Overview:

My exchange semester at National Taiwan University was by far the most rewarding and fulfilling experience throughout my undergraduate career. Looking back, I thought 4.5 would go by really fast, and it actually ended up going by faster than expected. From boarding my flight to Taipei to moving out of NTU Prince dorms-ShuiYuan building C room 429, it felt like I’ve only been in Taiwan for a few days. As the only NTU exchange student from SFU for spring 2019, I was a bit nervous but excited at the same time because it was my first time traveling alone to a foreign country without my parents and friends. Although I felt lonely during the first few days, attending the campus tour provided the opportunity to engage with other exchange students! The biggest advice I would give to any exchange student is do NOT be afraid to initiate conversations with other exchange students. Most, if not all, exchange students are in the same shoes as you, so don’t be afraid to spark conversations with people in your orientation group because you may be missing out on long-term friendship opportunities if you don’t push out of your comfort zone. Your study abroad experience depends on what YOU make out of it, so go abroad with a POSITIVE mindset and you’ll have the best time of your life. Personally, the memories and bonds I have made with my friends and mentors have definitely left me in tears. Taiwan is definitely a warm and happy place to be, and the intimacy between humans is definitely one of the most significant qualities of Taiwan.

Preparing for Exchange:

The application process for exchange was definitely challenging and long, but if you have friends who’ve been through the application process then I’d definitely recommend reaching out to them. Personally, the most challenging aspect of the application was asking for academic references.
because I haven’t really engaged with many of my professors during the time of application. However, after shooting a few emails to some of my professors, I was really surprised that most, if not all of them were happy to help me out. So, for anyone worried about acquiring academic references, I’d say shoot your shot and email your professors anyways, because in the end, you’ll never get any results unless you try.

In most cases, the academic structure and instruction standard at your host institution will be completely different than that of SFU. The course planning worksheet is a requirement for any student who seeks nomination for exchange and selecting classes at your host institution may be a challenge because the course description and grading system is very different, thus it’s really difficult to determine what the course your interested in may transfer back as. For me, the courses that I put down on my course planning worksheet were completely different from what I took at NTU, therefore, don’t stress yourself if you’re unsure of what courses you want to take. Most of the courses that I put on my course planning worksheet were not offered in the semester of my exchange, so seriously, don’t stress yourself with course planning!

My admission letter from National Taiwan University arrived at the ISS office very late: January 5th, 2019. The late admission letter left me with only 1 month to acquire my student visa and purchase my plane ticket to Taiwan. In addition, to reserve the dormitory, I was required to pay a 2-month deposit and 1 month of rent before the end of December (approx. 800CAD); therefore, I found it a bit frustrating how I had to pay for my dormitory before my admission package arrived.

February is considered “high season” due to the high volume of people visiting family in Taiwan during Chinese New Year, therefore it is recommended to purchase your airfare ticket in advance to avoid overpaying for flights. Personally, I chose to opt into the 1-year ticket option which enables me to select a return date whenever I want without paying additional fees. The 1-year ticket option is available with China Airlines and Eva Air. Personally, I was really thankful I’ve opted into this option since I was selected to attend the Environment summer program offered by Tsinghua University! With a month between my program, I was able to travel to many major cities in China: Wuhan, Shanghai, Beijing, Qingdao, Nanjing and Liuhe. I also made a 3-day trip to Seoul, Korea!

The cost of living in Taiwan is lower than Canada; however, Taiwan is a cash-based society thus debit and credit card payments are not the norm. For me, I always carry approx. 1000NTD (around 42 CAD) to ensure I have adequate funds for food and spontaneous night outs with friends. With the mindset of assuming all items in Taiwan are cheap, going over-budget is very easy since most exchange students tend to buy items in quantity and forget about keeping track of their spendings! To get the best deal on currency exchange, bring your passport and cash and exchange it to New Taiwan Dollars at the Bank of Taiwan. Withdrawing money at the ATM is also another option; however, ATM fees can be a hassle and the currency exchange rate may not be in your favor. To ensure that you have the funds to enjoy your time in Taiwan, I would recommend working full time prior to departure (since spring semester in Taiwan starts in February so you would have 1.5 months after your finals to work). SFU also offers many bursaries and scholarships for students studying abroad, so APPLY for scholarships because any amount of money could help improve the quality of your experience on exchange. For me, I was a recipient of the International Mobility
Award and the SFU exchange bursary, and these funds were basically enough to cover the cost of my plane ticket and most of my tuition fees! On exchange, I was able to go overbudget and travel with friends every week, and I would’ve never been able to fund these trips if I did not apply for exchange bursaries/scholarships.

**During Exchange:**

I still remember the day when I got my student ID, February 15th, 2019, it was one of the most exciting day since I was able to access the facilities at NTU from that day on (library, gym, computer labs…etc). With the student ID, you can get 10% discount on all purchases at the convenient stores and cafeterias operated in NTU! Consequently, students get free admission to museums in Taiwan (such as the national palace museum), and since I like to explore museums, my student ID helped me save a lot of money on admission fees.

When you arrive, make sure you attend the campus tour because that’s where you will form your friend groups on exchange. My biggest tip for anyone going on exchange is to say “yes” to every activity/hangout because that’s where you will be able to make connections that will last throughout your exchange.
Since club day for spring 2019 doesn’t start till March, I’d recommend following up with your NTU email to keep updated on club events (since some clubs will contact the Office of International Affairs to advertise their clubs to exchange students). I’ve joined a few clubs but later realized my schedule was too packed to attend all of the meetings. At NTU, all my classes did not exceed 30 students, and the small class size enabled students to form stronger connections with the professors. All of my class were taught in English except for my badminton class which was taught in Mandarin. A unique aspect of National Taiwan University is that it offers Physical Education classes, therefore, students are able to register for courses such as swimming, squash, basketball, tennis, tae-kwon do…etc. A semester at NTU is longer than a semester at SFU, therefore, 20+ credits (equivalent to 8-10 courses) is considered a normal course load for local students at NTU. Most of the courses that I’ve took did not have any exams which gave me the freedom to deeply explore the island of Formosa.

A course that I’d highly recommend is Introduction to Field Geology II. For 5000NTD, it’s a 2-credit course which enables you to explore the geological features of the Hengchun peninsula and learn about how Taiwan was formed geologically. This course was also a great way to engage with other exchange students and local students in Taiwan! The total duration of the field excursion is 4 days 3 nights, and on the last night the instructors organize a talent show, and participation in the talent show will allow you to earn bonus points towards your final grade. The talent show enabled me to push out of my comfort zone and emcee in mandarin. The geology talent show was one of the best nights I’ve had in Taiwan.

All exchange students are guaranteed on-campus housing in NTU Prince dorm at the rate of 4900NTD/month for a shared room and 7400NTD/month for a single room. NTU will send you an email to pay 2-month deposit and 1 month rent prior to moving into your dorm, and you will be required to pay the fee in order to reserve your room. The rooms are really basic with bedding frame, desk, fridge and closet. You will be required to bring your own mattress, blanket, pillow, lamp and internet, and you can purchase these items at IKEA, Costco or at the dorm front desk. My biggest advice for internet is to opt into the unlimited data plan. Unlike Canada, data in Taiwan is relatively cheap, and you will depend on mobile data to get to navigate to places and
communicate with your exchange mates. For me, unlimited 4G data only costed 2600NTD for 180 days, which converts to less than 20CAD a month.

During orientation, I was introduced to the International Companions for Learning program (ICL), a collaborative project between NTU and the Ministry of Education of Taiwan, which aims to promote cultural exchange to elementary and middle school students across 100+ schools in Taiwan. Personally, joining this program was definitely the best decision I’ve made on my exchange at NTU. Near the end of the program, the ICL program will provide FREE trips to visit the schools across Taiwan, and you are allowed to sign up for as many trips as you’d like. I’ve signed up for 5 trips and I regret not signing up for more. I never expected myself to create such tight bonds with these kids, and the welcoming atmosphere provided by each school was truly heartwarming. I would’ve laughed it off if someone told me that I would be skyping kids on my exchange, but it happened and I’m super glad I was able to meet many kids around Taiwan. Visiting each school provided me a strong insight into the school system in Taiwan but also allowed me to live the childhood I never experienced here in Asia. Throughout the trips, I was also able to engage with various local and international students who all shared something unique about their culture. I am extremely grateful that I had the opportunity to learn from everyone in the ICL program, and these memories will forever remain in my heart for the years to come.
Reflection after Exchange:

There’s no doubt that my exchange semester has been the most fulfilling semester I’ve had during my undergraduate career at SFU. I’ve learned so many life skills and made many close friends who I hope to remain in contact for the rest of my life. The people and the environment in Taiwan truly make you feel like a 2nd home, and I’d highly recommend everyone to consider Taiwan as an exchange destination to pursue. Although it may be challenging sometimes, especially for those living in a foreign country alone for the first time in life, the experience is definitely rewarding and the places you’ll travel to will be worthwhile. While on exchange, try to be as engaging as possible. Keep an open mind to try new things and learn!

I’ve also created a YouTube channel documenting my abroad experience at my host country. Please check out my channel by searching my name “Shawn Liu”.

For those hesitant about studying abroad, don’t be afraid to set up an appointment with the Study Abroad officers! If you’re not confident with your application, submit one anyways, because you’ll never know the result unless if you apply. Your life as a student will eventually end, so why not make the best of it by STUDYING ABROAD!
More Photos:

Main Gate, National Taiwan University

Group picture, ICL Xiaoliuchiu trip
English Romanticism group picture (most professors will ask for group pictures at the end of the semester)

Riding an electrical scooter at the most southern point in Taiwan (Eulanbi)
Climbing Elephant Mountain with my best friend, Dominic

University level Chinese Orchestra competition in Yilan
A typical meal in the school cafeteria, roughly 70NTD (a bit less than $3CAD)

Picture with the former president of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai Shek.