

大家好!

In summer 2024 it has been 12 years since I started my journey to Taiwan. In 2012/2013, I spent my Rotary Youth Exchange in Hualian, at the beautiful East coast of Taiwan, warmly hosted by the Rotary Club of Hualian Harbour. Although it was more or less by chance that I ended up in Taiwan, I will always be grateful that things turned out the way they did.

Till today I have fond memories of my youth exchange. Whether it is the language classes; the daily calligraphy classes at school together with fantastic teachers; the delicious food (鍋貼 and 炒飯 still remain some of my favorite dishes and everywhere I go I keep looking for 葡萄柚綠茶); enjoying family life and local culture; and of course the many friends I made from all over the world. I was very lucky to have three wonderful host families who supported me in every possible way, whether it was finding a dancing class for me or celebrating Christmas with me so I'd feel less home sick. One moment I remember in great detail is the thrill and nervousness before I gave my speech at the Multi District conference in Taipei in May 2013. I often find myself thinking back to that moment when I am faced with a major challenge. It gives me strength and courage to remember what my 16-year-old self was able to achieve, and empowers me to face whatever challenge lies ahead.

I do not overexaggerate when I say that my exchange year in Taiwan significantly shaped my life. It offered me (1) a strong and lasting connection to Taiwan and the Chinese language; (2) it broadened my horizons and planted the seed for an international career; and (3) it marked the beginning of a lifelong relationship with Rotary.

- (1) To be very honest, I would probably never have learned Chinese without this exchange year. And while, admittedly, I did write this text in English and then had great support from PP ISO translating it, I am still able to have a basic conversation in Chinese and I am motivated to maintain and improve these skills again. I was recently having a chat with a colleague and he told me that he did notice that I had learned Chinese in Taiwan, which made me incredibly happy. Learning and understanding Chinese language allowed me to encounter a different kind of thinking and opened many doors for me. Similarly, I still feel a strong connection to Taiwan, its culture and its people. It will always have a place in my heart and as much as I can, I follow the news and try to keep up to date. This year, several of my friends travelled to Taiwan and I was happy to help them with recommendations and travel advice. I was even happier when they returned and were as fascinated by Taiwan as I am. It was a strong reminder for me to go back soon and renew those ties and memories.
- (2) As soon as I got back from Taiwan in June 2013, I knew that I had to go abroad again. After graduating from high school in 2015, I decided to go to Costa Rica for a six-month internship at a hotel. After meeting so many people from Latin America during my exchange year, I was intrigued to go myself and improve my Spanish skills. Until then, I was sure I would become a hotel manager in the future – my host families may remember. But after my experience in Costa Rica, I changed my mind and decided to study *International Relations* instead. I was motivated to study world politics and do good in the world. During my bachelor studies in Regensburg, Germany, I had the opportunity to take Chinese language classes again while all along studying international politics, economics, and culture. Given the focus on *international* affairs,

it seemed only logical to go abroad again. I spent an exchange semester in Bogotá, in Colombia, and afterwards went to China for an internship with the German Consulate General. This would not have been possible without my prior experience in Taiwan.

It was probably the sum of all these experiences - the passion for the youth exchange programme, the experience of living abroad and my designated field of study - that got me interested in the work of the United Nations. In order to gain some insight and learn more about the work and impact of a UN organization, I applied for an internship at UNICEF in New York. I ended up spending one year with the organization, gaining a better understanding of the structures and processes of a multilateral organization. And while I learned so much during this one year, I was eager to further deepen my knowledge. My master studies in Berlin and Potsdam offered me the perfect opportunity for that.

All these places, from Taiwan to Costa Rica, Colombia, China and the USA, eventually led me to Stockholm, Sweden, where I now pursue a PhD in Political Science with a focus on international organizations. And while I have been on the move a lot in the past 12 years, Rotary has always been by my side.

- (3) Of all the ways my exchange to Taiwan has impacted my life, perhaps the most significant has been my introduction to the world of Rotary. I became a member of our local Rotex club right after returning from Taiwan. Like so many others, I wanted to give something back to the community that had given me so much. Over the years, I worked together with countless In- and Outbounds, supported and accompanied them during, before and after their exchange year. I served as the Rebound Coordinator, Rotex Germany Council Member and President of Rotex 1880. Two of the highlights as a Rotex were the International Rotex Convention 2018 in Taiwan, and the Conference for German-speaking Rotex clubs (Germany, Switzerland and Austria), which I organized in my home district 1880 in September 2023.

I have met fellow Rotarians and former exchange students in all the places I have lived. But especially during the last three years in Berlin, many paths have crossed again. In Berlin I had the chance to meet Philipp and Aurélie from D3490 again; regularly catch up with Li Shang Han (who, back in 2012, was a Rotex member in D3470 and is now a close friend); and finally meet former Secretary Tammy again - after 12 years!

Now in Stockholm, I met again with two Swedes who I first got to know at the Rotex Convention in Taiwan in 2018— it's a small Rotary world!

In 2021, my journey with Rotary entered a new phase when I became a member of the *Rotary Satellite E-Club of Canada One - Global Professionals*. This may come as a surprise as I have never been to Canada (yet), but it was close connections with the Rotary Club of Regensburg Millennium that brought it to my attention when the club was about to be chartered. I am very happy with the community I have found in this club. Almost all members are former exchange students, which is a strong bond that connects us across the globe and across time zones. We only meet virtually, but that doesn't make our commitment any less sincere. Last year we organized a fundraising event to raise money for a scholarship for a student in Mexico. We also supported a

football tournament in Sierra Leone and donated funds to an initiative in Burundi that provides school meals for children. I am learning and growing in this environment, and I am still fascinated and curious about the world of Rotary. There is so much to learn and so much to cherish.

I am incredibly grateful for all the opportunities Rotary has given me, for the people I have met through Rotary, and for the person I have become as a result. Special thanks go to my sponsor, RC Freital, and my host club, RC Hualian Harbour, as well as to D1880 and D3490. But most of all, I would like to thank my host families. They have made this experience unforgettable and have shaped so much of who I am today.

As a Rotex and a Rotarian, I hope to give something back. My wish is to enable as many young students as possible to go abroad and experience “a life in a year” themselves. The Rotary Youth Exchange will always be close to my heart and I can't wait for the day when I will host an exchange student myself, maybe even from Taiwan?!

With sincere gratitude and all the best wishes
林加佳/ Laura Sophie Ritter