

MY NEW YEAR EXPERIENCE IN TAIWAN

I always pictured Chinese New Year as a celebration that involves multiples parades full of dragon dances and people carrying colorful flags, banners, lanterns, drums and firecrackers, but in fact I have found out that this holiday is traditionally celebrated as a family affair and is considered the favorite holiday for most Taiwanese citizens.

My personal experience during this holiday was definitely amazing and unforgettable. Everything started when I got a notice from the office of international affairs of my university inviting me to register for a host family during Chinese New Year to which I immediately reply letting them know that I was interested; few days later I got the name and information of my selected volunteer, her English name was Rhonda.

Honestly, I didn't have big expectations about this celebration, but suddenly things became more interesting when she asked me to go to her grandparent's house in Changhua County located in western Taiwan. At first I planned to spend three days with them but by reason of the bus and train tickets were sold out I had to leave one day earlier and come back two days later than planned which made a total of six days staying.

After a trip no longer than 3 hours I was dropped off at the front of the house, while waiting at the door I was feeling nervous because during the trip I suffocated my brain with all sorts of questions if they would like me or what would they think about me, but all this worries faded away when an 8 years old little girl in braids wearing a black jacket appeared behind the door and stared up at me, then quickly handed me a pair of sandals in sign of taking off my shoes; straight afterwards she grabbed my hand and led me inside the house.

I glanced around me, the living room was now filled with people, at the time she started introducing each one I had serious troubles with every name, I tried my best to remember it and match it with a face; though, it was useless; fortunately everyone noticed my difficulty and told me not to worry about.

My first day at their house was really quiet; I spent the time helping to decorate the doors and windows with red paper cuts with themes such as happiness, wealth and longevity. We end up the night watching a Taiwanese drama and going to bed early. The next morning some noisy kids woke me up and made me realized that it was Chinese New Year Eve, after having breakfast my friend's mother asked me to go shopping to the traditional market to show me around, she seemed very excited talking to me and so did I because our conversation was a mixture of Chinese and English. After lunch I was told that the whole family would pray to their ancestors as well as to the household gods, they will also acknowledged the presence of the ancestors with a dinner arranged for them at the family banquet table.

That night we shared a delicious dinner full of traditional dishes; afterwards we sit at the living room to start playing different games: the young ones were playing cards or rolling dices, the old ones were playing mahjong and others were chatting because this is the only time in the year that so many of them can have fun together. Later on, they started the typical red envelopes-giving to younger generation by their parents, grandparents, relatives, and even close neighbors and friends. My big surprise was when some of them handed me out a red envelope, to which I didn't have any option but to say: "恭喜發財"(pinyin: gōng xǐ fā cái) that means: "congratulations and be prosperous".

Over the next few days, many relatives came to the grandma's house, but we also went to visit other family and friends, which was very much like party hopping. Everyone seemed happy to see everyone else because of the festive atmosphere.

There was not one minute that I haven't enjoyed this great experience. It was simply, without question, one of the most beautiful and precious times of my life in Taiwan. One that I know, I will always be grateful to this amazing family for everything they have done to make me feel part of their family.

