

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Leadership-in-Action

***Leadership-in-Action: Experience Abroad Reflection
Kaohsiung, Taiwan***

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1 September 2026

Choosing Taiwan as my Leadership-in-Action location was a decision inspired by a layover I had in Taiwan in 2023. Enroute to Toronto for my first year of university, I had the opportunity to stay in Taiwan for all of 20 hours. All it took was 20 hours for me to gain a fascination for this country I had never been to before—the people were kind, the food was amazing, and above all, you could still see culture embedded in every corner of Taipei, despite its history of rapid industrialization and modernization. Since that trip in 2023, I resolved that I would return to Taiwan as soon as I could and learn more about the country that had gripped me.

Since that trip, I never did get to go back to Taiwan. It was only when I became a Laidlaw Scholar that I had the opportunity to choose any location that I wanted, and Taiwan was an easy pick. Aside from my personal fascination born from the 20 hours I spent in the country, Taiwan has some interesting government policies. The one I was most interested in was the English 2030 program, a government initiative to introduce English as the second official language of the country by 2030. It was an incredibly ambitious program, and I wondered whether it would truly pan out. Given that Taiwan's infamous inequality between Taipei and other regions, I wondered whether cities and towns outside of Taipei would be able to keep up with such a demanding government initiative. As such, I sought to find an organization that taught English to Taiwanese students, which would allow for my language skills in English and Mandarin to be used.

The organization that I worked with for my Leadership-in-Action project was Taiwan Love and Hope International Charity, a non-profit organization in Kaohsiung. The charity's main



goal is to provide a safe space for underprivileged children in Kaohsiung, providing free educational programming from 9-4 during the summer months where parents can drop off their children before work.

As a volunteer, I took charge of the morning English classes, teaching students basic English through worksheets, fun games, and songs. As this was my first time leading a class, I often felt out of my depth, having to prepare for hours before classes to ensure that they would run smoothly. Furthermore, I was in charge of leading a team of other volunteers, ensuring that they understood what would happen in the classes ahead of time, as well as assigning them responsibilities. Though I have experience in leading teams, since I had never been a teacher-in-charge before, it was challenging to balance creating lesson plans, leading the volunteers, and ensuring that all students were adequately engaged.

Living in Taiwan for a month was an incredibly unique experience for me. Though I had the advantage of having intensely learned Mandarin in high school, actually using it every day was an entirely different challenge. I quickly realized that most of my vocabulary was constrained to formal debate rather than everyday conversation. I could hold entire discussions about climate change and talk for ages about the differences between Western and Asian education systems, but when it came to something as simple as asking about different dishes at a restaurant, my words and accent felt foreign.

Speaking Mandarin in Taiwan also posed a challenge because of its linguistic differences from the Mandarin spoken in Mainland China, which was the kind of Mandarin I (and many other language learners) grew up learning. Something that many non-Mandarin-speaking people are unaware of is that Taiwan and Mainland China use distinct writing systems. Simplified Mandarin was only formalized in Mainland China in 1988, well after Taiwan and China politically separated in 1949. Because of this, Taiwan still retains use of the original Traditional Mandarin, where characters are written in a more complex manner. Thus, though I can read quite fluently in Simplified Mandarin, reading Traditional Mandarin was a whole different beast. Oftentimes, this resulted in me frantically writing characters into my phone to try to figure out what the Simplified equivalent was. Reading Traditional Mandarin was a particular challenge to me when it came to reading students' names when I led the summer English classes. However, with a lot of note-taking and dictionary look-ups, I began to get the hang of it by the end of my time in Taiwan.

Another linguistic factor that I found challenging to navigate was vocabulary differences. Mandarin is like English in that it varies vastly between regions, mainly because English speaking people have immigrated (and colonized!) to so many different countries. Since Mandarin is spoken in Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and in diaspora communities, each region often has unique regional words. As Mandarin is my third language, I often find it difficult to separate which words originate from which region, leading to a few awkward encounters and bouts of miscommunication. Some of the most common examples I can think of is “rubbish” (lei se in Taiwan, but la ji in other regions, despite

having the same characters in both countries), “dine in” (nei yong 内用 in Taiwan, but tang shi 堂食 in Mainland China), and “take out” (wai mai 外卖 in Taiwan, but da bao 打包 in Mainland China). Though these regional differences infuses some fun into language learning, it does make for some complicated encounters, especially when talking about work to the other people in the charity!

One thing in Taiwan that I found quite interesting is how racially and culturally homogenous the society is, and how it causes some confusion when I attempt to explain my background. I am half-Indonesian and half-Southern Chinese, but most people typically assume that I am full Southern Chinese because of how I look and dress. This would be quite easy to understand, if not for three additional facts: I speak English “like an American” (according to most people, though I’m unsure if Americans would agree!), I speak Mandarin with a Taiwanese accent (due to a long friendship with someone who spoke in a strong Taiwanese accent), and I don’t speak Cantonese (the language spoken in much of Southern China). Because of this, many of the kids I taught were quite confused of my cultural background. I’m not sure that they completely understood it by the end of my time with them, but they were very interested in learning about my origins!

Though I was quite concerned with integrating into Taiwanese society and the charity I worked with (or, integrating as much as one is able to as a tourist), I found that I was surrounded by incredibly kind and helpful people during my time in Taiwan. From the people at the organization I worked with to 7-11 cashiers to hotel managers, everyone



was always happy to answer any questions I had, and went above and beyond to help me. The highlight of my trip was the genuine kindness and hospitality shown to me by people that I met, and I absolutely loved the time I spent there. I am so grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me the opportunity to volunteer and travel abroad; it was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and something I will cherish forever!

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation, Professor Joseph Tiangco, and the University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Programme, all of whom sacrificed time and resources to make this project possible.