

EXPERIENCE REPORT

STUDIES AT THE NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In this experience report, I will write down my memories about my exchange semester at the National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei. Instead of focusing on my most incisive experiences, I am going to emphasize on topics which might possibly be informative and therefore helpful for future exchange students. About myself, I am 25 years old German student from Berlin and currently at the University of Ulm for a master's degree in econophysics, after study periods in Karlsruhe, Grenoble and Seoul.

In case you have any questions concerning the exchange semester at the NTU, be it organizational or other, feel free to contact me any time and I will try to assist with advice: Jaspergeipel@posteo.de

PREPARATION OF THE EXCHANGE

There are a couple of things one needs to tackle before hopping into the airplane:

- The application: Application for the National Taiwan University was done via Ulm University's international office and straight forward that being in particular due to the helpful support by the exchange coordinators Ms. Baur and Ms. Huang.
- Flight ticket: The main question here is, when do you purchase the tickets? Personally, I only purchased the tickets after obtaining the official confirmation from the National Taiwan University. However this was long after obtaining the confirmation from Ms. Baur and the International office in Ulm. In retrospect, I would trust more in the exchange agreements between the two universities and save around 200€ by purchasing early. In case your return is more than one year ahead, you won't be able to get a ticket for this date. Instead get a return flight at an earlier date and change the date later on, as this is still cheaper than buying the tickets separately. It might also be worth a try to directly call the flight company to circumvent this issue. Also one should check for Rail&fly ticket which grant convenient airport access. China airlines is the only airline offering nonstop flights to Taipei international airport (TPE)
- Visa: In case you intend to stay for more than one semester, there is the option to apply for a resident visa. This turns out to be very neat as it will provide you with a Taiwanese identification card and the applications fees are cheaper than for the other visa. Such a Taiwanese ID is prerequisite for opening a Taiwanese bank account, which in turn is required in order to get the NTU scholarship. But if you do, be informed that the health certificate you need to fill out differs for whatever reason from the one required by the National Taiwan University! Thus it is indeed required to fill out both of them! Therefore I recommend to directly contact the Taiwanese 'embassy' in Germany and ask for the certificate because it is difficult to find on their website. Visiting the doctor of your trust and smooth talking him into inventing some medical indication for the required tests, might save you quite a bit of money: As I did not, I privately had to bear the total costs of around 250€ for the entire procedure. Besides there is the option to quit the country every 90 days and reentry to refresh the visitor status. In case one intends to travel around in South East Asia, this might be a valid option, as it requires no action in advance. In my opinion applying for a multi entry visa doesn't make any sense, as it is expensive and doesn't offer any benefit compared to the resident visa.

- International health insurance: This is an absolute must-get before the departure, although to my surprise I met a couple of international students without any. Retroactive insurance is not possible and NTU requires one for the enrollment procedure. I decided to get the one from Envivas, which amounted to less than one euro per day and which also covered the other insurances the NTU requires. Due to a sports accident, I indeed had to take an insurance claim and I got my money back no questions asked.
- Vaccination: Your doctor might recommend you to get a full set of additional vaccinations, due to the tropical weather. This sums up to around 200€. Personally I felt fine with the recommended German vaccinations but in the end it is a personal call to make.
- Money: The general price level is definitely lower than in Germany and if thrifty one shouldn't have to spend more than back in Germany. However there are some factors which can change the balance significantly: Due to inflationary money policy by the European central bank, and or the mediocre economic situation in the euro area, the value of the euro lost nearly 15% compared to the Taiwan dollar over the last six months. It is difficult to foresee how it will develop in the future but personally I am not convinced by a rapid comeback towards more favorable exchange rates. On the bright side, for Taiwanese students, an exchange semester in Europe thus became much more affordable. In addition the food culture in Taiwan is extremely different from what I was used to in Europe and most noticeably in such a way that it is very uncustomary to eat at home. Instead it is customary to go together with a bunch a friends in one of the countless little restaurants in the streets of Taipei. Although the average price of around 3-6€ per meal in a restaurants is cheap from a European perspective, it might still sum up in the end. Besides, one might, as I did a couple of times, be interested to travel to some of the many other destinations in Taiwan which are worth visiting. Here again transportation and accommodation is cheap, but it sums up if done frequently. Nightlife prices for guys are comparable to what is common in larger German cities. Girls don't have to pay any cover fees at all. My budget was around 600€ per month (excluding the rent) and from what I feel, it would be very difficult to reduce this amount significantly. An application for scholarships might be a smart option to cover the additional expenses but should be tackled early on as their application deadlines usually run out even before the NTU's application procedure does. I myself had the privilege to be supported by the Baden Württemberg Foundation for which I am most grateful.
- Money exchange: The exchange rates at the Taoyuan International Airport are considerably better than the ones in Germany. Therefore I wouldn't recommend exchanging any Euros into Taiwan Dollars before arriving in Taiwan, unless one arrives later than 10pm in which case the currency exchange offices are already closed.
- Money withdrawal: Money withdrawal might prove to be an issue in Taipei, depending on your type of bank card. With a typical Giro Card/Maestro it was really difficult to find an ATM actually issuing money: Only the Citibank branches consistently did their job. In my opinion the DKB credit card is probably the best choice and most of the students had one as it doesn't cost any fees and allows for free cash withdrawal all over the world.
- Volunteer service: If chosen during the application procedure, the NTU provides a student volunteer service, i.e. a Taiwanese student offers his support. In my case this was a geology PhD student named Liang Fu, whom I am particularly grateful for his support to find an apartment in Taipei.
- Course selection system: The course selection system at the National Taiwan University turned out to be complicated nay confusing. It includes several add and drop phases, of which the first are online registrations and the later consist in approaching directly the professor although nothing is guaranteed to work out. Therefore I highly recommend to deal with this system as soon as possible and to figure out which lectures you really want to take.
- Accommodation: see section below
- Outgoing events might be really worth to go. For example Baden-Württemberg foundation organized a summer festival at Schloss Hohenheim to which all of its fellows were invited. There, I found out that two more fellows were going to Taipei and it turned out that one of them, Christoph Mayer, would even take

the same airplane than me. Figuring that out was extremely convenient as we chose to do most of the organizational stuff and also start exploring the city together.

Besides these couple of points, I don't think there is more to take into consideration and one can easily 'take the plunge', especially as Taiwan is a really safe country with very sociable and friendly citizen.

ARRIVAL AND FIRST DAYS

Arriving to Taipei can be quite overwhelming. I had booked in advance a cheap but not recommendable hostel and printed out a detailed description about how to get there. Therefore was quite confident to find it with ease. From the Taoyuan International Airport I took the bus to Taipei Central station, which takes around one hour and costs 120NT\$. However without any internet access, I would probably have been a bit lost there, as the area around Taipei Central station is pretty confusing, if it wouldn't be for Chris's Taiwanese volunteer who was so kind to pick us up at the airport.

The next couple of days I was focused on getting settled in Taipei: Together with Liang Fu and Chris, I went to National Immigration office next to the Xiaonanmen station in order to get my Taiwanese identity card, aka Alien Registration Card (ARC). Having the resident visa, the procedure in itself was very simple, however some Taiwanese volunteer put us in the wrong line with the wrong documents to fill out, which cause us to wait in vain for about two hours: Better to go directly to one of the terminals on the right side of the hall and ask for the right papers.

I also spent quite some time figuring out what would be the best cell phone contract: There are a couple of different possible options, but think that the fastest and probably cheapest is the prepaid card of Chunghwa Telecom Company. The sim card can be purchased upon presentation of two identification documents (passport and id) directly in most of their numerous branches. At the time it cost 180 NT\$ per gigabyte of traffic and a couple of NT\$ per minute. And as most of the communication (even with the landlord) was done over the LINE application, i.e. the Asian WhatsApp, this was always sufficient for around a month. Thus I basically never spent more than 5€/month on telecommunication, which is quite neat in comparison to the European price level.

Getting a bike was one of my main priorities early on: Although the traffic can be quite rough from time to time, Taipei is a great bike city and virtually all destinations within can be reached by bike. Some beautiful fixies can be purchased from 4000NT\$ on and low priced bikes can be purchased for 400NT\$ at the university bike auction. However the auction starts at 7am and one really has to be there two hours earlier in order to get one of the rare examples and the quality tends to be pretty mediocre. Thus in the end I decided to entirely rely on the Taipei Bike Sharing System, aka Youbike, which is a public bicycle sharing service offered by the government: There are several hundred bicycle docking stations everywhere around the city, where it is possible to rent one of the flashy yellow Youbikes, simply by using the student id. The first 30 minutes are free of charge, afterwards the system debits 20NT\$/30min directly from the student card. For my personal usage, the Youbikes were amazingly practical and I took them every day to drive to the campus.

Within the first week, I also participated to some exchange student meetings, which are probably the best place to find some nice people, went for the obligatory and in my opinion totally worthy Taipei 101 visit and also for the very cordial welcoming event by the NTU. A campus tour offered by Taiwanese volunteers was unfortunately more confusing than helpful, but a nice occasion to meet some of the Taiwanese and the other exchange students.

ACCOMODATION

Unlike most of the exchange students, I decided to not accept the offer by the National Taiwan University and move in one of their student houses, such as the Prince dormitories. Reasons for that were mainly the lack of a proper kitchen space and the dormitory regulations, which in my opinion interfere unacceptably with people's privacy.

During my time in Taipei I was reported different stories about how strictly these regulations were actually enforced. The search for an apartment is definitely very challenging, especially as most of the websites are in Chinese and the landlords were usually not proficient in English. An exception would be craigslist over which quite a few offers can be found, however the apartments are usually upscale and out of the reach of a student's budget. My buddy Liang Fu made a little PowerPoint presentation to explain how to navigate through the Chinese websites and thus allowed me to find some neat apartments. I and four other exchange students finally found a pretty nice apartment directly next to the Chiang Kai Shek memorial hall, which we all agreed is the best housing area for students in Taipei due to its key location in the Taiwanese Metro system and the abundance of little restaurants nearby. A Taiwanese friend had to act as a guarantor and be present during the contract signing. Although we were initially very pleased with our apartment, a high number of little issues (construction noises, malfunction of the air conditioning and drier, etc.) resulted in an overall difficult housing situation. Unaware of our own rights, we were effectively at the mercy of the landlord's goodwill. Based on these experience, I would probably not recommend to rent an apartment by oneself, but instead search in the Facebook group 'Apartments in Taipei' in which rooms in shared flats are frequently offered.

TAIWANESE FOOD

In Taipei, it is difficult to identify the archetype of a typical Taiwanese meal, as influences from other food cultures, i.e. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese and even Western are ubiquitous and the variety is immense. What stands out is the great number of small little restaurants, where locals eat on daily basis as well as the street food stands offering the famous xiaochi 小吃, i.e. Asian fast food. As far as I realized, it seems really uncostumary to prepare food at home, especially given the mentioned abundance and also the surprisingly high supermarket price for staple food. Thus testing new restaurants and new meals is like the unofficial national sport in Taipei. My personal favorites were the steamed buns filled with sesame, called 'baozi 包子', its smaller version, the xiaolongbao 小籠, whose best can be enjoyed at Din Tai Fung restaurant and last but not least the famous Taiwanese bubble tea. The Taipei night markets also shouldn't be despised, and offer of multitude of fascinating specialties such as the notorious stinky tofu: I do not want to anticipate the reader's judgment and instead advice to approach the Taiwanese cuisine with a healthy dose of curiosity. It is worth it!

STUDY AT NTU

The National Taiwan University is one of the, if not the most renowned universities in Taiwan, especially as most of the Taiwanese political prominence has studied at the NTU. The campus, located in the south of Taipei, is with its long palm tree alleys surprisingly beautiful and offers several nice places to unwind between courses. Also many different cafes, cafeterias, restaurants and convenient stores can be found on the campus itself, but the ones next to and especially the ones north of the campus are generally a bit better.

The variety of courses taught in English essentially depends of the field of study: while in business it is pretty vast, in economics it much less abundant and virtually nonexistent in physics. Therefore I point out again the necessity to identify as early as possible the courses of interest and then fight through the selection process in order to get enrolled. Apart from that, if you are already proficient in Chinese, finding some proper courses should be easy.

In my opinion, the course selection should be done in accordance with one's own ambition concerning the Chinese language: For each skill level (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1) there are two different and independent courses, the 'general Chinese' course and an 'enhanced Chinese' course, lasting six and four hours per week respectively. I took both courses and want to emphasize that were both absolutely amazing for the appropriation of the English language. Although the coordination between them wasn't always elaborated and repetitions occurred which I thought were somewhat redundant but as I heard helpful for others, I recommend without hesitation to sign up for both of them.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that they are also very time consuming, especially memorizing how to write the traditional characters takes considerable amounts of time and I therefore think that besides the Chinese courses one should take an absolute maximum of three other courses. I opted for Financial Policy and Economic History which both were quite satisfying.

Last but not least, the sports facilities both outdoors and in the gigantic Sports Center are in excellent condition and leave nothing to be desired.

OFF-CAMPUS LIFE AND OUT OF TAIPEI ACTIVITIES

There are no two opinions about this, Taipei is a multifaceted and buzzing metropolis, which always provides an opportunity for a further intriguing activity. Popular attractions, which I visited, include notably the Taipei 101, Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall, Beitou Hot Springs, Fine arts museums, Taipei Fish Market, Yangmingshan national park, Elephant Mountain, Ximen shopping area including Taiwan's oldest ice cream manufactory, several night markets and much more. Besides Taipei offers great public transport access for weekend trips to other destinations in Taiwan such Kenting, Green Island, Alishan, Taroko Gorge, which except the very touristy Alishan are worth recommending. Hiking amateurs will also greatly appreciate the picturesque yet challenging ascents to Xueshan, Yushan and Baidawushan summit. For further information about these hikes and the somewhat difficult permit application procedure, I refer to my great friend Klaus Martin Lassner's experience report, which covers these hikes extensively. Alternatively you can just write me an email.

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS – TL;DR

My exchange semester in Taipei has without any doubt been an incredibly valuable, instructing and exciting period of my life. I am most grateful for the privilege, to have experienced, by virtue of that semester, the Taiwanese and Chinese culture as well as to have meet extremely sympathetic persons, both Taiwanese and international. As a politically interested person, I also found it particularly fascinating to hear some personal views about the controversy regarding the political status of Taiwan and the recent Sunflower movement. Finally, I highly recommend to future exchange students Taipei and the National Taiwan University, which both easily stand any comparison in the Asian region.