

# Teaching Taiwan

## An Experiential Learning Essay

By Lauren Collins

**O**ne of my favorite undergraduate courses to teach is *Memory and the Politics of Heritage in Asia*. This class uses examinations of material objects (not only museums, monuments, and memorials, but also archives, school curriculum, and oral histories) to explore how history does not exist as a passive, fixed account, but is instead an active and ongoing struggle to shape narratives, preserve memory, and influence collective consciousness. In this class, we explore history as a living, contested terrain.<sup>1</sup> However, it can be difficult for undergraduate students sitting within the four walls of my classroom, place-bound on my campus, to truly feel how competing narratives of history are actively being contested and fought over in real time as we study them. For this reason, when I had the opportunity in the summer of 2023 to take a group of undergraduate students to Taiwan on a faculty-led program to explore memory politics there in real-time, I immediately agreed. In my experience, there is nothing more powerful to understanding memory politics than taking students to the physical spaces where history has taken place and is actively being remembered, suppressed, and shifted.



Taiwan under the magnifying glass. Source: © sema srinouljan| Shutterstock.

**T**aiwan's complex history and its current political situation are important for American students to understand.<sup>2</sup> By studying in Taiwan, students can gain insights into Taiwan's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), its struggle for international recognition, and its democratic development. In this essay, I describe a faculty-led program to Taiwan in the summer of 2023 modeled on the idea of "reading the city" with students as cocreators. I make the case here that in order to study a topic like memory politics, simply traveling to a location is not enough. Successful teaching also requires an intentional pedagogical design that is flexible and fluid and includes space for student-directed ownership over activity planning and teaching. Successful faculty-led study abroad programs in Asia require faculty to step away from the comfortable role of expert and instead take on the role of coexplorer and experience curator, held lightly.<sup>3</sup>

Taiwan is one of the most interesting case studies on the politics of memory, with a history marked by waves of colonization and migration from Europe and Asia, as well as the ongoing dispute between the PRC and Republic of China (ROC) over sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> First inhabited by Austronesian-language-speaking indigenous peoples (whom many scholars believe later migrated throughout the Pacific Ocean, including to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Madagascar), during the European colonial era it was briefly occupied by the Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese.<sup>5</sup> In the seventeenth century, the island was annexed by the Qing dynasty of China after their defeat of the Ming empire. In 1898 Taiwan was ceded to Japan after the first Sino-Japanese War, remaining a key part of the Japanese empire until the end of World War II.<sup>6</sup> Following Japan's surrender in 1945, Taiwan was returned to Chinese control, but it soon became a refuge for the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT's defeat in the Chinese Civil War against the Communists under

# The potential for conflict or a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue is a critical concern for regional stability and international relations.



Chinese President Xi Jinping. © Frédéric Legrand | Dreamstime.com. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen. © jamesonwu1972 | Shutterstock. Flags and battleship montage by Willa Davis.

Mao Zedong led to their retreat to Taiwan, where they established the ROC government. Meanwhile, the Communist Party formed the PRC on the mainland. This unresolved conflict between the KMT and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still troubles the current status of Taiwan and its efforts toward territorial independence.<sup>7</sup>

Today the continued unresolved tensions between Taiwan and the PRC have created a situation where two governments claim to be the legitimate authority representing Taiwan. In recent years Taiwan's international recognition, with only thirteen nations recognizing it as a sovereign nation as of July 2023, has dwindled rapidly.<sup>8</sup> Nine countries have switched allegiance to the PRC since Tsai Ing-wen became president in 2016 (President Tsai's second and final term ends in 2024), and Beijing continues its efforts to diplomatically isolate Taiwan. Taiwan now has

just thirteen formal diplomatic allies—Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in the Americas, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu in the Pacific, Eswatini in Africa, and the Vatican City in Europe. However, many countries, including the United States, under the One China Policy, established diplomatic relations with the PRC while maintaining unofficial ties with Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

These different historical experiences and political ideologies of Taiwan and the PRC have resulted in distinct national identities and competing historical narratives. The PRC

sees Taiwan as an integral part of its territory, considering it a renegade province in need of reunification with the mainland. On the other hand, Taiwan views itself as a sovereign nation with a unique history, culture, and democratic system. Its strategic location in the Western Pacific and its central role in the global production of semiconductors have made it a focal point of regional and global politics. For these reasons, the potential for conflict or a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue is a critical concern for regional stability and international relations. These factors contribute to the ongoing struggle over the historical and political narrative surrounding Taiwan, making it a vivid example of how history is fought on contested terrain.

## Pedagogical Considerations in Faculty-Led Study Abroad

Study abroad in Asia was significantly disrupted in the spring of 2020 by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It took until the 2022–23 academic year for many programs to begin running at prepandemic levels again, but students have been slower to return to study in Asia.<sup>10</sup> The pandemic reduced educational opportunities across the region, with programs halting in most locations. For places that remained open to only the most intrepid of students such as South Korea and Thailand, participating students had to demonstrate great dedication, including being willing to pay for and take part in mandatory two-week quarantines. In this context, a return to Asia and the offering of faculty-led summer programs is critically important.

This is also why thoughtful, pedagogically robust faculty-led programs are more important than ever. Faculty-led study abroad—a format many of the readers of *EAA* are likely familiar with—typically relies in large part on external partnerships with study abroad program providers who help organize logistics, assist with the provision of local guides, and provide risk management assistance and liability coverage. As anthropologist Gareth Barkin has documented, these study abroad agencies and their plug-and-play offerings can present barriers to the sorts of experiential learning associated with long-term study abroad, which is ideally possible (if to a more limited extent) on short-term programs, instead prioritizing experiences more closely matching a guided tour.<sup>11</sup>

When I was offered the opportunity to design a course on memory politics in Taiwan for students after a long hiatus from travel to Asia during the pandemic this summer, I thought deeply about how to structure the program. This would be the first time traveling to any part



of Asia for all but two of the fourteen students in my program, and the first time out of the United States at all for about half of them. Before the pandemic, I had planned and led six short-term faculty-led abroad trips for teachers, K-12 students, undergraduates, and graduate students to the PRC, as well as eight additional short-term abroad programs to Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Much of my work and scholarship have focused on education abroad, particularly the increasing corporatization of program offerings and resulting disconnection from local community stakeholders with the growing power of short-term study abroad program providers like World Strides, Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), and Education First. My interest in, and desire to, disrupt the tour model common practice in short-term education abroad has led me to experiment with a range of models (constrained of course by duration, budget, program vendor, and program focus) on each of these programs. My main goals have been to (1) deepen student understanding of and interest in the people and culture where we are spending time and (2) to provide a practice field where in addition to content knowledge they can notice and practice affective skills like self-awareness, creative and spatial thinking, group care, and resilience. Additionally, as anthropologists Neriko Musha Doerr and Gareth Barkin have modeled their programs, I center my program design on pushing back against a common discourse in study abroad and intercultural education of a fixed or idealized “other,” seeking opportunities for cultural learning that do not provide easy answers and require students to do their deep analysis through continual sense-making.<sup>12</sup>

Below, I describe intentional interventions in the design of this summer abroad program I put in place to move away from the “guided tour” model.

### **Pedagogical Framework Underlying the Course** *Reading the City*

This three-week program on memory politics in Taiwan centered on the idea of “reading the city” with the capital, Taipei, as our key area of focus. “Reading the city” is a pedagogical model emphasizing the exploration and analysis of urban environments as a means of understanding and learning. It involves examining cities as complex and multilayered texts, where students engage with the built environment, social dynamics, cultural expressions, and historical contexts to gain insights into history, memory, and place.<sup>13</sup> Pedagogical models of “reading the city” typically involve embedded experiential learning through time spent physically in and exploring a place, actively engaging with the city through site visits, fieldwork, and firsthand experiences. Students are required to read academic texts alongside our explorations, but the focus on learning is experiential.

Before leaving, students conducted preliminary research on the history, memory politics, and significant events related to our itinerary and their areas of interest to prepare for the trip. However, since the course did not officially begin until the summer term, we were limited to four hours of meeting time together over two sessions held one month before the trip. Once we arrived in Taiwan, rather than a standard guided tour, we utilized public transportation and our feet to



View of a busy street corner in downtown Taipei City. © Chingyunsong | Dreamstime.com.



Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall. © Jose Miguel Moya Gonzalez | Dreamstime.com.



Massacre Monument at 228 Peace Memorial Park located in Taipei. © Richie Chan | Dreamstime.com.





The Raohe Street Night Market is one of the oldest night markets in Taiwan.  
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Over the three weeks we were in Taiwan, students observed, documented, and analyzed a wide range of urban spaces, buildings, landmarks, and people to develop a deeper understanding of the city's physical and social fabric.



Dalongdong Baoan Temple in Taipei. © Sanga Park | Dreamstime.com.

explore specific sites related to memory politics in Taipei, including City Hall, the 228 Memorial Park, the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, night markets, temples, and the National Palace Museum. Each day, different students were assigned to be responsible for logistics, figuring out what metro, bus, or taxi routes we would need to take to get to our intended locations. At each of these locations, rather than a guided tour, students were tasked to observe memorialization efforts and analyze the visual and narrative elements used for memory representation. Over the three weeks we were in Taiwan, students observed, documented, and analyzed a wide range of urban spaces, buildings, landmarks, and people to develop a deeper understanding of the city's physical and social fabric. Through this idea of the city as text, students learn to critically analyze the built environment by drawing out the deeper

historical, social, economic, and political dimensions present.

Although the short duration of our trip meant we spent a lot of time together rather than immersed with local families or other students, students were encouraged to conduct interviews with local people during their free time to gain firsthand accounts of their experiences and understand differing viewpoints and issues we discussed as a class. Each student successfully interviewed at least one local person. These interviews happened predominantly during evenings and free time when students were on their own to explore. Two encounters stand out relating to how this happened, but are in no way the only examples. In the first case, during a group visit to a theater, we watched part of a traditional Chinese opera performance. One of my students was approached by an organizer of the event and invited to a different performance a few days later during an afternoon there were no group excursions. She attended and spent quite a long time talking with the host and other organizers of the event. In another instance, some of the students joined a local basketball scrimmage happening on a neighborhood court. They struck up a friendship with a local college student the same age and ended up first having dinner with him and some friends at a local restaurant and, later, after the program had ended, joining him and his family for further explorations of Taipei. Additionally, students maintained reflective journals to record their observations, personal experiences, and thoughts throughout the program.

### **Pedagogical Framework Underlying the Course *Improvisation and the Unscripted—Student-Led and Designed Excursions***

In my classroom, students are not often able to apply what we are learning beyond the immediate context of the course. This is what makes time abroad in a place like Taiwan so powerful. For anyone who has led students abroad on a short-term program, one of the key challenges we face is navigating how to cover a large amount of content we would typically do in a classroom back home with lectures, readings, and in-class activities into an intense, but compact field approach. In my own experiences, short-term program providers who work with faculty on instructor-led programs typically structure their offerings around a tour guide format, often contracting with local travel companies. Daily operations of programs on the ground are outsourced to local partners who provide support staff trained as tourism professionals rather than as



educators. There are set itineraries and packages, prescribed narratives, and well-worn paths. In my experience, these are valuable, but leave the group in a passive, recipient-oriented mindset where sites blur together, becoming a kind of tourism immersion reality television show, with little awareness, or memory, of where they are or what they are experiencing.

To combat this, for our time in Taiwan I assigned students group projects they had to complete while we were there that asked them to choose, research, plan, and present a site about any aspect relating to Taiwanese history, culture, and/or identity to the rest of the group. We had to be able to get there by public transit, and each group was given a budget of up to US \$200 to conduct the trip and associated activities. The activity needed to be about four hours. During it, the group would need to prepare to explain the importance of the site, why they chose it, and provide a guided activity and series of reflective questions for the group to engage with while at the location or during the activity. Through this assignment, students engaged in a process of knowledge construction, filtering ideas about course content and the living space of the city through their experiences. In each excursion, the group leaders brought previously learned ideas and facts, as well as their own experiences, background, and cultural contexts, to create activities. The excursions were successful and a daily trip highlight. Students cocreated the curriculum through delving deeply into topics that interested them rather than solely relying on topics I selected.

The success of this assignment required that our “on-the-ground” itinerary have four days that were initially unplanned when we arrived in Taiwan. They were broken up over our three weeks, with the first group delivering their excursion a week into the program and the final group delivering theirs two days before the program’s end. Local support staff associated with our trip provider and I were available for brainstorming, and translation needs as students developed their plans. Each group and their chosen experiential activity deepened our understanding of Taiwanese history and culture in very different ways. Students’ confidence in their leadership and teaching capabilities, as well as those of their peers, significantly increased.

### Excursion One

#### **Early Chinese Migration to Taiwan and the Michelin Guide to Taiwanese Breakfast**

The first group led us on an early morning food tour of Taipei, introducing us to classic Taiwanese breakfast items including *doujiang* (warm soybean milk), *luobogao* (turnip cake), *danbing* (Taiwanese egg wraps), *congyoubing* (scallion pancakes), and *youtiao* (fried crullers). When the activity began, we first stopped at a local soy milk stand to get drinks, and then proceeded together to a local park where the group delivered a brief lecture on the origins of each of these dishes and how they had made their way to Taiwan. They split us into small groups to discuss how food shaped our own identities and reflect on what the origins and stories of these dishes added to our understanding of what it means to be Taiwanese. For our final stop, we feasted on the fried crullers at the Michelin-starred Fu Hang Soy Milk, getting to also experience the forty-minute wait snaking down two flights of stairs into the street, common to any trendy dining establishment in Taiwan.



A long line of customers at Fu Hang Soy Milk in the Huashan Market Building, Taipei, Taiwan.  
© Kaedeeneri | Dreamstime.com.

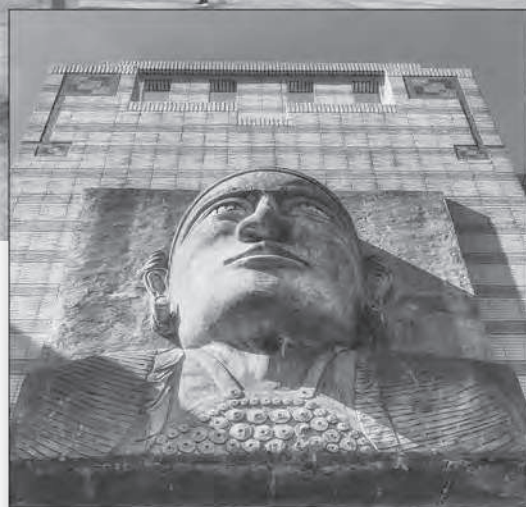


Fried cruller chefs hard at work at Fu Hang Soy Milk. Source: Image courtesy of the author.





Wulai village. © Kenneth Paul | Dreamstime.com.



Wulai Atayal Museum. © Atosan | Dreamstime.com.

## Excursion Two

### *Wulai, Weaving, and the Indigenous Atayal People*

The second group showed a particular interest in Taiwan's indigenous history, and learned from a local contact that on the very outskirts of Taipei was the traditionally indigenous mountain community of Wulai. With the assistance of Facebook and one of our Taiwanese guides acting as translator during a phone call to the Wulai Atayal Museum, the group connected with the local head of the women's weaving cooperative, who agreed to give our class a brief workshop on traditional weaving practices. Although it was a one-and-a-half hour journey, we traveled there by taxi and public transit and learned how quickly the urban core of Taipei transitions to rugged mountain terrain. This excursion in particular required the group to do a large amount of scenario planning and have a backup plan in case

the weaving workshop didn't come through. In addition to our time in the workshop, the student leaders engaged the group in a visual mapping activity of the community where everyone was tasked with taking photos and then discussing evidence of indigenous Atayal identity in the community.

## Excursion Three

### *Ceramic Making and New Taipei City in Yingge*

Inspired by the hands-on aspect of the weaving workshop put together by the second group, the third group organized a ceramics workshop in the historic ceramics district of Yingge in New Taipei City. There we learned about Taiwan's oldest kiln and made our own bowls and mugs. This excursion also took us far from the center of the city where much of our time had been spent and required the group to navigate the Taiwan Rail Line in addition to the MRT and local buses.

## Excursion Four

### *Gamification and the Taipei Botanic Garden*

As our three-week class was winding down, group four decided we needed something to add a significant "fun" factor to the final excursion. We had learned about the Japanese colonial history of the Taipei Botanical Garden earlier in the program from a local contact, and the group decided that they would take us there, using an app called Goose-Chase to create a scavenger hunt that gamified much of the learning we had done over the past three weeks, as well as included new information about Taiwan's ecology and environment. Despite the high temperatures and high humidity, the competition was fierce. The student-created scavenger hunt did better at summarizing and bringing together all we have done over the past three weeks than I could have come up with on my own.

Reflecting on getting back to organizing summer faculty-led programs in Asia, I want to emphasize how important it is to remember that in these kinds of experiential, high-impact programs, our responsibility as teachers is primarily to facilitate student learning, which often means not to deliver information ourselves or to lecture. Instead, it is to help set up experiences where students can discover the place we are in on their own. We are there to help them make meaning of it (not make the meaning for them) and give them the space to take more control



An arguably problematic image of Italian coffee brand Lavazza advertisement outside of a local café in Wulai. Source: Image courtesy of the author.





Yingge old street, aka the Pottery Street or Ceramics Street, located at Yingge town, New Taipei City, Taiwan, is famous for the over 200 year history of pottery craftj.  
© Richie Chan | Dreamstime.com.



Students making ceramic bowls and cups in Yingge. Source: Image courtesy of the author.

of their learning than they likely do in a classroom back home. These kinds of improvisational experiments such as having students take over pieces of the itinerary and the teaching (through experiential activities) have helped me personally build trust in the process of teaching with a “beginner’s mind” that has continued to inform my teaching in all my courses. These types of activities, including the subsequent debrief and reflections, also allow for metacognitive work for all of us in discovering our thinking and ideas have changed as a result of our time experiences.

This experiential learning project centered around the idea of “reading the city,” and student participation as partners provided a unique and immersive learning experience for undergraduates. Through a grounded exploration of the city of Taipei, students witnessed firsthand how different stakeholders were invested in telling their own histories and stories through public spaces. These included the rainbow crossing right outside Exit 6 of Ximen Metro Station celebrating the local



A Screenshot showing some of the tasks required of scavenger hunt teams in GooseChase. Source: Image courtesy of the author.



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history of Taiwan's LGBTQ+ movement and the display of political posters and rallies for the New Power Party advocating for Taiwanese independence. A program design asking students to take control of part of the curriculum allowed for a deeper engagement with the city, its people, and its stories, fostering a sense of ownership and connection to the learning process. Ultimately, this approach highlights the importance of pedagogical innovation and experiential learning in study abroad programs, providing students with the tools to critically analyze and understand complex historical and political narratives. ♦

### NOTES

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LAUREN COLLINS is a scholar whose work explores the relationship between the United States' global power status and the practice of global education, especially economic and sociocultural impacts of global education programs on local communities. Her research looks at the nature of the impact of US student presence on host communities in the Global South, specifically Southeast and East Asia. She is particularly interested in how communities are building global education program provision infrastructure in response to the desires of US study abroad programs to place students in "nontraditional" experiences. She has developed and led nearly fifteen study abroad programs throughout Asia. At the University of Colorado Boulder, she oversees the curricular aspects of the Asian Studies major and minor, teaching both lecture courses that introduce students to this incredibly diverse region and in-depth seminars that explore topics such as urbanization, migration, and the politics of memory in Asia.