

Title: Out of Tainan and Straight to Seoul
By: Shelby Cooper

With two different scholarships, I was able to travel abroad for the first time to two different countries. In the summer of 2019, I was able to study Chinese in Taiwan with the Taiwan-U.S Sister Relations Alliance (TUSA) Scholarship. Then, in the fall, the Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship helped me study abroad in South Korea. Along with these external aids, I had different internal motivations for wanting to go to these two countries specifically.

At the time, I was a declared Chinese and Linguistics Group Language major. After completing two semesters of Chinese at Oxy, I was particularly more drawn to the traditional Chinese characters and the accent used in Taiwan as opposed to the simplified characters and accent used in mainland China. I also felt comfortable and confident enough that I could survive in this Chinese speaking country in case of there being no English.

Deciding to study abroad in South Korea was a much easier decision to make as I had planned to travel there since I was first introduced to Korean in high school. However, in general, I'd advise that the most important aspect of choosing a country is choosing one that really resonates with you because, as cliché as it sounds, this first is a region where you will have to learn how to live in for 4-5 months. But you should also take highly into consideration why you want to go to any particular country, whether it be guided by current academics, the future, specific interests, or anything else.

Especially for those who might not have traveled abroad before, studying abroad may bring challenges associated with navigating these new spaces. I personally faced my biggest obstacle as soon as I arrived in Taiwan, having to navigate across the country with my two suitcases, only occasional Wi-Fi (no cell service), no experience with non-American public transportation, and a basic grasp on spoken Mandarin.

After landing late and discovering that the rest of the airport, never mind the country's public transportation, was closed for the night, I had to put myself in the airport's hotel. The next morning, I shuttled back to the airport to buy a phone card only to find out that my phone was not compatible. So, with my out-of-service cell phone, I made my way to the train station and eventually onto the KTX. After arriving in the city of Tainan, and switching to the city train, I finally had to reconcile with the terrifying thought of asking the girl sitting by me if she could show me where the school was that I was headed to. Despite the rocky language barrier, she patiently explained it to me and showed pictures of the street it was on. Looking back on it now, the route from the station to the school is so easy and straightforward. Yet, at the time, there was so much I didn't know. I ended up making many mistakes until one of the English-speaking university students took pity on me and put me in a taxi to the dorms.

After such a large physically and emotionally draining challenge, it felt as if my other challenges were not so bad in comparison. In both countries I did experience challenges in terms of language barriers where I had to navigate with my limited spoken Mandarin and Korean skills. Although it was much more present in the southern city of Tainan, Taiwan than it was in the capital city of Seoul, Korea where nearly everybody I encountered spoke English to a degree.

Simultaneously there were challenges in having to push through my social fears and interact with new people constantly, whether it was to ask for directions to the train station or to make friends out of my classmates. On the other hand, one of the biggest barriers I had anticipated facing was navigating these nearly homogenous spaces as a black woman. Yet, besides being asked once or twice for my picture in Taipei, the biggest inconvenience I experienced due to being of a different race was difficulty in figuring out how to manage my hair. But, being from northeast Ohio, I was already no stranger to humidity and its actions towards hair like mine.

Even though there may be any number of challenges in studying abroad, there are also bound to be successes for each obstacle you overcome. One of my biggest successes during my time abroad in both Taiwan and South Korea was pushing past my comfort zone to talk to different people in their language and experience different things. I am quite an introvert. At Oxy, I'm not particularly great at taking the initiative in making and hanging out with friends, but this semester, part of pushing myself outside of my comfort zone was going out with different people as much as I could to explore different aspects of Taiwan and Korea. In Taiwan, I made friends with my classmates, doing things together from going on weekend trips to Keelung to singing and choreographing our own Chinese version of *I'll Make a Man out of You* for our closing ceremony. I also did things on my own like traveling to Hualien to meet a friend or seeking out nearby coffee shops to do my homework in. And in South Korea, this led to me going to Seoul Tower with my mentor and two fellow mentees, showing a new friend around Ewha shopping street, taking a day trip down to Naejang Mountain with my Oxy friend and roommate to see the fall leaves, going out with some classmates for a last-minute language exchange, and a lot more that I wouldn't have done myself prior.

Through both programs, I was able to go from someone lost and feeling like I was doing everything wrong to someone who, by the end, was able to guide other people who were lost or wandering. So, even though I did not come out of my study abroad with explicit career experience as some do, I experienced a great deal of personal growth after having had to look out for myself for such an extended period of time in a way that I did not have to before. Despite any of the challenges, it was an opportunity that I was grateful to experience through Oxy study abroad. And even more so, the aid that I received from the Gilman Scholarship allowed me to study abroad during the fall semester not only without worrying about the money I would have lost not working on campus but also in the loans I avoided having to take out to cover visa and miscellaneous travel fees.

To other students who are like me, cost-conscious but still dreaming of studying abroad, I encourage you to not only not be afraid to study abroad, because everybody has their own reasons and goals for pursuing the experience. But I also encourage you to not be afraid to apply to scholarships such as the Gilman that can help you on your journey to travel more comfortably.

The Gilman is intended for low income students who are determined to study abroad but are worried about funding a such a trip. And since your determination to study abroad should reflect what you have written in Oxy's internal study abroad application, you could already be on your way in preparing to apply for the Gilman Scholarship! So, to those who might be financially eligible, but are at all hesitant, please don't be, and apply for this opportunity for thousands of dollars to help you study abroad like you have dreamed.



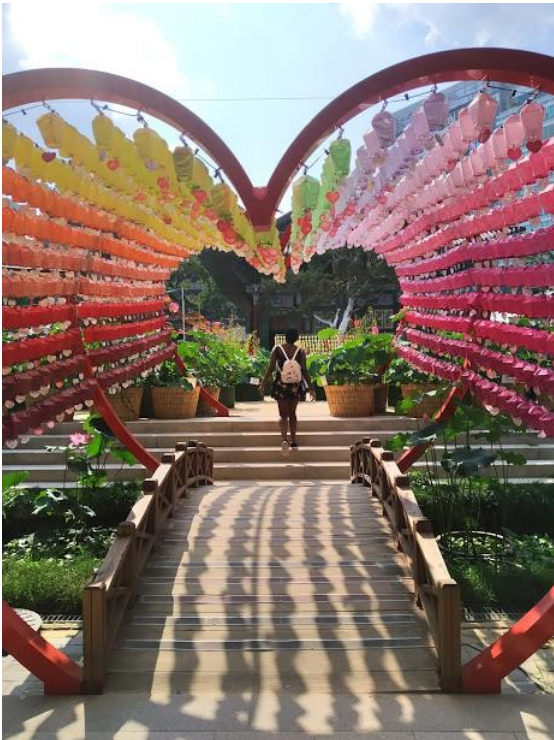
The National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan



Beitou Park Literary Trail in Taipei, Taiwan



Jin Shui Mountain Roads in Jinguashi, Taiwan



Outside of Jogyesa Temple in Insadong Seoul, South Korea



Ewha Shopping Street in Sinchon Seoul, South Korea