

William Otter

AURA Report, 2013-2014

I used my Advanced Undergraduate Research Award to partially fund three semesters of study abroad in Taiwan and China. I spent the summer of 2013 participating in the Taiwan-US Alliance Ambassador's Scholarship program at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan, the fall in CET Harbin, an intensive Mandarin language program at the Harbin Institute of Technology in Harbin, China, and the spring in the Associated Colleges in China Intensive Language Program at Minzu University of China in Beijing.

The goal of my time abroad was to improve my Mandarin language ability; to that extent, for those ten months I took nothing by language courses, which totaled about twenty hours a week of classroom time. My semesters in Harbin and Beijing were especially difficult academically, as they both included a language pledge that required me to speak Mandarin at all times (both in the classroom and outside) and class workloads that required at least as much homework time each week as time spent in class. Learning these countries' language became a full-time job, but I was well rewarded for my efforts by the huge leaps my ability took this year and the world of information and understanding I unlocked as a result.

The pronounced geographical differences of the three cities in which I studied predictably lead to subtler cultural differences among people ostensibly unified by a common language and ethnicity. In Tainan, people smile a lot; in Beijing, nobody ever looks too impressed by anything; and in Harbin, expressions get swallowed up by puffy jackets, scarves, and quick strides to the next heated building. And in every place I went, I found sincere people happy to help me understand their culture's complex, fascinating history and language. Those same people usually also wanted to teach me dirty words and discuss the Houston Rockets.

In terms of very tangible benefits, my time abroad, partially funded by AURA, improved my Mandarin ability to heights I never imagined I would reach when I started studying freshman year. I am enrolled in classes at Rice for next semester to keep improving. The Rice Study Abroad Office also selected me as a study abroad ambassador for next school year due to my fairly unique and lengthy study abroad experience. As for the intangibles, I've learned what life is like in two countries very different from the U.S. and that knowledge will inform in some way every future decision I make. My experience valuable beyond simple financial terms, so I sincerely appreciate the Chao Center giving me a grant that I was able to turn into much more.