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September 2019

Taiwan-United States Sister Alliance Summer Program 2019

From June 10th to August 8th of this year I participated in a scholarship program for intensive Mandarin language study in Tainan, Taiwan. As I had only been studying Mandarin in school for two years, it was the most challenging language-related program I would participate in up to that point. In addition to standard language classes, the program scheduled one-on-one courses, mandatory language exchange time with a Taiwanese student assigned to us by the university, weekend excursions to different parts of Taiwan, multiple community service opportunities, and a weekend stay with a host family. It was a multifaceted trip that gave us students experience with the different aspects of learning a language and living in a different country.

Besides having an authentic environment to practice Chinese in, the most rewarding part of the trip for me was learning about Taiwan's rich history and culture through a combination of people's stories, island exploration, and informative classes. This would not have been possible without the AURA grant. The AURA grant allowed me to not only participate in the program with a better spirit and a feeling of relieved financial stress, but it also gave me the opportunity to go above and beyond the pre-scheduled activities of the program and explore Taiwan for myself.



I met several kids at this elementary school who knew a surprising amount about American music and basketball. I still miss them.

For example, we traveled to Kenting and Pingdong in late June to learn more about two of Taiwan's indigenous tribes, the Paiwan and Rukai, and to teach some elementary schoolers some English. Meeting these children was eye-opening for two main reasons. First, it shed some light onto Taiwanese politics and the history behind the island and its people. Second, many of the kids already had international influences, despite living in the countryside. For example,

upon seeing me they asked me if I kept up with the NBA, knew of contemporary African-American rappers like 21 Savage, and were surprisingly familiar with Ed Sheeran.

It was this scheduled activity that made me discover how much I loved the countryside of Taiwan. A few weeks after this trip, during the host family weekend, my host family took me to their home in Taitung, the eastern part of the island. It was there that I had the opportunity to go to a marketplace on the road, meet more indigenous people from a different tribe—this one being the Buyuma—and learn more about them.



Enjoying the scenery at Taroko Gorge, the main tourist attraction near Hualien, Taiwan.

Influenced by my enjoyment of Taitung, the following weekend—my final before I had to go home—I utilized some of the AURA funds to take a weekend trip to Hualien, a city north of Taitung. I was looking forward to the slower lifestyle and the spectacular scenery of the Taroko Gorge, both of which I was lucky enough to indulge in before I had to return to America.

Finally, just before we left, a team of 4 other students and me gave a presentation based on data we collected about crime rate and cost of living differences between Taipei and New York. The crime rates in Taiwan are exceptionally low, particularly for such a large international city, and we gave our theories as to what factors might have influenced that.

Considering all factors, this is the best trip I've taken in my life. Before going, I was not entirely convinced that the merits of traveling abroad to study were as noticeable as many had said they would be. And for the longest time while I was abroad, there weren't many salient indicators that I had improved. However, when I compare my Chinese level in June to what it is now, I don't think that there's any contest which is better. Moreover, the level of political and social understanding that I've gained from listening to real people speak from their hearts is an invaluable asset that I will never forget. I believe that programs like this truly encapsulate the idea of Asian Studies.