

Live and Learn

during a Ph.D. Life in Taiwan

By Arnat Wannasri (汪雅爾)
2nd Year Ph.D. in International
Health Program

Before I begin my story, I would like to tell you a little about myself. My name is Arnat Wannasri. I was born in Bangkok – the capital of Thailand – but raised in Amnatcharoen province – a small province in the Northeast of Thailand. I lived with my grandparents since I was just one year old because my parents had to work far away from home. Growing up on a rice farm was my most memorable lesson of my life. It gave me a great opportunity to live close to nature and I could discover several funny things while I was helping my grandparents doing works.

I am a simple person, but my life is incredible. A boy from a farmer family, after graduation from high school, had received a scholarship from the Thai government to pursue a bachelor's degree in the Netherlands. For the master's degree, I also got another scholarship provided by the National Health Security Office (NHSO), Thailand. Scholarships gave me a lot of opportunities to open up my eyes to new perspectives.



▲ Arnat Wannasri

I had worked for 7 years at the Health Insurance System Research Office (HISRO). My research projects were about health systems and health policy evaluation. I had decided to work for the government, which was the hardest decision in my entire life, after my seven years of fantastic research life at HISRO. I have been working as a public health government officer in a tertiary hospital since late 2017. However, I am always keen to study and learn new things. Further, higher education is an essential qualification that will allow me to both continue my research, and to teach health professionals in my hospital. Hence, I had decided to pursue a Ph.D. abroad and asked for a study leave for four years. As I continue to pursue my Ph.D. in International Health Program here at National Yang-Ming University, Taiwan, it is the time to live and learn outside my home country again.



▲ IHP Trip to Shihmen Reservoir (石門水庫)



▲ IHP Trip to Hualien Bay Happy Farm

Taiwan, a wonderful mysterious mountainous island, is not too far from my home country – Thailand. A funny thing is that Taiwan and Thailand often confuse many foreigners who never been to these two countries. My foreign friends told me that they got confused easily because the pronunciations between Taiwan and Thailand are too similar. In my opinion, hmm...their reason seems to be okay to get confused because of the first syllable. I am not going to describe the differences between Taiwan and Thailand right here, but I would like to invite you to visit both countries to discover the differences between Taiwan and Thailand by yourself. However, I have to state here clearly that both countries are super fantastic.

For my Ph.D. journey, I got two scholarship offers, one from Thailand and another one from Taiwan. I do not feel regret for choosing to study in Taiwan

because the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) Scholarship provides a comprehensive benefits package, including return airfare, housing, tuition and credit fees, insurance, textbook costs, and a monthly allowance. Further, the most important aspect is that the Taiwanese health care system is ranked among the best health care system in the world. In addition, NYMU, as the first medicine-orientated university in Taiwan, has established the International Health Program (IHP), which is devoted to excellence in teaching, learning, and research in international health issues. Hence, I could learn and gain knowledge from a top Taiwanese university about how the Taiwanese government manages its health care system, which could be beneficial to my home country in the future.

Taiwan has the largest number and density of high mountains in the world and my university is located in a mountainous area. I have become a mountain climbing lover since my first week of arrival in Taiwan, as one of the hiking spots in Taipei is located just behind my university. The hiking trails in Taiwan are easily accessible by numerous paths. This is why hiking is very popular for people of all ages. I feel jealous of Taiwanese people because they are still able to live close to nature and they can easily escape from the chaos of town to find the serenity.



▲ TICA Cup 2019 at National Dong Hwa University - Won Orienteering Competition

When I feel bored or want to stay physically active, I always ask my friends to go out hiking or climbing up to the field on the hill for running. It is noticeable that my life has become more active and enjoyable. Further, I have also noticed that a lot of Taiwanese elderly prefer to have an active lifestyle – walking in the parks and hiking in the mountains (even in the late evening people still climb up the mountains) – rather than sitting at home.

Although Taipei is surrounded by mountains, the public transportation systems are very comfortable. The MRT is the central nervous system of Taipei's mass rapid transit, which allows you to be able to dig in for most of the top Taipei tourist attractions. Thailand – Bangkok has MRT as the main public transport option as well as Taipei, but the price is a little bit higher. Further, I found that scooter and motorcycle are among the most important vehicles for Taiwanese people, especially for students. Motorcycles are also literally everywhere in Thailand, but I must say that Thailand has to wave a white flag with an intent to surrender because Taiwan has the highest density of motorcycles in the world.

Commuting around the cities seems not to be a big challenge for me because I can use MRT or bus, but I have a little difficulty when I have to walk from my dormitory to the study building. This is due to the fact that the study building is located on the hillside. However, I think wandering around my study campus is lots of fun because you will feel like you are walking in a national park.



▲ You must be able to ride a scooter.

I used to live in a foreign country before, so I am able to adjust quickly to my new life in Taiwan. However, I do not want to get stuck in the expat bubble; therefore, I decided to take a Chinese language course, which is free of charge provided by my university. Recently, I am able to understand the very basic Chinese words, but still cannot communicate in Chinese. Besides communication, many people may often complain about the weather in Taiwan. You will often hear that “Taiwan is very hot”, but for me, Thailand is much hotter. Hence, I can enjoy the precious sunshine and warmth from sunrise to sunset during the summer season.

Taiwanese street food is another great topic to talk about to getting to know Taiwan better. “HOT POT”, “XIAO LONG BAO”, “BEEF NOODLES”, and “BUBBLE MILK TEA” are very popular among expats. Food is such a big part of adaptation while living in foreign country.



▲ Exquisite touch golden clams at Li Chuan Aquafarm, Hualien

Although Taiwan shares some similarities in terms of culture and food with Thailand, I am still craving for Thai food. I always go to the fresh market or Thai grocery shop to buy stuff and ingredients I need for cooking Thai food.

Once I have all that I need to cook fabulous Thai dishes, I sometimes invited other Thai friends from other universities or other expatriates in the dormitory to join. Joining meet-up groups or other social events can sometimes or probably help you feel at home in foreign country. Life might be difficult for a while, but living or studying in foreign country is one of the most terrifying and exhilarating adventures that you should try at least once in your life.

Choosing to study for a higher degree in Taiwan was one of the biggest decisions I ever made. Taiwan is a big facilitator of higher education with high standards and quality. The application process is relatively easy and the staff of the university is really willing to help. Most importantly, Taiwan is one of the safest countries in the world. Hence, your parents will not much concern about you while living far away from home. In NYMU, I have a lot of friends coming from Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, St. Vincent, Belize, Eswatini, Honduras, and of course, Taiwan. I felt marveled over my friends' knowledge and fruitful experience that they have shared in class which has remarkably enriched my public health knowledge.

What else I can do in university besides studying, there are



▲ We won Interdepartmental Soccer 2019 Tournament.

many answers to this particular question. I always enjoy playing sports and doing physical activities. I have recently joined the school badminton club, started to love running and hiking, participated in a soccer game with my IHP friends. In addition, several organizations (e.g., Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture and ICDF) have organized numerous free activity programs for Taiwanese residents and expats. I strongly believe that by joining the events, it is a way of making use of our freedom and autonomy wisely or taking a proactive role in our education while living abroad. Last but not least, one important thing that I have learned from Taiwan is that "being just a small island has never stopped Taiwan from becoming well-known around the world".



▲ Visit Bai-Sha Bay with IHP friends