

The Hidden Sting: Racial Discrimination Towards International Students in Taiwan

Elsa Sichrovsky

Students pursuing a higher education in Taiwan come from all over the world. What is it like to live in Taiwan as a foreign student? Taiwan is a democratic society that has served as an important crossroads of people, languages, and material culture—5000 to 300 years ago when much of the Pacific island region was populated by indigenous peoples from Formosa; the 17th century to World War II, as a colonial land of the Netherlands, China, and then Japan; and in the postwar period as a postcolonial country with a troubled nation-state status but strong economy and strategic geopolitical role on the international stage. What challenges do foreign students face regarding cultural and ethnic or racial differences in Taiwan?

First of all, let's get a better sense of who lives in Taiwan. Out of Taiwan's population of over 23 million, 95% are ethnic Han Chinese, mostly Hoklo (70%), Hakka and other groups who originally migrated from mainland China. In addition, close to half a million Taiwanese are members of one of the 16 officially recognized Malayo-Polynesian indigenous groups, and over 700,000 are foreign workers (61% working in manufacturing, from Vietnam 44%, Philippines

29%, or Indonesia 15%; over 36% in health-related services, from Indonesia 77%, Philippines 12%, or Vietnam 11%) (Taiwan Ministry of Labor, July 2020). Moreover, around half a million foreign residents are Chinese (mainland, Hong Kong, Macau) or Southeast Asian women who are naturalized citizens married to a Taiwan-born man, leading in the last decade or so to roughly 1 in 10 children having a foreign-born mother. Furthermore, Taiwan has become a popular tourist site for foreigners; for instance, 7.5 million foreign visitors came to Taiwan in 2018 (2.7 million mainland Chinese, 2.6 million Southeast Asians, 2.2 million Japanese, 1.8 million Hong Kong and Macau people, and 1.2 million Koreans) (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, 2018). Finally, although the COVID-19 virus has brought the number down, the population of foreign students studying in Taiwan has been growing rapidly (127,000 in 2018), now making up roughly 10% of college and university students, largely from China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia but also Japan, Korea, Thailand, Pacific Island countries, the Americas, Europe, and Africa (Taiwan News, Feb. 3, 2019).

Even though Taiwan is clearly a country with a complex history of global relations and a diversity of ethnic groups and languages, interacting with foreigners is not an integral part of daily life for most Taiwan-born people. For people from abroad and Taiwan locals alike, understanding of others' 'foreign' cultures is often lacking, relying on rumors and surface impressions unless and until firsthand experience is gained. Fear often mingles with fascination, and a simple lack of familiarity backed up by persistent historical prejudices circulating in popular culture can lead to thoughtless and inhumane behavior.

For many international students, studying in Taiwan is their first extended experience away from home. It's a vulnerable period of life when social support is vital and even small acts of kindness, or their opposite, can have big consequences. It's common to hear that Taiwan is a great place to live, with wonderful foods and warmhearted people. Most of us want to believe that things generally go well as cross-cultural understanding builds between

locals and foreign visitors, residents, and new citizens. Yet, even a casual look at newspaper coverage of foreigners in Taiwan will reveal that local reception can differ depending on whether the person is a temporary foreign worker in manufacturing, agriculture, service industry, or a student on an exchange program or to obtain a degree, or here long-term through marriage. Moreover, having lighter or darker skin and being from a richer or poorer country no doubt can influence people's views. Does one's outward appearance or the geopolitical and economic status of one's country vis-à-vis Taiwan shape locals' views or behavior and international students' experiences?

Being a biracial person who is frequently seen by Taiwanese as a foreigner despite being born and raised in Taiwan, I can empathize with the stresses and struggles of living as a highly visible, exotic other. When I was an undergraduate student in NCKU, I shared in some of the disheartening experiences of my fellow foreign students, and thus have a special interest in

the cultural and racial issues that affect the treatment of foreigners in Taiwan. I recently interviewed 10 international students, women and men from 9 countries, in order to gain a deeper understanding of international students' experiences in Taiwan, with a focus on the issue of racial discrimination. They all currently study, or have studied, at Taiwanese universities at either undergraduate or graduate level, or both.

In describing the initial reaction from the local population, several students said they have been stared at, pointed at, photographed or even nonchalantly filmed "like zoo animals" by strangers. For example, a Central American student and her friend went bowling. To their shock, the woman in the alley next to them took out her phone and began filming them, making them feel like a freak tourist attraction. A Caribbean student also reported being filmed by a group of bystanders upon arriving at a new place of employment. The group began inching closer to him and would not stop filming even after he made eye contact with them. In both instances, the strangers

stopped after the students took out their cellphones and began filming as well. Some students have endured even more invasive behavior. Another Caribbean student told of how a man once grabbed and rubbed his arm vigorously, trying to “rub off” the pigmentation of his skin color. The man was shocked that the color of his skin did not rub off. He asked the Caribbean student if rubbing his arm would make him sick. Commenting on the incident, the Caribbean student said he felt upset about the obnoxious behavior, but later thought that the man reacted this way because he had never seen a person of color before. Nevertheless, these people assumed that a casual familiarity was acceptable, not realizing how dehumanizing or objectifying their behavior might appear to the people they’d treated as exotic others.

Furthermore, discriminatory reactions are not limited to strangers. On campus, international students have found themselves targets of resentment for being, or because they were assumed to be, recipients of government-funded scholarships. While professors at a university that admits international students might be expected to welcome foreigners who have left their native countries to study in Taiwan, several students mentioned being given poor grades or being failed, without explanation and despite having performed well given that the study material was taught in a foreign language. In addition, I was told that international students are commonly seen as seeking easy credits and not putting forth the effort their subject deserves. A student from West Africa was interested in learning Spanish, and thus enrolled in a Spanish class. On walking into the classroom, the professor pointed at

him and said in English, “I won’t speak English to you or to any other foreign student here. The only two languages we speak in this classroom are Spanish and Chinese. So, you should just drop the class.” The student responded by saying that he had learned a little Chinese and would do his best to study the material. Despite the unwelcoming treatment, he passed the course. However, the professor’s attitude discouraged him from pursuing further studies in Spanish. As these experiences suggest, professors’ expectations of international students tend to be low: three students mentioned that professors expected them to perform at a level below that of Taiwanese students and were shocked when they were able to perform at the same level or above. A Central American student described how a professor was fond of saying that Latin American students “only come to Taiwan to drink alcohol, sleep with girls, and do drugs.” Upon hearing that the student was from El Salvador, the professor went on to say that he had had Salvadoran students before and they, too, were poor students. The student was given a poor grade and the professor refused to provide an explanation as to why.

This attitude on campus wasn’t limited to professors; rather, I was told that Taiwanese students, too, commonly have low expectations of international students. A student from West Africa spoke of how he was able to solve a complex problem thanks to his background in math and physics, when none of the Taiwanese students were able to solve it. A Taiwanese student remarked, “How can he solve the problem when we can’t?” This student’s astonishment left the strong impression that international students are

assumed to be of lesser intelligence and, therefore, can't possibly outsmart the local students. The student from West Africa said he felt upset by the classmate's reaction, but it was his first year in Taiwan and he tried to be accepting. He subsequently found that discriminatory remarks are so commonplace in Taiwan that it's a constant struggle to "get used to it" and not react to them. On seeing that the international student was upset, the classmate apologized and said he "hadn't meant it that way," an expression that came up frequently in international students' accounts of confronting locals for their discriminatory behavior. Needless to say, it's frustrating and distressing to have to choose between "getting used to it" or saying something that could lead to another level of vexation, or even trauma, as the victim of discrimination gets blamed for upsetting the perpetrator.

While one might think that acquiring a working knowledge of Chinese would change Taiwanese people's perception of foreign students, for one Caribbean student the bittersweet result of

understanding Chinese has meant that he hears locals talking to each other about the "heiren" (黑人) walking past. The locals assume that he won't be able to understand that they were openly discussing his skin color. One Central American student mentioned that, on more than one occasion, he has overheard students bemoaning in Chinese that he was a member of their group project: "You have that guy in your group? Tough." Several of my interviewees also overheard other students echo the aforementioned sentiment that because they may have received a scholarship, international students have come to take advantage of Taiwan: "Foreigners come here and we give them everything without them having to make any effort." Here again, the assumption of "lower intelligence" or "comes from a poor educational setting" seems to be at play. Taiwanese students, and the public in general, should not assume that people who are stereotypically "foreign"-appearing do not have the linguistic ability to understand comments referring to them. For that matter, why even assume that someone is not Taiwanese just

based on physical appearance?

For those able to communicate in Chinese, hearing discriminatory remarks directed at them is an everyday reality. For instance, a Vietnamese student was told by several taxi drivers that she was "too big" to be a Vietnamese and that she should go on a diet, since Vietnamese are stereotypically perceived as having a petite build. When a Malaysian student went to a clinic to receive a vaccine, she attempted to ask the doctor a question. The doctor stopped her and said in Chinese, "Here, it's not like your country. Taiwanese doctors are very busy. I have many patients after you waiting for me." The doctor had considered her simple request to ask a question as a sign that she lacked the intelligence, or was too uncultured and rude, to realize that he had other patients waiting for him. He took an attitude of domination toward her apparently simply because she was from a country considered politically weaker and less economically developed (and gender could have been another factor). Not only did he insult her intellect, he also denied her the

right to seek advice to ensure that she received the correct medical treatment. At an Indonesian cultural event, a Taiwanese student mistook a Malaysian student as a Taiwanese and remarked in Chinese, “No wonder these Indonesians want to come study in Taiwan. They’re so stupid that they serve chilies without even cooking them first.” Shocked and upset, the Malaysian student walked away without responding. Although the cultural festival was meant to provide exposure to foreign cultures, the Taiwanese student’s comment revealed that he or she had judged an unfamiliar cuisine as a sign of lacking intelligence, and then went on to arrogantly despise the intellect of an entire country’s people. The Malaysian student charitably remarked that such comments were probably made due to a lack of exposure to and education about foreign cultures.

Verbal insults and disrespectful microaggressions are unpleasant enough for anyone to be subjected to, but many international students reported facing discrimination that interfered with basic aspects of life. In particular, simple banking such as opening an account or applying for a debit card became a complex and lengthy process that sometimes even involved having to completely rearrange one’s schedule for the day. A Central American student recounted how she attempted to open a bank account for a foreign friend. The bank told her that she needed to go to the branch of the local bank nearer to her friend’s university. When she went to that bank, she was told that she could not open a bank account there because the bank did not have a contract with the university. She was again redirected to another bank, but she had

already been denied service from that bank because her friend was a foreigner. She realized that the banks were trying to mask their reluctance to open accounts for foreigners. Several other international students mentioned similar experiences of being refused service by banks. When applying to open a bank account, a Caribbean student was told to bring a pay slip from his place of employment. Despite having brought the required pay slip, he was once again denied service. This time, he was simply told that the bank did not open accounts for foreigners. A student from West Africa said that when making overseas monetary transfers, he was interrogated as to what the recipient intended to do with the funds, as if he was suspected of being a criminal. The students had to visit several banks before they could find one that was willing to open accounts for international students. In fact, foreigners are legally permitted to open a bank account and apply for a credit card as long as they provide the necessary documents (Contact Taiwan, July 30, 2020).

When searching for rooms to rent, the international students also found themselves repeatedly declined by landlords on the basis of their nationality. When a Central American student and her roommate were looking for a room to rent, she found that landlords were often friendly enough during the initial phone conversation but would eventually ask where she was from. As soon as she revealed that she was a foreigner, the landlord would immediately say that the room was not available. Thinking to avoid this situation, she decided to have a classmate make the call and say that she was from Macau. However, the landlord asked where her roommate was from. Once the landlord

heard that her roommate was from Central America, he immediately said that the room was not for two people despite having agreed earlier in the conversation to allowing two people to live in the room. A Caribbean student was also met with rejection: during a phone call inquiring about a room available for rent, the landlord asked him if he was a foreigner. On hearing “Yes,” the landlord hemmed and hawed, saying he would have to “think about it” but ultimately never contacted the student. Once again, through no fault of their own but because of being a locally undesirable nationality, international students were forced to expend copious amounts of time and energy contacting numerous landlords before finding one who would permit them to rent.

International students are allowed by law to have part-time jobs, and now can even work full-time during academic vacation periods (Workforce Development Agency, Ministry of Labor, October 9, 2018). Therefore, many international students seek part-time employment, which gives

them enough money to enjoy Taiwan through travel, eating at restaurants, and so forth. Once again, a seemingly commonplace part of student life became a disheartening experience as international students found themselves limited in their employment options by racial perceptions—that is, because they were considered undesirable. A Caribbean student, whose native language is English, had some initially promising email responses from employers when applying for a job as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructor at language training centers. However, after seeing a personal photo or meeting in person, the potential employer rarely would not contact him again. While fellow international students perceived as “white” could walk into language training centers and secure a job, students who were people of color had to rely on referrals to secure a job. Even if they were native English speakers, if their appearance was not sufficiently Caucasian, their accent and linguistic ability would be called into question. If there were two candidates for the

job, one visually “white” and the other visually a person of color, the visually “white” candidate would be hired, although in many instances the visually “white” candidate was not a native English speaker.

Although these international students who are people of color were eventually able to secure employment as language teachers, they were frequently told that their students’ parents actually preferred an outwardly “white” teacher, due to the perception that the English language is best represented by Americans (with light-skinned people from the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand a second choice at most schools, although they might be encouraged to tone-down or Americanize their accents). They found that venturing into Taiwan’s cram school industry meant entering a world where visual “whiteness” is more persuasive to potential clients than actual linguistic ability, and thus language training centers cater to a deeply rooted belief that linguistic authenticity, and, more broadly, the potential to earn social capital, is intertwined

with the ascribed cultural capital of “whiteness.” Thus, a teacher’s wage and promotion potential is likely to be dictated by such racial perceptions, whereby biased views of English-language accent become more biased the darker one’s skin is and language school operators excuse their racist actions by claiming they’re merely meeting—albeit racist—consumer demand.

Due to Taiwan’s growing population of Southeast Asian migrant workers, international students who are or resemble Southeast Asians have found themselves the target of particular stereotypes, which include being “uneducated” and “undocumented.” For instance, a student from West Africa went for an internship. He completed the occupational safety class and application process but, when he began working on-site, a manager walked up to him and told him, “You are not allowed to be here. You did not take the occupational safety class.” The student explained that he had taken the class, but the manager replied, “Just because you took the occupational safety class, you still don’t have the right to be here.” When asked why, the manager said, “You are probably illegally in Taiwan.” The student was confused because participants were required to have an ARC (Alien Resident Certificate) to even apply for the internship. He relayed the conversation to his overseer, who then had a conversation with the manager in question. Later, the manager apologized to the student and said he “hadn’t meant it that way.” The student said that he knew of other cases of international students being confronted and suspected of having illegal status. In spite of having an ARC and having completed the occupational security class before the internship, being a person of color led to him

being singled out as a potentially illegal and possibly dangerous immigrant. The incident caused him to wonder, “Does it work to stay here in Taiwan? People see you as illegal no matter what.”

In recent years, Taiwan has been striving to attract foreign talent and has changed its immigration policy to remove some of the previous barriers to residency and employment, particularly in light of Taiwan’s decreasing birth rate and growing older population. However, without further education of the local population, international students as well other people from abroad will continue to be ill-treated and discriminated against on a daily basis. Foreign people might experience an initial friendliness, motivated by curiosity, but even that might be spoiled by seemingly innocent yet pernicious assumptions and discriminatory behavior, such as expressions of inordinate surprise when a “foreign-looking” foreigner shows the ability to speak even a few words of Chinese. First appearances, for better or worse, too often give way to expressions of ungrounded disdain for cultures different from their own among Taiwanese, and international students and other foreigners are left feeling like unwelcome aliens struggling to attain the basic comforts of life like housing and banking. When their efforts to learn Chinese, participate in student life, and contribute to the economy are ignored or disrespected, or their presence met with suspicion and rejection, or merely condescending amusement or shock, they may question whether to remain in Taiwan after graduation, maintain ties and return in the future, or recommend the country to others.

When discussing their experiences, some of the international students I spoke with concluded that the discriminatory actions they have endured are not motivated by genuine negativity towards their nationality or skin color, but rather were the result of language barriers and a lack of contact with other racial or ethnic groups. They believe that if Taiwanese had more interaction with diverse cultures, they would avoid making cutting remarks and false assumptions. The longer they have lived in Taiwan, the less easily angered international students said they have been by the discrimination, as they've grown accustomed to it. They strive at least to maintain their dignity as foreigners in a potentially hostile environment. One Vietnamese student deals with it in this way: "...gotta earn people's respect, by walking away from those who don't give it to you."

It's a harrowing prospect, but at the most basic level, could it be that many people assume that racial or ethnic difference equals unbridgeable biological or cultural difference? In this regard, foreigners who come to Taiwan surely also hold some prejudices against unfamiliar racial or ethnic qualities. Something culturally unfamiliar may be encountered and appreciated or rejected, as is the case in any relatively free society, but if the social context of that encounter is filled with harmful assumptions about essential human differences, we shall forever remain insider versus outsider. That is to say, prejudice can go both ways, and when it exists and turns into social acts of discrimination, mutual rejection rather than appreciation becomes the more likely outcome. We all need to reflect deeply on this prospect of essentialism's destructive ways, so

that both foreigners and Taiwanese can move forward in mutual acceptance and appreciation of our cultural differences and common humanity, while resisting racial and national biases that express a crude politics perpetuating historically pernicious social hierarchies. Race is widely known to have no scientific biological reality and yet it continues to be a social force with myriad cultural expressions. Ideally, in the future, Taiwan won't be a country where tolerating racial discrimination, walking away from it, or being perceived as a source of unwanted conflict when trying to fight it are the only options because so many people continue to see you as essentially different due to "race" or other cultural factors.

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