

Changing perspectives and opportunities

by

Julia Ritirc

University Teaching and Research Assistant, PhD Student

University of Vienna, Department of East Asian Studies/Sinology

Vienna, February 2014

I still recall the day when I arrived in Taipei. Even though it was not my first visit to an East Asian country and I was very well familiar with Chinese culture and the language, I still had this peculiar feeling in my stomach: a mixture of an unpleasant but trickling sensation. The reason therefore was that I was about to commence a three years study program. To be honest, the rather long time span I had ahead and the uncertainty of whether I would be able to accommodate and integrate well into the new environment worried me quite a lot. Yet, I knew that I was about to experience something very unique. Few was given this great occasion to, and I was one of them.

It did not take long, the unpleasant feeling disappeared and uncertainty turned into assurance. This was mostly owed to the positive attitude Taiwanese people showed me and the relatively healthy, orderly, and secure environment I was surrounded with. The decision to leave home, family, and friends for such a long time was not an easy one. And after three years, I decided, again, to leave dear friends behind and left Taiwan for the job opportunity I had been pursuing for such a long time. Notwithstanding, I turned back home with my luggage full of wonderful experiences and reminiscences.

In 2010, the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Vienna awarded me on behalf of the Ministry of Education (MOE) with the Taiwan Scholarship allowing me to spend three years of intensive study at a university of my choice. I opted for National Chengchi University in Taipei (NCCU) to become my new affiliated university. The following account is a brief extract of my personal and subjective impressions and experiences of my life and studies there between 2010 and 2013:

Back then in 2010, I had already graduated from the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna with a Master of Arts (MA) in Chinese Studies and I had been working as the department's secretary for almost one year. My goal was to enroll in a PhD program and pursue an academic career. Yet, despite the MA obtained, my Chinese language skills were fairly poor and I lacked a concrete and thorough methodological and disciplinary background that would eventually allow me to embark on the envisioned career. I reckoned that the only solution to overcome my deficits would be a longer stay in a Chinese-speaking country and the completion of another MA in a methodological discipline. Furthermore, I was convinced that in order to stick

out of the masses of PhD candidates and to work professionally with Chinese, I better had to enroll in a Chinese speaking program.

These considerations led me to apply for the Taiwan Scholarship which—at that time—comprised one year of intensive Chinese language courses and two years of MA study. The package suited my ambitions very well.

I decided to apply at NCCU because it is one of the most important universities for political studies in Taiwan with a long tradition in the discipline. All the professors at the department have gained international experience through long-term studies abroad, and most of them hold PhD degrees from very respectable universities in the USA and Europe.

During my first year in Taipei, I studied Chinese at the Chinese Language Center of NCCU. With the help of my diligent and dedicated teachers I quickly improved my language skills. In spite of the intensive preparation, I still had the feeling to literally jump into very cold waters when I started my MA classes at the beginning of the second year. I was not entirely convinced that my language proficiencies would allow me to finish all the class assignments of my MA courses.

It turned out that my worries were ill-grounded. Cold waters became warmer when I learned that I was not the only foreigner at my department; I had a German and a Korean combatant! Another reassuring event happened at my first lecture: The professor very attentively inquired whether my Korean colleague and I had problems in following the speed of her talk. During the following two years, I encountered the same mindfulness and sympathy from all other professors whose seminars I attended, the administrative personnel, and fellow students. Many people gave me a helping hand in order to solve diverse issues.

After two years of hard work, I finally reached my goal and graduated from NCCU with an MA in Political Science. I was one of the few of my cohorts and I finished my studies with respectable results. I think that my diligence and honesty earned me the appreciation and respect of my professors and colleagues. However, cultural differences and stress surely impacted my behavior some times, and in the aftermath I deeply hope that my feebleness will be forgiven. I also hope that the people I met and worked with will retain a rather positive image of me.

Today, I am sitting in my office in my very familiar Austrian environment. Yet, my perspectives have changed and some familiarities are colored with estrangement. The reminiscences I brought home are manifold and I learned how to obtain goals by using different strategies than I was used to. More importantly, Taiwan taught me to pay more tribute to my own culture, though not at the expense of appreciating other cultures.

Studying in Taiwan bears a wide range of advantages: Taiwan provides a very good and interesting academic environment with access to various important resources also in regard to other (East) Asian countries. It has a thrillingly interesting and pluralistic society, and possesses marvelous landscapes and astonishing natural and cultural sights. The island is very well organized in terms of infrastructure and public transport which facilitates a lot your daily life and traveling. Also, it is a hub for traveling to other East Asian and South East Asian countries. What makes living in Taiwan very appealing is the clean and orderly environment. Despite

the crowded and buzzing city, people try to leave you space and respect your privacy, at the same time they meet you with curiosity. Most of the time Taiwanese are very much bothered with making you feel comfortable.

However, life and especially studying is not always a honeymoon, it is important to put efforts in order to achieve one's goals. The scholarship of the MOE covers a huge amount of costs and gives foreign students the unique chance to live and study in Taiwan without constantly worrying about the financial situation. It is not enough to lead a luxurious life, however it provides the financial means for the most fundamental necessities and with a few compromises it also allows scholarship recipients to discover more of the island than just the university campus and cheap food at jerry-built restaurants. This gift has to be valued accordingly by those who receive it!

For students who are considering to study in Taiwan I recommend the following: Keep in mind that it is not only you who is facing cultural misapprehensions or language barriers, the same holds for those Taiwanese who are dealing with you and your concerns. Mutual respect is a fundamental premise in managing daily affairs at university and outside the campus. If you have a bad experience, remind yourself how many of them you have had in your own country! Even though you might have some initial difficulties overcoming the cultural or language barriers, try to be open. You will definitely make friends that will help you to fathom better Taiwan, its culture, and its people. Most importantly, stick to your plans and keep on going! You will not regret it!