

The State of Taiwanese America A Time of Generational Transition

By Ho Chie Tsai, MD

Young Physician Committee



I am often asked to speak out on behalf of the Taiwanese American 2nd generation community, and more often than not, I am reluctant to represent the voice of an entire generation. After all, how does one capture the varying degrees of Taiwanese and American identity, as well as the wide-ranging experiences and opinions that define and continue to shape who we are as individuals? Is there really a common thread beyond our historical and familial ties to Taiwan that links us together as a community? Why is it important for us to declare ourselves a unique subset of the broader American community? Will this all matter to us as we inevitably become a more visible and intertwined part of American society?

I struggle with these questions everyday. And perhaps, this is a good starting point for all of you in the 1st generation to begin to understand how we, the 2nd generation - your children - have a unique Asian American identity all our own, and different from yours.

So, who am I? I am a 2nd generation Taiwanese American physician living and working in the San Francisco Bay area. Locally, I am one of the officers of our northern California NATMA and NATMA 2G chapters. I also manage the NATMA website. Most Taiwanese American youth and young professionals know me not as a doctor, but as the creator and manager of TaiwaneseAmerican.org, a popular community website on a mission to highlight our emerging leaders, active organizations, and upcoming events across the nation. College students know me for my frequent speaking engagements at the Intercollegiate Taiwanese American Students Association regional conferences coast to coast. Younger students know me as a summer camp organizer and speaker.

So, although I am reluctant to speak on behalf of our generation or simplify our issues into a brief article, I do recognize my special role in serving our community and that I have extensive

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The mission of this non-profit website is to highlight the people, organizations, and events that are of interest to the 2nd generation Taiwanese American community. Our vision is to create a strong network for future generations of Americans of Taiwanese descent. TaiwaneseAmerican.org is constantly seeking angel donors and resources to fund our many ideas and projects. Contact Ho Chie Tsai at hochie@hochie.net or (312) 933-4624 to find out how you can help.

contact with thousands of Taiwanese Americans of varying ages that comprise this 2nd generation. Perhaps the best way to share with you what I have learned is to update you on my work with TaiwaneseAmerican.org during the past year and what I've observed taking place.

As I reflect upon the past year of TaiwaneseAmerican.org, I am excited about how far this website has come since debuting in April of 2006. Over three years later, we have hundreds of daily hits from dedicated supporters, an amazing Facebook fan following, and name recognition among most if not all of the 2nd generation organizations around the country. It tells me that our fragmented community, scattered in cities all across the country, longs to create a more unified network and collective identity. In late 2006, I introduced our first "Taiwanese American pride" T-shirts, such as the Stinky Tofu Walks Alone and the Bubble Tee designs, and was soon surprised at how popular these items were with Taiwanese American youth. It became more evident to me that our young community was looking for ways to affirm and present their unique identity to friends and community. What better way than to wear an American-branded T-shirt from a website that highlights our proud growing community? It's as if kids could finally say, "See? It's cool to be Taiwanese American! I'm not alone in this world!" In the past few years, we've now grown our collection to five different T-shirt designs, which generate several thousand dollars of donations each year that help fund Taiwanese American projects and events.

The TaiwaneseAmerican.org website highlights events taking place around the country that we feel would be of interest to the 2nd generation community. As such, we are particularly in tune to how groups and organizations in various cities are growing by tracking their events and organizing efforts. This past year alone, we've had the privilege of seeing our 2nd generation community emerge like never before. Taiwanese American Professionals chapters have sprouted up in about 15 major cities across the country following the footsteps of the original TAP in Los Angeles. Our youth summer camps like the Taiwanese American Foundation in the Midwest, the Taiwanese American Youth Leadership Camp on the west coast, and the Taiwanese American Next Generation / TAC camp on the east coast have grown stronger with steady participation from the youngest of our 2nd generation community. The east and west coast camps are showing evidence of maturation as they break away and run their programs independently from the 1st generation organizations. Even ITASA, the Intercollegiate Taiwanese American Students Association, our longest-running network of 2nd generation college students has seen a strong revival with increasing participation at their three regional conferences. Our own NATMA 2G has demonstrated growth in several major regions and has taken a more active role in planning and participating in our national conferences alongside the 1st generation the past few years. It is clear that as we look to define our own Taiwanese American identity, we are building organizations that serve our needs at various stages of our careers and identity formation. We are looking towards creating a foundation for the generations of Taiwanese Americans who will come after us. Our Taiwanese American community is active in every corner of the nation, and I am simply pleased that TaiwaneseAmerican.org has been able to play a role in growing this movement.

What amazes me the most, however, is the collective success story of Taiwanese Americans who are projecting a more diverse image of our talents beyond the medical and academic



professions! As Asian Americans, we are often stereotyped as smart and hard-working; though on the surface this may sound positive, many of us feel an unnecessary pressure to live up to these expectations, and therefore limited in our career choices. However, when we can see role models in all industries and career paths, especially the creative ones, we will know that our community has "made it."

I'm proud to observe that we are getting close to this tipping point. A little over a decade ago, we saw singer-actor Welly Yang (whose father was a NATMA leader) debut as our first Broadway star in the musical *Miss Saigon*. Since then, our list of minor celebrities continues to grow. Just this past year alone, we've had an opportunity to see folks like actor Kelvin Yu work alongside recognized Hollywood stars such as Sean Penn, in the movie *Milk*. Actor turned producer Will Tiao has now taken his Taiwanese American-financed multi-million dollar film *Formosa Betrayed* to its final stages with the recent announcement that a distributor has acquired the movie. Music video producer Karen Lin is breaking new ground for herself by starting production of her first romantic comedy feature film that will be set in Taiwan. All have expressed their desire to promote the Taiwanese identity through their work or accomplishments. We have only seen the beginning of this talent pool, and more surprises are sure to come!

In other creative arenas, we've seen folk singer-songwriter Cynthia Lin follow the path of Vienna Teng and start to gain increasing mainstream recognition. The indie band Exit Clov, featuring Taiwanese American twins Emily and Susan Hsu, have found a special niche in the DC area; they became overnight YouTube stars in Taiwan when their video to help Typhoon Morakot relief efforts went viral. I predict that other singer-songwriters like the talented Calista Wu, Alice Tong, or Diana Li will also soon be "discovered". Filmmakers like Philip Wang and Ted Fu of Wong Fu Productions or Jason Lee of the Asian American arts collaboration website TurtlistMedia.com are not only pursuing their arts, but creating opportunities to network other rising talented artists with their attentive fan base.

And the list of accomplishments by talented Taiwanese Americans goes on. I haven't even begun to discuss the work by our grassroots community leaders, our science and technology folks, our authors and writers, our politicians and activists, and our medical professionals. However, I'll save this story for another chapter in our ongoing story.

I raised several questions earlier in regards to whether there is a common thread that binds our community. I still don't have the answers. Perhaps it is this continual search for our identity, as individuals and as a 2nd generation community, which drives us on this journey to discover our own passions and inspire ourselves to do great things with our lives.

At the very least, I hope that what I have shared here has opened your eyes to how talented and diverse our 2nd generation community is. As we grow more connected to all the amazing people that identify as Taiwanese American, I know that our 1st generation will take pride in all that we will accomplish. After all, it is you, our parents, who have helped to shape our roots and values.

Our community is blossoming, and we are collectively paving our way through an Asian American history that we can call our own. Now, it's our turn to lead the way.