

Episode 54: Nostalgic for Taiwan

Summary

Nick's friend Ted grew up in North America but has Taiwanese parents. In this conversation he talks about how his father was nostalgic for Taiwan and what happened when he eventually returned.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Ted, and Ted, you're Canadian but you have Taiwanese heritage, so both your parents are from Taiwan, right?

Ted: That's right, yeah, both born in Taiwan and they emigrated from there.

Nick: OK, so you were born in Canada?

Ted: Uhh, I was actually born in Austria!

Nick: Is that right?

Ted: Yeah, we didn't get the papers to move to Canada until after I was born. Umm, my Dad got a scholarship to study in Austria.

Nick: OK, and so then you went to Canada shortly after that.

Ted: Yeah, I think I was one year old. I don't remember anything from Austria.

Nick: OK, and so your parents have lived in Canada ever since?

Ted: No, not at all. Uhh, they probably lived there for about twenty-five years (in North America in total) and then we emigrated to the U.S., so I didn't, uhh ... I left Canada when I was thirteen years old and we moved to California. That's where I finished, uhh, high school and college and, you know, went on from there.

Nick: And do you think your parents integrated well into those other countries or do you think they missed Taiwan a lot?

Ted: Nooo, yeah, not at all, not at all. I mean, my father, uhh, he ... my father and all of his four brothers had left Taiwan at some point because of the white terror, it's a political situation, the Kuomintang repression in Taiwan after, uhh ... there were a lot of massacres and anybody who could get out at that time, uhh, tried to do so.

And most of my family got out through academic scholarships if they could study abroad. So I had one uncle that went to Switzerland, one that went to France, one that went to Japan to work for a while, another went to the U.S. and my Dad eventually went to Austria. Uhh, and after living in Canada for a long time, I'd say he never really adjusted. Uhh, he didn't have many Western friends, uhh, you know, he still kind of was living the lifestyle of Taiwan, but most importantly Taiwan in the 1960s. So when they moved back to Taiwan in the 1990s, that's after something like twelve years in Canada and thirteen years in the U.S., uhh, my Dad moved back to a country that didn't exist. Taiwan of the 1990s was a completely different country. It had jumped the development barrier from the third world - my father grew up, uhh, not wearing shoes, walking ten kilometres to school every day - to kind of a post-modern digital, uhh, society, where he couldn't, uhh, talk with the younger generation. Not a language issue - part of it was a language issue as well because the Kuomintang enforced Mandarin as the official language, which was never the indigenous language of, uhh, of Taiwan. In fact my father speaks fluent Taiwanese and Japanese, because he grew up in the Japanese empire because the, uhh, before the Kuomintang takeover of the island. And so the younger people had to speak Mandarin. So there was even somewhat of a language barrier, although he could understand, he was never totally fluent in Mandarin. Uhh, and, so that's, you know, and Taiwan was, uhh, banned as a language - Taiwanese - for many generations - well, at least a generation and a half. Kids were even punished for speaking, uhh, Taiwanese words in school. They'd be lashed¹ out for every word that they'd say. So a lot of things had changed in the meantime and he went back to a country that he could barely recognise and he always used to, uhh, miss the weather in Taiwan because in Canada the winters are fearsome and brutal and minus thirty (degrees Celsius) every winter. And he'd always talk about how it was much nicer in Taiwan. And when he actually moved back to Taiwan he realised the summers are pretty brutal and hot and if he didn't have air conditioning, wouldn't have survived. Everything is always ... the nostalgia was the main, uhh, driving factor for the memories.

Nick: And so, I mean, he must have been dreaming all these years, twenty-five years, of going back to Taiwan and then he had this kind of reverse culture shock, right?

Ted: Yeah, it's a generational shock, a developmental shock, a cultural shock. I mean, he got along well with his old classmates, people he grew up with in his own generation. They share that aspect, that part of the history and upbringing². Although there are other aspects he didn't share with them. They eventually did other things - those who didn't leave Taiwan, uhh, you know, had different lives and in the end he was probably better suited to communicate with other people in similar situations, such as my relatives, such as my aunts and uncles, who all left at a similar time period and, you know, had similar experiences both in Taiwan and abroad in the West.

¹ lashed: hit with a whip

² upbringing: the way someone was raised in childhood

Nick: OK. And so do you think he was disappointed when he came back and found it was so different from his memories?

Ted: Uhh, I suppose. There's the old adage³ that you can never go home again, which is very true, that's exactly the situation. Uhh, it affected my life as well because, uhh, we had a lot of disagreements when I was growing up and I had always attributed that to a culture shock. I grew up in the West, in North America. Uhh, you know, I integrated with my friends there. I had different ways of thinking and I just assumed that my parents had another, like an old-fashioned or a different culture. I mean, I respected it all. I didn't really have problems about identity, I know I have some cousins, some people have, you know, rejected, they try to reject ancestral cultures. I was not like that, I was fine with it, but it was hard to discuss things because I just didn't think we were seeing things on the same level. And then when I learned later, after he had moved back to Taiwan for quite a few years, and I, you know, visited, I've visited quite frequently, is that he was having the same problems with the Taiwanese who never left as well, of that generation. And it's because that Taiwan had developed so quickly in that twenty-year span that it was no longer a recognisable culture. The money, the development - everything changes. And so that gap is also present even with kids that didn't go abroad and grow up abroad. And so it was just, you know, a personal situation, probably exacerbated⁴ by cultural differences but, uhh, yeah, I guess it's kind of a universal thing. I mean, maybe a country like Switzerland, which is very stable and conservative and people don't like to change, that is probably less of an issue, generation after generation, but in the very fast-moving, fast-developing cultures, it's going to be an issue. Like in China, even more dramatic in the last, uhh, twenty years, some of those kids are unrecognisable. The, you know, that generation of kids, I mean, even some of the old-timer⁵ Chinese can't stand them⁶. It's a very difficult, uhh, process and when some identity is created, when a personality is created, it's very difficult to change. And that's kind of ... they have to grow up in that backdrop, and they have to ... everyone has to handle it in the best way possible.

Nick: That's really interesting. So he was kind of almost overtaken by Western, uhh, younger people and also by younger people in the East as well.

Ted: Correct, correct, yeah, yeah. So he would have been better off just moving - especially for him, I would say that some of my uncles adjusted quite well, it really depends on the personality - if he had gone with the flow⁷ and tried to adapt more

³ old adage: saying, expression

⁴ exacerbated: an existing problem made worse

⁵ old-timer: old person, old-fashioned person

⁶ can't stand them: strongly dislike(s) them, can't put up with them

⁷ gone with the flow (verb phrase: to go with the flow): let things happen naturally without trying to fight against it

and to find a new identity in his new country. He would have been better off in some ways. I have some aunts that are like that, and they have done very, very well. They have lots of, uhh, local friends, they're very comfortable, both in the Taiwanese, the modern Taiwanese context, as well as in the Western context. And I think by being so nostalgic for Taiwan, my Dad let, as you said, two cultures slip past⁸, umm, and he was trapped in kind of a nostalgic, historical zone that doesn't exist anymore.

Nick: OK. And you said you've been back a few times. Was that important for you personally? Or were you just going back to visit family? Or do you feel like it's part of your heritage that you wanted to know and wanted to become part of?

Ted: Well, I would say that it's more to visit family, kind of as an obligation, a duty, and to keep in touch with the relatives there. I've done pretty well compared to some of my other cousins that grew up in Canada or in the U.S., I have several. Umm, some of them didn't learn to speak Taiwanese when they were at home, and I think that was a big mistake by their parents. Umm, I was, you know, I spoke Taiwanese at home, so when I'm in Taiwan, I can communicate, uhh, fairly well, and I used to go back fairly regularly, especially when I was living in Singapore in recent years. It was quite an easy flight, so I would be up there a few times a year, or even over a long weekend, it's easy to do. Umm, and I guess the most important, most interesting thing was that I've seen it change so much. I've seen, uhh, pretty much the whole development. I was very young at the time, but I still vaguely remember⁹ in the 70s, umm, all of the streets were just thronged with¹⁰ motorcycles, you never saw cars. It's a bit like Saigon actually, uhh, maybe ten years ago. You see the whole developmental wave happening in different places in different times. But it goes through the same motions. And at some point they evolve from motorcycles to cars, and then the traffic congestion got so bad that you could walk across the whole city faster - Taipei City - faster than you could, uhh, take a taxi. Umm, and then, later then they built a metro and that made it, you know, a lot easier. And then ... it's what happened everywhere, I'm sure it happened in North America, in Europe, in Australia, everywhere, but it happened within my recent lifespan. I've seen it happen before my eyes. Every time I visited it was a bit different, and so that's kind of interesting. It gives you a bit of perspective so you kind of appreciate more if you go into a third world, uhh, chaos, like India or something. You know, I think you have a better perspective on it. You don't get to judgemental or snobby about it. You know, that's just kind of the natural evolution of things.

Nick: Alright, thank you very much.

⁸ slip past: go past in a quick or unexpected way

⁹ vaguely remember: remember but only just, not clearly

¹⁰ thronged with: completely packed with or full of

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Ted's family leave Taiwan?
2. Why happened when Ted's father moved back to Taiwan?
3. What has Ted learned from seeing the quick pace of development in Taiwan?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She had a very difficult _____ because her parents got divorced when she was a child and she had to move around a lot.
2. There was a mix-up with the hotel reservation and they didn't have a room for him. Then he just _____ the situation by yelling at the hotel staff.
3. He's an _____ so he doesn't know how to use the Internet or any other forms of modern technology.
4. When my parents divorced and my mother remarried, I wish I had just _____ and got along with my step-father. Instead, I hated him because he wasn't my Dad.
5. I _____ going on camping trips with my family when I was very young. My parents still speak fondly of them but I don't recall much.
6. My grandfather used to get _____ at school for being naughty. These days, that kind of corporal punishment is outlawed.
7. I should have fixed my bag when it first started to fall apart. Now it's beyond repair. As the _____ says, *a stitch in time saves nine**.
8. The old man who always wants to talk to me about nostalgia is outside. Maybe I can _____ without him noticing, and then I won't have to talk to him.
9. There's a big festival on the weekend and the city will be _____ people.
10. That couple is always arguing and they treat each other really badly. I really _____ and I hope I don't have to spend any time with them.

**a stitch in time saves nine*: take preventative measures as soon as you can because if you don't, the problem will be more difficult to fix later on.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you been to Taiwan? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Ted's father was nostalgic for Taiwan while he lived abroad. Are you nostalgic for anything from your childhood or from an earlier period in your life?
3. Do you think integrating into a new society is completely the responsibility of the immigrant or does the welcoming country have a role to play too?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They left Taiwan because people were being repressed by the ruling Kuomintang party.
2. Taiwan had changed so much since he left that he found it hard to fit in.
3. He learned that all countries go through the same process at some point and that has helped him have a better perspective when he visits poor countries.

Exercises

1. upbringing
2. exacerbated
3. old-timer
4. gone with the flow
5. vaguely remember
6. lashed
7. old adage
8. slip past
9. thronged with
10. can't stand them