

“Exploring Taiwan” on the Go

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This paper considers the concept of danger in the context of teaching and learning within a university course taught for the most part in a standard university classroom. Might being enrolled in a rather typical general education university course involve danger for students? As university faculty, we keep in mind the possibility of danger when we escort university students overseas to pursue academic endeavors. But, what might be possible risks for students on our university campuses of origin? To what extent should we feel concerned about the comfort levels of foreign students who study on our home campuses? As we work with students who are local residents, should their perspectives and needs outweigh those of international students who may be on campus for only a short time? How do these two groups of students interact with each other? Could danger present itself on campus for both groups of students, in the form of unsettling academic experiences, unexpected personal challenges, and/or being forced to explore in depth one’s strongly held beliefs and values? These questions comprise the central inquiry in this paper.

The occurrence of danger within the context of academia is not a new phenomenon (Stephenson and Kurashina 2009). An internet search on the general topic of violence on university campuses yielded a variety of responses. On April 7, 2008, experts gathered at Columbia University, USA, to discuss extreme issues on university and college campuses in the areas of dating violence, sexual violence, crimes on campus, shootings, and mental health and legal issues (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/07/violence>). Violence fueled by political matters was reported to have occurred at Osmania University, Hyderabad, India, on February 15, 2010 (<http://timesofindia.com/city/hyderabad/Fresh-violence-breaks-out-at-Osmania-University-campus/art>). More recently, on February 26, 2010, two people were arrested after violence on the campus of University of California Berkeley, linked to university funding constraints (<http://www.sfexaminer.com/local/Authorities-respond-to-overnight-unrest-at-UC-85498132.html>).

At National Taiwan University, “Exploring Taiwan: Geographical Environmental and Resources” - Course Number 208 39150 - is one of the very few academic courses taught in English, although such courses are in the process of becoming a major thrust in NTU’s effort to attract more international students. The course is offered jointly by the College of Science and the Department of Geography. The first two weeks of the class, the “drop and add” period, are particularly challenging for the facilitating professor teaching the course, because of uncertainty regarding which students will remain in the class. In the relatively small classroom at NTU that can seat a maximum of fifty students, local and foreign students must decide whether they will formally enroll in the course during the two weeks of sitting in. This is not an easy decision for students to make. Students are called upon to avoid scheduling conflicts with other required courses, because occasional field trips off-campus are integral to the “Exploring Taiwan” course. Lectures are given in the classroom once a week, from 9:10 to 12:10 A.M. Students must select the course they wish to take among several courses offered in English during the same time period; there are other possible options as well as the “Exploring Taiwan” course. Prospective students have two weeks to “size each other up.” Might it be a threatening experience to spend a significant amount of time in a small classroom in close proximity with students who are virtually unknown? Should students take the risk of possible danger and formally enroll in the “Exploring Taiwan” course?

Many students decide to commit to “Exploring Taiwan” because they really want to learn about Taiwan's unique landscapes, as well as the culture(s) of Taiwan. Instructors from physical science, the life sciences, social science, and environmental education from NTU and other universities offer the lectures. The visiting instructors include visual images to enhance their presentations, such as maps, graphs, and landscapes of Taiwan; documentary films about Taiwan; and even local music. Serving as the facilitator for this course, I learned the effectiveness of the multi-pronged teaching technique when I taught “Multi-Cultural Australia in the New Millennium” at NTU from 1999 to 2001, with a team of faculty who traveled by invitation from Australian universities to Taiwan to team-teach the course. It became clear to me then that effective teaching and learning occurs not only via textbooks, but also through in-depth “hands-on” exploration of particular topics, taught by a variety of professors.

Students’ Initial Responses

Effective teaching and learning is also linked to identifying the goals and expectations of the students. After delivering my introductory lecture in the course, I asked the students to write a short autobiographical statement on

why they had signed up to take the course, and how they expected to benefit from the course content. Albert, a Taiwanese second-year student in the Department of Medicine wrote: “[I would like] to know more about this beautiful island, and learn how to introduce it in English to foreigners” - a sentiment that has come up several times from local students over the last three years! Jennifer, an exchange student from the University of Maryland, USA, with family members mostly from Kaohsiung and Pingtung, wrote: “This course is for my personal enrichment and knowledge of a country I call my second home.”

My goal is to ensure that enrolling in a general education course such as “Exploring Taiwan” will be an enriching experience for everyone, including students who are exposed to different approaches in learning. Their academic experiences may be new and challenging, but hopefully also very satisfying. Clara from Paraguay, who spent one year studying Chinese at Sun Yat Sen University, and now is enrolled in the Department of Computer Sciences and Information Engineering at NTU, wrote: “...for me, going to the lectures in this course is a way to learn... and start thinking not just in numbers.” Emily, who listened attentively to the introductory lecture, responded: “The use of videos and field trips should make the course more enjoyable.” Tory, originally from Papua New Guinea, who has joined the Institute of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology of NTU, described the course as a way to meet new people, and to get to know the geography of Taiwan. Many students expressed interest in the special fieldtrip to Yehliu Geopark to see the unique rock formations and terrain.

One of my goals for the “Exploring Taiwan” course is to provide students with an opportunity to better appreciate the concept of diversity. This comes from my past experience as a young scholar, when I encountered people who would say, “All Orientals look alike,” or when they would often confuse Chinese people with Japanese, Koreans with Chinese, and so on. The students enrolled in “Exploring Taiwan” can anticipate spending a considerable amount of time together. For local students of Taiwan, this means learning about the different nationalities and cultures represented by the international students enrolled in the class, as well as learning about ethnic diversity within Taiwan itself. For the international students from outside of Taiwan, this means attempting to understand the subtle but significant differences between ethnicities and nationalities that are present within Taiwan, as well as within other Asian countries. Prejudices and stereotypes held by the students may be apparent. This is not uncommon, but likely can be safely mitigated, with patience and willingness on the part of the students and attentiveness from the Professors. Matthias, a Sinologie and Korean Studies major at NTU who was born in Poland and grew up in Germany, indicated he appreciated this approach. He wrote in his introductory autobiography: “I especially want to try to figure out the difference(s) between Taiwan and Mainland China,” having already studied in Beijing for two years. Some of the students’ inquiries, to be sure, might become very sensitive politically, culturally, and/or personally for those enrolled in the course. But, in the context of thoughtful teaching and learning, ill-will can be channeled into good-will with careful guidance.

With such diversity already present among the students, my goal of having the students learn to embrace diversity in the classroom theoretically should not be too difficult. Approximately one-third of the students themselves come from a multicultural background. One student who was born in Kolkata [Calcutta] of Chinese and Indian parents can speak Hakka, English, Hindi, Bengali, and Mandarin. Another student, who is Hmong, was born in California. A Japanese student whose parents are Chinese and Taiwanese grew up in Tokyo. And a fourth generation Chinese-American student grew up with her Poh-Poh [Grandmother] in the United States and speaks impeccable Cantonese. It is an eye-opening experience in class for local Taiwanese students to encounter a significant number of international students who have multi-cultural backgrounds, and for all of the students to experience the impact of globalization first-hand. It is not just English that is spoken and heard in our classroom, but, to date, also German, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Cantonese, Hakka and Pigeon English. The students begin to learn that living with diversity can be unnerving. But also, such experiences can become quite empowering.

How Different is Taiwan?

Most of the international students enrolled in my class were living in Taiwan for the first time in their lives. In the context of the “Exploring Taiwan” course at NTU, the international students as well as the local students had an opportunity to view Taiwan with a vision that was fresh and new. Overseas students were greatly amazed by the scenery in Taiwan, as well as the cultural differences, not to mention the possibility of typhoons and earthquakes that they might experience firsthand. A student from Germany indicated: “I experienced my first earthquake in Taiwan just a few weeks ago, and it was totally scary; plus, in this situation, you not until then [sic] experience the feeling of how helpless humans are compared with the forces of nature.” A student from the nearby neighbor country of Singapore wrote: “During my four months’ stay in Taiwan, I have encountered many typhoons and earthquakes. I would say that this is indeed a unique experience, in that I would never ever encounter this in

Singapore. To be precise, during the Level Four earthquake that happened recently, I was totally caught unprepared by it, and it was really shocking.”

The hot and humid climate was the situation that a student from the U.K. was not prepared for. He mentioned: “Taiwan experiences temperatures and humidity levels [that] are far greater than those in the United Kingdom. I had to learn new ways to approaching and protecting myself from the climate. I learned quickly that it was essential to always carry water with me, in addition to sun cream to protect my skin.” Another student from the U.K. stated: “You could even joke that a summer in the U.K. is similar to a winter in Taiwan. The incidents of typhoons, earthquakes and other climatic hazards don’t take place in England either...During the day, I would feel very uncomfortable walking outside [in Taiwan] because I would continuously sweat.” Every year, one or two of the international students would become ill because they could not easily adapt to the heat and humidity in September, when the academic term at NTU begins. As a student from Germany recalled, when the temperature goes beyond 25 degrees Celsius, primary school classes in Germany are cancelled because there is no air-conditioning in the classrooms.

Coming from Japan, Yuki noticed the big difference in weather conditions between Taiwan and Japan: “[The] air is more polluted here and lots of my friends from Japan got headaches right after they got in here [sic]. Japan is quite humid in summer, but very dry in winter. Taiwan is still humid in the winter, and that is what my Japanese friends mentioned all the time when they came.” Teena, from North Carolina in the USA, noticed: “During the month of October, North Carolina is already in the fall season and really cold. However, Taiwan is still hot, even when it’s during the middle of November. I love/hate Taiwan’s weather!” For international students coming from different areas of the world, summers in Taiwan are hotter and winters are colder than they had anticipated.

On August 8, 2009, after most of the international students had arrived, Typhoon Morakot struck Taiwan. It was the deadliest typhoon to impact Taiwan in recorded history. It wrought catastrophic damage in Taiwan, leaving 461 people dead and 192 others missing, and roughly NT\$110 billion (\$3.3 billion USD) in damages. As recorded by the Water Resources Agency, Ministry of Economic Affairs, the storm produced copious amounts of rainfall, peaking at 2,777 mm (109.3 in), surpassing the previous record of 1,736 mm (68.35 in) set by Typhoon Herb in 1996. The extreme amount of rain triggered enormous mudslides and severe flooding throughout southern Taiwan, including Chiayi, Tainan, Kaohsiung and Pingtung counties, and parts of Taitung County and Nantou County. One landslide wiped out Shiaolin Village in the southern County of Kaoshiung, killing about 500 people. In the famous Zhiben hot springs area, the six-story Jinshuai Hotel was destroyed when it collapsed into the Zhiben River (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon_Morakot, Taiwan News 2009). Because of the magnitude and intensity of rainfall brought by Morakot, it was called “an extraordinary event” by U.K. geographer, Dave Petley (2010) who has studied landslides in Taiwan since 1991. He quoted the World Bank 2005 Report, saying that “Taiwan may be the place on Earth most vulnerable to natural hazards, with 73 percent of its land and population exposed to three or more hazards.” Therefore, faculty teaching “Exploring Taiwan” must be aware of the risks in taking students to fieldtrips in mountainous zones, at times when the weather is unstable in Taiwan.

Apart from living in a new physical environment, international students enrolled in our course also experienced culture shock, from eating very different kinds of food, to learning to speak Mandarin. Rather than feeling overwhelmed because of culture shock, the international students emphasized the positive side of meeting new people and becoming good friends with students from countries such as France, Germany, Sweden, Panama, Britain, China, Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, and the like. When so many students are so far away from home, they learn that they share common goals, and they establish endearing friendships. James from California noted: “Being away from everything and away from my comfort zone, everyday I am able to discover new things about myself. Never before have I spoken so much Chinese in my life.” Winnie, another Californian Chinese, made positive and parallel observations: “During the first four months that I have been in Taiwan, I have had the chance to befriend many local students and meet many local people of Taiwan. I have celebrated both western holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, as well as lunar holidays such as Mid-Autumn Festival and Double Ten in Taiwan. I have eaten at countless street vendors’ stalls, bargained at night markets, and soaked in hot springs. I have taken university classes with native Taiwanese students, sang with them at KTV, and chewed betel nut.” She has perhaps set a good example of what being an international student in Taiwan has to offer. Coming from different cultural and personal backgrounds with a variety of perspectives, each student in class - - the local students as well as the international students - - will experience Taiwan in ways that are unique. As noted by Hana from Japan: “In Taiwan, I often see young people talking about politics and exchange their opinions in schools, restaurants, and public spaces; but I rarely hear young people talk about political issues in Japan.” Eric from Canada was amazed at Taiwanese people differentiating among themselves into sub-ethnic groups, depending on their time of arrival in Taiwan: “In Canada, people are expected to be from different cultures and have different national identities, regardless of one’s time of

immigration. We therefore have Chinese Canadians, Indo-Canadians, Filipino Canadians, etc...We have a mosaic culture.”

Nonetheless, some of the international students have observed distinctive cultural differences between Taiwan and their countries of origin, which have provided significant challenges for them. To mention a few, Victoria who lived in Costa Rica and in the U.K., both of them being described as her home countries, could not believe that no Christmas Holidays are observed within the National Taiwan University Academic Calendar. It was very challenging for her to find her version of a “proper Christmas dinner” on Christmas Day. Victoria learned that the respect which is granted to elder members of the family in Taiwan, and also to teachers in Taiwan, is very different from the situation in both of her two countries of origin. In Taiwan, to her surprise, different kinship terms are used for older brother and younger brother, older sister and younger sister, and also different kinship terms for grandfather, grandmother, uncle and auntie, depending on whether these relatives originate from one’s mother’s side of the family or one’s father’s side.

What Impresses Students Most?

Near the end of the semester, I asked the students what had impressed them the most while enrolled in our course, and during their stay in Taiwan in general. Victoria spoke for a number of exchange students on campus: “Right at the beginning of my stay in Taiwan, I was met at the airport by a volunteer from NTU and was given help in various ways. As an exchange student in NTU, I have a Taiwanese friend who helps me with anything I might need and takes care of me. My volunteer has been extremely friendly and helpful to me. Whenever I needed her, she was there for support. For example, when I told her I didn’t have a bike and asked how I could get hold of one, she gave her brand new one to me during my stay here. For my birthday, she gave me a hand-made teddy bear and a very nice card to go along with it. She also introduced me to her closest friends and made me feel part of her group of friends.”

Victoria also noticed the different ways that foreigners are treated in Costa Rica and the U.K. where she came from: “Taiwanese people are friendly, open, generous and willing to help foreigners, whereas in England, immigrants are generally not well received, especially if one doesn’t know how to speak English.” She summarized her experiences during her four months’ stay in Taiwan as follows: “I don’t know if maybe I have just been lucky with my experiences in Taiwan. But, I have had for the most part good experiences here and I can safely state that I think the Taiwanese disposition to help foreigners is strong and very welcoming. I believe this outlook of the Taiwanese towards foreigners is what the Taiwan Tourism Bureau is trying to promote with its logo ‘Taiwan Touch Your Heart’ and all I want to add is that this island and its people have definitely touched mine.”

Coming from the USA, Jennifer noticed differences in the ways that people react to foreigners in the USA and in Taipei: “In the USA, people are very accustomed to diversity, so seeing tourists is very common. However, I have found Taiwanese people react almost instantly to seeing foreigners, and are often willing to lend a helping hand or talk to them out of curiosity. When I walked around with an exchange student of a different skin color, many heads would turn to look at us.” Oscar from Mexico wrote: “...Upon my arrival at Taiwan, I was very disoriented and confused about the culture. I was away from home, in a country that [sic] I didn’t understand a word of their language. I had a hard time finding places, I felt very lonely. As I spent more time in the dorms, I met many good friends. These friends were extremely generous and kind to teach me the basics on how to survive in Taipei. They helped me get my MRT card, [helped with] immigration matters, speaking the Chinese language, and many other things.”

Apart from the friendliness, the hard-working population in Taipei left a deep impression on one female student, Dianka, from St. Lucia, in the Caribbean: “The Taiwanese work sometimes twelve hours shifts, which are a lot longer than the ordinary workers, and yet still they continuously have a smile fixed on their faces, continuously welcoming and serving you happily.” Another student, Magassa, was struck by the nightlife and entertainment industry. She told me that in France where she comes from, most shops are open between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. But, in Taiwan, she can go shopping, visit the night markets, and do many other things late at night! An exchange student, Aleris, observed: “Hard work is always good for a country’s economy, mostly. But, in some ways, it is not good at all for health, because most people work over-time and have only few hours for rest. In Sao Tome and Principe, we look at life completely differently from Taiwan. For us, life is all about “take it easy” and we even have one expression which symbolizes our way of doing things, ‘*Leve-leve*’ in Portuguese, which in English means ‘step by step.’”

In comparison with Singapore, where local people appear to be even more hard-working than in Taiwan, June found that the traffic in Singapore is much safer than in Taipei. She remarked: “I am pretty amazed by the traffic rules here. It seems like pedestrians would be required to give way to the oncoming cars. Moreover, scooters are

everywhere and pedestrians really have to pay extra attention to avoid an accident. In Singapore, we strictly obey the traffic rules.” Nevertheless, June was impressed by the retail activities in Taiwan. She explained: “Even smaller towns and cities usually feature a few large retail stores where you can find all kinds of international goods. There are lots of different ways to go shopping, from the tiny local shop next to your residence to the major go-destination experiences complete with movie theaters, restaurants and designer fashions. Things sold in Taiwan are really affordable. In night markets, you can shop while you buy food and play games. Some stalls offer an impressive array of products such as ‘Everything for 20 NT.’ ”



Candle Rock of Yehliu GeoPark

A Fieldtrip to a “Danger Zone”

As an extension of the lecture on the Physical Geology of Taiwan, my students and I took a fieldtrip to the Yehliu Geopark in north-eastern Taiwan. Owing to its beautiful and unique scenery, Yehliu Geopark showcases earth movements that occurred millions of years ago, creating new land that went through differential erosion for thousands of years, that become the landscape of modern times. Located in Wanli, Taipei County, the Yehliu Geopark stretches for 1,700 meters along the northern coast of Taiwan. The Geopark is famous for its unique geological landscapes that have resulted from the differential weathering of sandstone and limestone by rain, sun, sea water and strong winds, especially the north-eastern monsoons from November to March. Names have been given to the protected rock formations according to their shapes, such as Mushroom, Candle, Ginger, and Chessboard (Plates 1, 2, and 3).

The protected landforms, however, cannot escape from the large number of tourists who swarm into the Geopark every day. Albert, a member of my class, is a medical student who visited Yehliu just four years ago when it was called a Scenic Area. Albert observed that some tourists step beyond the red-line that reminds visitors not to cross over into the danger zone, i.e., the slippery ground very close to the sea. On the coast is a bronze statue commemorating a vendor who sacrificed his life to save a high school student who was swept into the sea by high waves. Nevertheless, some tourists occasionally ignore the signs. While we were there, the Mainland Chinese, who comprise the majority of tourists visiting the Geopark, shouted in excitement. Arriving in groups, they made the Geopark look like a Chinese traditional market. Some of the Mainland Chinese did not care to line up to have their picture taken with the Queen’s Head, which is the iconographic landmark of the Yehliu Geology Park (Plate 4).

Despite the tight schedule, the students and I had a wonderful time visiting this beautiful place in the middle of the week, amidst their other classes on campus and examinations. Fieldtrips have always been regarded as an essential part of the study of Geography. Our visit to Yehliu Geopark helped to forge closer friendships among my

students, both international and local, and certainly between myself, our teaching assistants and the students enrolled in our class.

Conclusions

From 2007-2009, altogether 137 students from 34 nationalities have enrolled in the NTU course entitled "Exploring Taiwan" during the three years that the course has been offered at NTU. Students have enrolled in the course, to date, from the following countries of origin (listed in no particular order): Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Macedonia, Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, the U.S.A, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Saint Lucia, Paraguay, Chile, Sao Tome and Principe, Nigeria, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands.

Among the most enjoyable, and also sometimes stressful, parts of the course are the students' oral presentations given at the end of the course, in the last two sessions of the semester. Students are encouraged to work in teams. Successful teamwork is very important during the process of writing up the required term paper, and presenting the oral report. A fair amount of consensus and equal division of labor makes the process much smoother to undertake and complete. The motto of Taida [the colloquial identifier for National Taiwan University] begins with the letter T, which stands for "Teamwork." This term also applies to my preparations for the class, with the help of local NTU Teaching Assistants Fendi Chen, Kirsten Fung, Ying-chun Liu, and Eric Shih. Eric, whose academic training to date includes Geography and Broadcasting, has filmed the class members in action. He is hoping to create a short feature on YouTube for the purpose of promoting the "Exploring Taiwan" course, in order to attract more international students to enroll at NTU. The idea of making this short film came from Prof. Tung Shen, Dean of the Office of International Affairs at NTU.

In summary, I suggest that the course "Exploring Taiwan" should continue to be offered by the Geography Department at NTU as a general education course for international students, and also as one of the core courses for the Taiwan Studies Program at the University. Surprisingly, the reputation of this particular academic course at NTU has spread to other universities outside of Taiwan. This appears to be in large part because of the successful experiences reported by former students who have been enrolled in the course. One student wrote in her short autobiography at the beginning of the semester: "My friend said that I MUST take this course if I go to Taiwan as an exchange student..." Another student, after returning home, sent me the following e-mail message: "I now have gained a much deeper understanding of Taiwanese culture, history, society and geographical features than I had before. My contact with Taiwanese friends broadened my horizon in an unforeseeable way."

These words of encouragement are perhaps the most important driving force for me and for the various visiting instructors to continue to teach the course entitled "Exploring Taiwan" at National Taiwan University in Taipei. Having taught this course for the third time, I feel very reassured when it becomes clear that all the students in the class have survived the typhoons, earthquakes, heavy traffic, pollution, and required fieldtrips off-campus in the long eighteen week course. Keeping the students healthy in a physical environment that is new and strange to them is essential. Safety always comes first in my mind, when going with students on fieldtrips.

However, my concerns for success for the students within the sociocultural environmental sphere while they are in Taiwan are even more intense. To step voluntarily outside of one's comfort zone to enroll in a particular university course as an international student in an unfamiliar country, or as a local student who is neither particularly accustomed to studying with international students nor to English being spoken in the classroom, could constitute an experience of danger. A student might be called upon to re-think in significant detail his or her entire approach to the world. Indeed, the outcome could be viewed as potentially life-threatening in such capacities as the students' sense of space, knowledge of place, perceptions of propriety, and articulation of identity.

My own fieldwork as a researcher in social Geography has taken me to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Bali (Chiang 2006, 2008, Chiang et al. 2009). Perhaps I never gave much thought to personal danger for myself, when traveling overseas as a Geographer, even though sometimes bringing research assistants with me. But, in the course of encountering so many students, international and local, with such varied background experiences in the "Exploring Taiwan" course at NTU, I began to consider what sorts of possible dangers might exist for them.

As Asian universities are vigorously recruiting international students and sending students abroad for English and culture programs, summer schools, and exchanges programs, they need to be aware of unexpected circumstances that incur safety, health, and other issues. This is what university administrators, especially those working in Office of International Affairs, should be aware of, when they design and implement such programs. A lot of times, one evaluates such programs by numbers of students enrolled. What counts as more important is the

quality of such programs, and the repercussions for students' future personal growth, apart from learning something new, and embracing the opportunity to meet the world's people, wherever we may find them.

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