

Exchange Report  
National Taiwan University  
February 2020 – January 2021

### **Introduction**

My year in Taiwan was in many ways a typical exchange experience. I met wonderful people, improved my Mandarin, saw beautiful sights, and ate great food, all while bizarrely safe from COVID-19. But as cliché as it may sound, these experiences were nothing compared with the spiritual experiences I had internally. In fact, my year in Taiwan was one of the most challenging of my life. My advice to anyone deciding where to study abroad—or making any decision really—is to inform yourself about different places and programs, but ultimately go with your gut. If you feel drawn to something, somewhere, or someone, there is probably a sub- or unconscious reason. Ask the universe for what you want, work towards it, and be open to any form in which it may come. The following report is about my experiences at NTU and in Taiwan in general that will hopefully be relevant to the most people.

### **Why did you choose this university in this country?**

I am majoring in East Asian Studies (Chinese Studies) with a minor in Geography, so I naturally wanted to go to a Chinese-speaking country for my exchange. There are a few practical reasons why I chose Taiwan over Mainland China, the first being that Taiwan uses the Traditional Chinese writing system rather than simplified characters. I had also been to China before and wanted to use the opportunity to get to know a smaller country more intimately. Finally, friendships with Taiwanese people and those who had visited Taiwan led me to become fascinated by its unique culture and history. I feel lucky to have been accepted to the exchange program at NTU because it is the best university in Taiwan. The beauty and convenient location of the campus were also attractive.

### **Were there any major differences compared to your home university? What were they?**

There were several differences in terms of both academic and social life. Course registration at NTU is more complicated than at Uni Heidelberg, but the university provided step-by-step instructions that were easy to follow. In my departments in Heidelberg, it is not uncommon for one or two assignments to determine your total grade. However, my classes at NTU all factored several elements including graded homework assignments, shorter papers, quizzes, etc. into the final grade. This system meant that the workload was more spread out, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

The teaching style of the Chinese language classes was also very different, and in my opinion superior. In Heidelberg's Chinese Studies department, a lot of emphasis is placed on translation. At NTU because all the students had different native languages, the classes were taught entirely in Mandarin, and much more emphasis was placed on expressing our own thoughts both orally and in writing. I found the quality of the instruction excellent and think my Chinese improved significantly.

In terms of student life, the main difference is that students' social lives at NTU seem to be much more closely tied to the university itself than those of students in Germany. There is a wide variety of student clubs and events. Furthermore, most students live either at home or in a dorm, where no overnight guests are allowed. In my second semester I moved to a WG, but even there my landlord did not allow us to have any visitors. This is quite different than the independence I had become accustomed to in Germany and also reflects the experience of many Taiwanese.

Finally, NTU discourages students from working during their exchange period, whereas having a job parallel to one's studies is commonplace in Germany. The university did ultimately allow me to take part in an internship during my second semester, but it was fairly complicated to coordinate and get permission. This taught me about the general mentality in Taiwan that students should focus solely on their studies.

### **How did you prepare for your stay abroad?**

My preparations for the exchange were unusual due to COVID-19. The first steps were not too complicated. I obtained the appropriate visa, registered for a vacation semester at Uni Heidelberg, bought a plane ticket, found a subletter for my room in Heidelberg, etc. However, a few weeks before my planned flight in early February 2020, the COVID-19 situation had started to become more serious, although there were still only a handful of cases in both Germany and Taiwan. Around midnight the night before my scheduled flight, I saw a Facebook post from NTU that the start of the semester had been delayed two weeks. This was extremely stressful because I was not sure if it was an official statement. I have since learned that NTU often shares announcements on Facebook before sending out official emails, so that is a valuable resource for anyone interested. Ultimately, I did delay my flight but decided to take part in the exchange despite the uncertainty. I saw no indication that Taiwan would be more dangerous than Germany, and this turned out to be a great decision. The Taiwanese government's swift and thorough response meant that my exchange was basically unaffected by the pandemic, at least directly.

### **Would you recommend the host university to other students? Why or why not?**

I would absolutely recommend NTU to other students. My experience was overall excellent, and I am extremely grateful for the opportunities made possible by the university. Not only were the Chinese classes superb, but I also had the chance to explore fields such as oceanography that are not offered as in depth in Heidelberg. There are also a few course offerings specifically for exchange students that teach you about Taiwan's culture and natural environment. I went on a geology excursion to Kending in southern Taiwan, which enabled me to explore the country in a way I never could have on my own. The campus is gorgeous and has excellent facilities. I spent a lot of time just walking around and studying in the library and felt quite cozy there. I easily made friends with both other exchange students and Taiwanese students who were eager to show me around Taiwan and take me on weekend getaways to other cities and nature spots. Furthermore, I am fairly certain that having NTU on my resume helped me get the internship I did during the second semester.

There is unfortunately one important issue I have to mention. During my exchange period, a few students died by suicide or attempted suicide on campus, and I was frustrated by the university's response. Similar incidents at other universities followed. This issue is obviously much more complex than one university alone, but I still find it important to mention. A close family member of mine died by suicide, so I did reach out to both the administration and student association to discuss their responses and offer my perspective. Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that the effort would have had to come from my side, and I was not in an emotional or logistical position to take on a more active role. As a visitor in another country, I usually try not to be obtrusive or criticize the local society, but this issue was very difficult for me. I found the publicity around the incidents paired with the lack of genuine community engagement deeply unfortunate.

**Was it difficult to find your way in the host country? What surprised you the most?**

Overall, I did not experience an intense culture shock in Taiwan and felt safe and welcome wherever I went. I would encourage any future exchange students not to be shy about speaking Mandarin, even if you know only a few phrases. Local Taiwanese may be eager to practice English with you, but they will definitely be friendly and excited if you want to practice.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, my exchange also coincided with the Black Lives Matter movement, and I had many eye-opening discussions about race with other exchange students and locals. There were even a few on and off campus BLM events. Racism against Black people and prejudice against all dark-skinned people definitely exists in Taiwan. Simultaneously, since the start of the pandemic, Asians have been facing increased racism in the West as scapegoats. It was very interesting and humbling to observe these issues, all while being more acutely aware of my whiteness than ever. I experience white privilege everywhere, but in Taiwan I sometimes found myself receiving special treatment in a much more overt way than in Europe or the US. I also noticed some white people who had been living there for several years had become accustomed to such special treatment (e.g., higher pay than locals) and were not actively critical of the inequality. The conversations on race in Europe, the US, and East Asia are so drastically different, and I would encourage any students on exchange anywhere to talk to locals about their perspectives.

This may seem insignificant, especially following the previous topics, but the main logistical thing I struggled with was different eating habits. There was no kitchen in the dorm, only a microwave, so I had to eat all of my meals outside. Many Taiwanese restaurants close for lunch at 14:00, so I also had to eat earlier than I was used to. I was, however, surprised to find that vegetarian restaurants are everywhere, as many Taiwanese people are vegetarian for religious (i.e., Buddhist) reasons. I would recommend keeping utensils and a reusable container in your bookbag because the amount of plastic cups, plates, and single-use chopsticks is quite shocking. That said, I do miss the convenience and deliciousness of Taiwanese food.

**Conclusion**

As we all know, 2020 was a tumultuous year for the entire world. I am extremely grateful to have spent it in Taiwan at NTU and hope that this report has been helpful to anyone interested.