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Study Abroad Reflection Essay

As I looked out over the breathtaking city of Taipei, I felt a deep sense of gratitude. I had come so far, both literally and figuratively, from the shy child in my Mandarin class to this moment of clarity and confidence. Standing in Taiwan, surrounded by a city I had only read about in textbooks, I realized something powerful: I had found my purpose. I wanted to help bridge the gap between the United States and this vibrant, complex region of the world—not just through language, but through shared understanding.

The opportunity to study abroad in Taiwan solidified this passion. From the moment I stepped off the plane, I was immersed in a cultural landscape that was both exhilarating and humbling. As I walked through the bustling streets of Taipei, I marveled at the fusion of old and new—ancient temples tucked between glass skyscrapers, traditional food stalls standing beside high-tech convenience stores. Taiwan is a place where the past and future coexist, and it was in this unique environment that I found myself growing in unexpected ways.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this experience was being able to use Mandarin in real-world settings. What had once been classroom drills and vocabulary tests transformed into spontaneous conversations with locals, directions asked on street corners, and stories shared over meals. My ability to converse in Mandarin didn't just help me get around—it made my experience deeper and more meaningful. It allowed me to see Taiwan not as a tourist, but as someone who could begin to understand its people, values, and rhythm of life. I realized that language is more than just a tool; it's a doorway into another worldview.

Using my language skills outside of a classroom was transformative. Instead of memorizing grammar rules to pass a quiz, I was learning how to communicate with warmth, empathy, and curiosity. I was building relationships with people from different walks of life: a shopkeeper who patiently taught me how to pronounce the names of fruits, an elderly man on a train who told me about growing up in post-war Taiwan, and a college student who introduced me to her favorite teahouse. These connections, while brief, left lasting impressions on me. They reminded me that language is a human connector, not just an academic exercise.

One of my favorite experiences was exploring Taiwan's famous night markets. Now I understand why they're a source of national pride. The night markets are more than just places to eat or shop—they are cultural microcosms, alive with energy and

tradition. The streets were filled with enticing aromas, the sounds of sizzling woks and lively chatter, and vibrant displays of clothes, toys, handmade crafts, and more. I quickly developed a soft spot for 地瓜球 (sweet potato balls), a chewy and delicious snack I came to crave. Every night market visit was an adventure—trying unfamiliar foods, bargaining in Mandarin, watching street performers, and simply soaking in the atmosphere.

These markets also revealed something deeper: a sense of community. I saw how vendors took pride in their stalls, how families and friends gathered to eat and laugh, and how these markets served as spaces of connection and cultural exchange. Observing how Taiwanese people interacted in these settings taught me nuances about their social norms, values, and daily life—lessons that no textbook could convey. It was in these unscripted moments that I truly felt immersed in the culture.

The most impactful experience during my time in Taiwan, however, was visiting a local high school. I was given the chance to speak to a class of Taiwanese students about American culture. Nervously, I introduced myself and shared stories about Clemson football games, homecoming, and the Fourth of July. To my surprise, the students were eager to learn, asking questions about college life, sports, and American holidays. Their curiosity and enthusiasm turned my nervousness into joy. I realized how meaningful cultural exchange can be—how sharing our experiences opens doors and breaks down misconceptions.

In return, the students taught me about their own culture. They explained the origins of bubble tea, introduced me to the traditions of the Dragon Boat Festival, and showed me how to write my Chinese name in calligraphy. We even played a language game where I helped them practice English, and they corrected my Mandarin pronunciation. This two-way exchange showed me how much we can learn from one another when we approach conversations with openness and respect. It sparked a new passion in me: creating more spaces for young people from different backgrounds to connect and learn from each other.

Throughout my study abroad experience, I had countless personal interactions that shaped my understanding of Taiwan. Whether I was ordering soup dumplings at a night market or chatting with a fellow commuter on a train, I found myself in moments of real connection. These seemingly small interactions reminded me that global relationships aren't always formed through grand gestures—they're often built through everyday encounters. These moments, where I felt seen, understood, and welcomed, gave me a new appreciation for the importance of cultural empathy.

This experience was not only eye-opening; it was life-changing. I came to Taiwan hoping to improve my Mandarin and learn more about the culture—but I left with so

much more. I left with a deeper understanding of who I am and who I want to become. I want to pursue a career that allows me to continue fostering cross-cultural understanding—whether through international business, education, or diplomacy. My time in Taiwan confirmed that I want to dedicate my life to building bridges between people, countries, and cultures.

Studying abroad didn't just teach me about Taiwan—it taught me about the world, and my place in it. It showed me that the most meaningful connections often happen when we step out of our comfort zones and into someone else's world. It taught me that learning a language is not just about grammar or vocabulary, but about listening with intention, speaking with humility, and always being willing to learn. And above all, it taught me that cultural exchange is not a one-time event, but a lifelong journey—one that I'm excited to continue.