is and try to escape?

The next stop was China town, which we just drove by, and Mexican town and then Little Tokyo. Mexican town was a little spooky, not because it was Halloween, but because the whole atmosphere was kind of old and they were selling lots of things which reminded me of old Taiwanese stuffs, like those ancient toys and hoods that

looked just like those of Taiwanese aboriginal clothing. Soon as we drove past the corner, it was interesting to see a wholly different region, Little Tokyo. Compared to the dirty and messy streets of the Mexican town, the streets here were clean and tidy. The shops were full of products from Japan, like Hello Kitty and Japanese traditional stuffs. Everything was tidy and shiny. It's definitely got the 'feel' of Japan.

At night we came to the place where we were going to stay for the rest of the days. It was a dormitory in a temple called Shi-lai Temple, a place founded by Master Shing-yun many years ago, with a lot of hardship and efforts, since at older times, western people were unfamiliar with eastern cultures and religions. I thought that those people were really awesome because it's a hard thing to carry through your beliefs when you are confronted with obstacles and objections.

At 6 o'clock sharp, we went to the restaurant in the temple, where we had most of our suppers during the stay. The meal was vegetarian of course, but it was not bad, although not good as the food in Dharma Drum Mountain, located in Jinshan, where we sometimes go for a picnic on sunny days. The interesting coincidence was that as I mentioned Dharma Drum Mountain, the principal Mr. Hu said to me that it was the exact place he converted to Buddhism. And for the rest of the supper time, he shared his ideas about Buddhism with me and Gwen, the teacher from Chien-hua Elementary School. I would say it was a quality time of the day.

After supper, Rosie and Ray, a lovely couple, picked us up at the temple to their house, where they decorated wonderfully with Halloween decorations, like coffins, skulls, spiders webs, and so on. Their daughters and sons-in-laws and grandchildren were there too, and we had a great time. Their house was virtually a museum. Ray was a crazy fan of antiques, from TVs, cars, telephones, and so on. And Rosie was a fan of Coca-cola. So their house was full of those old stuffs, and they even got a phone booth in their house! Matthew, the older grandson, was a good boy who was a nice helper of his grandfather, and he showed us everything including the cars and the TVs. Some kids came trick-or-treating, and they were obviously scared by those paparazzi with cameras in hands and lights flashing here and there. The Halloween cakes they served us were a little bit too sweet but they were really special. And we had sodas, juice, and punches, and talked and laughed happily, with some of the teachers pretending they were eating spiders. Time to say goodbye approached, and we would have liked to stay for more time, but we were all very tired, although I was not sure whether it was because we didn't have enough sleep last night, or because we went city-tour and walked too much and got too thrilled and over excited.

The next morning, Rosie came to pick us up to the office of Hacienda La Puente Unified School District. It was something like Education Bureau in Taiwan. The superintendent Dr. Barbara Nakaoka welcomed us. One of the points that she

brought up was that they were very careful about choosing teachers, and the word ‘choose’ draw my attention immediately. How fortunate the kids are because they have those officers and teachers and parents who are willing to put so much effort to make sure that they are getting the best education by choosing the best teachers they can find. What’s the situation in Taiwan? The school just can’t do anything with those teachers who are apparently not suitable for teaching. How sad it is because it is the kids who are suffering, not us. And when they grow up with this kind of education, are they going to be able to lead us into the future? Will they be prepared for the possible competitions in the future?

After the reception ceremony, we went to visit the preschool in the district called Amar Children’s Center. Preschools are a place where they prepare kids for kindergartens, and something special about this preschool is that it is public, unlike all the other preschools in the district which are very expensive. Instead, the expenses are quite low or even none, depending on the total income of the family. All of the students are from low-income families, especially immigrants. Their main goal is to make sure that those low-income parents can get a job or go to school to learn more English or learn some more skills to improve their financial problems, while they’re taking care of their children. And we could see that the children were really being taken care of very nicely. In addition, it’s not only child care that they are doing, but also educational activities with clear and substantial standardized teaching plans. We saw that teachers were really teaching based on their lesson plans, and the children looked happy in the well-organized classrooms and playgrounds. There were at least 2 teachers in a classroom, taking care of no more than 20 kids, so that every single kid could get enough care and education, and to ensure that every single goal is being accomplished by every single kid. The spirit is coherent with the one, No Child Left Behind. Actually every school here set their aims on that same purpose, like the superintendent mentioned in the morning, that they were making every effort to ensure that every kid is going to college or university.

The next morning, we were lucky enough to observe the election of governors and senators of California at Shi-lai Temple. We were able to watch and observe the whole process of voting. One of the supervisors there led us into the room and he even showed us how it worked. The following are the differences of voting system between Taiwan and the US: 1. They can vote by mailing their votes; 2. They don’t use stamps and ink like we do; they use some special pens to punch their candidates’ names on special machines to vote, which is very explicit and easy to use; 3. The votes are read by computers, not by human beings; 4. They don’t examine your ID’s, and only signatures count. But, if someone is found guilty of making false signatures, he or she is going to be heavily punished; 5. You don’t have to go voting

on the day for voting only, since the day is not off and people have to go to work as usual. If you can't make time to vote on that day and you still want to vote, you can go voting previously, maybe 1 or 2 weeks beforehand, at certain assigned places. And in the room where voting was taking place, everyone looked so easy and relaxed. While as we know in Taiwan, the staffs and the police and the public are all so nervous and cautious about anything, doubting that everyone is cheating. We can't talk, and we can't laugh, and everybody has to look like you are very serious and solemn. Like the man who led us into the room said, government of Taiwan is really falling behind and outdated.

The next day we were invited to meet one of the supervisors of LA County, Don Knabe. When we got out from the building of LA County, we saw that a huge national flag of America was hung up in the air by two enormous ladders of fire engines. And hundreds of cops, LAPDs that is, police cars, motorbikes and fire engines were parked in the middle of the roads nearby. We were so curious about what was happening, and we were told that there was a funeral of a US military officer, also an LAPD, who got killed in a bomb attack in Afghanistan. I was totally shocked, because the Americans took the death of a police officer, or a soldier, so seriously. I felt like that they were treating him like he were a member of their family, and it showed their respect to those who serve as public servants. This kind of things might happen in Taiwan only when the president dies, I guess. Anyway, we were so excited to see so many LAPDs in person, instead of in a movie. Everybody got crazy, and took lots of pictures with them. They were very polite, and I think that they had been bored too at that time, and were happy to have people who were so interested in them. They even showed us their weapons and little kits and fire engine tools too! Cool, huh?

After supper that day, we came back to the dorm and we found that almost everybody was laughing and talking to each other in a louder voice, which means that we were getting closer. At about 8 o'clock, we even gathered together and did exercise. One of the teachers brought a copy of aerobics video with her, and several of us lined up in the living room and moved our limbs and bodies, trying to get rid of the fat accumulated during the past days. One of the teachers was even taking pictures of us exercising, thinking that it might become a wonderful memory for us to remember. Indeed, there are things that you always remember when you travel, and they are not the famous sites or museums listed on your schedules, but those trivial incidents or moments that you hadn't expected. What we had seen during the day and this exercise experience were just like this kind of memories that I will always remember.

Something which really impressed me happened the next day. Right after I

finished my supper and was ready to leave the restaurant, I saw 2 kids with T-shirts with ‘Grazide’ written on them. What a coincidence, since that was the school I was going to visit the next week. So I walked over and tried to talk to them. I asked one of the boys what grade he was in, and he answered that he was in 4th; then I asked the younger (at that time I wasn’t sure if he was elder or not; I thought that maybe they were of the same age) one what grade he was in, and he said that he was in 2nd grade. I was surprised and I let my surprise show by saying that “Wow, but you look so tall...” And then, before I observed anything wrong, the adults around us (3 females) were comforting the elder boy, “You’re good.” “You’re perfect.” “You’re the best.” It was then that I realized how careless I was. I was implying that the elder boy looked shorter by saying that his younger brother (maybe) looked taller. Although I said to the elder boy later that I was terribly sorry that I hurt his feeling, I knew it was too late. I felt so embarrassed, and that was when I first realized the difference of notions and attitudes of adults toward children between Taiwan and the US. While our attitudes toward children are casual or even careless, Americans respect children. I made up my mind at the moment that I would always put this respect as priority when I face anyone, especially children.

The next two days were weekends, so we finally had the time to visit Disneyland and the Universal Studios. At Disneyland, I was still very surprised to see families with little babies with them. Some of the babies were really very little, maybe only one or two months old. I recalled that once in a TV program, I saw a dad and a mom were taking their baby to the beach, and they even put the baby in the shallow part of water, and the baby was maybe only a month old! In Taiwan, I heard that some moms are prohibited to take their babies out until they grow older, like 6 months. What a contrast. It was so sweet of the parents to be willing to take their little children out for some fun, despite all the troubles, like carrying diapers, milk bottles, toys, quilts, and so on. The troubles had always hindered me from the thought of taking them out, but then I started to wonder why. I mean, there were no reasons for me to stop having fun just because I had a new-born baby. However, are public places in Taiwan infants-friendly as it is here in the US? Would it be convenient for parents to take their babies out to places like a museum or an amusement park? Maybe there lies the biggest problem. There at Disneyland, they even had parking lots for strollers! It was a spectacular sight with so many strollers ‘parked’ at a place. It again reminded me of how people in the US are showing respect to other people, especially children. Actually, not only children get to have those privileges, but also those people who are handicapped or not capable of walking due to some injuries. They can borrow wheelchairs and I saw some of the wheelchairs were electronic, like scooters. And in the park, even in the theater rooms or the fun riders, let alone the

restrooms and the trains, the parking lots for the wheelchairs were everywhere to be seen too. So that means, you don't have to stay at home all the time and let all those fun things be just in your dreams; you can still go out and have fun like normal people do, even if you don't have legs. This thoughtfulness to everyone is the symbol of respect and justice, and here it was not only a slogan, but real practice.

The day before we left LA for Taiwan, we had dinner with some of the Chinese people who live there, and the principal of Grazide, the school I visited, was there too, to say goodbye to me and Cheyenne, my partner during the school visit. That night I experienced this convention which was really extraordinary to us. She insisted on unpacking the gifts we gave her in front of us, so she brought the gifts to the restaurant so that we could see her unpack them! It has been only a fact I had learned from TV that Americans open gifts right away and show their gratitude politely. We Chinese people would never do things like that, and we would even refer this kind of act as redundant or unnecessary. Nevertheless, it was so kind and generous of her to have done that, and I also felt very grateful for all the arrangements she made for us at Grazide and also the photo frames she prepared for me and Cheyenne as gifts, with 'Grazide Elementary' carved on them.

The day for us to go home finally came, and we were not so sure whether we were feeling glad for that, or feeling sorry that the time to say goodbye to the journey and to dear fellow teachers had come. One part of me was glad because I could finally see my daughter again. I had been worrying if she had been well or not, and if she had forgot about her mom. But at the same time, although I learned a lot from the trip a lot, and thought that LA was indeed a good place to live, especially for children and senior people, I found that I was rather sad to say goodbye to my fellows and partners, instead of LA. I learned a lot from them, and I truly enjoyed every moment we shared here. I have to say that it was you, including Principal Hu and Yvonne, who had made the trip so wonderful and memorable. Thank you all.