



2017-2018 LUCE SCHOLARS NOTES from the field

VARUN AERY

LIVING IN **Phnom Pehn, Cambodia**
PLACED AT **Future Forum**

I arrived in a country of wonder. Picture colossal temples over 1,000 years old carved from bedrock and sandstone depicting a Shiva lingam, a divine phallic symbol, resting on a sacred *yonis* or vulva. Hidden in the forgotten city of Koh Ker, these monuments portray fertility and serve as an important reminder of the deep historical ties between Cambodia and India. My Khmer instructors invited me to climb a tower of rocks to pour water over a lingam statue and chant an ancient prayer. "*Aum namah Shivaya. Aum namah Shivaya.*" (I bow to God. I bow to the Inner Self.)

During my first weeks in Siem Reap, I learned that Cambodia had long been governed by the same political leadership since 1985, but mounting competition from the Cambodia National Rescue Party, a local opposition party, was emerging. Within months, however, the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the opposition party due to allegations of treason. The government shut down a number of civil society groups, including talk radio stations, newspapers, human rights and environmental advocacy organizations, often basing its decision on ostensibly administrative reasons: alleged failure to file taxes, improper registration, etc.

The shift in civil society space has impacted the activities of non-governmental organizations. My original placement, for example, chose to suspend a research project that I worked on to prioritize improving Cambodia's education sector. The project entailed visiting villages to interview young Cambodians about their interest in public policy issues.

I now work as the Deputy Research Director for Future Forum. I am responsible for writing a special report for Members of Parliament that assesses how Cambodia can promote the rule of law in the next 20 years. Because Future Forum adopts a measured, collaborative relationship with the government that focuses more on solutions rather than simply pointing out problems, public officials view this project as constructive. Additionally, I help train Future Forum's Young Fellows to craft their own research projects and to present their recommendations before relevant

stakeholders, including Cambodian policymakers and foreign ambassadors.

While Cambodia remains focused on its future development, Cambodian people do not forget the painful memories of the Khmer Rouge, a militant government that committed genocide against the Cambodian people and suspended human rights to free speech, religion, culture, and education, among others. Hence, many advocates are developing early warning mechanisms to ensure long-standing peace and reconciliation. I currently volunteer for one such organization, the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), led by a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide. CICP seeks to build a network of institutions dedicated to memorializing and preventing the recurrence of atrocities, including genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing.

Working alongside Cambodians has taught me a lot about resiliency. As a human rights lawyer, I am well aware of the challenges that civil society advocates endure. At times, you question whether it is safe for you to go on or whether you endanger the people you work with. Still, I look to Cambodians who continue to build spaces, such as libraries or research hubs, to promote peace and the rule of law for future generations. Their bravery will remain an inspiration throughout my human rights career.



Varun at the Delegation of the European Union for International Human Rights Day.

SAKARIA (SAI) AUELUA-TOOMEY

LIVING IN **Seoul, South Korea**
PLACED AT **Ewha Womans University**

One of the first things that stood out to me when arriving in Korea was that Seoul never sleeps. It was not unusual that soon after meeting someone (including in a professional setting), I would be invited to go out for rounds (1, 2, 3 차) initiated with the phrase “한잔 합시다!” (“Let’s have a drink!”) This would usually consist of crisp and refreshing drinks, Korean BBQ (고기집), and Karaoke (노래방), in no particular order. In my experience, it was the passage for friendship that enabled a relationship to grow.

My first few months in Korea were focused on learning the language. Although the reading and writing aspects of Korean were easy, speaking and listening were something I constantly struggled with. One of the most rewarding experiences I had on my Korean language journey was making non-English speaking friends from around the world. We had no choice but speaking in Korean, our only common language, making hanging out always a challenge, but when we were able to communicate ideas successfully, it was truly invigorating.

At Ewha Womans University, I conduct research on the role South Korean media plays in its international relationships, identifying specific factors that influence South Korean media success. Getting to understanding the research conventions in Korea is an added benefit, although it has taken some time. Patience and perseverance are necessary virtues of a researcher, not unlike in the United States. In the beginning, the sometimes slow pace and my somewhat passive role were challenging. On the other hand, it also opened other opportunities, such as guest lecturing at the university, enrolling in more intensive Korean study, and applying to the Olympic Broadcasting System for the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics in an effort to better understand media and communication in



Ready on the set! Sai about to play his role as a young business man for a Korean drama.

Korea. (In February, I will be working as a liaison officer at PyeongChang, coordinating and assisting in the interviewing of participating athletes.)

I came to Korea with the mindset that I would get the most out of my Luce experience by taking every opportunity available to me. And for my first six months in Korea, I did exactly that. I first jumped into dancing with the help of my fellow Luce Scholar Monique. I joined a Taekwondo club AND a boxing gym. At Yonsei University, I signed up for the horseback riding club and got recruited into its M.A.Y music group. I also joined a couple of modeling and acting agencies. The best part about participating in these activities was meeting a diverse set of locals, learning about their experiences and understanding their perspectives of Korean life.

With six months left in Korea, I look forward to exploring more outside of Seoul, prioritizing and growing in a few of the activities I have particularly enjoyed, and continuing to learn from new friends I have made and I will be making along the way.

DANIEL BLOCK

LIVING IN **New Delhi, India**
PLACED AT **The Caravan Magazine**

“You’re going to get sick.”

It was May—roughly two months before I was scheduled to depart for India—and my doctor was telling me to exercise caution while eating abroad. He wasn’t the only one. Virtually all of my American friends with experience in India had delivered similar warnings. Be wary, they said, of the food.

I did get sick, but it wasn’t in the way I had anticipated. What happened to me has nothing to do with my stomach (which has largely been fine), or even with India. Instead, it’s my head.

Roughly one month after arriving in Delhi, I started to feel fuzzy walking back from my Hindi class. As I arrived at my apartment, I felt exceptionally unsteady. I walked inside and saw my flatmate—Raghav—standing out on our balcony.

The next thing I remember, I was in a hospital with a searing headache and thin grasp on reality. I spent several days in two different institutions, undergoing a battery of exams. I was told I had a ten-minute long seizure and spent several hours unconscious. It took two weeks to fully recover.

I was put on Keppra, an anti-epilepsy medication, and slowly resumed my regular activities. I finished my Hindi classes and started work at *The Caravan*, helping write the magazine’s first formal style guide. I spent time with my two roommates, my coworkers, and other friends. Gradually, the medical crisis began to recede from view.

Then it happened again. Not long after our program’s trip to Thailand, I felt dizzy at a party and had to be rushed

CHRISTINA CILENTO

LIVING IN **Vientiane, Laos**
PLACED AT **Village Focus International**

by my friends to the emergency room. Shortly after I arrived, I again collapsed and convulsed. It took three more weeks to feel normal, and my daily medication dose was increased.

Learning to live with this condition has been one of the defining challenges of my year. It has involved navigating an unfamiliar healthcare system (and finding ways to get more sleep than I have since middle school).

But medical issues notwithstanding, my time in Asia has proved incredibly rewarding. My work placement has kept me blissfully occupied with tasks that range from reporting to editing, and my Hindi has steadily improved. For a story I'm writing on the Sikh diaspora, I traveled to Canadian politician Jagmeet Singh's ancestral village in Punjab and met some of its residents. Over biscuits and milk, we discussed life in India and their relatives abroad. "Jagmeet Singh: Hard Questions for the Poster Boy of Canadian Multiculturalism" will be published as the cover story in the February 2018 issue of *The Caravan*.

My experience with India's medical system inspired me to write an article about inequality, medical tourism, and some of the unfortunate similarities between health care in India and in the United States. The story was recently published in *Foreign Policy*, and it helped put my problems in context. No one wants to have seizures. But I'm fortunate that I have the resources—financially and otherwise—to ensure I get quality care.

As the year moves forward, I am hoping for better health and more travel opportunities. I am writing from Udaipur, a beautiful former princely state in Rajasthan, and I'm planning a trip to the Himalayas in February with Raghav. Afterwards, I'm hoping to travel again with my fellow Scholars.

More than that, I'm looking forward to future opportunities to write. In the past, reporting has helped me develop my understanding of different politics and spaces, and I asked to be placed at a publication in India so I could similarly explore this country. Naturally—with 1.3 billion people and dozens of languages—India is too complex to grasp in twelve months. But even with my health hiccups, working for *The Caravan* has taught me a tremendous amount about the country's politics and history. I'm excited to learn more as the year continues.



Daniel shopping inside a Diwali market near his home.

It's an odd feeling to live in a country I couldn't have identified on a map up until about a year ago. While I'm not proud of my ignorance before coming to Laos, I'm proud of all I've learned and experienced since arriving. Living in Vientiane is my first time being outside the U.S. for more than two weeks, and I'm loving adapting to a new way of life. Chili peppers don't faze me anymore; beer just doesn't taste as refreshing without ice in it; and a crisp 65-degree morning now warrants my putting on a scarf and jacket.

For the past six months, I've been working at an NGO that protects villagers' land rights in the face of threats such as deforestation and agricultural development. My organization empowers villagers to know their rights and mediates between international companies and communities to ensure those rights are respected. It's an issue that I wasn't aware of before I arrived, and one that has changed the way I view international environmental challenges.

But beyond gaining professional experience, the past six months have given me life skills that I'll carry beyond Laos. Vientiane has taught me how to launch myself out of my comfort zone and stop worrying about what people think of me. In a country where few people know my name, I've grown to accept the social failures that come with introducing myself in a new community. The welcoming nature and incredible generosity of Lao people have helped me adjust to life here and inspired me to connect with more people around me.

I've learned, as well, that I don't need to know everything, and admitting my ignorance has been incredibly refreshing. I don't feel a need to flex my knowledge or "prove myself" as I did in the U.S. Instead, I've focused on learning from those around me. My Lao friends are eager to teach me, and they've shown me how to embrace my mistakes. My language teacher still torments me for the time I asked him where I could fill my flattened bike tires with "wind," and that was five months ago.

Working and living here has released the need to take the lead. Instead, I embraced learning through observing. During my first field experience in rural Laos, I was silent nearly the entire trip, listening as my Lao colleagues conducted focus groups with villagers about their lives. My notes were comically incomplete: "Women are in charge of something related to rice, while men do ??? during the rainy season." I scribbled the phonetics for dozens of words in the margins of my notebook to check with my colleagues. At the end of each day, they graciously filled me in on what I had missed and went over new vocabulary with me. I hardly contributed anything during that trip, but I discovered so much more once I resolved to stop trying to show all I already know.

At the six-month point of living in Vientiane, I'm still finding joy in everyday life of Laos, like the sunsets over the Mekong River, the surprisingly risqué Zumba classes held nightly in parks, and the screeching of *tuk-tuks* (motorcycle taxis) badly in need of new brakes. I can't quite believe I'm living here yet, and at the same time I'm wondering how I'm possibly going to get myself to leave at the end of the year.



Christina celebrating Hmong New Year with a friend's family in Oudomxay, Laos.

underground music scene that I began to appreciate the subtleties that set it apart from American street culture. I started to realize that I didn't need to rely on a formal internship to gain insight into Korean popular art and entertainment culture that compelled me to Seoul, and I was having tons of fun throughout this learning process.

But August eventually came to an end, and my optimism at finding a placement in Korea's thriving entertainment industry by September had begun to fade. It was then that I realized that I had developed an extensive social and professional network of my own over the course of my first two months in Seoul. I was actually thankful for this extraordinary opportunity to exercise even more agency in customizing my Luce year.

As if everything were falling into place, this moment of gratitude in the midst of uncertainty happened just before all of South Korea would be celebrating 추석 (chuseok), which is essentially Korean Thanksgiving. I spent that week exploring a small coastal city called Tongyeong and recharging my internal battery with five friends, old and new. Upon returning to Seoul, I felt excited to continue casting a wide professional net. If I had learned anything up to this point, it was to trust my intuitions and to be patient.

Four months into working at media start-up Asian Boss, Inc., I could not imagine launching my career anywhere else. Every day, I am gaining comprehensive insight into cultural trends and grassroots perspectives from people not just in Korea, but all over Asia. I feel as if I will become an "Asia expert" as the company's primary researcher and research topic generator. Even if that seems like a lofty goal, my coworkers never fail to remind me that I (supposedly) know more about Seoul than they do. The time I spent getting to know the nooks and crannies of the city over the summer has been invaluable for my team. I entered my role knowing the best locations to conduct street interviews, what topics were trending in Korea and even people I could contact to conduct interviews as needed. I admittedly get lost in the hustle of start-up culture, where company culture and operations are still being defined, but it's exciting to have my hands in so many projects all at once. I just remind myself that I am no stranger to navigating ambiguity and that I should practice gratitude in those uncertain moments.



Monique at the ironically named Demilitarized Zone, the heavily military-controlled border between North and South Korea

MONIQUE CLAIBORNE

LIVING IN **Seoul, South Korea**
PLACED AT **Asian Boss (a media start-up)**

As someone who had never travelled to Asia before my Luce year, I was prepared to embrace the uncertainties inherent in cultural immersion. But nothing could have prepared me for the challenge of not having a secure internship placement when I arrived in Seoul. This was my first insight into the Korean entertainment industry—the landscape changes more rapidly, and nothing is guaranteed. Nonetheless, I remained optimistic that I would find a new placement rather seamlessly, so I resolved to immerse myself in my Korean language studies and explore Seoul as much as possible while I still had a flexible schedule.

I used these initial months to dive into the Seoul's urban dance scene through classes at 1Million Dance Studio and Soul Dance—two venues that attracted me to Korean street culture in the first place. After hours of private language tutoring in the morning, I could look forward to connecting with young Koreans through the shared language of dance. I was already somewhat familiar with Korean hip-hop and street culture. But it was not until I began actively participating in Seoul's hip-hop dance and

JILLIAN CORREIA

LIVING IN
PLACED AT

Tokyo, Japan
Institute of Developing Economies
Japan External Trade Organization

At the core of Japanese culture is the concept of *shokunin* (職人), where an artisan is devotedly and singularly dedicated to their craft. When I first moved to Tokyo this past June, I discovered this concept to have manifest itself most prominently in Japan's food system.

I can remember my first grocery run—crisp grapes the size of golf balls glowed rosy red under soft spotlights, individually wrapped strawberries sat on pedestals, their sweet perfume wafting through the saran wrap, and perfect spherical melons with stems intact were framed in luxurious wooden boxes. Excitedly, I plugged in 1,400 yen into my exchange rate app... \$12 for a strawberry? \$127 for just a melon?

Later, I realized I had found the luxury fruit section, that there were in fact ordinary apples, bananas, eggplant, and carrots available for sale. Still, there was a certain glamour to the produce aisle—no fruit with blemishes, no misshapen vegetables—produce had been elevated to the status of art, something needing to be crafted for aesthetic appeal, rather than nourishment. As someone who works in agricultural development, this piqued my interest. Mainly, where was all the imperfect produce?

23 million tons. That's how much food Japan wastes in a year. What's more, 9 million tons of wasted food is disposed of prior to its expiry date. For the first few weeks, I rifled through the grocery store in hopes of finding a dented milk carton or mushy tomato. Nothing. And so, I began bumbling through new Japanese vocab, trying to explain what banana pancakes were to a shop worker and how I needed their bruised bananas in the back or they wouldn't be sweet. Or when a cashier tried confiscating a box of broken crackers I had picked to replace them with a newer box, saying I liked them broken (which elicited puzzled looks). My Japanese has grown the most as I grocery shopped; I've found language learning most effective when you're trying to communicate something you believe in.

In the fall, I began working for Second Harvest, Japan's first food bank, as another small way to mediate food security here. My first day on the job, we were cooking and assembling curry lunch sets to the homeless in Ueno park. I was on rice duty, and should mention, this was not as easy as it sounds. Globes of rice stuck to my plastic gloves and the side of the bowls, while next to me another volunteer dolloped the precise 250-gram serving into her bowl in one fell swoop. Down the assembly line, the rice bowls transformed—bright scoops of pickled veggies, careful slices of *tamagoyaki* (卵焼き, Japanese omelets), and artful spoonfuls of curry all boxed and bowed before distributing to those lined up for lunch.

While I first found the fruit growers' and grocery stores' dedication to aesthetic perfection as undermining Japan's food security, I've begun to see a certain beauty in *shokunin*; how under the veil of perfection, such dedication can be something beautiful when used in service of others. It can bring dignity to a rather humble act, such as feeding those most in need of nourishment.

As the midway point in my Luce year, I've taken solace in the fact that my local grocery store now waits for me to buy their leftover *onigiri* (お握り, rice balls) at midnight before clearing the shelf, and that I've learned how to properly dollop 250 grams of rice. These small wins, and the knowledge that there is so much more work to be done, are what excite me for the next half year in Japan to come.



Jillian practicing Aikido martial arts (合気道) as her sensei (先生, teacher) looks on.

JOSHUA (JOSH) FEINZIG

LIVING IN
PLACED AT

Taipei, Taiwan
National Taiwan University

In the early mornings at Taipei's Da'an Forest Park, an endless count of Tai Chi (太極拳) collectives, comprised mostly of Taiwanese seniors, take hold. I like to think of them as competing factions, each donning its own t-shirt color in the same territory as the day before, and I wonder what draws a person to one camp and not another. Could a person ever get away with changing affiliations? Tai Chi enclaves are interspersed with Qigong, aerobics, and what might be samba. The groups remain healthily spaced across imaginary boundaries, though I've been told there is no licensing or reservation system that would explain this sense of order. The karaoke types emerge a bit later on, perhaps around 6:30am; some bring elaborate KTV speakers and set up shop under park bungalows, while others take traditional Chinese instruments to quieter quarters and hum along. Wheelchair-bound elderly convene in shaded areas as their caregivers, mostly



Josh on an old street in Jiufen, a mountain town in north-east Taiwan.

middle-aged Indonesian or Filipino women, sit together a distance away though still within sight of their dependents. This rather dreamlike, organic system reconstitutes itself each morning, though if you don't make it to Da'an before 7:30, you may miss any sign that it ever happened.

Use of public space is one of the most striking things about Taiwan. Public libraries are always packed, and it's incredibly easy to start conversations with passing strangers, or to use public transportation to get from Taipei to nearby national parks and surfing coves. Political life is reflected in public space, though I've found through my work at National Taiwan University's College of Law that Taiwan's democracy, unlike the silent subway rides and spotless floors, is raw, messy, and still under consolidation. I've also been working with Minister Jiunn-rong Yeh (葉俊榮), Taiwan's Minister of Interior, on a variety of policy questions, from the incorporation of international legal covenants to Taiwan's recently-announced truth and reconciliation commission that will review the White Terror authoritarian period. Using my ever-developing Chinese to navigate this beast of a bureaucracy and administrative legal system has had its share of frustrations, but has also fostered a deeper sense of patience and gratitude.

Defining the contours of national identity and belonging is a central concern for all political communities, but in Taiwan it seems foregrounded in everything: What is Taiwan, and who is Taiwanese? On a recent work trip to Kinmen, a Taiwan-controlled island just two kilometers off the coast of mainland China, the residents I spoke to described themselves as Kinmenese as opposed to Taiwanese; back on Taiwan's main island, many of my colleagues will playfully speak to me in Taiwanese Hokkien (臺灣語), and are sure to make it known when something is 'uniquely Taiwanese' (this has ranged from food dishes to the dark-colored stray dogs that roam certain pockets of Taipei). But underneath these questions of Taiwanese collective identity that have percolated for decades and with significant geopolitical meaning, other issues to do with borders and belonging seem to have gone overlooked. Each year, Taiwan detains (sometimes for months at a time) and departs thousands of undocumented individuals, mostly

laborers from Southeast Asian nations who initially come to work Taiwan's fields and factories, though there's nothing resembling an immigration court or hearing system to provide any degree of due process. Though in serious need of rectification, this state of affairs is somewhat understandable: For all its progressive strides, Taiwan is still a nascent democracy with a thoroughly complicated relationship to international covenants and human rights law.

As part of my work this year, I've been asked by the Interior Minister to review Taiwan's immigration detention system and detainment laws, which has involved site visits to prisons and collaboration with regional NGOs. On one occasion, a welcoming banner bearing my name hung above the main entrance to the prison complex, and on another, the visit ended with an invitation to partake in *ganbei* (幹杯), traditional Chinese toasting, at a nearby teahouse with the prison police. Although somewhat troubling and morally dissonant in light of the observed realities within the prisons, these site visits have been instructive in developing recommendations for policy reforms.

These moments of complexity have challenged me and continue to attune me to my own ideas about the world and about law and government. If not further clarifying, the months ahead will be replete with questions.

BENJAMIN (BENJI) FLEISCHACKER

LIVING IN **Beijing, China**
PLACED AT **Central Conservatory of Music**

I followed the woman and her children for almost a block. She was quizzing her four-year-old daughter on the endlessly diverging terms for Chinese relatives. "Father's younger brother is..." "叔叔 [*shushu*]!" her daughter shouted. "Mother's nephew who's older than you is..." "堂哥 [*tang ge*]!" I could barely keep up past the terms for grandfathers.

I've been a four-year-old child for the past six months, working my way slowly through picture books, reading aloud every sign I pass on the street, asking friends "how do you say...?" about every word from "salt" to "discourse."

Starting from zero opens up a world of possibilities. Before graduation, I worried that I would have no time to keep exploring new subjects. Even worse, the expectation that adults be competent and professional made the barrier to trying new skills seem insurmountable. But with language, everything is an open door. I make a fool of myself every day when I buy groceries. While writing this report, I accidentally called an advisor "*laoshu* (little mouse)" instead of "*laoshi* (teacher)." So there seems to be no reason not to botch a thousand piano etudes, lose a thousand games of *weiqi* (Go) and get a thousand bruises on my fingers practicing *matouqin* (morin khuur, or the horsehead fiddle).

Chinese grammar, I've been told, is incredibly easy. One word often triples as an adjective, noun and verb. Tenses are not embedded in words themselves; to distinguish between times of action you explicitly state when an event occurred. Instead of a past, present, and future tense, the Chinese language relies extensively on the particle “了.” When listing two events, 了 indicates that one took place before the other. “I went to the store” places a 了 at the end in order to show that it was completed before the second (the implied now). To say “I will call you after I go to the store” one also uses 了. When describing a recent change, for instance, “I am hungry” or “my phone is out of juice,” you again use 了. “几点” means “what time...” but “几点了” means “what time is it?” In other words, it's much easier to order events with respect to one another than with respect to the current moment.

I've been living for the past six months in a “了” timescale. Experiences don't seem to happen within an objective timeline, instead they accumulate one on top of another in a jumble of memories. I go to my placement, the Central Conservatory of Music, once or twice a month. I spend much of my time studying Chinese; enjoying the crisp, surprisingly pollution-free air of Beijing; performing concerts around the city; and making new friends on the subway. Starting in January, I will be teaching music theory and composition to 9-year-old children at the Leapp Music School. In December, I was a special guest DJ on EzFM classical radio. I am currently working on a demo program for China Radio International called “exploring classical music.” I hope to propose it as a weekly chance for casual classical listeners to better understand the composers and music they hear.

Beijing often feels like it's starting from zero. Buildings are torn up in a day. When I walked home from the train station one day in November, a store I had seen that same morning was completely blocked from street view by a ten-foot wall. Restaurants and coffee shops last less than a month before closing. With everything developing so quickly, it's a comfortable place to be a toddler.



Benji guest DJ'ing at the China Radio International for a music broadcast.

CYRUS (CY) GHAZNAVI

LIVING IN
PLACED AT

Tokyo, Japan
Center for Global Health Policy,
The University of Tokyo

There is nothing quite like riding the train during Tokyo rush hour. Shinjuku Station – the world's most trafficked train station – remains as ever a veritable mass of humanity that is eventually funneled, ever so carefully, into the metal tubes that go racing down the Japan Railway tracks; I have come to know stations like this all too well. Cramming myself into the already overflowing train car has become second nature, so much so that boarding an empty train almost makes me feel cheated. You see, the beauty of Tokyo's rush-hour trains is nestled in a wonderful paradox: never in your life will you have less personal space, but contrastingly, never again will the little space you have be as unconditionally respected. It is precisely this combination of apparent chaos and fundamental organization that keeps my love for Japan on track.

When I'm not jamming myself into the bursting-at-the-seams trains, I'm usually riding a bus. On one fateful afternoon, I was waiting at the bus stop when an elderly woman approached the waiting area. As is the custom in Japan, I offered my seat, but she refused:

“That's alright – I'll stand.”

“Not a problem, I'll stand with you then,” I remarked back.

Given that foreigners are a bit of a rare commodity in that neighborhood, we quickly struck up a conversation that continued through the bus ride. Finally, she surprised me by asking,

“How about you come over to my apartment for tea tomorrow?”

I enthusiastically accepted, and the next day I was treated to freshly brewed matcha, homemade umeboshi (pickled plums), and a boatload of family picture albums. I had a similar experience with my neighbors, a retired elderly couple who love to cook for their guests (apparently, they used to own a restaurant together). They invited me over any number of times, and each time it was a feast. After days of eating bento boxes because of my poor cooking ability, these multicourse, homemade meals paired with the crisp, vintage plum wine that the couple had started fermenting nearly a decade earlier were akin to a slice of heaven. Such experiences, within just the first month of my time in Japan, quickly demonstrated that befriending Japanese locals would not be nearly as difficult as I had been warned. In fact, in both such instances, warm individuals reached out to me; these moments, which have been sprinkled throughout my first six months in Japan, are precisely what will make my year here unforgettable.

In between these precious cultural experiences, I spend my time researching global health issues at my placement, the Department of Global Health Policy at the University

of Tokyo. Recently, I spent one-and-a-half months on a business trip to Hokkaido University in Sapporo, where I studied mathematical modeling techniques that can be applied to infectious disease epidemiology. Sapporo, located in the north of Japan, was my first experience living in snow, so I ended up learning more than just computer programming and differential equations. Now, having just come back to Tokyo, I am wrapping up my Hokkaido project and gearing up for another. My next project, an insight into Japanese fertility rates, has required me to flex all of my Japanese language muscles so that I can write grant proposals and give lecture presentations to fellow researchers. Needless to say, I am researching the language just as much as I am global health issues, though I have a long way to go for both. Luckily, I know Japan can take me to whatever destination I set for myself; after all, the trains here are amazing.



Cyrus posing at Cape Soya with a monument that marks “the northernmost point of Japan.” Unsurprisingly, this was also the coldest he has ever been.

MARTHA ISAACS

LIVING IN **Singapore**
PLACED AT **Centre for Liveable Cities**

On a Friday afternoon, I found myself onboard a ferry with my colleagues headed to an island about 40 minutes off the coast of Singapore. We were invited on a “learning journey,” a chance for governmental employees to learn about different aspects of Singapore’s infrastructure. This particular learning journey focused on Semakau Island, the landfill composed of the entirety of the country’s incinerated solid waste. A far cry from the dirty trash dump where my family would leave our old couches in my hometown, Semakau Island feels akin to a tropical island resort. It hosts a wide range of animal species and even a high-end fish farm that remains undisturbed by any pollutants (due to a high-tech geofilter that won international engineering awards). Singaporean officials hope that the island will never become

completely full thanks to waste reduction strategies and new uses for burned trash remains. As I watched an elegant crane residing on the island’s beach, I could not believe that the waste I threw into my flat’s trash shoot would eventually become part of the crane’s home. I have spent much of my time in Singapore in such awe of the city’s efficiency—every day, I walk past a detailed, to-scale 3D model that includes every building in the country.

Working as a Visiting Researcher at the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) has allowed me to observe the inner workings of a city I have long studied as the “City in a Garden.” Singapore is renowned for its biophilic design, expensive COE (certificate of entitlement) necessary for car ownership, and impeccably clean Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system, but working alongside the planners behind these policies have shown me the complex processes to build them. My own role within CLC centers on pushing forward policy that reduces Singapore’s automobile usage. Despite cars’ expensive price tags, much of Singapore’s pedestrian network prioritises car travel and presents barriers for road crossing, especially for those with limited mobility. In a stroke of luck, I have befriended the original planner of the MRT system, Bruno, now 82. We have joined forces to develop a traffic impact analysis to grow political will for the pedestrianization of Orchard Road, Singapore’s famous shopping street. Considered a “pioneer” in Singapore’s development, Bruno carries a photo of himself with Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, handy on his cell phone. In the past five months, I have observed how leaders from around Southeast Asia view Singapore’s development successes through CLC’s training programs. During one such program, I traveled with local government officials from the Philippines to visit the Singapore Housing and Development Board (HDB) to learn about Singapore’s public housing scheme. My own home is in an HDB flat, and my building has a sky bridge on the 50th floor which offers a breathtaking view of the carefully crafted urban form that my fellow civil servants have planned in the last decades.

Before I moved to Singapore, one of my Chinese teachers at the Chinese Language Institute in Guilin, China told me an old Chinese name for Southeast Asia, 南洋 (*nán yáng* or Southern Ocean), referencing the large ethnic Chinese population in Singapore, Malaysia, and surrounding region. Outside of Taiwan and China, Singapore is the only country in the world with an ethnic Chinese majority, but I have found Singapore vastly different from China in terms of Mandarin dialect, pace of life, and the presence of crisp curry puffs instead of tender soup dumplings. Singapore is certainly unique—as an urban planning case study and hub of ethnographic diversity. I have started to adjust to Singapore’s rules, such as refraining from drinking water on public transit. I have embraced the soothing rhythm of a place with one season, picking up on small changes in sunset time where the day length only varies 31 minutes throughout the entire year. In 2018, I am excited to keep learning from my colleagues and working to improve urban mobility for all Singaporeans, as well as using my trash to build a bit of new real estate on Semakau Island.



Martha (far left) on a work visit to Semakau Island, a land mass composed of Singapore's incinerated solid waste.

CASSIDY MCDONALD

LIVING IN **Nanjing, China**
PLACED AT **School of Journalism and
Communication, Nanjing University**

At first, my Mandarin lessons were driven by urgent, survival-level needs. I studied every day in order to ask things like, "Why has this ATM eaten my debit card?" (Answer: We don't know, and you can't have it back.) Or, "Will the taxi pick me up at the restaurant?" (Maybe; hard to say.) Or, "Is it safe to eat this duck brain?" (Yes, now eat it already.)

Thankfully, my study motivation soon changed. I moved in with a host family who quickly thrust me into a child-like-existence. They fed me, found me "little friends — 小朋友" and took me out every weekend to "play — 玩." (Their words, not mine.) With my life expertly managed by my host parents, my Mandarin lessons shifted away from survival needs, and toward my desire to understand China as a whole.

After four months, my host mom and I gleefully discovered that, with just a little help from a dictionary app, we could have somewhat-weighty discussions. Over long lunches, she'd tell me about her factory-owning grandparents and how their fortunes shifted after World War II, her own rise from poverty in the 1980s, and her confidence in China's global rise. Once, I asked my host father — a former corrections officer — whether he could advise me on a news story I was reporting. I wanted to write about China's weak domestic violence laws and the women who had murdered their husbands out of self-defense. His advice was not to write such a story, as this surely wasn't a big problem in China.

When I told friends that I was going to China because I wanted to improve as a journalist, some didn't understand. Why report in a place without press freedom? At times, I've asked myself the same question. But every day I'm reminded of the reasons I came: when I walk out my

front door and spot yet another new construction project; when I buy my morning coffee using the online payment apps that are years ahead of American technology; when I hop on the subway and watch the hundreds of well-dressed, wealthy Chinese en route to earn their portion of China's soaring GDP. China has risen, and now we must pay attention.

One fall day, over crispy pork and noodles, my host mom confessed something to me. She said, "At first, I noticed you had a one-sided perspective." My stomach dropped; since I'd arrived, I was so careful to remain open to new ideas, to conceal my Western biases. Somewhere, I must have failed.

Seeing my embarrassment, she explained where I went wrong. My problem had to do with freedom, something I consider a basic societal goal. She said, "I think freedom is a luxurious thing." Freedom, she explained, is something people can only consider once their "bellies are full." If they can't get enough to eat, she wondered, what need is there for freedom? In her life, she had known hunger, and now, she was happy just to be full.

Unlike her, I have not experienced swift political changes equivalent to those in China, nor have I ever starved as a result of those fluctuations. I don't fear rapid governmental change and political quarrelling. In my host mom's eyes, I was overly concerned about pursuing justice, but naïve about the side effects of that pursuit; she believes the greatest consequences are borne by common people. As a Western journalist, I've come to China to write about the voiceless — to amplify their complaints and speak truth to power. But I must be careful to anticipate the ramifications of my reporting, and more importantly, not to assume concerns that Chinese don't actually have.

This winter, I moved north to Beijing, and my host mom's words have stayed with me. Every day, I grapple with the concept of freedom, my role as a Western observer and my duty as a journalist. These questions have nothing to do with ATMs or duck brains, but they certainly are no less urgent.



Cassidy (center) working on a video with graduate journalism students at Nanjing University.

NEIL NORONHA

LIVING IN **New Delhi, India**
PLACED AT **Carnegie India**

New Delhi is truly a tale of two cities. You can take a ride underground in the state-of-the-art metro or you can just hop on a three-wheel bicycle rickshaw and travel through narrow streets. You can shop in gleaming Western-style mega malls or you can hone your negotiating skills by bartering and haggling in bazaars. You can marvel at the signs of economic development and progress around each corner while passing by children with tattered clothes begging for food.

One of my first days in New Delhi exemplified that contrast. It started when I and Kadi Sy, another Luce scholar here this year, went to explore the markets of South Extension in South Delhi. We had just arrived in India the day before and were the inquisitive foreigners looking to acclimate ourselves to our new home. Walking on top of a “flyover” or underpass, we witnessed a glorious aspect of quotidian life in South Delhi, to which we now have become accustomed—endless traffic. The congestion here represented both the immense economic growth that India has experienced in the last three decades as well as the alarming rise in pollution that is frequently mentioned.

A fascinating chimera, New Delhi has afforded me, an NRI (non-resident Indian), an experience where I have gotten to celebrate the intricacies of my culture while still acknowledging my status as an outsider. Indian-born citizens just see me as one of their own, allowing me to blend into the milieu and feel more connected to the people and culture of India. For example, I am presumed to be fluent in Hindi so everyday Indians, be it Uber drivers or shopkeepers, converse with me in Hindi to start. In turn, as my mastery of the language has improved, I have integrated myself into society more and more, arriving at a point where I fully feel like I have lived in India for years, not just months.

At the same time, this natural adaptation has at times placed me in uncomfortable situations which highlight the distance I still feel from my host country. Many times, when I go sightseeing with a friend who is ethnically non-Indian, there would be at least one Indian national who would aggressively want to take a selfie with my friend—“Hey look, I got a picture with this foreigner.” The stares at my friend would be accompanied by whispers and hushed Hindi conversations. Locals use these types of ephemeral encounters as an opportunity to confirm or reject whatever stereotypes or biases developed from media or hearsay. This seemingly harmless ignorance can materialize into actual racial discrimination, when it comes to foreign visitors trying to rent, for instance. Ironically, in many cases travelling with my non-Indian friends, I am more of a foreigner than they are, for their knowledge of India is often more comprehensive. Yet, I would receive a sort of preferential treatment I was not accustomed to in the United States.



Neil experiencing Diwali in Kurta Style

Together, these contrasting experiences, one of cultural attachment and one of distance, have given me a nuanced perspective of living in India, which, prior to this year, I had only visited twice in the last fifteen years. As such, when a new encounter or issue seems foreign or confusing to me, I remind myself of the complexity all around me, recognizing that my Western biases as well as my privilege as an NRI male may influence my perception. At Carnegie India, where I am placed, I am studying how the Indian government handles a range of transnational threats, from terrorism to natural disasters. When I prescribe recommendations in my articles, my colleagues constantly remind me that, just because the United States sets up its bureaucracy in a specific manner doesn't mean that it would work for India similarly. It has definitely been a humbling experience so far, one that I know will have made me a better foreign policy practitioner.



2017-2018
LUC SCHOLARS
NOTES
from the field

COREY RUDER

LIVING IN **Kyoto, Japan**
PLACED AT **Center for Ecological Research,
Kyoto University**

G *u-ru-ko-su. Gurukosu. Glucose?*

I scrunched my forehead at a laboratory manual, struggling to read the Japanese. Depending on the character system, I could sound out some of the words and barely guess at others. Adding to the confusion, my predecessor in the lab had scrawled notes in Vietnamese across all the margins. As to whether these were notes to himself or crucial updates to the method I was trying to run, I didn't have a clue.

As a graduate student, I think about science communication in one way or another all the time. I read textbooks and journal articles, try to make sense of data, think about how to communicate my research plans to my advisor, and explain that studying biogeochemistry does not mean that I'm in medical school. I started my Luce year excited about the interesting science communication challenges inherent in conducting research abroad. While I anticipated some basic roadblocks, I was not prepared for how difficult communication on all levels would be.

My first wake-up call came during language training in Tokyo, and was less of a call and more of a siren. The deafening noise started as I pulled my shorts up and I froze, realizing that the green button I had just pushed must have said "emergency," not "flush." Further frantic presses only increased the pitch and volume of the alarm, and I noticed with horror a flashing red light on the roof that broadcasted my ignorance throughout the sleepy park. I stood underneath the blaring beacon for a full ten minutes, praying that it would stop and that my inability to explain myself to any police officers who responded would be explanation enough. After nothing happened, I slowly began to jog away and broke into a guilty sprint as soon as I was out of sight. Once I got home, I memorized the relevant characters and vowed to never confuse them again.

Two months of language classes passed without much further embarrassment and I started to feel more confident in my speaking skills. That is, until I met my advisor's daughters. Sato and Motoka (8 and 6 years old, respectively) are intelligent, spunky, and know full well that I don't speak great Japanese, but just don't seem to mind. There's nothing more simultaneously discouraging, humbling, and motivating than listening to a kindergartener tell you a whole story about her dog and not understanding anything substantial beyond the word "dog." Sato has given me her old school workbooks to practice with and they both teach me new words, including but not limited to rollercoaster (*jettokousutaa*), ferris wheel (*kanransha*), and alligator (*wani*).

My new colleagues at the Center for Ecological Research have also been teaching me new words. The other grad-



Corey (right) working alongside her advisor Kei Koba (left) and postdoc Keitaro Fukushima (middle) in the stable isotope laboratory at CER.

uate students teach me slang in the regional dialect and often encourage me to walk up to my advisor in lab and say a phrase that roughly translates to "knock it off!" They also teach me onomatopoeias, which are broadly used in Japanese to describe both sounds and feelings. Fish eyes, for example, are *puro puro* because they're wobbly and gelatinous (this can also be used to describe giant rice pot pudding). Fried tempura is *saku saku* because it's light and crisp, equipment gets *boro boro* when it's old and worn out, the bubbles in a purging system go *buku buku*, and *doki doki* is both the sound and feeling of a pounding heart.

A few months in, I'm still figuring out how to communicate well. More and more of this has started to be in a scientific context, such as struggling to write out shipping labels correctly and talking to my peers about research, but this happens with varying levels of success and has been a slower process than I initially imagined. Several weeks ago, I showed up at a research symposium and realized that I had the only poster written in English. Using enthusiastic hand motions, the Japanese words for three forms of nitrogen, and the verb "to become," I attempted to explain how and why I am studying nitrogen cycling in Osaka Bay, then listened as others generously tried to translate their posters into English for me. By the end of my year here, I doubt that I will achieve a level of language proficiency that allows me to grasp the complexity of scientific concepts in Japanese, and I probably will always get a headache from reading (or trying to read) Japanese laboratory manuals. I can, however, make people laugh by pointing to my bicep and saying *muki muki* when someone hand-filters a particularly difficult water sample. I can operate toilets without setting off emergency alarms, am getting faster at finding the correct characters on my Japanese keyboard, and know quite a bit more about nitrogen cycling and stable isotopes than I did when I first came. Most importantly, my understanding of how to work alongside other people has developed substantially. It's true that communication, especially in a scientific context, requires accuracy and precision of language. What I'm learning is that good communication is just as much, if not more, about compassion, patience, and generosity.

ELENA SWARTZ

LIVING IN **Kathmandu, Nepal**
PLACED AT **Democracy Resource Center Nepal**

“**E**k, dui, tin, char, paanch, chaa!” One, two, three, four five, six! Says Ram.
“*Bistaarai garnus.*” Please slow down, I say.

This is a common exchange I have with Ram ji, my Nepali folkdance teacher. With his patient teaching, I have learned traditional dances from all over Nepal since July and even performed with him in October. I trip on the quick steps that seem to be a Nepali staple and try endlessly to articulate my finger positions as crisply as Ram does, but the movements don't come fluidly to me. Every now and then, however, I find myself trying a step and being able to translate it into the ballet terminology that I am more accustomed to: *passé*, *coupé*, *chassé*. Those moments make me feel so proud because I know I am translating between my past and present selves; I can see that I am changing and growing as I watch myself in the dance studio mirror.

Dance has been an outlet for me to challenge my boundaries since I began taking ballet classes at the relatively late age of 15. I was always trying to catch up to other dancers, from taking tap dance classes with seven-year-olds to making friends with girls my age who had been dancing together since they were tiny. It was sometimes a lonely experience, but there was something about movement that made me feel more *myself* than almost anything else I did. I learned to love that I wasn't a technically perfect dancer and embraced the way I moved. In many ways, my experience in Nepal thus far is like learning how I dance. Ram and I have about the same fluency in one another's languages (him in English, me in Nepali) which can lead to some long pauses in the music during which we try to express ourselves clearly. However, it is gratifying when we do finally understand one another when I apply words I learned in my Nepali language classes to dance: *pachaadi*, *agaadi*, *alikasi*. Backwards, forwards, a little bit.

I am challenging my body to learn a new language here while also challenging my mind to adapt quickly to ever-changing political situations at my work placement at the Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN). DRCN is a Nepali non-governmental organization that promotes Nepal's developing democracy through field and theory-based research on the implementation of Nepal's constitutional obligations. My first four months with DRCN was marked by exciting and sometimes chaotic political developments as Nepal completed its first round of local and national elections as stipulated by the 2015 constitution. While I tried to retain as much as possible about Nepal's complex political history before I began working at DRCN, nothing could have prepared me for events during this election period, such as the creation of new political parties and unfortunately, some sporadic violence. I have read dozens of qualitative reports from DRCN's Ne-

pali election observers about areas around the country. Some of the events observed made me feel angry, such as reading about women's claims of not receiving voter education. Other events instill cautious optimism, when voters in the cold mountainous districts cast votes in the national elections despite inclement weather. Throughout my work with DRCN, I am always reflecting on my own knowledge of civic engagement in the United States and how it relates to Nepal's burgeoning democracy.

As I embark on the second half of my Luce year, I look forward to my increased level of patience with the uncertainty I feel in my body and mind. While this uncertainty is uncomfortable, I know it will yield important self-reflections and learning.



Elena (right) dancing with her dance teacher.

KADIATA (KADI) SY

LIVING IN **New Delhi, India**
PLACED AT **Breakthrough Trust**

“**Y**ou are a Muslim, a woman, and Black. You are screwed.” These are the first few words my friend, a manager for Teach for India, said to me as we sat in a chai café in a posh Bengali neighborhood in South Delhi. This opinion was not new to me. Concerned friends and acquaintances have warned me about the possible difficulties I would face in choosing India as soon as I announced my interest in being placed there for my Luce year. Indeed, my experience in India has been shaped by my identities and the challenges that come with traveling solo as a Black woman. So far, I have had the opportunity to visit parts of both North and South India. I have wandered through the *gullies* (alleyways) of Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and Amritsar; seen the mountains of Himmachel and Uttarkand, and the swampy mangroves of Sundarbans at the India-Bangladesh border; witnessed nationalism on display at the India-Pakistan Wagah Border, and traveled back in time to the golden age of the Rajasthani Maharajs in Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar. The ability to see the beauty in places and

the people around me despite difficulties has been the most critical lesson I learned since coming to India.

In the short time since arriving here, I have been fortunate to have established friendships and connections with open-minded people who have made my time in India very enjoyable. I am always surprised at the unique places where I find pockets of kindness and people with genuine interest in knowing and exchanging stories with a foreigner such as myself. During the Christmas holidays, I found myself in Hyderabad and was invited to the home of a music teacher. I was treated like an esteemed guest and was given a sitar performance by children he was giving lessons to. The gentleman lived in a two-room house with ten other family members and was apologetic to me about his modest home. "We are very humble people," he would say whenever he felt he needed to explain his living situation to a Westerner (who he assumes has money). I still feel very emotional when I think of this moment. Despite of the racism, sexism, and Islamophobia I have faced, moments like this have made me fall in love with India.

Here in New Delhi, I work for a human rights organization called Breakthrough Trust. I'm currently working on a project on early marriage in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, while simultaneously working with Breakthrough's media team to formulate a digital media strategy plan for the organization. I also teach Arabic classes to eleven of my colleagues on Tuesdays and Thursdays for an hour after work. I am grateful to work for an organization with like-minded colleagues and have established close working relationships with my supervisors Ditipriya Gosh and Urvashi Ghandi. In the second half of my Luce year, I hope to work on our gender-bias sex-selection program and to conduct independent research on the role of religion in changing gender norms. I look forward to continuing with my Hindi lessons and going on more solo journeys in India and the rest of Asia.



Kadi at her adopted family house during Diwali with friends celebrating the festival of lights after pooja (prayer) offerings to the Goddess Lakshmi.

BRYAN VADHEIM

LIVING IN
PLACED AT

Hanoi, Vietnam
PanNature

One of the first questions I got when I first settled on Vietnam as my placement country was "So how do you feel about riding a motorbike?"

Despite having been warned, I continue to be consistently astounded by both the sheer number and creative uses of motorbikes throughout the country. Driving during rush hour is best described as feeling like a single molecule in a frenetic tsunami whose progress is only occasionally hindered by the combination of police officers, traffic lights, and waves directed in perpendicular directions, with any obstacle seeming largely ineffective at impeding anything when encountered individually. The bikes themselves are used to pull ploughs, as family vehicles (5 people and a dog being apparent maximum occupancy in a vehicle I was previously sure could only fit two), for date nights, as mobile pet stores for all those times you really need a goldfish on the highway, and to transport any number of items, including furniture, industrial gas cylinders, monkeys, 10-12 five-gallon water cooler jugs, and every kind of fruit imaginable. The ubiquity of motorbikes is a constant point of discussion in Hanoi, from growing concerns about deteriorating air quality to how their presence may affect the future of public transit. The transit systems available in other cities – Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, to name a few – are oft cited as possible models for replication in Hanoi.

Transit policy is just one of a host of issues that have Vietnamese looking abroad for replicable models. In my own area of interest, natural resource management policy, electricity and forest management loom large as areas that the country looks to learn from international examples. With electricity demand set to triple by 2030, limited domestic fossil fuel reserves, and hydropower potential that is nearly tapped, Vietnam is looking outward as it seeks to either import the energy it needs or nurture its fledgling supply of renewables, such as wind and solar. Sustainable forest management will similarly require a mix of cooperation with neighbours to re-establish wildlife corridors and learning from international best practices.

Working on such topics of international focus can sometimes make it easy to forget that Vietnam must also forge its own path that aligns with its fiercely independent culture. Nowhere is that unique culture more tangibly (and deliciously) evident than in the country's food. I am lucky enough to live with a Vietnamese host family, whose general kindness and patience with my fumbling Vietnamese cannot be overstated. Cô Mai has also appointed herself a culinary curator of my introduction to Vietnamese culture. Some dishes are famous: *phở bò* (Hanoi's beef noodle soup), *bánh bao* (a steamed bun filled with pork sausage and hard boiled quail eggs), or *nem rán* (a crisp fried spring roll); a multitude of others I had not heard of: *chả cá* (catfish baked and then stir fried with peanuts, dill

and green onion), *bún ốc* (a snail soup best consumed for breakfast), or *bánh cốm* (a sweet green rice cake that I still have difficulty describing, despite many, many samplings). These foods are merely a handful of those that Hanoi is known for, let alone the head-spinning diversity of specialties outside the capital. In food as in policy, Vietnam has taken international ideas and made them Vietnamese. *Bánh mì* (an often spicy sandwich made with a baguette) is a particularly well-known example of Vietnam innovating with a mix of ingredients native to Vietnam and those introduced by French colonialists. I am thankful to have a regular reminder that the best things are often the result of a blend of international and local.

Vietnam famously opened its economy in the early 1990's to the outside world, a step to which many attribute the subsequent decades of rapid economic growth. Vietnam continues to look outward, as it refines its role regionally in economic, political, and cultural terms in a way that remains uniquely Vietnamese. My past six months as an outsider in Vietnam have offered a unique lens to view a country as it balances its own strong identity with a willingness to learn from the experiments of others, both successful and otherwise. I hope to bring a similar mixture of humility and individuality to the personal and professional lessons in resource policy, cuisine, and driving in store for me in the months to come.



Sophia eating *murtabak*, and beef *hor-fun* (干炒牛河) while drinking local Tsinghao beer and *milo*, a classic mixture of Singaporean cuisines.



Drinking *bia hơi* (fresh beer) with Cô Mai and Chú Viet in Hanoi.

SOPHIA WALLACH

LIVING IN **Singapore**
PLACED AT **Singapore International Mediation Institute (SIMI)**

For me, breakfast has always been the most important meal of the day. Before starting my Luce Year, I would have eggs, cereal, or perhaps oatmeal when I woke up cold in the middle of a New York winter.

Yet, this year has turned what was a constant comfort into a chance to explore and taste the diversity Singapore has to offer. During my first month in here I woke up to the sweltering heat and smells of Little India where my breakfast options included *roti prata* or *dosa* and a steaming *kopi* with condensed milk. Soon I moved places and my options expanded ranging from *laksa*, a spicy Malaysian noodle coconut soup dish to what some consider the Singaporean national breakfast, toast with *kaya* butter dipped in soft boiled eggs topped with soy sauce. An acquired taste, but in my mind, a classic.

Before arriving in Singapore, I had a chance to adjust my breakfast routine during my language study in Guilin, China. One morning, I decided to skip breakfast and my daily dose of *mifen* (米粉), a Guilin noodle dish sold across the street. The morning I decided not to go out for breakfast was the morning the government decided to bulldoze the entire row of stalls, wiping them off the streets of Guilin. As I stood in awe later that day, gazing at the emptiness where my favorite *baozi* (包子) shop used to be, I realized I was the only one staring. As part of the government's effort to "beautify" Guilin, stalls like these were disappearing all over the city.

In Singapore, where everything appears organized and efficient, the urban transformation has already occurred: the government long ago moved all the street food stalls into now ubiquitous hawker centers. When I reflect on my experience in Singapore, a Chinese saying comes to mind: "when you drink water, remember the source." *Yǐn shuǐ sī yuán* (饮水思源). The gleaming buildings and crisp, immaculate greenery are just the surface.

When I first began my placement, the Singapore International Mediation Institute (SIMI), I struggled with the new work environment. The small size of the team, with people mostly working from separate locations meant I spent most days on my own. In the beginning, I found this isolating. In a country that values structure and order so highly, I felt out of place with the seeming flex-

ibility. However, after coming back from the mid year meeting in Thailand, I started to realize the opportunities in this unexpected situation. One day I could work from a cafe in the Central Business District, surrounded by the hustle of the thirty-minute lunch break or I could travel to the heartlands and find a quiet library. I now volunteer part-time for an NGO called Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), through which I see those disenfranchised by Singapore's legal system. I'm able to audit a course and pitch projects for my placement. My coworkers and I have met mediators from all over Singapore, in a variety of fields, all with a passion for making mediation a tool in this complicated country.

One of the projects I'm working on is the volume of SIMI's annual publication Contemporary Issues in Mediation, nicknamed CIIM (pronounced "ch-eem," and roughly translating as "complicated" or "complex" in

Singlish). I think this is a fitting title for both the field of mediation and my experience so far. Singapore's reputation as a highly efficient and organized society is extremely accurate. Yet, it is not the whole story. Having some access to Mandarin allows one level of insight into Singaporean culture, but there is also Malay, Tamil, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese, and Singlish (which manages to combine them all). In fact, the Singaporean cultural identity is different no matter who you talk to, which makes understanding it that much more of a challenge. As a form of governance, it makes the multitude of associations and bureaucratic organizations that much more understandable. From eating chili crab in Geylang (芽笼) and *murtabak* in Bugis, to learning muay thai and even attempting to play erhu, the past six months have flown by. I'm excited to see what the rest of the year has in store.

