



Serena

from Mississauga-West
to
Taiwan

“Writing this BeaverTale would have almost been easier in Chinese now.”

I last left you just after Chinese New Year. Surprisingly, the four months since then felt longer than the beginning of my exchange – or perhaps its just each day, piling up on top of each other. It has started to feel like normal life, and it’s harder to tell how much time has passed. Almost every day, I find myself thinking, has it really been ten months? It feels like a lifetime since I left Canada, but only a moment since I arrived in Taiwan.

Just after my last Beaver tale was the first time I started hearing about COVID-19, or as it was called at that time, “武漢肺炎” (Wuhan Pneumonia). Though it was not unusual to see people wearing masks before, after the onset of COVID it was rare to see someone without one. At the time, few government-enforced restrictions were in place but normally crowded places, such as temples and tourist destinations, suddenly became empty. My host mom was reasonably concerned about my going out with my friends, so I spent a lot of time with my siblings, playing sports in the park, board games, or working on a 1000-piece Canadian puzzle. The start of school after winter holidays was delayed by two weeks, which would be added on to the end of the school year in July.

As COVID cases in Taiwan became less and less, the number of cases around the rest of the world grew rapidly. I remember watching the numbers grow everyday with my exchange friends, worrying about our families and friends, so far away from home. Slowly, more and more events were cancelled, and the seriousness of the situation began to set in. Rotary assured us all exchange students were welcome to stay but faced with the possibility of being unable to leave Taiwan, I debated returning home and talked to my family about it often.

However, it quickly became apparent that staying in Taiwan

was the safer choice. School started again, with added precautions of daily temperature checks, masks, and social distancing rules preventing students from eating lunch together. I started taking mechanics class, drink mixing, jewelry making, aromatherapy, and even math – which was actually the easiest of all my classes! (It’s easy to be a good student when half your classmates sleep through every class.)



Slowly, COVID-19 became the new normal. I am very lucky that, in Taiwan, we never had to isolate, and social distancing was kept to a minimum, but as a result it was easy to feel very removed from the rest of the world. It felt like living in a bubble; every day there was new news, schools and events being cancelled around the world, but I woke up at 6 and took the bus to school as usual. Many people, including strangers, would often ask me if my family in Canada was okay, and remind me to tell them to wear masks – many Taiwanese believe the number of cases rose so rapidly in Western countries because less people wore masks.



Even with COVID-19, though, I am lucky enough to still be able to travel and experience more of Taiwan. In February, I told my second host family about the Canadian holiday “Family Day”, and to celebrate they planned a weekend



trip to the Yilan, on the eastern side of Taiwan!! We climbed Taiping Mountain and arrived at the top to a shocking 4-degree temperature with lots of fog and rain. I never thought I could ever feel that cold in Taiwan!! We still managed to



enjoy the beauty of the mountain, though, and even saw a family of monkeys in the parking lot.

That night we went to a night market, which was much bigger than the night markets we have in Miaoli. We visited temples and saw the sea (and I waved to Stephanie in Japan). I never imagined my Family Day in Taiwan would be such an unforgettable experience, and I am forever grateful for my second host family, who took me in and treated me like their own daughter, and worked so hard to help me have an incredible experience in Taiwan.

When I switched to my third host family in March, I struggled to overcome the sadness of leaving my second family. I reached out to a friend who I knew was very close with her first host family, and her advice changed my whole perspective; she said, “It is easy to miss your last host family, but you know, your new family is probably excited about hosting you too. And there’s all those new experiences waiting for you with them.”



Switching families is hard, but after moving to my third family I started to understand why it is such a crucial part of exchange. I focused on connecting with my new family and realized how lucky I am to have three families all so eager to host me.

In my third family, my host parents, younger sister, and younger brother, my host grandparents, my aunt and uncle, and their 8-year-old son all live together. It is not uncommon in Taiwan for households to be so big, but for me it is definitely a unique experience!! It is also my first-time having siblings so much younger than me. There is

never a day that my siblings don’t make me laugh and learning how to be an older sister has given me a new perspective – and made me appreciate my own older sister much more.



Thanks to my third family I also had the opportunity to learn to play the Guzheng, and the Ocarina. My sister gives me Ocarina lessons every week (sometimes assigning me as many as 15 songs to learn at a time – she is a strict teacher!). Being able to perform for Rotarians is a great added benefit.



The Guzheng is an amazing instrument and I look forward to continuing to learn it in Canada as well. I'm glad to be able to find new musical challenges to keep me busy, and lucky to have the chance to learn new instruments I can enjoy for the rest of my life.

My third family owns a business making meatballs, which they run from the first floor of the house. Behind the house, they just started making a garden, which I have enjoyed helping cultivate. We eat dinner together every day at 6pm, and afterwards spend time together, eating snacks, drinking tea, and talking. My grandfather drives us kids to school in the morning, and I walk home after school, which takes about an hour. Since I no longer rely on a bus to get to school, I have more time to spend with my friends from school and have started going out to eat breakfast with them before class. My homeroom classmates have extra classes from 4:30 to 7:30pm every day, and on the occasional Saturday, to prepare for the end of the year exams, so I'm happy to be able to spend time with them when I can.



Recently I reached a new level of friendship with my classmates, and now I am included in the 八卦/bagua (gossip) too! 八卦/bagua is an essential part of Taiwanese culture, and my school even has a 八卦/bagua Facebook page, and during our weekly class meeting, our teacher shares all the latest 八/bagua. Though I can't contribute much to the gossip at school, it is nice to be included and can be very funny to listen to, and sometimes people who assume I don't understand Chinese accidentally let me know of very interesting 八卦/bagua. All part of the life of a typical Taiwanese.



At school, I also took part in a fire safety demonstration and accidentally blew smoke into my classmates faces! The instructor asked for volunteers and my hand shot up, so they set a barrel on fire and I had to put it out – just as the wind changed, and all the smoke blew right over my classmates. We also had an English singing competition, in which I had a solo!!

In April my counsellor planned a trip to climb one of Taiwan's tallest (and easiest) mountains (over 3000 metres!!), with all of my three host families. The car did all the hard work, though we stopped a few times on the way up to buy fruit and take pictures next to the highest elevated 7-Eleven in Taiwan. Once we started hiking, it took less than ten minutes before I was out of breath and my face turned really red because of the elevation.





We climbed three peaks that day, and at the top of the first one, we looked out over the peak and saw nothing but... clouds. When we returned the rest area, the view was beautiful; the clouds had parted, and a valley could be seen far below. We hurried to climb the second peak, and at the top, looked out and saw.... nothing but clouds!! Disappointed, but not ready to give up yet, we climbed the third, final peak. It was there that we finally had some luck: though still cloudy, the valley was visible, and the pictures we took were beautiful.

We stayed in a university campus that night and enjoyed three tours by the faculty; one to see the wild frogs at night, one for bird watching in the morning, and one of the greenhouses around the campus. Then, we headed to Sun Moon Lake, the biggest lake in Taiwan. We enjoyed a day biking around the lake and looking at indigenous art in the shops nearby.

Soon after that trip, many of the Outbound students from Taiwan started returning home due to COVID-19. By May, every student had returned and was out of quarantine, including my first host brother who returned from Germany. Though unfortunate that they had to return early, I am glad I had the opportunity to make more friends and have experienced more of Taiwanese "teenage" culture with them, including learning new Taiwanese slang, that I use to impress my friends at school. One aspect of Taiwanese culture that I still am not used to is many teenagers love to play car racing phone games, which I am really bad at, with their friends. Thankfully, my host brother was able to teach me the basics and now I too can join in on the fun, even if I still don't really understand how to play.



Since Rotary meetings were put on hold for two months due to COVID-19, I started taking tea ceremony lessons from my club President, who often invites other Rotarians to his tea shop to chat, as a way to stay in touch with my club. The tea ceremony requires grace and precision, two things that do not come naturally to me. Luckily, my teacher has been very patient with me, even when I spill expensive tea on the expensive tablecloths. After almost two months of learning, I no longer spill tea (as often) and can provide an amicable experience for my tea ceremony guests!



These past months have given me a much deeper understanding of Taiwanese culture, and my third host dad is very patient with me, explaining the meaning behind every cultural nuance. I have finally begun to understand how I can be myself and fit into the culture, and now I am more comfortable here than I thought would be possible. When I look back on who I was before I came to Taiwan, I can't believe how much I've grown, how much more confident and responsible I have become. I can't believe in less than 8 weeks this experience will come to an end, and the idea of returning to Canada feels almost like a reverse exchange; how much have I forgotten, how much I will have to relearn about my own country? Writing this Beavertale would have almost been easier in Chinese now, and when I speak to people who don't speak Chinese, I struggle to remember English words. Even with the other exchange students, we always speak Chinglish.

May 2020

My adventures are not over yet, though, as I still have a 5-day trip around Taiwan right around the corner, and then a Chinese speaking competition with all the other inbounds. I just finished my final Chinese exam, and graduation from our Chinese class. Going to university for Chinese class every Thursday and Friday is an experience I didn't realize how much I'm going to miss. Getting used to life in Taiwan was hard but leaving it all behind is going to be so, so much harder.



Though this year has definitely been the hardest one of my life, it has also been the most rewarding. I went from knowing only "Nihao" to being able to speak and think in Chinese every day, from knowing nothing of the culture to being able to live and understand it every day, and from knowing no one in Taiwan to having a family that I love here, friends that I enjoy every day with here, and people that I know I can never forget. I am so, so grateful for everyone in Taiwan who has supported and cared for me, from my three host families, my counsellor, the Rotarians in my host club, and District 3501 RYE. Thank you for making my experience in Taiwan one of love, friendship, and growth, and for encouraging and supporting me through every day.

Thank you to my sponsor club, the Rotary Club of Mississauga West, and District 7080 RYE, for all of their hard work towards the program that allowed me to be here. Without you, without Rotary Youth Exchange, I don't know where I'd be. This experience has forever changed my life for the better and I will always be grateful to you for making that happen. Thank you to my family in Canada, for supporting me and letting me leave for a year and always being there for me.

There will never be enough words to express my gratitude for everyone who helped me have this incredible experience. As it all comes to an end, and I'm faced with leaving the life I'm built here behind, I try to remember the words of Winnie the Pooh: "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard." And I know I am very lucky, because saying goodbye to Taiwan will be the hardest thing I have ever done.

For one last time,

再見(Zàijiàn)

Sincerely,

Serena

葉 Yè

栗 Lì

娜 Nà

P.S. If you want to hear more about my Exchange, check out my blog at <https://srye.home.blog/>

On this Youtube I also have more videos from exchange. . <https://youtu.be/Byk-CpgYICg>