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Winter 12-2006

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Recommended Citation

Houle, Wen, "Winter 2006, A Return to My Birth Country to Study Mandarin" (2006). *International Educator: the Newsletter of the UNH Global Engagement Editorial Board*. 21.

https://scholars.unh.edu/international_news/21

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Center for International Education

December 2006

A RETURN TO MY BIRTH COUNTRY TO STUDY MANDARIN

by Wen Houle, CIE Information Management Assistant

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Wen Houle at the "Queen's Head" in Yehliu Natural Park, Taiwan

How very fitting for a staff member of the Center for International Education to study abroad! I recently attended the Mandarin Studies Program in Taiwan, my birth country. This summer program is offered by the Taiwan-United States Sister Relations Alliance organization in Little Rock, Arkansas. Fourteen scholarships were awarded in this program's second year; recipients were undergraduate and graduate students from various states.

I had left Taiwan at the age of six, before formal instruction of Mandarin began. Unfortunately for me, I did not learn the language while growing up and have only been able to return to Taiwan for a visit once before, so this was truly a special opportunity.

The island of Taiwan is about the size of Maryland and Delaware combined, and home to 23 million people. The capital of Taipei in the northern part is very international, as evidenced by its 2.5 million residents. Taiwan has the second highest population density after Bangladesh; factoring in the three-quarters that is mountainous, one realizes just how densely populated Taiwan

is. Its subtropical climate makes summer hot and humid, often punctuated by typhoons. During my stay in Taiwan, I did experience two typhoons and one earthquake (6.1 on the Richter scale)!

I spent July and August at National Chengchi University in Mucha, situated in the southeast corner of Taipei, and surrounded by hills and rivers. NCCU comprises nine colleges and over 40 graduate institutes and awards approximately 3,000 degrees each year. My classmates and I met foreign students from many countries (Australia, Palau, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Singapore, to name a few) as well as Taiwanese residents. Chinese people are described as friendly, polite, and courteous, and we all found this to be the case.

I eagerly began my learning. Our class of eight students was led by a wonderful Chinese instructor, who authored the text that we used. Lessons were conducted with minimal spoken English. Our schedule included two hours of lessons each day accompanied by homework, quizzes, and written and oral reports. In addition, we attended lectures, pronunciation and writing classes, and field trips.

I thoroughly enjoyed the food, much of which I remembered from childhood. Night markets, going to the top of Taipei 101 (the world's tallest building), going to the beach and harbors (this is an island, after all), visiting a tea house, traveling to the resort of Sun Moon Lake, attending a professional baseball game, and navigating the subways, buses, and trains—I'm happy to have experienced these events.

A wonderful side benefit of this adventure was the chance for me to catch up with my relatives, all of whom I had not seen in many years and a few of whom I had never met. When I returned home to New Hampshire, I discovered that 2006 was designated the "Year of Study Abroad"—how appropriate!

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