TWO TERMS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
A REFLECTION ON ACADEMIC EXCHANGES IN SINGAPORE AND TAIPEI

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Dr. Roe,

The enclosed report, *Two Terms in South-East Asia: A Reflection on Academic Exchanges in Singapore and Taipei*, is a comparison of my two semesters taken abroad. The first was my 3A term at the National University of Singapore. I was fortunate enough to escape the Canadian winter and spend my winter term there in 2011. The second exchange was a more exceptional case, a term my faculty director and I have nicknamed ‘4C.’ I opted to defer my expected graduation date by one extra semester for two reasons: to complete the requirements of my International Studies in Engineering option and to embark on another exchange. The first one was so rewarding I couldn’t resist the temptation to try another! That second exchange was at the National Taiwan University in Taipei during fall 2013.

This report is intended to fulfill the requirements of GENE 303 and accordingly the ISE option. Its intended audience is mainly prospective exchange students looking to better understand the differences between Taipei and Singapore, NUS and NTU. The details here enclosed can aid them in deciding which place would better suit them.

I hereby confirm that I have received no help in writing this report. I also confirm this report has not been previously submitted for academic credit at this or any other academic institution.

Sincerely,

James Rossy
Encl.
Abstract

At this report’s time of writing, the University of Waterloo’s Engineering Exchange Office has partnered with over 70 universities in over 20 countries. Each partnership offers UW students a tremendous opportunity to enrich themselves through travel while working towards their degree. I myself have attended two of these foreign institutions. The first was in 2011, I took my 3A semester on exchange at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The second was this past autumn, 2013. I studied at the National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei. Both schools and both cities have a great deal to offer prospective exchangers looking to experience South-East Asia first-hand.

Singapore is of course the bustling metropolis famous for its impressive modern architecture and its crucial importance an economic bridge to Asian markets. It’s a remarkably clean, organized city-state whose primary language is English, making it very accessible to foreigners. While most travellers pass through in just a few days for a quick glance, locals know that Singapore is about more than just the business frenzy in tall glass towers. The local culture is a unique, contemporary hybrid of Western and East-Asian views. Its local dialect of ‘Singlish’ is English-based but borrows from at least six regional languages as well, a good metaphor of Singapore itself.

Taipei is Taiwan’s cultural, economic, and political capital. Its primary language is traditional Mandarin but one may also find natives speaking the original Taiwanese. Though modern, Taipei isn’t overly westernized and most vendors don’t understand English. Learning sufficient Chinese for day-to-day tasks is easy though and definitely rewarding. Good food and drinks are ubiquitous and cheap. Consequently most exchange students quickly learn to love the Taiwanese style dumplings, sweet bubble tea, and fresh fruit smoothies. The country has an excellent transportation infrastructure making short trips from Taipei easy to plan.

The two cities are evaluated upon the following four criteria: higher education, quality of life, cultural zeitgeist (or spirit), and travel offerings. The results of the comparison show that Singapore is preferable in terms of quality of higher education. However Taipei has more to offer with regards to quality of life and zeitgeist. The two are arguably even in terms of travel opportunities. Thus this report ultimately recommends Taipei to prospective exchange students, with a caveat that it explained in the section Conclusions & Recommendations section.
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1. Introduction

Singapore is an astounding place to live. It’s a unique, bustling economic center filled with talented people and impressive institutions. Its importance as the economic bridge of Southeast Asia to international markets cannot be overstated. It’s also an amazing place for an adventurous student to take an academic exchange. I did just that. At this report’s time of writing, I am enrolled as a fourth year engineering student at the University of Waterloo working towards a BA of Software Engineering. I took the first semester of my third year (3A) on academic exchange at the National University of Singapore (NUS). It was an excellent experience. I enjoyed it so much that I opted for a second exchange. I’m currently taking my final semester on exchange at the National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taipei. This report consists of a high-level comparison of Singapore and Taipei. As my last semester comes to a close, I’ve written this report as a pseudo-guide for prospective exchange students or curious faculty members to provide insight into these two exceptional places. There’s no shortage of material to cover but this report has been scope down to four criteria: higher education, quality of life, cultural zeitgeist, and travel offerings. To help better define the scope of this report, consider these two summaries of what this report strives to be, and what it tries to avoid.

What it is.

This report is a qualitative comparison of Taipei and Singapore from the perspective of a student traveler. Though it contains some information about Taiwan beyond just the city of Taipei, Singapore is small city-state and therefore more comparable to Taipei. As a purely unbiased analysis would be far too dry, I didn’t resist the urge to editorialize and share my personal opinions.

What it is not.

This report is not a travel guide. It contains details that could certainly be useful to prospective travelers but does not offer itineraries, contacts, or reviews for particular establishments. Neither is it a comprehensive journal of my travels throughout my two exchange semesters. To cover every trip, even at a high level, would go well beyond the scope of this report. Lastly, as the contents of this report are based mostly on my own experiences, prospective travelers should aware that their mileage may vary.
2. Higher Education

In Taiwan, NTU is referred to as simply as “Tai Da (台大)” which is a short for “Taiwan Daxue (台灣大學)” which translates to “Taiwan University.” It’s a short, simple moniker well known throughout the entire country, including even the small, isolated islands off the south coast. Its main campus is massive and includes five additional sites that altogether occupy nearly 1% of the total area of Taiwan. It attracts the highest scoring students from all around the country, though the majority of admitted applicants are from Taipei or the surrounding regions.

NUS is equally well respected in Singapore and also internationally. Though its roots extend back to 1905, the university has only existed under its current name and form since the Singapore government merged two of city’s finest school’s in 1980. NUS consistently ranks very highly, praised in some rankings as the number one school in Asia. Its faculties are diverse but it is best known for its business, computing, and medical schools – medicine especially since it has a large university hospital on its main campus.

Facilities

To judge the quality of a university’s facilities, I consider the cleanliness, usefulness, and diversity of facilities available to the typical undergraduate exchange student. Both NTU and NUS have impressive facilities. Both campuses have ubiquitous Wi-Fi, ample green space, and plenty of eateries. Overall though, NUS offers better facilities. NTU is an older university, accordingly its buildings show more signs of wear. The NUS gyms are nicer and free of charge for all students. NUS has shuttle buses running around campus all day. And the NUS campus is carefully designed to let students navigate buildings without stepping out into rain.

Faculty

Judging a university’s faculty is difficult as I only interact with a very small subset of it. Nonetheless, I’ll speak to what I’ve noticed and what I gather from other students. The professors, teaching assistants, and service workers and NTU are slightly better. Although the Singaporean staff were fluent in English, the NTU staff seem more enthusiastic and engaged in their work. As is the Taiwanese norm, the NTU faculty is exceptionally accommodating.

Student Body

Judging the overall caliber of the students is also challenging. What are the defining characteristics of an excellent student body? Perhaps one that is enthusiastic, helpful, open-minded, diverse, critical, etc. After some thought, I accepted that I can’t choose a clear winner for this category. Both NTU and NUS have an
outstanding body of students that, with respect, puts UW to shame. I’ll never forget the first time I visited the NTU student activities center and discovered its six floors packed with students participating in clubs. On a typical day, one can find at least four orchestras, a dozen small bands, some unique sub-culture groups such as manga enthusiasts, and a cocktail club. NUS has a similar level of student engagement.

Class Content
The University of Waterloo is a very challenging school. While most UW students would likely agree, I argue that one doesn’t fully appreciate how UW compares until one studies elsewhere. Sampling the undergraduate course offerings at not one, but two of Asia’s leading universities, I was surprised to find that neither was on par with UW in terms of quality of courses. Both NUS and NTU have comparatively lighter course loads. The course material does not delve into subjects as deeply as their UW counterparts. The grading schemes are indisputably more generous than at UW. Admittedly though, these are all pleasant surprises for international students who need free time to travel and explore.
3. Quality of Life

The quality of day-to-day life is a subjective, intangible property that differs greatly from person to person or season to season, making it difficult to measure and compare between Singapore and Taipei. However some of the key factors that influence those feelings are perhaps not beyond reasonable evaluation. In my opinion, three of the most relevant considerations are food, transport, and cost. Food, with regards to its deliciousness, trustworthiness, and availability. Transport, with regards to the reach and reliability of the public transportation system or taxis. And cost, the relative expensiveness of common activities compared to what we may expect back home. The cultural spirit, or zeitgeist as I prefer, is also an important factor to consider but it merits more attention and will be discussed in the next section.

Food

In the interest of full disclosure, I should admit my strong affinity for most oriental food. I prefer a rice-based diet to a potato or bread-based one. Accordingly, there was never a meaningful chance I would find the food offerings of either Taipei or Singapore to be poor. That said, I found one to be better, and it’s Taipei. In Singapore, the local food is often found in cafeteria style clusters of restaurants which offer good value and decent trustworthiness. These cafeterias ubiquitous and usually offer the same set of restaurants as any other. Thus the food is very available but not so fresh or surprising. That’s not to say one can’t find other more distinct dishes if one ventures out to say the Arab or Indian quarters. However most of Singapore is ruthlessly consistent and organized so one can’t be surprised the food offerings are as well. In Taiwan though, the food business is chaotic and diverse. Try visiting a night market to find children eating fried squid on a stick as though it were a hot dog, or stinky tofu despite its rotting odor. Street vendors are very common but also less reliable. I didn’t personally get sick in Taiwan but I have friends who did briefly. There are also cheap restaurants everywhere which usually offer free drinks and soup. As my Mandarin was so poor, I would often order the wrong dish by mistake but was typically pleasantly surprised.

Transport

Public transport is important for travelers, especially those on a budget. It rarely makes sense to purchase a car or motorbike for the short duration of a semester. A fast, reliable, far reaching, reasonably priced transit makes a city much more livable. In this regard, both Singapore and Taipei have an exceptional transit system that puts most North-American cities to shame. In both, the subway is the heart of the network. They are reliable, far-reaching, extremely clean and safe. Moreover, both NTU and NUS campuses are
located just next to a subway station. There are also buses but they are sometimes delayed by traffic, especially in Taipei where armies of motorbikes own the road. For that reason, I’m tempted to declare Singapore the favorite. Though it is worth mentioning that NTU students have free access to Taipei’s the shared bicycle program via their student card, so I’ll call it a tie.

Cost
Most Asian countries have the desirable quality of being relatively cheap compared to most North American or European countries. Most day-to-day essentials – food, transport, entertainment, housing – are considerably more affordable than their equivalents back home in Canada. It’s part of what attracts backpackers from all over the world to South-East Asia. Singapore and Taipei are no exceptions; both cities offer attractively low costs of living for students. However, Singapore’s high taxes on alcohol and cigarettes can put a strain on a student’s budget depending on how they choose to spend their evenings. Moreover, Singapore has fewer night markets compared to Taipei where cheap goods are ubiquitous. Thus in terms of cost of living, Taipei is slightly preferable.
4. Zeitgeist

Zeitgeist is a German loanword which in its traditional use by philosophers was meant to represent the ‘spirit of the time,’ or more specifically, the shared, dominant ideas and beliefs of a particular period and place. The word’s practical use has shifted slightly over time and now refers more to the spirit of the people, rather than the beliefs themselves – see Google’s popular annual Zeitgeist videos as an example.\(^2\)

It’s therefore to best word to represent the elusive notion of a culture’s shared spirit, it’s public’s *joie de vivre*, the passion (or lack thereof) in the hearts of the people. I find examining zeitgeist to be crucial in judging a city. When travelling, I’ve visited bustling cities with live, energetic locals. I have also visited more dreary places where locals trudge along like zombies, always avoiding eye contact. The spirit of the locals fuels or drains one’s own and is therefore important to consider.

The first Singaporean I met was a friendly, talkative taxi driver. He was Chinese but had been working in Singapore for some ten-odd years so he knew the city well and shared interesting tips as I made my first drive to NUS. So first impressions were good for Singapore. However, over time, I came to find that this particularly gregarious taxi driver was an exceptional case; most of Singapore’s blue-collar workers like drivers, gardeners, or builders seemed more quiet and disinterested, though still always polite. The same can be said for the armies of white-collar workers – largely finance – riding the subway to and from work each morning. Everyone keeps to themselves and public places are remarkably quiet. I found younger Singaporean students to be more outgoing. NUS is always crowded with intelligent, optimistic students who spend nearly all their time on campus. In contrast to Canadian schools where people tend to hibernate through winter semesters, Singapore’s year-round tropical climate draws students away from their dorms. Interestingly, I found the male students to be noticeably less enthusiastic than the female students. Those I asked explained that all native Singaporean men are required to serve two years of mandatory military service.\(^3\) For many students, they are called in after they have already begun university, meaning they must return to finish their degrees the sudden interruption of two years absence. I was told they return stronger men but with diminished spirits. Despite the mandatory national service, Singaporeans seem to be quite content with the nation’s political state. As a former British colony, their government is modeled closely after their former occupants’. Accordingly, they benefit from greater civil liberties than many of their neighbouring countries, freedoms that the Singaporeans are aware and proud of. Singapore
is also remarkably ethnically diverse but wealth inequality across races is obvious. It’s an upsettingly consistent pattern that darker skin tone correlates with lower income jobs. As a result of its diversity, local Singaporeans are entirely at ease with foreigners just like in Hong Kong.

I remember just as well the first local Taiwanese person I met; it was an equally auspicious start as Singapore. NTU’s Office of International Affairs arranged to have new exchangers met at the airport by friendly English-speaking students. These ambassadors helped us acquire a phone number, exchange money, and had a bus waiting to shuttle us to NTU. This first pre-emptive greeting is in fact representative of a difference between Taiwanese and Singaporeans. While both are typically polite and approachable, Taiwanese residents are more actively engaged in interacting among themselves and with foreigners. One can spend a lifetime in Singapore unnoticed and undisturbed if one wishes. In Taipei however, I was approached semi-frequently by pleasant locals requesting photos or just brief conversation. Just an aside, when travelling in China, I found people were even more forward and engaging than in Taiwan. It’s interesting to note then, in these three countries all of Chinese heritage, the inverse relationship between civil liberties and people’s degree of engagement. In terms of civil liberties, Taiwanese find themselves closer to Singaporeans than Chinese. I was pleasantly surprised to find students and faculty felt free to openly express concern and criticism of their government. Relatively speaking, Taiwan’s public services are quite good. Their healthcare, education, and transportation infrastructure are all better than most Asian countries⁴. Yet the citizens still push for improvement, which I find admirable. Like Singaporeans, Taiwanese are very career-oriented, especially Taipei residents as it’s the economic and political capital. Accordingly, the NTU student body is remarkably active with hundreds of clubs ranging in interest from Model United Nations to the NTU Whisky Club. Students are eager to participate in clubs as they feel it helps them develop marketable skills while still having fun. Although the students are career focused, I would argue that the Taiwanese prioritize family bonds greater than Singaporeans. Perhaps this helps explain the pervasive atmosphere of warmth that is palpable in Taiwan but somewhat lacking in Singapore, despite its high temperatures.

Though I describe Singapore as slightly colder in mood than Taipei, I found both cities to be lively, startling, and fueled by ample human spirit. I commend the Taiwanese for being more warm and engaging than the natives of ultra-commerce-driven Singapore. Though consider as a counterpoint that Singapore has a much more vital foreign community that helps define the city culture. The zeitgeist is strong in both cities but I feel that Taipei is preferable in this regard.
5. Travel Offerings

While on exchange, Waterloo engineering students are typically permitted to assume a lighter course than would have been required back home. The reason is that the value of an exchange is much greater than just the opportunity to explore another university. Students should be exploring another culture, another country, another continent. It would be a wasted opportunity to visit any foreign school without also travelling the country and its neighbours. Thus, in evaluating NTU and NUS, Taipei and Singapore, one should also consider the travel offerings of each place, both domestic and international.

Domestic Travel
Singapore is a sovereign city-state with a total land area of 716km$^2$, meaning one can drive along the entire border in less than a day, excluding the small islands nearby$^5$. It is one of the world’s most modern cities, a marvel of technology and civil engineering. Despite its small size, Singapore has a few hiking trails and even a decent, albeit fake, beach strip named Sentosa. But obviously, in such a small area, there aren’t enough destinations to keep a traveller occupied for the full length of his or her exchange. Taipei, on the other hand, is ideal for simple day or weekend getaways. There are scenic shores in the north accessible by subway train. There’s also high speed rail along the west coast meaning the better beaches in the south are just a few hours distance. There are well-maintained hiking and climbing spots within day-trip distance. There are cheap flights to the scenic, culturally unique islands off the south-east coast. The list goes on, the conclusion is clear: in terms of domestic travel, Taiwan has more offer.

International Travel
What Singapore may lack in terms of domestic attractions though, it more than makes up for with easy international travel opportunities. For example, Malaysia, Singapore’s neighbour to the north, is a $4 bus ride away. During my exchange, some friends and I attended the Kuala Lumpur Formula 1 Grand Prix. The entire weekend, including tickets, transportation, hostels, altogether cost less than just the ticket price of Montreal’s Grand Prix. Beyond Malaysia, Singapore is a flight hub for all of South-East Asia so one can find tickets to just about anywhere in the region for about $150 round-trip. Thailand, Vietnam, and Bali in Indonesia were the most popular among the NUS exchangers. Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Hong Kong were also common destinations. There is no shortage of choices, only a shortage of time!

Taipei is not quite as well connected to the popular South-East Asian spots as Singapore. Its
most common routes are towards far-east places, namely Japan, China, Hong Kong, and South Korea. These routes are absolutely worth travelling but aren’t the quintessential South-East Asian experience that seems to be growing so popular. Like Taipei itself, cities along the far-east are typically modern, highly developed, with seasonal climates. They aren’t much cheaper than North America, with the exception of China which requires an overpriced visa. If one is intent on leaving Taiwan for a short, budget-friendly, beach-bound leisure trip, the Philippines is the best option and one I personally recommend highly.

All things considered, I would argue that Singapore is better jumping off point for international travel. However, Taiwan is the clear winner for domestic offerings. Overall then, in travel offerings, Singapore and Taipei are evenly matched.
6. Conclusion & Recommendations

In reflection upon my two academic exchanges, the first at the National University of Singapore and the second at National Taiwan University in Taipei, I have compared the two experiences with regards to four criteria: higher education, quality of life, zeitgeist, and travel offerings. I’ve found that that Singapore’s NUS is preferable in terms of education quality. However, Taipei is preferable in terms of quality of life, cultural zeitgeist. The two destinations are about even in terms of travel offerings. Thus, based on my arguments of partly opinion and partly fact, Taipei is decidedly the preferred destination for a prospective exchange student looking to get the most of their travel experience.

Despite the result drawn from this report’s analysis, I must however confess that while my mind argues for Taipei, my heart argues for Singapore. My brief semester at the National University of Singapore was the best time I’ve ever had. Why was I happier there than the arguably more interesting Taipei? There are a few reasons. Firstly, I was a younger, more enthusiastic, less traveled student when I arrived in Singapore, making the exchange a thrillingly new experience. Secondly, Singapore was the first time since middle school that I let myself put my social interests above my school work for a short while. Finally, the large community of exchange students in Singapore grew to be astoundingly close-knit. Of course, the exchangers in Taipei were also very good friends. But the NUS students and I would refer to ourselves as a family. We would eat dinner together in large groups nearly every night. Many of us remain very close to this day. I don’t believe that any particular attribute of Singapore or Taipei accounts for the NUS exchangers forming even tighter bonds than the NTU ones. It was, in my opinion, just the good fortune of so many of the right people who wanted the same things meeting at the right time and place. I cherish my friendships from both places, but there was something special about the NUS crew. As I said, I stand by my recommendation of Taipei but do so with mixed emotions.

The better recommendation for any aspiring exchanger though, would be to follow your own gut. When choosing an exchange school, you should of course do some research but you should also allow yourself to dream about what adventures each place offers. From there, choose what feels right knowing there are no wrong answers. Any place you choose will be extraordinary and therefore seem in retrospect to be the absolute right choice to have made. You should respect the real risks of travelling and prepare adequately. Make sure though to include on your traveller’s checklist an open mind, a generous heart, and good hiking shoes.
7. References


8. Acknowledgments

I would to formally thank the UW Engineering Exchange faculty, in particular Cindy Howe and Dr. Peter Roe, for the amazing opportunities the program has made available to me. Relatively few students get to take part in these unique, enriching experiences. I therefore feel especially grateful for being allowed to participate in two separate exchanges. I would also like to thank Software Engineering Director Andrew Morton for his aid in planning my first exchange at National University of Singapore, and Associate Director Patrick Lam for his aid with my second at National Taiwan University. Andreea Ciucurita and her colleagues at on the Waterloo International Study Abroad team were also of crucial help in coordinating with the host schools and managing my application. Finally, I’d like to show gratitude to two exceptional institutions, NUS and NTU, for welcoming foreign students.
9. Appendix

Image 1 - NUS main campus, athletic fields, January 2011. Source: self