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MCS&105

27 January 2015

Being Myself: Of Finding My Identities

I have always been confused by my own identity. Am I Taiwanese? I looked into mirror: I saw brown eyes, dark hair and yellow skins. Or am I Chinese? Every time when I start to think of these questions, I feel perplex, uncertain, and depressed. At home, my mother and father always tell me that my whole family is Taiwanese, because we share our own cultures, traditions and languages here. Most importantly, we have our own democratic government. However, at school, our teacher told us that technically, we were from China. Once, I remembered it was in my fourth grade. When my geography teacher said that we Taiwanese are nothing different then Chinese, I raised my hand and said “No! We Taiwanese are Taiwanese not Chinese!” Outrageously, my teacher then called me up to the front to punish me. Suddenly, the whole class started booing the teacher. It feels good when people get together and recognize themselves as a group. In addition, in search of myself, the history of my grandparents also plays an important role. They tell story of how we crossed the sea and came to Taiwan. My parents, some of my teachers, and my friends also make me become who I am today. If not of the ancestors that cleared the road for us, will we be who we are nowadays? Therefore, in order to talk about myself, the origins that define who I am cannot be forgotten.

Start with my grandparents. My grandparents’ parents were from Guangzhou (Paternal Side) and Fujian (Maternal Side) during Chin Period. At that time Taiwan was still in control of China. Not until 1895 that Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese because of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. From 1895 to 1945 this time period was called “Japanese Occupation”, and this was when my grandparents were born. My maternal grandparents were born in 1934 and 1932 respectively, and my paternal grandparents were born in 1929 and 1931 respectively. During which, there were three kinds of school systems in Taiwan: Taiwan public school, Taiwan private school and Aboriginal public school. Taiwan public school was for every non-Japanese people to attend except for aboriginal groups in Taiwan. About Taiwan private school, it was for Japanese in Taiwan to attend. And, for Aboriginal public school, only aboriginal groups in Taiwan were allowed to attend. Taiwan public schools were the ones that my grandparents attended. Inside the curriculum, Japanese was the major language, and Chinese and Taiwanese were not allowed to speak during class. Therefore, my grandparents can only speak Taiwanese and Japanese, because at school they spoke Japanese, and after class they conversed with Taiwanese, which no a single word of Chinese was spoken; except, my maternal grandparents could speak Chinese, because they were born in middle-class family. Because of Japanese education, the bond between Chinese and Taiwanese were cut. Not only that Japanese colonization changed my grandparents’ experience of Chinese culture but also the wartime propaganda, which my parents experienced the most from 1949 till now that stirred nationalism in Taiwan.

My parents were “forced” define themselves as Taiwanese during Martial Law in Taiwan, which was from 1949 to 1987. In 1945 government of R.O.C lost the Chinese civil war, and in 1949 they were exiled to Taiwan. During the Martial Law, as children, my mom and dad watched TV programs that encouraged people to fight back and take China back. At school, Taiwanese were not allowed to be spoken, because Nationalists that retreated from China spoke Chinese. The government of R.O.C wanted everyone to unite, and the only way was to have the same languages. In addition if anyone was heard mocking on R.O.C government, that person would be sentenced to life imprisonment. I remembered my mother once told me about a classmate of her that said something sarcastic about R.O.C government. The next day, the student never came to class from then on. However, my mother and father never hated R.O.C government, instead they felt united. I once asked my parents why they never hated R.O.C government even if they were treated badly. My parents told me, “R.O.C government makes people united. We Taiwanese should unite in order to claim our national identity.” In addition, the other thing that defined my parents as Taiwanese was the Taiwanese language. Although R.O.C government banned people from speaking Taiwanese, people still conversed with it at home. The reason that Taiwanese language is such crucial evidence that separate Chinese from Taiwanese is because that Taiwanese never exists in China. Taiwanese language is a combination of Chinese, Japanese, and Hakka, and it has no word forms, which is hard to learn if no one around you speaks it. Therefore, It is the propaganda and the language that makes Taiwanese recognize themselves as Taiwanese.

I was born in Taiwanese family. Both my grandparents and my parents speak Taiwanese. At home, I speak Taiwanese with my family too. However, the thing that keeps bothering me is that at school I speak Chinese with my friends. Also, as I mentioned before, my geography teacher keeps telling us that Taiwanese is equal to Chinese. Because of this, I started to hate Chinese people. I remembered one time when I went to England for the summer camp, I told the class that we Taiwanese people did not like Chinese. I also experienced oppression during my summer camp in England. I was called Chinese after I explained to people that I was a Taiwanese instead of Chinese. From then on, I started to ask myself, “Why not go to America and become an Taiwanese-American?” That’s right! Why not go to a place where everyone respects your identity? I then started to listen to English broadcast, watch English movies, and read English literatures to prepare myself to study in U.S. I even bought a book that teaches people how to speak American accent. Moreover, I discovered that if anyone was able to speak, read, or understand English, that person would gain some certain amount of privileges. With privileges it will be easier for people to recognize their identity. I think what I want is a place to stand in this world. I want people to recognize my identity as a Taiwanese and not to ignore it. I want to come to the place that possesses the most privileges in the world, and fight for my own privilege. This is why I am here in America now.

The history of my ancestors is what makes me who I am. I once confused about my own identity, but now I know who I am. I am a Taiwanese, and I am also an American. If someone calls me Chinese, I will simply laugh and tell him that I possess another identity, which is American. I will never forget how my ancestors struggled to be Taiwanese. I will never forget how China government treats my people. I want everyone in the world to know that Taiwan is a nation that has its own government, own citizens, and own identities.