

A GLIMPSE OF TAIWAN FROM A SHORT-TERM INTERN'S PERSPECTIVE

BRYAN TSANG LAO

ABSTRACT

This short essay is a casual narration on the experience of a student-intern who has stayed in a Taiwanese university and accommodated some Taiwan students in the Philippines. The author shares some of his insights as regards Taiwanese culture, student interactions, and the Chinese language in general.

Keywords: *Taiwan university internship, Philippines-Taiwan student internship*

During the summer semester of my last year in college, I was given the rare opportunity to accept an internship in Taiwan's Chung Chou University of Science and Technology. The internship, which lasted for seven weeks, was definitely a great learning experience.

The main purposes of the internship were to conduct research in the field of robotics, get certified as a micro-controller technician, and get prepared for a potential robotics tournament in the coming months.

This included class hours in the computer laboratory where students like me were routinely asked to work around and study a small robot that we fondly called the TEMI robo-soccer robot. Included in the class activities were assembling mechanical parts, analyzing waveforms, programming in assembly language, and soldering (e.g. heating lead and connecting components) electronic elements boards.

The most noteworthy among the activities would probably be the soldering part. We were asked to master soldering the surface-mount devices (SMDs). These small electronic components are found in many household electronic devices, cell phones, mp3 players and such, and they are not bigger than this letter o. Never have I seen these devices handled and soldered by hand; I always thought it to be “high-level stuff.”

This exposure was a very sharp contrast to the type of exposure undergraduate engineering students in the Philippines experience in their respective schools.

Even in observing the little details around a typical laboratory, one would be surprised to see things not normally found in the laboratories here. These include, but are not limited to, motorized projector screens, centralized control boards for controlling multiple PCs, high-end branded desktops, and some interesting and useful tools, which are readily available to students.

The full impact of the amazement, however, was somehow hindered by the inability to communicate properly. Classes were all conducted in Mandarin. Even though our professor knew how to use English, he was not very comfortable speaking it.

But the pace of the lessons still allowed us to stay on track, of course, with extra time spent in translating. Without a minimum level of fluency, one could already imagine the excruciatingly slow

pace the class would have to endure just to learn a simple step. This would be an example, among numerous ones, of how being able to speak an international language can be a big asset.

Our learning did not stop in the classrooms and laboratories. We were also given free time to explore the sights and sounds of Taiwan. We were blessed to be situated in a very convenient location, Yuanlin, Changhua. It is found near (leaning a bit to the west) the heart of Taiwan, and its strategic location is very good for quick visits to tourist hotspots in all cardinal directions.

In the visits that we made, it was not surprising that an electronics district was available in all of them, as Taiwan is famous for its electronics industry. Taiwan is the mecca of electronics enthusiasts and engineers. It is the place to be for engineering students like me.

Each district is an impressive sight to behold. It would stretch at least a few blocks. Each electronics district would house not only blocks and blocks of gadget stores (i.e. cell phones, mp3 players) but also blocks and blocks of electronic component stores (i.e. resistors, LEDs). Furthermore, with the sheer amount of stores available, competition was steep and so prices were exceedingly affordable.

One cannot help but be wishful that such places also existed in one's own country. It saddens me to be unable to think of a similar place. It is not that electronics districts do not exist in the Philippines, but that you could probably house all the electronic component stores in Metro Manila in a single shop in Taichung and all the electronic component stores in the whole country in one district in Taiwan. The technological advancement and the reach of its availability in the country are simply overwhelming.

If regular tourists were to visit one of the larger electronics shops, they would be surprised at the scale and the variety of selections a single store carried. Some of my fellow interns and I shopped at a

handful of these stores and bought quite a number of these electronic components, not because we actually needed them, but mostly because of the rarity and affordability these shops provided, which shops back home did not offer.

One of the most common items found in electronics shops was the DIY electronics kit. To me, this is an indication of a more advanced popular culture. There is a shift – an evolution – in the interest of the population from simply using electronics (and being ignorant of their parts) to actually making electronics (and knowing what makes them tick). This more advanced culture seems to root from government support. The amount of money, time, and effort spent in cultivating and nurturing an awareness of the arts and sciences are seen in many aspects.

One of the most evident government efforts in promoting science is seen in Taiwan's numerous public museums and zoos. For the museums, most of the ones that we visited were actually free, but the quality of which were comparable to a Php 500 ticket in the Philippines. Also, most of them tower at four storeys, equipped with interactive and informative displays that make use of the best quality materials and the most well-thought-out layouts.

We visited only one zoo, but it was all we needed to visit. It would literally take a whole day to visit every animal and see every attraction in the zoo. The animals were shipped from all around the globe, and some of the animals had special housing for them to feel comfortable in. Penguins lived in freezing areas while nocturnal animals were given enormous spaces with branches and huts and unlit housing. The outdoor animals were housed in spaces larger than probably 90% of the houses found in Manila.

Against all these, one cannot help but think about why one's own country has not reached such a stage in development, why one's

mother tongue had not become an “international language,” why it took so much money to go to a zoo or a museum.

Going abroad was definitely an eye-opener for me. To grow, and grow fast, one must be able to see what is offered in the world and what one can offer back. To stay in one place will limit one’s own perception of what is advanced, what is enough, what is progress.

But while there might be no substitute to going out to the world and exploring it, there are definitely ways to immerse oneself in a foreign culture. One such way is to interact with local foreigners, as is our case as well.

A few months after coming back home from my seven-week internship in Taiwan, our Taiwanese counterparts came to the Philippines for their own short-term stay. Unsurprisingly, I was put in charge to accommodate them during their stay, mostly because of my fluency in Mandarin. The main differences in our experiences were that of culture and the classes taken. But more importantly, the biggest similarity would be the language barrier they and we have been subjected to.

I was faced with the problem of planning activities for them as only one other person was able to speak Mandarin in our group. No matter how friendly or how willing our volunteers were in trying to accommodate them, the language barrier played a huge role in keeping them from feeling at home. From simple communicating with the university’s administration to going out by themselves on day trips, the biggest problem was always the language barrier.

Unlike the Ateneo group that attended electronics classes, the Chung Chou group came to Ateneo to study the English language. Although English could not be fully grasped in the short span of time of their stay here, I believe that the classes were very much appreciated.

As regards culture, there was a stark difference - from transportation to the general attitude of the people, from the price of goods to the local hobbies.

As regards transportation, I would have to say that travelling in Taiwan is much easier. Even young students have access to their personal scooters. To those without personal vehicles, commuting is not so bad an option. Commuting is generally easier in Taiwan. Not only are the train networks considerably efficiently connected, crowd control is also much better. This is unlike the Philippines where taking the LRT during rush hour might not be the best option for those who value their personal space very much. This is not to say that Filipinos don't know how to get around. The Philippines has a myriad of transportation implements unique to the country. There are the jeepneys, the FXs, and the tricycles, all of which were introduced to our foreign friends. However, taking the taxi seemed to be the most desirable choice for the students, as it was their constant choice.

As regards attitude, the general attitude of the Filipinos is much more mellow than that of the Taiwanese – which I would like to call “feisty.” Although I heard no complaints from the Chung Chou students, attitude most definitely plays a part in cross-cultural travels.

On the prices of commodities, it is interesting that the Chung Chou students found our regular food expensive but our clothes to be very affordable. For me, the opposite was true. The regular food served in and around their campus was definitely more affordable than the same food offered here. As for Taiwanese clothing, I would say that prices are roughly the same.

Finally, as regards local hobbies, I found not much difference with the people of the same age group (about 19-21). People of those ages tend to look to partying and having good eats, and a good time, and on long weekends, maybe go for a long drive to a tourist spot.

In conclusion, I would say that Taiwan is definitely a beautiful country. However, if someone were to visit Taiwan, I would highly suggest that he or she, at least, try to learn some basic Mandarin. Some very good places to visit are the night markets and the public zoos and museums. The Taiwanese are a very friendly people, at least for my seven-week stay there. I would highly recommend visiting the country.

On the other hand, I would also say that the Philippines is definitely a beautiful country as well. However, learning even just basic English is a must. Some very good places to visit are the natural landscapes and geographic formations. The Filipino people are a very mellow and friendly people. Of course, I also highly recommend visiting the Philippines.

About the Speaker: At the time he delivered his talk, Mr. Bryan Tsang Lao was a fifth year BS Computer Engineering student at the Ateneo de Manila University. He studied as an intern at Chung Chou University of Science and Technology (CCUT Taiwan) and was subsequently certified as a C-class Technical Tester by the Taiwan Embedded Microcontroller Development Institute (TEMI). Occasionally, he also works as an assistant instructor for robotics workshops.

Editor's note

This lecture was delivered on December 11, 2012 at the Ateneo de Manila University Social Development Complex Conference Hall.