



Experience Report
Semester abroad at National Chengchi University (國立政治大學, NCCU)
in Taipei, winter semester 2015/16

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This report is meant to give students considering to do an exchange semester at NCCU an insight into my personal experiences, as well as to provide students who have already decided to go to Taipei with some helpful information before their exchange.

Preparing the semester abroad

When I started my master's program in Goettingen, I had already spent a considerable amount of time in mainland China. However, I had neither been to Taiwan before nor been a regular student at a Chinese university. Since NCCU is a university specializing in social sciences, I planned to do an exchange semester there, doing courses for my minor *political science*.

As you may know, it is mandatory to do a semester abroad in our bachelor's program, but not in the master's program. I want to express my special thanks to our department head professor Schneider, whose support made my exchange possible.

At the Goettingen *Faculty of Social Sciences*, recognition of courses done abroad is no problem at all, provided the student consults with the department in charge beforehand and gets a [learning agreement](#) validated. The process for my own exchange went as follows: At first, I selected all the courses offered during my semester at NCCU that were of interest for me and printed out the course descriptions. Then, I went to the advisor in charge at the *Institute for Political Science* who then evaluated the descriptions and decided which courses would be recognized for which modules in Goettingen. Among these, I then chose the courses I subsequently took at NCCU. One important thing to keep in mind with regard to the recognition is that [one credit at NCCU corresponds to two ECTS](#). This is as well to be discussed and agreed upon with the respective department in Goettingen.



NCCU Campus

The campus and its location within Taipei

NCCU is located in Wenshan district in the southeast of the city. Thus, it is quite remote from downtown Taipei. However, due to Taipei's well developed public transport system, particularly the metro (or MRT), most parts of the city are still relatively accessible.

The campus is spread across a hill and the foot of this hill. Most, but not all, teaching and administration buildings are situated downhill,

View from the balcony of our dorm, Taipei 101 in the background

dormitories uphill and downhill. It is a 15 to 20 minutes walk from the uphill dorms to the two campus gates, but there are also small buses running up and down the hill.

Numerous sports facilities are available at low cost or free of charge in and around campus, including fields and courts for several kinds of ball sports, a long course swimming pool and

exercise rooms. The banks of the small river right next to campus were turned into a park very suitable for running or cycling, but also for barbecues.

The uphill campus is covered in greenery, one frequently encounters hikers passing through. The hills surrounding NCCU are great for hikes, there are several temples around the area, most notably Zhinan Temple (指南宮).



View from Zhinan Temple, the campus is visible on the far right in the center of the photo

Housing

The master student dorm I lived in during my stay at NCCU is uphill. The dorm is a modern building with convenient facilities such as fridges, water dispensers and washing machines. Rooms are basic but in good condition, functional and clean. Master students live in single or double rooms, bachelor student dorms have four students per room as far as I know. Since I lived in a dorm, I cannot say too much about off-campus housing. However, it seems to be quite complicated to arrange for a room or apartment

to rent before arrival in Taipei. Many offers available online at English-language websites are aimed at so-called expats and therefore in higher price segments.

In and around the dorms, it is expectedly easy to meet other people, especially other exchange students. We had a lot of European exchange students living on our floor, but also exchange students from elsewhere in Asia as well as regular students, mostly from Taiwan and China. Although one should be careful not to overgeneralize these kinds of things, most Taiwanese people are very polite and quite reserved. Therefore, it can be difficult to meet people beyond the circle of exchange students. Nevertheless, anyone who approaches people friendly and open-mindedly will not have trouble making friends, just like anywhere else.

Assistance for students

The team of the *Office of International Cooperation* (OIC) around Deborah Lee is very helpful and supportive. They assist foreign students with any problems or questions during their stay. Furthermore, NCCU runs a buddy program, i. e. all exchange students have a regular NCCU student helping them during their first weeks. My buddy and me were already in touch via e-mail long before I arrived in Taipei and he was very helpful and kind.

Getting around

It is highly recommendable to get an Easycard (*you1you2ka3* 悠遊卡) as soon as possible upon arrival. This card is not only the most convenient method to pay for public transport, it can be used to pay for cabs and in many stores like the ubiquitous 7-Elevens, too. The card is also the method of payment for the U-Bikes, a system of rental bicycles available at a large number of rental

stations all across Taipei.

If your destination is around the eastern part of the city centre, going to downtown Taipei by the buses running through Wenshan tunnel (文山隧道) is much quicker than taking the metro. Depending on your destination, it can also be advantageous to take a bus first and transfer to the metro at Gongguan (公館) or Wanfang Hospital (萬芳醫院) stations, instead of taking the metro at the zoo, the metro station closest to NCCU. Wanfang Hospital it also the place all exchange students have to go to in order to get their medical exams at the beginning of the semester. If you are in a hurry or it is too late at night to get a bus or the MRT, cabs are basically available anywhere and at any time. Cab fares are very reasonable, especially if you can share a cab with several people.

Studying at NCCU

I only took courses offered by the *Department of Political Science* and the *Department of Diplomacy* taught in Chinese. Thus, I do not know a lot about the English-taught courses offered by the OIC or about the Chinese language classes. At the beginning of the semester, I still considered taking OIC courses too, so I caught a glimpse of some of them. The courses seemed interesting and the professors very capable, but some courses were overcrowded. As far as I can tell from the course catalog, the selection of courses was good in other branches of the social sciences apart from political science as well.

Coursework at NCCU differed significantly from what I was used to in Germany. In general, professors' lectures made up a larger share of time in seminars than here, mostly followed by discussion and debate among students. All of the professors spoke loudly, clearly and not too fast so I could understand them quite well. I had bigger difficulties understanding my classmates sometimes. Anyway, I believe that everyone with an advanced level of Chinese, say HSK 5 or even 4, or who does not have huge difficulties in the course *Modern Chinese VI* at our department, can take away much from academic courses taught in Chinese. Depending on one's Chinese level, the courses can either be treated as more 'actual content-related courses' or more 'language classes in a realistic setting'. In fact, this also varies within one single course. For instance, when I was already familiar with the topic of the day, I was able to participate in class much more actively than was the case with topics I had never learned about before. In any case, one definitely learns a lot.

One big difference is that in the political science courses, students were required to write literature summaries either every single week or at least for a significant number of sessions. Although Chinese was the course language, I was kindly allowed to write these summaries either in Chinese or in English. The literature was mostly in English. Additionally, instead of just 90 minutes, seminar sessions there lasted two or three hours with a short brake. Of course, the three hour sessions in particular could be very tiring at times. Nevertheless everything worked out ok and I am glad I was able to take the classes and make this experience.

Now you might think that the required workload is just excessive. To put this into perspective, the workload requirements for the final assignments were by far not as high as in Goettingen, so that I consider the overall workload to be comparable and the credit conversion to be fair.

NCCU's library is very well equipped, at least in the area of political science with East Asia focus. Thus, it is also possible to conduct research for projects in Goettingen during the stay there. In fact, I even accessed the library again with the help of a NCCU student after I returned to Germany

when I needed a work for a paper that was not available at our library, but at NCCU.

As a last note for this section, I would advise students not to overload their schedule during the exchange semester. There are many things to discover in Taipei and in Taiwan as a whole. If you are there for the first time, it would be a shame to sit in class or work on assignments all the time and to miss out on those.

The city Taipei and beyond, conclusion

In my opinion, Taipei is a fascinating place with a high quality of life. It offers the advantages of a metropolis, like a rich cultural life, for instance concerts of important bands in musical genres far off the mainstream. At the same time, some of the problems rampant elsewhere are less prevalent there, for example regarding the situation of the environment or traffic.

The city is located in a basin, surrounded by green hills that make for an intriguing scenery in contrast with the city's mass of buildings. One is able to escape city life any time.

Not far southeast of the 101 there is Elephant Mountain (象山) where many photographers try to take the perfect shot of the city's highest building. Yangmingshan (陽明山) National Park to the north is also not far away from Taipei. In general I felt like Taipei is a relatively green city, with many people taking care of plants in the small front yards of their residential buildings.

Unsurprisingly, Taipei's culinary landscape offers a wide range of tastes. Nothing is left to be desired, from all Chinese regional cuisines, over truly good Western food, to Indian restaurants recommended by fellow exchange students from the subcontinent.

Another place worth mentioning is the area around National Taiwan University (臺灣大學) and Gongguan metro station. Located not too far from NCCU, around there one can find loads of coffee shops, restaurants, little shops, art on display and so on, many of these catering to a student audience in particular. One can spend one or the other nice afternoon just strolling, (window) shopping or having a cup of coffee.



Fort Provintia, Tainan



The Pacific on the southeastern coast

You can obviously rely on any decent travel guide for sights and activities, I just want to mention a few of my personal highlights here: In Taipei, the palace museum (故宮博物館) is definitely worth a visit. It is huge, so if you take your time with it you might very well have to go there twice to see everything. I also highly recommend the public hot springs in Xinbeitou (新北投). Were they not so far away all across the city, I might have gone there every week to take a relaxing bath. Outside of Taipei, I heartily recommend the area around Taroko (太魯閣) Gorge. Kenting (墾丁) National Park was really great and quiet in winter, though it seemed like it might be totally overcrowded in the main tourist season. Tainan with the remains of Dutch colonialism is also a great experience. This list could go on and on, as I already mentioned there are countless things to discover in Taiwan.

All in all, my time in Taiwan was a great experience and I am determined to return there in the near future. In my opinion, doing an exchange at NCCU is highly recommendable for any student of the social sciences with an interest in East Asia, and of course especially for students at the *Department of East Asian Studies*. Should you have any questions regarding my stay, please feel free to contact me at: thomas.dittmann@stud.uni-goettingen.de