

Final Exchange Report

Major: M.Sc. Hydrology

Host country: Taiwan (ROC)

Host university: National Taiwan University (NTU)

Exchange Period: Spring term, 02/2024 – 06/2024

1. My motivations for a stay abroad in Taiwan

As a student of hydrology, one reason I applied for the exchange semester in Taiwan, was to learn more about the attitude of Taiwanese (and Asians in general) towards environmental topics, their strategies in dealing with the regional circumstances and to discover the local (natural) environment firsthand. Also, I wanted to get to know a different culture and cultural area, to learn a new language (Mandarin) and to meet international people, thus becoming more independent and enhance my intercultural competence.

2. Preparing for the stay abroad

Before my stay abroad I first collected as much information as possible by visiting the websites of the Global Exchange program and of the host university, reading the exchange reports of previous exchange students, participating in a sensitization workshop, and joining different WhatsApp groups. The application process is pretty straightforward, you just have to keep in mind the deadline. And I recommend preparing as soon as possible for it. In case of questions, do not hesitate to ask the staff of the international office in Freiburg and Taiwan, they are both helpful and fast in responding.

The visa application process was easy, fast, and completed in only a few days. As a German citizen you have different possibilities, which you best ask the responsible Taipei Representative Office. At the time of my application, the responsible office was in Munich. You can enter Taiwan without a visa and stay for 90 days, after that you have to leave the country (for example for a short trip over the weekend) and re-enter Taiwan again. Or you could apply for a visitor visa or a resident visa, depending on the length of your stay. But keep in mind that you should also check the visa requirements of your host university. I, myself, had a visitor visa for 180 days, but even if you have only a visa for 90 days, it is possible to extend it in Taiwan. Regarding the flight, I suggest booking it as early as possible, because it is one of the highest expenses of your exchange. In my case a direct flight via China Airlines was the cheapest (and fastest) option.

One requirement of the host university is that you have an insurance. Since my insurance in Germany did not offer services outside of Europe but did not allow me to pause it (since I am still a student at the University of Freiburg), I needed an additional insurance. I chose the insurance TravelSecure Young, offered by the Würzburger Versicherung. However, I luckily had not to make use of the insurance during my exchange semester.

Finally, for sake of simplicity, I applied for a room in the NTU dormitory and was lucky to get a single-bed room in the Prince House Shui-Yuan dormitory in close proximity to the NTU campus. In case you do not get a dorm room, there is still the possibility to rent a room in a shared apartment. You could get information about that via Facebook or WhatsApp groups.

3. My experiences at the National Taiwan University

The National Taiwan University is considered as Taiwan's best and most famous university and local students are proud to be a part of it. The facilities of NTU are a mixture of old and newer buildings, but fortunately you have ACs in all of them. The main library was one of my favorite places at the campus. It offers many different areas, where you can study. The extent of the NTU campus is basically equivalent to that of a whole city district. With many trees, several ponds, and even a farm area, the campus reminded me rather of a park than of a campus and it is a nice place to just relax and enjoy nature, like watching the various types of birds there.

a. Organization

Generally, the organization of events at NTU is great. They offer various events at the start of the semester to help you orientate yourself. For the registration event you need to print out some documents and appear in person to get the needed stamps (yes, the registration cannot be completed digitally). During the semester basically all information is provided via email, the most important emails are written in English and Mandarin, others only in Mandarin. If you need to contact the International Office at NTU, I recommend writing an email, because it is easier for them to translate it if needed. Also, a local student volunteer will be assigned to you, whose function is to help you during your first weeks.

b. Courses and exams

One of the most complicated things at the NTU is the course selection system. But do not worry, like most students before you, you will also figure it out. The whole period of selecting courses consists of several phases, in which you should try to choose the courses you are interested in as soon as possible. Also, keep in mind that not all courses are conducted in English, even if the title of the course is presented in English. So always check the course language. Also, it is possible to add classes in the first weeks after the start of the lectures, but you have to ask the lecturer for permission. Finally, you can also drop courses you do not want to attend anymore.

In general, studying at the NTU is different than studying at university in Germany. The concept is more similar to high school classes and includes attendance checks, regular homework, assignments, and several quizzes/tests. Most courses also have midterms and finals. Usually courses at NTU offer 1 to 3 credits. Sadly, the number of credits does not always determine the workload of a course.

Personally, I took six courses: *General Chinese*, *Enhancing Chinese*, *Applied Machine Learning*, *Introduction to Biological Oceanography*, *Observations of Climate Change in Oceans* and *Exploring Taiwan: natural environment and resources*. Since I had no knowledge of the Chinese language before coming to Taiwan, I was really interested in learning it. I highly recommend choosing at least one Chinese course, either to get to know the local language or to improve your language skills. Also, this is probably the cheapest option to attend Chinese courses in Taiwan. The *General Chinese* course is quite a lot of work, you will have weekly dictations, in which you have to write the characters, homework, and revision tests. But despite the work, it was really fun, especially if you realize how your Chinese is improving. For myself, it was a great experience to be able to order food at a local restaurant after four months of studying. The *Enhancing Chinese* course is just a second Chinese course (with a different workbook), just that the content is more orientated on everyday life.

The other courses I took were all conducted in English. *Exploring Taiwan: natural environment and resources* is a mixture of regional studies and some biological basic knowledge. This course is offered mainly for international students; however, it did not benefit me that much. *Applied Machine Learning* was an interesting and practical course, but the workload was intense. The other courses focused on oceanography, a prominent field, considering that Taiwan is an island.

The quality of courses conducted in English is different however, some of them are really good and understandable, others do not bring much value to your academic journey. Also, at least in my case, I had to drop another course, because I simply could not understand the English spoken in the lectures. But this depends on the field you are studying in and the lecturer.

But, generally speaking, the difficulty of courses at NTU is easier than in Germany and you can also get good grades more easily. However, you will have a lot of work to do for most of the courses, thus the workload is more intense than in Germany. If you want to explore Taipei and Taiwan, I recommend not to choose too many courses.

c. Extra curriculum activities

Besides the official course, you can also join one of the student clubs. NTU holds a Student Club Fair a few weeks after the lectures start. I highly recommend visiting this event, even if you do not join a club in the end, because it is interesting to see how many different clubs they are offering. There are student clubs for judo, capoeira, volleyball, surfing, diving, gardening, composting, to only mention a few. Also, NTU has tennis courts and an in- and outdoor pool you can rent and a gym you go to. In addition, NTU, or more precisely the Office of International Affairs, offers many events

and some daytrips, which are a great opportunity for meeting new people and getting to know the local culture.

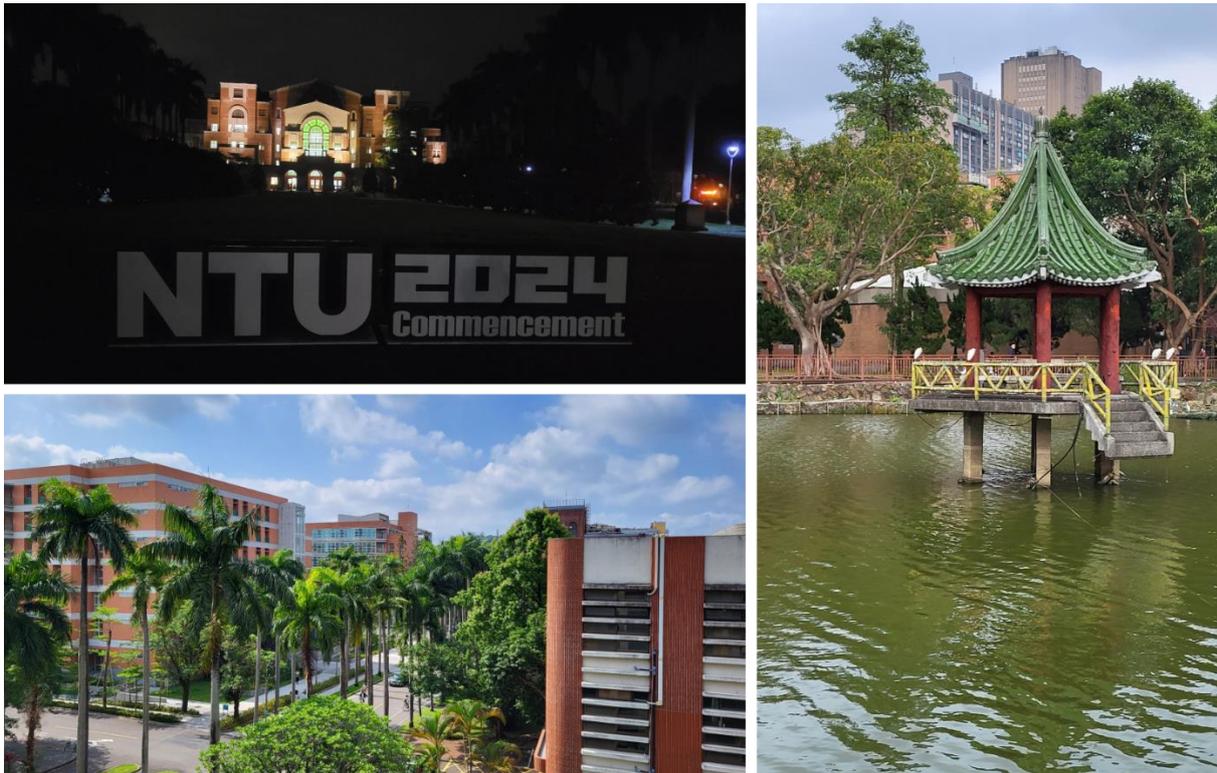


Figure 1: Impressions of the NTU campus. (Top left) The Main Library at night. (Bottom left) Some of the many palm trees on campus. (Right) A pavilion inside the Drunken Moon Lake.

4. Life in Taiwan and Taipei

a. Food

Taiwanese food is mostly a mixture of Chinese and Japanese cuisine; thus, it is no surprise to find many Japanese restaurants in Taiwan. If you want to try the famous local dishes, you can go to one of the many night markets. Besides that, Taiwan has also plenty of food courts and restaurants. But what really surprised me, was how much fried food Taiwan has to offer. Thus, their cuisine is not the healthiest one and people with a low-carb diet will probably have some struggles in Taiwan. There are also vegetarian options though. The NTU campus has different food stores as well, among them also a low-priced vegetarian buffet. Lastly, Taiwan is the best country for trying bubble tea, since it was invented there. With a plethora on (bubble) tea stores you still find some new kinds after four months.



Figure 2: Examples of Taiwanese food. (Left) Dàn bǐng (egg pancakes). (Middle) Niú ròu miàn (beef noodle soup). (Right) Bubble tea.

b. Transportation

Transportation inside Taipei is really easy. With a transportation card called EasyCard you can use the MRT, trains, buses, bikes and many more. You can top up the card with cash at each MRT station or at convenience stores. Conveniently, you can use your student-ID as an EasyCard as well. The MRT system of Taipei is on a worldclass level, and I really enjoyed using it. However, you have to keep in mind that you are not allowed to eat or drink something inside. The buses are mostly quite good as well; however, you have to give the bus driver a signal, otherwise he will not stop. Also, the rides are sometimes rather adventurous. Lastly, UBikes are a convenient means of transportation too, they are accessible via EasyCard. In Taipei you can rent one for the first 30 minutes for free.

c. Finance

In comparison to Germany most things in Taiwan are cheaper (e.g., water, electricity, transportation), though buying groceries can be more expensive. Especially toiletries, cosmetics and sun cream are more expensive, so it is cheaper to bring them with you to Taiwan. For cooking ingredients, vegetables and fruits prices are mostly higher than in Germany as well. In Taiwan it is common to eat out because it is cost less than cooking by yourself. Regarding housing, the prices are more or less similar to Freiburg, except for dormitories which are the cheapest option.

d. Weather

Taiwanese weather is the one thing, probably no one really likes, even most locals do not like it. In winter it can get cold, so you will need a sweater or jacket, because the rooms do not have a heater. Spring is probably the most beautiful season, not only is the weather rather pleasant, but you can also observe the spring blossom. Especially

the cherry blossom is, similar as in Japan, an event also the locals really enjoy. Unfortunately, temperature is increasing rapidly after that, so summer is really hot with temperatures over 30 or 35 °C. Due to the omnipresent high humidity, the apparent temperatures often exceed 40 °C. Also, there is much precipitation in the summer months.

This humidity also causes things to mold really fast, so I advise you to buy some silica bags and/or boxes and put them in your locker to prevent your clothes from getting moldy. Another advice is to always bring your umbrella with you, especially in summer. Taiwanese use them either as an umbrella or as sunshade.

One other thing, which could be problematic is air pollution. Luckily, I did not suffer from it, other exchange students however had some health issues because of it. Therefore, you will always see some Taiwanese wearing face masks.

e. Environmental issues

Taiwan tries to become more environmentally friendly, but in my opinion, they are not there yet. The waste separation is not really efficient, inside the dormitories and on campus they separate waste, but other than that you mostly find just two trash cans, one for trash and the other for recyclable items. Confusingly, it is often not clear, what is considered recyclable. Also, there is a high number of disposables. But, especially at NTU there are student clubs and initiatives that try to change Taiwan to a more environmentally friendly country. In addition, the use of renewable energy is increasing as well, but is not as prominent as in Germany yet.

5. Highlights and criticism

One thing I totally loved about Taiwan is its beautiful nature, I really enjoyed taking a walk in the parks or go hiking. In my whole time in Taiwan, I was not one time bored, since there are so many things you can do or places you can visit. I also liked the convenience stores, because, as one could imagine, they are really convenient and basically everywhere in Taiwan. Another great thing were the water dispensers, inside the NTU buildings, dormitories, or museums. They provide filtered cold, warm, or hot water (for drinking tea or cooking instant noodles). Together with the MRT system and UBikes these are perfect conditions to start your explorations. One highlight was the Lantern Festival in spring, where I could witness many traditional lanterns, labeled with wishes, fly off the sky. I also enjoyed the local museums, especially the National Palace Museum is an impressive exhibition of traditional Chinese and Taiwanese culture.



Figure 3: The beautiful nature of Taiwan. (Top left) Trees in the Alishan Forest Recreation Area. (Top right) View from Mount Qixing in Yangmingshan. (Bottom left) A rock formation on Xiaoliuqiu. (Bottom right) The lotus pond at the botanical garden.



Figure 4: Some (cultural) highlights. (Top left) Taipei 101. (Top middle) Lanterns at the Lantern Festival. (Right) A pagoda near the Maokong gondola.

Nonetheless, my stay in Taiwan was not without troubles, especially the first weeks were a struggle. The first thing that shocked me when I arrived in Taiwan, was the appearance of most buildings. As one of the most developed countries in east Asia, I expected Taipei to look more modern.

Also, I would have loved to know that not all people at stores can speak English. So, it is beneficial if you know some Chinese before coming here. Also, translation apps (like Google Translate/Lens and Pleco) and Google Maps are a must if you want to have an easier life in Taiwan. Sometimes, this language barrier appeared at places where I did not expect it. For example, the staff at the NTU main library could not speak English, though an elderly man at the night market could speak it nearly fluently.

In addition, it is sometimes rather difficult getting to know Taiwanese students. Many have little time due to their studies or are afraid to talk with international (English-speaking) students, because they think their English skills are too bad, which is mostly not the case. But in general, Taiwanese are friendly people, and there a willing to help you. Some offer help by themselves, others after you ask them. It also happened a few times that elder people spoke to me and other exchange students to practice their English or some even their German. In conclusion, Taiwanese are welcoming, and I never experienced a completely negative attitude towards me or other international people.

6. Final Conclusions

I do not regret the exchange semester at NTU at all. It was one of the most helpful experiences in my life so far. It was an interesting and enriching experience to meet many people from different countries. Also, it increased my appreciation for certain things in Germany (like nice-looking buildings, drinkable tap water or the existence of sidewalks). For me, the student exchange was a perfect opportunity to become more independent and to overcome challenges and thus grow as a person and I can only recommend everyone interested in an exchange to make use of this opportunity.

7. Acknowledgment

Finally, I want to thank the University of Freiburg and the National Taiwan University for offering the Global Exchange Program and also the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung. Without their scholarship my stay abroad would not have been possible.