



# Serena

from Mississauga-West  
to  
Taiwan

*“Stupid in three languages is better than smart in one!”*

My journey started on August 17<sup>th</sup>, the day I would leave a life in Canada behind to start a new one in Taiwan. Leaving my family at the airport was the hardest thing I have ever done. “I’ll be back in a year,” I had to keep reassuring myself. “It’s only a year.” Little did I know that the Serena who left Canada would not be the same one coming back – and already, my time in Taiwan has changed me more than I could’ve ever imagined.

As I saw my last glimpses of Mississauga, my home for 17 years, from the airplane, I noticed heat lightning flashing in the distance. Watching the lightning from this viewpoint distracted me from the steadily increasing distance between me and my family. The lightning was a metaphor for the next time I’d be in Canada: with a new perspective on the old familiar.

Now, though, I can barely believe I’ve already spent 12 weeks in Taiwan!! Fall set in a few weeks ago, which in Taiwan means instead of boiling hot its only as hot as a rice cooker. Everyone always asks me why I’m not wearing a coat. The onset of winter brings high winds that blow everything everywhere almost every day. Last week, I experienced another first: the first time I felt chilly in Taiwan! Amazed that this was even possible, I checked the temperature. 22 degrees (I’m sure everyone in Canada is falling out of their seats at that. How’s the snow over there?).

Taiwanese people are the nicest you will ever meet. When I climbed a mountain with my host family, a man at a rest area was handing out Chinese medicine tea. He carried 25 kg (25kg!!) of tea on his back, halfway up a mountain, just to give to strangers as they went by.



25 kilograms of tea!!

In my first month at school, my classmates gave me food everyday – when I tried to repay their kindness, they would only give me more. Once I gave some classmates two small candies, and they returned with a large bag full of the exact same candies to give to me.

And the first time I went to play piano at a nearby music school, and one of the teachers had Tim Hortons (!!!!!) hot chocolate for me, that she saved from her recent trip to Canada. After she saw how happy the hot chocolate made me, she gave me 5 more packages to take home!

I am treated like a superstar in Taiwan. Every time I think I've finally gotten used to my celebrity status, something new happens and shocks me all over again. Just today, I switched into a different cooking class, and though presumably my new classmates have seen me wandering around our small school for two months now, it felt just like the first week of school again. I was surrounded by shy giggles and not-so subtle stares and then more giggles when I smiled in response to the stares. Although Taiwanese students are definitely shy around foreigners, it doesn't take much for them to open up - soon they all crowded around me and started asking to take pictures together. One girl actually asked me to sign my name on her arm!!!

Miaoli County (苗栗, Miáoli) is small enough that lots of people know us exchange students, sometimes even by name, even if I've never seen them before in my life. The other day, I missed my bus stop and took a taxi home. The taxi driver asked where I was from, and when I told him I'm in high school, he said, "Ah! I see you with your friends from Datong and Zhunan Highschool in the train station all the time. You go to Chinese classes at the University!" Which, we do, but how does he know?!

Another day, a stranger stopped me and asked if I enjoyed the night market. After I asked her when I went to the night market, she said she had seen me there with my friends. When I showed a picture of the exchange students to a Taiwanese friend at school, she recognized and named 3 of them just because her friends from other schools talk about them.

And that's just in Miaoli – in Tóufèn (頭份), the smaller town I live in within Miaoli, it feels like everyone knows me. Every day, the workers at the Beef-Noodle restaurant, the middle-schoolers just let out from class, and the 7-Eleven cashiers say hello to me as I walk home from school. In the morning, the seniors doing Tai Chi in the park all give me smiles.

The locals here sure like to keep tabs on us foreigners, and although off-putting at times, the friendly strangers make Taiwan feel like even more like home.

道樂色 (dào lè sè): One of the first words I learned upon arriving in Taiwan. My host mom informed me that one of my chores would be to take out the trash; hence, dào lè sè. However, even taking out the trash became an exciting experience. In Taiwan, the trash truck comes around three times a week, warning you of its arrival by playing Beethoven's 'Für Elise', and you have to throw your trash in as it goes by. Even after two and a half months, rushing out the door to catch the trash truck hasn't gotten old.

Mandarin! Zhōngwén! 中文! My first two months of Mandarin surprised even me, as I learned quickly, even though I studied very little in Canada. Before leaving Canada, I was very nervous that I didn't know enough Mandarin; however, once I got here, I realized there was no need to worry. Not many people speak English, but we found ways to communicate without words, and even if you just say “謝(Xièxiè)!” someone will be quick to tell you, with full conviction, that your Chinese is 很棒 (Hěn bang), great!

Though the tones and characters may seem daunting at first, Mandarin is actually a very logical language. The absence of verb conjugations is also a great relief!! On top of that, Chinese characters are made up of radicals that work together to form a meaning. A radical is a single component of a character; for example, the character 林 (lín), meaning forest, is made up of two 木 (mù), meaning wood, radicals. A 森林 (sēnlín) is a really big forest, hence the 5 wood (木/mù) radicals. Simple, right?

However, the hard work is only just beginning; every day I discover just how much there still is to learn, and my host mom keeps reminding me the importance of tones, as I often forget to use them. Some days I feel proud of how far I've come, and other days I get discouraged by how far I still have to go, but every day I learn a little bit more of the beautiful Chinese language.

Though Pīnyīn is easier to learn for English speakers, Zhūyīn is superior for learning correct Mandarin pronunciation and is used more commonly across Taiwan. Though daunting at first, our superb Chinese teacher at university taught us Zhūyīn quickly, and now Pīnyīn is all but obsolete in my day-to-day life. Zhūyīn also lends an inside joke to us exchange students, in which we try to write English words using the Zhūyīn alphabet (so “Happy Birthday” becomes “ㄏㄞㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝㄩㄝ”, which is just Zhūyīn nonsense to any Taiwanese person).

However, the more Mandarin I learn, the more English I forget. Just the other day I forgot how to say “millimetre” and had to Google “the word for the thing smaller than a centimetre”. This phenomenon is even more apparent in exchange students from non-English speaking countries: “My friends tell me I am stupid in Polish now,” another exchange student said miserably at Chinese class, “but I am stupid in English too, and even more stupid in Mandarin.” But using exchange student math, stupid in three languages is better than smart in one!

There are around 400 different syllables in Mandarin, without distinguishing tones, compared to 15,000 in English. This makes Mandarin rich soil for puns to grow on; with so few syllables, many must be repeated often and can have multiple meanings. Many advertisements make use of puns, and I celebrate a small victory every time I recognize one. I've managed to make one pun myself, when we were making dumplings (called shuǐjiǎo) in class, and my classmate said she was tired, so I said I could make her sleep (shuǐjiǎo)/I could make her dumplings (shuǐjiǎo). Hopefully as my Mandarin improves, my puniness will as well!!

In school, I take Western Cooking, Chinese Cooking, Baking, Hairstyling, Phys Ed, and English. Since I go to a vocational school, the small taste of regular, at-a-desk classes I have is even more relaxed than in Canadian school; in English class, we watch Korean dramas with Chinese subtitles, if we do any work at all.

The student-teacher relationships are also infinitely more casual than Canada. When my homeroom teacher said she wanted to invite me over to her house for barbeque, I couldn't wrap my head around it. Going over to your teacher's house? In Canada, that would be miles and miles past the line of appropriate student-teacher interactions. But here my classmates call their teachers by their first name and talk to them about their personal lives almost more than they talk about school. And once, when we had school on a Saturday, two of my teachers fell asleep in class.

In cooking class, I've learned how to make so much food I could be here forever trying to list it all. The coolest thing I've learned how to make is stir-fry – you know how when you get stir-fry, they make your vegetables dance around in a big pan, and fire goes everywhere? I learned how to do that!! I think I need to build up my arm muscles to be able to do it properly – professional stir-fryers always make it look so effortless, but the pan is actually really heavy. I've also learned how to flip pancakes the cool way – by sending them flying through the air and catching them as they plop back onto the pan. Watching several classmates send their pancakes to the floor gave me some apprehension about trying it, but/ I am proud to say I managed to flip not one but two pancakes successfully!!

As an exchange student in Taiwan, every day is a surprise. Often, all I know of our plans for the day is what time I should wake up in the morning. Even if you are told more, because of the language barriers you can never be sure; a great example of this is, a month ago, my homeroom teacher told me my class would perform a skit about environmental protection on October 30th. My role was to be a bad student and throw trash. I thought my teacher said she would drive me to the skit location on her motorcycle. When the day arrived and we performed, I learned my actual role was to be the one, standalone bad student, riding behind my teacher on her motorcycle and throwing trash off it, while my classmates and the entire school watched and cheered. Luckily, I didn't fall off the motorcycle and I managed to say my one line at the right time. Other classes gave performances too, and the event turned out to be a competition, which my class won!!

Last month, we celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival with barbeque and wearing pomelo hats (an important tradition here!!). We barbequed many things I've never considered eating, like squid and octopus and "squid's cousin", a seafood I forgot the Chinese name for and never knew in English. Here, they eat just about anything, and it's not uncommon to have no idea what's on your plate. I've developed a strategy that works well so far; eat first and ask later, or just don't ask at all – if it tastes good, which it usually does, there's no need to know.



Taiwanese people love to travel, and even though the island is small compared to Canada, there is plenty to do. So far, I've climbed 9 mountains, seen endless museums, attended an International Teacup Festival, and dipped into a hot spring in the mountains. My favourite place so far is Jiālǐ shān (加里山), the tallest mountain in Miaoli, which I climbed with my host dad in August. Even the drive through the mountains to get to Jiālǐ felt magical.



*My host dad and me at the top of Jialishan*

In some places the hike was so steep we had to pull ourselves up with ropes. At the top, butterflies danced around us, and neighbouring mountains could be seen peeking out from beneath the clouds. We ate instant noodles (pào miàn, 泡麵) for lunch, enjoying the refreshing breeze and incredible view.



A close runner up to Jiālǐ is the beach. Windmills spin slowly in the distance, and tiny crabs skirt across the sand, faster than wind. If you try to catch one, they all suddenly disappear. Lone fishermen stand far out from the shore, on shoals just below the surface, against the rising tide. My family, counsellor, and I spent a full day collecting oysters and clams on the beach in Chānghuà (彰化).



To get there, we rode in a small but loud cart that didn't look like it was meant for human passengers. The cart twisted around small roads, through the shallow pools on the beach and far out from the shore, where it dropped us off next to a few other carts and a couple small tent-like wooden structures.

We were given a flat shovel, a bucket, and instructions on how to find the clams. Everyone quickly trudged into the water and started raking the shovel through the sand. I found a few clams, but people kept putting their clams in my bucket, and by the end I had an impressive amount!! Afterwards, we barbecued clams and oysters on the beach and ate them until the sun went



down. Then we headed to a hotpot restaurant for dinner, and even though I

*My host cousin and the shrimp*

had already stuffed myself with oysters and clams, I enjoyed the seafood hotpot quite a bit!!! You could catch your own shrimp in the tank next to the tables – that’s about as fresh as it gets, right?!



*A Mango ice cream delight!*

Taiwanese food is amazing, but Taiwanese fruit deserves a place of its own. Unless you are a worldwide fruit expert, I guarantee you there are fruits out there you’ve never even heard of. From guava, to passionfruit, mangoes, pomelo, and even different bananas, everything presents a deliciously addicting taste (I should apologize to my host family for eating all their fruit). On top of that, there’s endless bubble tea stores, ready to fulfill any and

all your bubble tea needs.

If you find yourself in Taiwan, don’t leave without trying bǎixiāng guǒ zhēnzhū chá (百香果珍珠茶), passionfruit bubble tea. On second thought, though, maybe it’s better if you don’t try it – once you do, you might not be able to leave!



Though I’ve been in Taiwan for 12 weeks already, this journey began more than a year ago, when I officially decided I wanted to be a Rotary Youth Exchange student. As an Outbound in District 7080, I discovered Rotary brings people closer together in a way never knew was possible. Before leaving Canada, I was genuinely concerned that my standards were too high – how could any potential exchange student friends even begin to compare to the ones I was blessed enough to find as an Outbound? But now that I’m here I continue to be amazed at the incredible people Rotary can bring together.

My host District 3501 is considered small in Taiwan, with only 27 inbound exchange students across 2 ½ regions - there are 3 Inbounds in my town of 80,000, 3 in the adjoining city, and 8 more in Miaoli. The 14 of us that attend Chinese class together on Thursday afternoons and Fridays have already grown close, and through them I am learning about the whole world. Did you know that in Brazil, it's bad luck to cut a birthday cake from the top down? You should start with the knife against the bottom of the plate and cut upwards.

Everything else aside, though, it is not the beautiful scenery, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, or even the food that makes exchange so amazing. By far, the most invaluable part of the exchange experience is the people you meet within it. Through Rotary I have gained another family, one scattered all around the world but forever tied together no matter how far we go. This year and the one before it as an Outbound have given me the chance to meet and befriend some of the kindest, most exceptional people in the world. Every day, the people I have met through Rotary, in Taiwan and Canada, continue to make this experience life-changing in the best way possible. Though I can't believe I am already 3 months into my year, I no longer dread the return to Canada, because I know the friends and family I have gained from this experience will always be there, no matter how far apart we are. Instead, I am ready to live the next 8 months to the fullest and learn as much as I can while I'm at it.

If you are considering becoming an exchange student, just imagine me yelling at you from across the world, "Go for it!". There is nothing else like exchange, and I can't imagine where I'd be if I wasn't here – I can't imagine who I'd be if I wasn't here. Rotary Youth Exchange is guiding me and helping me grow into a person I can't wait to be. I am so thankful to my family, my sponsoring Rotary Club of Mississauga West, District 7080, my host Rotary Club of Miaoli Central, my host family and future host families, and the person I was a year ago, who threw everything she had into applying for exchange.



4 way test, written in Chinese

As they like to say here, "Bye bye!!" (Yes, they say it in English), and zàijiàn (再見), until next time!

Sincerely,

*Serena*

葉栗娜 Yè lì nà

葉 Yè · my first host family's surname

栗 Lì · for 苗栗(Miáoli), my host county in Taiwan (as my host mom says proudly whenever she introduces me to people)

娜 Nà · for the 'na' in Serena

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\*If you're interested in hearing more about Taiwan and exchange, head over to my blog at 'srye.home.blog'. There, I give more detailed and (slightly) more frequent updates. You can also leave a comment on any post if you want to talk to me more! If you are interested in applying for exchange or are perhaps an Outbound, don't hesitate to reach out!!

*Serena*