A Maori film student group’s journey of kindred exchanges (Part 1)

Kia ora!

Indigenous People

By Chi-hao James Lo
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The wedding guests rose from their chairs and cheered as the Maori war cry of their distant relatives resonated with their hunters’ spirits. Though traditionally performed in honor of their opponents and as a means of intimidating their enemies, the Maori delegation from the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) cordially graced their audiences with the Haka, a dance not to be taken as a performance, but rather respect given in the face of challenges.

On Dec. 3, a group of Maori film students from AUT landed in Taiwan with their chaperones to begin a 13-day trip of cultural exchanges with the Haka, a dance not to be taken as a performance, but rather respect given in the face of challenges.

The trip was organized by ATAYAL Organization Director Tony Coolidge, whose Atayal ancestry and passion to connect Austronesian groups sparked the “Tap Root Cultural Exchange Program,” in which students from various Austronesian backgrounds are given the chance to meet and study one another’s cultural similarities and differences. Raised in America, Coolidge first discovered his Atayal lineage during his first visit to Taiwan. “I fulfilled a promise to come and meet my relatives and I was surprised to learn that I am part of a culture called Atayal. It was in this town of Wulai here that I discovered this culture with the carvings, the dance and the textiles and everything here,” said Coolidge. “And I was very curious! I said, ‘Wow, this must be something like Polynesian or Maori rather than generally Polynesian,’ said Reece Howard. The delegation’s journey to the southern and eastern parts of Taiwan will continue, with the second part of their journey, one during which they traveled to the oceanic tribes of Taiwan, to be published next week.

Film students from AUT were selected as the first participants of the Tap Root program for their background and expertise in making film documentaries. The students were invited to visit various universities to attend documentary film festivals in order to learn and understand more about the connections between Austronesian peoples across the globe.

The students were accompanied by Makarita (Maaki) Howard, a lecturer and Ahi Kaa (bearer of Maori traditions) at AUT for 23 years, and her husband Tom (Tamati) Howard, an elder in his extended family, for the duration of their visit. The Howards, bearers and experts of their traditions, became sources of invaluable knowledge and insights for both the students and their Taiwanese hosts.

Following their visit to Chaoyang University of Technology in Taichung, the delegation was invited to the Atayal town of Wulai, where they received a fortuitous invitation to a wedding, at which the Maori and the Atayal bonded over a celebration and performance exchanges. Though linguistic or cultural similarities may not have been immediately apparent, student Reece Howard remained optimistic for their visits to tribes such as the Amis, Bunun and Rukai. “I am not really looking to see obvious similarities but it is more like the spirit of things,” said Coolidge. “I hope that it will connect them and encourage more cooperation in the future.”

“I hope to find anything closer to Maori rather than generally Polynesian,” said Reece Howard. The delegation’s journey to the southern and eastern parts of Taiwan will continue, with the second part of their journey, one during which they traveled to the oceanic tribes of Taiwan, to be published next week.

The second part of this article will be published on Thursday, Dec. 26.