

mabuhay

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THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

Step back in time
to the mountainous,
windswept islands of Batanes
in northern Philippines

Shanghai's latest design
inspiration is Imperial China

Secret Hong Kong islands
for repeat visitors

Travel essays by America's new
generation of Filipina authors

Born to jet set

After growing up around the world, this travel writer learns a career lesson while witnessing a sacred Saisiyat ritual in the mountains of northwest Taiwan

As the bright orange flames from the campfire turn dark amber, the back-and-forth swaying of the beatmakers speeds up, waist bells clanging furiously, while the singers' chanting grows louder and more trance-like. Lyrics and movements intertwine, filling the colossal black sky of Wufeng County – a three-hour drive away from Taipei – mixing with the incessant howls of mountain dogs.

Every two years in November, the Saisiyat – one of Taiwan's smallest aboriginal tribes – hold Pasta'ay to appease the spirits of the Short Black People, a pygmy race they were thought to have eradicated thousands of years ago. The spirits are crossing into the mortal realm now, but all I can think of is that I am due in Taipei at sunrise and I have yet to conduct an interview for a travel story I am writing for the local newspaper.

"When can I speak to the elders?" I ask my host, Jhu Yi-de, of the Saisiyat's pre-eminent Jhu clan. He hands me a small bottle of *mijiu* and tells me to drink and wait. I've always disliked the taste of millet wine. It's sweet like liquid fruit roll-ups but burns like bourbon. Jhu mutters, "You don't understand aboriginal culture."

The words stung like *mijiu*. I had only a few years of reporting experience, but the thing I prided myself the most about being a journalist was my ability to understand other people. I had lived in Taiwan for six years and spoke near-fluent Mandarin. Weren't my stories better than the listicles about stinky tofu and bubble tea written by travel writers flown into Taiwan on three-day press junkets?

Born to a Peranakan mother and Malaysian-Chinese father in Selangor, I spent my childhood living in Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Singapore and Taipei. As a child, I saw the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China. During the May 1998 Jakarta riots, I hid in the Malaysian embassy when my classmates' homes were being looted.

There's a term for children of expatriates who constantly move from country to country: third culture kid. Coined in the 1950s by anthropologist Ruth Hill Useem, it describes the process of combining our parents' home culture with our host country's culture to form a third culture.

A lot of people live in the same city for at least the first 18 years of their lives before discovering the joy of travel and living in new countries. Some of these lucky people will become travel writers. Travel was my constant state of being, though. I was a real-life Carmen Sandiego!

But back in Wufeng's muddy campgrounds, after hours of reveling with the elders (Jhu's advice to drink and wait was wise indeed), I finally had my interviews and I couldn't have felt more ordinary. As spirits mingled with mortals and elders clinked shot glasses overflowing with *mijiu*, I did my own recalibrating. Just because I had been traveling for two decades longer than most journalists my age, does this mean I am better qualified to write travel stories?

I turn 30 this year and have lived in a total of 10 countries across four continents. As I amass frequent flyer miles, I realize how little I know about other people and how I want to learn more about the myriads of cultures and communities that make traveling so interesting. A citizen of one country or 10, a good travel writer listens, owns up to their biases and, every now and then, takes a swig of sweet, burning *mijiu*. – **Dana Ter**

