

Conflicting Cultures

ZACK HAS DREAMED of playing college basketball in the United States all his life. He lives for the game, and if he isn't at home or in school, he is almost certainly on a basketball court. He has traveled all over Asia to compete in tournaments, and has consistently improved his game over the years, to the point where he is one of the best young players in Taiwan. Despite the twelve-hour time difference, he makes sure to watch televised games in the U.S., so that he can study the American game. He daydreams about playing in front of thousands of fans. While very few Taiwanese high school athletes get recruited to play at American colleges, Zack, a rising senior, shows real potential. The greatest obstacle that stands in his way is traditional Taiwanese culture. His parents strongly oppose his commitment to his athletic career, despite his excellent grades throughout his schooling. Like many other parents at the school, they feel basketball and other extracurricular activities only distract from his studies. The lack of support from Zack's parents prevents him from realizing his dream.

Since kindergarten, Zack has attended Takau English School (TES), a relatively small private day school, with just over 500 students ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade. While the school boasts beautifully manicured foliage, state-of-the-art classrooms equipped with the latest technologies, and top-notch athletic facilities, what truly sets TES apart from other international schools is its student body. It attracts the most talented students in the area. While students from over 30 countries attend TES, the vast majority of the students are of Taiwanese heritage and come from wealthy families. Although the student body is very homogeneous, the school emphasizes multicultural learning and promotes fluency in both Taiwanese and Western culture to navigate and thrive in the global context.

English is the language of instruction at TES, but unlike at most other international schools in Taiwan, the school does not prohibit students from using other languages while on campus. The school administration chose not to restrict Mandarin speaking so that students can freely express their culture. In the context of the classroom, students are expected to use English in their academic conversations, including responding to questions posed by the teacher, giving presentations, or collaborating on group projects. However, students almost always opt to speak Chinese in other contexts, even if they are fluent in English. Some students, either younger or recently admitted to TES, have not nearly developed their English at a level that is expected by the school. Others, such as non-native Taiwanese students, tend to speak only English. This range of language abilities creates complex social dynamics among the students, who constantly code-switch between English and Chinese in different situations. TES supports language learning through specialized courses, taught by native speakers of the language.

While language is a major source of cultural conflict at TES, the school's curriculum also contributes to divisions within the school community. TES follows the IB curriculum, a mainly European program which prioritizes analytical thinking and free discussion over the rote

memorization common in traditional Asian schooling. The goal of the program is to “develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.” This foundation of the curriculum highly prioritizes Western educational values, and resembles the style of teaching most students will see when they attend college in the United States or another Western country. Although TES parents choose to enroll their children into this system for this reason - albeit unfamiliar to them, there is some pushback. For example, the IB requires students to discuss national politics explicitly and openly, which runs counter to Taiwanese cultural norms. Also, some parents do not agree with the more student-centered educational goals, as they believe it to be excessive and unnecessary. They would prefer instead that the school offered an educational program that allowed students to specialize in one area of study. Guided by this belief, these parents additionally enroll their children in cram schools to give them a competitive edge in the college admissions process.

The school’s emphasis on extracurricular activities also reinforces and facilitates Western culture. The administration highly values athletics and the arts, ideals that directly conflict with the traditional Taiwanese approach that emphasizes academics almost entirely. TES has recently invested in a one-of-a-kind swimming pool equipped with advanced technology. It also has spacious outdoor fields, and a professional-grade basketball court, which Zack plays on nearly every day. Following through with its commitment to the arts, the school provides a wide variety of musical instruments to students, and houses a state-of-the-art auditorium where performances regularly occur. Students are encouraged to make the most of the resources available to them, but face resistance from their parents when they pursue extracurricular interests. Zack is not alone in his frustration with the different aspects of his life competing against one another.

After graduating from TES, students continue to experience the conflicts between Western and Taiwanese culture. Over 90 percent of seniors will attend college in the U.S., and those who do not often go to Europe or Australia for higher education. As students graduate from college, many will continue to live in the U.S., or countries other than Taiwan. After graduation, many students will live the majority of their lives outside of Taiwan. However, regardless of the success that graduates will almost certainly enjoy in other places, they can be ‘called home’ at any moment. This is a very unique aspect of Taiwanese culture, where aging parents call their children and tell them that it is time to return to the place where they grew up. It is expected that the child drops everything and returns to care for their parents, immediately departing the life they began cultivating at TES. As students, like Zack, plan to leave Taiwan and work to fully assimilate in a new culture and society, they will remain in the service of their families, and will likely return back home one day.

