Julian Hatwell – Changhua Diary

Arriving in Formosa.

Taoyuan airport is really quite unremarkable. I’m not sure if I can think of anything that makes it stand out from the other airports I’ve seen before.

The person who met me was very functional.

I was expecting to be sharing the shuttle with other students and have a chance to get to know them on the way, but it turned out I was sharing with handful of individuals who just happened to be going to the same part of Taiwan.

The drive is notable for regularly alternating between industrialized urban sprawl and dense verdant vegetation. The route we took was an expressway that just hugs the foothills of the mountain range that forms the spine of the long island of Taiwan and actually occupies most of its land area. Mostly on the right hand side were complicated factories, formed of tangles of tubes and towers. On the left, for much of the journey, just a hint of a low mountain range, barely discernible from the haze and low clouds, but then opening up into fully formed black peaks once we were an hour or more into the journey.

The driver popped a CD into the in car audio system and softly played a series of slushy Asian ballads, all trembly soprano voices and emotive string arrangements.

I was following the route on Googlemaps when we stopped at a lay by. The driver started talking to me in Chinese and for a moment I thought there was going to be an awkward problem of communication but then one of the other passengers said “if you are going to the university, you change cars here.” I was surprised only because we were already so close on the map.

The new driver also didn’t speak any English but he was very jovial and got me to the university gates in around 5 minutes, where I was met by Connie, the international office co-ordinator, my room-mate Jason, and Emily, Julin and Lucy who are ambassadors for the summer program.

The dorm is basic but perfectly functional. Everyone is really friendly. Jason is very friendly and offers me various things I might need, like a network cable.

I have time to freshen up and write a few words before we decide to get some dinner together. We have a really nice chat about where everyone is from and what we are studying. I’m so fortunate because everyone speaks a little bit of English and it’s easy to make myself understood. Everyone is trying really hard to make me and the other international students feel welcome. It’s been a great experience already.

Dinner consists of a kind of choose your own Asian stew, or braised food, as they like to call it. There’s a cart outside the little restaurant, we has a similar character to your local, friendly, greasy spoon from back home. On the cart is an assortment of veg, meat, tofo, eggs, and other things. You pick what you like the look of with a pair of tongues into a little basket and when you’ve got enough, you hand it over to be cooked. They asked me if I wanted it spicy, and whether I wanted soup or sauce. I chose spice sauce and didn’t regret it. When it was served to the table, it was like having all my meat and veg in one bowl, covered in curry gravy. Delicious.

Changhua isn’t the prettiest town and the local students are quite quick to say that it’s not usual for tourists to come here. They tend to spend their time in Taipei or down the Western coastal route. Nevertheless, it’s got a nice vibe and feels pretty safe. Every so often the local students spot other students to say hi to on the walk back from dinner.

First day: Bed was pretty hard and will take some getting used to. Air con made a weird rattling noise during the night and I could only sleep with my in-earphones in. So not a great night’s sleep but slept a bit later than usual so I should be OK today.

For breakfast we took a stroll down to the local food street, which is basically a regular high street very near the university with loads of food outlets that cater to the student budget. I choose a pancake filled with fried egg and chicken, which was pretty light and quite tasty. Just what you need to start the day well.

After that it’s back to the campus and the main admin building where we meet all the student ambassadors from NCUE who will be our buddies for the trip. After a brief introduction from the head of the department of international affairs, we spend an hour just chatting and getting to know each other. Everyone is very chatty and the time flies by.

We go out together for a lunch at a place that does all kinds of dumplings. I choose a spicy pork filling and my room-mate, Pee, chooses curry. We swap a dumpling with each other just to try. On our way out, I also order a takeaway soy milk drink with sweet red beans and pearl barley floating around in it.

The buddies have organized a campus tour punctuated with ice-breaker games. The heat is absolutely sweltering but we move quickly from building to building and try not to spend too much time in the direct sun. Everyone is a really good sport about the games and activities and the buddies film bits of it and take a lot of group photos. It’s all very light-hearted and I really feel part of the group after that. We finish the day in another small diner eating “snow ice,” which is fluffed up, crushed ice with sweet toppings of your choice. There is a bit of a mix up and I end up eating someone else’s dessert but it was really nice anyway and I didn’t notice.

After working in our room for a bit until about 9.30pm, our room-mate, Jason (Wei Cheng) who is one of the NCUE buddies asks if we’re hungry because the snow ice was “only water.” We agree it would be a good idea to try to find a snack so we go up the local food street again and nosh on some street food, which is mostly fried stuff and bloody delicious. After a short walk we head back and I do a bit more catching up on my dissertation before climbing into bed.

Day 2: Today I am excited as its our first Chinese lesson. We get up promptly around 7.30am and head off for another breakfast diner. I have French Toast with BBQ pork, which again is surprisingly tasty for what it is and what it costs. We head directly back to the language centre to start our class. We’re shown into classroom that actually appears to be a café and a gruff looking man comes in and start fiddling with the laptop and projector. I’m a bit concerned if we’re going to be taught by him as he doesn’t seem very friendly. After a short time he gets the projector working and walks out, only to be replaced by a very smiley, friendly lady who immediately starts greeting us and speaking in Chinese. And we’re off…. 3 hours later, it seems we can each string together a sentence like “I like to eat fried banana,” and “We go to sun moon lake to take picture.” It’s been brilliant fun, though as with most things, you get out what you put in.

At the end of our class, our NCUE buddies are there to collect us and we start walking to a local vegetarian diner, for a bit of variety. It turns out to be closed so plan B turns out to be a diner like most of the other ones we’ve been to, but again the menu is a bit different to anywhere else. I have duck rice with a side dish of bamboo shoots. Its quite nice, coming topped with vegetables and a rich duck gravy.

After lunch are taken by bus for a city tour, stopping at a giant buddha on a hill, a functioning railway round house, the only one in Taiwan that is still functioning as a maintenance yard for locomotives. The final stop is a Confucian temple which has an old fashioned classroom on one side with lots of antique desks. We pick up a traditional papaya milk drink from nearby, which has a mindblowing creamy yet floral taste and silky texture. After that we take the short drive back to the campus and head back to the dorms for a very welcome shower.

Day 3: We get up early for a full day excursion. A breakfast box was provided containing an assortment of sweet buns and a carton of very sweet black tea. The coach drive took us out of the city and towards the inner mountainous region of Taiwan. Most of the other students dozed off as I watched the scenery unfold out of the windows. There was a constant humidity haze which I had thought was pollution when we were in the city areas but remained when we were passing through the fresher air of the lush mountains and river valleys. Most of the river valleys were rather dry, with just a small torrent winding through a wider, arid, grey boulder filled flood plain.

After a couple of hours we reached our first destination, the Sun Moon Lake; so called because of its peculiar shape, vaguely reminiscent of the large disc of the sun with the moon’s crescent as a branch off to one side. We climbed down out of the coach and collected some ferry tickets and posed for the 20 or so obligatory selfies before embarking. I tried to practice a bit more Chinese and learned the word for harbour “mah toh” from the other students. I was very pleased that I managed to discern that the ferry captain used the word two or three times in his announcement.

We took a short ride to the other side of the lake and posed for a few more pictures on the pavilion before returning. We grabbed a few tasty snacks for lunch from the local street vendors. I had a chicken wing that was stuffed with rice. Seems like a good recipe to make the meagre portion of wing meat go a long way! I also had a fried banana and tried my first cup of bubble milk tea.

We made our way to the ropeway station which was the route to the main attraction for the day. The ride took about 10 minutes over some really beautiful green mountain peaks. Then we arrived to the first station and walked down to the amphi-theatre where some traditional singing and dancing was taking place. The climax was a little unnerving, when all the male dancers came out in loin-cloths and basically starting mooning the audience. I was trying to explain that this would be considered a bit rude in England and would be seen as a family show as it obviously is here but my companions assured me that it was authentic and traditional. The world is a truly fascinating place.

We ducked out just before the end to take the second cable car route down to the amusement park and spent the rest of the day on roller-coaster and water slides, enjoying the thrills and spills. There was a lot of high pitched screaming! Just around the time we were getting ready to leave, the most torrential downpour came and got us all soaking again after we’d just about dried off. The coach ride home was pretty quiet. Every one was worn out after a long and exciting day.

Day 4: This morning we were able to take our time a bit getting up as the first cultural activity didn’t start until 10am. After a light breakfast at the usual eateries, we returned to our main seminar room, which we hadn’t seen since the orientation day, for a fun cookery class. The only item on the menu, snow milk cake, was exquisitely simple to make although it did take a little time. First, we had to pour out quantities of milk into two separate containers. Into one, we whisked some corn flower and then played another ice-breaker type game to see who would be the first pair to use the cooking equipment. After completing the dessert mix, it was poured out into a bowl and taken away to chill. We then played some typical Taiwanese and Chinese card games until lunch.

Lunch consisted of Italian style spaghetti in a carbonara sauce at a local diner. We finished it fairly quickly and then made our way to the Chinese lesson where we learned how to order food and drinks. The teacher set us some homework, to video ourselves ordering food in time for the next lesson.

After class we went back to the seminar room for one of the highlights of the schedule – calligraphy class. Two of the regular students from NCUE demonstrated some techniques and then we were immediately into trying it for ourselves. Lots of practice papers and materials were provided and we had a couple of hours of trying to copy some of the different characters. It’s much harder than it looks but it’s also surprisingly relaxing, almost meditative to just focus on the brush and ink.

The group were having so much fun that the guides agreed to stay a bit longer and extend the class. We had a chance to try fan painting with water colours, which was a really beautiful experience, but not before we stopped for dinner. Pizza was ordered in and then out came the snow cakes for dessert. For such a simple recipe, the snow cake was quite delicious. I take a little credit for that because I was really working the whisk, so the cake I made was really light and fluffy.

After we finished the craft session, we stopped to take the obligatory selfies and tidy up the room. The time had really flown by again and it was already 9.30pm, so headed directly back to our dorms to turn in for the evening.

Day 5: Another reasonably timed morning. We got up at 7.30am for breakfast at 8 and a 9am start. At breakfast, we filmed each other ordering our food in Chinese. It was a bit tricky and we hesitated a few times but we managed to do it without help and the ladies behind the counter actually understood. So thumbs up to our Chinese learning so far. We were expecting to be taken to our seminar room for another craft class but it was actually scheduled in the language centre and taught by one of the Chinese teachers, for the most part in Chinese. It was good to be exposed to more words and chatter in the language we are trying to learn. There were some students from another international group but although I tried to say hello and engage with them, they seemed to prefer their own company and we sat separately during the session. We were introduced to the basics of folded paper cutting with scissors, which reminded me a lot of making snow-flakes at primary school. In fact, some of the items we made were for Chinese New Year decorations, so really quite similar. Then we cut out some stencils of animals from the Chinese zodiac and stuck them onto brightly coloured paper. This activity was OK, but I had enjoyed yesterday’s calligraphy session so much more.

Our buddies met us for lunch and took as to yet another local eatery, with its own particular way of preparing soupy noodles. My soup was milky and slightly sweet, but on the whole quite delicious. I also had a side order of tofu with preserved egg, which was unbelievably tasty, even though the egg looks really weird. This was definitely one of the more memorable meals so far.

After lunch, we went back to the language centre for our Chinese lesson and were taught be the same teacher who took the paper cutting class this morning. She obviously likes active classes as this one involved some cooking! We started off learning a lot of kitchen words and before we new it, we were cooking up another cake! Again, this was a super simple recipe, just brown sugar, and various flours and baking powder which was steamed in a rice cooker. We worked our way through the recipe as we went along, learning the words and phrases. While the cake was steaming, we also made a refreshing lemon jelly drink.

When the class was over, our buddies took us back to the seminar room to relax, chat and play card games. We discussed what we might do with our Friday evening and there was talk of going to the karaoke lounge but everyone was also watching the weather reports carefully as Typhoon Nesat was fully formed and headed directly towards Taiwan. After some discussion with the camp administrators it was decided that we were OK to visit the local night market in Changhua, so us international students bundled into a taxi with a couple of our buddies while the others took their scooters. We met up at the market and wondered around, trying all the street food and taking the obligatory selfies. It was really buzzing with excitement and, despite the sweltering heat and humidity, I was quite sorry to be heading back to university by 8.30pm. When we got back, we had a bit of a catch up about the plans for tomorrow. outside and then headed back to the dorms for showers and an early night. Weather permitting, it may be a fairly early start again.

Day 6: We woke up early, as planned and checked our messages. The community service day was still on as it seems the Typhoon won’t arrive in the area until much later today. We set off for a quick breakfast we was the usual pancake type roll with a filling.

We boarded the coach to be taken to a nearby village on the outskirts of town where there are some day care facilities for the elderly. When we arrived, we were greeted by a lady who I think was some kind of centre manager or social worker and she walked us to the day care centre. As we were approaching, we could hear some music and we turned a corner to see a group of old ladies sitting and playing various percussion instruments, like tambourines in time to some recorded music. Another lady was animatedly leading the rhythm by waving her hands about to indicated who should hit which drum. It was all very cute. After the song finished, we were asked to introduce ourselves, which we all managed to do in Chinese. Then they beckoned us to join them and we sat down to beat out a couple more songs together.

The rest of the day consisted of various activities. First of all, we had a walk around the village to see the facilities for the elderly. They explained how the facilities had all been renovated and there was also a youth hostel where people could stay cheaply if they helped with the elders. Then we made some ai yu jelly, which was going to be the refreshments at the end of the day. We were also brought out some fruity dough that a local baker had made and asked to roll it out into various shapes. I made a few pretzel shapes and some things that looked a bit like Danish pastries. These were taken away to be cooked. After that we were taken to a different room for some lunch, which consisted of a variety of 7 different dishes with rice that we could help ourselves to.

We then went outside to watch a local hero who was a master spinning top performer. He showed us a few tricks, including launching spinning tops through hoops, launching 7 tops at once, and launching a massive 24kg spinning top, that (so we were told) was the world’s biggest. After the demo, we had a go ourselves with some small tops, and a couple of us tried with the bigger tops too. It was easy enough to get them spinning but not with the precision that the master showed us. Then we went back indoors. The session continued with a demonstration of some traditional toys and games that the old people like to play to keep their minds active. Finally, we were all told to wash our hands so we could eat our ai yu jelly which was now set and sliced up into cubes and floating in a brown sugar syrup.

All in all it was quite a fun day but it felt more like a school trip than a community service. I had been expecting to spend more time with the older people, perhaps doing errands or making food for them but instead it turned out to be another cultural excursion. Even though it was fun, a part of me was looking forward to giving something back to the community that’s been so kind to us so far.

Sunday: As Taiwan was going to be buffeted by a couple of Typhoons over the late part of the weekend, the afternoon’s excursions were postponed. We stayed in and ate food that we’d purchased in advance, plus the steamed buns we made the day before. The girls came over to the male dorm house and we played cards and other games in the common area for most of the day.

Day 8: Today was scheduled to take place all in the seminar room. A couple of visiting speakers presented to us some information and videos about the different aboriginal tribes that live in Taiwan and have done, possibly for thousands of years. We were told about a couple of theories as to how they might share ancestors with all the Austronesian people. Taiwan is surprisingly culturally diverse for such a small island, especially given the proximity to China and the invasion by Japan in war time. We played some very light games to test our recall of the facts and traditions we learned about and then made a simple braided bracelet with a traditional bead.

In the afternoon, the focus switched to Hakka culture. The Hakka are an ethnic group from southern China who also inhabit Taiwan in significant numbers and have a culture and traditions that differ from the main Chinese population. We learned about how their homes are arranged and their traditional dress. This was followed by more light games and tests of memory. Then we learned more about the traditional paper cutting and symmetry in certain auspicious Chinese characters which lends itself to the paper cutting techniques. Finally for the day, we ground up various seeds and nuts into a paste and added green tea and hot water to make a traditional nutritious drink. I have to say it was rather too bitter for my tastes but it was OK after we diluted it with more hot water.

Day 9: Today had been unscheduled it was decided to run the activities that had had to be postponed for the typhoons. We woke at 7.30am to get a coach ride up into the more mountainous central Nantou county. We were taken directly to a tourism centre and tea exhibition where a very friendly lady was going to walk us through the tea preparation process. Before the demonstration, we were shown a couple of videos promoting the local tourism, which was quite interesting. A couple of the hiking and cycling routes looked really nice and made me a bit regretful that we wouldn’t actually be doing them. For the tea demo, the lady only talked in Chinese but one of our buddies chimed in with translations. We dry roasted some tea leaves and could really sense the aroma of the fresh tea. We all had a go and stirring the pan and squeezing the excess moisture out of the leaves in a cloth bag. After than we were taken into a large common area and seated around a table each with a very large bowl of tea in front of us. We were instructed to drink a little and all the while I was thinking that it was far too much to drink all of it. Then, very unexpectedly, the lady had me sit back as she dipped a white cloth in to the tea and then laid the cloth over my upturned face. It turns out that the activity was to enjoy a tea face mask! Well, who would have thought of that?

There was a lot of giggling and photos of each of us wearing the masks. After a few minutes we took the cloths off our faces and dabbed ourselves dry. I can’t say it did much for me. I think caffeine is an astringent on the skin, so at best it would have tightened any wrinkles for a few minutes. After a short time, we sat around a table and the lady demonstrated the Chinese tea ceremony, and all its etiquette, very helpfully translated by one of our buddies. We all enjoyed pouring and drinking the very aromatic tea. Once the visit was complete, we left the tourist centre and took a short walk around to look for some food. On the way, we stopped at a magnificent temple with incredible views of the plains below, and took scores of selfies and group photos.

Next the coach took us a short distance back into the lowlands for our afternoon activity, which was a visit to a mushroom farm. It was really interesting apart from the small downside that the exhibitors only spoke in Chinese again. I would have liked to ask a lot more questions because I am quite interested in fungal biology, but it wasn’t a big problem as I was able to read some of the translated panels on the well displays.

We spend a little while preparing a take away jar of inoculated soil which would germinate into a rather pretty, pink, edible oyster mushroom if tended correctly. It was obvious to me that this wouldn’t be a suitable take away gift because we wouldn’t be able to take it through the airport. Anyway, we all carried on with the activity and agreed to give the extras from the international students back to the NCUE buddies.

After that, we were taken into the facility, after sterilising our hands and donning shoe covers and hair nets. Again there was an opportunity to take some pretty ridiculous selfies wearing all the garb for the climate controlled facility. We were shown several different mushroom varieties growing in their substrate and were allowed to handle some and pass them around for a closer look and a smell of the faint but flavoursome odours. The lady from the facility explained how they were popular for cooking and also for alternative health remedies. After the tour, we went back through the gift shop and tried cooking some of the Japanese oyster mushrooms. These turned out to be quite delicious. I bought a couple of packs of freeze dried mushroom chips which will make ideal gifts for friends and family when I return home.

We had a heavy dinner mostly comprising of delicious pork dumplings from a local eatery. It was just me and the two other guys sharing a dorm. After that, we shared a local Taiwan beer, which was pretty good.

Day 10: This morning we had another three hour Chinese lesson. It was a different teacher again and I really liked this one. She was very friendly and got to know us quickly. Again, 99% of what she said in class was in Chinese using hand gestures and a little guidance to help us work out what to do and say and what she meant. We learned the peculiarities of counting numbers in Chinese, picked up a bit more vocab relating to shopping lists and so on. The last 45 minutes was a trip to the supermarket to practice finding the things we wanted and look up the prices. It was a good opportunity to ask the shop staff “excuse me, where are the…?” and “how much is this?”

We went for lunch at a place that served only one thing – chicken or pork with rice and some vegetables. The only thing you could change about the meal was whether it was a breaded chicken or pork cutlet sitting on the top, and what sauce it should come with from a natty selection including garlic mayo, thousand island, teriyaki ad more. Despite, or perhapse because of its simplicity, it was really quite appetising.

The after noon cultural activity was a day trip to Lu Kang, a famous tourist town with a glass works and an olde worlde shopping street. There was much excitement once the bus set off and the Taiwanese students realised there was a karaoke machine on board. They immediately set to choosing songs to sing together on the journey. Sadly there was only a single page of English songs and barely anything I’ve heard of. I tried my chances with “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother” and made a total pig’s ear of it, but nobody seemed to care. The rest of the journey we were entertained by three or four mic junkies who obviously loved to sing, with talent in varying measure.

The first stop was the glass works and there were some really nice things to see. Again we had a tour group but only in very rapid Chinese and not much opportunity for the buddies to translate for me, so I split from the group a little and wandered around at my own pace. It was quite nice, but I wasn’t totally wowed, having been lucky enough to visit Venice, with its truly artisanal glass ware in years gone by. I found a Buddhist temple outside which was pretty amazing. I have a feeling that none of the others actually saw it as they were quite busy photographing each other in cheap tacky sunglasses.

We set of after about 90 minutes to Lu Kang, which again was interesting enough but not a real wow location when you compare it to some European and Chinese old towns. We ambled slowly looking at local crafts and collectibles, though I didn’t find anything worth picking up as a souvenir. The others seemed be stopping to take selfies at every opportunity and more besides, and I think today I was a little tired of it all so I wandered ahead and enjoyed the personal space a little. Amazing how sensitive our fellow students are as at one point someone asked me if I was OK or a bit tired. Everyone has been very kind and considerate and I’ve been pretty awed by the sense of group camaraderie and companionship offered to the international students like myself.

Once we’d taken in the most part of Lu Kang’s conservation area, we stopped in a large tourist eatery for the local seafood delicacies. The main attraction was the oyster pancakes, though I opted for an oyster fritter which seemed to have a crispier batter, and a vegetable side dish, also battered and fried.

On the way back, the karaoke machine was up and running almost immediately. I was really regretful that there weren’t any decent English song choices as I would have loved to join in and belt out a rock ballad or something more exciting. At one point, the group started to sing a song that they didn’t know very well and just as they were really faltering and losing the tune, the driver picked up his PA mic and started crooning with such gusto and verve that he showed everybody up. It was absolutely brilliant, possibly the highlight of the day for me.

As we pulled in, we thanked the driver for taking us and entertaining us so naturally and then made our way back to the dorms, while co-ordinating meeting times and plans for tomorrow.