SFU Exchange Report –
National Taiwan University

1 INTRODUCTION

With the increasing amount globalization taking place in the world, it is incredibly important to have a solid understanding of different cultures, people, language, and customs. The world is a huge place and you can only learn so much about it by staying in the small bubble of the lower mainland. SFU Exchange offers the perfect opportunity to experience first-hand what it is like being in a different school, in a different country, with a new set of peers, being immersed and integrated into a whole new way of learning and thinking.

I have always adored Asian culture, especially that of Taiwan and Japan. For my exchange term, I chose to go to National Taiwan Normal University to study Mandarin in the Fall 2013 semester; it is the most prevalent language in the world and would be extremely beneficial to learn, not only for my personal interest but for business dealings. It could open up so many opportunities that I may not even know existed. Hoping to have a future career in a large business, it is impeccable to have a broad understanding of how different parts of the world operate.

I have already taken one Chinese class at SFU, but it is so hard to make this knowledge grow when everyone around you primarily speaks in English. Not using the language outside of class or hearing others speak it on a repeated basis leads one to forget what you have learned very quickly. As I am nearing the end of my student career at SFU and will soon get my BBA, I had to act fast. This is a type of opportunity that has a limited time window as I feel that after you graduate, you will probably become too busy and not get to take advantage of the same benefits.

2 PREPARING FOR THE EXCHANGE

I don’t think there was one time I felt nervous before my trip, just excitement as I know some Taiwanese and other people here in Canada who have been there that always tell me about the great food, culture, transportation and everything being very affordable.

In terms of what to bring: PACK LIGHT! You can find almost any product you can back home (and more), and for usually cheaper than you could have got it for. This is especially true with clothes. I made the mistake of bringing too many clothes so I barely got my luggage closed and had to leave a few things behind on the way back as a result.

To find the cheapest flight there, I recommend using Google Flights. It lets you know what day the prices are going up/down in an intuitive manner and I found a sweet spot that let me maximize my duration while avoiding the post-Christmas price gouging. In fact, I came back only two days before the start of the Spring 2014 semester at SFU. Though the flight to Taiwan is pretty long at roughly 11 hours or so and definitely the longest flight I have ever been on, it was actually the most comfortable flights I’ve
had. Having flew only with WestJet and Air Canada in the past, I was pleasantly surprised to find out Asian airlines actually have good service, meals, recent movies, and without even asking, provide you with slippers, pillows, and blankets to make the flight more comfortable.

I believe they are currently constructing a train from the Taiwan airport to Taipei, but right now once you get there, there is a bus costing $135NT (about $5 Canadian) that will take you right to Taipei. Don’t worry about having exact change, from the airport to Taipei you buy the tickets at a cashier as opposed to on the actual bus.

Taiwan is a very cash-based society, so credit cards aren’t usually accepted unless you are shopping at the more western-style places or from a major store such as Uniqlo. Personally, I didn’t bring that much money with me, maybe about $50 Canadian that I exchanged at the airport in Taiwan so I could survive a few days (there is a $100 NT service fee and the rates aren’t the best, but better rates than exchanging in Canada). Before leaving on my trip, I applied for the Amazon.ca Rewards Visa card. This credit card has no annual fee, and most importantly, no foreign transaction fees. This means that I can buy something from a store, actually get a good foreign exchange rate, and not get dinged 2.5% on top of it. I also used it to do cash-advances at HSBC ATMs to get the good rate and only a 1% surcharge.

3  DURING THE EXCHANGE

I arrived a few weeks before my fall exchange start time in Taiwan since I wanted to do some travelling during the nice hot late summer weather. I highly recommend going south to Kenting or to Green Island and doing some snorkeling when it’s warm. That’s what I planned, but I had to reschedule due to a typhoon coming.

As I went to the Mandarin Training Center at NTNU, I actually had two separate orientations: one for NTNU and one for the Mandarin Training Center. The one for NTNU was in a lecture room with speakers at the front going over a handout they pass out and how to apply for classes using their online system. Everybody was grouped together according to their department, and there was a student representative for each group to make everyone feel more comfortable together. The Mandarin Training Center orientation consisted of an introduction to the different types of classes offered, expectations, and then the signup process where you brought them all your documents, get your tuition waiver, and pick up your books.

After the orientations, I went to the main campus and talked to the Exchange Coordinator at the school. She let me know about my dormitory, gave me my room number, some forms, and I paid her 11,000 NT in cash which includes a 1000 NT refundable deposit. You then take the form over to the dormitory, they give you the key and you’re set. Once you get inside though, you’ll realize that there are no mattresses for you, so just take a two minute walk down to the JSF store which sells everything you’ll ever need to survive. The dormitory has keycard access and bathrooms with private showers. There were three squat toilets and one western style toilet.

Classes were 3 hours per day with roughly 3-4 hours of homework every night since I signed up for the intensive class. There were 8 people total in the class and they were all international students trying to learn Chinese just like me. It was a very thorough, fast paced course that made sure speaking, reading, listening, writing, and even presentations were all practiced. There were also two field trips: one to the
Confucius temple and one to make pineapple cakes. Just put your best effort forward and you won’t have to worry about the grading. I picked up a lot of Mandarin during my stay.

Taiwan is a very humid country so prepare for that but there are lots of places to checkout, from the city, mountains, countryside such as Kaohsiung, Danshui, Hualien, Taizhong, Kenting, Guanshan, and so many more. With the super convenient MRT, train, highspeed rail, and bus systems in Taiwan, it’s very easy and affordable to get from place to place too.

4 Reflection After Exchange

I would say that the hardest, but also a fun challenge in Taiwan was communicating. Trying to order food can be daunting if an entire menu is in Chinese...but there are still ways to order if your Chinese is poor if you just be creative! For example, point at pictures if available, point at some other table’s food and say you want the same (wo yao yi yang), ask others around you for help, or even just pick something at random.

While you are out in Taiwan, seriously go explore the country, meet lots of new friends, and enjoy yourself. You can be studying from the textbook all day, but it helps you so much more to actually use what you learn in the real life environment. Check out all the night markets, just be cautious if others try to get you to try some stinky tofu, it’s pretty overpowering at first.

Deep Fried Chicken Pieces – You will find this in every nightmarket
Along Taiwan’s Eastern Coast
Chiang Kai Sek Memorial Hall
Tainan Park
Taipei 101