ALLIE SPEIDEL | Tokyo, Japan

I remember walking into my first Japanese language class to take a “diagnostic” exam and feeling overwhelmed by the elegant curves and shapes dancing across the page. I ended up handing a completely blank test back to my teacher. Over the next couple of months, I gradually began to unlock small pieces of the Japanese language. I went from being able to recognize certain characters, to reading full words, to constructing toddler-like sentences, to carrying out limited conversations essential for daily life. The more I learned, the more I realized there was to learn. The organizational complexity of the 10,000+ characters that compose the Japanese language reflects much of the complexity and delicate balance that exists in all aspects of Japanese society.

Navigating the various rules of this society, many of which are unspoken, has been awkward, at times humiliating, and enlightening, all at once. I have come to a point where I accept that I will probably get everything completely wrong the first time around, but I have become less self-conscious about it. As a gaijin (foreigner), I stand outside of this delicate structure, and regardless of how much I learn and adapt to assimilate into Japanese culture, I will always stick out as a tall, blonde, white gaijin woman. And this is actually okay. In a slightly counterintuitive way, my foreigness provides a slightly more comfortable forum for discussing the subtle and sophisticated rules that guide Japanese society.

I had the opportunity to live in Sendai, a northeast town known as the “city of trees,” surrounded by the most stunningly beautiful nature, for my two months of Japanese language study. There, while struggling through the complexities of the Japanese language, I was able to build a wonderful web of friends, both Japanese and international. I learned through this network that language is merely one means of communication and cultural exchange; shared passions, experiences, and interests solidify our friendship. This lesson continued as I transitioned into life in Tokyo and began work as a researcher at the Tokyo Women’s Medical University-Waseda University Joint Institution for Advanced Biomedical Sciences. In my work looking at strategies for creating vascularized liver tissue, I have had the opportunity to work with leading researchers in the tissue engineering field and have been humbled by how kind and generous they are with their time and scientific passion. I have learned so much wonderful science, gained further cultural insights, and made what I believe will be lasting scientific and personal friendships.

Although I am already halfway through my Luce experience, I am looking forward to the remaining embarrassments and lessons that lie ahead of me as I dive deeper into the complexities that weave together Japanese language, society, and behavior. Much like gradually unearthing the meaning behind the seemingly disorganized shapes and curves that compose the Japanese “alphabet,” the experience of my Luce year has helped me appreciate the marvelous compilation of

Allie wearing traditional yukata for the Obon Festival in Matsushima
seemingly unorganized moments in my life and realize that there is in fact a wonderful beauty and complexity that link them together, and that they need to be considered together for their true impact to be clear. I am looking forward to what further moments and experiences will join my collection over the remaining half of the year.

**AMARYNTH SICHEL | Seoul, South Korea**

A Korean dinner table is typically covered with scores of small plates, called banchan. Although each dish has its own distinct flavor—some spicy, some savory, some fermented, and some vaguely sweet—eating them together inevitably produces a delicious mouthful. Unintentionally, I’ve built my life in Korea in much the same way, pursuing many distinct experiences, which combine to afford me a rich, eclectic taste of Seoul and South Korea.

My job with Seoul City Hall gives me insight into how the city government creates and administers policies for its 10 million inhabitants. Working in an all-Korean office, I was initially concerned that I wouldn’t be able to communicate with my coworkers. However, with my teammates’ studied English, my rudimentary Korean, and the universality of body language, connecting with my colleagues was not an issue. Although Korean people work more hours annually than people from almost every other country in the world, my group makes time to eat together. Lunchtime has quickly become one of the best parts of my day: we eat budae jjigae (spicy “army stew”) or kimchi fried rice, and I try to decipher their fast-paced banter, while they try to teach me Korean phrases.

Although building relationships with my colleagues was not a problem, finding ways to support my section’s work has proved challenging. Even though I was placed with the Americas and Europe team in the International Relations Bureau, all of the work is conducted in Korean, and so my ability to contribute was at first limited. Some days, I just sat at my desk in defeat and studied Korean. However, with the support of my team leader, I have gradually found interesting ways to put my skills to work, supporting pan-Asian policy sharing initiatives and assisting visiting dignitaries.

In an unexpected turn of events, my work with City Hall has also led me to broadcast journalism. In spite of having no radio background whatsoever (unless listening to NPR counts), I now work as a field reporter for Seoul’s English language radio station, reporting on topics ranging from human rights in North Korea to local charity fundraising drives.

Through my Korean running club, I’ve learned not only about the bourgeoning fitness community in Korea, but also, inadvertently, about a vibrant, underground Korean music scene. When I joined the group, I was just looking to find like-minded runners and to practice my Korean. However, many of our members are involved with arts and entertainment, so spending time with them when we’re not running together along the Han River involves DJ performances or gallery openings.

Many things in my life in Korea feel unexpected—a year ago, I never would have guessed that I’d work as a radio journalist, I knew nothing about Korean hip hop, and I had never seriously climbed outdoors. However, these unpredictable and disparate opportunities combined to make my life here full, rich, and flavorful. Just like a Korean dinner table.

**AUBREY MENARD | Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia**

When packing for a year in Mongolia, I brought fleece-lined jeans, thermals, boots, and snow pants. At the time, this seemed like reasonable preparation for living in the coldest capital in the world. I imagined myself traversing snowy and frigid lands, just trying to stay warm.

While Mongolia is extremely cold and I have used the clothes I packed for winter hiking, I realized quickly that I had the wrong mental image. I soon came to find people in Ulaanbaatar dress glamorously, taking great pride in their style. Where I wear my
winter boots with attached anti-slip steel grips, my Mongolian counterparts teeter on ice in high heels.

As I write this, we’ve just finished the New Year’s holiday. Since the Soviet era, Mongolian work places, NGOs, and other social groups have thrown lavish parties to mark the new year. Women wear ball gowns or formal cocktail dresses and take at least a half day off of work to have their hair and makeup professionally styled. Instead of gyms being full in January with New Year’s resolution fervor like they are in the U.S., Mongolian gyms are busiest in December as people get themselves in shape to look their best for these holiday parties. Having not anticipated this when packing, I borrowed a floor-length gown from a friend after being warned that dressing more casually could be perceived as a sign of disrespect for my coworkers or workplace.

Aside from all the glamour, my daily life in Mongolia is very enjoyable. I live with Zorig, a Yorkshire Terrier, whom I named after the leader of Mongolia’s peaceful democratic revolution. Mongolians have long used dogs to ward off wolves and protect their herds. As the middle class has grown, more and more people have started bringing dogs into their homes. Walking Zorig has been the best way for me to get to know my neighbors and a wide swath of Mongolian people that I otherwise wouldn’t encounter. People often approach with curiosity, allowing me to practice Mongolian and to learn about their lives and families.

Now the country is getting ready for Tsaagan Tsar, the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Each family will make hundreds or even thousands of meat dumplings to serve to their family members as they visit each other. They say that a full stomach at the New Year is a portent of a full stomach for the year to come. Each family visits their relatives in descending age order, paying their respects to the eldest first. This holiday is very important because in Mongolia’s nomadic history, this may have been the only time in a year that extended families saw each other and shared their news.

I’ve been invited to spend Tsaagan Tsar with friends’ families. I made many of my friends here through a club for young feminists, and I’m constantly impressed by the activism and creativity of these smart women. They’re currently engaged in a campaign against sexual harassment in education. They raise awareness and funds for their group through a yearly production of the Vagina Monologues and also put on a photo exhibition to promote healthy body image.

The year is more than halfway over, but I feel as though I’ve just hit my stride in my work with the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I’ve started many projects that I’m hoping to have time to finish before June comes. My focus is on extractive sector governance, and with extracted resources (primarily copper and coal) comprising approximately 95% of Mongolia’s exports, there’s a lot to do! The country is currently in an economic downturn because of a global decline in copper and coal prices, and growing other sectors to build a more balanced economy is of great national concern. Indeed, politics are heating up as the country moves towards national elections in June, and I’m grateful that I’ll be here for long enough to see who emerges victorious.

BRANDON TENSLEY | Chiang Mai, Thailand

Before I landed in what’s often billed as Thailand’s cultural capital, I was told, “You’ll love the sights there!” and “Thai food is the very best!” It turns out that Chiang Mai is, in my (never) humble opinion, one of those rare places whose hype you should actually believe.

These things are absolutely true: Wat Pha Lat, tucked away on Doi Suthep, offers some peerless views of the city, and godspeed if you want to find a dish that can top khao soi, made up of crunchy, squiggly noodles atop a spicy, curry-based soup.

In fact, Chiang Mai is more, far more, than its hype, which was made plain to me through my placement at The Irrawaddy. The news magazine was founded in 1993 by a group of Burmese journalists living in exile in Thailand, forced from their homeland following a crackdown by the military junta on democracy protesters. For over two decades they’ve been vigilant chroniclers of Burma’s history and trajectory. Thanks to its location not far from Burma’s border, Chiang Mai has become a sizeable hub for Burmese expats.

A typical day for me, then, straddles a couple different cultures. After zigzagging through Thai to negotiate a ride on
a rot daeng (red truck, Thailand’s cousin of a taxi) to get to work, I’m hurtled into a Burma bubble, to which my Western senses must once again adjust, from the tea in the kitchen to a uniquely tone-tinged language. The rest of my day is spent reading and writing about Burma, usually to the soundtrack of steadily clicking laptop keys kept in rhythm by thudding beats pulsing from someone’s headphones.

It’s not as dull as it might seem, though. Here’s why:

Burma, a wholly fascinating former hermit state, had a general election on Nov. 8, 2015, after decades under military rule. While many people found themselves disenfranchised, millions of others were entitled to vote, and they claimed that right. For many it was the first vote of their lives. Being a part of, and learning from, a team of stellar journalists covering the people of Burma’s enormous and bold effort to steer their leadership (as it happened, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy trounced the ruling party) was thrilling, and marked an important pivot in my Luce year. It positioned me to look at democracy, or at least small yet crucial steps toward it, from the outside in.

And this, to me, is what gives Chiang Mai its magic. On the one hand, it’s a deceptively ancient city that’s firmly Thai in atmosphere and attitude. Much of the “old city” area is studded with Buddhist temples, and it can be a bit of a challenge to maneuver around town if you don’t know nit noi (a little) Thai. On the other hand, Chiang Mai has also become a hotspot for foreigners, exemplified by my colleagues at The Irrawaddy, who see the city as the cultural crossroads that it is, and as a place where previously submerged histories of Southeast Asia are brought to life in subtle, powerful ways.

On my longest days, writing can be exhausting, and there’s always the specter of burn-out. But as I prepare for my first trip to Burma, where I’ll work with a small army of journalists in Rangoon on a story about Burma’s burgeoning LGBTQ movement before ricocheting to Bagan in an overnight bus, I’m struck by how lucky I’ve been able to, in a way, cheat the Luce, basically coming away with a two-for-one deal. And then I think to myself, And? Go on.

**CHARLOTTE LEE | Chiang Mai, Thailand**

Tomorrow at 6 am, I’ll meet a couple of coworkers to head out to a remote Hmong mountain village, where we’re conducting community training on data collection for our nutrition and dental health education project. We’ll likely stop at the 7-11 (“seven” stores are ubiquitous, seemingly on every corner—they now feel more Thai to me than American) with the grilled squid stand out front, the one right before the highway turn off for the endlessly winding road to Mae Hong Son Province. I’ve grown to love the silver trucks with my placement The Life Skills Development Foundation’s red insignia plastered across the windshield, just as I’ve come to love listening to the Thai acoustic covers of American songs from 10 years ago, peppered with the sound of my coworkers’ laughter, as we joke and snack on fried bananas (มันสำปะหลัง) for the three-to-five hour drive out into the mountainous countryside. We’ll probably get coffee before the training, and if there’s a nice cup and a view, there’s a good chance one of my coworkers will Instagram a picture with my favorite hashtag #slowlife, a reference to the desire to live a more relaxed and simple lifestyle. We’ll conduct the training, using the short health education curriculum I designed. I’ll be on the sidelines for the most part, rather than butchering technical Thai terms with poor tonality, but it’s going to feel pretty darn good to see my work come to life.

These road trips weren’t always a source of joy. The first time I went into the field with my Thai coworkers, who speak very limited English, the linguistic isolation was overwhelming. I was trying to conduct qualitative interviews to understand the prevalence of malnutrition and the community’s nutritional beliefs, but I could barely communicate what kind of noodle soup I wanted for lunch. I painstakingly translated on the fly using a Thai-English app that has saved me more times than I can count, and eventually we got the information we needed. Now, after months of vigorous scribbling of work vocabulary in staff meetings, pocketing handouts to practice reading Thai script, and more time with Google translate than I’m proud of, I’m in a place where I can understand most meeting agendas, ask and answer basic work-related questions, and give short presentations. I introduce myself with my Thai nickname (น้ำชา or tea water), and can tell a couple bad jokes that often garner a surprising amount of pity laughter.

Brandon bathing an elephant at Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, Thailand
When I’m not torturing my coworkers with terrible jokes (or snacking on some delicious fruit or dessert that my coworkers feed me), I juggle a number of projects for TLSDF, including co-designing and authoring grant proposals on community-based child protection and career advancement for migrant domestic workers, developing a case management database software system for our orphans and vulnerable children project, and designing a baseline study for our early childhood care and development project on nutrition and dental health.

I’ve learned so much more in a week in the field here than I could ever learn in a classroom. One of the most amazing things about working for TLSDF is taking part in their mission to reach marginalized indigenous communities, and getting to learn about so many rich cultures (Shan, Hmong, Karin, Lisu, Lahu, and Mian, to name a few). In classic Luce Scholar fashion, my expectation of being immersed in an imaginary monolithic Thai culture has been completely upended.

In my spare time, I am actively achieving my personal Luce goals of eating delicious spicy food, doing lots of yoga and meditation, and co-teaching a photography class for Shan migrant children with my siblings. I’ve also had the chance to travel a bit around Asia: running a 10K around Angkor Wat, getting my scuba diving license at Koh Tao, and visiting my grandmother’s childhood home in Shanghai are experiences I will not soon forget. My Luce year has already changed me, opening my third eye, introducing me to the #slowlife, and showing me that I’m stronger and more capable than I thought I was. I can only smile thinking about what the next six months will bring.

CHRISTIAN OLDHAM | Tokorozawa, Japan

Recently I have become aware of how much my thoughts about creative endeavors are transmutable across genres. By which I mean, in doing a flower arrangement, I actively think of how the flowers would act if they were garments of clothing; when writing, my mind turns to sculpture; and when working on sculpture, perhaps less surprisingly, I draw inspiration from architecture. I think this is in part due to my placement with the Studio of Kosen Ohtsubo. Several times a week, I head out of west Tokyo to the city of Tokorozawa, where I study in a house with a facade of aged steel, and shaped like the kanji characters 「凸凹」 (pronounced “dekoboko” and translated as “rough” or “uneven”). Here, I work with an avant-garde master in the art of ikebana, otherwise known as flower arrangement, a Buddhist tradition whose formal history dates back over 550 years to the city of Kyoto.

If you mention the word ikebana in America, you’ll find that people are generally unfamiliar with the form and surprised that something such as flower arrangement could be considered an art. In America, practitioners are few and far between, and historiography of the form does not go further beyond a number of seminal texts written in the 1970s. In Japan, by contrast, ikebana has an incredibly established presence within the society, insofar as there are ikebana critics, historians, celebrities, and rebels, all relating to—and engaging with—the art form day-to-day.

If you’re one to believe that artistic techniques evolve chronologically throughout history, then it could be said that ikebana has followed a path of stylistic development similar to many other art forms. What started as complex classical arrangements were followed by simplified and modified variations, eventually reaching a point of having no regulated styles. In and around the 1960s, even the exclusive use of flora was abandoned in order to consider other organic and inorganic materials such as metals, plastics, textiles, and vegetables.

It was at this point that my mentor, Kosen Ohtsubo, played a significant role in the history of ikebana, being the first artist to actively use vegetables in arrangements, exhibiting garbage and debris as ikebana, even going so far as to apply geisha makeup to radishes and creating a torture device for trees that methodically bisects them. His influences went beyond traditional ikebana, with its interest in exhibiting symbolist Buddhist arrangements.
focusing instead on topics like ecology. With this change in underlying motivation, Mr. Ohtsubo's approach attempts to bring ikebana into topical consideration, reclaiming it from traditional arts for contemporary practices. As ikebana schools and practitioners have been in decline, with roughly 1,000 schools closing and current enrollment being about 10% of what they were some 50 years ago, the question of why ikebana has failed to maintain its position as intermediary between traditional arts and contemporary practices in serial and temporal sculpture/installation is at the forefront of my mind.

Regardless of the numerous possible answers to that question, I feel incredibly lucky to be working with someone such as Kosen, whose application of ikebana has included elements of electrical engineering; whose critiques of my attempts have included a simple but revelatory “it’s not funny enough;” and perhaps most importantly, whose views and conception of art making, in any medium, are widely varied and open to being challenged.

I believe it’s this environment that has accentuated my sensitivity to the transmutability of creative efforts, as the perspectives shared between mentor and student, from artist to artist, are as considerate to history as they are to innovation.

**DIANA WON | Seoul, South Korea**

Korea is a place where the only constant is change. Each decade since independence has been marked by significant political, economic, and social changes. This means that the Korea my parents left in the mid-1980s is a Korea that only exists in memory. The increasingly competitive environment has broken down much of the collectivism that was once a cultural norm, and Korea is experiencing growing pains now as a developed country.

My Korean-American heritage has made it easier in many ways to move to Korea. My stomach is entirely Korean, for example, easily acclimatizing to the spices, textures, and fermentation ubiquitous in Korean cuisine. I came with some familiarity with the language, able to converse at an elementary level. I understand many of the intricacies of Korean culture: the humility, deference, and formality that are so highly valued. In other ways, however, negotiating my space in Korea has been-complicatedly personal. While so many parts of the culture are familiar to me, like anyone in a new place, I have so much still to learn.

Some days I meet with local social entrepreneurs who are working to bridge Korea’s growing inequality. Other days I could be presenting on social entrepreneurship at a conference in Phnom Penh. As a consulting firm, our work is largely client-driven and constantly changing. In the spirit of innovation, we are learning together as we go, using design thinking to drive strategy and build a social sector. The ability to work not only domestically but also regionally provides a unique vantage point to learn about and contribute to Asian development.

Every moment is a learning opportunity—an opportunity to grow, adapt, and explore Korea. In the next six months I look forward to reading Korean literature, catching the Hallyu wave, and learning more about Korea’s evolving role in the region. The only constant in my time here is that I’ve changed—how Korean of me.

**JAKI BONILLA | Mae Sot, Thailand**

Grounding: this word may best describe these past few months for me in Thailand. I have learned to greet people the right way, gained confidence in pronouncing the five tones of Thai language, and made friends with a number of pi (older sisters). The most difficult barrier at the beginning was learning the new language. I was impatient to start asking questions and
having deep conversations with Thai people because I wanted to learn about the Kingdom of Thailand through their eyes. In time, I’ve learned to appreciate the word *sabaii*, which can be used to describe the easygoing style that most Thai people live by: go with the flow and things should happen slowly. Things turned a little easier when I applied this cultural idea to my life in Thailand, first in Chiang Mai for intensive summer language training, then in Mae Sot, a town along the Myanmar and Thailand border where I’m working at one of the field offices of the International Organization for Migration. With a large number of migrants from Myanmar who speak Burmese, Karen, and Mon, Mae Sot is one of the most diverse areas in Thailand.

The IOM’s field team in Mae Sot likes to say that we are all migrant workers because we are from all over Thailand, Myanmar, and then there is me, the only one from the United States. We work with migrant workers and refugees through a variety of projects. Through my work and interaction with IOM Myanmar, I have learned a lot about Myanmar. In addition to working with the adult population, I have also had the opportunity to visit migrant children’s learning centers along the border. Most recently we visited one of the centers with a community-based youth organization called UNITED, and it was unforgettable to hear the children sing ethnic Karen songs with their simple guitar and sweet boy band-like voices.

Outside of work, I often spend time with my co-workers too, since they are like a family to each other. I really enjoy watching them play *futbol*. They recently coordinated an office Christmas party, a new tradition. The other day we all went shopping for a new year’s dress. I had shared that this is something women do in my family and they all decided they wanted to join this tradition, too. They insisted that I teach them Latin dances so I think this will be the next. I am grateful for having found many ways to connect with inspiring women in Thailand!

**JENNY COOPER** | Singapore

Playing club field hockey. Living in public housing. Riding my bicycle to work. A steady stream of visitors from the United States and chance encounters with American friends and former colleagues around town. A community of Luce Scholar alumni at Opower and in Singapore. None of these are experiences I anticipated having during my Luce Scholar year in Singapore. And yet, through serendipity, they have all become central to my life here.

“My colleague’s club field hockey team needs a goalie. Do you want to play?” Within two weeks of moving to the city-state, one degree north of the equator, at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula, I found myself on the field suited up in goalie pads, playing in field hockey games and practices for the first time in 11 years. (Although I’d note that in Singapore, “field hockey” is just “hockey,” goalie “pads” are a goalie “kit,” a “field” is a “pitch,” and “practice” is “training.”) There’s nothing quite like putting on a goalie kit in 90 Fº temperatures with 65% humidity. It’s akin to wearing a personal steam room.

Needless to say, it’s been a terrific means of meeting people, not to mention an epically fun way to stay active. And, in yet another unexpected twist to my hockey adventure in Singapore, as I got to know my colleagues in the Singapore Opower office, it turned out that three of them are former hockey players, and two of them are former goalies. Serendipity in Singapore.

Sometimes I assist my co-workers with their case work and attend meetings of groups such as the Anti Human Trafficking Network conducted in a mixture of Burmese, Thai, and English. In addition to field work, I liaise with the IOM office in Bangkok. I spent the majority of my first few months at IOM working with project officers and consultants there to prepare for a large community stabilization project in Mae Sot, Ranong, and Phang Nga, providing targeted assistance to the Rohingya and Myanmar Muslim population who are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. I like being able to see the big picture of the IOM and the field office work on a daily basis.

During my housing search when I first arrived in Singapore, I received a message through one of the local housing websites inviting me to consider a room for rent in an Housing Development Board (HDB) building in a neighborhood I hadn’t heard of. Eighty percent of Singaporeans live in HDBs, the shorthand for the country’s public housing. No one had mentioned this as a housing option for me to consider. Embracing the mantra, “keep an open mind and explore all the options,” I decided to take a look. This turned out to be one of the best early decisions I made in the country. The apartment was in a neighborhood comprised mostly of Singaporeans (very few expats) and surrounded by a mix of new and old Singaporean buildings and shop houses, quaint bars and restaurants, numerous bus lines, and East Coast Park,
which has a 20km bicycle path that connects to the Central Business District. It was only after I moved in that I learned of this last point and realized I could ride my bike to my office almost entirely via bicycle paths—exceptionally uncommon for Singapore and music to my ears as someone who loves using bicycles as transportation. Serendipity had struck again.

While most people in Singapore speak English, I began my Luce year taking full-time Mandarin lessons. As one of the four national languages of Singapore, Mandarin is widely spoken here. Three weeks into my language study, a new student joined our five-person class. It happened that not only was she a fellow UC Berkeley graduate, but also, like me, from the (incredibly small) Peace & Conflict Studies department. Once again, serendipity in Singapore.

My placement with the Regulatory Affairs team at Opower in Singapore is a story of serendipity as well. During initial exploratory conversations with my now-manager at Opower, I learned that he is close friends with a former Luce Scholar. And, it turns out that Opower’s Director of Operations & Investor Relations was also a Luce Scholar. Unexpected Luce Scholar connections aside, my placement at Opower is one element of my life in Singapore that is developing just as I had hoped and anticipated it might. I work with a small team of incredibly bright, friendly, mission-driven colleagues to leverage energy policy and electricity market regulation in countries throughout the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region to reduce residential electricity consumption—and the resulting GHG emissions—through behavioral energy efficiency programs. I’m engaged in a mix of qualitative and quantitative work, and internal and external meetings, that enable me to better understand residential energy use, GHG emissions, energy policy and politics, and the utility industry in countries throughout APAC, in addition to the challenges and opportunities associated with an American behavioral energy efficiency and software company expanding to markets in Asia. It’s been an outstanding opportunity to bring together my background in climate policy and graduate work in business and environmental science, in an immersive professional and cultural experience in East Asia.

LANIER ZIMMER | Yangon, Myanmar

Who could have predicted that Paul (my fellow Yangon-based Scholar) and I would spend our first week in Myanmar congratulating each other on finding a “normal cracker”? We definitely had our fair share of adjustments to the cuisine and lifestyle of Yangon, but they have all been worth it. Patience has never been a strong attribute of mine, so living here has greatly helped me improve that quality.

I am so grateful to be in this country. I had no idea what to expect. I found that the people of Myanmar are some of the friendliest and most genuine people I have ever met. To be living in a country during a time of great change toward a more democratic government is very interesting and exciting. The energy and enthusiasm about the future of this country is contagious. My ability to speak Myanmar has immensely aided my connection to the people. Even though I’m probably on par with a two-year-old in terms of my ability to speak the language, I absolutely loved learning it over the summer and have continued with a tutor twice a week.

As Director of Admissions for the American University of Myanmar I have assumed a leadership role in starting a new university. Managing a staff has been fun but also challenging, because of the need to navigate cultural differences in the workplace. I’ve created a strategic recruitment and marketing plan, which I recently presented to the newly expanded Board of Trustees during their bi-annual meeting. I’m writing this update on the first day of our college prep program, for which I recruited students in the fall. Oh, I forgot to mention that I work in an enormous mansion decked out in gold, including a gold Statue of Liberty. I have my very own spacious office that happens to have the jazziest private bathroom I’ve ever seen. (If you were wondering, the answer is yes, there is a stereo in the shower.)

Tragically, I lost my father to cancer in the fall of this year. The Luce Foundation, Asia Foundation, and my Luce classmates were incredibly supportive of me and my family during this extremely difficult period. My fellow Scholars even remembered my favorite BBQ restaurant in Evanston and
managed to orchestrate from across the world the biggest delivery of ribs I have ever seen. The loss of my dad was immense, but I’m grateful to the Luce family for their love and support and I count my blessings every day that I get to spend living the experience that my dad had been so proud of me for undertaking.

Before I left for Myanmar, my dad said to me, “Every time you have a good time, do it for me.” So that’s what I’m doing. I returned to Myanmar with a renewed commitment to Luce, my placement, and this truly unique and special country. Life is short, the Luce year is even shorter, and I am thoroughly taking advantage of this once-in-a-life-time opportunity.

LAURA SHUNK | Beijing, China

A hot wind whipped the Inner Mongolian plain, sending dust spinning through the stubbly grassland and into our eyes; the breeze provided little relief from baking under the dry and unrelenting sun. We watched an old sedan creep up the dirt road from the newly built highway, then saw a portly man wearing wireframe glasses step out. He was a professor and an advocate for the farmers of the region, and he led us into the shade of his yurt and plied us with salty milk tea and a pot of bones; a prize lamb had been slaughtered for our lunch.

Our host used a pocket knife to pry chunks of meat free, depositing them into our outstretched hands. Everyone was silent for a while—the meat was soft, succulent, ribboned with tender fat, rich with grassy flavor, and impossibly juicy. Two things struck me in that moment: I wondered aloud why we don’t find Inner Mongolian lamb touted as a luxury ingredient on trendy restaurant menus across the globe. And I acknowledged to myself that despite countless meals devoured in various American Chinatowns, I knew almost nothing about Chinese food.

My goal for this year, which I’m spending with the Beijing Farmers’ Market, was to try to understand the sustainable and alternative agriculture system in China, but it took just a couple of weeks to realize that it would be impossible to understand that system without also having a good grasp on the country’s rich and complex food culture. Farming often reflects what we value on the plate, and in China, there’s parallel tension—just as traditional, industrialized, and new sustainable practices compete for resources in the fields, old regional cuisines vie with the homogenous pan-Chinese canon taught in culinary schools, and global influences that add flavor simultaneously threaten to replace generations-old recipes. (I could take this comparison further—China is endlessly interesting right now because this tension is in play across all realms, from politics to economics to culture.)

There is no way to really understand a food culture but to eat—so I picked up my chopsticks and haven’t put them down. There’s no better place in the world to experience the breadth of Chinese food than Beijing, and my partner Rob and I have been studiously making our way through the regions: we slurp Chongqing noodles folded with yellow peas and laden with tingling spice; gnaw spice-crusted lamb charred on outdoor spits, as it would be in northwestern China; compare notes...
on the vast array of mushrooms from Yunnan, some delicate, some hearty; and marvel at the texture a Buddhist chef has coaxed from lotus root, presenting what looks and tastes like a rib in the middle of a vegetarian feast. We've tasted the tart, peppery soups of Guizhou; the fiery cooking of Hunan; and countless examples of Beijing's most famous dish, Peking duck. And as we've traveled around China, we've been able to compare what we've had in the capital with its place of origin, putting our meals into a broader context.

Food is always an excellent window into another culture, and my food education in China has gone well beyond the professional realm—it has helped my language skills and my ability to decipher characters, oriented me to my new home city, taught me local customs and table manners, and brought me a group of friends that are just as interested in food as I am. Above all, eating has helped me parse this experience and gain a deeper understanding—of farming, of cuisine, of China.

LAUREN DUBOWSKI | Yogyakarta, Indonesia

“I don’t know how, but every time we have a festival like this,” the man standing next to me says as he shakes his head, “the rain goes somewhere else.” It’s the musim hujan, or rainy season here in Yogyakarta, Central Java, which means a full-blown tempest most days, like retribution for Indonesia’s other six months of constant sunshine. But not today. All I can manage to reply at the moment is: “Wow!” I’m too distracted by the way one of the janur kuning—huge, decorative garlands made from bamboo and braided coconut leaves—is dancing in the wind in the blue sky, high above where we’re standing to get a good view when the parade arrives. “Look!” he exclaims, pointing way down the street: “Here come the elephants!”

My new home, nicknamed Jogja, is full of surprises—and not only on special days like this one in January, when a grand public procession marked the coronation of a new Paku Alam, the deputy governor, who is also considered to be an official caretaker of Javanese culture. One night, as I was driving my motorbike home from a contemporary wayang kult (shadow puppet) show in a village, I just had to pull over when I saw a crowd of people carrying giant white bird puppets: another observer explained that it was a rehearsal for the upcoming Muslim Idul Adha celebrations. It is this mix of tradition and innovation, ritual and the unexpected, that makes life here so exciting—along with the eagerness of most Indonesians I meet to share and talk about it.

My Luce placement is a residency with Papermoon Puppet Theatre, led by Artistic Directors Maria “Ria” Tri Sulistyani and Iwan Effendi. A writer-illustrator-performer and a visual artist, they have developed a unique style of puppetry—a performance form I’ve always been drawn to, with an amazing history in this part of the world, that I wanted to delve into this year. As I learn from Papermoon, I’m also working with them on a project to commemorate the company’s 10th anniversary this year, as they open their own new performance space. Papermoon frequently collaborates with artists from other countries, tours worldwide, and hosts an international puppet festival, Pesta Boneka, allowing me to experience other kinds of puppetry through them as well.

During my required visa runs, I’ve also been able to participate in a conference at the opening of the new Asian Arts Theatre in South Korea; visit with Amrita Performing Arts, a company reinvigorating performance in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia; and see Kathakali dance-theater and Kathputli puppetry in India. The expertise our Luce cohort is developing firsthand across the continent makes for an ongoing crash course in every place I could explore. But Indonesia alone, made up of an estimated 17,000 islands, has countless cultures, languages, beliefs, traditions, and performances—which incorporate all kinds of dance, masks, music, puppets, and more. Ultimately, my year in Asia will only serve as an introduction to all of the art that is made here.

Between now and July I will continue to seek out as much art as I can, while I also create a performance of my own, which I hope to present before the end of my time in Jogja. And I will keep working to broaden my interests and skills, something this fellowship has brought me a truly precious opportunity to do. So far, in addition to learning Bahasa Indonesia, I have worked as a dramaturg on a new film script, regularly made time to write and go out with my camera to take pictures, and summitted Mount Merapi, Indonesia’s most active volcano! The Luce year has been such a gift of time, space, and an endless supply of surprises—all of which are essential, and always at a premium, when making a life in the arts.

I’ll readily admit: I too have been constantly thinking and talking about China, whether in my work on foodwaste-to-biogas-fuel projects at the Yunnan Province Research Center of Biogas Engineering and Technology of Yunnan Normal University, or when hosting a lecture forum on the environmental movement in China, or simply walking the streets of Kunming. Six months into my time here in the Middle Kingdom, it has only become clearer to me that more thought, more talk, more confusion, and more pondering will be needed as I seek to gain some insight into this vast, wildly diverse, and globally influential country.

But perhaps the most striking takeaway that I’ve gained since coming to China is its unique ability to shed light on my own country and culture unlike any other place I’ve traveled or lived in. China and its many facets are often windows into the shortcomings and failings of the United States. But they also remind me of the brighter and nobler aspects of being an American. Often it seems that observing and participating in life in my little corner of China is like looking at the other side of the same coin—different enough to make the absurd, the kitsch, the cute, and the humble stand out in stark relief. And yet, if I challenge myself and push through the trite sigh of “Oh, China…” I can see that we Americans are not so very different from the Chinese.

I see this in the fierce brands of nationalism that are so central to both cultures. In both countries the flag, never out of sight for more than a few moments, flies high and proud everywhere, not only at the government institutions where one would expect to find it, but also from bumpers of cars, social media photos, and shoulders of security guards. Both nations are fiercely proud, often to a fault.

But I also see this in the strong sense of self-reliance and the can-do attitude that drives Americans and Chinese alike to build themselves and their nation to be bigger, better, faster, stronger. Our common histories of rapid change and growth are embodied today in the families that I interact with. I ate dinner with one such family recently. Three generations sat at the table. The oldest was born into the political turmoil of the early 20th century, as the last of the Chinese emperors fell. The second, into the personality cult of Mao, and the height of communism. The third, at the dawn of Reform and Opening, when China began to find its feet again on the global stage and began sprinting up the economic ladder. All three embody this rapid change in their individual trajectories. And all three have witnessed their home city of Kunming being transformed again and again, and China rising from a nation of little consequence on a global scale to one seemingly on the lips of everyone.

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when I can speak to them in Vietnamese (even if it is just xin chào, or hello). Everyday brings about a new and unexpected experience. Whether it is drinking rice wine and going to karaoke with coworkers or dodging herds of cows and water buffaloes in the countryside, I am taking in every moment as something meaningful and worthwhile. In many senses, the same surprises that caught my eye when I first got here—the organized chaos of traffic, the constant change, and the street food—continue to intrigue and fascinate me. There really is nothing quite like sitting on a plastic stool and eating a bowl of miến trộn (mixed glass noodles) on the side of the road.

It has also been an exciting time in modern Vietnamese political history: 2015 marked 70 years since independence, 40 years since reunification and the end of the Vietnam War, and 20 years since the normalization of relations with the United States. Moreover, 2016 marks 20 years since the government policy that opened up Vietnam to the international community and spurred Vietnam's integration into the global economy. I have enjoyed learning more about Vietnam's economic integration, international development, and the role of NGOs from the perspective of my placement, the People and Nature Reconciliation (PanNature), a local Vietnamese environmental NGO. My main research focus at PanNature has been understanding the environmental implications that trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership can have in a country as biodiverse as Vietnam. My workplace is full of ambitious, determined, and friendly coworkers, and after every lunch, we chat while drinking trà đá (iced tea) and eating sunflower seeds around the corner from the office. Another highlight of my time has been living with a wonderful homestay family (cô Mai and chú Việt), who have helped me drastically improve my knowledge of Vietnamese, provided insight into cultural traditions, and introduced me to so many delicious foods, expanding my knowledge of Vietnamese cuisine beyond a bowl of phở.

My year as a Luce Scholar thus far has opened my eyes to what it means to live and work abroad, to experience a new culture, and to facilitate discussions on global issues. I constantly remind myself how lucky I am to be here, especially because I never imagined living in Vietnam, or anywhere else in Asia.

It is certainly the case at my placement organization, Perkumpulan Berencana Keluarga Indonesia (PKBI), the Indonesian affiliate of Planned Parenthood. My bicycling has become an ongoing joke; my coworkers always ask how I got to each event, shaking their heads and smiling. Most of my work with the organization involves community events in villages in the greater Yogyakarta area, so my days are punctuated with meetings at schools and municipal halls, or sometimes hopping on the back of a motorbike and zooming off through electric green paddy fields to some unknown location. We put on events that range from teen reproductive health town halls, to mobile clinics with pap smears and HIV testing, to community events with the local waria pesantren—a Muslim boarding house for transgender women.

Indonesia has a complex and contradictory history with sexual and reproductive health and rights. It is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, the fourth most populous country overall, and a relatively new democracy. I have spent my Luce year thus far working to untangle the religious norms, legislation, and cultural taboos that shape women's access...
(or, more accurately, lack of access) to contraception and comprehensive reproductive health services. My coworkers have been instrumental in this process, and as my language skills improve, we are able to have increasingly in-depth conversations about reproductive health and sex education in Indonesia and the United States as well.

As I look forward to the next six months, I am excited to dig into new projects and explore some particularly pressing issues, such as teen pregnancy. Given the climate around women’s rights and health, I don’t know what these projects will bring—but I’ll be there, naik sepeda.

I warily eyed the strong-smelling liquor as paper cups were passed around the small concrete shed. We were quickly learning that Karneri hospitality goes hand in hand with a well-developed local drinking culture. Since breakfast my companion and I had already unsuspectingly accepted several cups of a sweet, pinkish cider consumed by young and old alike. Locals don’t consider the drink (which, we later discovered, was locally brewed rice wine) to be “real alcohol,” but we found ourselves feeling increasingly woozy at an embarrassingly early hour.

Rather than offend our generous hosts, we smiled, nodded, and slowly sipped away our remaining sobriety. Meanwhile, the former soldiers downed glasses of the liquor with gusto. Apparently delighted to have an out-of-town audience, the most senior of the group recounted how he joined the KA as a teenager and the years he spent fighting the Tatmadaw. Even in peaceful Loikaw, the legacy of this long conflict remains visible — from the military fatigues sold by clothing vendors to the life-sized plastic guns of all varieties that fill toy stalls.

The former officer and his comrades face limited economic opportunities in Kayah State. He seemed to assume that, as an American, I must be a wealthy investor interested in the State’s rich natural resources. “We have tin, and uranium,” he nodded sagely. “Have your friends talk to me; I know how to get permits.”

Under current rules, only the national government is authorized to issue mining permits in Myanmar. But in practice, ethnic armed groups, affiliates of the military, and other local elites hold important sway over local investment decisions. These informal networks erode the rule of law and create opportunities for rent-seeking, particularly in the lucrative extractive industries.

The Thanksgiving meal was anything but typical. Bowls of cow intestines and pork sausage (a local specialty) were served along with a curious green powder that made our lips go numb. It couldn’t have been much later than 1 pm, but the camo-clad former soldiers had already broken out a bottle of moonshine. “Come on, drink more!” they insisted, “Eat more!”

The setting for this unexpected meeting was Kayah State, a remote sliver of mountainous landscape nestled in the eastern corner of Myanmar. Although the region is situated just 200 miles from my home in Yangon, it had taken my friend and me more than 15 hours by bus to arrive in the State’s capital, Loikaw. Our hosts were former members of the Karenni Army (KA), one of numerous ethnic armed groups that have spent the better part of the last 60 years locked in conflict with the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw) over demands for independence. Parts of the State only recently became accessible to foreigners, and much of the area remains off limits due to the conflict.
Since moving to Myanmar, this and other challenges in the oil, gas and mining sector have occupied my time at the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI). Ongoing reform efforts and the upgrading of the country’s framework for natural resource governance present a major opportunity to improve accountability in the sector. But progress remains hampered by entrenched interests and a broad lack of capacity.

While it’s not every day I get to join former rebel officers for a tipsy tête-à-tête, in many ways the Thanksgiving spent in Kayah State represents my experience in Asia. “Say yes to everything,” one former Luce Scholar had suggested as I prepared for the Luce year. As I follow this advice, it has been the unanticipated misadventures that inevitably create the most novel opportunities for connecting with people – both personally and professionally. I’d gladly swap turkey and gravy for intestines and moonshine any year.

SAM LEWIS | Luang Prabang, Laos

Ten minutes. Ten minutes on my rusty second-hand motorbike brings me to the edge of the Luang Prabang peninsula, where one can sip a frosty Beerlao and watch as local boys fish at the edge of the Mighty Mekong. Ten minutes in the opposite direction and I reach the open-air waiting room of Lao Friends Hospital for Children, where a crowd of anxious mothers, their sick children, and my eternally smiling co-workers greet me each morning. In between the two falls the entirety of Luang Prabang. Don’t let the geographic size deceive you, though; the depth and complexity of this place and its people far exceed what this charming little town’s size suggests.

Luang Prabang is known as a jewel of Southeast Asia: a quaint town nestled amongst the lush mountains of northern Laos showcasing an odd yet delightful juxtaposition of golden Buddhist temples, shockingly delicious French cafes, and remote rural living. And it certainly is a jewel. In my short time here, however, I have also come to know a place very different from this familiar description: a place where children suffer from nutritional deficiencies of a severity unknown to even the most seasoned global health doctors; a place where a family would send its teenage boy to a monastery so that he could eat and receive at least a modicum of education; and also a place where co-workers gather on weekends to picnic over laap khuai (minced water buffalo) and leuad ped (duck blood), feasting until the crate (or two) of Beerlao is emptied.

I have come to know these qualities while working at Lao Friends Hospital for Children, an organization that has served as much as a home as it has a workplace. There, I have joined the humbling and thrilling ride that is the first year of an ambitious medical and public health project. The institutional highs and lows— heartwarming patient recoveries, the excitement of opening an Emergency Room, the first patient death—have mirrored the roller-coaster experience of living and working in a new and unfamiliar country. My role within the hospital has been as varied as my wildly inconsistent tonal pronunciation. Some days, I help patch together a still-developing network of services to ensure that patients are taken care of. Other days, I sift through patient data to begin to piece together a picture of what this young hospital is taking on. Still others, I pen pleas to aid agencies and organizations to ensure that we have the resources we need. Regardless of my daily tasks, I always make sure to find time to sneak down to the patient ward for a visit with the world’s most adorable kids.

There are far too many things I want to do before I leave this enchanting town in six quick months. All I can hope is that I tackle my admittedly minor personal challenges—mastering indistinguishable tones, broaching questions of cultural difference, understanding a deliberately opaque political system—with the same courage and persistence that my colleagues and friends exhibit in their struggle to improve a bleak and stagnant health care system. And that I fully relish this experience, keeping in mind how sok dee (lucky) I truly am.

VARSHA GOVINDARAJU | Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Just a few days into the new year, I returned from a trip to India to see Phnom Penh glowing. I have always enjoyed driving down the streets here on my motorbike, and it was made that much more beautiful by the shimmer of trees draped in Christmas lights and the sparkling New Year’s sign hung behind Independence Monument in both Khmer and English. I have become fond of Cambodia, and grateful for how it encourages me to throw myself out there in more ways than one. From driving a motorbike for the first time, to learning a new language, to finding a roommate in a city I didn’t know, I am constantly reminded of the joy and growth that comes from putting myself in new and challenging situations.
Coming from the reserved city of Seattle, the close-knit vibe of Phnom Penh was a shock. When my motorbike broke down in the middle of the street, strangers would come up and help me kick start my bike or show me the closest repair shop. Between laughs and the noise of traffic rushing by, we would talk about my bike and what was wrong with it as if I had any idea. I would watch mechanics melt rubber into my punctured tire using cans and fire with skill and precision, leaving my bike feeling brand new for just 2000 riel (50 cents). My Khmer teacher in Siem Reap knew I liked dancing and invited me to teach dance classes twice a week to Khmer women for the two months I was there. In the school’s concrete courtyard, I would pull up on my motorbike and meet the stares of bright-eyed Cambodian children wearing red, white, and yellow uniforms. As they waited to be picked up by their parents, squeezed two or three onto a pedal bike, some would peer into these dance classes. Accompanied by Bollywood, salsa, and western pop songs, older teachers and little girls tried everything, including the chorus of “Single Ladies” by Beyonce. My broken Khmer and hands-on instruction left everyone laughing, but eager to talk and to learn.

Working for the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center (CWCC) is where I’ve had to adapt the most. After working at several jobs that emphasized productivity and efficiency, I’m immersed in a professional culture that values face-to-face communication and relationships above all. My email savvy is no longer helpful, as in-person communication is where the real work gets done. In our office converted from a Khmer house, I find myself walking up the narrow stairs to talk about a specific project and often end up learning or making progress on something entirely different. I’ve come to value the relationships I’m building with my coworkers and the importance of learning directly from them.

Out of the office, however, is where I experience true discomfort and growth. Through various outreach programs, I’ve traveled to villages outside Phnom Penh and Kampong Thom, to meet and chat with men who are abusers in their communities as they receive anger management training. Meeting these men was initially incredibly uncomfortable, as one even showed up drunk to the training. However, their commitment to changing their behavior was stunning. I’ve met wives who speak frankly in women’s support groups about their husbands still beating them, and yet they still manage to host events in their village to help other women. These conversations, while difficult due to my limited Khmer abilities, have given me direct insight into rural domestic violence issues and how CWCC can help. My Khmer language training gives me the opportunity to not only understand what people are saying, but laugh with them, cry with them, and show I care enough to try and communicate with them.